[The] basic rule of The Play is: If the viewers refuse to play, there is no play.
Bojan Jablanovec (2012: 57)

Via Negativa is an international postdramatic theatre group based in Slovenia. The group was established in 2002 by theatre director Bojan Jablanovec to explore the relationship between the performer and the spectator. The group uses an actor training method based on the ‘pseudo-spectator’ in which, in order to foresee the possible reactions of spectators during performances, members of the group perform to each other as imagined audience members during rehearsals (Krpič 2011). As a result of this method, I argue here that they develop a unique relation to the figure I am calling the ‘trans-spectator’, the spectator who becomes performer, transgressing the fourth wall of the theatre.

Via Negativa’s performance Bi ne bi (Would Not, 2005) is a part of the project Sedem smrtnih grehov (Seven Deadly Sins), which took place between 2002 and 2008. In the performance Bi ne bi, a group of performers thematized the sin of lust. The performance started as a casting party where the performers and the spectators mingle, exchange small talk, dance, drink and eat snacks. The performers politely asked the spectators questions such as: 'Would you like to dance with me?', 'Would you like to lick honey off my body?', 'Would you please spank me?', 'Would you let me touch your penis?'

After the introductory section, the spectators sat down on a set of bleachers, while the performers occupied their positions on the stage. Each performer had a solo performance during which the spectators were addressed and invited to take part. The performers played on almost all the basic human senses, except smelling: seeing, hearing, tasting and touching. Barbara Matijević, sitting on the chair in front of the spectators, undressed while at the same time she was telling a story of how she enjoys secretly observing people in public spaces and imagining them naked. She openly flirted with the spectators, 'undressing' them with her eyes. Katarina Stegnar distributed several small bells to those male spectators to whom she found attractive. She taught them to play the melody of Johan Strauss’ 'The Blue Danube Waltz'. She showed her pubic region to the spectators and promised sexual intercourse to any of the selected male spectators who would demonstrate his affection by ringing his bell after her, and who would show his hard-on. Petra Zanki stepped in front of the spectators, dressed in a negligee, with a cherry in her hand. She explained to the spectators that the negligee that she was wearing had been touched by her grandfather and her father after her grandmother gave it to her mother, who finally gave it to Zanki. She explained that she had worn it while she had slept with several boys. She offered food to the spectators to eat from the surface of her body and told a myth in which the girl who can tie a cherry stem into a knot using only her tongue can give unlimited oral pleasures to a man.

Via Negativa’s Bi ne bi belongs to a particular type of art performance including classic works such as Valie Export’s Tap and Touch Cinema (Tapp und Tast Kino, 1968–71), Marina Abramović’s Rhythm 0 (1974), Cassils’ (formerly Heather Cassils) Theresias (2010) and Becoming an Image (2015), Janez Janša’s Zid objokovanja (The Wailing Wall, 2011) and recently Tomaž
Pandur’s theatrical production of Faust (2015), to name a few, where the spectators establish very intensive emotional and physical relationships with the artworks or art events. Although in only a few of these performances (namely, Export’s and Abramović’s) was physical contact between the spectator and the performer anticipated, in many other cases the spectators eagerly and sometimes inventively found a way to get directly in touch with the material traces of the works. This article is about the trans-spectator – or the spectator’s transgression of the line between the performer and the spectator in terms of a temporally established physical relation – a transgression that transforms the viewer from a passive spectator to a temporal performer.

THE SPECTATORS’ SENSORIAL INVOLVEMENT

Barbara Orel asserts that the spectators of the works of Via Negativa became aware of their own perception by becoming part of complex intersubjective relations with the performers during the performances (2014: 52). In general, spectators’ sensorial involvement in art performance is primarily visual as the spectators usually passively observe from a certain distance, since in many art performances sound does not play a significant role. The situation is significantly different when the spectator takes an active part in art performance. In comparison to the realm of the visual, which requires distance, the haptic relation is necessarily related to proximity of the bodies of involved (Paterson 2007: 91–7). Close spatial relations of the spectator and the performer involve the evocation of the senses of smell and touch, occasionally even the sense of taste. Playing with smell and taste in art performances, argues Tal Dekel, referring to Anisa Ashkar’s E-Alina (2010), helps raise the audience’s level of involvement and strengthen spectators’ sincere empathy with the performer (2015: 303).

Although vision is a very important sensorial channel in Bi ne bi, there are also moments when vision is deliberately blocked by the performer or when seeing is simply impossible. After the introductory section described above, the performance staged physical contact between a small number of spectators and performers set in pairs on stage. Members of each pair sat beside a small box and put their right hands into it through a small hole; through this action, they built a temporal haptic relationship, the nature of which was fully accessible only to them.

