

Analysis (3.1.3.)

The questions posed in 'Revolution By Night' are about the personal investment in riots. What kind of personal engagement is invested in activism, and how does this engagement relativize the individuality of the activists? Activism establishes a radically different social space which challenges our normal perceptions of identity. What are the features of this new collectivity, and how is it expressed in the often dramatic riots that characterized the first phase of The Youth House Movement?

'Revolution By Night' is built around two texts, and the relationship between text and performance differs from the other performances.

The first text is an attempt at positioning myself, not as the artist/researcher, but on a more direct personal level. Since this performance took place in direct 'confrontation' with an audience of activists from The Youth House Movement, I felt it necessary to clarify my own position. I wanted to establish a kind of personal trust between me and the activists that would enable them to engage more freely in the discussion organized after the performance. I saw such a personal trust as fundamental to the success of the discussion, but it was also something I needed to establish on a more general level of the project 'Aesthetics of Resistance': Who am I to engage in such a project? Why am I engaging in such matters at all? From what position do I speak about those things?

The first text is written with this purpose. For once, I don't introduce myself as 'the artist/researcher', but as the I that has 'initiated this performance and the discussion afterwards'. The performance is presented as 'my attempt to present this (...) in an artistic format'. For once, it is the 'real' Frans Jacobi speaking and not the ambiguous figure of the artist/researcher. The story that I am about to tell is presented as concerning a 'very personal experience'. The beginning of the story is constructed as an admission of my distance to The Youth House Movement and my difficulties in identifying with it. Then, an experience of engagement and being part of the social space of activists is described. Even though this connectedness is described as temporal and short, it still marks a point of real active engagement, meant to create a kind of bond between me and the 'real' activists. Combined with the admission of my position as an observer at a distance from the movement, it establishes a kind of truthful, unpretentious position, from which I am somehow allowed to speak about an activism that I didn't really take part in.

This positioning of myself is referred to several times by various participants, not only in the following discussion, but also in other discussions following other performances. Each time mentioned as the reason for the acceptance of me as a speaking partner on the part of the activists. Here, it proves crucial to position myself; positioning is not just an academic question relating to the idea of research, it becomes a premise for my dialogue with the activism I am inquiring into.

In the performance I stand high up on stage, dressed in black, with one foot on a box of cobble-stones. A typical rebel stance. This cliché posture, combined with the obviously self-ironic tone of the text, create a disarming humorous atmosphere, where the intended collective trust is easily established.

The first part is thus about establishing a relaxed, trustful atmosphere between the performers and the audience. Furthermore, the personal narration has elements that

thematize the content of the entire performance. The concept of Active Time vs. Dead Time, taken from the writings of Stine Krøijer, is here exemplified in a very direct personal manner, as it appears as the dramatic high point in the narrative unfolding in the first text. The connectedness experienced in Active Time becomes the underlying premise for the second part of the performance, and for the discussion to follow after the performance. The general question becomes, whether the second text and the staging of it in the second part deliver a plausible interpretation of connectedness, of Active Time. In the discussion, this is also the underlying theme: how to describe the emotional engagement and the commitment, obviously felt by the activists in the first phase of The Youth House Movement?¹

The second part of the performance is based on a song text, 'In Love', by the Danish artist, Søren Thilo. The text delivers a humorous rap-version of the engagement thematized in the first part, and it describes the engagement in orgiastic terms, as being 'in love'. The staging of this text is not a participatory event including the audience, as in some of the other performances, but a staged dramatization of the text. The eventual participation by the audience is on the level of emotional identification.

In a sense, the staging of the text realizes the image of 'a darkness falling on Nørrebro, all the angry activists dancing in a haze of black confetti, falling from the sky on an already condemned address' that is presented in the first text, and that was never really unfolded in the ineffective action from inside the Youth House. Here, in a more theatrical version, this image unfolds in the slowly evolving collage of Henrik Have's dry, experienced voice, the cinematographic soundtrack of Lonely Boy Choir and my own withheld, but desperate and shrieking scratching the lacquer of the car with a large knife.

If the actions of The Youth House Movement are images, they are confrontational images, images provoking political thought or establishing another social space. The image unfolding here, in the second part of 'Revolution By Night', is a reflective image. Its function is to be a reflection on the original events, on the first phase of The Youth House Movement. It is an afterthought, a contemplation. It offers an aesthetical space for contemplation. This goes for this project as a whole, and it is somehow the premise for my version of research as well. The research is a contemplation of certain crucial events which I find it interesting and important to reflect upon. In this case, it reflects the emotional structures in the engagement, in the other performances, other aspects of the original events are contemplated.

