Performing institutions

A catalogue of performative practices

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The world is constantly reconfigured. Concepts are defined, and rules for potential action are devised. Universities, academies and independent research institutions enhance and communicate knowledge. Libraries and archives attend to its administration. Parliaments create laws for living and working together. Art may toy with these social machineries and realize their potential to differ.

Therefore, we question the grand narrating machines of society with artistic means: archives, universities and theater – institutionalized concepts of producing history, knowledge, a public community. What emerges is a continuously extended catalogue whose entries are not written down, but are rather staged instead with experimental settings: for instance, the archive project *All That I Have* (2010-2012), the eleven-day performance *The Institution* (2013), the theater production *The Audience* (2015) or the theatrical outing to the countryside with *The Theatre* (2015).

As these performative experimentations are essentially volatile, new potentialities may continuously appear: potentialities that take shape in encounters with guests and visitors. The entries in our scenic catalogue are not conceived as new definitions or even designs of better institutions, but rather they contribute to a continuously extended collection of performative practices which are able to seize and enhance patterns of social action – patterns that have become part of a society's set repertory by means of institutionalization. Through these patterns, a society obtains reassurance, ways of administration and continuation. Playing with these patterns enables us to react to social processes of transformation, to influence or even to generate them: *Performing Organizations, Institutions and Societies*.

The experimental settings that are based on these considerations are described below. They focus on physical encounters of performers, guests, visitors

and research material, but always take place in surroundings that become rhythmical and enhanced through digital processes such as light, sound and video programming. Pre-produced as well as newly-recorded material is transmitted into the theatrical space; it interweaves with the current action and articulates a new temporality. A space that does not (yet) exist emerges in the thresholds between programmed, rehearsed and unpredictable processes, between virtual and actual infrastructures.
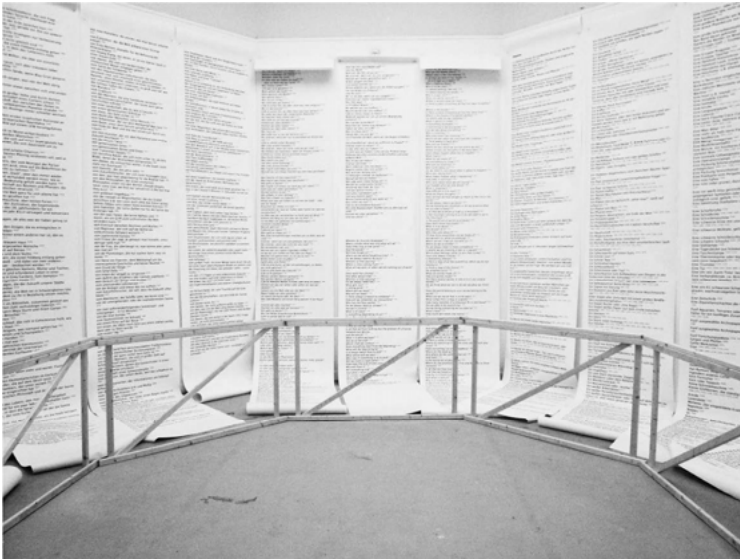
ARCHIVING

Since 2010, performances and walk-in installations have showcased the archive project *All That I Have*[1]. The starting point is a collection of images, sketches and texts, printed on square and labeled documents. Each document relates to one of 170 questions. For instance: 'Who is speaking?', 'What are worlds made of?', or 'Are we alone?'. The questions function as the archive's register. The rest of the material that has been added to the archive during international research and interview travels, relates to one of these 170 questions. In the excerpts taken from texts and interviews, in sketches and photos – by now more than a thousand – different elements are listed: movements, stories, talks, sounds, people, places, and both visible and invisible things. The material is arranged in alphabetical order, is continuously extended, and eventually assembled into films, object collages, books, choreographies, texts, audio guides and space constellations. Each entry in the catalogue again relates to at least one of the numbered questions. Each performance, installation or publication that is based on the documents, objects and lists will be archived again. Visible (and invisible) information is thus translated and multiplied again and again, and becomes part of a ramified network of found (and invented) references.

The visitors of archive exhibitions and performances may trace single questions within this network; they may, with an audio guide, follow stories through the archive (which are sometimes contradictory on purpose); they may find new connections between the archive material; they may wander aimlessly through cross-references, get lost between them; or they may expand the material with their own memories. In a strict sense, *All That I Have* is not an archive. It does

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1   'All That I Have' (2010-2012). Performance series by Herbordt/Mohren, Akademie Schloss Solitude Stuttgart, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt/Main, Museum for Contemporary Art Novi Sad, Sophiensaele Berlin, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, and others, www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/2010-the-archive/.

not document, order and offer accessibility to an actual present. Rather, it collects gazes, descriptions and notations which deliberately enhance the given material. It documents possibilities of things being different, and it overrides the gap between existing knowledge and potentialities to come. These long lists are registers of possible protagonists, of stories that could be told, sounds that could be heard, things that are not (yet) to be seen. *All That I Have* is an inventory of how it could also continue; now, in this moment, and in any other.

