

Turning City into the Third Space

By Sodja Lotker

City and its public space have in recent years been a popular destination of performance work and its subject of exploration. In my practice as a dramaturge and a curator the idea of the city came back again and again in a variety of forms: as a stage for theatre performance, as a system to be researched by artists, as a metaphor for co-habitation of 'difference' etc. In this text I will describe some of these projects and try to trace back, decipher why, and figure out what am I doing at all, looking (through a series of rather fragmented thoughts, and a set of notes and quotes that keep helping me 'to cope') into the possibility that this trend is not only popular but possibly even necessary.

What I did

The evolution of the connection to the city in my practice is visible in my work done for the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space¹, the scenography event, where the focus of exploration is the 'setting', the environment of the performance². The core of the PQ event is expositions of individual countries and regions, accompanied by various special projects and programs. The event has developed since the late 1990' to include (besides the work for opera, drama and ballet) what we in the Quadrennial call 'expanded scenography' work for variety of artistic performative actions from theatre to visual arts.

One of the first large accompanying projects of this effort was the Heart of the Prague Quadrennial³, live indoor exhibition of almost 2.000m², that we made for the Quadrennial 2003. The Heart consisted of a scaffolding installation of five 'towers' and a series of in-between spaces (tables, ramps, bridges, slides) that provided for a variety of 'stages' (audience could sit around the table and watch a show, or stand on the top of a tower and watch a show through a crack, or listen through tubes something that is taking place on the other side of the Heart installation).

¹ Prague Quadrennial is the largest exhibition and event for performance design-scenography, presenting work from over 70 countries in over 12 000m² of expositions and over 500 live events in 10 days, existing in Prague since 1967 www.pq.cz

² In this text I will use word performance and theatre interchangeably to mean one and the same thing: artistic performative action.

³ Curated by Czech scenographer Tomáš Žižka, architecture by designer from New Zealand Dorita Hannah.

But more than being a place of exploration of new modes of performance and new modes of spectating (both variety of performative languages and in architectural settings, including performing for different human senses not only eyesight), to me, the Heart was a social experiment. Over ten groups of artists (including Recto Verson from Canada, MAU from Samoa, Akhe from Russia, Monkey's Wedding Theatre from South Africa, Carol Brown from UK-New Zealand and Kyzyl Traktor from Kazakhstan) were 'living' and performing in this space for two weeks from morning to night. Each of the groups had their basic territory, but was invited to spill into territories in-between or even trespass other territories, often in the same time. This co-habitation created a setting for many dramaturgically interesting moments of overlapping of performance within spaces, that required from audience a complete dedication (if not even complete giving in) in order to follow this complex dramaturgical constellation. But this co-habitation was very hard for all involved, performing day by day without spatial and temporal integrity provided many misunderstandings, quarrels and even 'wars' between the groups⁴. So, the Heart of the Prague Quadrennial in 2003 was a small city built indoors, that reminds me of Shanks and Pearson, writing that "*most of us now live in cities` it is the urban, the congregation of strangers which defines our contemporary situation`*"⁵. This co-habitation among strangers was the most distinguish aspect of the project in my opinion now.

But I also remember very clearly the day I was going home after the last day of the project, thinking that it was such a pity that the project took place indoors, in an almost laboratory environment, and was available only for a very chosen Quadrennial audience, and I knew that it would have been better to do it 'among people' in public space. *If the mountain won't come to Muhammad then Muhammad must go to the mountain*. I knew that the lab rats need to get out into the city, instead of creating a laboratory city. And this is exactly what we did: for the Quadrennial 2007 we invited a series of groups of artists and artists to perform in public spaces of Prague, exploring public space as scenography. Jana Preková, Czech designer and her group performed in the Prague metro; visual artist Lucy Orta did a performative action connected to war in Iraq in the Prague Castle, where the president resides; *Tony Clifton Circus*, absurd circus from Italy performed at the most frequent metro and trams crossroads, where many homeless people used to dwell; and *Beau Geste* had their romantic dance with a digger in the shopping district. This was a very simple project, some of

⁴ The one I remember the most is a 'war' between the Samoan group that wanted to perform ritual killing of a Chicken (from Czech national exposition), that were stopped by the Russian group.

⁵ Pearson, Mike and Michael Shanks. *Theatre/archeology*, Routledge, 2001. Print. p- 147

the projects were commissioned for specific spaces, somewhere existing performances for public space, but the core of the project was for the Quadrennial to get out into the streets, be visible and interact with new audiences, not much more.

