

André Lepecki

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“My understanding of dance is not so much prescriptive as it is cartographic”

André Lepecki (New York) in conversation with Franz Anton Cramer on curatorial decisions

What was the profile you wanted to give this year's IN TRANSIT? What would have been the most important motifs for reorienting the festival?

There were two major concerns. I knew that I wanted to make both editions (1) relate to each other. The connecting element in both would be the questions: How does performance art today tend to become vernacular? How does it become a global force? How does it recast notions of art and politics in the context of our neo-imperial moment? It is not a big secret that Performance art, even though some kind of master narrative and genealogy always tries to bring it back to NYC, has emerged everywhere with incredible force. In the late 50s and throughout the 60s we see manifestations of it from Japan to France; from Germany to Brazil; from the US to Eastern Europe.

This was my point of departure for both festivals at large: how to make a festival that is dedicated to exploring the political force of performance art in a planetary context? How to curate a festival able to display Performance Art as a force traversing all sorts of artistic practices today – from film to painting, from dance to theatre, from installation to theory? With these questions, the curatorial proposal last year focused on the notion of “Singularities”. I felt I had to do a festival that had to be very radical in its affirmation of performance as a political, global, and aesthetic force. The whole program privileged many small performances. The use of the word “singularity” was not about insisting on the “uniqueness”, on the individual aspect – but on presenting works proposing “un-qualifiable” events, works that were so many critical points, breaking or suspending all sorts of perceptual and critical framings.

This year my goal was to continue pursuing the vector opened in 2008. But since the “turn” had been performed already, I felt that we could now go one step further, and present works, authors, artists that in themselves would already display a more complex notion: how objecthood and live performance exchange place in contemporary practices, and how this is also a political event. So in a way, it is almost as though there was an education of the audience already last year, with a radical intervention of sorts.

In 2009, I wanted to fill up the whole House (2), to saturate the building with long durational events, to make it into a very active environment (even when the activity was one of quiet contemplation). Because usually the House, as a “container”, is a desert of modernity: empty, full of marble, a hollow shell, glass everywhere, sound echoing ... It is a difficult building to present performance in. It was never designed for this purpose. So we had to come up with solutions that could dialogue with the specific characteristics of the building. The notion of “resistance of the object” helped. I drew directly from the work of critical and performance theorist Fred Moten, in his ground-breaking book *In The Break: the aesthetics of the black radical tradition*.

In this book, the project of a radical aesthetics in performance is tied to the observation that within the colonialist project of production of reality, some human beings were given the status of objects – but that these objects could, and did, talk, dance, sing, paint, compose and through these actions, resist. The resistance of the object is thus a resistance through performances of any subject who has been deemed a–significant, in–significant, irrelevant, abject... a thing.

On the other hand, this resistance of the object also comes from the unbearable accumulation of all those commodities and things which have been deemed discardable, unusable, silent, inert, trashy – but whose concrete persistence in surrounding and defining us reveals a whole political condition of the contemporary. So, forms of theatricality, of performativity, and of embodiment were brought to the fore during IN TRANSIT 2009: rabbits; Martians; drag–queens; Martian–drag–queens; puppets; dolls; plants and flowers, thousands of soap bubbles, and blood performers... Between the a–significant human subject and the inert discarded thing, resistance emerges as that force of presence which makes performances truly transformative.

