

Gabriele Schmid: Ready for Takeoff
The Space between Artistic Experience and Theoretical Reflection
as the Field of Therapeutic and Pedagogical Action.

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Photos by Julia Dietrich & Sophie Firle

The subject of my paper is the relationship between artistic experience and theoretical reflection in the context of the education of art therapists. I will explain my reflections with the help of one primary example. This is the interdisciplinary project *Performative Structures and Images* which took place in summer 2009 at the University of Applied Sciences Ottersberg. I led it together with Aleksandra Schuller, who is a lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, in Koper, Slovenia. A number of students from the faculties of art therapy, theatre pedagogy and fine arts participated. We offered two workshops, a lecture and a seminar leading to a final project, which took place in one week in June. I chose the theme in advance: *Bildbeschreibung* by the playwright Heiner Müller. I chose this piece as I thought that it would be strange enough to touch the students emotionally as well as inspiring images and movements.

Before the main project took place I ran a workshop entitled *Performative Images*, in which I introduced several media techniques to the students: Slide projections, overhead-projections, video-projections. I wanted them to combine these techniques with experience they already gained over the course of their artistic education. Olga, who was working with engravings on transparent rinalon plates prior to the workshop, consequently developed a piece which involved scratching on such a plate on the surface of an overhead projector.

Also I offered a seminar in which the students introduced the sources of Heiner Müller's text to one another. These included Hitchcock's *The Birds* and the Japanese No-theatre. My aim was to offer them stimuli for their own work and also to give them an idea of what the dramaturgy department does in a professional theatre context.



Aleksandra Schuller gave her well-organised workshop *Performative Structures* directly before we started the project. It consisted, to quote her, of sensory awareness exercises, the work with movement, voice and sound. All this with the focus on body and space awareness and self-reflection of the personal and group creative processes in studio and nature - something which our art therapy students are not very familiar with.

Our aim was to offer the students the chance to learn different techniques in the fields of media and performance art and to let them combine these techniques in a free experimental setting, which led to a public presentation. At the end of the whole process, students were asked to write down their experience and to reflect on it in the context of what they had expected to learn based on the description of the module in which the project took place: The students will learn how to plan, organise, carry out and reflect projects. They will learn to act in relation to other artistic disciplines. ... They will obtain fundamental competences like team spirit, the ability to stand conflicts and the ability to cooperate.



My aim was to lead the students to independent artistic research and to the reflection of their learning outcome as well.¹ The didactic setting includes the confrontation with techniques and contents, especially the structure of Müller's text, from which I thought they could, by irritating the student's knowledge contexts, evoke some kind of crisis, consequently a learning process. With this presumption I follow a theory by the German pedagogue and philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow. In his book *Existential Philosophy and Pedagogies* he postulates, pedagogues may not only expect from the child what it can do easily. By slightly over challenging the pedagogue constitutes a pull of development. This often is accompanied by a kind of crises which Bollnow grasps as discontinuous learning. The crisis is characterized by disrupting the normal process of life, often found in states of development like adolescence or,

¹ I am leaning on the theoretical background of performative aesthetics in which the experience of performer and onlooker builds the art work (in contrary to the concept of work aesthetics concentrating on the material side of art).

literally, the midlife-crises. The crises – if in physical or mental regard - takes place between an old, overcome order and a new, often more complex order.

Bollnows assumptions from the 1950ies are quite different from what is discussed in the field of present German art pedagogy.²

Whilst in the past art historians and artists often strictly separated their ways of professional understanding from each other, nowadays it has become common among scientists in the field of art pedagogy to speak of their communicating as a sort of art. Against the background of the theories around the so called iconic turn they grasp the communication side of (conceptual) artworks as “Vermittlungskunst” (mediation as art). Art, understood as the realisation of such processes, often with social and/or political aims, helps to understand art pedagogy as artistic in its core. The understanding of art as mediation is based on a concept of art understanding art as an instrument for critical self-observation of societies. Artists in the 1990ies worked on forms of communication and information. Scientific methods became aesthetic material, the material side of the artwork itself became a kind of attractor which enables communication. In the context of this tendency, writes Pierangelo Maset, mediating of art can become art by developing conceptual dimensions.³ Mediating art starting from art, a postulate from Eva Sturm, is related to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Art is understood as a producer of concepts of decoding, therefore as something closely linked to the premises of semiotic studies which postulate, that every cultural phenomenon can be studied as communication. In such understanding artistic experience and material become signs. They are swallowed by theoretical reflection.⁴

On the other hand students of art pedagogy or therapy tend to separate strictly between theoretical (understood as objective) and practical (understood as subjective) insight, between reflection and experience. In this sense art becomes either an illustration of ideas or can't be understood at all.

