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'Auto-theatre' at the 2016
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I have always liked Michael Asher's famous conceptual work, but I refer to them here not only because I am fascinated with the blend of simplicity and revolutionary quality, but also for two practical reasons. Since Asher came up with his work in the early days of institutional critique (which was actually first applied to the field of visual arts, so it provides a good example), it can serve as a simple and handy metaphor for further reflection on institutional critique itself. Even though Asher, according to Andrea Fraser,¹ did not really identify himself with the belligerent trend of institutional critique, he still acted for the very same purpose, namely in order to engender reflection on the functioning of art institutions and, more precisely, on the procedures (including economic ones) of artistic practice, production of art and its introduction into circulation.² In the case of Asher's early work (from quite a long time ago, in the 1970s and 1980s) it was about tackling the myth of 'neutrality' of sterile white exhibition spaces, among other things (it immediately becomes easy to find a theatrical analogy, as discussed by David Wiles,³ namely the alleged blankness of the 'black box' of alternative stages): that seemingly innocent manner of displaying art objects which only in elegant, clean space can gain their proper significance, becoming separated not only from all activities of actual individuals performed prior to their exhibition but also from the real world and its conditions. The reality, left outside the gallery walls, is something completely different from the object, which becomes 'knighted', as it were, to the rank of an artwork and exhibited in an appropriately separated and prepared space.

Asher frequently performed various interventions in (and on) the spaces he came across, problematizing the meaning (both apparent and hidden) generated by the mere organization of a 'space for art'. Those interventions could either be modest and barely noticeable (painting

1 '[...] institutional critique – a term with which Asher himself has never particularly identified'. See Andrea Fraser, 'Procedural Matters: Andrea Fraser on the Art of Michael Asher', *Artforum International*, 46 (2008), quoted from a reprint in *Mutual Art*, <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Procedural-Matters/C659AE7686ED540C> [accessed on 12 January 2016].

2 As Fraser notes, 'The clearest and most consistent object of Asher's critical intervention is not the institution of the museum or gallery but that of artistic practice and the symbolic and material economies in which it exists', 'Procedural Matters'.

3 David Wiles, *Krótką historią przestrzeni teatralnych*, trans. Łukasz Zaremba (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012), pp. 342–352. Wiles reminds us that the disputes over black boxes took place at exactly the same time as the disputes over the gallery white cubes, that is, in the late 1970s (p. 347).

the ceiling, which otherwise was always left white) or quite spectacular (reconstruction of the gallery's entrance/exit that rendered it... doorless, forever open and publicly accessible. Such portals were often simply a very elegant, plastered, geometrically sophisticated hole in the wall, which completely stripped the gallery of its insulating power: it was no longer possible to contemplate artworks 'in silence', as the outside was merging with the interior and street noise, daylight and smells penetrated the space).

In 1974, Asher 'intervened' in the Claire S. Copley Gallery in Los Angeles – and this is the piece I wish to refer to: he simply had one of the inner walls of the gallery removed (which had separated the exhibition hall from the office) in such a way as to make the two rooms into one space. He did not make any other changes, he only carefully masked any trace of demolition, so that the space seemed homogenous – merely with one part of it devoted to the exhibition of art, and the other filled with the gallery's administrative staff working at their desks, or bustling between bookshelves and file cabinets, among paintings facing the walls.

Thus, the gallery's facilities, along with the storage space and office equipment, were displayed for public view, allowing the visitors to listen in on the conversations of the gallery staff and observe them at work.⁴

It was chiefly important that suddenly the planes of looking were levelled: it became as interesting to watch people at work (and perhaps more interesting, as until now they had always been hidden, working in private), along with looking at the art objects that those people had prepared for view. 'Office' work was noticed – but it also became a kind of a new object itself, or an unexpected installation. On the other hand, the public gained access to but a small segment of the gallery's 'back-stage area', definitely not the most exciting one and fairly well-organized. Revealing 'just the office' could also appear to dim the emotions relating to artwork.

Of course, what was 'revealed' once the wall had been demolished could be understood in many ways. At one point, its practical dimension became highly interesting to me, because I too wanted to remove a certain wall in a public building (for non-artistic reasons – it certainly would have made the life of people spending long hours there more comfortable, as instead of claustrophobic cubicles they would have gained a fairly open and multi-functional space) and, unfortunately, I did not obtain permission for this from any of the numerous administrative concerns that had a say in it. I will add that it was a standard partition wall and its removal would not have been a daunting construction task. That was when I first heard of Asher's work, and I even wanted to use it as a subversive argument. Were I an artist justifying the necessity of an 'intervention in the wall' adequately, would I have elicited a favourable response (and financial means)? Is a pro-social action well regarded and appreciated when it is labelled art, while when it is carried out 'just because', it seems suspicious and it is best to quash it? Had I demolished that wall by myself, overcome by impatience (that is, paid for it to be removed) and decorated the newly gained space, would I have been held responsible or praised by the institution's management? In short, Asher's

4 Patrycja Sikora, *Krytyka instytucjonalna w Polsce w latach 2000–2010* (Wrocław: BWA Wrocław – Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej, 2015), p. 28. On p. 29, there is a photo of the space at the Claire S. Copley Gallery.

work served me for a moment as a reference point in my attempt to solve an entirely non-artistic problem while still having something to do with institutional critique, although from a completely different angle.

