

Don't Be Yourself.

Notes on the Impossibility of Documentary¹

Boris Nikitin

Translation by Kai Tuchmann

PART ONE: THE DOCUMENTARY AND ITS IMAGES

1

Good morning. My name is Boris Nikitin, I am a theatre director, writer, and curator. I was born in Switzerland—which is also where I live. In my work, I have been dealing with the construction of reality and identity for many years, especially in non-fiction genres like the documentary, but also in news, politics, economics, law, and advertising. My approach towards the documentary, and this is probably also the reason why I am standing here before you today, is critical, and my work has been characterized by this critical attitude for some years now. There are many reasons why I have adopted a critical approach towards the documentary—one could also say of non-fictional representations of reality—but—so I believe—there is also a biographical background, which I would like to briefly detail, because it can be informative for the understanding of what follows: When I was 20 years old, that was in 2000, I came out as a gay man; and with that, I began not only to discover my own sexuality, but at the same time to question the reality in which I lived, which I had been taught, and in which I had believed until then. It felt like a surreal judgment to be in a body that desired the same sex—a circumstance that I tried to bend around with all the willpower at my disposal in order to conform to what I believed to be reality. Social norms, we all know, are very powerful forces that affect our bodies and psyches in such a persistent way that we often forget that they once had a beginning and were not always there. Often these are powerful collective habits that have their roots in legal systems; sometimes they are laws that remain in force to this day.

By coming out, I finally succeeded in interrupting this social delusion—I would also call it a fiction—which is based on historical, and in some places still

1 The revised version of Nikitin's Beijing lecture presented here was made possible by a grant from ITRT Studios Basel/Berlin.

current, law, that being gay makes me something inferior and despicable. This is one of the reasons why since then, I have viewed reality as a potential propagandist product. This is not just a mind game for me, but a tool to not have to think of reality as something closed and inevitable, but to be able to think of it as something possible. As something that I can change.

I am telling you all this—perhaps a little strangely right at the beginning of our seminar—because I would like to think together with you today about reality, about its representations and their effects. The question of the document will play an important role, and at some points, we will also touch on the question of the juridical. The seminar will discuss how these representations and their repetitions—because there can be no representation without repetition—influence our idea and perception of reality. And it will ask how we can shift the grammar of representation through our artistic work and thus open up spaces in reality.

2

Kai Tuchman told me that the focus of this year's seminar is to connect the history of Beijing with questions of site-specific theatre forms and that you want to examine site-specific as a particular form of a "theatre of the real." I have indeed made some works that could be classified with the genre label "site-specific," for example, a spatial installation in a hospice in Athens or a work in a school in Berlin. In the vast majority of cases, however, I choose the theatre space as the platform and framework for my productions. However, and this could be another reason why I am standing here in front of you today, in recent years I have repeatedly expressed the thought that these theatre works are basically also "site-specific." They deal very concretely with the situation of the theatre. In addition to the themes and material they deal with, all my works are always about theatre as a concrete, constructed space and as a concrete, special form of the present with its special characteristics, possibilities and rules. They are always also about theatre as an institution, as a context, as a set of expectations, agreements and presuppositions, in short, about a special form of framing reality.

I think what makes the genre "site-specific" so interesting is its artistic perspective: It confronts a real, already existing space with a theatrical perspective. As a result, many social, ideological, legal and political constructions and fictions that permeate spaces and buildings suddenly become visible. Their supposed unambiguities suddenly become ambiguous and take on an aesthetic form.

For me, site-specific is not simply a genre description that refers to art in public space or in other real spaces. Rather, it can be understood as a very particular way of looking at reality, examining seemingly immutable conventions for their components, for their construction. It means, and I will return to this again and again in the course of this lecture, to look at reality as something that is potentially fake or the product of propaganda.

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Let us perhaps try it out directly: If, for example, we look at this university classroom as a site-specific spatial installation or as a ready-made, then we don't just see a generic neutral, rectangular room of which there are hundreds of thousands in this world. Instead, we suddenly notice certain features that *qua habit* seem quite normal and unambiguous to us, but which can now at least be identified as remarkable under the particular theatrical gaze: for example, that this space is of a very ordinary, rather sober aesthetic that is possibly meant to be understood as "neutral" but actually is not; that the particular row-seating presupposes an essentially very unnatural disciplinarity of the people who are supposed to sit on these chairs and that education is apparently thought of together with a hierarchization of the gaze; we notice banalities that are nonetheless remarkable, such as that I stand and talk and you sit and listen. I look at you and you look at me. It is a situation created by both the space and the context: the university. And this context brings with it some preconditions while at the same time fabricating them, not least with the help of this concrete space: for example, that you are the students and I am the guest who is paid to speak here. The space organizes a hierarchy and a social order, a kind of site-specific software that we take for granted, which is why we mostly block it out and adopt a relatively uncritical view of reality as a simple matter of facts.

