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Rearticulation of the History of Performance Art

"Via Negativa investigates the basics of theatricality."—This is how theatre director Bojan Jablanovec, and the group of performers from Via Negativa, define how they work in theatre.

With each new play Via Negativa investigates one of the seven deadly sins (anger, sloth, lust, gluttony, avarice, envy, and pride). Each deadly sin constitutes a task in which the actors expose their “true selves” by way of a performed public confession.

When I was writing about Gluttony (2003) I termed the whole theater approach of Jablanovec and Via Negativa destruction. I stated (in a text in Maska, 2003) that Jablanovec’s project explores the contours of a theatrical space whose definitions and possibilities are shifting. The outcome is an eccentric position that tries to expel the actor from the center of the play. The eccentricity of the role implies ex-centricity, while exploring the various dimensions of feedback and the negativity of such positioning. The question of language and its techniques is always a question of the interconnections in-between layers of different meanings.

And what is the story with Via Negativa’s Incasso? (2004) The plot of Incasso is, in the words of Via Negativa, “Different strategies that allow an individual to control his relation to money. Performers use the entrance fee as material for scenes in the performance, and not as payment for their work. The performance stops the usual circulation of money so as to help the performers to create a personal relationship with money instead of a mercantile one. Every scene is a personal statement that reveals shifts, cracks and short-circuits in the performer’s identity produced by his/her relation to money.”

Incasso has much to do with the changed context of life in relation to capitalist production and labor, communication and performative politics, and, last but not least, with the history of theater and its most political though marginalized kernel—performance art.

Incasso is about life, and even more, it is about naked life, a life without form, after each performer's life is dismantled in front of the audience. The result is a clash between “good and naked life;” both are put to work within the post-fordist global capitalist way of production. What is going on in the process of global capitalist production is that life in itself is the primary source of the labor force of global capitalism. The mode of our submission to the capitalist machine is through precariousness, marginality, and a constant fear for our living standards and the contemporary (im) possibility of fixed forms of labor. The precariousness of life is connected with that of labor, and is the central topic not only of contemporary biopolitics, but also of contemporary theater politics. It is the situation of an immaterial production of ideas, images, communications, co-operation and affective relations; these processes are not creating the meaning of life, but life in itself.

Incasso is about the changed position of the contemporary subject from a political toward a “prosumer” condition. Prosumer is coinage from pro[ducer] and [con]sumer
that is discussed within the mediactivist sphere (recently by Antonio Conti). The prosumer is a pathological vicious circle of contemporary global capitalism, a condition of producing and consuming at once; it is where shitting and eating coincide. The prosumer presents a deadly hybridization that allows us to say that we are not political subjects at all, but mere prosumers. The prosumer is the positivisation of the contemporary evacuation of the political subject. According to Conti the prosumers are without a body, as goods today own language, while prosumers are caught just in a flux of information. In commercials we learn our intimacy and our fears. In such a situation goods are speaking, and they speak, according to Conti, not about their content, but about our lives, needs, and social relations. Goods reflect our forms of life, the way we think, travel, and the customs we are obliged to observe to live a good life.

The obsession with communication, speech and language is clear today, as all are subjugated to information-communication technology, and it is time (pace Conti) to repossess their potential. Communication is at the base of production processes as well. The process of work is established in a process of verbal exchange; communication is of crucial importance within production processes. This involves, according to Negri, something completely different from "Habermas's reconciliation of communication." Negri argues that it is contemporary communication that clearly indicates the failed dialectics between permanently unstable labor and lives of the precariat and fixed capital.

Incasso is about recuperating the history of performance. What is a performance event? It arises from the avant-garde visual arts of the 1960s, and implies a tradition from conceptual art, body art and happenings, but also street theater and student protests, a position of doing things with gesture and bodily actions for an audience. It was also an act of dematerializing the art object of art, instantiating processes of destabilization of meaning through action instead of producing objects, and of destabilizing perception and meaning through naming.

Each performer in Incasso speaks of his or her actions. Speech is not only a mode of transmitting commands and instructions to labor (eating money, pissing on money, writing in blood on money, etc), but also a process of signification. Language is, as Paolo Virno says, not only an artifact of real life that mediates our relationship with nature, but also part of our biological matrix, co-substantial and specific to our human nature. Language is the biological organ that is in-between the space of thought and political action. Incasso forms a condition for languages to be spoken out. The performers speak incessantly, articulating a public space amidst theatricality, and the space of performative communication. Incasso is a re-articulation of performance history within the field of theatricality, through the re-appropriation of performative politics. The classical theater survived because of the too long marginalized performative aspect at its heart, especially in the Slovenian context. The history of contemporary performance art in Slovenia is yet not written, and its genealogy in relation to visual (art) or theatrical (practices) not yet established.

It is important therefore to build today an intelligent event (Incasso!) that shows the disclosure of reality while subverting its theatrical models.

Incasso raises the question of connecting subjectivity with a political decision to construct a parallel space within theater, the other space that is not the space of otherness. For the performers this means not only to retake the forms of performative communication, but to open a territory of existence. The result is a constant exposing of their psychic lives. The performers' existences are organized and shown in their process to become dynamic, pathetic, traumatic, victorious and clandestine. The disturbances of
emotionality, depressions, syndromes of panic, paralysis of desire, apathetic sexuality and hilarious emotionality, lack of money, etc. all intervene, as argued by Franco Berardi Bifo, as a powerful semiotic flux, connecting the transformation of different media and cultural practices through everyday pathology. And individual psychic life is also at stake in contemporary biopolitics.

The communication therefore changes from one to many (performers), while exposing not so much what is hidden, but what can be made visible. The performers speak about a certain refusal, an antagonism between practices and concepts, lives and forms of representation in theater.

Each performer in Incasso is like a node between resistance and communication. This is not merely to give meaning to the institution of theater, but also to give meaning to the most internal processes of establishing significance in-between performers. Or, as Berardi Bifo argues, every resistance and disobedience in the process of communication is a process of marking a different signification.

References:
* Franco Berardi Bifo, Interferenze media-attive,
* Antonio Conti. Politiche del linguaggio.
* Toni Negri. Communicazione ed »esercizio del comune«.
* Paolo Virno. Un movimento performativo.

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**Bojan Jablanovec** is (as Delak, Hrvatin, Kline, Novakovič, Repnik, Šromayer, Živadinov, and etc) contemporary author that research new possibilities of theatre representation. To back up this "story" is also a new generation of dramaturges (Kunst and altri) and a platform for writings that is precisely Maska, a magazine for performance art. This is just a skeleton with only few names, what matters is the desire to (re)take theatre and performance (art) in order to rethink the public (space), subjectivity, and, last but not least, the contemporary condition of politics, economics and of production of life.