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Simulation (of Illness) as a Performance Strategy, Death as Fleetingness and Sense Perception as an Arbitrary Location of the Real

Drop Dead*1 is a thematic development of Via Negativa’s Four Deaths, which focused on the question: “Whom must we kill for the love of the audience?” At the time, the performers examined the topic of envy through staging the deaths of four great personages of European performing arts: Pina Bausch, Tim Etchells, La Ribot and Marina Abramović. Envy, which in Four Deaths was articulated on the relation “I – other”, now no longer represents the central thematic axis. In Drop Dead, the role of the other is assumed by the performing (and at the same time, performed) subject.

The performance does follow the performance strategy (the principles of theatricality) of Via Negativa (self-ironizing with the withholding of commentary; physical action in place of emotion or psychological realism; elimination of redundant set elements in the articulation of a problem; comprehensibility and not illustration...) *2, but this time the thematicization of the medium is somewhat different. It is no longer articulated at the level of the relation between fiction-reality and the role of the artist, but is instead most intimately coupled with the marked territory of authenticity.

After the introductory address to the audience and the arbitrary selection of a co-creator from the audience (that introduces into the performance an element of self-referentiality), the story of a certain, precisely determined end begins. Katarina Stegnar puts on a black evening gown, turns her back to the audience (“truth” is difficult to utter) and elliptically ascertains her death – simulates her invisible, deadly illness. Such is the introduction, a pre-funeral ceremony that the actress, aware of her end, will attend until the moment of her passing into non-presence. It ends with a scene of a created intimacy between the departed and the audience whispering their messages into her ear and those who have decided to take a lock of her hair as a keepsake.

Drop Dead offers an open field of meaning as a response to the question: What if it is all true – what if everything is theatre? If this question were left hanging, it would seem only a clichéd conception, but, this way, the variation on the topic of the desire for the real is realized through its continuation, the delineation of the question: So what now, now that we know this? In this case, knowledge is the object of an individual’s personal decision. Despite, or rather precisely because of, the starting point of the performance being (the sudden, unexpected, approaching) death, the categories of the Real and the Imaginary are delineated through a prism that does not allow for an ambiguous, non-sensual (objective) reading of the performed and are given in the manner of a conscious hyper-reality encircling and including us. Thus, what emerges as central to the performance is an acting figure, a bravura, an acting skill and illusion (a mode of presence), the representation of reality as an obsolete category, indeed, as a fine platform for a by no means obsolete play with perceptual multistability, as Erike Fischer Lichte*3 would characterize this switching between the phenomenal and the semiotic body, that is, the thematicization of embodiment within the performative gesture.

An ultimate incision, a split between the real and the imaginary (although, according to
Baudrillard, the first does not exist precisely due to the absence of the second) is thus reflected precisely in death, the last point of passage from the “you are” to the “you are not”, which, on the other hand, confirms one of the concepts of embodiment (the actor’s phenomenal, sensual body is the condition for the constitution of the semiotic body). Katarina Stegnar’s body is the germ of illness, which is – at the same time, or consequently – the germ of the story, a linearly structured narration about the beginning of a subject’s end. The central performative gesture is set in the symbolic.

Katarina Stegnar is terminally ill; her autoimmune disease is not visibly perceptible. If we talk about the performance in the language of body art, then Drop Dead is an action in which the feeling of pain moves from the (wounded) surface of the body of the performed subject to the spectator’s perceptible surface (without knives, violent interventions into the body, blood or other bodily discharges, but through a simulated illness, and not so much through the otherwise quite precisely measured allowance for the spectator’s intervention into the surface of the actress’s body).

In Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*4, Lea Vergine says that contemporary society has gone beyond the point of stability that would enable the discussion on the opposition between the sublime and the vulgar, adding that we are hidden beneath created (she probably means artificially) oppositions. Referring to the body-oriented performance practices from the 1960s on, she claims that pain is that reality which the individual has the right to express. She places the body art truth of the body (which is often analogous to the truth of the manifold forms of discrimination against individuals and individual marginalized social groups) outside traditional representational frameworks. The body and the real are equated, whereby bodily action is related to the symbolic order.

In Drop Dead, the categories of the disembodiment of the phenomenal body and the inhabitation of the semiotic one are thematized so that the passage between both categories is always fluid (similarly fluid, although no less opaque in its meaning, is the passage between the imaginary and the real, which again proves to have its domicile in the body – flesh).*5 The performer does not offer a point in which we could “touch” either of the bodies; she thus constantly plays with the relation that the spectator will establish to the performing/performed subject through the mediated (and not through the seen, for Katarina’s illness is invisible – thus, at times, the spectator is above all a listener). The performer is disembodied so that she can embody the performance of disembodiment (body art activism is transferred to the level of a thematized theatricality). The point of the strength of the relation between the spectator and the mediated emerges where the spectator grants authenticity to the perceptible, so in the relation where their belief settles.