We can see all this if we leave our naturalized, accustomed everyday gaze for a moment and adopt an aesthetic perspective. Let's call it the *site-specific gaze*. The *site-specific gaze* opens our perception to the constructedness of space and our behavior in it. It opens our perception to the way reality is formed. If the here and now were a site-specific performance installation in which we find ourselves, then we would begin to take a more distanced view and wonder about all the supposedly self-evident things here. That would ultimately be the prerequisite for us to play with them.

4

As a theatre-maker, I am always concerned with the following questions: What does it mean to be seen by other people? What does it do to me that I am being watched by other people? How does it affect the way I create a certain identity, a certain image of myself? How does it affect my reality, my view of the world? And how does it affect the way I look back? These are questions that are, to a certain extent, inherent to the logic of theatre, but which I think can also be applied to reality.

I would argue—it is a crude assertion—that reality is grounded in the fact that we are constantly observing each other. To briefly put on the site-specific glasses again: This is actually exactly what we are doing right now. You are observing me and I am observing you. However, this mutual observation does not take place on the same level, but—as we have just seen—within a hierarchical order that assigns each of us a place from which we make our observations of other people—and thus of the world. I think the way we perceive reality cannot be separated

from the social “place” from which we do so, namely the socio-political role in which our bodies find themselves. Bodies are ultimately receivers and transmitters of reality. For this reason, I would argue, what we call “reality” is to some extent indistinguishable from “social reality.” This is basically what we mean when we say that reality is a construct. A construct, but one that is so convincing in its appearance and in its permanent repetition that we are often inclined to naturalize it, to take it for granted, to believe it and forget its constructedness, like this room here where we are right now. It is, you might say, the point at which reality becomes *realistic*. It is the point where reality and propaganda intersect in the assertion of the authentic. But where the non-fictional, the real(istic), the authentic appears as a figure of thought and a model of perception, the fake is not far away. After all, only what we accept as real can be faked.

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Most of my works have a non-fictional or documentary component. In most of them, the biographies of the performers or actors are central source material. At the same time, many of my projects have titles like: *Imitation of Life, F for Fake, Propaganda Piece, How to Win Friends and Influence People*. These titles indicate that there is a potential ambiguity in what the audience perceives, even if the material presented or used on stage has a documentary or non-fictional *look*. Roughly speaking, I use non-fictional material, but I invite the audience to be cautious. I do this because I believe that documentary or non-fictional claims should be approached with a certain amount of care. Because the document, in its unbroken gesture of showing or representing reality, harbors a structure that could be described as authoritarian.

A classic non-fictional assertion such as the one I started with this morning: “Good morning. My name is Boris Nikitin,” is probably the simplest and, at the same time, the most fundamental documentary assertion of all. It says that this body belongs to Boris Nikitin, that this body *is* Boris Nikitin. I assume that none of you has doubted this assertion. Why should you? However, it is quite conceivable that I am not Boris Nikitin at all, but Boris’s assistant, for example. And even if you now open your internet search engine and look for images of Boris Nikitin, you will basically not be able to be sure until the end of this seminar whether this body is really Boris Nikitin. You will have to trust that Kai Tuchmann—who is, after all, the director of this course and who has announced a Boris Nikitin—has not deceived you. But in the end: How can you know if perhaps even Kai Tuchmann has not been deceived?

One could continue this Kleistian game endlessly, but at least we can state that it is an assertion that is not necessarily true, but which, in conjunction with a certain meshwork of conditions, leads us to believe it. As early as 1890, William James wrote in *The Principles of Psychology*: “As a rule, we believe as much as we can. We would believe anything if we only could.”

We do believe. That’s how we organize our daily lives. And I think that’s also the “nature” of documentary assertion: we tend to believe in it because it’s em-

bedded in a set of conditions we are used to organizing our lives with. But I would say that every non-fictional description of reality is potentially fake. And by potentially, I mean that reality has the capacity not to be the way it is. That it can be changed, which is why reality, if one follows this thought to the end, is per se always political and thus the object and subject of conflict.

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This brings us to documentary theatre as an art form that deals with documentary content as non-fictional art. What distinguishes fiction from the documentary? To put it simply: In fiction, the recipients are aware of the constructed nature of the story, so that the category of credibility may play a role, but not that of belief. The recipients can be disappointed, but they cannot be deceived. There are exceptions, but they confirm the rule. In the case of documentary, on the other hand, an ultimately unspoken agreement conveys that it is a representation of real, factual events, especially real people, or documents concerning them. We are in the realm of information. As already indicated, it is not only the content that plays a role here, but also the context or paratext, i.e. the framework in which the content appears, including the necessary authority that lends legitimacy to the documentary character or stands up for it (the publisher, the theatre management, the party, the collective agreement, Kai Tuchmann). In contrast to the fictional, it plays a central role here that we believe and trust (or not) these authorities who assure us that everything is correct.

