DINA JOKANOVIĆ

Neoliberal crisis reduces art to a business activity

First of all, where did you grow up and when was the first time you knew that your life path was in performative arts?

I grew up in the small provincial city of Murska Sobota in the South East of Slovenia, which was at that time about 4 hours drive from Ljubljana. The city lies in the middle of extensive fields of corn, wheat, sugarbeet, vegetable gardens and orchards. My parents came to live in the city from neighbouring villages, and were proud that they were not peasants anymore. It was the story of the majority of citizens. Murska Sobota was a socialist project of urbanizing of the rural part of Slovenia which caused a lot of tensions, disappointments and frustrations in the local population. This atmosphere was very fruitful for all kinds of "artistic rebellion", which in my case was first expressed in a passionate need to be a part of the rock'n'roll subculture. And this provoked deep conflicts with my parents, which we never resolved.

What influences from your youth would you say had the biggest impact on your life as an artist?

It was quite early in my high school theatre activities, which I took a part in as an actor, that I read three books: A Short Organum for the Theatre by Berthold Brecht, The Empty Space by Peter Brook, and Towards a Poor Theatre by Jerzy Grotowski. I was thrilled about the ideas in these books even before I saw any professional theatre productions. Shortly after that, I started to go to theatre performances in Ljubljana, and very soon I was quite disappointed with them. I could not understand why none of what I had read in the books was visible in the performances that I saw. I was not sure if I had not understood what I’d read, or if I simply couldn't recognize these great ideas on a real stage.

What was the main trigger for founding Via Negativa?

At this point my story becomes a little bit twisted and not as straightforward as I would like it to be. It was a slow process that lasted for 10 years and not at all some kind of epiphany or sudden decision. In 1989, immediately after finishing at the Academy for Theatre Studies in Ljubljana, I started to work in Slovenian institutional repertoire theatres, and this lasted until 1999. During all of this time I was struggling with the production system in these theatres, but I hoped that I would work out how to approach it in a way that would make it work for me. So I accepted various offers to direct drama pieces and, (as a ‘talented young director,’ as I was labeled in those days) I fought with the dramatic texts, the actors, the rehearsals etc. I was never satisfied with myself or the outcomes of these fights, until finally I had to accept that my expectations of theatre demand a completely different approach in the sense of production and working methods. With Via Negativa I first of all I started to build a production framework and working methods that would work, not only for me but also for the people I work with.

The performances you stage and direct are usually based on somewhat reduced aesthetics, and your focus seems to be based on (mis)communication between artists and viewers. Do you think that performance art can communicate with the
audience differently than theatre?

Not at all. They function on the same principle and the difference between theatre and performing arts is quite artificial in my opinion. (Mis)communication is written in the core of both practices. I believe that the crucial difference lies in the working process itself, or, more precisely, the difference is that performing arts is dealing with issues of the working process, which become a visible part of their production, while on the other side, theatre mystifies its working process. In this sense for me our state theatre academies are institutes of mystification and not tools of artistic enlightenment.

**What are your expectations from the viewers? Have you ever had a negative experience with an audience? And I assume that some viewers have had negative experiences with you?**

I do not have any expectations of the audience, but from the other side, the audience should have and do have expectations of the artist. I never think about this as something right or wrong, I’m just simply aware of this fact. It is a fact that each artist must accept and work with. Problems arise if the artist submits to those expectations, or if he wants to fulfil them. I think it is necessary to play with them. Our task is to outplay them intelligently, and we have to use expectations in order to offer something else, something we believe in and fight for. About the unexpected there’s always uncertainty, which could work for or against you. In this sense certain viewers probably have had some negative experiences with us, but this is a process written in the dynamics of the continuity of artistic development.

**What are the criteria that guide your selection of performers in your productions? What are the artistic and philosophical rationales or processes that you use when building your projects?**

It’s quite a simple philosophy. In Via Negativa the performer has to stand on the stage with his own reason, body and story. I make sure there is a consistant working process, a frame of work and a focus. During all stages of our work I follow the performer’s interest, needs, and energy. If there’s no personal need or readiness in a performer’s habitus to expose himself on the stage beyond any boundaries – then there’s no ground on which we could co-operate. I always give performers a lot of opportunities, support and time during the process to find the way to approach the subject we are dealing with, and to overcome creative blocks. This is successful only if we constantly and openly exchange material and ideas. We always start from a zero point, and we have a deal that the delivery of the content (meaning story, situation, gestures, etc) is the obligation of the performer. I can start to build the structure and context only when I feel that we have reached some promising material.

**The human body is the main tool in your productions. How far is it possible to push the limits of the human body in the pursuit of art?**

It would be more precise to say that our basic tool is the presence, which is captured in the body. It’s true that in our performances many times we touch the ends of the body’s limitations, but it is not our goal to test them or push them further and further with each performance. It would be creative suicide. But everything that performer possesses in the sense of creative tools is trapped inside the body: energy, imagination, voice, everything is limited by the body and limitations were always a big creative challenge for humans. In my opinion it is only because of our limitations that art or creativity in general make sense – always with the same mission: to overcome them.
How does the role of art change in this time of crisis?

In the times we're facing today the importance of art and the artist's responsibility is growing. The current situation offers artists a very explosive and productive context on one side and on the other we are faced with brutal financial cuts and neoliberal logic, which is reducing art to the level of a business activity that has to compete for profit on the free market. Daily politics deals with us as parasites on the state budget and in this atmosphere general public opinion is not on our side. In my opinion the most important task of an artist in this situation is to fight against this logic with strong works, clear and sharp statements that viewers can identify with, and in this way to gain more audience on our side. “To make people free is the aim of art; therefore art for me is the science of freedom.” This is one of many of Joseph Beuys's statements about the meaning of art. At least from Duchamp onwards art is what the artist succeeds to define as art. And this is what the art is preoccupied with for the whole century: to create new definitions of art. Maybe today's mission of art should be to make people free from art. And we should not be naïve, art cannot change the world, but can support and accelerate its need for change. More risk taking performances, more visibility, louder works, regardless of the shortage of money. This is the only strategy for today and tomorrow.