The Collective That Isn't One

LIGNA in conversation with SANDRA NOETH

SANDRA NOETH: In your performative audio play *Der neue Mensch. Vier Übungen in utopischen Bewegungen* (*The New Human. Four Exercises in Utopian Movements*)[1], which was also presented during the Dance Congress 2009, you strongly focused on concepts of collectivity and the choral. The piece is a collective choreography designed with the help of various traces of instructions and absent references, which the members of the audience experience and execute individually via headphones. How is this relationship between the individual versions of the movement instructions and the formation of the groups organized?[2]

OLE FRAHM: Our question is aimed at the audience as a collective. One starting point was the idea that in theater the audience situation is rarely brought into play. In other words: you always have the presence of a crowd of people, who have more or less randomly met in the auditorium, without really having gone there together. There is a certain recognizable middle-class audience, who are there on a regular basis, but ultimately it is dominated by a necessary anonymity,

1 *Der neue Mensch. Vier Übungen in utopischen Bewegungen*, premiere October 2008, Kampnagel Hamburg.

2 The conversation between LIGNA and Sandra Noeth took place on February 7, 2010 in Vienna. LIGNA is Ole Frahm, Michael Hüners and Torsten Michaelsen and exists since 1997. The group develops situations between theater, dance, installation and performance, which establish new spaces of action, enable unlikely, collective movements and reinvent the role of the audience. With their models of performative radio use, such as the radio ballet, they intervene in the public sphere and question its norms and controls.

so that the individual can focus on what is happening on stage. So there's this collective, which doesn't act, but only observes and which is physically attacked by the stagnant air in the very narrow corridors. We wanted to cast the spotlight on precisely this group – and for this, we of course looked to Bertolt Brecht and his *Lehrstücke* (teaching plays). What interested us most was how the audience can be moved to become aware of itself. Namely by putting them into contact with one another …

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: ... and allowing them to become an audience for the others. The audience is thus split up into four groups, who perform different things parallel. In doing so, they follow four different movement concepts – by Rudolf von Laban, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht and Charlie Chaplin – and because these groups are set in a certain relationship to each other and watch each other during the performance, every participant is both actor and spectator. You see things that you have already performed yourself or which you will be performing and after a while you understand the structure of the piece. We create a situation in which you can, so to say, play with the others, but in which something always evades capture, something that can only be accessed bit by bit through the process. However, it's not necessary the case that you can grasp the totality of the piece after seeing the four parts. I believe there is always something left over that you don't have, which maybe didn't quite work out, which is random for all in each and every performance.

OLE FRAHM: The decisive aspect is that the singular experience of the spectator cannot be replaced. It is always singular. You may be part of a collective, but will always remain within your own realm of how you perceive the space and your own body in relation to everyone else. This subjectivity is something that is created by the headphones. It would be a completely different situation, if we would use a single loud radio. But it is precisely the internalization of the external radio voice, which creates the personal space of perception, which in turn produces one's own irreplaceable relationship with the world.

If I am part of the Laban group for instance and I see how the others raise their hands, I know that we're hearing the same thing and yet nevertheless I don't know for sure how the others interpret what they are hearing. Especially in the case of the Laban swings as presented in the piece, it's not quite clear to amateurs how to execute them. At the Dance Congress it was of course very nice to see how the many dancers present in the audience performed these swings.

On the one hand, there's this singularity of perception, on the other, there is a collective moment of awareness, which is somewhat scary. In the performance,

we repeat the choreography of the first *Radioballett*[3] four times. In the video documentation, we can see how in the first round, in which people are supposed to point upwards, some point up with a straight finger, other with an outstretched hand.[4] Over the course of three-quarters of an hour, the mass forms itself and unconsciously agrees on how each individual should point. This harmonization definitely has something to do with the principle of mimesis. It is the mimetic ability of humans, which evidently articulates itself as a desire to be formed – almost as if there were such a thing as a correct execution of the movements. This mimetic force is also in *Der neue Mensch* – for example in the previously mentioned swings.

SANDRA NOETH: My impression is that failure plays a major role. Thoughts such as: "I'm too slow", "I can't follow", "I missed something in between". In the beginning, the audience is very occupied with trying to understand the structure of the piece and then gradually slips into its role, learns to handle the theatrical space, has maybe already repeated some movements. What surprised me is that apparently the audience usually very quickly accepts what you're suggesting. Even if everyone is free to act as they wish, the authority of the voice in the headphones takes effect. Regarding the dance context and the dance and art historical dimensions that you are addressing as a group, this observation reminds me of choreographic processes of creating unisono and group figures in connection with concepts of subjectivity and individuality as are currently being intensely discussed.