For the Quadrennial 2011 we have decided to do the special project that would keep it simple, by giving very separate territories to individual artists, to put it into semi-public space of piazza (in-between the National Theatre Prague and the historically important Laterna Magika theatre⁶) but to 'make it more complicated' for the audience. We have created Intersection: Intimacy and Spectacle project. We have started off by first creating the setting, the scenography of thirty white cubes and black boxes, miniature 'ideal' galleries and theatres (2 000 m²) designed by architect Oren Sagiv. We have created a miniature city next to the National Theatre that provided co-habitation of performative projects from variety of genres and disciplines – from fashion design and installation art to dance, disco dance, theory and possibility for audiences to borrow a mask for the duration of going through this exposition. The exhibition was live for the most part (exhibited scenographer making models in real time, tango lessons, moving puppet installation), where the 'boxes' that did not include live performer provided for stage for spectator, where the audiences became performers. It was a little maze city that audience had to come back to again and again if they wanted to see it all. This city aimed to provide place for residence for variety of 'strangers' to deconstruct the traditional ideas of what theatre is, and provide for rhizomatic performative experience for audience, a confusion, cultivated chaos rather than 'definition'. The event was enjoyed by audiences, students and children but did not 'sit well' with Czech theatre critics, that wanted to see productions by the most famous participants of the project (such as *Romeo Castellucci* or *Josef Nadj*) and did not understand that they have to invest some time into the experience, rather than receive the performance as a finite product. They could not understand this city where strangers co-existed in constant flux, where seeking definition, and clear understanding was a useless effort.

This project again was in a semi public space, despite the fact that it as an interesting place, giving possibility to infect the National Theatre with new disciplines and points of views, it did in part provide for safety. So, again in 2015 we will go directly into the streets, to collide with the everyday. Partially inspired by the fact that in some countries (USA, Germany and until recently even Czech Republic) there is a law against wearing a mask

⁶ Laterna Magika is the theatre here famous scenogrpaheer Josef Svoboda did a lot of his work.

during political demonstrations I have developed a project of bringing masked groups of people into public spaces in the center of Prague to explore our right to mask (right to identity and imagination).

The idea that performance needs the city is a very clear one. Theatre needs audience, public space naturally provides new audiences, people that do not have money, time or reflex to go to the theatre. And this is what in part was at the core of my previous project.

The more pressing question, that occupies me now, is whether the city needs the performance? And this right to imagination is exactly, what in my opinion ties the city and the performance together. And following this thought will hopefully help me get out of my loop of creating a city as a lab vs. using the existing city as a lab, safe vs. unpredictable, inside vs. outside loop.

What I want to do

American theoretical physicist wrote that *“a lot of our collective representations – a country, a religion, General Motors, the ego – are of the same quality as the rainbow. A great many things that we take for solid reality are very similar to the rainbow. In fact, it’s not wrong to do that. The difficulty arises because we do not realize that this is happening, and we therefore give the representation the value of independent fact.”*⁷ Many things are ‘this’ or ‘that’ because someone decided so, or designated it as such. They are social constructions. Many contemporary performances seek to question, explore and designate these social constructions, these rainbows that can be changed, exploring of what is socially constructed and how it is constructed. And this I take for a very political aspect.

The political aspect of theatre, and the change it can provide grounds and research for, is extremely important exactly today when politicians have a certain unwritten right to imagination and storytelling, where not all that is said is real or even really meant, versus art and performance being paradoxically obsessed with authenticity and reality (social community, site specific project that research specific spaces and communities for instance), where one is often very careful not to fantasize or act⁸. We need imagination to imagine

⁷ Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*, Routledge, 2004. Print. p. 67.

⁸ Well described in Stephen Duncombe *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, New York: The New Press, 2007 http://www.stephenduncombe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Dream_final.pdf

possibility of change, without imagination we are stuck in the reality owned (or even created) by someone else, who has more courage to create it (politicians and corporations possibly). Without going very deeply into our right for change, and why it is necessary, here I would rather want to point to performance as a tool for the change. No wonder many performance and theatre artists do projects that research existing urban and social constellations in order to propose possible future constellation, and point to the need for change, as well as to propose practice (performative act) as a tool for change, what is and what could be in one.

In a post-performance talk at the Dublin Theatre Festival Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck⁹ talked about theatre as the third space that made me look into initial ideas by American social geographer Edward W. Soja (inspired by work of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre), where he looks into city as the third space, where the third stands for space beyond binary oppositions where “*everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.*”¹⁰ This tight connection between the real and the imagined, the knowable and unimaginable, the existing and the experienced – what is and what could be - is to my mind exactly the definition of what theatre is, the theatre experience, where the objects and actors and the minds of audience create tight and complex unities, like nowhere else.