Many productions of documentary theatre appear with the claim that the production describes or represents an existing reality—in other words, that it is not a fiction. We are all aware of the importance of this distinction as a convention. Now I often say, somewhat polemically, that documentary and propaganda are ultimately structurally the same, both claiming to describe reality in a non-fictional way. Both, I would argue, therefore have an inherent manipulative potential. A manipulative potential, by the way, that is also inherent in a seminar like ours, since a seminar is also a non-fictional event. Basically, everything I say here can also be understood as propaganda. Assuming this was a site-specific performance, its title could be, for example, “How to convince students”.

The reason I say this is not merely to make fun at the meta-level, but the same reason I choose these titles for my works that contain documentary, non-fictional, biographical material and present it as such: We cannot take away anyone's responsibility to decide what they will do with what they see or hear. By referring to potential deception, I am referring to everyone's responsibility to be prudent with the information he or she takes in. And likewise with the freedom to make a decision at all.

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As far as the documentary as a genre is concerned, as I said at the beginning, I am skeptical about certain notions of the document *as document*. Many documentarists counter my skepticism by saying that the very montage of the material

indicates that it cannot be understood as an undisturbed or uninterrupted representation of reality. This may be true in theory, but I think it can also be argued that in practice, it is precisely the montage that transforms the raw documentary material into a political realism that is potentially manipulative, that is, potentially persuasive. We know this practice from election campaigns, from education and from advertising, but we also encounter it in the theatre or cinema.

Ultimately, however, the crucial question is: What authority is attributed to the document as such and what is this authority used for? In the case of many artists working in the field of documentary theatre, most of whom I wouldn't assume to be authoritarian, it can be deduced from the way they work with documents that they don't doubt the authority of the document as such. Rather, they *use* it. Documentary theatre often appears with the claim that it is promoting enlightenment and pointing out grievances. This pedagogical—one could also say political—claim is often a decisive factor behind the work itself: For example, to show the suffering of refugees, or the humanitarian and political misery in certain regions of the world, the lives of homeless people, the everyday practices of cleaners, scientists or other people in their respective contexts.

In the context of this claim, the documentary material takes on the function of authentication. It makes what is reported credible and reinforces the message. One example in theatre practice is the staged, montaged reading or speaking of excerpts of documented speeches, writings, articles—a procedure used again and again in German-language documentary theatre, in which the mere fact of the document brings with it an increased aesthetic effectiveness. Another example is the use of contemporary witnesses who, as performers, represent their own biography live on stage and thus at the same time bear witness to the events that took place in their lives (or, if they are not live on stage, do so in recorded videos). In contrast to trained actors, you could call them “real” people. I don't mean that sarcastically, since it's the genuineness of their identity that distinguishes them from the characters who are usually traditionally seen on stage representing a fictional role. The real people in documentary plays are not to be confused with amateurs, i.e. actors without professional training who also embody fictional roles. The function of real people on stage is the opposite: They do not represent another character, but themselves. They vouch for the non-fictional reality of their statements and thus for the subject matter being negotiated on stage. They are witnesses.

8

Documentary is generally described as a genre that reports on events that take place or have taken place in (contemporary) reality. It is a form of non-fictional description of reality. The problem of documentary in this context is the impossibility of grasping what “reality” (or the present) exactly is. “Reality” cannot be separated from the modes of its perception, its representation, rhetoric and depiction. It cannot be conclusively grasped, is always assertion and interpretation. The dilemma of documentarists arises when they try to represent reality and get

necessarily thrown back on their ideas of “reality”—on their subjective, selective presuppositions and on the collective norms that shape their gaze. Every representation of reality reproduces its own premises. But what are premises and norms but collectively accepted fictions, which create the illusion of reality through repetition?

The problem of using documents and/or witnesses in theatre to “prove” authentic content is what I have just called the reproduction of one’s own premises. It is a side effect of documentary theatre. I sometimes call it the *stowaway*. The stowaway is what secretly flies along and gets off at the destination, while the documentarist tries to capture and depict reality. It is the unquestioned norms and attributions that travel along with this reality without being the center of interest. Often these stowaways are linked to questions and attributions of gender, race, class. Often these are clichés that are reproduced unseen in the act of documentation, while the latter focuses on its actual subject.

An example—from a European point of view—is found in documentary representations of crises in certain countries in Africa. Usually, the results are documentary works—theatrical as well as cinematic—that try to draw attention to the misfortune of other people and to the dysfunctional political systems that produce this misfortune. The stowaway here is the fading out of a reality beyond the crisis and thus the reproduction of a cliché, a prejudice that has ultimately shaped the image of this continent for centuries: that chaos reigns there and that this chaos has a dark skin color. In a sense, the documentary, in many cases, reduces reality to what is necessary for its mission.