The mere gesture of merging was the most important part of Asher's activity of the time, I think. Suddenly, threads that usually remain barely visible or about which the visitor does not think at all become tense. Facilities. Storage space. Office. Cleaning. Security. Bills. Management. Preparation. Decision-making. Wages. Money. It is interesting whether the gallery employees – fully accessible to visitors visually and acoustically – were really working, or were merely marking their activities for the need of this 'open' month. Were they even able to work, suddenly deprived of the isolation and calm that was perhaps necessary to them? Were they asked afterwards how they took that time of work vivisection and whether it had any consequence later, for them and for the gallery? In any case, the spatial change that was implemented resulted in installing new visibility fields in the institution, directing everyone's attention – both of employees and of visitors – to areas that had hitherto been isolated from one another, which by this gesture were incorporated into a common existence.

Asher also posed an open question about work (increasingly important in his activities, as well as highly important in institutional critique). Whose work lies behind the entry ticket I buy? Who exactly has prepared all that I am seeing? What did those preparations look like? In a word, Asher not only drew attention to the power of the institution that directs the gaze and judgement of the visitor, always deciding what will be exhibited and how (which had been revealed and undermined by the additional, unusual 'unveiling' of a hitherto hidden segment), but also to its internal complexity and, very importantly, to the possibility of a different understanding of the term 'public view'. I think it could have been – already at the time – about the question of transparency of institutional procedures. That is why it is useful to remember Asher's projects in the context of contemporary theatre. Yet a question remains: which (metaphorical) wall should be demolished in this case?

Theatre audiences have never really dealt with inter-institutional procedures before, and only rarely do these hold interest for present-day audiences (most of whom are still set on 'the show' as a primary 'product' of theatre – or rather treating the process of a production's creation as a purely internal matter, separated by a special wall behind which one does not peek). However, along with the launch of an intense critical current in theatre, something happened which has caused exactly those basic procedures of show production to begin being newly reflected upon. And, what's more, this reflection is collective – audiences are being invited to partake in it – because that 'something', that impetus for change was (I don't say this with certainty, I'd rather use the conditional here) an issue for dialogue with the audience or, rather, a need for re-establishing dialogue.

In the still-dominant model of public repertory theatres,⁵ the questions regarding to whom and as whom I speak, as well as what circumstances dictate it, did not exist at all previously as questions posed from

5 The description of a model called 'the theatre of a cultured city' – see Dariusz Kosiński, *Teatra polskie. Historie* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2010), V, p. TKKT.

within an institution establishing a framework for artists' statements, as well as modes of reception. The audience – or at least the more traditional part of repertory theatre audiences, confused in recent years by the tide of theatrical changes and novelties and feeling somewhat uncomfortable at being forced without compromise to deal with incomprehensible, radically 'other' post-dramatic theatre – has found itself on the verge of an equally radical retreat. Since theatre artists have ultimately ceased to care about communication with the audience, and spectators have as a result felt deprived of appropriate competencies in understanding anything in a production, the inevitable process of 'divorce' was becoming increasingly threatening. 'Progressive' audiences had their theatres and their artists with whom, it would seem, they shared views and aesthetics; meanwhile 'traditional' audiences remained with those that gave them, first of all, a sense of security and fulfilment through the possibility of 'participating in culture' (in brief, they confirmed the distribution of authority).

In the widely discussed recent manifesto 'My, czyli nowy teatr publiczny' ['We, the New Public Theatre', reprinted in this issue], Maciej Nowak, a director of repertory theatres and at the same time one of the eminent animators of new theatre trends, postulated the need to 'fill the niche between laboratory-type theatre and commercial stages' through setting up a 'new public theatre', which would 'combine the achievements of new theatre with social responsibility'.⁶ Nowak believes that in spite of all the achievements of 'new theatre' – of which the most important aspect, I'll add, seems the injection of new life into repertory theatre – it has failed to perform a crucial task: 'establishing a new audience', because it focused on 'the Regietheater model, partly even on formalistic theatre, which ignores any alliance with the audience [...] by which theatre, in an attempt to improve its ranking on the artistic stock market, leaves its audience sitting in a stupor, glassy-eyed'.

The situation was not quite so bad, his rhetoric enhanced for the needs of a manifesto, but the divides among audiences and the exclusion of a large part of audiences from the faction of 'theatre initiates' did in fact occur. I believe that those productions in which (or through which) artists were probing their own place in the theatrical status quo necessarily included the audiences also, which after all co-establish that status quo.

