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GERMANY

CUSTOMISING THE CUSTOMER - TRANSGRESSION IN THEATRE FESTIVAL CONCEPTIONS

In a conversation with the author in the summer of 2008, the director of the Athens-Epidauros Festival Yorgos Loukos characterised his task as follows: "Of course I too would have wanted the Callas to perform in the Epidauros Ancient Theatre. It must have been incredibly impressive. Nevertheless, it is as important to do something for the local people. They are curious. For example, the younger generation, I see them hanging out in the cafés and in the streets, as they do not really know what to do after their classes in school or at the University."¹ In the light of the December troubles in Athens, these words have a grim ironic flavour. Greece would not have been spared of barricades, raided shops and burning cars, if the state had subsidised its festivals and theatres more. It would be commendable if something would have been done for the schools, education and jobs beforehand. However, Loukos' words mark a striking change of perspective: With the Athens-Epidauros Festival, the creative potential of a civil society is meant to be integrated, not segregated. The principle, the unpronounced concept of this attitude, will be scrutinised below under the neologism "customising customers".

Times of Change

Since Aeschylus the theatre has reflected its times' socio-public, technological and culture political circumstances and changes. In the past 20 years, the theatre itself as well as the dedicated festivals have dramatically changed in Europe and throughout the entire world - deliberately not taking into account local events, such as the Swiss Mardi Gras in Basle or passion plays as in Oberammergau. In numerous cities the preserved "folk forms" are still fully operating as they have been 10 or 100 years ago - e.g. in Bad Hersfeld, the Karl-May-Plays in Bad Segeberg or the dedicated segments on the occasion of the Salzburg Festival such as Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann* (Everyman) performance. But with new performing strategies, with media and interdisciplinary forms of expressions, with so far unknown performance practices and spaces, boundaries have been pushed, demolished and fresh ground broken.

Art meets Theatre

Theatre and art meet productively in this process. They challenge their audience to become active. As in the visual arts, time-based phenomena, performance and installation have returned, materiality, intervention and installation have been integrated in the theatre, questioning the hegemony of the author, director, text and representation. Video and digital media have become for the theatre and the arts common forms of expressions.

In addition, the theatre is increasingly globalised and interconnected: productions are created beyond physical and language borders and performed on multiple continents. Internet, GPS and digital media are deployed by the theatre staff and artists not only for information exchange, but to release creative processes and to actively involve the audience.

In the course of this transgression a young, curious and critical audience has emerged to whom the use of the Internet and mobile applications is as natural as for their parents' generation the telephone and television has been, and who furthermore seeks individualism, community and presence mainly in public events. Popular culture and the entertainment industry offer a diverse repertoire that today's theatre welcomes as a challenge and stimulation, not as competition.

Theatre festivals and art biennials increasingly gain importance as formation tool for a new public – they generate and define audiences and producers, as well as crucial site factors and innovative potentials. They integrate glamour and spectacle, reflection and amusement, individuation and community into event and experiment.

With Yorgos Loukos in Athens since 2006, Gérard Mortier in Salzburg between 1996 and 2001 or Matthias Lilienthal as director of the Theater der Welt festival in 2002, with Harald Szeeman as director of the fifth Documenta in Kassel in 1972, or more recently Adam Budak, curating the international art exhibition Manifesta 7 in 2008, festival and biennial concepts have been established, which have productively, exemplary and successfully perpetrated the tension between the event and experiment. As diverse their fields of activities and approaches might be, essential similarities become apparent in their striving to establish a creative platform for the artists and their audience within a defined time frame: the concept of “Customising Customers”.

