

Challenging fiction

an interview with Christophe Meierhans, by Bart Capelle (Field Notes #3, Brussels dec. 2012)

The work of Christophe Meierhans often involves interventions in everyday life, aimed at revealing and confusing social codes, unspoken agreements and norms. 'Some use for your broken clay pots' will be a theatre piece that is part of a triptych, revolving around one challenging proposal: a new constitution for modern-day democracies. Our conversation about the play in development coincidentally and appropriately takes place on 7th November, while a large part of the world seems to be rejoicing in the re-election of Barak Obama.

What made you want to create a new constitution? And in what sense will it be different from democracy, as we know it?

I want to find a way of uncovering some of our a priori assumptions as westerners, living in democracies since a while now. We have the impression of living in a system of state that has always been. By the most critical it is considered as the least worst of system and by the less critical as the only possible way of living a good life in a community. Through theatre I want to find a way of making these firm unquestioned convictions visible and mobile again. A constitution is the basic contract between all citizens in a society, serving as the measure for every decision and for every judgement. Modern democracies are based on elections as the organizing principle to transcribe the will of citizens into the institutions that govern them. As an exercise – and in first instance just for the hell of it - I want to reverse this principle and devise an imaginary constitution that is not based on election, (voting based on promises for the future) but on disqualification (elimination based on deeds from the past).

What made you decide to use it as the basis for a piece of theatre?

If you propose a new fictional model to people in a political context, you have to deal with judgment, doubt, fears and resistance. The framework of theatre works in the completely opposite way. People go to the theatre with a willingness to believe in the fiction you present to them. Combining both worlds enables you to make use of a theatre audience's desire to believe in a story. And in this particular case the story being told will be the proposal of a new constitution. The 'trick' we will have to create probably boils down to this: you don't have to make people believe in the constitution, you have to make them believe in the fiction. The constitution is a story and every story has a kind of moral or ethical background or a transfer back to reality. What does one do with this story when one is back in the real world? I hope it will reveal that the real constitution we have is also a fiction, an invention. It was constructed some time ago and is just a tool like any other.

As you say, politics cannot (or shouldn't) rely on suspension of disbelief, as theatre does. But at first sight a constitution, a judicial document, doesn't seem quite suited

as the text of a play. How do you want to transform this kind of content into something theatrical?

In the political world the moment of presenting a new plan to the citizens and convincing them to believe in it, is the campaign. This moment when politicians make their promises focuses on the way of communicating much more than on content. When you look at the American elections for instance, a huge part of it is a show - it is theatre. You can directly transfer a political campaign into a theatre and its still at its right place. It is easiest to imagine the scenario of 'Some use for your broken clay pots' as a press conference, which is part of an electoral campaign. As in a normal press conference there is the protagonist, an electoral candidate who presents the whole idea of a new constitution to his electors as if wanting to persuade them into accepting it as a system. Without doing anything special, the audience is put into the position of electors. And the electoral candidate - again the extreme being the United States - aims to convince them through theatrical appearance and actions. After the initial presentation the audience will have the time to ask the candidate questions about their programme. That's another way of discovering the script, which will only partly be uncovered by the written monologue. The monologue is a teaser to the play and the question and answer session is the actual story.

It sounds like quite a challenge for an actor.

Yes, it probably is. Becoming a politician and convincing people with words is part of an actor's job but constructing an argumentation on the spot is not necessarily what an actor is skilled at. On the other hand, for any role an actor has to get into the skin of a character. Often they imagine the personal history of their character and are able to improvise as this character. In this particular case the actor will have to put himself in the skin of the constitution somehow. He (or she) will need to know the story behind it very well. The actor will need to be pretty much convinced of the constitution, just like actors have to believe in a character. The part will require enthusiasm and invention. This can be rehearsed to some extent but in order to answer questions, which will not have been pre-formulated, the actor will need to be inventive on the spot and will have to be actually enjoying it.

What happens if you discover gaps or loopholes in the constitution while performing the Q&A part of the piece? Would you let those gaps remain for the next shows? Or could that possibly change the constitution?

In the first place, the ambition is to prepare the constitution in such a way that all the possible gaps are covered. Of course this can only be theoretical. And of course the audience is there to challenge the constitution and the fiction that's in place. And again, I think that this is a very normal aspect of theatre. The audience is challenging the fiction. A good piece of theatre should be able to incorporate these challenges. But the constitution as a basic script can be improved, that's for sure. If there are better suggestions, there is no reason not to make amendments.

Can you explain where the title 'Some use for your broken clay pots' came from?