Some of these productions were presented by the curators of the 2016 edition of the Konfrontacje [Theatre Confrontations] Festival in Lublin,⁷ thus enabling a look at this trend in Polish theatre – perhaps not a very strong trend, but increasingly significant (more or less over the past two seasons). The most interesting feature of the festival programme was not that more artists thematized their position within the framework of an institution 'producing' culture (enough to make it a perceptible phenomenon), but that reflections on the subject pointed to so many various aspects of the situation currently under diagnosis. Like a solid case analysis, these shed light on the matter from various perspectives, as if the creative teams behind each project decided to explore a slightly different, discernible manifestation of the common problem. Critics and

6 Maciej Nowak, 'My, czyli nowy teatr publiczny', *Polish Theatre Journal*, 3 (2017).

7 The theme of one of the festival's currents was 'Autonomy / Institution / Democracy'. See the website of the 2016 edition: www.konfrontacje.pl.

curators have already tried to name the current 'auto-theatre', as Joanna Krakowska terms it. It is theatre:

the creators of which speak from the stage in their own name and under their own name [...], they refer to their own experience, they examine their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation of their statement, define and question their identity, reveal the secrets of theatrical process, relations within the company, institutional limitations, economic conditions and ideological unrest.⁸

It is also 'a formula for establishing contact with the audience on new principles – of sincerity, revealing experience, responsibility for one's words, testing democratic procedures', confirms Krakowska, that is, an attempt to reach one another in a smaller community, established ad hoc, in which 'one can still have influence over something'⁹ – in contrast to the sense of loss of influence on global political events occurring in public life. Tomasz Plata, in turn, suggests that:

a theatre which self-reflexively examines its own medium, goes beyond the narrowly understood theatricality towards performativity, in addition remains deliberately modest, minimal, consciously giving up various traditional trump cards of theatre as an institution, and at the time is interested in its fundamental mechanisms [...]

be called 'post-theatre'. But, Plata specifies, 'not in the sense that would suggest the exhaustion of other theatrical forms', but to differentiate this special trend from more traditional theatre, as a 'formation vividly interested in foraying into other genres',¹⁰ for instance freely using the modes of expression of performance art or new choreography. Plata's term would therefore be broader and contain the current called 'auto-theatre' by Krakowska: here artists utilize the tools of institutional critique particularly eagerly to redefine their own and the audience's position in theatre, in which they have just noticed what had until now remained unidentified, or invisible, or embarrassing, or 'normal', or 'taboo' or so problematic that one had best not touch it... Meanwhile, one must touch it, as the problem has become so acute that it's no longer possible to avoid it.

Let's take, for instance, the question of pay, which is basically not talked about. Yes, perhaps the amount derived from a grant or the allocation of grants, but not artists' pay. The production *Kantor Downtown*¹¹ asks then about precariousness among actors and power relations operating within a theatre company, as well as the power dictated by the economy. The figure of director Tadeusz Kantor and his visit to New York City almost forty years ago, when *Umarła klasa* [*The Dead Class*]

8 Joanna Krakowska, 'Auto-teatr w czasach post-prawdy', 21st Konfrontacje Festival catalogue, pp. 24–25.

9 Krakowska, 'Auto-teatr w czasach post-prawdy'.

10 Karolina Plinta, 'Post-teatr i okolice. Rozmowa z Tomaszem Plata', *Szum*, online edition, 30 August 2016, <http://magazynszum.pl/rozmowy/post-teatr-i-okolice-rozmowa-z-tomaszem-plata> [accessed on 12 January 2017].

11 *Kantor Downtown*, by Jolanta Janiczak, Joanna Krakowska, Magda Mosiewicz, Wiktor Rubin, Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz (premiere 13 November 2015).

was performed at the renowned theatre La MaMa, highlights questions that appear quite marginal to the expected subject of the production (how Kantor is remembered by prominent underground artists of the era who saw that production) but, in fact, they are today the results of it, quite clearly. First, what is the status of an actor completely subjected to the will of a director-demiurge-tyrant; second, what is the status of an actor as an employee; and third, how avant-garde theatre reacts (if at all) to the problems of (its own and other people's) precarity. The surprising direction taken in the development of the subject – starting from an apparent *hommage à Kantor* – is consistently derived from the statements of New York City artists, then young and rebellious, today living legends and decidedly less radical but surprisingly honest and open.