In short, it curtails reality, and with this, it often reduces real people to the identity category relevant to the documentary so that they may vouch as witnesses for a very specific reality in a “realistic way”: refugee, warlord, victim, perpetrator, man, woman.

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I come from a background that is critical of representation on stage, especially the representation of identity. This is, in a way, the propagandistic imprint of my own education, the commonly formed discourse within a mutually understanding peer group, which I myself am a part of.

One of the essential questions here over many years has been: How are men and women represented on stage while a story is being told? While many plays try to analyze the world and criticize society, their productions often include clichéd representations of women and men. The reproduction of these clichés are the stowaways of these dramas.

This has a lot to do with European literature and the canon. While there are some interesting major female roles, they tend to be exceptions that confirm the rule. Most dramas are about protagonists who can be identified as male. This has primarily to do with the ways plays have been produced. Much of the dramatic literature performed on stages was written by men and is more than 100 years

old. Consequently, it often reproduces gender roles that appear very traditional from a contemporary perspective.

This distribution of roles, identities, attributes and the status that these accord is, so to speak, a site-specific ideological and social feature of the concretely built environment of the “stage.” However, this is not only about roles. It has implications for the entire profession of acting. The question is: Who plays the good roles, who plays the small roles? There is a clear division based on hierarchy between men and women, and again between men and women, on the one hand, and people who do not identify as either men or a women, on the other. Even though there has been some movement in these institutions in recent years, theatre is still very patriarchal structure. This has to do with literature, with how actors are trained, how many female, male, trans or non-binary directors we have, how many artistic directors we have. In Europe, eighty percent of theatres are run by men.

The question of gender is one thing. The other question is the category that in English is called race. In German-speaking theatre, practically all the people on stage have one skin color: They are all white. The theatre is interestingly much more conservative in this respect than the society within which this institution exists. If you go out on the street in Germany or Switzerland, not to mention France or England, you will find a more diverse population than on the stages that are supposed to represent the world.

Nowadays, theatre is gradually starting to become more diverse. But until today, most drama schools still refer to the expectations of an audience that is itself predominantly white and, so the argument goes, wants to see mainly white protagonists on stage for identification. This creates a circular reproduction of norms that assert themselves as seemingly incontrovertible reality. Drama schools have a certain typology of actors and actresses according to the theatre market. They practice type-casting. So it is as much about what is performed on stage as it is about what happens inside the institution—and ultimately in the bodies and brains that inhabit the institution itself. Memorizing a text is a physical act that affects the body and the brain. Repeating a text fifty times a day because you have to memorize it changes something in the brain: a person who is only supposed to internalize the role of the housekeeper of color, or the girl who is in love with the hero but he doesn’t love her, so she has to kill herself... If those are the only roles they memorize as actresses, and there is no other content or identity on offer, then it’s a political problem.

10

The more recent documentary theatre in the German-speaking world must be seen in the context of developments in the independent theatre scene in the 1990s. Until then, the independent scene was dominated by the production of dramatic plays, albeit in a non-institutional setting, under precarious conditions and often in connection with amateur theatre. With the emergence of postdramatic theatre, new aesthetic practices emerged that emancipated themselves

from the dramatic and from acting as the playing of fictional characters. One of these postdramatic forms was the emerging *performance theatre*—a theatre that was not dedicated to the playing of characters but to “performance,” i.e. a self-presentation on stage in which one’s own real body and real biography were the material presented on the stage. One part of this postdramatic theatre was documentary theatre, which often approached reality journalistically—and sometimes converged with performance theatre.

But in both forms—and in many others—it was not just about different material. Rather, it was about the broader question of how the traditional system of representation itself, which had grown over decades, could be changed—on stage, but also backstage.

One approach was to acknowledge the fact that we have a problem with theatre literature. How can it be changed? One strategy was to say we need to tell new stories. We have to go outside and see how we live, for example, by doing interviews, by focusing on the lives of people who have never been represented on stage, by taking a closer look at everyday realities that were invisible until then.

Another way was to bring down the system of professionalism that mainly privileged the trained white actor who was assigned the big roles. In the 1990s, there was a feminist movement in performance, whose protagonists said: our lives are not represented on stage because there is no literature to represent them—so we have to go on stage and do it ourselves. It was a new aesthetic of progressive, self-empowering dilettantism. To change the dominant narratives on big stages, it was necessary to change the way you work, the way you collaborate, it was necessary to break the dominance of the director. Suddenly there were collectives telling their own stories in a different way than we were used to in “professional theatre”.