Figure 1: 'All That I Have'

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DECENTRALIZING

Our main goal is to establish an extended concept of theater with respect to format, spatial scope and participation. We imagine a theater which integrates other art forms effortlessly, and which for each project focuses on specific aspects according to the context. A theater that may take place anywhere, but that searches vigorously for new configurations of theatrical principles. A theater that purposefully rearranges the dividing lines between those who watch and those who are being watched, those who know and those who don't, those who are involved and those who are not. At the center of its debates, a decentralizing theater takes

the peripheries of the institution of the theater, of urban spaces, and of clear-cut concepts of 'oeuvre' and 'author'.

For instance: *The Theatre*.[2] Every other Sunday, a group of theater visitors sets out for a one-and-a-half-hour bus ride to visit a small village. The honorary village representative welcomes them to the new establishments: a walk-in village chronicle, a guest house, a cinema, a museum for contemporary art and a theater. Each of these miniature institutions is installed in vacant buildings, taking place on the threshold of art and everyday life; the responsibility is mainly in the hands of the villagers. The art museum initiative, for instance, is a platform for local and associated artists. The village centre initiative constructs a new centre, part of which is a cake sculpture[3] in constant transformation. The Michelbach Symphony initiative performs a farewell symphony,[4] specifically composed for the village and its visitors with up to 100 participants. No musical training is necessary. At the same time, the visiting theater audience experiences the whole village as if it were staged. They may observe the village square through the window panes of the community hall while listening to sounds and stories with their headphones. They try to distinguish fact and fiction in the village chronicle, they watch a film about a fictitious village community in the cinema, they follow the traces of people that might have passed through the village in the guesthouse, or they even book a room there – for a night, or for a few months – free of charge and with breakfast at the friendly neighbour's included. A series of discursive festivals at the cooperating theater[5] and in the village[6] accompanies these initiatives and activities. The visitors, together with guests from the arts and humanities, discuss how participation may be introduced as a critical practice, which potentialities can be recognized in the withdrawal of communal institutions in rural regions, and how art may accompany and initiate transformational processes in this context. The project creates decentralizing and self-organized

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2   'The Theatre' (2015). Performative outing to the countryside by Herbordt/Mohren, Theater Rampe Stuttgart/Michelbach an der Lücke, http://www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/theatre/.

3   'Cakeskape' (2015). Steel sculpture by Michl Schmidt, Michelbach an der Lücke.

4   'Michelbach-Sinfonietta' (2015). Composition by Gordon Kampe, Michelbach an der Lücke.

5   'The Village Festival' (2015). Staged symposium by Herbordt/Mohren, Theater Rampe Stuttgart, October 24, 2015, http://www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/2015-the-village-festival/.

6   'The Theatre Festival' (2016). Staged symposium by Herbordt/Mohren, Michelbach an der Lücke, May 22, 2016, http://www.die-institution.org/.

versions of grand machineries of narration in the countryside. The audience travels to the village from all over the place and observes the village's communal structures and everyday practices as art. In these processes, new interdependencies emerge between town and countryside and between invented and existing infrastructures.

Figure 2: 'The Theatre'

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ESTABLISHING

We stage *The Institution*.[7] It takes place in a centrally located apartment and lasts for 11 days, six hours a day, with around 70 active participants: actors, musicians, researchers, artists, visual arts students, a cook and many more. The term 'institution' is understood in its broadest sense: from a set of rules (for instance, to design ways of living and working together in a society) up to the concept of a consolidated organizational, programmatic and architectural narrative (such as the institution of theater).

Yet our institution remains elusive. It is a performance which plays with these definitions. It invents strategies for how to continuously determine anew what an institution could look like. In concrete terms this means: a second floor plan is built into the existing one – slightly shifted against the first one, only rudimentarily realized, and potentially pointing far beyond the original plan, as an exhibited architectural model reveals – including indoor garden, guest room, archive and debate room. For 11 days, the performers make use of the rooms in ever-changing ways and change its characteristics. In an endless combination of tasks (as guest, host, visitor, or witness), places (archive, public square, theater, or home), and situations (work, inhabit, invite, disappear, show, or observe) they play along the lines of a set of basic rules which continually change the rhythm of movements. All sequences have the same timeline. Every eight minutes and thirty-one seconds, a light flickers for twenty-nine seconds and an electronically-distorted sound played back into to room can be heard.[8] At the same time, *The Institution*, positioned in this space-time structure, becomes rearranged every day in its narrative and functional attributions by guests and visitors (artists' interventions, music clubs' rehearsals, workshops and seminars, neighbours' meals). Everything that happens – be it a shared meal, a lecture or a performative play – becomes accessible and criticizable as a performance through these external

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7 'The Institution' (2013). Durational performance by Herbordt/Mohren, project space of Akademie Schloss Solitude Stuttgart, http://www.die-institution.org/index. php/en/the-play/.