On stage, we see school benches set up, like an echo of Kantor's *The Dead Class*, but instead of puppets and actors we see TV screens, about to light up with images of conversations recorded in New York City with Penny Arcade, director Lee Breuer, Jill Godmilow, the monologist Reno, Thomas Walker... It is both peculiar and touching that the places of Kantor's actors are taken by old performers, who were reforming the New York scene at the same time Kantor was changing the Polish one... They are asked about Kantor, and at first they talk about him, but at the same time they gradually reveal their attitude not so much to the production they saw a long time ago, but to their position in the world of avant-garde art. Kantor (played by an ever-present actor wearing the characteristic jacket and hat who interjects quotations from the director's writings and statements) suddenly seems so distant from that world that the notion of 'avant-garde artist' becomes internally unstable (Polish black-and-white severity doesn't match the colourful American ease).

We listen to professed admiration for Kantor's 'romanticism' with a certain suspicion and amusement (after all, we become tinged with an inevitably emerging sense of superiority about what those Americans can possibly know about our art and history...). The alienation of both 'avant-gardes' – signalled at first by the imbalance between 'our' solid knowledge and 'their' lively emotionality – begins to reveal its other meaning, located in the attitude to life, mutual help and support, existing in a diverse (and accepting of diversity) community, openness of expression. The attitude to the carefree sincerity of the artists' statements, received at first with slight embarrassment (giggles in the audience as old avant-garde stars gush about the production like teens: 'wow!', 'it was fantastic!'), changes over the course of subsequent recordings that are viewed with mounting interest: statements increase in length, grow more serious and gradually engender new questions – about the meeting of two languages, two avant-gardes, two different worlds. If one sets aside the historical context of the Kantor production – highly obvious in Poland, in America not necessarily so – can one still build an understanding?

It turns out that one can, and on many levels, at that. First, even if New Yorkers did not catch all the messages of the production, today one still feels a prick of jealousy at their interpretative eagerness, openness to embracing new ideas (if not altogether clear to them, at least passionately translated into one's own idiom), communicative courage. Second, it is reminiscent of a certain kind of a counterculture community, even if their respective areas of activity and tools implemented are extremely different. Third, Kantor and the New Yorkers suddenly also become closer

to one another in consciously generated acts of self-creation (Kantor's performance on stage, the artists' creations in front of the cameras) and – a dramatic discovery! – in the peculiar permissiveness towards using violence in art (a genius is permitted to do so?). Fourth, finally, thanks to the amazing 'testimony of reception' installed on Kantor's school benches, today's audience can newly redefine the term 'the dead class'...

And suddenly precisely that last issue becomes actualized in the performance – not as a school 'class', not as a group of near/distant departed, but as a social 'class', the artists' class. The contrast between 'that other' avant-garde and today's 'project creators' is also highlighted. On one of the school benches, a human figure is sitting from the beginning of the performance: dark trousers and an oversized jacket, inclined head with whitewashed face, like an echo of Kantor's puppet and at the same time of the Kantorian actor (quotes Kantor utters on stage are after all chosen in such a way as to leave no doubt about the case: 'in my theatre actors don't have fixed working hours, they work night and day'). When they get up and start a series of activities (first washing off the white mask, recovering their own face and taking off the costume, remaining with their own body), we then see at last: it is a young actress, she introduces herself anyway with her name and surname (Marta Malikowska), speaking therefore as much in her own name as she does as a representative of that new 'class' of artists.

She interacts with the screen characters – the material is edited in such a way as to enable the actress to pose questions to which the New York artists respond. 'Where did you get money to support yourselves?' is one of the crucial questions. And the answers turn out to be circuitous and highly ambiguous. Penny Arcade – as guardian of counterculture – argues that she has never taken a cent from any institution, she lived off what the audiences of her (basement) performances paid her directly. All right, then: is 'risk exciting' in this case? Malikowska asks, and clearly means not only artistic or moral risk but an entire set of 'risks' inherent in working as an actress. It is about the oppression of degradingly low pay obtained for exhausting work (what's exciting in lacking the means to live?), about the clash of the stereotype of an avant-garde artist with being a mother and raising children ('I don't smoke!', Malikowska says, pissed off) or about the possibility of remaining an independent artist (the risk of violating the theatre system based on the director's domination). The actress examines it all 'on herself', and the most acute part of her performance lies in her squeezing between rows of spectators, half naked, asking them to write how much they earn with a black marker on her body, having first revealed how much money she makes. With house lights up, we see one another, at times we even know one another well (this especially applies to festival audience), but it always takes a while before the breakthrough happens and the first brave volunteer is found. Naked body plus money: though we're apparently talking about something else, the associations are inevitable, which makes it so much harder... This so-so-historical and apparently nostalgic installation for nine screens and two actors, with Kantor, its starting point, ultimately at its centre, poses the question about responsibility (here, today, in Poland) of society towards an artist's work. But also vice versa.

