

### **Analysis 3.3.3.**

Mayhem: An avantgarde music club in a run down abandoned factory on the outskirts of Copenhagen; an audience of 50-60 persons placed on old chairs in a large circle; in the center of the circle a stack of building materials and some tools; 5 performers, a sound-artist and an accordion-player; the accordion plays a single chord; a female performer steps onto the stack of building materials, raises a piece of paper with the name Patti Smith in front of her face, and reads up a quote from Patti Smith; 3 performers starts moving the building materials and begins the construction of an improvised 'parasitic' architectural structure; another female performer introduces herself as Frans Jacobi - the artist/researcher, and start reading up a long introduction; the 4 performers each take turns reading up quotes from various sources; as the architectural structure evolves the sounds of the building process is caught by a set of microphones and used in an improvised soundtrack being mixed by echo, reverb and other soundeffects by the sound-artist.

Midsection a long manifesto of the Upbuilders is being read. Here the voice of the performer is also distorted, mixed into the echoing soundtrack.

When the architectural structure fills the space the building stops, the artist/researcher reads up the last round of commentary. Lights are turned of and a series of video-projections are turned on. The space is filled with images of water. The architectural structure becomes a raft floating on the sea. The accordion set in with a beautiful romantic tune. This is where the performance ends. Everyone is enveloped in this romantic image.

The performance is followed by a discussion between Appolonia Susterjec and Frans Jacobi.

### **Bad Luck**

This is the performance where everything went wrong by a series of independent, but unfortunate incidents:

First the musician I had conceptualized the soundtrack with, Boris Schiøler/Lonely Boy Choir were forced to cancel his participation for private reasons. In collaboration we found a substitute, the brilliant sound-artist Tobias Kirstein, but he wouldn't be in Copenhagen until the morning of the performance. We decided to collaborate anyway, having a whole day to prepare. Arriving at Mayhem in the morning to set up and prepare for the performance, I found the whole area hit by power cut. Furthermore Tobias called and said that one of his kids were sick so he would come by later, but since there was no power we were not able to set-up any sound-equipment anyway. Raving around in the darkness I tried to organise the set-up. The power only returned in the afternoon, but by then the whole family of Tobias had fallen ill and he had to stay home taking care of them, so he only managed to arrive short before the start of the performance, setting up the sound-equipment in a hurry. We ended up having only 5 minutes to hastily go through my ideas for the sound without any chance of testing anything. The result was that the rythm of reverb and echo produced by the sound from the tools never really happended. Tobias did his best but it would have required contact-microphones fastened directly to the building materials, a fact we would have detected in a rehearsal of the idea. So the soundscape that played an important part in my intentions with this performance

became somewhat diminished. I am thankful to Tobias that he ventured out into the performance in such horrible conditions anyway.

Raving around in the darkness, I changed my plan for the placement of the audience, instead of having them create a circle themselves when asked for by the artist/researcher in the beginning of the performance, I decided to place the chairs in a circle from the beginning, so people would form a circle just by sitting down. This would later prove to be a quite fatal decision.

As if these troubles were not enough, one of the invited participants in the discussion to follow the performance, Rene Karpantschoff, called in sick late in the afternoon, leaving me with absolutely no time to find a substitute. I had to take over his role myself, which made the discussion digress and become quite unbalanced.

The performance went ok anyway - the script saved it – but looking back at it now I can see that some important points were missed. An analysis will be more of an evaluation, since the conditions to do this performance were not optimal. Lets try anyway:

### **Analysis**

The first part of On Water works like a performative essay in the same manner as the G13 performance, but the elements here are more action-like.

The text is narrated by the artist/researcher who uses a lot of small phrases to guide and take care of the audience. In the beginning she uses the term 'learning-play' to describe what we are going to experience and the tone of language used in her text has a fitting pedagogical character. She is a teacher presenting us to the content of the performance. The intention is a kind of self-mockery on my part; a way of dealing with the role of the artist as researcher. To point to the problem of forcing so much content into an artwork and then at same time trying to make it work. With an ironic humouristic twist, but still an attempt at solving the problem of integrating this content and commentary into the performance, without restricting the performative, aesthetic elements too much. The role of the artist/researcher is precisely forged like a figure, seemingly narrating the performance from the outside. In this performance though she is 'on stage' with the other performers, which makes her a part of the cast. She is at once inside the performance and outside. This positioning of artist/researcher is something that I am experimenting with throughout the nine performances in 'Aesthetics of Resistance' – in each performance the role is cast slightly different.