At one point, Marko Mandić, who was masturbating on stage, blocked the spectators’ gaze with a small canvas, to let the spectators know that their capacity to see could be refused.

The sense of touch occupies the central position. However, not every part of the performance was affected by the direct relation between the spectators’ and the performers’ bodies. For instance, Barbara Matijević asked spectators to remove a piece or all of their clothing to lend the articles of clothing to her; she then put on the borrowed clothes.

Her bodily haptic relationship was mediated through the clothes she borrowed. In Petra Zanki’s part of the performance, touch
was mediated through food. Although her performance was concerned with the sense of taste, food consumption was necessarily related to the sense of touch, especially because the spectators were fed from the performer’s body.

In all of these examples, the bodily relationship between spectators and performers was transgressed by the objects that mediated it (see Dant 1999: 153–75). But Silvia Marchig’s, Sanela Milošević’s and Barbara Kukovec’s performances all stemmed directly from the faculty of touch, or, more accurately, from the physical relation between the female performer and the male spectator. Silvia Marchig ran and leapt into the male spectator’s arms fifteen times, while at the top of her voice describing the characteristics and faculties of her dancing body. Puppeteer Sanela Milošević ‘animated’ the penises of two spectators.

And Barbara Kukovec explained how she lost her virginity and was at the same time the ‘primum movens’ of a spanking game. In all of these cases sensorial bodies were put in direct relationship with each other (see Reeve 2011: 27–32).

THE SPECTATORS’ ‘TOUCH’ IN THE PERFORMANCE

In general, not only in art performances, the body touches and is touched in many different ways. However, one part of the human body seems to be particularly convenient for the purpose of producing a sensation of touch – the hands. In her street performance Tap and Touch Cinema, Valie Export cruised around the streets of ten European cities between 1968 and 1971, wearing a box acting as a small ‘movie theatre’ around her upper body. A barker (played by Peter Weibel in some of the cases) invited people to reach with their hands through the box (metaphorically functioning as the fourth theatre wall) to touch her performing body. Drawing on her experience, she claimed that ‘the curtains which previously had been drawn up only for the eyes is also finally raised for the hands’ (Export 2003). Hands are a very important instrument through which to investigate our relationship to the material world and through which we obtain physical and symbolic information (Tuan 2005) or authentic knowledge simply by touching the material world (Leslie 1998). And indeed, many times in art performances, the hands have played a crucial role: just take for instance Chris Burden’s Shoot (1971), Stelarc’s The Third Hand (1980), Iye Tabar’s El-en-i (1998), Yann Marussich’s Bain brisé (2010) and Dani Ploeger’s Biotope (2012).

In Bi ne bi, hands are instigators of touch, activating either the performer’s theatricality or the spectator’s absorption of the performance.
The significance of touch delivered specifically by the hand and generally by the performers’ and spectators’ performing bodies reveals one of the reasons that spectators are willing to participate in art performance. They want to ‘touch’ the performance, through direct contact with either the performer’s body or material evidence of the performance. James J. Gibson argues that the spectator who participates in art performance is actually after epicritical vibrisa, a ‘textural’ sensation perceived directly by their hands or through the object used in the performance, which enables them to experience the performance as a performer (1966: 100–1). The spectator’s identification with the performer’s body through the material traces of the performance is an important element of art performance (Jones 2015: 19–20). Just take for example Theresias, where spectators dared to touch the bust of ice during Cassils’ short breaks (Krpič 2013: 39–41). In another of Cassils’ performances, Becoming an Image, which I experienced live, I saw the spectators touch the heap of clay after it had been smashed by the artist during the performance. Some even punched it several times themselves. This parallels the case of Pandur’s interpretation of Faust, where the stage was flooded with water and some spectators, after the play had finished, approached the stage and dipped their hands into the water. The participants were transformed, themselves ‘performing’ in order to get sensual experience and to claim unique knowledge/knowing of the performance.

On the Limitations of Spectators

Via Negativa’s quest for the trans-spectator was propelled by the spectator’s lustful desire to ‘touch’ the performance, and yet the project had certain limitations. As Blaž Lukan has correctly pointed out, the erotic drive that motivates the spectator to touch and to be touched by the performer in Bi ne bi was not symmetrical (Lukan 2010). The spectator’s sensual and erotic expectations were certainly unrealistic and could not come true beyond the walls of theatre. While the performers were all along aware that the performance was just a play and nothing more, and that all promises made within the performance (see the case of Stegnar) ceased to exist as soon as the performance was completed, the spectators were allowed to dream on. Moreover, the spectators remained in a passive relationship to the performers except in the moment when they chose to accept the invitation into the performance. The transgression of the spectators was thus predicted in advance, and (as long) as the challenge was not too excessive, the spectator was willing to cooperate. The true believer was the trans-spectator, not the performer (Krpič 2011).

References


