

Stand-up-and-speak vol. 1.-20 minutes of fame: The politics of post-spectacular theater

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“Don’t make political theater – but make theater politically!” was the claim of post-dramatic theater rejecting the traditional rules of drama as anachronistic and founding a new, performative esthetic. A theater would be political if it reflects its own prerequisites. Post-dramatic theater brought up spectacular new forms: It made its subjects political by inviting reality into the theater, blasting dichotomous opposites (like stage-audience, actor-observer and so on), activating spectators, and rediscovering the public sphere. Today it is esthetically established. But the reality post-dramatic theater had stood against has changed radically since then. Today “social networks” have incorporated the actively participating, spontaneously creative “spectator” for their purposes: We are “living” in a cross-linked mode, encouraged by all kinds of online-structures and services to perpetually communicate, declare

ourselves, without consciousness of being interlaced in economic policies. “Activation of the spectator” – following Brecht – proves to be a system- and economy-conformist attitude in a society where all of public and political life has become a spectacle of all for all. So what is the end of post-dramatic reflection today when reality as its prerequisite isn’t available anymore? In an epoch when the convention of pseudodemocratic all round-participation turns out to be the social and esthetic rule, a “post-spectacular theater” – as the theorist André Eiermann puts it – which wants to be called political must dare and attack its own form and break of its own esthetic limitations, i.e. attack the spectacle itself.

Key words: Post-spectacular theater, post-dramatic theater, the political in theater, face-to-face communication, absence.

As a theater maker I am interested in theoretical questions that, in the beginning, focused on the search for the authentic actor and his way of presentation, while later on I concentrated more and more on the working and producing process. This view upon the creative process led me to discuss the possibilities and conditions of authenticity, reality, and perception and their interactions within the social and theatrical discourse. By interlacing theory and practice I developed an increasingly critical consciousness towards my own working methods, my own materials, and towards framing the concepts of the political or social aspects in my work.

Thus I am interested in the relation of politics and discourse in practice. The invasion of external reality in theater and, reversely, the increasing theatricalization of social reality have profoundly changed our perception of what is real and what is fictional. In this context, performative theater puts forward working with the theatrical situation as such and its social context. “Real life”, biography as art is being worked on by many theater makers in various documenta-

ry approaches. But reflecting itself led to the criticism that the new theater has a tendency to be apolitical.

The political aspect in artistic work, however, shows in the fact that this altered perception is thematized, and therefore the functioning of the politics and the formal discussions of theater; this is the case, for instance, when the actors of the German author and theater director René Pollesch talk about acting as “achievement training for capitalism” (Primavesi, 2011: 63; my translation).

In his 2002 published essay *Wie politisch ist Postdramatisches Theater?* [How political is post-dramatic theater?] Hans-Thies Lehmann tried to respond to the criticism that post-dramatic theater is only an esthetical, noncommittal or formalistic game, but has nothing to do with enlightenment, morals or consciousness of one’s own responsibility.

A theater approaching subjects from public political discourse and thus representing critical views, is this then in contrast political theater? Lehman says clearly *no*: “the fact that politically repressed people enter on stage, doesn’t convert the stage into a political one.” (Lehmann 2011: 35; my translation)

Analyzing the innovations and infringements of post-dramatic theater, Lehmann refers to Guy Debord’s concept of “spectacle society” (1967), where citizens are depicted as “passive spectators for whom the public and political becomes a show” (Lehmann, 2011: 38; my translation). A theater that is engaged in a relation to the “genuinely political” must then esthetically interrupt its own rule of show-making and at least question the spectators’ assumed innocence in relation to the scene or action and thematize their presence and latent co-responsibility. The political, therefore, lies in the form, in the self-reflexiveness, the *How* of the performance.

Post-dramatic theater has initiated a new discourse that refers to a change in media communication and the merging of the real and the virtual in society. This discourse gave way to an opening and a dissolution of classical dichotomies concerning drama and theater, subject and object. Theatrical resources such as body, voice, space and time were no longer subject to a narrative context but became intrinsic values in themselves becoming present and self-reflecting, that is, getting rid of their representative function. Another important innovation was the “rediscovering of the relational dimension of theater art” (Lehmann 2014: 33; my translation), expressed in the opening of the theater framing concerning the traditional separation of stage and audience: the audience was actively taken into the theatrical event on stage by direct face-to-face communication.

Following Hans-Thies Lehman, the political comes into play only where – as is the case in post-dramatic theater – there occurs a demolition of acoustical and visual customs, that is, when something comes into presence that irri-

tates the perception of the present audience: “the political in theater cannot be thought of but as the interruption of the political and as a practice of exception.” (Lehmann, 2011: 35; my translation).