The production corresponds in an interesting way with Bojana Kunst's *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* – the publication of the Polish translation and a meeting with its author from Justus

Liebig University in Gissen accompanied the artistic programme of the Lublin festival.¹² Kunst juxtaposes the situation of 'art labourers' with the situation on the capitalist market, showing that the constraints of the post-Fordist era market implicate the production and circulation of art also (one is to work: creatively, innovatively, incessantly, with total devotion), leading to burn out and exhaustion resulting from not separating work from life (that old term leisure practically doesn't apply here, since everything and everywhere is work), as well as to the loss of social self-agency of art and its increasingly meagre influence on reality (since it has been completely appropriated by the norms of capitalism). Kunst urges artists to respond to such appropriation by considering the possibility of 'doing less' among other things, as a 'radical new gesture engendering a discussion about the value of artistic life',¹³ a gesture intended essentially to defend art. In the madness of meeting deadlines, implementing several projects at the same time, the intensity of action and competition, art has approached capitalism to such an extent that 'it is no longer an exception, but one of the means of extreme labour exploitation'.¹⁴ The slogan 'do less' is thus understood as one of the possible strategies of disobedience against capitalist imperatives.

Great – but what could Marta Malikowska (as a 'figure of the precarious actress') from *Kantor Downtown* say to that proposal? That she understands and she will very willingly submit to artistic powers restoring profound laziness – but that if she does it, she'll drop out of circulation, become invisible to curators and directors, and instead of the present 'little', she won't get to do anything anymore. That if – fortunately – she works at an art institution, then applying the strategy of refusal to take part in a performance or a project can result in her being fired, then her membership of the 'precariat' class would change to membership in the 'unemployed' sector, which certainly wouldn't raise her artistic capabilities because she'd have to devote a great deal of time to finding a new source of subsistence. Rejecting the postulate of 'doing less' doesn't necessarily have to be a sign of conformism, because it might entail the thought that work within an institution wouldn't have to be humiliating and draining if only we transform its very organization and the system of dependencies operating within it. This thought, therefore, would be significantly more potentially creative than a refusal to participate would.

Artists invited to participate in the Mikro Theatre cycle, implementing their ideas within the space of the Komuna// Warszawa company (and shown in part at the festival in Lublin), attempted to work through this same subject – yet another implied in the self-theatre trend. Tomasz Plata came up with the idea, announcing the rather simple yet devious assumptions regarding the construction of each performance: sixteen minutes, four headlamps, two microphones, a video projector, one prop and up to four creative-team and cast members. Finally, the budget – also minimal. 'It is an exercise in self-limitation', Plata explains in his statement on the cycle, while being

12 Bojana Kunst, *Artysta w pracy. O pokrewieństwach sztuki i kapitalizmu*, trans. Pola Sobaś-Mikołajczyk, Dominika Gajewska, Joanna Jopek (Warsaw, Lublin: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatralne / Centrum Kultury w Lublinie, 2016).

13 Kunst, *Artysta w pracy*, p. 149.

14 Kunst, *Artysta w pracy*, p. 148.

an attempt to reflect on the ways of producing theatre. Does theatre always have to be a giant production machine? To what extent can one limit the production facilities of a theatre, and at the same time preserve its quality? Would a more modest theatre be at the same time more democratic, more accessible?¹⁵

This is the positive and creative side of the project – its indirectly expressed critical aspect seems to refer to the sense of experiencing constant underfunding of culture (and/or the unfair distribution of public funds) while being faced at the same time with gossip about the skyrocketing earnings of celebrated directors, the visual extravagance of certain productions, and finally – directly – to the overburdening of artists with gig work. Let's therefore make a cycle of short shows practically for free – but let's try to extract a maximum of artistic and intellectual benefit from it.¹⁶

Marta Malikowska, mentioned above, takes part in one of the Mikro shows, but doesn't even appear on stage: in *Micro-Dziady* [*Micro-Forefathers' Eve*] (amusingly summarising in six minutes the arch Polish Romantic drama, in a very clear reference to the 2016 season's most widely covered Polish premiere, the fourteen-hour version of *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] directed by Michał Zadara, presenting the uncut play-script for the first time ever) in which we only hear her voice, previously recorded – because, as she explains, she is at the same time performing in a better-paid show in another city. This joke is a reference not only to economic issues, but to the previously discussed pace of artistic work, enforced by conditions of project implementation.

In other shows of the cycle, time actually becomes the main protagonist. What to do with the sixteen minutes we've been given? ask Weronika Szczawińska and Piotr Wawer. And they practically give that time to the audience, as if perversely implementing Kunst's idea of 'laziness'. Across the performing space, a giant hammock hangs in which they both lie down, yet this has nothing to do with idleness and relaxation. On the contrary: the passing minutes are very precisely counted down, micro-narrations coming from the hammock (for instance, about great Polish directors, somewhat in the convention of brief TED lectures) are carefully measured and thematized, with meticulously planned pauses. Even the bare calf appearing suddenly from the middle of the hammock is swinging casually (?) in its allocated time, and not a second longer. What then are the calculated pauses, in which 'nothing happens'? Are they wastes of time or, quite the opposite, giving oneself and the audience a 'break', a phenomenon practically non-existent in the fast pace of everyday life. 'We are commodifying time, releasing time, wasting time and regaining time', as Szczawińska explains, examining in her micro-show how one can experience not only time constantly stolen in a capitalist reality but also trying to establish what exactly happens to theatrical time.

