

WHY ALL THIS AT ALL?

Marin Blažević
in conversation
with performers
Katarina Stegnar,
Marko Mandić,
Grega Zorc and
director Bojan Jablanovec

“If we set out towards Via Negativa in the wake of its name, then every beginning, every direction or end will emerge as something merely transient, projecting itself in its negativity, inexactitude, unreliability, indefiniteness and finally also in its dispensability. Statements about Via Negativa score low on the credibility scale, and not merely because we ourselves are involved in the various – interpretative, analytical and critical – competences guiding the project, but also because the project itself, while being conceptually and from the production point of view fairly solid, does at once suggest as well as eliminate the complexity of (self)reflexivity, as it persistently announces only to then undermine its own presuppositions. This happens on many levels: when there’s talk about the correlation and interaction between the audience and performers; about the mutual questioning of the performance strategies and genres (with theatre and performance art occupying the first place); about the collective nature of putting the performance together and the distribution of authorial responsibility; about the risk-taking and the economy of the live performance; about the politics and ethics of performing; or, for example, when there’s talk about provocation, subversion or perversion of the conventions and protocols of performing arts (from the happening to opera), in other words, also about the negative theology itself. And so if Via Negativa already in principle (with its name) as well as in its approach to specific questions of the performances’ execution sets itself up through the gesture of negation, only to then radicalise and degrade it and make it downright banal, until every stance-expression (this is how Darko Suvin translates the term *gestus*) is felled completely, down to the exhausting state of permanent reversibility of negation, it is difficult to resist the question: why all this at all?” (Excerpt from Marin Blažević’s Introduction to the book *The NO*, Maska, Transformacije series, Zbirka transformacije, 2010)

Marin Blažević: The question of collaborative methods amongst authors-performers has for at least a century now been a key theme as far as theatre is concerned, or more precisely, the avant-garde performing arts, which are characterized by their alternative orientation, their knack for experimentation and an overall post-drama – or simply non-drama, or even anti-drama – aesthetic outlook. No matter how hard they strive to relativize the actual impact of the process of collaboration in the sense of a redistribution of the authorial function as a relationship of power between the subjects involved in the creative process, the degree of collaboration nonetheless remains the measure of a different politics, social organization and an ethics of artistic performance.

Katarina Stegnar: I would say that the basis of this project is really that of “one-to-one plus the spectator”, by which I mean the performer, director and audience. The methodology is simple: you come ready with a scene and while you are acting it out on the stage, others are watching and then giving you feedback. From this feedback and from their ideas, you begin to build a scene. In that sense, authorship is highly questionable here, even though we always put our own signature on the scene. Even though the performances are made up of scenes, acting as links, in a sequence or a jigsaw puzzle, these are still individual scenes with a beginning and an end and thus connected to an author – one person. Still, given the nature of our work together, it is difficult to ultimately say who came up with what, who wrote the text, who gave what brilliant idea. In a sense, the group operates like a buffer, a safety cushion. Although you work on your own, you know full well that you are surrounded by people who will give you a needed push when you find yourself unable to go on or you can’t bear it – you can always rely on the group to help you make that next step. But in an ideal world – if we were ideal artists – we would work strictly one-to-one, that is my feeling. Still, if you ask me, the intention of the project is fundamentally a solo one.

Marko Mandić: But even if ultimately this is a one-to-one, I would say that by watching others (provided that you are there at the rehearsals, which I seem to be ever less and less lately) your own authorship, what you are working on, also changes. While you are

watching and commenting on the work of others, you are at the same time reconsidering the plan for your own scene; you are thinking about your own work and so your own process of creativity is given a push. While observing how others work, you are being helped to work yourself. This to me is the basic logic: that you are constantly expanding your ideas or cutting them down to size.

Grega Zorc: I find myself agreeing with Katarina on this. When I come to the rehearsal with a theme or an idea, then I feel myself to be the author. In the process of work, however, I begin to lose some of that authorship. Other influences come ever more into play: if somebody puts together a scene or does something that I like and which I think could help me, I straight away steal the authorship of that approach.

Marin: When I listen to your experiences, it seems to me that one of the fundamental techniques for Via Negativa is to incorporate the function of the spectator into the dynamics of collaboration. So, instead of representation and the compulsory directive from above, Via Negativa has opted for mutual observation, reciprocal giving of comments and suggestions.

Katarina: Each one of us works according to his or her own logic, but the group is there to offer possibilities, give alternatives as to where the whole thing can even go. Let's say there's ten of us: given that we all think differently, there are going to be ten different suggestions and you choose the one closest to your thinking, or rather, the one that best fits the logic of your scene. This is also important because all our scenes are incredibly charged, meaning that they try very precisely to look for their next step. In that sense, there's nothing arbitrary about what we do; on the contrary, it is all very determined. So, when you get a good suggestion, it's perfectly clear to everyone that this is a good suggestion. And with the help of this suggestion you can bring your material to a point that you couldn't see before. Perhaps you only intuited it. But as for someone intervening into your material and telling you how to act or some such thing, no, that's not done. In that department, we all stand on our own.