But what once had been the “political” today may be political no more. Former infringement of rules as well as disruption of a dramatic situation, e.g. by breaking the fourth wall, and irritation of audience perception and, consequently, its activation establish a new “rule” in many theaters today. The political manifests itself, however, transgressing valid rules, in the breaking of its esthetical limits. At the beginning of the 1990s such surprise would still happen, for example, by the recovered participation and activation of the spectator. In the 1990s, post-dramatic theater was thereby political: then, it did break and change by that esthetics the usual dramatic rules.

This post-dramatic theater that once portrayed itself as the liberation from the predominance of drama, when the dramatic situation did not any longer match the complexity of the present world, today cannot anymore unsettle our perception habits. The corporeal co-presence of audience and actors, genre-transgressions, separation of signifying and signified, self-reflexivity, and the triumph over the representational function of theater – they all by now are established as part of post-dramatic esthetics.

Social reality, however, such as the patterns in which it is perceived, have changed during a critical reflection of post-dramatic theater. The “spectacle” has, to put it bluntly, become the mode of social encounter, “and therefore it is this very type of participation that the spectacle has come to discover for itself” (Eiermann, 2012: 141; my translation). The spectacle of social encounters as well as the spectacle that takes place unreflectively on today’s stages. Today’s communication structures of social media such as Facebook etc. are no longer facing a passive spectator. We are, in the contrary, permanently animated to publish our opinions and attitudes. “The slogans of spontaneity, the creative expression of one’s own personality etc. have been adopted by the system... Non-alienated spontaneity, expression of personality, self-realization – all this by now non-intermediately serves the system.” (Žižek, 2005: 8; my translation)

The activation of the spectator, having been re-discovered, following Brecht, by post-dramatic theater, therefore today will not establish any rule-breaking but turns out to be, in the contrary, a system- and marketing-conformist attitude.

Thus face-to-face-communication in contemporary theater supports mainstream structures. As a consequence of this social development the formerly provoking post-dramatic theater loses its challenging critical power.

In his thesis *Post-spectacular Theater* the theorist and former student of the

University of Applied Theater Studies in Gießen, Germany, André Eiermann (2009), applies Lehmann's concepts and the structural principles of performative theater to today's situation, thus continuing and criticizing post-dramatic theater. By the term post-spectacular theater he refers to theater models that in the "age of permissiveness" (Žižek, 2005) unfold an actual self-reflective critical potential, that is, a theater that develops new and socially adequate forms of criticism and transgression.

Eiermann presumes, like Lehmann, that if we talk about political theater, we are not talking about holding certain political viewpoints and convictions. A distinction between political and daily politics or policy or party politics was attempted, above all, by French contemporary philosophy. In the programmatic text by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe *Rejouer le politique* (1981) the political is conceived as a becoming reflexive of own thinking, that is, if it questions itself in terms of its own political conditions and conditionality. Following Lehmann, theater is political when it breaks through its own esthetical limitation, and examines and changes itself.

Jacques Rancière introduces the concept of "division of the sensual", meaning the division made by the dominating regime or system. Political means to him to achieve a "re-division of the sensual" (2002), that is, when the traditional order of things is at stake. He denotes the established common and normative rule, esthetics, and order as "police". This is the backdrop of Eiermann's sharpened criticism of post-dramatic theater and his theory of a post-spectacular theater. For Lehmann, the order of dramatic theater would correspond to the police of a theater, the esthetical limitations of which post-dramatic theater tries to overcome. But now that post-dramatical esthetics have grown an established normative, that is, have advanced to become the order of things, the police themselves, then their anti-spectacular strategies are not critical and political anymore.

Following Eiermann, the critical potential of theater today consists in new distances between actor (stage) and audience, thus interrupting, with the background of today's social encounters, the rule of immediate communication of face-to-face communications and their idea of perpetual presence.

For Eiermann, this distance is a necessary consequence of an "interruption of the rule" (Lehmann, 2011: 36) and a prerequisite for the creation of a triangle that consists of actor, spectator, and a third instance. By means of this "mediating or interfering third" the bodily interaction of performers is inevitably upstaged, and the immediacy of interaction as well as the immediacy of the co-presence of actors and spectators yield to imagination and inner vision. In this sense the "incidence of performance", as the German theater theorist Erika

Fischer-Lichte (2004) puts it, depends not so much upon the immediate encounter of actors and spectators and on the presentation of an action, but on the framing established by the *mise en scène* and the expectations and projections of the audience that partly exist before the performance has begun.

A result of this context are complying strategies of post-spectacular theater such as the interruption of the mutual perception of actors and spectators, pausing, uncertainty, distance, silence, or retreat, that form a counterpart towards our hyperactive, affirmative network societies and thus, in a theater performance, bring about the opportunity to reflect critically current social reality.