The idea of "customising customers"

The proposed phrase “customising customers” could be seen as a deliberate provocation, yes even as a calculated offence against established theatre and festival forms. “Customising” and “customer” are

originally economic terms. Following Charles S. Peirce, each term has both a stating and a performing character, meaning that it does not only describe something but also shape it. When talking about “customising customers”, a neologism that despite not yet having become part of the economic vocabulary, we could be strongly suspected to play into the hands of another dangerous tendency: to endorse the commercialisation and flattening of the theatre and art establishment. The choice of terms might discourage all those, who have assigned themselves to the fine arts, the sublime goals of the theatre beyond consumption and recycling interests, as well as those who believe that they have to defend a worshipped author, his holy text and its literal translation.

They, however, do not understand that each form of art is committed to its contemporary era, thus developing its own dynamics, within which one can talk about author and his work of art only in inverted commas. Indeed, it is the phrase “customising customer” that takes these dynamics explicitly into account when developing a festival concept and profiling its artistic direction. The protagonists mentioned above, the festival directors and curators have understood this. Their activities have dissolved and stimulated the so-far highly valued patterns. During Documenta 5 the public could not only admire paintings on the walls and sculptures in the park, but videos and performances that so far had not been presented to a wider audience and only from then on have been seriously considered within the domain of art.

But does behind the phrase “customising customers” not lurk the danger of degrading the critical visitor to a mere buyer by referring to him as a customer? Does the concept of “customising customers” not actually imply selling strategies for popular and consumer-oriented products? Looking closely there exist at least three not unsubstantiated commercialisation fears: [1] The trend towards an event culture and the suitability of the festival programmes for the masses as observed at the festivals in Salzburg and Bregenz, or as on the occasion of the MoMa exhibition in Berlin (2007). [2] The relatively stable theatre landscape with subsidized national companies in fixed venues, as they have been established across Europe after the Second World War that might be perforated by a dynamic festival scene. [3] Biennials might serve their region as suitable fig leaf to attract tourists while for the remaining year public authorities do much less or nothing for the continuous presence of art and especially theatre.

These issues need to be acknowledged.

The concept of "customising"

The noun "customising" describes the adaptation of an industrially produced mass-product to a customer's personal demands. It pinpoints a paradox of the mass production in which altering means 'eradicating an error'. Hence, since the beginning of the industrialisation, manufacturers and middlemen

have modified standard products for a financially strong clientele. Since the 1950s especially the automobile industry, suppliers, repair shops and manufacturers have specialised on offering a larger customer base, defined as part of a "custom culture", a personalised transformation of a mass-produced car. The "customer" elevated a basic consumer product. He distinguished himself from other consumers, achieved a distinction benefit and felt part of a specific bourgeois culture. The rise of sub- and youth culture - from the 1950s rockers and greasers, via punk to today's skateboarder, tattoo and i-Pod generation - would not be possible without the principle of "customising".

For the traditional industry it is hard - in contrast to trading - to drain the potential of an individualised product range. In the 1970s the Japanese car manufacturer Toyota succeeded in achieving a relatively high degree of individualisation of its mass-products by means of reducing the production phases and a whole range of fitting possibilities. Combined with a service offer the customer received a benefit package, up to invitation to exclusively announced marketing events, that were meant as a long-term customer retention and thus safeguarding the turnover. This form of "hybrid production", linked to an in-house quality management, revolutionising the corporate marketing departments.

For today's service enterprises, for the information and telecommunication industry "mass customisation" means to constantly expedite the individualisation of the product range and marketing strategies on all levels. Examples are Sony, Amazon, Google or Nokia Siemens Network. The electronic entertainment, hardware and software industries carefully ensure that the customer himself is able to customise and programme the product according to his requirements and preferences.

The sales and marketing sectors of small and large corporations are applying individualised newsletters that are aligned to the purchase behaviour in order to personally and directly address the customer. Here the term "customising" reaches beyond the purely economic frame right into sociology. Specifically in the IT, fashion and luxury industry, the customers are persuaded to believe that the purchased product is unique, distinctive and that through the product its owner too becomes unique and distinctive. To eliminate the flavour of plenty, the sales strategy includes numerous advertising tactics customised for the target group. By purchasing and saving customer data, corporations intend to compile a detailed and individualised buyer profile. And behind these customer tailored offers lurks the customer tailored to the offer - the "customised customer" and thus by definition subject to standardisation.