8 "Light takes about eight minutes and thirty-one seconds to travel from the sun to the earth. If the light of the sun suddenly expires, eight minutes and thirty-one seconds remain for one last inventory. Eight minutes and thirty-one seconds in order to construct a future that continues differently, or a different history, in order to observe how it becomes darker and darker, and how, after twenty-nine seconds, everything starts again." Excerpt from 'The Institution' (2013). Durational performance by Herbordt/Mohren, Stuttgart, http://www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/the-play/.

markings. Every thirty minutes, a visitor is guided through the rooms. They can observe what happens, and, at the same time, listen to factual background information to invented stories on headphones, find themself alone in an automatized guest room, meet the hosts in the archive, and finally withdraw to the veranda for a private opening celebration.

The Institution combines possible qualities of a (theatrical) institution: It is theater (in which actors stage something for an audience), rehearsal room (where neighbouring music societies rehearse the interpretation of an eleven-day composition), meeting point (for instance, for a neighbour's meal), archive (where its fictive history is invented, collected and continued), seminar room and gallery. It provides a preliminary working context that cooperates with a number of regional and supra-regional institutions of the arts and sciences, as well as with local initiatives – while largely remaining self-organized.

Figure 3: 'The Institution'

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IMAGINING

Performative practices produce a form of something that is (yet) to come. It provides a (preliminary) reality for something that is only imagined by performing it as concrete.

"What I think is fascinating in projects like these is that they are concrete drafts of what establishing could also be. You remain in the conditional here, but in a concrete one. You could, because you can. Because you can do this here temporarily, one could." (Badura 2015: 292)

A series of workshop talks with guests from the arts and sciences called *Performing Institutions*,[9] accompanies *The Institution* and serves as a platform for discursive preparation and critical reflection. The brief talks and discussions ask for the tasks and goals of institutions, for the criticism they might undergo, and how they could be thought of differently. So far, examples from architecture, the visual arts and from law have been debated, as well as the question of institutional critique in the performing arts. The talks are an inherent part of the performance; they merge art with the reflection of art, and they question the staged host institution in turn. With the succession of different contributions invented institutions meet upon staged ones, existing institutions encounter their possible criticism and future. The ambiguity of 'vorstellen' (imagine, perform, represent) lies at the core of the project. The fictitious host institution turns the tables on its visitors and asks them with each of its arrangements: Which other concepts could we think of as institutions? How could we arrange our living and working together? Which other strategies could we find to change these structures?

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9   'Performing Institutions' (2013-2015). Series of talks of the Young Academy at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, initiated by Herbordt/Mohren, Berlin, Frankfurt, Mülheim, Stuttgart, and others, http://www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/2013-the-conversation/, http://www.diejungeakademie.de/en/home/.

Figure 4: 'Performing Institutions'

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TRANSLATING

The concept that holds together the catalogue entries and the performances emerging from them is that of translation. 'Translation' here becomes representative for the following entries that are (still) missing: 'confusing', 'constructing', 'disappearing', 'documenting', 'filling', 'inventing', 'recording', 'remembering', 'repeating', 'reporting', 'representing', 'shifting', 'transforming', and so on. Concepts, themes and scenes are translated from one medium to the other. Facts are translated into fictional documents and vice versa. Observations are translated into memories, memories into texts, texts into movements, movements into social issues, social issues into politics, politics into art. Information multiplies. Perspectives become doubled. Distinctions become blurred. Systems (and their institutions) become rearranged.