Mikro Theatre performances consequently direct their main attention

15 See the announcement of the cycle on the Komuna // Warszawa website: <http://komuna.warszawa.pl/2016/04/08/mikro-teatr-w-komunie-warszawa/> [accessed on 10 January 2017].

16 'Preparing this type of a production is a challenge greater than the cycle's name indicates. It is too long for one idea to be enough but too short for classic narration. One has to come up with a new formula', Grzegorz Laszuk comments on the Komuna // Warszawa website.

– that of artists and of audience members – towards the medium and conditions of show production. There is no way that a sixteen-minute production doesn't immediately trigger a fundamental reflection on, say, ninety-minute productions. Why is that the standard? How does the framework of public theatre determine performance times? Can constraints imposed on an artist prove creatively fruitful and how do these relate to limitations (so carefully internalized as to seem practically imperceptible) imposed everyday by institutional theatre? 'Boundary conditions' in almost all cases brought about an immediate return towards a more careful self-analysis of the theatrical situation itself – but at the same showed how a 'self-limiting' formula could work and what effects it would bring.

The question of the relation between actors and audiences is directly (and very wittily) taken up in *Drugi Spektakl* [*The Other Show*] by Anna Karasińska and the Polski Theatre in Poznań. It is indeed the second show – after her well-received debut – Karasińska has directed, which makes the title a self-ironic game with audience expectations and with critics, pertaining to that magical 'second' show (will it confirm the talent?) but also refers directly to the subject of the production: it's about performances taking place in the auditorium of a theatre, thus 'secondary' to the ones taking place on stage. Actors have only a row of chairs at their disposal and they re-enact audience behaviours: the late arrival attempting to squeeze through to his seat, the lady trying to silently unwrap a candy – but primarily audience reactions to a performance: boredom, curiosity, admiration, acceptance, disappointment. Some actor-spectators ultimately busy themselves with their smartphones, others are clearly miles away, others rather indiscreetly doze off. The actual audience enjoys this mirror image, because the gags are intelligent and acted in a restrained manner, not sarcastic at all, but even emphatic (the facial expression: 'did I unplug the iron [at home]?'), leading to a moment when the performance takes a decided turn.

One actor walks into the audience and as a 'representative' of the audience confesses what he would like to really see on stage. The actors attempt to satisfy him, responding to a series of his subsequent ideas, both the more and the less sophisticated ones, playing out scenes in the simplest way possible but also in the least standard manner possible – surprisingly, metaphorically, even absurdly. Finally a request is voiced: 'I'd like to feel something'. Here the laughter and good fun ends, and the audience (and earlier, certainly the actors) freeze. After all, the actors have with full devotion been attempting to meet just this task (they play out a hot love scene, a scene of violence, a rape scene) but to no avail: the 'spectator' stubbornly shakes his head, no, he didn't feel a thing. And we're left with such a disappointment.

In this simple theatrical action, practically a series of metatheatrical sketches (with which many audience members – why, yes! – had the right to feel 'disappointed'), Karasińska contains a reflection much more profound than it would initially seem, wondering what 'fiction' means in today's theatre. Consequently, if we keep operating within the framework of this art form according to conventions (dangerously imperceptible) that are rooted so deeply as to render reactions on both sides almost automatic, can anything unexpected ('moving') ever really happen? According to Karasińska, the theatre contract would perhaps not have to be replaced entirely so much as urgently defied: new ways of reaching

out, of establishing dialogue, of creating common presence and attention are needed immediately. The traditional audience/actor relationship – presently put to a test – has revealed its limitations. If we do not step beyond it, if we insist on being stuck in the convention of self-confirmation of our positions and pretending the ‘importance’ of theatre experience, then nothing truly significant will ever happen to us together. *The Other Show* doesn’t formulate a proposal for exiting this situation, but at least it attempts its diagnosis.

Two productions from recent seasons have used the suggestions of institutional critique perhaps to the fullest extent: *Aktorzy żydowscy* [*Jewish Actors*], directed by Anna Smolar, and *Kwestia techniki* [*A Technical Question*], directed by Michał Buszewicz (the latter not at the Lublin festival, and made by the Stary Theatre in Kraków). Both pierce the interior of the institution, although each from a different side. In the case of *Jewish Actors*, the very title, which immediately sounds stigmatizing (and provokes an association, in addition, with Agnieszka Holland’s film – later also a theatre production in Opole – *Aktorzy prowincjonalni* [*Provincial Actors*], therefore imposing on ‘Jewish actors’ an additional stigma of a kind of amateurishness), signals that the company has taken up a difficult matter: their own position and their own actors’ identity. Until recently, the Żydowski Theatre in Warsaw was treated as a folkloristic museum, performing only revues and the classic *Fiddler on the Roof* – it existed as a culturally important shrine (one of only two theatres in the world to perform in Yiddish also), but when it came to artistic quality, it was, to put it delicately, rather beyond qualification. It was only the very interesting *Dybuk* [*Dybbuk*] directed by Maja Kleczewska that drew a wider audience and revealed the potential of the ensemble, until then only associated with stereotypical song and dance from Jewish culture.