Marko: To me, the crucial thing is that all the spectators-collaborators around you tell you what *they* see. This makes for the first stage of our "critiques". As a performer, you of course have your own background to what you are doing on the stage, but in the final instance, it is only those who are watching you who can tell you what has come through to them. This is the first and the most basic sieve through which you go, so as to check what you are conveying or which meanings have come "out" in the way you had hoped they would.

Katarina: This is not always the case though... In fact it's pretty rare that you come up with a piece of material that is completely sound in its conceptualization, enactment, in everything. That's why you often need someone else to make sense of what you yourself don't see. And the people around you can indeed open up some very important doors for you. But something else is equally true. We've been working together for a very long time now and we know each other pretty well – therefore, you know very well whom to believe, and we know each other's preferences. Over the years, we have of course developed our own individual tastes. It was highly interesting when Kristian and Sanela (performers from Serbia) joined us. They saw very different things at the rehearsals, coming from a different background, as banal as this may sound, with a different taste, a different approach, a different take on things, which can really help you see things from a new angle – as though a new door were opening up. In fact, a lot of the time you are trying to find yourself in your own material, searching for an idea, a story, the right kind of attitude ... This is where people watching you are constantly pulling you forward. And it's quite irrelevant whether they pull you forward because they honestly see something or because they think they see something – what matters is that you get something out of it and that this something helps you make the next step. What really matters is pre-

cisely this process of observing and seeing, of thinking about it, the radical openness of what is being done.

Marin: Even though the performer is at one with the material he or she creates and then revises through the described methods of collaboration, there have been instances when some authors-performers needed a replacement. Clearly, for some performances (or possibly all of them?), there's no need for the performance to be confined within the sole ambit of the subject who has created them, within the – at least seeming – authenticity of one performer, her range of gestures, the surface and excretions of her body or within the contours and potential of her narrative. I would imagine that situations in which replacement is inevitable can present a certain difficulty for the author-performer, who leaves the enactment of their own performance to a foreign autobiography, a foreign body, voice, emotive potential and experience, to foreign techniques of enactment, in short, to a foreign identity.

Grega: If in a given performance the author, let's say Katarina, needs replacing, this tends to give the performance new energy, but not new content. Paying attention to what happens during replacements, I would say that the scene always conveys the same thing, the only difference being in how much someone pees, which is not crucial.

Katarina: This really depends on the performance. Some performances are very precise about what somebody does individually, while in others, it's much more of a joint effort. I found it much easier to accept being replaced in a performance where there's a lot in the way of shared material than in a performance where the material was very precisely bound up with me, where there's just me on the stage... I told Bojan that *Incasso* won't be played unless I play it. *Incasso* is a performance in which I feel incredibly attached to what I've done. I feel very territorial about it and so defend it because I feel it's very much mine. And though I said it wouldn't be played – of course, it was played. However, I managed to at least require that the actress who was playing me introduce herself as me on the stage: "I am Katarina Stegnar." Although, of course, for the audience, that's completely irrelevant.

Marko: I agree, it's irrelevant, but I too would set a condition with, for example, *Would Would Not*, for the actor doing my scene to introduce himself with "I am Marko Mandić, a graduate of drama school, the creative word..." and close with "It's nice to be Marko Mandić." I would be interested in seeing what would happen if someone else, while enumerating my biographical data and issues, also jerked off in my name. And although I find it interesting to have Uroš, while replacing Dylan (in *Viva Verdi*), say: "Because Dylan no longer wants to do his performance, I'm going to be his replacement" – I don't in fact see this is as necessary.

Katarina: But *Viva Verdi* is a story about sloth, so this does somehow fit in.

Marko: Well, I'm yet to see in *Would Would Not* someone who would replace me in ...

Katarina: "Marko Mandić can't jerk off today, so I've come instead ..." Or who would want to do Sanela's scene in *Would Would Not*? I am talking about the scene in which Sanela animates the penises of two spectators. Who could be persuaded by Bojan to bring that interaction off? I think the performance would have to go without this particular scene.

Marko: Everyone should be replaced. Personally, I find this logic excellent. The performance must happen even if a scene goes missing, and we should try and find replacements for everyone who isn't there. Everyone is replaceable and the performance must exist even if, in the final instance, all the actors are replaced. Too big a deal is made in the classical theatre when, for example, an actor who's created a big role isn't there to

play it. Instead of him, you could have someone walking on the stage with a book in hand, reading. I mean, in the 21st century, this should be self-evident. This logic of ours that all of us are replaceable seems excellent to me.

Marin: This transfer of the acting material from the original performer into the economy of reproduction doesn't seem to be motivated by the intention to question – contaminate, subvert and even pervert – the theatre's and performing arts' formal principles and guidelines and by implication their underlying poetics, but merely the presentational pragmatism.

