



*A real place, where real people go to work, and where their work takes the form of 'conversation' \**

**Ivana Ivković**

Contemporary societies throughout the world have embraced a culture of individualism. Neo-liberal social policies have turned workers into precarious free agents. Communications technology, including the internet, social media and the increasing use of smartphones, brought with it a promise of meaningful relationships and communities. Instead, existing divisions have deepened - "friends" and "followers" do not translate to human relationships or communities. Traditional sources of social solidarity are in steady decline in what Gregory Sholette has called a "failed society where previous forms of human connectivity have been left in tatters" <sup>1</sup> - more of us live alone, more of us are no longer part of labour unions, neighbourhood organisations, religious groups. Numerous newspaper articles have been written on citizens' loneliness and the loss of a sense of belonging. And belonging is about taking part, being engaged, having a voice. And having an occasion to exercise that voice.

Can theatre (still) provide that occasion?

The pressure on artists (and a wider cultural sector) to justify their position in contemporary neo-liberal capitalist society, through community work, social work, therapy work... - all those social services that are deteriorating in our former-west and former-east societies - has fostered an idea of the artist as a service worker, and then a step further, in the encounter with our failing communities, infrastructures, our public and society in crisis, as a political activist.

Today, in the age of absolute disenchantment with the (political) establishment (think Donald Trump, think the dead left of Europe, think off shore tax avoidance and living under the poverty line) the artist is under renewed pressure to take up politics. And as the crisis of representation in democracy has "hit the representation machine of theatre at its core" <sup>2</sup>, prophesying future

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\* from: Nicholas Ridout's *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (2013).

social relevance of theatre aligning with that of the opera of today, the only way to take up politics is to do so by engaging in our vanishing public sphere. We ask ourselves "can art, instead of doing politics, lend its instruments to make the public sphere rise again, at least from occasion to occasion"? <sup>3</sup>

We've been talking about audiences for a decade or so, about their number, their satisfaction; but today the artist's work has to breach the walls of the white cube, the black box, the institution, the audience of the event - it is imperative it extends beyond to engage society as a whole - an artist today focuses more "on the relations that [their] work will create among [the] public and on the invention of models of sociability." <sup>4</sup>

### **Micro-utopias**

So, frequently we're asked to create so-called participatory art that instils a temporary, momentary sense of belonging without actual social or political responsibility, without conversation about the economic and social conditions of the artist's work; to take part in 'micro-utopias' (Bourriaud) of the present where active participants play at being social without any real effect upon the antagonist space of the public, learning how to settle the world better, producing a precarious, fleeting and affective sense of sociality with no "belonging, enduring, material or local character".<sup>5</sup>

Are we confusing "the audience with the public instead of always viewing it as separate from the public, as something by means of which we temporarily leave the public outside"? <sup>6</sup> Can there be talk of public, social, political, with no (political) responsibility?

### **Usership**

Proposing an alternative to the current capitalist framework of the contemporary art world (focusing on visual arts and its market-driven specifics), Stephen Wright calls for a repurposing of art toward a notion of 'usership' that is neither that of a spectator, an expert, nor an owner. The notion of usership is a proposal for a new category of political subjectivity, one that challenges the existing economic-political relationship between artist, artwork and audience: "Usership represents a still more deep-seated challenge to ownership in an economy where surplus-value extraction is increasingly focused on use: how long will communities of use sit by as their user-generated content value, rather than being remunerated, is expropriated and privatised?" <sup>7</sup>

Usership marks a call for renewed power of art, art that can be more than a comment on the state of affairs, art that engages us, that is emancipatory, that pulls us from the despair of our era of neo-liberal capitalism, nationalism, warmongering.

Should we, as Wright proposes, employ artistic competences in various spheres of life for the purpose of an action or claim in the real world, outside the asylum of the art world, the gallery, the studio, the stage, to mobilize and 'ungovern' <sup>8</sup> the sphere of public, of political action?

Today, in the post-Occupy era of public performance and public protest, Chantal Mouffe questions how to envisage artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art, advocating a strategy of engagement with institutions that would lead to "a multiplicity of agonistic spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where new modes of identification are made available". <sup>9</sup> Though not by substituting critical artistic practices for political practices, as she doubts their ability to bring about a new hegemonic order on their own.

So, how do we engage, publicly, (in) the contemporary, as citizens, as workers, as artists? Perhaps as 'artists'?

### **Artist**

My first encounter with the term 'artivism' was in the mid-2000s, in the aftermath of Carlo Giuliani's death at the G8 summit protests in Genoa, in the midst of the rise of notions such as: multitude, virtuosity, immaterial labour, exodus. This coincided with the start of my engagement in the field of dramaturgy, another term then raising in popularity in the field of contemporary performing arts in Europe. Somehow none of it seemed immediate to me. Important, yes, very, theoretically, politically, but slightly removed from what I perceived as my own artistic concerns and practice.

In his eponymous text published in 2005 Aldo Milohnić <sup>10</sup> used the term artivism to address "political interventionism [that] resorts to cultural-manifestation techniques", but even more importantly, to question whether contemporary "art is destined to assume again the function of an asylum for critical political operations", outside of "highly aestheticized, contemplative and benevolent bourgeois art that remains secluded behind the safe walls of art institutions".

