Parva Theatralia. For Heimo Zobernig

Juliane Rebentisch

In a passage of his *Mythologies* that used to be very dear to me, Roland Barthes articulates in a few pages his loathing for the way the so-called new theatre merely reproduces the myths of its bourgeois predecessor. The myth, for instance, that "the actor, 'devoured' by his role," is "fired by a veritable conflagration of passion."[1] From every line speaks his revulsion with the fact that the new theatre, too, is in the greatest hurry to convert the characters' passions into commodities. For its money, Barthes writes, the audience gets sweat, saliva, tears aplenty. Yet even more important to me than Barthes' critique of the reification of the passions was always the dandyism allied with this critique, his scorn for the authenticism of 'giving it all.' For what I found indeed more mortifying than the bodily fluids offered up for money was the authenticist ideology of obsession in which the theatre crowd veiled their trade. And intolerable, too, of course, the social world of ostentatious intensities this ideology produced backstage, where the fluid supplies were restocked.

Back in the day, this was a decision that could define who you were: to steer clear of all of this, to read Barthes and be interested in the visual arts. In the era of this fundamental opposition to authenticism, it was customary to prefer the use of initials or another abbreviation when referring to artists of one's special esteem: thus Barthes about Cy Twombly (TW), Diederichsen about Cosima von Bonin (CvB), or Schmatz about HZ; such cold code was conferred like a trophy.

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Of course, this frontal opposition between the theatre and the visual arts has always already been a misleading notion. And so Barthes' little polemic against giving-it-all is in the end inexact. There is a difference between the body of the actor labouring to exhaust itself in prefabricated roles, as in bourgeois theatre (hence the compensatory ideology of the authentic), and the body relieved of the charge of psychological-dramatic representation, as in performance and action art. It is no accident that here, at the post-dramatic pole, elements of the theatre and the visual arts are fused. Here, too, is exhaustion and occasionally even obsession. And yet everything is different. Not only in the self-conception of the actors but also, and this second aspect is closely related to the first, in the relationship between them and their audience. Yet there is no need to 'give it all' to make these shifts tangible; no need to

raise a visceral storm (as, for instance, Viennese Actionism did). There are much more unagitated ways of demonstrating them.

Among HZ's early work are action pieces, the so-called "Friday Actions," that he and Alfons Egger performed in 1980.[2] Everything is done more or less laconically, without much physical exertion: texts are being read, movements performed (in moderation), spectators photographed, etc. Yet in a situation where there is neither a distinction between a stage and an audience seating area nor a clear ontological separation between the real and fictional worlds, the actors develop a simple but quite intense physical presence that reflexively extends to the spectator as well. For his body, too, is here part of the situation. In his relationship with the actors, he is no longer an onlooker who hides in the dark and consumes a product but a present participant who, though not on an equal footing, exercises an influence over the theatrical process, too—simply by virtue of his position in space and relative to the other participants, or by reacting noisily. In contradistinction to dramatic theatre, this also gives rise to the possibility that the audience intervenes directly in what is happening. The ultimate horizon of the responsibility for the theatrical situation the audience is thus burdened with is an abrupt end to the performance, something HZ and Egger once staged almost didactically: one spectator, who has been photographed to the point of harassment, gets up and pours milk over the polaroids spread out on the floor.

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One thing these early action pieces are secretly in love with is architecture: everything explicitly happens *in a space*. The latter is mapped out in a crawling survey, marked with chalk, rendered visible in itself. For Egger's mise-en-scène of Flaubert's "Temptation of Saint Anthony," HZ installs a series of fluorescent tubes, Dan Flavin-style, setting a dramatically backlit theatrical stage but simultaneously also moving the architecture into the limelight. Later, HZ explicitly confessed to this love: he takes ever new measures to lend architecture a heightened perceptibility, one that addresses the body as much as the eyes, that proceeds through movement as much as vision. Yet such attention to architecture is only one consequence of HZ's sensitivity to the complexity of *situations*. He has removed the actor from the latter to move them centre-stage. The minimal theatre has today become a pointedly theatrical minimalism.