Bojan Jablanovec: In the performance *No One Should Have Seen This*, Bojana Kunst presents herself as Bojana Kunst. A day after presenting this performance at the PŠi conference in Zagreb, Bojana, this time in the role of a speaker for the journal *Maska*, again introduced herself as Bojana Kunst. A woman in the audience asked in bewilderment: "So you *are* Bojana Kunst?" To me, this anecdote confirms what we find very difficult to accept in ourselves, namely: identity is fiction. As identities, we are completely fictitious, merely some personal mythologies we live within ourselves – to the outside world, they are pretty meaningless. Except if you turn the situation around and start building your own identity as a fiction, for instance a fiction that we're calling identity, which is precisely what we all do anyway. The fact that this double nature of identity operates simultaneously internally and externally, thus generating an unbridgeable gap that cannot be patched up, is what makes the performing arts such an interesting medium. On the stage, it doesn't matter a jot what your name is and who in truth you are – on the stage, you are fictitious, regardless of whether you are telling the truth or are lying, or are bluffing or writhing in agony ... In this performative sense, it is, paradoxically, utterly insignificant who we are. In the sense of production, creative idea and choice, however, it is incredibly important. Without Marko Mandić being Marko Mandić, we would have nothing, without this we couldn't do anything. Because only Marko Mandić can decide what Mandić is going to do, and how and why he is going to do something. These are the two extreme positions that break directly on top of the performer not on the spectator. What I am trying to say is that over and over again we have to confront one and the same question: why in fact do we do what we do? And the answer that identity is fiction is not always easily understood, let alone swallowed. For me then, the question of authorship is essentially bound up with the concept and the decision for a particular concept of creation. After modernism began to problematize the position of the author, and the avant-gardes sought a way out via the collective, and later on, via post-structuralism, the author met his death, and in the patent offices of post-industrial capitalism he was reborn again – with all of this in mind, authorship is just one way of production. The author, of course, remains one big myth, everyone needs him; everyone searches for him. With *Via Negativa*, there's no such thing as an absolute author. Everyone is the author of what they do, there's no absolute author – given the nature of our work, there can't be any.

Marin: It's not always necessary to approach the question of authorship as an expression of the social hierarchy of power; we can simply understand it as a necessity to assume responsibility for decision-making when facing various situations in the process of dealing with a concrete artistic project. The theoretical discourse did indeed find itself in the position where it could convincingly conceptualize the death of the author or at least the reduction of the author to a function, which is one of the inevitable premises of reading. But the cultural market, so as to ensure its own existence, is forced to create and manipulate value – both symbolic and economic – which determines the roles within the relational framework of artistic production and reception. Institutionalizing an author is still the most transparent and therefore also the most effective way of determining and distributing worth.

Bojan: Authorship is a matter of decision. If we decide on it, then we can make it up.

Marko: The issue to me seems to be, and Bojan has already mentioned this, that we need to deal with – and confront – a certain identity of ours in order to be able to even work. With *Via Negativa*, each one of us works individually, opening or closing certain drawers (of our identities) that we want to, or don't want to, present to others. Eventually, in this process, we do come up against the performance as such, or rather, the decision as to what kind of a performance it is going to be. You have to decide on a certain identity, so, basically, we say this is now the identity of Marko Mandić and I present it. That's why I would say that this identity can be acted out by anybody; in that sense, we are replaceable. We have created a particular identity for a particular performance and this identity can be utterly realistic or completely fictional. Of course, the process doesn't end here, for it seems to me that with every performance, these processes go on. The identity gets built up. Even if there's a bit of confusion, our performances and scenes go on evolving.

Katarina: I find this idea of decision-making interesting. This is a long process, which must yield some result at the end – a performance. But the key thing about the process is that it tries to give everyone a chance. While you are working, the group is a hundred percent behind you, helping you to push through to the end. Having said that, however, with *Via Negativa* there's an agreement from the start that if something isn't good – if it has no story, if it doesn't work for whatever reason, if there's no statement – it won't get staged. If you don't have a statement to make, you have no right to be on the stage, that's understood. Our work is so open-ended that we fight for this right for each other also. It's often the case that you don't have a scene ready at hand, so all of us think about how to finalize it. Also, deciding on the nature of the performance is always also deciding about whether a certain story should be narrated through to the end. The crux of the question lies in there being – or not being – a director who says: you go left, you go right, you're going to cut your hair now, you are going to piss yourself, you'll eat that. This is the real question: who is it who pulls the strings? I would say the answer to this is very personal for each of us. Of course, Bojan intervenes in the performance, he is after all the director, but within this relationship there's always a certain space that is a grey zone, where things are very personal. No one can persuade me to do something I personally don't want to do, but if it's a personal statement on which I have worked for half a year, then it's highly likely that I find myself doing something transgressive anyway. In any case, this is my personal view; that's how I approach what I do; someone else probably does it differently. Still, there's always essentially a juxtaposing of two decisions: a decision about what is good for the performance as such and a decision about what you want to achieve with your individual scene. If there's a conflict between the two, this of course needs to be resolved. But if the performance is thought-out well, it is very clear what decisions are the right ones and then it's not difficult for you to take on even a radically transgressive action – because you know why you are doing it. When it concerns you, the decision is always yours. When it concerns the performance, the decision is the director's.