Jewish Actors, created by Smolar and Buszewicz in the mockumentary convention (the material comes partly from the actual biographies of the actors, however on stage this is transformed into cheeky monologues, self-ironic scenes mocking the ‘eternally performed’ roles in *Fiddler*, stemming from bitter recognition of one’s limitations relating to the character of the institution one has been working in ‘since forever’), poses a series of difficult identity questions not only to the actors, but also to the audience. Should an actor in the Żydowski Theatre be a Jew? If they aren’t a Jew, but because of their workplace are considered Jewish, should they somehow defend this ‘other’ role? Is Jewish theatre condemned, metaphorically speaking, to *Fiddler* and should actors come to terms with the fact that, unfortunately, they will never stage *Macbeth*? Is a ‘minority’ theatre like this even needed in a country where practically no one speaks Yiddish anymore? There is a great deal of inveterate resentment in those questions (about durability and acceptance of it being a museum no one has dared touch), but also a lot of liberating energy: at last! At last we can talk about it openly, we can honestly reflect on a situation that’s been filled to date with understatements, patched up with stereotypes. And the actors – and actresses, especially – perform recklessly and courageously, demanding their subjectivity precisely as actors, undefined by an adjective.

The use of percussion in this show is a great accent introducing a separate self-commentary – Dominika Korzeniowska plays it furiously. Accompanied by the deafening sounds of cymbals and drums, the audience walks into the auditorium. Next, actresses present classic

Jewish dance steps to the clashing rhythms. Percussion here is initially a radically alien instrument (and therefore immediately becomes a sign of distortion), but subsequently it establishes a new sound and rhythmic order of the performance (becoming therefore included, incorporated into its world). It can be understood as a symbol of what happens in *Jewish Actors*: thanks to courage on the part of the creators, the encounter engenders a sudden shift in the place of Jewish theatre on the general theatre map, as it reveals its artistic potential. I imagine that after the premiere, a queue of directors willing to work with the Żydowski Theatre – as a theatre – formed in front of the management office. An honest exploration (one could use a different term here, the psychoanalytical term ‘working through’) of one’s situation enabled a liberating re-establishment of oneself. What is most significant is that it concerns primarily the artists who were given a voice, for the first time, not to sing the *Fiddler* roles of Tevye or Golde beautifully, but to talk about themselves, who’ve up to now been performing Tevye and Golde, but not at present.

Buszewicz’s *Kwestia techniki* [*A Technical Question*], in turn, makes the tech crew the protagonist of the performance. It doesn’t conceal their work, per usual, but instead gives them the stage to command: it’s a show about them and created by them. Three stage hands, employees of the Stary Theatre (Jarosław Majzel, Janusz Rojek, Mirosław Wiśniewski), however, first show us not themselves but their art: on-stage we see a dance of black scenery flats, telling quite a dramatic story of one flat’s rejection by the other two, then its inclusion in the community. The flats ‘dance of their own accord’, they establish certain hierarchies... This opening scene, in a nutshell, contains the entire matter: someone’s invisible work (but as important for the running of a performance as the work of ‘visible’ actors), for cultural reasons, for reasons of prestige and of economy, is less valued by an institution and co-workers (internal hierarchies are so strong that the ensemble and the tech crew aren’t on first-name terms, and form separate worlds), though it too requires perfection, efficiency and excellent training.

The stagehands – when they take the stage – say a lot about those inter-institutional inequalities (albeit with distance and humour), yet the dance of scenery flats has shown what masters they are at their craft. Every performance proves it, after all, but it’s rare for anyone to pay attention to their contribution to the overall endeavour: carefully mounted scenery, smoothly moving fly bars, a well laid-out floor. Perhaps someone will notice it now, for that’s the purpose of this production: to show theatre work other than that of an actor. Stagehands here are actually representatives of the entire staff of theatre employees ‘hidden’ backstage. In this case, though, it wasn’t even necessary to remove theatre walls: the tech crew simply annexed the exhibition space by themselves. All right, then – not entirely by themselves, at the director’s suggestion, so it’s not an intervention but a show. Though perhaps that’s for the better, because in this case something else has occurred: a merging with the world of actors dreamt by the crew, brought off peacefully and without any patronizing.