That students tend to lean on naïve concepts of art and science is no surprise. It is an inheritance from didactic concepts which simplify the complexity of the world in a misconception of how many shades of grey even younger children are able to grasp. Such a starting point every now and then leads to the anticipation, that different artistic disciplines can be linked by following a kind of recipe which we should tell them. The same applies for the relation between art and its theoretical reflection or use in pedagogic or therapeutic fields.

² Compare Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1959): *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

³ Pierangelo Maset: *Zwischen Vermittlungskunst und Maschinengefüge. Ästhetische Bildung der Differenz*.

http://igbk.de/dateien/dokumente/de/pierangelo_maset_zwischen_vermittlungskunst_und_maschinen_gefuege_Auml_ssthetische_bildung_der_differenz.pdf S. 203. Retrieved 03.11.2011

⁴ Compare Eva Sturm: *Sagte sie*. Weg zur Kunstpädagogik. http://kunst.erzwiss.uni-hamburg.de/pdfs/Sagte_sie.pdf. Retrieved 03.11.2011

The reflections of the participants of our project mirror such anticipations and irritations. Maria writes that, when she was confronted with our expectation of participants joining together the outcome of the two workshops and the seminar, she doubted that this could be managed. She was not the only one.

But already from the very start of my workshop some of the students got uncertain because I only had given them the media equipment and material to experiment with but no closer instruction. The other Maria writes: "In the first workshop (performative images) we were asked to produce images on the basis of Heiner Müller's *Bildbeschreibung* with the help of different projectors and other pieces of equipment. It was left to us to do what ever came to our minds. The free experiment and the playful tryout of possibilities without a single guideline were out of my depth and caused uncertainties. To find my way in an unfamiliar situation generated difficulties."

Two examples may show how finally the connection of the different offers in the week of the project took place. The first project came out of the experimental work with slides and a theoretical and practical presentation about the Japanese no-theatre. Mathias had on the basis of his experiences with Müller's text, which he found confusing and chaotic, worked with slide-projectors. By chance he found out, that with the help of the ventilation of the projector he could effectuate moving images by fixing small objects like feathers or flowers in a slide without glass. In the movement of the image he found an analogy to the diversity of narrated sentiments in *Bildbeschreibung*. Within this stage setting, also consisting of an overhead-projection of red coloured structures reminding on blood, two students developed different kinds of movement. Very slow and based on the no-theatre the one, very quick and hounded the other. The movements were accompanied by the sound of marbles dropping on an iron plate.



In the reflections of the students emerges, how differentiated they referred to the text and how subtle they reflect the work with images and performance: "I found myself" Mathias writes, "in the role of a small violated boy. ... It was this feeling of melancholy which was evoked by the artistic action."

In this piece as well as in some of the others totally different personalities worked together – in the eyes of the students with surprising efficiency. It was the community

building effect of artistic work which caused the result and also the learning outcome of the participants.

This also has to do with the excessive demands a lot of the students felt at the beginning. Lisa at the start of the project felt overstrained because of the many different participants and because she suspected that no one (including Aleksandra and myself) had a plan for the week – which was true.

Then, more or less by chance, she found herself as a member of a performance group which acted in a light space developed during my workshop. Johannes had, mainly by himself, built a closed-circuit-installation with the help of an old record player combined with a light source out of an old Russian microscope. He also used several video cameras and an old mixing desk. In the installation the light of the microscope generated an endless feedback.



Johannes reflected the connection with Müller's text on a structural level: "The proverbial penny dropped when I realized, that Heiner Müller overtook mainly structures out of the material he used (Euripides' *Alkestis*, Homer's *Odyssee*, the Japanese no-theatre). I realized that it is possible to use the inner structure of a work of art and create something new. My view on the text was changed by that. I no longer tried to catch the content but find the structural vertices." Müller, Johannes mentioned, had created a melting pot of different spaces described by quotes out of other works which partly overlap. Johannes took this insight as a model (grasped as analogy) for reality and for his video installation as well.

The result of his practical work was a three dimensional light space which he then offered to the other participants to play with. Soon a group of three students started to perform in what then was called "Johannes' space". They before had taken part at Aleksandra's workshop. The experiences they had made there were the starting point of the performance, which demanded immersing completely into the inner images and moods Müller's text evoked. Tina writes that she focused a mood which is best described as "morbid inhumanity or human desperation". After a period of improvising the students developed a structure which enabled them to act freely within the arranged limits. Their movements were accompanied by sounds of

knocking, scratching, singing and moaning. Tina describes her emotion during the performance as very strong, a mixture of fear and helplessness, as if she could do nothing against something inevitable.