Marko: I agree. Nonetheless, I think that the basic core, from which all the links are generated and operate, or rather, from which the collective creates, is definitely Bojan. The first year, when we started with *Anger*, Bojan very deliberately and consciously removed himself from the centre-stage position; of course, he was the creative director from the start, but somehow we were the ones who were lined up and had to observe each other. Even though it seemed in this first project that the director was completely erased, as though *Via Negativa* had no director, because possibly it didn't need one, over the subsequent seven years, the director nonetheless instituted himself as a very important player. All the functions that are crucial in a given production, as, for example, in a classical play or a performance, were put in place again.

Katarina: Personally, I find it curious that this question about who is the director and who takes the decisions gets asked over and over again. Take the question of nudity, for example. When after showing my cunt in the performance *Out* I asked the audience if anybody wanted to venture a guess as to why I did that, at one of the shows, I got a re-

sponse that made me quite furious. Someone from the audience said that I did it because the director told me to. At that point, I felt like stopping the show and starting in on a lecture on what we do and who we are. If you ask me, the spectator always tries to provoke. What you said earlier is true, authorship is a concept – but people like their old comfortable schemes, which don't require them to think, so the scheme within which we operate is for them a blasphemy of sorts. The media follow a similar trajectory when searching for answers to this question. The only answer they seem to be capable of coming up with is: this is the theatre of Bojan Jablanovec.

Marin: Theatre, in itself a hierarchical institution that mirrors the model of social organization, cultivates the role of the author with the intention of not only the author then being able to revise the theatrical event but also being able to demolish positions of authority, mechanisms of identification (in the relations of actor–part, referential reality–the world of drama fiction–theatre representation, author–work, etc.), as well as the conventional forms of theatre collaboration. The institution is at once the framework and the means of exercising control over the theatre event as well as upholding and perpetuating the social situation, in which the relations between the actors are evident enough and for the most part uncontested. Therefore, it's not surprising that Via Negativa too hasn't been able to – nor did it want to – jettison certain channels through which theatre as an institution operates (for example, the critical reception) and has consequently had to resign itself to the necessity of getting legitimacy for what it does in the name of Bojan Jablanovec.

Katarina: It boils down to the question of freedom, which is something unimaginable for most of us. It's unimaginable that you can do something so transgressive because you yourself have decided for it, because you obviously want to make a statement with it. It's easier to believe that there is some frightful creature that manipulates you; that there's always some great manipulator forcing you to do exactly what he wants you to do.

Grega: When each of us is working on his or her own scene, that's when we tend to take decisions collectively. At that stage, deciding involves how to, for instance, develop a given scene or how to bring it to its conclusion. In these debates, you often find yourself without anything to say or not being really sure what to make of it – but Bojan is the kind of guy who doesn't let up, he constantly provokes us with new questions, why we like something and why not, or he gets us to start thinking a little differently about the whole thing. But once the scenes are done and we start putting them together into the performance, then I would say Bojan is the one who takes all the major decisions. Then the tables are turned and then I am the one suddenly expecting him to know how to integrate my work meaningfully into the performance. Here the situation always gets turned around; we always end up going through these two principles. Sometimes this shift can bring on a major crisis. Something like that happened to me, for example, when we were working on *Four Deaths*. I had an enormous amount of material; I had put a lot of work into this concept of envy, lots of material but I had no scene. Katarina, on the other hand, was working on Pina Bausch, and a month before the premiere, Bojan comes and tells us: "I've decided that each of you is going to work on a scene to do with one artist that you envy. Surely you all know within yourself whom you admire. Well, by tomorrow, I expect you to come up with a scene on envy based on this." Suddenly, like mad, we had to think along entirely new lines and in a month's time come up with a performance. I was completely lost: who do I envy, do I even envy anyone ... ?

Marko: It's all Katarina Steiner's fault ...

Katarina: Bojan is so positively inclined towards everything we do, perhaps if he'd occasionally say, look, this is shit, go home and bring back something new, it might be more productive. Whenever there's a critical moment, I find myself looking at Grega. Sorry Bojan, but at that point I am only waiting for what Grega has to say. Grega and Sanela.

Because they too operate in the same modus as myself... I remember doing a number of different combinations and pictures for the performance *Would Would Not*, effectively ten minutes of useless stuff. After a few weeks' absence, Sanela comes to the rehearsals again, saying immediately this and this is superfluous. The scene was accordingly cut and it worked. Bojan is always opening things up, considering new ways in which to approach a subject, but there are also people around you watching you perform and you can see perfectly well when they are bored and when they are taken by what you are doing. When you are in possession of so much material and when you are so open and so vulnerable, because you've invested so much of yourself, then you need to hang onto somebody. I always hang onto one person; I can't seem to be able to do it otherwise. I can't hang on everyone, because they see different things. There's no absolute truth. So I latch onto the one person who I sense resembles me somehow, who in a given moment thinks along similar lines. Essentially, of course, it is you who decides, since you are the one who gives something. And over the years, it becomes clear that you are closer in sensibility to one person and so you want to hear only what that person thinks and not have to listen to everyone else. This can be exhausting; these rehearsals can be terribly exhausting. At one point, you just can't listen to so many different opinions, you simply have to draw the line and say fuck off, from now on there's only me; enough of the rainbow of opinions and ideas, enough of this theatrum mundi. That one thing and off we go.

