

trans-local Symposium What's Wrong with Performance Art?

27-29 October 2017

Corner College Zürich

Curated and organized by Dorothea Rust and Dimitrina Sevova

Co-curated by Denis Pernet

With the Symposium we generated a temporal platform, which itself turned into a performative process about the relation between performance art and the notion of performativity. Its title is formulated as an open question, a question that can bring up yet other questions, as an agency for engagement, commitment and reflection. We set up a three-day event that brought together performance artists and artists who work in performance in the field of contemporary art, curators and theoreticians closely engaged with the context of the performance art scene and the production and exchange of knowledge in the field of art. The Symposium, with its experimental and unconventional format, was neither a symposium nor a festival, but rather a hybrid drawing on features from both. It gave a unique opportunity to bring together performative interventions, performances, presentations performed, critical reflections and collective discussions providing immediate feedback and the possibility for a close relation between the audience and the artists and theoreticians involved.

The hybrid structure of the Symposium functioned not only on a representational level, as a festival might, but created a space of close proximity between art research practice and the practice of theory, spanning the local and trans-local performance art scenes intensely across the language regions, crossing different fields and sub-domains of performance art, techniques, movements, strategies, situating all of them in contemporary art and its discourse. As it took place one week after the Swiss Performance Art Awards, it worked in resonance and as a continuation of this celebration of performance art in Zurich, giving the opportunity for discussing the current state and context of performance practices specifically in the field of contemporary and visual arts, looking for new perspectives.

All three days, the space of Corner College was fully packed with an audience in immediate proximity to the participants and performing artists. The majority of the participants, especially those from Romandie, stayed all three days, which gave the opportunity for a more in-depth analysis to develop, a closeness to the discussions, support to the performances taking place, and a chance to expand the network and build further collaborations. The Symposium and Corner College turned into a place of sharing and participation, and even a kind of fluid collectivity, or the intimate environment of the big family of performance art.

Taking into account the statement of one of the greatest art historians and theoreticians engaged with performance art, Birgit Pelzer, "a performative is less a saying than a doing," the Symposium encouraged the participants to experiment with the format of their contributions, within an otherwise strictly structured program based on panel discussions with a clear schedule, interrupted by clearly defined slots for longer performances. With the direct experience we opened a path for transmitting tacit forms of knowledge beyond language, the somatic aspects of language through performative moments and movements of sharing oral histories and bodily knowledge. The interventions of the participants in the panels were an interplay between different formats, from very performative to more discursive. Even among those invited for

theoretical interventions, many adopted performative strategies to create a discourse that engaged at a practical level with the notions of performativity and performance, their aesthetics and politics as well as social aspects in the field of contemporary art. The panels ended in an open discussion among the participants and with the audience. The questions from the audience gave new directions and unexpected currents to the discussion based on participation.

One of the strongest sides in our view was our collaboration with curator Denis Pernet from Lausanne, whom we invited to co-curate. He contributed to the program a high-quality, careful selection of participants from Romandie, who drew their own audience from other parts of Switzerland who traveled especially for the occasion. According to feedback from the audience, this gave the event a very specific mood, in which not only the participants but the audience itself mixed between the regions – a rare situation for art events in Zurich. We heard voices from the audience who very much respected and appreciated the opportunity to see artists from Romandie performing, and commented that they had not seen so many artists and theoreticians from Romandie in one place in Zurich before.

With the focus on an exchange between linguistic regions, and the question of what a local scene might mean across these regions, the international contributors were few. Nonetheless, their participation contributed to the trans-local environment that proved so fruitful to the Symposium. As Pascal Schwaighofer expressed it, nowadays all places are trans-local, and there is no possibility of thinking of locality without a sense of movement, transition, migration not only of people, but also ideas, knowledge and information. There is no point of isolation, and we must keep in mind its socio-cultural and politico-aesthetic dimension when talking about performance art. Performance art is without a doubt part of this trans-local nomadism.

As we had from the outset put the question whether performance practices resist the *Zeitgeist* or it adapts itself to it, the Symposium opened up a field of discussion focused on the current context, issues, achievements, forms of networking, institutions, support, with an outlook to the future. If there was a look back, it was rather to review the role of the archive, the methods and forms of archiving, and to what extent they feed the current discourse and might remain relevant to current practices and nurture their context into the future.