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HZ grew up a member of a generation that inverted the minus sign modernist art criticism had prefixed to the concept of theatricality into a plus sign. They adopted the modernist observation that minimal art is somehow theatrical but failed to see the problem—in contradistinction to their modernist opponents, for whom 'theatricality' had become synonymous with a false, because asymmetrically structured, relationship with the world. This revaluation of the theatrical directed against the way it had been understood in cultural criticism was largely a matter of intuition; but it had its objective justification. The modernist reproach against the minimalist object was that its pure and massive objecthood or thingness implied a surrender to the beholder: because they are in themselves nothing more, the argument went, these objects are what they are only by virtue of the context or situation in which they stand; because they are in themselves nothing more, they are what they are only by virtue of the beholder who perceives them in different ways depending on the situation. Here the dull things, there the all-powerful beholder, who cannot but encounter, in a feed-back loop, his own projections onto the unresisting thing—a scene of alienation between subject and object. Yet what reads, from the perspective of modernist art criticism—which has not shed all vestiges of metaphysical thought, fixated as it is on the idea of a work that rests in itself, supposedly independent of context and beholder—as alienation can also be described in a different tradition (in the line that links Kant to Derrida) as a genuinely aesthetic event. For, thus the first decisive counterargument: the thing in art is no longer a thing.

When HZ exhibits golden chairs, he primarily relieves them of any defined semantic charge. Yet we are faced here not with a simple subtraction; the chairs are not simply left standing in their thingness, their facticity. The relationship between HZ's chairs and meaning is rather precisely indicated by the English preposition 'without'; it is a paradoxical relationship, one with(out) the other. The reference to meaning, to something they potentially represent, remains essential to these chairs on exhibition even if this meaning can no longer be fixed unambiguously. They are neither mere things nor pure signs. They linger in a peculiar in-between: that constitutes their stage presence. They seem to be now the leftover props of a contemporary theatre production; now the actors themselves, communicating with perfect eloquence with one another (and with the sculptures exhibited among them); now they form up into a golden pun on that modernist fetish, the Arne Jacobsen chair, which each one of them quotes; now they are uncannily disfigured, a legion of doppelgangers who eye each other with hostility; now they read as institutional critique, an exaggerated comment on the scarcity of seating in exhibition spaces; and so on.

How things on exhibition appear to us at any given moment is something we do not make and yet inconceivable without us, without our imagination. The dynamic of aesthetic appearance unfolds between us and the object; we do not own it. Nor do we own the objects on exhibition, which we cannot pin down (neither in their facticity nor in their meaning). The distance at which they keep us by eluding us is the precondition of our proximity to them. And so, thus the second decisive counterargument against the modernist critique of theatricality, this experience also does not rest on a relationship of asymmetrical control over the object. To the contrary: it disables such control.

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Art's relationship with the theatre, it is often said, is shaped by its anti-illusionism. Yet that is to say rather little. For by dismantling the apparatus, art not merely gestures toward the technology by which it functions—as though this jejune glance behind the scenes alone said it all, as though it amounted to complete enlightenment—but more importantly gestures toward a condition of this illusion that resides outside the technological.

"Illusion," Hans-Thies Lehmann writes, "has always already been a coproduction of the theatre and the viewer's fantasy, the coefficient of their joint action."[3] For the means of theatrical representation, even in the most traditional theatrical practice, remain at a structural distance from what is represented, a gap that only the viewer can close: it is only under his gaze that the frill on the protagonist's dress can illustrate a decisive feature of her character. Such connections usually emerge as though by their own power. Yet our specific individual contribution to them becomes apparent at the latest after the play, when we talk to others about how we understood the action (or the director's interpretation of it), about what we, each for himself or herself, *saw*. The same holds for film, the medium that has today largely assumed the traditional function of dramatic theatre due to its technical capacity for the production of illusions: film's illusions, just like those of the theatre, depend on a certain activity (not: passivity) on the viewer's part.

To the degree, however, that the means of representation employed by the cinema or the theatre are relieved of their mission of dramatic representation, consciousness of the activity of seeing connections will come to infuse the act of viewing/beholding itself. Whenever the performance of seeing significant connections enters into reflection upon itself can we speak of aesthetic experience. The semblance of illusion then becomes aesthetic appearance (and the particular experience of an event we talk about becomes aesthetic experience). Of course, such transformation can take place even in the (movie) theatre itself. Yet it is no accident that

its privileged media today are those mixed media located between theatre and cinema on the one hand and the visual arts on the other which enable the artist to release their particular means in a quite literal sense: that is, into a spatial arrangement. In a further paradox, this both purifies and hybridizes them: HZ's exhibited chairs are 'pure' theatrical props and no longer props, sculptures and yet not entirely, or not merely, sculptures. They do not represent something else nor themselves, as the modernist notion of sculpture would have it, and hence open up toward ever different contexts—precisely which opening-up unleashes their potential of representation.

