

*Presentation by Florian Feigl opening the conference
„Curating Performance Art As An Artistic Practice“
Berlin, GlogauAir, 22nd/23rd of May 2015
during Month of Performance Art – Berlin „The Anthology“*

1 pc. diary entry

1 pc. reflection

1 pc. footnote long

1 pc. quote

1 pc. footnote short

1 pc. song

The presentation is read sitting at a table. A microphone is used to amplify the voice slightly.

The presentation is accompanied by the annotated action (italised).

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers to the audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

LONDON – EARLIER THIS YEAR

In February 2015 a group of international performance artists met in London at [performance space]. The aim was an exchange about collaborative practices and if the understanding of the various practices involves political consciousness or more focused: if the performance practice might be seen as political activity or even political activism – which, almost no need to say, it did to different degrees. This being an interesting issue to discuss nevertheless took the rather foreseeable course as all artist involved were upright representatives of what in earlier days would have been called *Lumpenproletariat* with a background in squatting, anarchism or at least leftist reading groups – and it had, just as foreseeable, little outcome other than the general exchange about how bad the world presents itself now-a-days. Focal points however

once more became issues such as bad funding situation and the wish for more sustainable and longer lasting structures to keep on and improve the practices. And it needs be said that all artists present were highly active practitioners who in the past 15 years travelled the world of performance art, founded artist run performance spaces, festivals, platforms – in short some of the more active representatives of the international artist-curator types who in my understanding are key to the development of performance art in the past 15 years. To sum up: main topics of the exchange were the good old friends like „little or no money“, „no space – ideally live-work spaces without temporal limitations“ – in short the general precariousness of life and work. So far those questions are probably well known to most people involved in that scene. As well very well known is the absence of critical discussion regarding aesthetical aspects of the presented practices and works.

During the course of the mostly informal talks and discussions before and after performances, in pubs and during scavenging tours to find the materials for the performances some thoughts formed up in my mind about the absence of money, space and aesthetical discours, about possible interrelations and the paradoxical presence of money, space and aesthetical discourse of a different quality. All that obviously in relation to performance art.

I want to propose the following hypothesis:

If we take the various characteristics we like to assigne to performances art such as ephemeral, social, practice based, in between, in the middle, border-crossing, not quite, . . . (and I stop here as I do not want to claim completeness), if we take those aspects seriously as aesthetical program, strategies, perspectives of performance art we have to acknowledge that by definition there cannot be money nor given spaces. Where money and spaces live we are dealing with defined forms and markets – gallery, theater, concert hall, cinema, laboratory. Bourgoise high temples of representation and exchange based on predefined rules and limitations. Where performance art happens it takes its place. And it happens because – surprisingly! – money (I use this term to shortcut lengthy descriptions of the various resources) already is there (mostly very little but some as it would not happen if there weren't any). But most importantly this – space & money – does not really matter as performance art happens outside of commensurability. Outside the moment when performance art happens in space and time one cannot understand it, one cannot trade it, one cannot comodify performance art. Performance art is a very delicate thing that reacts to its environments,

immediately corroding, rotting and getting most easily infected – open to change its very character. So clearly the experimental and independent character of performance art defies all predefined parameters that would create recognisability, representation, affirmation which are the preconditions to allocate money and space.

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glass with water

CURATING

holds a glass of water

hits a tea spoon against the glass with water and cheers to the audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

I remember an e-mail exchange with a friend when I was for the first time consciously confronted with someone who called himself curator. My friend Otmar Wagner and I discussed what „curator, curating, being curated“ might mean when compared to at the time more common descriptions like organiser, programmer, director. I remember that I took a moment and tried to feel, taste and relate to the word „curating“. Being curated felt like something slightly painful, tasting bitter and left a feeling of being treated with a rather patronising, manipulative maybe even depreciating attitude. I am aware of my very limited understanding at that time. I am also aware of the various contemporary discourses around curatorial practices and find a lot of strategies and perspectives in them which are close to my own practice - but I can't help remembering the initial discomfort.