The topic of death strikes the spectator through the condensation of emotions (empathy) in combination with a systematic disconnection of logical connections, not in the context of playing on the question of the sustainability of a theatre illusion, but in the context of examining the connections between the authenticity of emotion (consequently, empathy) and the mediated reality. In Katarina Stegnar’s theatre instrumentation, compassion emerges as the framework of the latter – an experience that is sometimes more and sometimes less plausible, but never the final and definite location of the real. Who are we buying, whose story are we living, who are our virtual friends? Katarina Stegnar thus (perhaps unintentionally) touches also upon the realisation that Kate Bolick provides in her article “Death on Facebook”*6: “Who am I mourning, the person I hardly know or their story?” Death is obviously that topic which controls us in the repeatedly revealed reality and turns us into submissive or caring beings. Death (of a stranger – an actress) proves to be the variable that ensures an average degree of an individual’s submission in their (un)safe microcosm.
Theatre is not merely play (and not only is all the world a stage), it is all three things together: stage-play-world is that cover under which there is space only for the body of one. It is not related so much to selfishness (not at all) and disillusionment, but rather to the truth of being, the essence of life (and death) of a certain precisely determined individual. With an extraordinary power of representation, Katarina Stegnar manages to achieve the following: a play with death that is not a vulgarisation or a pathetic trigger of the feeling of the sublime, nor is it an iconoclastic profanation of the theme. We most often move away from death by rising above it, but here, the performer transfers it into herself or herself into it.

Her body becomes the point of junction of absence and presence, an existential necessity and, at the same time, a presupposed necessity of the convention of the theatre medium. The subversion of the recognisable tactics of theatricality makes a picture (!) of the flawless stage illusion. The entrails of the so-called cybernetic machine are spread out; lacking a referential space, the always already mediated real and fiction are equated (in their absence). But because of the im-potence of distinguishing between image and reality, the neo-avantgarde equals sign between life and art has been twisted in the direction of an equals sign between image, sense and dispersive reality (dispersed on the relation between them). At the same time, the performer shows how that layer of art – the representation of reality – is not really obsolete (i.e., it is an exceptionally important and necessary part in reference to contemporary performance strategies).*7 Despite the cake that hits the floor off which the performer licks it to the last bit of cream, the theme of self-sacrifice (of the performer for the spectator) in theatre is here pushed aside. The cake has the status of Katarina’s last supper, her (!) dying wish. The body becomes an intermediary of the wish.

The noise of the ”spectacle” in Drop Dead is not the commentary inscribed in the performance, rather the performance itself becomes the noise (partly as a spectacle). In Bojana Kunst’s words on strategic performing: “Contemporary theatrical practices react to the spectacle, to the fatal belief that there is nothing anymore out there – to this vicious circle of simulations and simulacra. […] it is all about a critical awareness, employing and taking advantage of spectacle strategies (ways of performing) in order to reveal the action and power of performing.”*8

By creating the space of perceptual multistability, Katarina Stegnar approaches the imaginary, which is a recycling of the lost faculty of feeling (as Disneyland, according to Baudrillard, is the recycling of the imaginary by children and adults, and as many institutions are merely spaces for the recycling of lost faculties).*9 The relation between the performer and the audience is reciprocal; the performer no longer sacrifices herself for the spectator and their expectations, but, throughout, perceptually “plays ball” with the spectator’s gaze and presence; she grants them the status of an internalised medium.

On 17 October 2010 at 20:00, Katarina Stegnar offered all those present at the City of Women premiere of Drop Dead an authentic hour of a simulated farewell ceremony.

*1 Translator note: The original slovene title »Stegn se« contains a word play on the performers’ surname »Stegnar«
emphasizing the bodily being-in-the-world of humans, embodiment creates the possibility for the body to function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscriptions”. (Ibid., p. 89).


*5 “The spectacle surface /.../ with its sensual radiation thus conceals the ‘background’, the space, the depth of the field and redirects attention to the body /.../ It demands of the spectator to delve into the space of the corporeal, to make a sort of a 360-degree turn around the reception axis that, on its ‘path’, redirects the gaze to itself.” Blaž Lukanc. "The Real in Jablanovec: Eight Projects, Eight Observations". In: Bojana Kunst and Petra Pogorevc (eds.). Sodobne scenske umetnosti. Ljubljana: Maska (Transformacije), 2006.


*7 Here, the mode of presence is more important than technical perfection – the perfection of the performance.


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