Martina-Sofie Wildberger opened the Symposium in conversation with the publisher Georg Rutishauser, of edition fink, with a presentation of her upcoming publication *Performance as Book, Book as Performance*, in which she explores how the performance script and the duration and spatiality of the performance can become a performative event of polyphonic voices on the book pages. Her presentation transformed into a performative action or a participatory performance in which she offered a pile of T-shirts with her artist-statement message. The audience willingly became a distributor of the artistic message, wearing the T-shirts. The presentation was also the finissage of her personal exhibition at Corner College, which expanded the context both of her exhibition and of the Symposium, and brought an additional audience of her fans in the art scene to the Symposium.

The artists invited specifically for a performance transformed the space of Corner College into a celebration of performance art, while at the same time some of them engaged with and responded to the Symposium's curatorial question *What's Wrong with Performance Art?* through their own agency, to multiply the conceptions of *wrong* in the

tradition of performance art in which failure is a necessary ingredient for opening new potentialities and opportunities.

Nathalie Rebholz processed a soundcloud environment; Heike Fiedler a multimedia Dada-speech; Katharina Swoboda did her 'last' performance; Kamen Stoyanov worked on the accidental of the performance; Camille Aleña performed a partition with her 'found' choir of singers and fife players; in Delphine Chapuis Schmitz's performance with textual collages, the space became text; Dorothea Schürch turned the complex and internal mechanism of vocalization inside-out; Voin de Voin, as he puts it himself, performed the performance that writes itself as it unfolds; Gilles Furtwängler got to our senses with the tones of words and sentences becoming shades of sound; Axelle Stiefel's literally cigarette-long narration scattered into the space in temporally extended repetition and displacement to make the audience move.

The input by Linda Cassens Stoian built on the meaning and performative character of branching bio-systems of the notion of symposium to develop a situated knowledge of a theoretical praxis reflecting on the history of performance art. The input by Federica Martini engaged the practices of performance as resistance, strikes as a hybrid between performance, aesthetic practice and artistic production. We much appreciate these thematically focused inputs that unfolded lines of questioning and expanded on the curatorial approach of the Symposium.

In the panels, the participants across generations presented and performed their approaches and activities in distinct ways, which, as we heard from members of the audience, were stimulating and inciting for their art practices even outside of performance. Tensions and differences between Performativity in the arts and Performance (as) Art were debated. Their potentialities in relation to the arts, to a lived canon of performance, to institutions and contexts were highlighted and stressed.

Session 1 *Performing the Curatorial / Curating Performance* with **Chris Regn, Madeleine Amsler, Sibylle Omlin** and **Elise Lammer**, moderated by **Irene Müller**

Session 2 *Performative (Un)Learning – Performance as Teaching* with **Donatella Bernardi, San Keller, Kamen Stoyanov, Axelle Stiefel**, moderated by **Bernadett Settele**

Session 3 *What's Wrong with Performance Art – Strategies in the Performative* with **Valerian Maly, Voin de Voin, Camille Aleña, Lou Masduraud** and **Guillaume Pilet**, moderated by **Dimitrina Sevova**

Session 4 *Performance Szenen / Scenes – Tribal & Translocal Networking* with **Milenko Lazic, Pascal Schwaighofer, Muda Mathis** and **Gilles Furtwängler**, moderated by **Chris Regn**

Session 5 *Performative Tactics, Activism & Performance Politics* with **Mo Diener, Lia García, Angela Marzullo, Nathalie Rebholz**, moderated by **Denis Pernet**

The program was followed strictly, with no substantial delays and no omissions. Detailed information about the five panels, the inputs and the performances is available online (<http://materials.corner-college.com/2017/201710/20171027-29-symposium-what-s-wrong-with-performance-art.html>). The entire duration of the Symposium was carefully

documented in audio and video as well as photographs (see also the documentation attached). Further audio and video material will be uploaded gradually over the coming weeks as the files are processed and edited.

From the feedback we received, we can say that the Symposium created at Corner College a temporary common space for physical, intellectual and emotional exchange and encounter which can generate further ideas and activities, collective knowledge, and even collaborations. It echoed that the Symposium responded to a real need of artists, theoreticians, initiators and activists across the diversity of the regions of Switzerland and beyond to the trans-local.

In summary, we can say that the Symposium was one long breath and one long performance.

Thank you so much to Pro Helvetia for your contribution and support!

Text: Dimitrina Sevova and Dorothea Rust (curators of the Symposium)