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HZ is a scenographer. He has a keen sense for the placement of things in space, for their subliminal correspondences with one another and with the exhibition situation. He is aware of what contexts and frameworks mean for the objects on view. In a certain sense, this is the central issue of his oeuvre: that works are always works + *x*; where *x* stands for the specific exhibition situation, including the great variety of factors that constitute it (architecture, institution, interior design, proximity to other works, etc.). HZ has often addressed the various dimensions of this *x* without ever seeking to simply release it from its status as a supplement. Rather, his works aim to turn the logic of the supplement into something productive: now the display, as HZ likes to call this *x*, appears to be the real work, now it recedes into the background as a frame for the objects of the exhibition. HZ's oeuvre is not about choosing one or the other but about a dynamic of permanent reversal in the attention values attached to foreground and background, text and context, work and accessory features. This infuses space with time, lets it take place.

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HZ's current preferred colours come from video technology, where they are used in what is called chroma key or blue screen—today, that rarely means blue but in most cases green or sometimes red. These are very intense and loud colours that do not really exist in nature. When they are used as backgrounds during video recording, they can subsequently be filtered from the image without causing losses to the foreground, the image of the person or object focused upon. The resulting empty areas, purged of all colour, can be filled with a different background image. These are colours, then, whose obtrusiveness is inversely proportional to their technical destiny of disappearing in the final product, of making space for something else, for contexts of whichever sort in which the recorded figures or objects can be placed. HZ

exhibits these colours. He stages a salon-style hanging of artwork on chroma green; another room is bisected above the visitor's head by a chroma-red curtain. Colour itself thus moves to the foreground; it virtually comes to meet the visitor. In the case of the hanging, the paintings become for a moment a background for the green wallcovering; in the case of the curtain, by contrast, the surrounding architecture potentially becomes something that can be masked out and replaced by other contexts—for instance, that of a theatre.

At the same time, and in an inverse movement, the colours retain their technical meaning, remaining placeholders for exchangeable contexts that would lend ever new meanings to the paintings or sculptures on exhibition. In this they reflect on a structural component of aesthetic experience: precisely because aesthetic objects have been released from all pragmatically unambiguous context (lending them the peculiar dislocated quality of an object in front of a blue screen) do they begin to *appear* in changing contexts without ever blending into one of them. Now the other pictures form the decisive context of the one picture on a wall a beholder focuses on; now this context consists of theoretical considerations on the relationship of painting and video suggested by a painting's constellation with the garish green wallcovering; now our attention, schooled by institutional critique, to the conventions and rhetorics of hanging frames our gaze; now this frame is even formed by considerations on the structure of aesthetic experience.

The chroma-red curtain, by contrast, is a background not least for us, the beholders; seen against it, we appear like cut-outs, like an isolated element that can be placed or collaged into a variety of contexts. We ourselves are in front of the blue screen here, are potentially already images, our physicality diluted, our bodies halfway toward the pixelated two-dimensional reality of the video image. Yet this effect is only one dimension of the curtain. Another one is perhaps more obvious: it renders the theatrical effect of the exhibition situation upon the beholder explicit. Mounted above our heads, it literally leaves the question up in the air whether we are in front of or behind the curtain, whether we are spectators or actors. HZ's post-minimalism tends to fuse both sides: beholding itself becomes an action. Whereas the dramatic theatre's curtain stood for the separation of stage action and auditorium, of activity and passivity, of being-seen and seeing, it here becomes the sign of the sublation of these distinctions. Within the post-dramatic paradigm, the curtain finds its place in the visual arts.

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Henry Wallis's *The Room in Which Shakespeare Was Born* (1853) is one of the images HZ found in the collection that he has chosen to exhibit at St. Ives. An interior, and yet more like

a picture of a stage: for the furniture—chairs, a lectern, a table—have been moved to the walls to make space in the centre. This room is obviously awaiting an event for which its ordinary use has been set aside; one might think it is awaiting the theatre. This is what HZ produces: sites, scenes, stages that await their event. The event of their experience.

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[1] Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang 1979, 75-77.

[2] For a detailed description and documentation of the „Friday Actions" cf. Klemens Gruber, Monika Meister, "Éducation géométrique. Zobernigs frühe Vermessungen des Theaters," in *Heimo Zobernig*, Köln: Walther König 2003, 245-67, especially 251-5.

[3] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag der Autoren 1999, S. 190.