Marin: On the one hand, there is this revealing, presenting, amplifying, damaging, upgrading, fragmenting and reducing of the body to its excretions, skin surface, a chunk of flesh ... and on the other, which we've more or less been talking about so far, a redistribution and shifting of responsibility and entitlement in the process of creating a performance, which permits its individual performers a high degree of autonomy or authorship, demanding of them a high level of engagement in creating the performance material and counting on them to bring out the characteristic performative stance, style and technique. If to this wide array of challenges we add also the fact that *Via Negativa* performances are performed by trained professionals, dancers as well as theatre actors, the question of the relationship between classical representation and the anti-representational gestures of the performers almost begs itself. *Via Negativa* seems to be aware of the fact that the theoretical discussions about the divergences and overlaps between theatre and performance have more or less been exhausted; almost cynically, and certainly with a great deal of irony, it insists on the casual, even cheeky crossing of the already permeable boundary between two modes of performance, those of theatre and performance art.

Katarina: Ok, what is the technique for you to arrive at something? In classical theatre, you get a part to play and you play it. If you are a performer, it gets personal, you play yourself – but still there is a part to play here, you too are a part. On this, I don't see any difference. The difference is in the procedure. In conventional theatre, as I have said, you get a part and you work on that part. If the part happens to be difficult, you create a distance for yourself. With *Via Negativa*, on the other hand, the material is so personal, so transgressive, that I have to come up with a part myself so that I can play my material. In *Would Would Not*, the situation got so personal, I was so merged with what I was working on, that I had to create a part for myself, so I imagined that was the part I was playing. I always have my distance, regardless of whether the spectator notices that or not. For me, this is not different from classical theatre – I always have to create a part. When I joined this project, there was a consensus: “no acting” – but I have to act the most when it is myself that I act.

Marin: An interesting contention, namely, that you are acting most when you are in fact playing yourself as a part.

Katarina: This depends on the individual. What you present can have only so many characteristics, whereas you as a person have a whole gamut. You can't play them all.

Even when you are the part you are playing, you have to decide which are the ones you're going to play. Take *Incasso*, for example: it doesn't help a jot for me to tell myself "right, this is me I am playing." In *Incasso*, I play someone who is selling something, I play some intention. There's no question of my playing the entire gamut of myself.

Marko: I agree. You can only play a part of yourself. You always have to decide on a set of fragments. Classical theatre and performance can in principle be differentiated, but essentially there's no difference, we are all actors. Even if in classical theatre I strive to cut myself out, I am not able to do that. Although there might be the tendency to have a character who supposedly has very little in common with the actor, we as actors all strive to enter the character with our whole being, wholeheartedly, and occasionally we succeed ... In performing arts circles, it is a given that you must project yourself with your entire being into what you are doing.

Katarina: Performance is inextricably bound up with you as a person. Over the seven years, I have grown sick of myself. Therefore I consider it a blessing if I can work on some really strong concept or if I can envision a part which is very far removed from myself. Classical theatre gives you a part to play and you play it, but here you are playing yourself all the time ... Let me tell you, I sometimes get bored of working on myself all the time.

Marko: But with *Out*, there's a major difference! If the previous projects were all about getting away from the theatre, *Out* is nothing but veneration for the theatre! Having said that, sure there was playacting and humour, too, in the other performances, but *Out* is *the* theatre, with a capital 'T'. Which I think is great. I think we are slowly creating a self, a creative self, for ourselves, which of course you grow sick and tired of, since we are always aiming for authenticity. This is where the performative self comes into the picture and we have grown tired of it. You get tired of the model, you get tired of these skills, the craftsmanship

Bojan: In *Viva Verda*, Katarina says that it's perfectly clear that the same people can't keep from recreating themselves over and over again, that they are trapped in their own parts and patterns and that this is precisely what I am after. Yes, that's exactly right; this is what I am after, namely, that we discover ourselves every time anew. If you ask me, the only authentic position of an artist is precisely that he or she recreates him/herself every time afresh.

Grega: With *Via Negativa*, I felt myself to be an actor from day one. I never thought of it in terms of a performance. Perhaps I just don't get it. It's the same with the classical theatre. I can never be anybody else; I can always only be myself.

Katarina: The basic framework is the same everywhere.

Grega: It has to be said though that, with *Via Negativa*, I experience the kind of stage fright I never experience in the classical theatre. Here, I am responsible for what I do from the word go; there, I can relegate responsibility to the part I am playing.