Resistance implies persistence – an insistence of the artwork to make itself present. In live performance, persistence is achieved through the temporal strategy of creating long–duration performances. Thus, we had María José Arjona with her three–part piece *Remember to Remember*, 2008, working during eight hours per day, every day of the festival, creating a splattered, ephemeral, enormous painting by blowing red soap bubbles against white walls of a space designed by Christin Vahl. But also we had Yingmei Duan with her more than four hour long piece *Rubbish City*, 2008 (where 5 tons of clean garbage were brought to the gallery in order to create a phantasmagoric environment). We had Melati Suryodarmo with the five hour long *Perception of Patterns in Timeless Influence*, 2007, a piece with rabbits, Suryodarmo, an opera singer, a viola player, and time. We had Trajal Harrell with his eight hour long sleep performance *Tickle the sleeping giant # 9 (the ambient piece)*, 2009. Hooman Sharifi was in residency with his Impure Company for the whole festival, and created an island in the middle of the pond in front of the HKW building where they worked daily in rain or sun on notions of animality (a small boat could carry the audience there, if they so wanted...). Because there were always these works going on in the building, including an installation by Adrian Piper, an interactive “peep show” by Allen Weiss and Michel Nedjar, an interactive environment by Julie Tolentino, two video projections of Nevin Aladag, the profile of this year’s festival was more like an exhibition – but one that, thanks to live performance, created an alliance between objects and subjects.

Do you have a definition of “Dance” when you invite work?

My definition of dance, and I have written this in several places, is this: dance *is* what it *wants to do*. I always think about Dance, but my understanding of it is not so much prescriptive as it is cartographic. When Maria José Arjona is doing this apparently very conceptual performance, blowing the soap bubbles in an environment built in the Grand Foyer for 8 hours a day, she has a capacity to pace her gestures in the way she blows the bubbles which becomes very choreographic – which in turn complicates very nicely the theatricality of how she inhabits her space and carries on her task.

Concerning the motto of last year’s edition, Singularities: It is a topic that seems to imply a stepping aside from the traditional historicising mechanism. Rather than seeing one thing following the other, the Singularity would rather stand for the uniqueness of any kind of artistic expression that only afterwards can be put into historic contexts. In the programming you seem to revisit the notion of historicity in dance and performance.

It is important to realise that a Performing Arts festival is also a genre – with its own protocols and imperatives, which frankly sometimes I have some difficulty in realizing how strong they shape expectations. One of those protocols – which might seem really ridiculous, but is truly engraved in most people’s expectations – is that the bigger the performance room, the more important the performance! How could we react to that? How to make one see that works presented in a small gallery with 15 seats only are as relevant, “important”, “great” than the ones being presented in the grand auditorium with 750 people? This is an ongoing challenge!!

Another protocol in the performing arts festival as a genre is the compulsion to present the latest of the latest. So the question of historical context, of historicity, is very interesting: When I asked Sankai Juku whether they would be interested in presenting their work for the first time in Berlin, it turned out that most of their performances would not fit into the stage available at HKW’s Auditorium. The only performance that would be suitable for the technical conditions of the Auditorium was “Hibiki”, a piece from 1998. So we invited this performance because in many ways it made a lot of sense for this year’s topic, “Resistance of The Object”. It is well known how Butoh departs from a radical critique of the human as category of existence, how Butoh blurs the fine line between animal and person, living and dead, object and subject. And what’s more, Butoh is one of the inescapable moments of 20th century performative turn, with a profound, even direct relationship to Performance Art. But, even if these aspects make the piece in line with the topic of the festival, then there is this unwritten protocol about “the latest of the latest”. And of course I was asked: “How can you open a festival with a piece that’s ten years old?”

But you were allowed to go for this piece, apparently ... ?

Yes, I was – the HKW has this incredible trust in their curators, and I am thankful for this. But the fact of this objection reveals a very strange predicament in curating performing arts, as compared to visual arts. I am currently co-curating a section of an exhibition on dance and performance for the Hayward Gallery in London. Speaking with the Chief Curator, Stephanie Rosenthal, it is amazing to see how she is curating her show: she will include commissioned new works by La Ribot, or Xavier LeRoy but will place them side by side with pieces from the 1970s by artists such as Bruce Nauman or Lygia Clark. The inclusion of these works from the 1970s is not to give the public a “historical context.” These works are there because they are relevant works of art for the curatorial concept. In a way, there is a contemporaneity which persists in the work, which is independent from the time the work was created, but immanent to certain characteristics of the pieces themselves and to our own social moment. But in live performance, such an approach is not obvious at all! So when presenting “Hibiki” – I am almost forced to make a “historical statement,” of justifying historically the presence of this ten-year old piece in the festival. Which was not at all my intention! I was just showing work relevant to the festival!