Now I would argue that unlike performance theatre, which has embraced feminist, queer, postcolonial, non-ableist etc., influences, theories and practices and has begun to dare to take a progressive approach to reality, documentary theatre remained aesthetically conservative. This was ultimately a conservatism inscribed in the nature of the genre. While performance theatre derives its ideological as well as aesthetic power precisely from the fact that it attempts to transform reality and identity at the same time in the act of its representation, documentary remains, to a certain extent, aesthetically attached to the reality it documents. Since the directors/writers are interested in showing and criticizing reality “as it is,” they must submit to a pre-existing aesthetic grammar. Therefore, documentary theatre tends to transport pre-existing social norms into the present as stowaways, because many documentary artists are more oriented towards the classical critique of power. The gesture of pointing to social or political conflicts is more important to them than deconstructing historically developed techniques of representation.

Another problem of the documentary and its tendency towards realism is the role of the witness. In the testimony play, this “realistic” staging of the people on

stage (“real people”) serves above all to reconcile these people and their testimonies with the challenges of a stage situation. It is about giving the testimonies dignity, credibility. This documentary realism also becomes the inevitable form by which these people represent themselves on stage. It leads to a very limited portrait of these people, since the way they present themselves is limited. This has to do with the fact that their lack of stage experience means that they are not as “strong” as the apparatus around them, which is basically alien to them. They are “weaker” than the context that frames them, not least because its means of production are not in their hands. Often, however, it is precisely this “weakness,” the inexperience, that in turn makes them appear “real.” Here, authenticity is not an essence, but the product of a disparity between them and the surrounding frame. In a sense, it only emerges on stage, as a lack—if you met the same people on the street or in the theatre foyer, they would hardly stand out as “real.”

A criticism of documentary artists who work with experts, witnesses, specialists or lay people could consequently be that they primarily work with people who are weaker than themselves. There is an asymmetry in the distribution of power, in the knowledge of the apparatus. The authentic is not an expression of an emancipated personality—which the authentic could be—but the aesthetic manifestation of this asymmetry.

Part of this form is that these real people on the stage, in their function as witnesses, *must necessarily be themselves*. They are enticed to represent themselves on stage under their own civilian name in order to provide legitimacy to a construction of reality. They then become fixed to this self. It is here, above all, where one can observe the clear connection between the documentary and the juridical. It is a form of self-being that is not a possibility, but an inevitability. The witnesses *must be themselves*, because otherwise the whole construct of testimony and thus of the documentary would collapse. This leads to the almost surreal circumstance that the people who enter the stage as themselves are, in a sense, made into their own doubles, forced to reproduce their civilian selves—this legal construction—with each performance, in an endless loop. But unlike the actress, these witnesses cannot simply discard their role after leaving the stage.

In summary, we find in documentary a number of problems and challenges that arise from the representation of the real and the original. One final challenge could be added to this, which may at first glance seem somewhat trivial, but which can be identified as an expression of a structure: the lack of irony that can be observed in many of these works. A lack of irony, however, that is not simply an aesthetic feature, but—I maintain—is itself an expression of a tendency towards the authoritarian that must produce unambiguities.

One question that has preoccupied me in this context for many years—and with this I will end this first part—is whether there is perhaps a way to combine the documentary and the ironic and to develop from this a form of queer documentary—a documentary that is committed to reality, but without automatically representing its grammar; a documentary that works with the biographies of the performers without nailing them down to specific identities. By irony, I don’t

mean what some critics define as a postmodern “anything goes,” but the breaking down of an unambiguous realism into ambiguities. What could a form of documentary look like that integrates this ambiguity? How can a reality be represented that at the same time contains within itself the possibility of not being what it is? Can a representation integrate its own modification while it is still taking place? It seems to me that this is a genuine question of theatre, because transformation requires an element that cannot be represented by purely pictorial means; that actually cannot be represented at all, but can only take place: time.

One of the attempts to bring these questions together is my performance piece *Hamlet*. We will deal with it after the break.

PART TWO—HAMLET

Julia/n/Hamlet*

My father died a couple of weeks ago.

I don't actually want to talk about it on the stage because it's so private.

He couldn't do much anymore at the end.

He had difficulties with, like, motor skills.

But he was still really good at sensual and cognitive things.

And he could turn his head. Like this: -

Julia/n/Hamlet moves their head slowly*

He had thought about getting help to die.

He wanted to be poisoned. He would have gone to Switzerland to do it.

But in the end his body just took over itself.

When he died he was in a hospital in Braunschweig.

I was with my mother and my sister.

He was hardly present any more, was breathing heavily.

I let a bit of music play from my laptop.

We were, like, all bent over him like in a painting and held his hands but he barely reacted to it.

Then the nurse took a cotton bud with some water and wiped it across his lips.

He made a couple of abstract movements breathing quickly.

And then he was dead.

Seeing how this body carried that out by itself, as if at the end it was demanding its own rights—that was kind of impressive.