Katarina: You are you everywhere! It's only a question of thick skin, how far you dare to go, how much responsibility you are willing to assume, how stubborn you are ... Even in the classical theatre you can push yourself through, everywhere, everything depends on your stubbornness and on how firmly you stand behind the idea.

Marko: Even in the classical, repertory theatre, collective work and temporary authorship are ever more prominent. There are ever fewer directors telling you what to do. Or at least that's my experience. With *Via Negativa*, my personal thinking opened up significantly, as did also the principle of work; there are certain techniques with which I can also inject a degree of performativity into the more classical performances.

Katarina: I remember an anecdote when you were doing *Alamut* in Drama (Slovene National Theatre). I can't remember what we were working on then, but when Sebastijan Horvat (your director) came to see what we were doing, he wasn't all that impressed. Then you came up with a scene in *Alamut* in which you rub liver over yourself, and then Sebastijan said: well, now we are doing the same as you guys.

Marko: I was selling liver at the same time on two fronts.

Marin: So far in our discussion, the impact of the critical eye on the performance and its enactment has emerged primarily through the function of observing or watching each other in the creative process of collaboration. The position of the audience in *Via Negativa*, too, has a significantly different role from the relatively tight representative framework and stable relations which guide the – for lack of a better word – classical or drama theatre. What are the politics and ethics of the enactment and performance behind the attempts to manipulate the spectators and the self-degrading gestures of performers? What are the challenges and risks of the interaction between actors-performers and spectators-participants?

Bojan: When I find myself amidst a convention, amidst a commonly accepted arrangement, as for example in the theatre, where someone is doing something so as to be watched by someone else, I become interested in exploring whether within this arrangement there is scope for other, different arrangements, without necessarily negating, destroying or degrading the primary arrangement. An actor in the theatre is constantly aware that he or she is acting. If you strictly adhere to the basic rules of the convention, then you require an enormous range of skills to make acting seem interesting; namely, the spectator demands from you constant fascination. If, however, the rules of the game are well-known, you can also opt for the strategy of outplaying the game by searching for ways of laying down new rules within the ambit of performance. In this instance, you must channel your creation into a laying down of your own rules and then be consistent with respect to them – even in your own performance, you must act as a “transgressor” and in a sense be willing to outperform yourself. If the audience is clear about why and how we are playing the game, then it is going to expect this from you; the rules are there to be broken. What is important is only that you are not arbitrary on this, that you keep to the agreement and that the agreement is understood by everyone. Participation and interactivity are merely the external symptoms of what we do. A basic performance tenet is already accomplished the moment the spectator sits in his chair. With this, (s)he tells us, I am here watching. This way, the potential already overtakes the performance. The next step depends on the performance, whether and to what extent the performance allows the spectator to exercise control over it. In an ideal relationship, the performance allows the spectator to take over while at the same time remaining in control of its own structure – over the event and the spectator. If it should happen that the performance turns the performer into the spectator of his own performance, then we are on the border of chaos, a collapse of the system or pure catharsis. In this process, there's also a transfer of power from the side of the performer to the side of the spectator. The performer must summon quite a bit of strength to be able to hand it over without going into a state of panic. As to the spectators taking over – that has already happened to us.

Marko: Yes, with *Would Would Not*, they took over.

Grega: After the first few showings of *Would Would Not*, it became known how the performance proceeds, so the public came to the show prepared. They knew we wanted them to perform with us on the stage, that we'd be touching their penises, that Kristian would be asking someone to hammer a nail into his penis, that Katarina would be offering sex ... In Ljubljana, the audience got ahead of us. When I was looking for a partner in the audience, the girls already knew that I'd be asking them what kind of panties they

were wearing, they had their answers prepared; even before I asked, they already blurted out everything ... They were too fast, they knew what lay ahead. In fact, they were running the show.

Marko: With *Would Would Not*, we didn't have a safety mechanism for the rhythm. The performance felt a bit drawn-out already, it went on for three hours.

Bojan: Yes, but we didn't lose control, we didn't give up on our demand that the audience collaborate with us, that it effectively had to take over the show or there would be no show. We simply had to wait for Sanela to get two penises to animate and this took a long time. A painful pause, it wasn't easy to surmount it, but we had a deal: until Sanela gets two volunteers onto the stage, the performance cannot carry on. Essentially, this was the moment at which everyone was waiting for who would give up first. The audience didn't give up, half of it left the auditorium, true, but the others kept sitting and waiting ... In this situation, I felt quite powerless, but until the last person leaves, the performance carries on, we had to persevere. To me, this was the moment in which the audience took over the performance, and yet the performance retained control over its context. The whole thing looked quite different, however, at the subsequent showings of *Would Would Not*. The audience came fully prepared; those who had seen the performance brought their friends along, whole groups of friends came to have fun, to show that they would dare to get onto the stage, strip naked. When Sanela was looking for two volunteers for penis animation, the guys took their pants off in a second ... The performance was built on the premise that there exists a certain fundamental tension between the spectator and the performer, but this completely disappeared now. It all turned into an exhibitionist circus for the audience. The audience took over the show, we lost control of the context, so after these reruns, we stopped playing the performance in Ljubljana altogether.