You were not concerned with historical aspects in the program?

Not really historical aspects, no. But with historicity as a performance tool perhaps. For instance, “Resistance of The Object” is the expression used by Fred Moten, when writing about the work of Adrian Piper. Obviously, I was hoping Piper would contribute to the festival, which she did with an installation *Everything # 5.2* (2004 [2009]), and by showing her film *Shiva Dances at the Art Institute of Chicago* and answering questions from the audience after the screening. But her presence in the festival is not about giving a “historical aspect” – but to create an assemblage with the work of Fred Moten, with the other works in the festival, and to complicate the very notion of historicity in performance art. Another project using historicity as performance tool was Julie Tolentino’s project on archiving. In the first days of the festival Tolentino archived contributions from the public coming to the HKW. But then she also performed a piece where she “archives” in her body a solo work by Ron Athey. Here, unsuspected aspects of historicity emerged.

The performance involves the shedding of blood, and it seems that just by Athey being HIV positive, a lot of resentments came up, I was very surprised by this. It seemed we were back to the hysteria of the early 1980s when nobody was quite sure how the virus was really transmitted. Very strange, but very telling in terms of performance, memory, social amnesia, fear, corporeality, and the objecthood of the body ...

It is rather obvious what element of previous editions of IN TRANSIT you kept (the Lab, non-public encounters, working atmosphere). At the same time it seems that you have been going more into performance art and less in to what Keng Sen had called "contemporary folklore" or "global clubbing" and urban cultures.

The festival had a brilliant structure that Ong Keng Sen and Johannes Odenthal devised when they first started IN TRANSIT. The Lab is key. In the last two editions, I worked closely also with the Free University of Berlin and with the HZT (3) and we had seminars here at the HKW during the festival. We also invited students from APT (4) 2008, and also from the Masters in Choreography program from Amsterdam this year. We also had in the two editions something we called the Interactive Library – every single person involved in the festival (artists, technicians, lecturers, administration, staff) was asked to bring three books of their own library to share with the public. I think this worked very nicely... As for what you called the different sensibility of the past two festivals, I think the visual arts were more strongly present – mostly due to my desire to address performance art. Something I was surprised was how theatrical were some of the pieces that I chose for 2009!

Why should you not be theatrical ... !

It's not a matter of "should" or "shouldn't". It's just that I spend most of my professional life teaching or writing about dance and about performance art. This is what I know more about. But I surprised myself by being so attracted to theatre, and some incredible theatre works had to be in the festival, particularly because of their relation to the notion of "resistance of the object": El Periférico de Objetos with *Manifiesto de Niños*, Mapa Teatro...

The festival might not continue in coming years.

Well, the last I heard is that it may become a biennial. I do hope it continues. IN TRANSIT has the huge advantage of being a self-contained festival, outside of the larger economy of European performing arts festivals. This allows it to really keep the laboratory approach in which things could just happen, unforeseen. I have been a guest of IN TRANSIT since 2003, and there were always all sorts of connections between genres, proposals, thoughts, ideas. The enormous public success of the 2009 edition, with virtually all performances sold out, demonstrates that so called "difficult work" can be shown as long as there is a coherent capacity for presenting it to the public. HKW knows how to do that, and it should take advantage if it, so that it can carve and sustain a differential space for experimentation and encounter in the performing arts.

This interview with André Lepecki was realised in September 2009, transcribed and rewritten for publication in MAP #2 between April and August 2010.

- (1) The one in 2008, entitled “Singularities”, and the one in 2009, entitled “The Resistance of the Object”.
- (2) “The House” is short-hand for Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures).
- (3) HZT = Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin (Inter-University Dance Department)
- (4) APT = Advanced Performing Arts Training – an interdisciplinary post-graduate program in Antwerp, Belgium.