Since I have heard Benjamin Verdonck talk about it I started quoting it in my public talks often, talking about theatre always being exactly the place where real and imagined come together. Until after one of such talks, director Lotte van den Berg (whom I met during the Global City Local City project) came to me and said something to this account: “*You said that theatre is always a third space. But it is not always. We make it a third space.*” And I was very sorry she did not correct me during my speech. Because this is a crucial point: we make it the third space. We turn it into the third space. And this is exactly what makes our efforts meaningful.

Henri Lefebvre describes space as architectural (physically built), socially constructed (space designated for specific purpose or symbolism) and practiced space, where the practice

⁹ *notallwhowanderarelost* by Benjamin Verdonck performed on October 10th, 2015 at Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin

¹⁰ Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace*, Blackwell, 1996. Print. p. 57.

brings the change to the architectural and socially constructed space. It is by 'performing' the space that we can change the space. Change, metamorphosis, transformation is at the core of theatre and performance.

To go back to David Bohm who has also written that: "*We treat other people as objects, and eventually you must treat yourself as an object, saying, "I must fit in here, and I must do this and be that and become better," or whatever. But 'society is not an objective reality – period. It is a reality created by all the people through their consciousness.'*"¹¹

Performance creates the possibility to designate the social contraction and change it by practice, it further creates a specific third space – and create a common consciousness among audience that ties reality and imagination together.

In the Global City Local City (2012-2014 project) 15 artists and companies from 10 countries travelled to research different aspects of 9 European cities. One of the strongest 'impressions' or 'things I have learned' if you will during the project is that whenever we tried to 'understand' and make a quick judgment about a city we visited, we were in conflict with our own selves. Whenever we treated others as objects or objective we failed. When we tried to 'fit it' somewhere, it escaped us. City is not an objective reality; it is created through consciousness, mainly of the locals.

It took me, coming mainly from the world of touring European theatre that has a certain 'global' (and trendy I would say) language to understand that the differences among cities are massive, that this difference is made by consciousness of the locals, and that it takes massive effort even to start understating them.

Cities are complex organisms, with multiplicity of layers of reality (urban, natural, historical, communal, private, imaginative – as explored in the Global City Local City), congregations of (local) strangers that we entered and found ourselves as tourists, very often wondering if it is possible to 'understand' the city in five days (duration of the research) that we had for exploration at all. But in the same time the project gave us challenging, often painful possibility to experience difference, and to define, or re-define our own 'local', questioning what is often taken for granted. Further our 'global' perception or misperception

¹¹ Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*, Routledge, 2004. Print. p. 101.

often gave the 'locals' we encountered a new possibility to revisit the understanding of their city and social environment: created grounds for possibility for change.

And here I would like to stress that the most important in this project was exactly what escaped us, the painful, the ambiguous, the capacity of art to deal with the moment of change, the moment of conflicting realities, the indefinable, of paradoxical. To which I will go back in a moment.

But first I need to pose the question: is it my appetite growing: not being satisfied with finding new audiences, new definitions of theatre, new spaces and wanting to use theatre as a political tool. Is simply fashion to do art in public space? Or is it what contemporary society needs? Is social and political aspect of art and theatre just a passing trend often implanted by grant-givers or a necessity?

I found consolation in the recent article by Boris Groys *On Art Activism* for e-flux journal¹², writing about visual art activism he says: "*art activists react to the increasing collapse of the modern social state and try to replace the social state and the NGOs that for different reasons cannot or will not fulfill their role.*" I think this applies for contemporary performance projects, and not only the activist ones, but those that deal with political and social aspects at large. But what it means to me is that it is not fashion that is at stake here but a necessity to replace something that is lacking, simply taking on a new role that is underprovided in the contemporary society, a natural change of role. Art and theatre are simply gaining new roles.

But Groys further writes: "*Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists. And this is the point where theoretical, political, and even purely practical problems arise.*" And here I think he is talking about the contradiction between tangible, useful, the real and the imaginary and aestheticized. Here I would like to go back to impossibility to define, to the moment of contradiction and ambiguity, and agree with Groys that says that "*the fact that contemporary art activism is caught in this contradiction is a good thing. First of all, only self-contradictory practices are true in a deeper sense of the word.*"

¹² Boris Groys: On Art Activism in e-flux journal #56, 06/2014: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>

The moment of change is the moment of more than one reality, moment when we can see both sides of the coin in the same time, moments of ambiguity, of paradox, in-between moments, the moment of process. Performative practice can provide not only for research, questioning of social constructs and change by practice they can provide this most valuable moments of simultaneous existence of difference, possibility to see things that are not and not yet and more than anything these moments of ambiguity when “*subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history*”¹³ come together.

¹³ Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace*, Blackwell, 1996. Print. p. 57.