Taking the customised customer to the theatre

So what do we actually mean when we talk about the concept of "customising the customer" in the context of (theatre) festivals? In economics the Top Quality Management (TQM) analysis does not

only apply the term "customer" to the client, who in our case would be the festival visitor, but to all people involved in a product's production and delivery process. Translated to our case, this would include the technical, curatorial and producing staff as well as the artistic direction. And exactly in this extended understanding of the "customer" lies the decisive change of perspective that when applied to our concept of "customising the customer" characterises the fundamental change of attitude that (ought to) take(s) place on all levels of a festival organisation.

Customising the theatre

Permit me an anecdote as a first illustration of the "customising the customer" concept in the theatre context. In 2008 one of the founder members of the 1962 established Schaubühne, Jürgen Schitthelm recounted that every night before every performance the artistic director at that time, Peter Stein, checked in the ladies and gentlemen lavatories whether sufficient toilet paper was available.²

Of course, such an inspection can be interpreted in numerous ways. You can imagine West-Berlin in the Cold War, the chaotic anarchic Kreuzberg, where the Schaubühne was then located. However, that a highly praised theatre producer, then as today, was thinking about his performance and the actors, but also about the audience and its most elementary necessities, strikes me as astonishing. What has this to do with "customising the customer", all that he is doing is thinking of something rather essential that is forgotten by others, you might say. Allow me to be more open-minded. We can assume that Peter Stein intended with this initiative to enhance his product, in other words to attract a new target group to his theatre. The previous management did not pay much attention to sufficient toilet paper. If Peter Stein wanted the more exclusive inhabitants from Berlin's Wilmersdorf-Charlottenburg neighbourhood to visit his venue, he needed to stage not only excellent productions, but also needed to provide excellent sanitary facilities, thus ensuring that the spectators did not immediately leave again. With this measure Peter Stein attracted the audience he wanted, instead of serving only the one that was already coming. By extending this measure to the entire Schaubühne, Peter Stein's message could be read: if I take care of all kind of things, you too have a responsibility for the entire Schaubühne beyond your core tasks.

In other words, the concept of "customising the customer" engages all protagonists. It does not only refer to the old and new audiences, but to anyone participating in the festival process - be it on a creative, productive, organisational or administrative level: the direction, the marketing section, the permanent and temporary staff, the actors, artists, producers, stage directors, technical staff 1 - including those in the cloakroom and the toilets.

Customising the theatre customer

To make it simple: "customising the customer" concerns anyone involved with the festival. The audience as well as the producers. So what then does "customising" mean? To get everyone, audience and producers, enthusiastic about the cause, about the theatre. And this means to produce presence in the fullest sense. To a festival, in comparison to a repertory theatre company, it is a priority to attract a new curious audience, to stage innovative and avant-garde productions, to offer a spectrum that goes beyond the traditional, permanently pushing and moving beyond its boundaries.

In Salzburg, Gérard Motier accomplished this excellently. His simple credo was read: "theatre definitely will not change the world, but theatre can challenge the world's routine. A theatre performance can force us to think. Improvement and innovation will follow."³ Between 1991 and 2001 Mortier broke the ossification of the previous era of Herbert von Karajan and stopped an alarming commercialisation of the Salzburg festival. He attained this mainly via three sustainable measures, which perfectly outline the concept of "customising customers":

One: modernising the repertoire and opening the Salzburg Festival to works and plays of the 20th century, mainly in the opera and concert segment!

Gerard Motier: "It is a perversion that we only concentrate on works of dead people."⁴ His interest was to expand the then established and known repertoire. Seeing and listening habits needed to be adapted, new performance strategies to be developed and tested.