Marin: It seems to me that you managed to provoke some of your spectators to such a degree that not only did they start to control the unease or resistance to being directly involved in the process of staging but they also began to lose their sense of responsibility for their own responses and procedures. This shift towards the spectator's "right to perform" best comes across by way of obscene responses. Theatre that opens up its framework to the extent that you did with the performance *Would Would Not* suddenly becomes perverted into a snippet of reality rooted in acting without any sanctions for the actors, nor any consequences for the social life outside the theatre.

Katarina: In *Would Would Not*, I have a scene in which I pick a few guys from the audience who I find attractive, and then I show them my cunt and I provoke them by saying that whoever wants to come with me should show me his penis. It did happen a number of times that a spectator showed me his penis, but only once was it erect. He took it out in front of everyone. We left the auditorium and for half an hour I had no clue what to talk to this man about. A hard-core reality check.

Grega: We did these shows just before New Year's. The security guard from *Stara elek-trarna* (an old converted power station where the performances were held) was so enthusiastic about the performance that he called his son from Osijek to come and see *Would Would Not* with his friends. This security guard still greets me kindly whenever he sees me.

Bojan: When working on *Would Would Not*, we talked a lot about the strategies of opening up the space between ourselves and the audience, about the nature of this agreement for the performance to flow uninterrupted, and about the risks involved. When the performance was finished, we found ourselves very surprised that the audience was ready for a lot more than we had bargained for. So we would open up the space even more until that moment came which we had not been prepared for at all, when the audience literally took over our show.

Marin: In contrast to the excess of the situation, which took control out of the hands of the performer in *Would Would Not*, we should also note another kind of spectator response: a spectator's rejection of getting into any kind of verbal or bodily interaction that would cross the boundaries of the performance framework and of finding himself in the domain of exerting direct influence on the performance. The reason for the oppositional stance need not stem from the spectator's sense of discomfort, it could also be rooted in his rejection of the position of inferiority and the likely manipulation he is a prone subject to, if for nothing else, for the simple reason that – in contrast to the performer – he is not privy to the subsequent unfolding of the performance (or at least not of the segment in which this is arranged), not to mention the lack of technical skill which most often turns the act of the engaged spectator into a comedy as well as a release for the spectators who have not allowed themselves to be taken over the line. Collaboration in the artistic scene is not driven only by certain conventions but also by certain competences, and it is these that keep the performers in a privileged position vis-à-vis the spectators, although the latter can indeed intervene in a way that can disrupt power relations.

Bojan: *Four Deaths*, for example, is a very static performance, and yet the interaction between the stage and the auditorium is nonetheless pretty intense, even though we are not constantly flying back and forth between the stage and the auditorium. To begin, with Katarina establishes physical interaction as a dominant rule of her scene, but then we consciously withdraw it, counting on the spectator to continue watching the performance with that expectation intact. In the next scene, in which Grega doesn't stop clapping on the stage, the spectator, in this odd situation in which the actor is clapping and not the spectator, is in a quandary as to whether to clap back, to clap with him, to clap so that he'll stop clapping ... Of course, the spectator can also stubbornly decide to opt out of all engagement: "I am here merely to watch." The key thing here is the position of power that is accorded to those who are on the stage. In fact, the spectator defines his own position vis-à-vis this power already in advance – either he resists it or he can't wait to embrace it. Since we are aware that, in line with convention, our position is automatically that of power, we spend quite a bit of time trying to figure out how to set up at least some kind of fictional equilibrium between the spectator and the performer, which would then allow us to open up the space for communication. The biggest difficulty lies in making the spectator believe that you won't be abusing this power, that you won't use it towards manipulative ends, for, on his end, he is rightly asking: "Why would you be on the stage if not precisely for that?" There can be no equilibrium; equality is an ideological construct, there's always domination; equality is especially impossible in artistic practices, by rule it is impossible. The artist assumes the position of the one who knows, who dares, and who knows how. That is why a lot of our work explores the strategies of self-degradation, self-reduction. *Out* is an example of a self-conscious and collective degradation of the performer and his medium, and also of that of the spectator. *Out* problematizes the position which the spectator identifies himself with. Every spectator in the audience plays this role individually – but he accepts it, else his presence in the theatre makes no sense. In the dog game (a scene from *Out*), the point is not who is in a weaker position, the one throwing the ball or the one catching it, but that the game is possible only if both sides do the catching and throwing. They must both concede to some minimal common denominator, to some basic equation, but in this equation neither of them feels exactly great. Equality is always forced, even if it gives the impression of an idyll, it is always forced.

Marin: What you have told us now comes across as a revelation about Via Negativa's stance and political strategy.