Lisa describes how the learning outcome of Aleksandra's workshop and lecture together with the sources of Müller's text led to the experience not to play but to be in a liminal space: "I mutated to Alkestis. The tragic antique heroine, gone to Hades for her husband, coming back because of him, one does not know if alive or dead. In the performance I could run free all aspects of an insanely femininity. ... We moved in the light. Johannes reacted without the need for us to get in touch with him knowingly. But I felt comfortable in the projected images, captured in a subtle, dark beauty, but nevertheless safe and sheltered. This aspect was important for the creation of our own liminal space."

Mentioning the liminal space was a direct outcome of the lecture by Aleksandra Schuller about ritual, performing arts and arts therapies.⁵ In this lecture Aleksandra explained liminality referring to Arnold van Genep and Victor Turner as constitutional for artistic and therapeutic experiences.

Turner describes the process of liminality in three steps: the first step is characterized as the detachment of the old order or former social status, in my context for example that I realize that what I have learned as a concept of art is obsolete. The liminal phase itself is an in-between stage, in which for example I start to perform in a new way, as Lisa has described. The third step is characterized by the achievement of a new, in sight of the individual appropriation of the world, more complex order. This third step is mirrored within the student's reflections. Liminality itself is an unstable existence in-between. The liminal space causes a crisis which enables cultural scope for experiments and innovations.⁶

In the description of liminality we can find a similarity to what Otto Friedrich Bollnow in the context of existentialism described as crisis: a stage in between two more or less stable forms of existence. Bollnow described the phenomenon of the crisis as one example of discontinuous forms of education. Those forms of learning cannot be an outcome of curricular organized settings, as they are necessarily individual and not to be planned at all. Nevertheless in artistic contexts discontinuous learning is the core of artistic development.

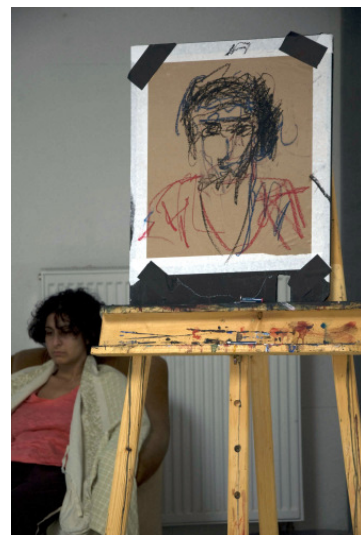
It was the difference between the courses which gave the students the chance looking at their learning experience through the eyes of discontinuity and individual formation. In sight of the professional qualification my expectation, that the students might learn to act not on the base of some kind of recipe but to act within a given,

⁵ Aleksandra Schuller: RITUAL, PERFORMING ARTS AND ARTS THERAPIES: ECSTATIC, AESTHETIC AND CREATIVE-THERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCE. Lecture held at Ottersberg in June 2009.

⁶ Compare URL: http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we07/forschung/sfb626/Aesthetische_Erfahrung/index.html, 12.09.09

singular context, is mirrored by a comment of Olga: “I cannot say that I have learned to work in a group,” she reflects in sight of the expected learning outcome, “at best one can say, I have learned to work with THIS group.”

The most touching learning process took place within the group work of two students. Finn, studying fine arts and Ellinor, studying theatre pedagogy, had developed a piece without us even noticing their cooperation. The result was a performance by Finn. In the reflection of Ellinor emerges how the sights out of two different angles onto the performance did enrich the artistic process. “I realized that one person eluded from the group work and also found his idea of performance was different. Eventually I offered my help for the artistic development.” Finn at first built a mask reminding on a middle-age pest mask. He used a different technique than the plaster mask taken from the face to which Ellinor was familiar within her educational context. Ellinor reflects: “For me it was unbelievable how perfect the mask fitted. I realized his very accurate power of observation and a talent to transform this into art.” Then Ellinor describes how they worked on the character. She gave Finn feedback about the possible feelings or background of the character and about his movements: “For me the work on a masked character is a quite sensible artistic and therapeutic method which urgently needs feedback. There is always a risk that the actor gets lost in his mask and loses control of his play. ... But I also realized when I maybe oversupplied. The central question for me was how (by giving feedback) to achieve a balance of freedom and control in the play. During the rehearsals ... Finn and I met on an artistic level and experienced freely and open. It was therefore a quite important research for my future studies!”



This was peer teaching at its best. It gives me the affirmation that we as instructors are well advised to believe into the skills brought in by the students themselves. This is also a contribution to what the Bologna process demands: to look at the learning

outcome of our students instead of insisting in what we ourselves think they should know. We cannot be really aware of what is important for bringing them towards their individually shaped professionalism. To doubt that they will find their way is in my opinion good for nothing. "To be sceptic", Bollnow writes in his context, "is destructive because skepticalness detracts the power the performer needs for his enterprise. To have confidence is a risk because the truster gives himself into the hands of the one he trusts in. We have", he concludes, "to assume the possibility of failure."⁷

⁷ Compare Bollnow 1959, p. 143ff. Translation G.S.