Here it is performed by Amira Jasmina Shalaby Jensen, a young actress, that I have worked with on several occasions. She reads up the text from small cards, in a manner, often used on televisions, i.e. very often in the news-programmes on danish television. Her appearance, and the system with the cards, merges the figures of the teacher and the news-presenter in a perfect manner. Reading up the text in english gave her problems though; since she is not used to acting in english her reading of the text became insecure and often slightly stumbling. I was on more occasions criticised for using her, when this was so obvious, but it was a very conscious decision. Her hesitating manner of reading inserts yet another distance into the figure of the artist/researcher which I really appreciate. She is acting the role of the teacher/news-speaker, but at the same time she is just Amira trying to get a grip on the often complicated text. She is here with us, together in this space, struggling with herself to become another.<sup>1</sup>

The other performers are reading up texts as well. Here it is various quotes appearing in the text of the artist/researcher. To create a variation in the presentation of the text, each quote is read up by another person. This person reads up from a piece of A4-paper. On the backside of this paper the name of the author of the quote is written with large letters. The performers are instructed to hold up the paper in front of their faces as they read up. This creates a simple figure, where the white A4-paper is like a mask and the large letters of the name is like the facial features. In the way the authors of the various quotes are shaped as present figures in the performance. Patti Smith, Hakim Bey and Lars Bang Larsen are actually present as performed figures. This feature is part of my attempt to perform the information gathered in my research process, and this part of the performance actually works quite well.<sup>2</sup> The texts become present in the space as performative reality.

The presentation of the central quote in the script, read up by myself, is problematic though. The manifesto by the Upbuilders was intended to be read over the dub-like beat that would have evolved out of the noises from the building-process. The first part should have been read up straight on top of this beat, then the second part should have been fragmented by resonance and reverb and mixed into the heavy beat. When this beat is never happening I am improvising another reading, dramatising my voice as Kirstein adds other effects to the voice. This results in a completely different expression than originally intended but the circumstances dictates us to attempt another solution. As a member of the audience explains to me in an email afterwards, the distortion of the reading of the manifesto deprives the Upbuilders of 'having a voice' in the performance. The other quotes stands sharp in the performance, but it is a major problem that the voice of the central group of activists is not represented in a sober manner in the performance.

Now, let's look at the architectural structure. Based on an idea of parasitic architecture, three performers improvises an chaotic free-form structure of the wooden materials placed in a stack in mid-space at the start of the performance. Quite fast this structure evolves into space and creates a kind of maze of wooden plates, wooden beams and other building materials. The improvisation works well, the evolving building process is fascinating to follow and the atmosphere of chaotic creativity dominates the space. The intention was to include the audience into the structure by placing them and their chairs one by one onto various parts of the structure as it becomes possible. This didn't happen and the circular structure that chairs and thereby the audience were placed in from the beginning somehow counter-acts this. The circle establishes a quite stable relationship between audience and stage, that isn't easy to break once established. The audience thus becomes on-lookers instead of participants in the performance. This is a subtle detail; the difference between participation and spectator can be very small, but it is conceptually important. Here it becomes a problem both in the parasitic-architecture-part, and in the last image driven part.

The problem of the circle is the direction of the gaze. Sitting in the circle the audience looks at the area in the center, that thus becomes a stage. If they were scattered inside the parasitic structure their gaze would have pointed in various directions and towards other members of the audience; they would comprise the stage themselves, and the relationship between audience and performers would be different. The fact that I am always referring to them as audience and to the other participants as

performers of course already establishes a relationship, but it is still variable. There are subtle differences to be considered.

Still the parasitic structure evolves around the audience, thereby enveloping them in chaotic atmosphere. This enveloping was intended to be radically enlarged by the soundscape created from the sounds of the building-process; the hammering and the screwdriver was to be echoed and distorted into a heavy repetitious beat. This never really works out and the chaotic enveloping of the audience in a parasitic audio-spatial sense-event is somewhat diminished.

Another more fundamental problem with the idea of the parasitic architecture in this performance is precisely that of architecture. Parasitic architecture is an anarchistic addition to an existing architectural structure; for this addition to be effectively parasitic the host architecture has to be the opposite: Formal, square and well-organised. The architecture of Mayhem, where this performance takes place is parasitic in itself. It is a temporary, no-tech, sloppy, second-hand interior, inserted into a derelict factory building. It is already as parasitic as can be. To erect another parasitic architectural structure into this space is an unprecise action; the drama inherent in the concept of the parasitic architecture is cancelled and the result is not as unpredictable as intended. It would be a far more drastic act to create such a structure in an institutional white cube architecture.