This reflective character of my research in general, and especially of the image here in 'Revolution By Night', was questioned by some of the activists in the discussion afterwards. Does the movement need such a reflection? From which position is it undertaken? What political goal does it serve?

If we look beyond the often heard discussions of the relationship between artistic research and the academic system – the debates on how art and academia can or cannot connect – this would be one of the areas, where my version of artistic research might serve a function: As a tool for critical reflection inside the groups of people the content relates to. This was also part of my intention in choosing the various sites for the last round of performances; an attempt at reaching audiences that might be interested in such critical reflection. In this case, activists from The

Youth House Movement and users of The New Youth House, where this performance took place.

The choice of the text 'In Love' has to do with this as well. Not necessarily a precise analysis of the emotional commitment in The Youth House Movement, it still proposes an interpretation of this commitment. Activism is like 'being in love'. This statement provokes a reflection in the audience; each member of the audience has to consider if this is how he or she sees it. In addition, it provokes a reflection on the emotional aspects of engagement. What kind of emotional commitment did he/she experience when taking part in the actions or demonstrations in question.

So, even if most parts of the audience feel that the statement 'activism is like being in love' is wrong or superficial, it provokes a discussion on the character of emotional engagement in activism.

The staging of the text adds to this; by presenting the argument as aesthetics, as an event in sound, scenography, music and performative action, the audience is induced into a reflection with the senses; they are incited to a reflection on how their participation in various riots was felt, how their commitment was expressed as physical and emotional actions.

In the following discussion, the term 'in love' is rejected by more or less all participants as too positive and too superficial, but it is substituted by other emotional terms, like 'anger', 'rage' or 'sorrow', as more fitting to describe the emotional engagement in the struggles concerning The Youth House. In this sense, the performance did succeed in engaging the audience in a reflection on the emotional character of their commitment. As described in the commentaries 'In Love part one' and 'In Love part two', this led to a discussion of the relationship between this kind of emotional engagement and the political and symbolic contextualization of these collective emotional structures.

By posing these questions as an aesthetic event, as a sense-event, the performance opens up for another kind of reflection on the original events. The destruction in 'Revolution By Night' has a dark, mythological character that is obviously present in the real riots as well. These poetic aspects of the riots are often neglected, but here a space is opened up for reflections on such terms.

How to open such space for poetic reflection? In the performance, various elements create a slight displacement that unsettles the obvious illustration of the text 'In Love':

The fact that the rebel, impersonated by the person reading the text, isn't a young black-block-like type, but instead an older man, with a very distinct and very un-rapper-like intonation, disturbs the preconception of such a figure. It forces us to consider the content of the text more carefully, exactly because it is recited by a person, from whom we wouldn't expect such a statement.

The same kind of unsettling of preconceptions is attempted with the way destruction is represented in the performance. By choosing to scratch the lacquer of the car with a large knife instead of burning it down, as it is done in one of the dominant images of property destruction circling around in our culture, another disturbance is offered. To destroy the car in another way than expected opens up the image for fresh

reflection in a different way from a reuse of the stereotyped image of the burning car would do.

The slow, dragging tempo of the performance adds to this disturbance; the kind of event that is normally conceived as fast, dramatic and eventful is here represented as slow and without dramatic development. The two main activities, the reading of the text by Have and the scratching in the auto-lacquer by myself, are interspersed with explosions of black confetti and repeated applauses from a large crowd on the soundtrack, but none of these add to a dramatic high or a release of tension. The tension is rather kept at the same steady pace throughout the performance, dragged out in time. This undramatic use of a set of dramatic features creates an ambiguous situation, a suspension where the audience is provoked to simultaneously experience and reflect upon these experiences. Or as a participant in the discussion commented:

“After a while I became increasingly irritated, and wished that the performer would just get on with it and smash that car for real...”²

It is exactly such an irritation, or unsettling of the viewers' preconception that provokes the reflection intended with this performance. The performance talks about something the activist knows very well, but it does so in a manner slightly different from what is to be expected. It presents a statement about activism that the activist might disagree with, but it is not so important, if the views presented in the performance are more or less correct or truthful compared with those of the activist. The important thing is that the irritation provokes a reflection in the activist and in the audience in general. A reflection, either as expressed by participating in the discussion, or in more general terms as individual reflections done by each member of the audience afterwards.

Notes:

¹ See commentaries 'In Love part one' & 'In Love part two' (3.1.4.4. and 3.1.4.6.)

² REVOLUTION BY NIGHT discussion AoR 3.1.2.1 (video documentation). The translation of comments is done by Frans Jacobi.