

Sigledal.org

25-10-2010

Katja Čičigoj

Radical powerlessness of criticism

“Why do we do this at all?” Uroš Kaurin asks in his performance. Alongside two other performances from the *Via Nova* series, this one was premiered under the title which too bears the form of a – similar – question: “What does it mean to be Ignacij Borštnik?”

These performances carry on researching the various ways of self-presentation within the framework of *Via Negativa*, which had itself rearticulated this question many times already. The tendency for continuous auto-reflexivity is no doubt commendable in the field of performing arts, which is still ailing from the symptom of “novelty at any cost”. But this self-questioning to the point of absurdity does give rise to an uncomfortable feeling that “no one should have to see” this type of perpetual recycling, as can be read at the closing of Katarina Stegnar’s performance. What shouldn’t be seen? What are the performers showing us that makes them problematize the showing itself?

Viva Mandić is the receptacle into which the performance of Marko Mandić flows. After projecting an excerpt from the justification of his receiving the Prešeren Award on one screen and a montage of stills from his various theatre performances, we can, on another screen, simultaneously follow a private exhibitionist video entitled *Mandić* from behind the scenes of the Drama theatre house. Acting as a job and exhibitionism is supplemented at the same time with Mandić’s sweating into a plastic bag. All of this has gone into the making of Mandić as an established figure (tellingly and humorously suggested by his model-like portraits) amongst the theatre goers. It also legitimises the toast he raises and which is made up of his own sweat: *Viva Mandić!*, as well as his reckless hugging and kissing the audience on the premise they would kill to get close to such a star, albeit a sweaty one. Katarina Stegnar’s designation of Mandić as a “conformist” is apt – Mandić goes all the way in realizing the performance’s mechanism, a “radical spending” of the body, while self-parodying it demonstratively with excessive automatization.

An even more explicit parody of his own diva-hood is enacted by Uroš Kaurin in “a concert for Kaurin and his audience” entitled *Tonight I Celebrate*. Dressed into a blond diva he sings cheesy popular love songs, whilst flirting with and singing praises to the audience. The actor’s love for his audience is of course conditioned by the love of the audience for him – the latter can be glimpsed perhaps in the scene when the audience sign to the actor, but it is explicitly

missing in the absent applause for which Kaurin begs from “his heart”. Kaurin compliments the audience, for they have “really put up with a lot” (from pissing to jerking off), while he himself does not subject them to a similar test (barring the no-longer shocking nakedness). No pleasure is offered to the audience, neither with the anticipated “exhaustion of the body” nor with the “likeable” song performance which ends on noisy screaming a-la Ramones “What a Wonderful World”. All manner of self-presentation is being shown up by Kaurin’s parody for precisely what it is – empty meaningless action intended merely to attract the gaze.

“Old crap in a new context”, as she calls it, is also served up by Katarina Stegnar in the performance with a telling title No One Should Have Seen This, in which we don’t “find out everything” as she herself promises us with caption on a piece of paper. Stegnar pushes the mechanism of an endless self-critique to its extreme. In her performance she confronts the text of Bojana Kunst “On the radical helplessness of consumerism”, read this time by Alja Predan instead of the author. Kunst is probing the cause of her own sense of unease accompanying her watching Katarina Stegnar’s performance, in which the performer enacts what for this type of performance is a typical meaningless and ineffective action, that of urinating, accompanied by cynical commentary.

Rather than with radical cynicism, Kunst reads the performer’s action more in terms of a voluntary subjection to a dispositive intended to reveal the impossibility of radicalism as emancipatory action in a world that has also regurgitated radicalism, spitting it out onto the market (the art market as well). This time, however, Stegnar does not subordinate herself to the mechanism – she does not urinate, but enacts a gesture of resistance by symbolic embodying a character of a crazy woman. In an overly theatrical manner she then enacts a “fucking of a chair”, a potential radical performative gesture which is here reduced to a caricature of theatricality. But if this enables her to get out of the dispositive of Via Negativa as well as of the discourse addressed to her by Bojana Kunst, she (intentionally or not) subjects herself to the circular mechanism of a critique of a critique of a critique she had herself initiated.

“The paradox of critical thought”, as Rancière had dubbed it, is brought to its full realization, a vicious circle without a productive residue. Perhaps time has come indeed that their auto-referential actions, as tellingly captured by the title of their last one, take up Kaurin’s question and address it to the audience: “Why do we do this at all?”