As noted above, that production wasn’t shown at the Lublin festival – all others mentioned over the course of this article were in the festival’s 2016 programme, in the section ‘Autonomy / Institution / Democracy’, which lists those components subjected to reflection in a simple manner. What to do in order to maintain artistic and organizational autonomy

within the framework of an institution? Can the institution itself maintain them? How to reconcile the goals of an artist (privileging the process, for instance) and of an institution (the need for an exact, which is to say a finished, work)? What to do to ensure that institutional procedures are democratic, equitable and allowing one to maintain their physical and mental health?

I cite these questions, though they were obviously not posed directly, but gradually emerged from the set of productions and the unusual atmosphere of the Lublin festival. It was organized in such a way to not to steal time from participants, or to let them squander it, but rather to centre our activities (I say 'our' as one of the participants) in such a way as to make it possible to calmly participate in shows and accompanying events as well as having sufficiently long conversations in various configurations. The festival created space for debates on what was happening around us – and created conditions for itself to be criticised (as an institution creating the framework for events and discussions). As a consequence, the self-critical look by the curators reached in this case much further than usually happens at festivals with overloaded, overwhelming (thus confusing) programmes, when the key experience seems to be of 'having no time' for anything but hurrying from performance to performance. Konfrontacje Festival, in turn, confronted calmly and deliberately – artists with spectators, problems with proposals of their solutions, cases to solve today with cases to reflect upon tomorrow, politics with art, activity with reflection.

Yet another work by Michael Asher comes to mind in this context – the only one he ever placed in open space. I refer to *untitled* (1991), forming part of the Stuart Collection and exhibited on the campus of the University of California, San Diego (until it was destroyed recently). No, 'exhibited' is the wrong word here, because Asher's work simply stood there, and campus users did not even think of it as an artwork. We are all familiar (at least from American films) with water fountains in the corridors of public buildings, courts, schools, offices. Water springs from them in a slightly upward direction, and people keep stopping by to have a drink. Such a 'fountain' was placed by Asher on the lawn in front of the main campus building; the faucet was built into a polished black-granite pedestal – it looked like a normal, usable, well-known object and was treated as such.

The only curious thing about it was that it stood outside the building and not inside, as usual. But if one thought more deeply about its location, one could notice that the drinking fountain stood exactly on the axis of the central flagpole, at the foot of which lay a (granite) plate with an inscription commemorating Camp Matthews, a training base for soldiers, situated here as late as the Second World War. Suddenly, at the location site of a seemingly banal public-utility fountain, not just physical axes of sightlines were crossed, but also metaphoric threads of meaning: the juxtaposition of training soldiers and students, the symbolism of a flag and of water, the granite of the monument and the granite of the pedestal... 'Art is an act of discovery – and here lies a lot to be discovered,'¹⁷ said Mary Beebe, the director of Stuart Collection, about the 'fountain'. Especially in that Asher insisted on claiming it was the

17 See Mary L. Beebe's statement on the Stuart Collection website: <http://stuartcollection.ucsd.edu/artist/asher.html> [accessed on 12 January 2017].

institutional context of an artwork that primarily decides its significance. The Lublin festival curators, one could say, acted according to Asher's proven concept, only transferring it onto another level: allowing the participants not only to see a set of productions, but also making them notice the operations of the festival institution framework, the purpose of its establishment and the way it is organized. Thanks to which, there was a lot to discover.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

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Abstract

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Demolishing Partition Walls: 'Auto-theatre'
at the Theatre Confrontations Festival in Lublin in 2016

Two pieces by Michael Asher constitute the framework for this article on the use of institutional critique in theatre. This critical trend was born in the field of visual arts and has been adapted in recent years to broader reflection on the functioning of art institutions in general. That is why Asher's project, consisting of his intervention in an art gallery where he demolished a partition wall between the exhibition hall and the office space, combining in this way two hitherto separated spaces, can serve as a handy metaphor for the analysis of divisions (their revealing and attempts at eliminating them) in theatre institutions.

The article describes several recent Polish theatre productions characteristic of 'self-theatre' or 'post-theatre' (*Kantor Downtown*; projects realized within the Mikro Theatre cycle; *Drugi spektakl* [*The Other Show*]; *Aktorzy żydowscy* [*Jewish Actors*]; *Kwestia techniki* [*A Technical Question*]), a trend attempting to redefine the conditions of its own operation created and adopted by the institution, or at least to pose questions about them (including the audience in this endeavour). The majority of the analyzed productions were presented at the Konfrontacje Festival in Lublin (October 2016), the main theme of which was 'Autonomy / Institution / Democracy'. The programme curators also subjected the festival formula proposed by them to self-reflection, thus examining in practice the ideas of institutional critique, and so, just like Asher, performing an 'intervention' on the formula of a theatre festival. This revealed, both through the organization of the festival as well as the choice of invited productions, the fields of tension and influence arising within (and through) the institution of theatre.