Katarina: What is political? Defining Via Negativa in this way seems stupid to me. Everything is political and nothing is political. It would be political if Zmagó Jelinčič (a

right-wing Slovenian politician) performed in my place. This amounts to the same stupidity as insisting on the difference existing between being a performer and being an actor. Our intention is not politics as such, but of course, if what we are doing comes across, and functions outwardly, as political, then so be it. But this is not our starting point, since that would mean we are doing this only for provocation. We start out by exploring power relations in a concrete performance situation, and only the person who can identify with what he is watching can be provoked.

Bojan: Marin, why would you say the theory of performing arts today always comes back to this question of the political? It may just be that we don't understand precisely enough what is behind this concept.

Marin: In the Croatian language – I am not sure about Slovene – we differentiate between the concept of the political theatre and the politicality of theatre. The political theatre reflects and implicitly or explicitly defends a certain political ideology, which is not to say that – as in the example of Brecht – gesture cannot be its fundamental premise. In other words, political theatre is ...

Marko: Engaged.

Marin: Yes, you could call it that, too, but across a range which extends from agitation for a concrete political idea, party or change in a critical stance or problematization of the normative, the dominant or hegemonic way of thinking, social behaviour or existing system, and that from a perspective of a certain idea of freedom. Siegfried Melchinger concluded his study entitled *History of the Political Theatre* from 1971 with a thesis that the “political theatre has only as much freedom as it takes it for itself.” Well, “that political”, as Hans-Thies Lehmann titled one of his closing chapters of *Postdrama Theatre*, was precisely in those years of the 20th century changing its strategies and tactics. The fact that a certain group of artists is involved in making a production already means that the theatre – at least the type that doesn't see its fulfilment merely in getting a repertoire product finished – is going to have to rethink the relations between the artistic collective, simply by virtue of the fact that it will be addressing the issues of existing and alternative models of social organization. Institutional theatre is hierarchical and disciplined. It is constituted through a stable system of entitlements and values ensured and perpetuated by the various circles of expertise and power and organization. It can be critical towards political and social themes, it can treat them ironically or subvert them or it can even speak up for radical changes, but if it doesn't question the production regime, if it is not constantly changing the relations within the creative collective, if it is not opening up new possibilities for transgressing the discipline, if it is not freeing up new spaces for, let's say, authorial potential of actors who could then dodge the guidelines of the directorial vision and will – it will be difficult for it to move away in any significant manner from the function of yet another apparatus for the reproduction and legitimating of a more or less repressive social and political setup. “That political” theatre that wants to see itself on the side of the alternative must today also confront the question of whether it is possible to create a different model for organizing relations as well as groups in the creative process. It has to establish this difference not only in the domain of aesthetics but also in opposition to the dominant and self-sufficient production model of institutional theater. Attempts to deal with this question signify a consciousness about a possible politicality of theatre beyond political action, provocation, agitation or simply thematization.

Katarina: We are on the stage because we are doing something that the spectator doesn't dare do or can't do or possibly secretly desires, and we are here to do this instead of him and for him. We are a valve of sorts, and that's why he comes to watch us. Is this political? A different take on what is going on but which is understood in various ways. Is that political? Could be, or it could just as well be mere entertainment or plain ego-

massage. But then ego-massage is also political. We don't do these shows for provocation; if I am showing my cunt, that doesn't yet amount to provocation; provocation is when the spectator sees it as provocation. That is political.

Bojan: Political is always going to present a bone of contention. If we take political to mean how you defined it, Marin, then *Via Negativa* is no doubt a radically political project, opening up as it does questions about the levers and dynamics of social relations, about the mechanisms of cultural patterns, about the impotence of artistic production, about the obscenity of contemporary consumerism, etc. Through the relations between the performer and the spectator in the context of contemporary performing arts, we problematize fundamental social relations and undermine the great humanistic myths about freedom and equality that form the basis of every political manipulation. That is the reason why we began with the seven deadly sins. And that is also why we persevere with theatre – because theatre constitutes one of the most rigid conventional forms, which is in effect as old as the nation-state itself. Theatre is our playground. Performance is our method of work. With the performance, we test this contractual theatre relation, the theme of our performances is theatre itself. That is why when it comes to us there seems to be so much confusion about the relationship between performance and theatre. We don't negate classical conventions, just subvert them. We are testing the boundaries. In our shows, we often underline the line that separates the performer and the spectator, we underline the difference between us. We are here, you are there. We are not equal and we never will be. There are double standards at play here, as there are indeed everywhere. But for one important difference: we can at least pretend here that we are equal, here we can change the rules of the game, we can even exchange roles, if you wish. The message lurking behind all this is political: the culture of equality is nonsense, there wouldn't be any culture if there were equality; culture exists precisely because there is no equality. The kind of theatre that is able to outdo its own rules can withstand anything. The same applies for the state. It can endure everything and more than we can today imagine. That's what we are showing.

Katarina: You could also say that we are a group of ten people who like to show their cocks and cunts, and why not?! Just as legitimate.

Bojan: And one that hasn't made a porn film as of yet.

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