OLE FRAHM: Yes, the work of Rudolf von Laban was one starting point, which had a couple of aspects that we found difficult. But then there are also moments in his work, which really impressed me. When Laban joined those veggie communes near the Lago Maggiore, he developed a radicality in his art, which is truly uncompromising. But which still – and that is the decisive difference to the other three positions – really searched for attaining unity with the cosmos through dance. Laban's modernist 'We-must-return-to-the-fundamental-structures-of-movement' and his conviction that dance needs no music, were very controversial positions in his time. He had a modernity, which far surpassed his

3 *Radioballett. Übung in nichtbestimmungsgemäßen Verweilen* (*Radio Ballet. Exercise in Lingering Outside of Regulations*), Hamburg 2002.

4 See also: *Übung in unnötigem Aufenthalt* (*Exercise in Unnecessary Residency*), Installation, Group exhibition *Art on Air. Radiokunst im Wandel* (*Radio Art in Flux*), Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen 2008/2009.

aesthetic horizon. That, which he really performed, is, in descriptions, often quite banal and above all reactionary, such as reproducing the stereotypical images of the city as juggernaut verses the harmony of nature. Interestingly enough, the performance situation of the movement choirs attest to a kind of grotesque aesthetic that allows associations to Chaplin, Brecht and Meyerhold.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: These four positions handle the subject, this civil subject, the First World War and the social changes taking place in this period, as well as the challenges of an audience, which is largely no longer a middle-class one, very differently. These are not somehow positions that we want to measure with the same yardstick just so as to extract a LIGNA message out of them. Instead it is interesting for us to create a constellation in which their disparities become clear and which also relates to them on a formal level. What we're doing is concerning ourselves with question of subjectivity. How can we conceive a non-authentic, playful subjectivity, which creates itself through the execution of movements? In this respect, the formal structure of the piece always refers back to the positions we have chosen.

SANDRA NOETH: An important aspect is the how you address the body – between the present bodies of today's audience and those of the 1920s. One the one hand, it contains the formulation of various concepts of subjectivity and community, but it also plays with representations, symbolisms and fiction. Moreover, a certain additional moment of translation seems to play a role – through the language, i.e. the original quotes, but also your contemporary narrative relating to the movement concepts. How do these various discourses and levels come together in the piece?

OLE FRAHM: What interests us is how the audience forms this shared body within a discourse, which may not be very accessible for most of them in the beginning. And which is composed of entirely banal things such as shaking hands with the right hand, walking forward, etc. To state it more precisely, we superimpose two discourses. There is the everyday discourse, which creates the bodies, the subjects and which brings into play a specific, never quite conscious form of subjectivity. On the other hand, we try to find out whether and how this can be contrasted with, disrupted by the discourses on the body from the 1920s. To find out what kind of body should shape the new human. The really interesting thing is to what degree artists in the 1920s were completely confident in their own aesthetic and its social power of effect – from the Futurists right down to the writings of the avant-garde until 1933. You didn't just make a good piece; you were imme-

diately connected to the entire universe. The Futurist painters truly believed that they could paint the laws of the cosmos. And by doing so burn them into the consciousness of the spectator. This discussion is very exciting when we realize that certain questions have been forgotten, namely whether certain collective processes can also be changed collectively and not only be changed top down, as for example through physical education in schools. To bring about change truly as a collective, so that moments can occur with which the institutions and discourses that form the body themselves become negotiable. That means the individual in his or her own body is however only relevant if the social situation is also taken into consideration. Theater rarely takes into consideration the physical situation of the spectator, ignores or forgets its physical situation in the space and reduces him or her to his or her audio-visual apparatus or perception.

For me these aesthetic models are so interesting because they began as early as the 1920s to rethink this relationship differently and didn't limit themselves to the statement that reception is active, because things are assembled in perception. Instead they insisted that we ourselves have to be in the situation, must act for ourselves in the situation. And in *Der neue Mensch* we mainly began thinking about how our own subjectivity is constituted by the body. I find the Brecht sentence – we think differently when the feet are higher than the head – quite revealing. It does work in a certain way; when the spatial situation changes, we are physically different.

MICHAEL HÜNERS: Of course that is nevertheless also just simply a statement. But trying it out, that's what's so exciting. To see whether something happens, to test it. And then it's also quite important that it is still the body acting as the site of resistance. In other words, we could use this body as a starting point to arrive at a political body. What we're looking at in the piece is a social issue. The question of a utopia, of renegotiating society anew or simply projecting it differently. And in this, the body is of course very crucial.

OLE FRAHM: We also discussed whether the piece might be problematic in this day and age. You can't even go to the theater without being accosted. Like those websites, where you have to write your opinion. And that is exactly where the distinction lies. Namely that there is a difference between what we do and this activation of the spectator by the media, which is based in principle upon collecting statistics on the viewer as consumer, in a manner of speaking. In our case there's no surplus value in this respect. On the contrary: you can simply begin to think about what kind of society you want to live in generally.