Two: increasing the quality of the performances by improving the rehearsal systems and by including new venues, which facilitate new presentation forms!

Since 1992 plays were performed in buildings of a former saline factory on the Perner island in the neighbouring Hallein, a location that was constantly improved until 1998. In addition, these factory buildings hosted numerous commissioned works, from Peter Stein to Luk Perceval. Here the festival was not forced to adapt to the artists and their quirks, but rather the artists, together with the artistic direction, adapted their concepts to the actual situation, the site and the festival's requirements. The artist was the "customised customer", the artistic direction in its role as a dramatic advisor or rather curator, was critically and as an advisor linked to the evolution of the production.

Three: attracting school children and students by offering accompanying events, such as introductions and discussion platforms as well as drastically reducing the ticket prices!

These initiatives enticed a young and critical audience that in no time redeemed the initial income losses.

The crux was that the festival had to permanently adapt to the requirements of the presence, to an attentive and contemporary audience interested in contemporary expressions of the theatre.

Customising the Customer: Act II

The concept of the "customised customer" expects from the artists a new attitude and approach towards the production. They are forced to intensively investigate the local conditions, the city, its inhabitants, the social conditions in relation to the global situation. Theme and content of the production have to be adjusted and fine-tuned according to a new local as well as international audience.

The following three projects are exemplary demonstration for this: An early work of the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff (in collaboration with Bures Miller), secondly a piece from the German artists' collective Rimini Protokoll and finally a project by the British artists' group Blast Theory. All three 'joint ventures' originated in the beginning of the 1990s and they all have stricken out in an interdisciplinary, multi-media and new direction. In these works the principle of "customisation" has been expedited in a rather radical way - with respect to their overall oeuvre, their product and their audiences. What they have in common is the inclusion of analogue and digital media in their projects, and - in the tradition of the situationists - their usage of the public space in order to convince the spectator to become an active participant, a protagonist in the performance.

1. Who is where?

In 1997 the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff was invited by Kaspar König, then curator of the *Skulptur.Projekte Münster*, the sculpture project in the German city Münster, to realise one of her audio "walks".⁵ *Skulptur.Projekte Münster* is implemented every ten years and ranks among the most renowned international art exhibitions in Europe.

Janet Cardiff, originally a graphic designer, has realised in the past years a whole range of complex media installations in which the spectator is interactively involved as a performer as if on stage, though until 2005 never in a theatre building but only in the art context.

Since 1991 she has directed in collaboration with Bures Miller audio walks, in which the participants equipped with headphones and walkmans were sent through the public space. These tours took between 15 and 45 minutes. In the approximately 17 minutes *Münster Walk* an audio CD lead the participants into the city centre, around the National Museum through numerous streets and parks. A custom-made recording technique for text and ambient sounds - a so-called binaural recording system - allows Cardiff to achieve a genuine 3D-reproduction of the sounds. With this technique it is possible to evoke the presence of physical phenomena that do not exist in the actual real environment. The participant carrying the audio device is instructed by a voice to follow a specific route. A second voice that seems much closer, much more intimate, narrates dreamlike recollections of events, referring to the

participants actual physical surrounding.

With the invitation to realise a site-specific work for Münster, Cardiff travelled for the first time to Germany. She intensively engaged herself with the location and German history. For the *Münster Walk* she created the fictional story of a woman, following her daughter's tracks.

The "listener-on-the-move" became immersed in a reality of parallels that was stimulated by the voice and the ambient sounds and altered the actual surroundings to an extreme.

Cardiff's work broadens the term "sculpture", as the physical movement in public space becomes an act of appropriation of the "sculpture". As a performing intervention her project also approaches theatre. The public space, the surrounding of the participant serves as a stage on which her stories unfold.

In 2005 the artistic director of Berlin's theatre "Hebbel am Ufer" (HAU) asked Cardiff to develop a "Walk" for the HAU 1, an art nouveau building in Berlin-Kreuzberg.