WATCHING

The audience may watch what is going on from a safe distance, like in the theater; they may participate in the open space of the stage; and they may also continuously decide between the two options. In this scenic arrangement, clear-cut divisions between watching and participating cannot be drawn. Rather, there is a constant process of negotiation between the two, and they cannot be considered separately. This blurring of boundaries is the project's intention; it demands a constant self-questioning and readjustment of positions from the audience. This

is what *The Audience* (2015)[10] is about, another performance in the series of *The Institution*. Initiatives and societies that form civil society alternatives to federal and communal institutions gather on stage. They act side by side, they each follow individual goals, but together they build the model of a different city within the city. The performances trigger informal processes of discussion, exchange and collaboration that continue beyond the context of the performances. The theater audience is invited to enter the staged, alternative model of a city, to follow its rhythms and routines, to participate in them or to observe them from a distance. A composed sound structure that connects the light and video work, frames the performance. A staged film team films a fictitious documentation of these activities. In the auditorium, headphones and screens broadcast sound and image of the live documentation. The spectators turn into *The Audience* in both senses of the word: as a public participating in its city while critically observing it at the same time – like in the theater.

The contributions, in this text only collected in extracts, form an archive of potentialities of being different; they readjust prevalent structures of retaining and ordering knowledge; they come up with different architectural and organizational solutions for social tasks; they translate that which is present into that which is not yet present; they perform things only imagined as if they were real, and they blur the distinction between watching and participating, between civil society action group and art. The contributions collected in this text present performative actions that might be capable of expanding social structures. They may be described with the term of 'performative practices'. The series around *The Institution* sketches such practices, creates a catalogue whose entries are not linked to definitions, but to scenic arrangements.

In this context, it is always central to implement thresholds of indeterminacy. These thresholds between everyday life, research and aesthetic experience, do not clearly show where representation starts, where the accompanying criticism ends, and where an unexpected encounter, a factual model experiment begins. With the help of digital technology, additional virtual and actual infrastructures of things present, past, and still to come, are connected. And yet, the conditions of all encounters described are staged. They follow an assigned timeline; when a certain period has ended, specific events occur; nothing happens by chance. Such systems of rules, which organize encounters of most different agents, can be called institutions.

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10 'The Audience' (2015). Performance by Herbordt/Mohren, Theater Rampe Stuttgart, http://www.die-institution.org/index.php/en/home/.

When institutions start to protect the awareness of potentialities in their routines and decisions – instead of insisting on solutions once determined – they might turn out to be better institutions:

"SV Institutional change, new models of institutions are possible. It is actually possible to break up institutions and to make something new. (Valk 2015: 303)

ID To dare to have utopian concepts, to risk to make yourself vulnerable or even ridiculous. When you do certain things, you can of course do something wrong, but sometimes it's better to do something wrong than to play it totally safe. (Dressler 2015: 297)

VV To me it seems essential to be able to answer this: If institution is an answer, what was the question? Which social function does an institution have? Which kind of public does it produce? (Vuković 2015: 298)

BH What we would need is not 'no institutions', but rather better ones." (Herbordt 2015: 250)

Within the quotes above, the necessity to perform institutions in alternating ways is marked. The artist's book they are extracted from is called *Vorgestellte Institutionen / Performing Institutions* (Herbordt/Mohren 2015). It concludes:

"In their last minutes, they will carefully establish a square meter for a single visitor one last time. One last time, they will take a circuitous, but nonetheless purposeful route, although there would be a much easier one. They will believe they have indeed briefly seen things in passing, which, however, isn't true. They will report to others about their plans. They won't worry about what of these plans will really happen. At eleven o'clock at night, they will arrive in the entrance hall. They will recount a performance. They will see each other again and it will be a proper celebration. On an easily visible brass plate in the middle of the entrance hall, they will be able to read: The cornerstone of this institution was laid among the esteemed presence of visitors, guests, witnesses, and hosts. Someone will have said: We are not at the end of history. We shouldn't give up writing it, but rather start writing in the first place! They will step into the entrance hall and everything will be brightly lit.
A succession of unexpected sounds.
A change of lighting and a new beginning.
Everything is brightly lit." (Herbordt/Mohren 2015: 306-307)

Translated by Sandra Fluhrer and Nadine Feßler

Figure 5: 'The Audience'

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All Quotations within the text, in alphabetic order of the prenams, from: "Performing Institutions. With contributions from Annemarie Matzke, Bernhard Herbordt, Emanuel V. Towfigh, Florian Malzacher, Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Iris Dressler, Jens Badura, Jean-Baptiste Joly, Jan-Philipp Possmann, Katja Diefenbach, Knut Ebeling, Martina Grohmann, Maximilian Haas, Melanie Mohren, Marcell Mars, Martin Nachbar, Michl Schmidt, Matthias Warstat, Natascha Siouzouli, Pirkko Husemann, Stefan Apostolou-Hölscher, Suresh Kumar, Sandra Umathum, Steve Valk, Ursula Achternkamp, Vesna Vuković." In: Mohren, Melanie/Herbordt, Bernhard (Eds.) (2015). Vorgestellte Institutionen / Performing Institutions. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, p.217 – 307.

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