I think it is important to not forget about it as it describes an understanding of curating that still is very common and forms the backdrop in front of which „curating as performance art practice“ might gain shape. More directly: which „curating as performance art practice“ needs to oppose actively due to the very nature of performance as art.

Two modes of curating:

Vertical or heroic curating: goal oriented, working towards a result, producing a collection, starting from existing categories of understanding and interpretation and trying to broaden them, employing works of art, employing artistic practices and processes, employing artists to produce a specific perspective and/or understanding of a topic, producing a clear before,

during & after, working within clearly defined working relations, working with representations and producing representativ results.

Horizontal or post-heroic curating: process oriented, being in the middle, valuing and never forgetting the relation between central and peripheral (thanks to Litó Walkey!), being infectious and ready to be infected, relating to participants, relating to their creative practices, processes and possible results, inviting to participate in an ongoing process, that produces temporary results and potentialities

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glas with water

FOOTNOTE #01

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers tothe audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

No space, no money for performance as art

If we acknowledge that performance as art is a deeply experimental art we have to acknowledge that there exists no language to describe it, that there exist no predefined categories of understanding, that one cannot necessarily say what one experiences when witnessing it. This means to understand that we are working in a highly insecure, unknown and fundamentally precarious environment. Curatorial practices might then be understood as strategies to set-up and investigate creative processes of individuals, groups, maybe even collectives to move within this area.

Money and space is connected to representation. If one finds money for performance art it will be for representations of performance art. And yes, there is a lot of stuff out there that looks like performance art – representations of performance art – and there is money for it. But I believe that there is a contradiction that practitioners of process based, ephemeral, critical and experimental arts cannot deny. Where one finds money and space one will not meet performance as art – but most likely representations of performance art. Commitment to the aesthetics of performance as art means being in the middle of it, having not yet words or language to describe nor categories to pull out which means to take a radical and deeply

critical position regarding structural elements such as money, space and exchange as defined in neoliberal post-capitalist societies. Under the common terms of negotiation all performance as art has to offer is shit.

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glas with water

QUOTE

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers tothe audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

"They portray us as DUDS, and that is what we are. We are nothing, we mean it, NOTHING AT ALL, and we intend to be of NO USE."

– Serge Berna, host of the *Meeting of Failures* and author of its 1950 manifesto.

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glas with water

FOOTNOTE #02

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers tothe audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

What bothers me deeply is the difficulty of aesthetical discourse among artist and about performance as art. Why is it so difficult to talk, discuss, critically review what we experience and witness.

What I am happy about: The little amount of fear I feel among you people. The amount of competence and autonomy.

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glas with water

NOTES

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers tothe audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

What do we curate? Social situations, emotions, relations (spatial, temporal or social), practices, communication?

What do we see? Spatio-temporal organisations, caring, preparing, cleaning, careful choice, social and/or practical, process based, material interaction?

A crucial point is that no one is paid. The common understanding seems to be to contribute personal practice and in exchange getting to see a lot of other practices. We do have an economy! Though one that is not based on scarcity or the lack of something but on abundance of means. How remarkable.

SONG

holds a glas of water

hits a tea spoon against the glas with water and cheers tothe audience

takes a pebble into the mouth

„If I could describe what I do I wouldn't have to.“

– Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the end of the lane*, 2013

sings the line repetedly in the highest possible pitch, duration ad libitum, when it ends add a last line in normal pitch: „ . . . to be continued.“

takes the pebble out of the mouth and drops it into the glas with water

What bothers me deeply: the lack of aesthetical discourse.

The difference between representations of performance art and performance as art – what is the relation to festivals, funding, curating as performance art practice – the role of horizontality (vs. Verticality), being infectious and being infected, being in the middle of something, the relation between something central and something peripheral,. What does this mean for curating as performance art practice?

What about performance as art being experimental art – without language to describe, without predefined categories to understand, where one cannot necessarily say what we experience, when witnessing it. Curating as part of individual and/or collective creative processes.