### **Work (that is political)**

As a practising dramaturg, and a member of a theatre collective for the past 15 years, I am

constantly being asked if my work is political. And for a while I struggled to answer that repeated question. Until I realized it was not a question at all, it was a demand. One that I was, unthinkingly, already responding to.

What is political in (artistic) work?

Not only the output of our work, but the conditions under which the work occurs.

Not how the work reflects on these conditions, but how the conditions are, inadvertently, reflected in our work.

As Pierre Macherey has stated some time ago, an artwork never arrives unaccompanied: "it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them".<sup>11</sup>

It is important, and political, that we address these questions in our own context, in my case the one of the field of contemporary performing arts, with its largely nomadic, dispersed, unorganized, non-unionised workforce;

and, in the age of individualistic free-for-all, to ask can we still do things collectively;

are we ready for radical art in the age of "radical consumption: the consumption of the body, presence, human actions and abilities, physical strength, spiritual power and affects";<sup>12</sup>

or are we ready to passively accept that "the projection of obscene pleasure into the value of artistic life takes away the artist's public role - the antagonistic and uncapturable autonomous position connected to shaping the common by conceiving and creating new forms. [Bojana Kunst warns us:] As a consequence, political engagement on the part of the artist is changed into a burlesque or a fashion trend."<sup>13</sup>

We live in the age of exploitation of sociality and human relationships for the generation of market value. The placebo-involvement of so-called participatory theatre, the nightmare of the so-called 'sharing economy' of companies like Uber (personally I prefer the term 'collective consumption' to 'sharing economy'), the museum-factory (that Hito Steyerl writes of; but we could think of theatre houses in the same breath) where exploitation of the artist continues to take place.

We live in a time of the disappearance of the public sphere. Is there potential for its true

rearticulation in theatre?

## Theatre

Counted and surveyed for its multitude of opinions, audiences have in the past decade been seen less as possible collectives, and more as 'target groups' of ideal neo-liberal subjects, individuals to be sorted into categories as active consumers. But art is a space of friction, "a space [says Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula] where a work of art and the spectator come together to produce a crisis, as well as mutual recognition." <sup>14</sup>

Some argue that theatre has fallen to a peripheral aside in contemporary society. I'd like to counter-argue its political potential may be in the space it offers its audiences to experiment with ways of engaging, with imagining oneself differently when confronted with a live-posed question, and possibly with our own role in society, our own difficult citizenship.

Let's think of theatre as a "network of relations of exposure", <sup>15</sup> the "space where things are real and not real at the same time. Where we can observe ourselves from the outside whilst also being part of the performance. It is a paradox that creates situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at the same time." <sup>16</sup>

Theatre opens up aesthetical and political potentiality in our contemporary society. It is a condensation of time and space, projected and in-progress, work and non-work, activist and amateur. The political stake of theatre is not to present a different social reality, but rather to stage the existing social reality under different terms, to question, to "mobilize passions" (Mouffe), to "ungovern" (Ramsey Burt) through "interaction, negotiation, and contestation as well as sharing". <sup>17</sup>

The political stake of theatre is to sift through the multitude, seek points of community, instigate collectives and collective actions, to build constellations in place of missing infrastructure, not as a side activity, but as an integral part of our artistic practice. To strive for a complexity of the performance as real, an encounter that redirects single-perspective notions of truth toward the less comfortable ambiguity of multiple perspectives and polemics.

Theatre I am interested in is not an "alternative" to the "real" world, but is a "real place, where real people go to work, and where their work takes the form of 'conversation.'" <sup>18</sup> A space of multitude, an agonistic space, an occasion to exercise one's voice, a space of friction, a happening.

I keep thinking I saw Bojana Kunst write somewhere:

*we do not keep bees for their honey*

but I'm unable to find the quote.

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- 1 Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter - Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2011), 154.
- 2 Florian Malzacher, *Not Just a Mirror. Looking for the Political Theatre of Today: Performing Urgency I* (Alexander Verlag Berlin, 2015).
- 3 Bojana Cvejić, "Theatrocracy, or the art of dramatizing the public", [http://www.academia.edu/14880823/Theatrocracy\\_or\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_dramatizing\\_the\\_public](http://www.academia.edu/14880823/Theatrocracy_or_the_art_of_dramatizing_the_public) (last accessed on 30.04.2018).
- 4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presse Du Reel, 1998), 28.
- 5 Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Zero Books, 2015), 65.
- 6 Ibid., 72.
- 7 Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, (Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 66.
- 8 see: Ramsey Burt, *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons* (Oxford University Press, 2016)
- 9 Chantal Mouffe, "Strategies of radical politics and aesthetic resistance", 2012, <http://truth.steirischerherbst.at/texts/?p=19> (last accessed on 30.04.2018).
- 10 Aldo Milohnić, "Artivism", transversal / EIPCP multilingual webjournal, 2005, <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1203/milohnic/en> (last accessed on 30.04.2018).
- 1 Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (Routledge, 2006), 61.
- 2 Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Zero Books, 2015), 22.
- 3 Ibid., 151.
- 4 in: Florian Malzacher, *Not Just a Mirror. Looking for the Political Theatre of Today: Performing Urgency I* (Alexander Verlag Berlin, 2015).
- 5 Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 148.
- 6 Florian Malzacher, *Not Just a Mirror. Looking for the Political Theatre of Today: Performing Urgency I* (Alexander Verlag Berlin, 2015).
- 7 Ramsey Burt, *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 23.
- 8 Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 124.