Eiermann's thesis of the post-spectacular concerns another important issue of recent theater sciences, that is, the opening of the very performance and theater concept, also denoted as the *Entgrenzung der Künste* [Dissolution of the boundaries of the arts]. According to this new theater concept theater is no longer a performance of actors and a staging of dramatic oeuvres but rather a space with undefined limits of theater, dance and performance modes, installation, and exhibition – in all possible facets (Eiermann, 2009: 405).

“Post-spectacular theater shows with veritable emphasis – for example, when its performances come close to installations – that this dissolution of boundaries doesn't work only in one direction, performing arts approaching fine arts as well as vice versa” (Eiermann, 2009: 37; my translation). The transgression of genre boundaries as initiated by post-dramatic theater is being radicalized by no longer delimiting the arts and theater studies concepts of performance and “œuvre” against each other but to accept that it has become difficult to reduce the post-spectacular phenomenon to “applying to entirely other conditions than the production and reception of artifacts” (Fischer-Lichte, 2004:20; my translation) For this reason, Eiermann proposes elsewhere to use the notion of “post-performative turn” since the opposite “œuvre” vs. performance has become questionable by the respective “self-reflexive performative activity” in either case. For the “drawback in passivity [is] the first critical step, the very play-off of absence and the interruption of supposed vis-à-vis of actors and spectators constituting the true resistive gesture” (Eiermann, 2009: 13; my translation).

Examples of such theater models characterized by dissolved boundaries, the very *lack* of action and, instead, an exposition of the spectators to a “void centre”, are *Call Cutta* (2006) by the theater collective *Rimini Protokoll* that had been announced as *The World's first Mobile Phone Theater*. In this work there were no actors, no plot, no set design. Instead, the spectator received a mobile telephone that would ring, and an unknown voice would involve her or him in a long conversation leading her or him through Berlin. Likewise the performance artist David Weber Krebs exposes the spectator of his performance *This*

Performance (2004) to total absence and, therefore, to her- or himself. During 20 minutes the scene stays entirely empty, an offstage voice articulating what a performance normally should achieve, e.g.: “This performance is about to start. This performance is about to tell a story. This performance is about to activate a process. This performance is about to catch attention”, etc. What Fischer-Lichte (2004: 11) described as a constitutive element of a theater performance – the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and the presentation of an action – is not fulfilled here; instead the spectators are being confronted with absence and an emptiness that is to be understood as reduction of presence. The empty centre of attention is encircled by their imaginations and fantasies, and the performance takes place independently of these elements. *Call Cutta* shows the absent performer as voice on the mobile phone, in *This Performance* as voice from offstage.

Therefore these dissolutions of boundaries are going hand in hand with a conceptual rearrangement or reconfiguration of the relation between ‘performance’ and staging ‘mise-en-scène’. The opposition, still postulated by theater studies, of *œuvre* and performance thus becomes obsolete, for “perception – and thus action – always occurs in the form of exchange processes between the subject’s and object’s properties of things as well as the persons involved” (Gronau 2010: 39; my translation). Then, as soon as the former centre of the performance is absent, that is, “the mutual perception between actors and spectators is interrupted, the ‘third party’, so to speak, enters the stage (...) and interferes as a mediating third party between actor and spectator” (Eiermann, 2009: 23; my translation).

So, by means of the mediating “third party” the bodily presentation/interaction of performers is upstaged giving way to the force of fantasy and imagination. Related strategies in post-spectacular theater are, for example, interruptions of mutual perception of actors and spectators present, perspective relativization of the present partner of communication/interaction, the interlocutor’s deformation, or even her/his complete absence. According to Fischer-Lichte, who separates the concept of performance from that of the *mis-en-scène*, the notion of staging (*mis-en-scène*) thus comes to the fore again – because staging defines the actual framing conditions in which the performance will take place. According to Eiermann (2009: 39) staging is a process that does not affect the audience by way of an esthetic form but rather affects them even before they get into it, yet having specific information and expectations prior to the beginning – which makes staging a strategic process.

Post-spectacular theater using its strategies may endow a critical potential regarding today’s recent stratification tendencies in society, affecting not only

the esthetical but also ethical issues by construing a nexus between digital communication media that encourage participation, such as Facebook, and the power shift towards a small number of large scale enterprises that control the market and the digital media, such as Google. These communication systems propagandize the free, democratic access of all participants who even get the more rewarded the more active they are. “The mighty often prefer critical participation to keeping silence – only to involve us in a dialog in order to ensure that our uncanny passivity be suspended” (Žižek, 2005: 8; my translation). The esthetical strategies of refusal and absence refer to these very points described by Žižek. Such withdrawal into passivity could install a new freedom in an existential sense and as an antithesis to today’s economic concept of freedom that only exists in the reduced form of economic choice. Such new theater models, however, convey the hope-giving existential chance *in the middle of nowhere* as a potential to freedom.

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