That moved me.

So, I'm just, like, standing there and staring at this body, which is lying there like a statue and its face looks like a mask.

And then all of a sudden it's all kind of strange.

I notice how my brain is busy synchronizing the image of this lifeless body with the memory of a living person that had just been there.

But it's not possible.

There is only noise.

*walks to the side, drinks water out of a bottle
then goes back to center stage*

A year ago I shaved my hair off.
 Up until then I had had very long, light-brown hair.
 Sometimes I wore it down and sometimes tied up, with different clasps in it.
 I got a lot of compliments for it. Which I quite liked.
 And then one day I completely shaved off my hair.
 And then my eyebrows.
 I think it is interesting to remove these attributes and to pixelate my exterior self.
 As a form of self-manipulation.
 And the erotic dimensions of it fascinate me, I don't really know why, it's just so
 naked and round.
 And what I like about it is challenging what's considered healthy.
 But that's not so easy.
 You have to train it.

11

Hamlet is a solo piece with performer and musician Julia*n Meding², performed together with a baroque music ensemble. The piece came out in Basel in September 2016.

For this work, Julia*n Meding and I have tried to create a person on stage who is in the zone between fiction and reality, between a documentary-biographical "I" and the "I" of the Shakespearean character. In other words, a person who is Julia*n and Hamlet at the same time.

I have said in the beginning that I sometimes call my plays site-specific, even if they are set in the theatre itself. They are site-specific, because I want to explore the conventions of theatre and make them perceptible. One of these conventions is that theatre is a place of observation and its consequence: evidence.

You could say that theatre is a machine that creates visibility. This fact is already implied in the Greek term *theatron*. The theatre is a visual apparatus. On a stage, people expose themselves to the gaze of others. They let themselves be looked at, evaluated, sometimes criticized. This results in a vulnerability that is also inscribed in this apparatus. Visibility is vulnerability. *Hamlet* is in many ways about precisely this blending of these two qualities. It is about the theatre as a place where the audience observes the performer Julia*n, while Julia*n reflects

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- 2 Although Julia*n now identifies as non-binary, audience members are likely to perceive the body on stage as male. Julia*n began to identify as non-binary only four years after the premiere. For the conception of the evening and during rehearsals, we assumed the character Julia*n/Hamlet to be a male-connoted person who would also be identified by the audience as a "he" —albeit in an unusual, interesting interpretation of "heeness". Since Hamlet is always also Julia*n and Julia*n is always also Hamlet in the performance, the linguistic representation of their gender identity in this lecture is aligned with Julia*n's later decision. It is a change made retrospectively.

and mirrors back this situation of being observed. The play with this situation and the resulting theatrical present is the material of this performance.

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As you know of course, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is itself a play that is self-reflexive in many ways; a quality that is most clearly visible in the famous mousetrap scene, in which the play within the play refers to the mechanisms of the whole drama. A crucial role in Shakespeare's dramaturgy is thereby played by the question of whether the protagonist Hamlet is suffering from a mental illness or whether he is only pretending and, to a certain extent, appropriating the attributes of "sick" and "unpredictable" in order to subvert the governing rules of the court. It is the great "reality question" of this drama, with which it simultaneously demonstrates its own consciousness as a play—that is, as a genre in which actors on a stage pretend to be someone else and thus invite the watching audience to participate in a game about appearance and reality.

This blending between "real" and "acted" and the indistinguishability of these two attributes resulting from the dramaturgy were the key conceptual point for our show, which is documentary and non-documentary at the same time.

[Nikitin shows an excerpt from the play.]

In this scene, Julia *n/Hamlet talks about the death of their father. In audience discussions after the play, audience members have often said that they found this scene uncomfortable. Not necessarily because they felt the description of Julia*n's father's dying to be too intimate—for some it was—but because Julia*n speaks this text in such an supercilious and distanced way. Many feel this stilted, arrogant form is inappropriate for a documentary-biographical text dealing with the real death of a real person. In fact, I feel the same way. It is important to mention in this context that the very first sentence Julia*n speaks after entering the stage at the beginning of the play is similar to the sentence I started my lecture with this morning. This first sentence is: "Good evening. My name is Julia*n Meding".

So the piece begins with the performer introducing themselves with their real name. The audience can deduce this from the fact that this name is identical to the one with which the performer is listed in the credits in the program booklet. This booklet with the non-fictional credits has a certain structural similarity to a passport or ID. A document records the presence of a person and constitutes them in the legal sense. It testifies to their identity. Of course, a program booklet is not a legal document, but since it works with legally authenticated facts and identities—the names of the people and institutions involved—it cannot be detached from the juridical either.