MICHAEL HÜNERS: These four positions are also outlines. We don't want to lay claim to the fact that if you assemble these four positions something completely new could emerge. And we could question the selection. Why did it have to be exactly these four positions, it could also have been done in a different way.

OLE FRAHM: These four really very different positions surprisingly share an aesthetic, which was not yet authoritarian in the 1920s, and converges on the grotesque, as Chaplin articulated it in his early films, in the display of gesture. The notion of the new human is often prematurely associated with totalitarian regimes. The aesthetic of the grotesque with its discovery of stasis, of interruption doesn't toe that line, however. Laban accordingly dispensed with grotesque elements in his choreographic work under the Nazis. In the course of our research, we discovered that our own aesthetic has also always contained a certain moment of the grotesque.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: Ultimately we have always worked in the style of the grotesque. Even in our first performative pieces, we used the radio in such a way that it didn't demand from the people that they really act out theater. It was always about performing gestures. As for example at the Main Train Station in Hamburg, where we presented the *Radioballett* and wanted to let the people perform gestures that subverted or transcended the regulations of the space.

For us, it has always been about discovering that movement always has a real effect on the space even when it is performed mechanically. You don't have to be the person sitting down, so to say; you don't have to perform what you're doing. You simply do it and that in itself has effect. Basically, it is always an invitation to non-emphatic acting, which seeks to challenge you to observe yourself doing something instead. And to see what happens when you do. It's a very Meyerhold-like thought. The movement is what matters and the truly conscious execution of this movement and then the reflection of the effect of the entire thing. And that is – I would say – already an aesthetic, which is entirely more grotesque than any kind of emphatic aesthetic. This is also always our answer to the questions: "You create robots or soldiers, don't you …" and "Isn't that dangerous?" – We would answer with Brecht from the *Messingkauf* (cf. Brecht 2003) that investing emotional energy in the actor or in the Fuehrer, to whom Brecht comes in the end, is ultimately what makes one passive and what is so dangerous. And he responds to that with an aesthetic, which refuses to do exactly that. Which instead discovers the possible distance more in one's own acting. What we're also trying to do is open up the space by playing with subjectivity.

SANDRA NOETH: This detachment in the historical text sections, the voices of the narrators, but also the formal detachment in the piece's performance concept seem to me to be very important and the idea that an encounter can only become possible through this detachment, that only through distance is infection possible. What is interesting in this respect is also that radio as a medium produces diversion. If we read the choreographic as a focused inscription, then we are confronted in your practice with that fact that many things – spaces, structures of receptivity and time – are being dissolved and sent back to their original location and that the location of the choreography is constantly changing and shifting.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: We began working with the term choreography, when he started calling them 'choreographies of forbidden and excluded gestures'. We don't choreograph in the sense that we arrange the participants in the space and purposefully create movement in most sections of the piece. It can happen that a very direct movement materializes, there is the alignment along the outside edges of the space, an orientation towards the middle, and this is in principle choreographed without us really specifying and determining positions. This kind of thing has to create itself in some other way. By all means, there is a certain composition of the space, whereby the main impression of the piece is that actually very diverse things are happening at the same time and all mixed up with each other and that the positions also occasionally get confused and don't comply with an overall view, but instead are carried out parallel in a disorderly fashion.

MICHAEL HÜNERS: That is why the term choreography is somewhat difficult, because it can't be thought of as a central perspective directed at a single viewer. It is more about the possibilities of the space or rather the possibility of creating certain situations within the space between and together with these four separate groups. And that is why we don't really have the intention of creating a choreographic scheme for a single spectator.

OLE FRAHM: The four positions each follow a different sequence. It is therefore as if we were talking about four pieces. The first position shapes the perception of the piece. Accordingly the overall dramaturgy presents itself different depending on which position that it. At the same time there is a precise rhythm in each of the four repeating parts. At the premiere, we were surprised at how long the Laban people did their swings in that part. It was great for the spatial situation, because it established a funny consistent structure. At the same time, we fixed certain clear points – especially in the stage performance at the end of each re-

spective part. We chose a very simple situation, namely two rows of chairs, which structure the space, emphasized by a spotlight, which illuminates the middle of the space. Moreover it is striking how people never go into the corners of the space, even when the space is completely illuminated. They orient themselves towards the center. In contrast, it's different in the walking part; everyone walks along the edge on purpose, so as not to bother the others in the middle. But there are also a few things that even today aren't quite clear. Chaplin claps his hands on the stage and Meyerhold should – as practiced beforehand – jump. But that only happens in rare cases.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: I really like it when the last jump by the Meyerhold people is accompanied by the humming of the Brecht people. This creates a rhythmisation. And really there are a great number of overlapping moments, which converge by accident. Ultimately we just brought those things together, which clearly refer to one another – the one side, which does something and the other, which produces the effect. The rest is simply not so precisely choreographed.