This project too was site-specific, explicitly designed for the building. For 27 minutes the participants were guided through the entire edifice: from the basement via the foyer, via the stage to the roof. This time the participating guests were equipped with headphones and a camcorder. Watching the screen of the camcorder, they had to follow the artist's directions through the site. In *Ghost Machine* the audio illusion was merged with a visual one, fictitious recordings within the actual site. The visitors were forced to shift between past and present, memory and reality and they were both seduced and irritated by Cardiff's manipulation of the "real" and their own, individual projections, fantasies and desires triggered by the stories, the movements, the imagery. How much more intimate and immediate can you reach an audience - and instruct it?

In addition, the participant's as well as the 'spectators' roles as (involuntary) performers were further expanded. While moving through the theatre with a camera, the participant encountered casual visitors purchasing tickets, or getting information on the next month's programme who felt under surveillance, recorded. Thus a characteristic was attached to the "performing character" which actually did not exist, or rather, did not exist in the performer's reality, while forming a part of the 'spectators', the audience's reality.

Münster Walk and *Ghost Machine* were extremely successful projects, as they each attracted a broad audience and also new visitor groups. They both are located in the only vaguely defined space between art and theatre. They are innovative, site-specific and able to fascinate a curious public beyond the habitual loyal audience, that has had very little or no contact with the theatre.

2. Listen carefully!

Since the late 1990s Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Daniel Wetzl have been working as the artists group Rimini Protokoll on the structural extension of the theatre. In their productions the relation between performer and the public has been permanently scrutinised and newly defined. They do not stage professional actors but explicitly amateurs who are cast especially for the respective topic of their projects. Thus everyone has something to say, becomes a potential expert, actor: in their project on demography *100% Berlin*, these were 100 people living in Berlin, in the adaptation of Schiller's *Wallenstein*, politicians and bankers.

Call Cutta (supported by the Goethe Institute and Berlin's HAU theatre) was produced in Berlin and Calcutta in 2004.⁶ Here the 'experts' were employees of a call-centre in the East-Indian megalopolis Calcutta. Exactly 15.000 kilometres away from Berlin and equipped with maps of the German capital and communication devices, which they used in their daily work, they became the protagonists of *Call Cutta*.

Call Cutta was a team-performance consisting of an 'expert' in Calcutta and a 'spectator' in the HAU. The HAU guest received a mobile phone and a headset and awaited a call from Calcutta. Once connected s/he was guided through the city, was confronted with stories the person on the other end was telling and thus started a conversation with an unknown accomplice at the other end of the world. Arriving at Berlin's Potsdamer Platz meant the end of the tour though email addresses and further contact details could be exchanged, if wished.

Once again the roles of the spectator and the actor, public and private coincided in an innovative way. The public space became the activity field, the stage. Any bystander became a potential participant, a character in the story, as in Cardiff's works.

3. Get involved!

Like Janet Cardiff and Rimini Protokoll, the artists group Blast Theory, led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, dissolved the classic performance practices and its locations. On the occasion of the b.tv festival in Sheffield they presented their interactive game *Can You See Me Now?* (CYSMN)⁷ for the first time. Here the action in the public space happens simultaneously in the virtual Internet space. With their game they even more challenged the classic division of roles between the actor and spectator, producer and recipient. Like Rimini Protokoll or Cardiff, they broadened the term 'public' beyond the frame of live performance.

Four professional actors in a public space competed against 15 to 20 online players for several hours: a game of cat and mouse. Real chasers and virtual victims were connected via GPS or WLAN respectively. The online players were chased by the professional actors. The goal was to stay undetected, uncaught as long as possible.

The online player had a 3D map of the specific Sheffield area, in which they could see themselves, other players as well as the real runners as moving avatars. While the players could communicate with other players by sending text messages, the actual runners were able to talk to each other by walkie-talkies, though these conversations were transmitted as an audio-stream to the online players.