This brief digression is important because in many documentary theatre productions and autobiographical performances of the last 20 years, this presenting of oneself under one's real name is always a decisive dramaturgical moment. It is a sign that the people on stage are beginning to present *themselves*. In a classical

performance of *Hamlet*, it is clear that the person on stage is not Hamlet, but an actor or actress portraying Hamlet. Therefore, the question of whether we “believe” this character hardly ever arises seriously, only whether we find them credible. On the other hand, the moment a real person begins to say things about themselves—or about others—under their real name on a stage, a different frame of reference is opened up.

So there are good reasons, in the sense of the documentary convention that is initiated by such an introduction, to assume that what Julia*n Meding tells about themselves in the piece is indeed autobiographical, or that it could at least—potentially—be autobiographical.

In our *Hamlet*, this question of identity—legal, poetic, documentary and non-documentary identity—continues in other moments that reinforce the audience’s perception that what this person on stage is saying is true. For example, the moment we just saw in which Julia*n said, “I shaved my hair,” and then reported that they also shaved their eyebrows right away. The audience, who have already been looking at this person for about 15 minutes and wondering what it is about their face—apart from the obvious wet-shaven baldness—that irritates them so much realize at that moment that what Julia*n has just told them is actually true. It’s not a mask, it’s not just a text. For good empirical reasons, the audience assumes that hardly any actors and actresses would shave their hair and eyebrows just for the stage—then to have to walk around like that in private. So the performance is really about Julia*n. However, not enclosed in a documented, legitimized, juridical identity, but as a physical presence, a body in time.

In a way, *Hamlet* is more about performance art than theatre: Julia*n really brings their whole physicality into the play as a theme. The moment when they mention shaving their eyebrows is very important. If up to this point the audience was still undecided about the possible biographical character of the play, at this moment at the latest a seemingly inescapable truth emerges through the physical evidence, which seems to underpin the non-fictional character of the whole evening. The shaved hair and eyebrows are the ingredients—one could also speak of circumstantial evidence—that construct Julia*n as a credible witness.

According to the conventions of the documentary, it also seems plausible that Julia*n’s father actually died a few weeks before the premiere of the performance and became the verbatim material that Julia*n and I decided to integrate. It somehow happens to fit in with the fact that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* begins with the protagonist’s dead father. It complements the idea of a double body that is both Julia*n and Hamlet. And, I can say this much, in fact, many audience members thought Julian*s father had died, even friends who are quite close to Julia*n and had not seen him over the preceding weeks owing to the play’s rehearsal schedule.

But it is simpler than that. The story of the dead father is my story. It was my father who died a few weeks before the premiere.

13

As I mentioned this morning, most of my plays are about the people on stage. *Hamlet* is a play about Julia*n. Julia*n is not a classically trained actor, but a musician and performer. *Hamlet* is the third project we've worked on together, but it's the first solo. The show is very much about them—at the same time it's about Hamlet.

When you see Julia*n in this play as a performer entering the stage and speaking to the audience in this special, kind of annoying way, it's hard not to wonder: What's wrong with this person? Why are they pretending? Why are they acting so strangely? Are they really like that or are they just faking? These are also the questions people usually ask about Hamlet: Why does he act so strangely? Is he really like that or is he just pretending?

You could say *Hamlet* is a documentary piece about a person who leaves you wondering if they are really like that or just pretending. It is a documentary work about the construction of identity and reality and about the (im)possibility of a reliable representation of the world. It is a documentary work about the impossibility of the documentary.

Hamlet is both. It is documentary and non-documentary at the same time. The character on stage is Julia*n and Hamlet at the same time. The character is non-Julia*n and non-Hamlet at the same time. The person on stage *is* and *is not* at the same time.

14

To put it a bit more directly and also presumptuously (because what is art without presumption?): *Hamlet* is a proposal of an alternative documentary theatre. Most of the texts in the play are biographical, some are based on my biography, others are connected to Julia*n's biography, but they are all one hundred percent connected to Julia*n's body, which functions as a document in this play itself. The play is an attempt to merge Julia*n and Hamlet into each other, inventing a character that is on the one hand, real, but in any case, ambivalent. The play is an attempt to create a queer version of the documentary. With this, I don't mean a documentary about a queer person, but a form of documentary that is itself queer in its structure.

Even though the evening is unquestionably marked by queer experience in terms of its mindset—I am gay and Julia*n identifies as non-binary—I have held back on the term “queer” in any public descriptions of the piece, for example, in announcement texts. We do not explicitly take up queer discourses in the play, it does not engage in any kind of “queer critique” of society, nor is it about a politicized minority perspective. In their explicit verbalization, queer discourses are often very academic, as is their vocabulary, which sometimes has an exclusivity that I found unproductive for *Hamlet*. One quickly pigeonholes oneself into an identity, which can be right and necessary as a strategy for political activism, but quickly becomes constricting for theatre.