The accepted beginnings of democracy are commonly situated in classical Athens, in 5th century before Christ. The ancient Greeks actually despised the idea of elections, as

something completely undemocratic. To control their representatives they used a system called ostracism. Each year citizens could decide to ban someone from the city, for instance because that person was considered as dangerous or as having a bad influence on the politics of the city. It is difficult to imagine in this day and age, but this banishment wasn't actually considered as a punishment. It was just a measure to neutralize someone ~~away~~ for a while. The banned person's goods would be preserved and could be recovered upon return some ten years later. The term ostracism supposedly refers to the procedure of anonymous voting, in which the names of people to be cast away were engraved on either oyster shells (Greek: ostreon) or pieces of broken clay (ostraka). So that's what inspired the title for this play. Broken clay pots are also considered as useless, as garbage. But we could actually reuse them, just as we can recycle the disposed idea of "positive" disqualification.

Recycling the abolished principle of ostracism into a new constitution, is that a way of writing an alternative history?

You could say so. It is quite difficult to trace how the legacy of the Greeks actually transformed through the centuries into the democratic systems we know today. There is a Roman empire in between which is very important. A lot of aspects of our democracy are Roman and not Greek. The Greek would choose their governors by allotment and this obviously didn't go through to the Romans. To us this kind of random appointment may seem completely crazy, but there were very strong philosophical, religious but also statistical and socio-political reasons for it. Appointment by lot is the best tool against corruption and the best guarantee for equal chances for anybody to access power. But it would be very difficult to defend today. In ancient Greece procedure of choice often involved an oracle. The fact that you find this chance-based selection in a religious context is not at all at a coincidence. If you leave things at random, you let a chance for the unknown, for something that is not in your power to decide for to take place.

Ancient democratic systems where very much ritualized. The importance of ritual is something you also want to incorporate into your constitution.

Any system that wants to serve as a common basis to organize things among human beings, can only work if people respect it. And there are probably two ways to earn respect. One way is repression: if you don't respect the system you will be killed. The other one is belief. A system can function if people like it and believe in it. But believing in a system is a very artificial act. It is a leap of faith and that is an act of will, a conscious choice. And man has invented rituals in order to celebrate or cultivate this act. And through ritual this rational choice transforms into something, which is felt as almost natural will, as desire. At the annual carnival in Cologne for instance, people take two weeks off work to participate. Not because they have to but because they desire to. In terms of ritualization, a political system should actually be much more of a carnival. People going to vote not because there is a moral obligation or social pressure or out of discontent, but because they believe it's the right way of doing things. Ideally, you shouldn't have any problems of participation rates in elections.

Ritualization is a rational submission to irrationality. And that is a form of wisdom, which we have probably lost in our modern societies. A ritual is a way of shortcutting those problems that will remain unsolvable because of the fact that no rational system can ever be perfect. A system that is supposed to interact with a changing world, with real persons, will always

know failure. So it needs faith, like in the theatre it needs suspension of disbelief. It doesn't have to be religious. The superhuman is that which human cannot rationally grasp. Like death, like birth, like hurricanes.

Maybe that's exactly what we are no longer capable of: accepting the fact that no system is perfect, that we cannot control everything.

Definitely, I think this is the illness of modernity. Working on this project I often think of medieval medicine. Medicine in medieval times didn't work with pills, it didn't reason in terms of adding something to the body in order to make it better. It started from the idea that there is something too much, a bodily fluid or possession even, so you have to subtract something from the body. Philosophically there is something interesting in there. Subtracting means refraining from something, not doing something you know you can do. And that might be wiser, after all! You don't need to do it, just because you can. This is something we have a hard time with in our time, in our society.

How does this relate back to the shape of the piece? Will you try and incorporate the idea of ritual and the irrational into the project?

It will be part of what the theatre piece aims for. It is a very thin line of course, because as soon as we go too much into some kind of exoticism, we'll lose the link with reality. People will be relieved to have it at a distance. But we want it up-close; we want it to be problematic. People should actually be bothered by the proposal. I would say the medium of theatre as such is already the ritual. On that level there is also a strong link to be made with the function of theatre in ancient Greece, one we shouldn't ignore. But I don't exclude any completely crazy moment occurring in the play if that is what it needs. Since I'm not a theatre maker, I don't have any theatrical fetishes. I don't have a specific taste in that matter that I want to pursue.

You are not a theatre maker per se and you see it as a tool. What are the other tools you will be using?

At the core of the project is the new constitution. We are inventing a new challenging and provoking constitution for our democratic system. That is the project and it can take different shapes. A book will be published as a readable adaptation of the constitution. And this theatre piece is one derivation of it. There are also plans for a film, which will stage the same candidate giving a press conference, but after having actually won the elections. The time of promises and optimism is over, now he will be confronted with very down-to-earth problems. So the film will actually be carried out as a critique of this new constitution. But every shape the project takes will be an artistic shape. You could do the same thing on a theoretical level, as a straight political science exercise. But I'm not a political scientist. I think an art project treating a certain subject, always should step into the subject to some extent. But the treatment of the subject is an artistic operation, which means the short-circuiting of language as the first and foremost way of dealing with reality.