Presented or rather realised at numerous festivals in Europe and Japan for four years, CYSMN attracted a young audience that was able to either actively participate online, independent from their actual location, or passively watch the performance by following the movement and conversations of all participants.

The potentially limited number of online participants was opposed to an unlimited "real" public at the actual site, as the four performers with their technological "gadgets" and their slightly awkward actions were of course actually noticeable by everyone at the local site. Thanks to Blast Theory theatre has ended up on the street. All walls are torn down, boundaries dissolved. The former stage, now the analogue and digital public space, as well as the linearity of the story are constantly re-defined, by the changing participants, the personnel present. Theatre has become an entire democratic forum.

Employing the customised customer

Janet Cardiff, Rimini Protokoll and Blast Theory have adapted and realised their projects for large festivals. These works were only possible because of the festivals. Thus they have been entrusted with a task in relation to innovation that cannot be accomplished by traditional establishments such as museums, art associations or theatres. Festivals are truly forums for experimentations and thus can present works-in-progress as well as projects that might never fully exploit their promising innovative prospect. Festivals are in a constant anticipation of future performing practices. Here are definitions about art and/or theatre are challenged, NOT made.

With calls for projects, workshops, competitions and debates the festivals are able to discover, evaluate and present excellent and innovative projects. An interested and engaged audience welcomes, even expects something beyond the regular events and a platform for debates and discussions.

Thus festivals that do not open themselves to experimentation and innovation should redraft their

mission. Cardiff, Blast Theory and Rimini Protokoll offer descriptive examples for the concept of "customising customers" as in their productions an innovative option can be offered to a contemporary audience that expects theatre forms that render traditional configurations infinite. A festival as a "workshop of presence" would be able to break through the spatially technical as well as structurally aesthetic frame of the traditional theatre towards a democratic public, within which also renowned forms of production and reception have their right, but only if contrasted with transgressing formats and interventions. Antipodes are crucial and creative. Today's festival customers must not be distracted by play stations and the internet.

Customising the Customer: Act III

The End. To be continued...

¹ The interview with Yorgos Loukos took place in July 2008, (unpublished).

² Jürgen Schitthelm in an interview with Christof Belka for the Fanzine *deutschlandsaga -70er Jahre*, published by Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin, 2008

³ Gérard Mortier in an interview with Wolf-Dieter Peter for Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcast Cooperation) in June 2008, published on <http://www.br-online.de/content/cms/Universalseite/2008/06/09/cumulus/BR-online-Publikation--140957-20080609073925.pdf>

⁴ Gerard Mortier in an interview for the Magazin Vanity Fair (Germany) <http://www.vanityfair.de/biografien/Gérard+Mortier/0/1524.html>

⁵ Cardiff/Miller's *Münster Walk* is described on the artist's website <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/muenster.html>

⁶ Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta* is described on the artist's website http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/project_143.html#

⁷ Blast Theorie's *Can You See Me Now?* (CYSMN) is described on the artist's website http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html and in a paper of Mixed Reality Laboratory who developed the software for the project, see <http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk/~axc/documents/papers/ToCHI06.pdf>

CV **Max Glauner** - Born in Stuttgart/ Germany 1962. Lives and works in Basel/ Switzerland and Berlin/ Germany. After studying Comparative Literature, Philosophy and Art History in Berlin (West) and Paris he received a *Master of Arts* with a thesis on "Aletheia: Genuine Truth and Images in Plato's and Philostratus' Dialogues". Concept and realisation of numerous national events and projects in the area of art and theatre (e.g. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Deutsches Theater Berlin, Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz). Lectures and publications on "20th century urbanism", "pictures of cruelty", "productive synthesis between theatre and the arts" as well as "new media and ethics". Since 1996 freelance art and theatre critic for national and international art magazines, newspapers and journals, and a regular contributor for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, *Freitag* Wochenzeitung, *Die Welt*, *Kunstforum International* and *Theater heute*.