Hamlet is rather an evening about dying, about the vulnerable and transient body, about the construction of reality and identity: “Universal” themes that are also at the center of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The only difference is that now a queer person has appropriated this *Hamlet*. It is precisely this act of appropriation that constitutes all queerness here.

Perhaps this could be a definition of a queer form of documentary: A form of documentation that does not depict reality, but appropriates it in order to participate in and act upon the definition of what “reality” or a “collective norm” is. This has nothing to do with sexuality at first, but a lot to do with the production of self-images and the world images that grow out of them.

15

In terms of the discussion about the montage of materials that we had earlier, I would say: My approach is that I mostly try to stage the documents as part of a larger artistic composition and less to show the documents in the sense of evidence. As you could see, Julia*n has a special way of presenting his alter ego on stage—a particular way of moving on stage, a particular way of speaking, which on the one hand has something aggressive about it, but also something ironic, un-serious. Even if the content is sometimes documentary, its form of expression by Julia*n is anything but sober. To a certain extent, the document enters a kind of feverish state. All this, in turn, contrasts very strongly with the autobiographical, documentary quality of the text. It contrasts with the realism of the documentary. This double, opposing movement is important in both opening up the connection between the civilian person Julia*n Meding and the stage person Julia*n/*Hamlet*.

This *being and not being at the same time* is central. It is a possible formula for sovereignty—for the possibility of deciding one’s own being and its suspension.

16

In most cases, I am interested in working with performers who have knowledge and experience of the stage, but without having been professionally trained and exposed to the ideological influence that most drama schools maintain to this day.

I try to work with the knowledge of the performers, with their biography, and with the knowledge I have as a director, plus the possibilities of the theatre. I attempt to create something that is more than just the sum of our working constellation. As an artist, I am basically not so much interested in referring to an already existing reality but rather in fabricating a new one—a potential reality, a reality imbued with a heightened atmosphere of the potential, of the possible. A reality that is not fictional, not an “as if,” but really real, even if it could only exist within the framework of two hours in the setting of a stage (which is itself, of course, a real setting). This possible reality makes much use of documentary grammar, of the documentary aesthetic, and of an aesthetic of the real. But it shifts it at the same time. This shift is possible with emancipated, sovereign performers, performers who can make decisions, who also have the ability to say “no.” To this day, I find it amazing how few truly emancipated, professionally trained actors

there are; it seems that the system that produces them actually prevents actors from emancipating themselves and achieving sovereignty—which, I suspect, must have micro-political institutional reasons.

In work with Julia*n, it was always about finding out how to become „strong“ on stage. Part of being strong, especially in this play, meant learning how to reject the audience; being able to say “no” and: “I don’t need your approval.” Julia*n performs in a way that doesn’t make people immediately like them. On the contrary. Many viewers report that they dislike this character in the first 30-40 minutes, even find them repulsive in some cases. We lose part of the audience in this first part of the play. The other part stays, either out of curiosity about what happens next with this person, or because they find the repulsiveness attractive at the same time.

After a while, however—this was also part of our bet—the audience that we have not lost begins to get used to this person, they spend time with them and gradually begin to recognize themselves in them—in their anger, in their querulous behavior, in their vulnerability. They realize that this person talks about death, they talk about illness, and about how the body becomes vulnerable. In the end, the audience realizes in a way that it is about them.

So probably the most crucial aspect in *Hamlet* is: Time. Documents can be very static. But you can counteract that stasis by creating a place where the person on stage has the ability to transform. *Hamlet* is not about facts that you put into a montage. Instead, it’s very much about the transformation of Julia*n, it’s very much about the relationship between them and the audience. Julia*n is alone on stage for 90 minutes. You watch this person and spend 90 minutes with them in the theatre space. That’s what’s theatrical about it: the transformation you experience while sharing space and time with—or against—each other. This possibility of transformation, of change, is an essential aspect of this play. It means creating an experience in which reality has the capacity to not be already fixed, to change, to be contingent. Or to put it a little less abstractly: in my experience, the tension of a theatre evening lies in its unpredictability.

17

My initial question when I started working on documentary theatre and with documentary materials about 12 years ago was: how can I liberate the documentary from the legal context from which it comes?

It is the document that ultimately makes us legal persons. Attached to these legal documents are certain markers of our identity, such as our birthday, our name that is given and repeated to us, our gender, the political and social classification of our bodies. The legal document of the passport links us to “our” nationality and associates us with an ethnic background.

Ultimately, this kind of legal documentation classifies our lives into certain categories, and these categories themselves influence our lives, our self-perception, our external perception, our world. These categories are real—in the sense that they are effective. They are connected to the law.

My wish is to see what a form of documentary theatre could be that has broken away from this juridical, representational context and does not force the people on stage—and thus also in the auditorium, because that is what it is all about—into a self-being, into a product of representative violence, but enables them as complex existences and contradictory forms of being.