When the parasitic structure is completed, and the manifesto of the Upbuilders is read, lights are turned off and three video-projections with footage of water, waves and the sea are projected from the ceiling and onto the central part of the space. The accordion player, Kim Jezus, starts playing a simple tune, full of longing. Here the enveloping works. The space is turned into an image and we are all, performers and audience taken somewhere else, out on the sea, on water. The intention here is to create an imaginary space, an illusion. To take the audience from the present very real situation of the building and the reading, out into an image. This is an interpretation of the squatting of Refshalevej; it is to mark the exodus from society at large into some kind of temporary autonomous zone. A transition from the real into the imaginary.

In a sense this transition in the performance reverses the *Verfremdungseffekt* of Bertolt Brecht. Where he wanted to cancel out illusion in the theatre, revealing all effects and technical tricks in the creation of a materialistic reality, I here go from the brechtian presence of performance in the first part, into an illusionistic imaginary scenery in this last part. This transition is inspired by the concept of 'deus ex machina'. This concept comes from the theatre of the antique and is both a technical and a narrative tool to solve an intricate and seemingly locked dramatic situation. Flying in from above a deity - a god or goddess - solves the problems in the plot, from the outside, bring it to the denouement. The term has later been generalised to mean any kind of unexpected event that solves a seemingly hopeless situation. Here in my version it is the move from one kind of reality to another kind of reality that is brought in 'from above'. The 'deus ex machina' is the system consisting of the video-projections and the accordion player, a kind of filmic machinery, that introduces a completely different ambience; a romantic cinematic ambience that all of a sudden envelopes the audience in an illusionary scenario.<sup>3</sup>

The passage from real to imaginary reflects the difference between the two projects described in the script – Havnelaboratoriet and the occupation of Refshalevej.

My interpretation is somewhat paradoxical; the artist group Parfyme is caught in the struggles with the authorities and in 'the present circumstances'. Their project, Havnelaboratoriet, exists in that struggle, in the in-between space of proposal. Partly an imaginary space, partly an all too realistic performance of the various interests of their sponsors and patrons. It is an image realised on the conditions of the authorities, it is what was possible on these conditions. Parfyme is painstakingly aware of this and it is encouraging that they speak so directly about it in the video I am quoting them from. The activists, the Upbuilders on the other hand, completely leaves 'the present circumstances' by their act of civil disobedience. By rejecting reality as we know it, capitalist reality, they are to a much larger degree establishing an imaginary space. Their version of imaginary becomes another reality. This is the difference I wanted to test with the transition in this performance; from performing in the real in the first part to leaving the real, exit into an imaginary space in the last part.

Reality vs. Imaginary. Upbuilders vs. Parfyme. Art vs. Activism. Performance vs. Theatre. Audience vs. Participants. Legal vs. Illegal. Obedience vs. Disobedience. Since the narrative in this interpretation is build on comparison between the two projects, this duality is reflected in almost all parts of the performance. The difference between the two are presented in an array of subtle dualities through the performance. They mirror each other in various ways and shift positions in a complicated play of differences.

Where Parfyme, as artists, try to establish a similar temporal autonomous zone as the Upbuilders, I, as an artist/researcher, try to establish a temporal performative space, where these problematics can be contemplated, reflected. Parfyme takes art into the streets, into society – I stay strictly inside the framework of art. Even when placing these performance out in various other contexts - the new Youth House, Mayhem or Copenhagen City Hall – they are always presented as artistic reflections. This is crucial. There is no attempt at leaving art, rather an attempt at testing how artistic research might be able to engage with topics outside of art.

'On Water' is hit by bad luck. This influence various parts of the performance, but even the choice of venue is problematic. If a suitable occasion occurs I will definitely try to redo it. The next time it shall be inside an established art institution, in a white cube. For now it works as an experiment in the series of performances in 'Aesthetics of Resistance'. To a certain degree a failed experiment, but even from this there are lessons to be learned – the reflections made here in this evaluation influence the way the next performances are set up, some of them even influence my thinking about the problematics presented in this performance.

---

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> This, being caught in becoming another, closely resembles the way Chloe Sevigny is present in the film 'Get Rid of Yourself', see AoR 3.1. note 16.

<sup>2</sup> See G13analysis for a longer elaboration on performing the information gathered in the research process.

<sup>3</sup> For a longer, brilliant contemplation on 'deus ex machina' see the chapter 'Theater Machines' in Gerald Raunig: '*A Thousand Machines*', (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2010), p. 35-56cli