MICHAEL HÜNERS: The question is simply, whether a piece shouldn't always have unintended openings, intervals, accidents, interruptions. – A precisely timed, fully choreographed piece aspires towards being something completely self-contained.

OLE FRAHM: It really is difficult. We developed various notations, while writing the piece. In the end it was the sound program, which emerged as the most precise form of notation, this strict synchronity of the track. For us the technical element plays a large role. What situations does the radio create, which no other apparatus can create? Our choreography was based on the question of how the apparatus can be used to produce a particular situation that exceeds one's own power of imagination.

SANDRA NOETH: In this light maybe the choreographic as a space-time structure applies more to radio than to a concrete movement score. At the same time 'reading' notation via hearing demands a more specific form of translation than for example deriving movements from one body to another. What is it that is being transmitted? Words, text, references and ideas, but also simultaneously rhythm and pitch of the voice …

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: It is interesting that a movement also has to be described very differently when it is intended for a situation such as this one, in which it simply runs linearly past the ears and the listener then has to execute it. That is also something we firs had to experience for ourselves. You can brilliantly write the movement down on paper, so that it sounds good when you read it. But when you hear it, it doesn't work. First of all, the capacity to absorb information is very limited. In the Laban part for instance, three orientations in the space are explained and that already is quite a lot of information. Then there's the problem of missing parts. Is it then at all possible to retain one's orientation, can you then still continue?

OLE FRAHM: According to Brecht, a great deal of the pleasure comes from precise interaction with the apparatus. Of course we try to build up tension between the things that must be executed very precisely, where you really know that you're doing them correctly and those things, which are simply somewhat less clear. If we had open, poetic instructions the whole time, then people would think, "What do they want from me?". And on the contrary, a constant imperative would be just as boring. The format of the *Radioballett* has been presented by other people on various occasions and it has been interesting to see that, from our perspective, if something didn't really work aesthetically, it was either because it had transformed into a kind of street theater or into a pure simple imperative. It is a fine line that we work on. I truly believe that our subjectivity is constructed in such a way that there is pleasure in the correct execution of something, but that it also needs this detachment.

SANDRA NOETH: … in order to still identify it as a game, as acting?

OLE FRAHM: Brecht said, "It is possible to also live in third-person". There have to be these audience spaces that are indeterminate. For me, one of the most interesting moments is when Brecht rebuilds the set out of chairs. In this moment, it is all about the audience reaching consensus among each other and how the space is truly restructured into something new. These are the moments in which we ask ourselves, what really is our responsibility in continuing to allow this piece to be enjoyable. And that also brings up the question whether there are people who don't participate at all. And if there are such people, are they spoilsports, almost in a Chaplin-esque sort of way, precisely because they don't take on any form of responsibility? On such a note, we can also reflect the institutions that create our subjectivity. Some truly believe in their subjectivity as citizens – I am utterly original, I am not replaceable. Of course, this runs contrary to our ap-

proach. And it is quite surprising to a degree, because it is a theory of subjectivity, which is fundamentally embedded in the 19th century and is apparently still being cultivated, instead of making use of the freedoms provided by the 21st century.

SANDRA NOETH: There is after all also the question why the piece is made for a theater institution and not for a different space.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: We made the piece for the stage or rather for a theatrical space precisely because the piece deals with that same space of theatrical reception.

OLE FRAHM: We resisted the stage for a long time. In the first piece that we created for Kampnagel, the stage there seemed too small for the wild strike that we wanted to retell. We thought that we had to leave the theater, go out into the public sphere – in other words, interrupt the representation, bring the actual materiality of the body into play. Which also happens now, but on the interior, as we have discussed. Brecht was very helpful in this regard by pointing out this function of theater: you have a spatial situation, which is completely artificial in its artificiality, but which – if its artificiality is taken seriously – suddenly establishes entire discourses. Of course, we could perform *Der neue Mensch* in schools, for example, but that would be a completely differently affair.

TORSTEN MICHAELSEN: Then we would really have to make a piece about school. *Der Neue Mensch* is a piece about the audience and therefore it makes sense to perform it on a stage and to see what form of audience could actually come after an audience – so the proposition of the positions from the 1920s – which has simply outlasted itself, wasn't able to follow through with its transformation in mass society. Thus the audience is called upon to put into practice a new approach. This is exactly what Meyerhold and Brecht were looking into. And Laban ultimately did so as well, by letting the audience disappear altogether. And Chaplin too – by presuming that an audience simply needed a really good joke every 30 seconds in order to be emotionally involved.

REFERENCE

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