

Crossing Over

A personal kaleidoscope of political art

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“Quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood.”

– Hegel, *“The Phenomenology of Spirit”*

Until recently, I’ve always been overcome by a feeling of reluctance when answering questions that I believed merely sought instant gratification for public inclinations; such is the case, for example, when a new category of art is coined (see *artivism*) in order to “better classify” that which is already covered by the concept of theatre itself. Thus, up to now, I’ve always considered the question of whether I am a “political artist” to be cut from the same cloth. How could I get involved with the activist group Center for Political Beauty and work to overcome both metaphysical and physical borders on the one hand yet contribute to the construction of new perceptual barriers on the other! Moreover, I did not wish to be solely associated with activist art, if not only for the sake of doing justice to the other fields I’ve ventured into. It wasn’t until later that I realized that this attitude had led me to become somewhat narrow-minded. The “true” search for universality does not necessarily lead to commonplaces and may even be able – depending on the people involved – to dig deeper and lay bare the roots of certain concepts or buzzwords for closer consideration. At any rate, after experiencing the highly astonishing year of 2016, my perspective changed. In that year, suspicions were confirmed or abolished, latent insight awakened or laid to rest. Now I seem to have gained a higher vantage point that overlooks a greater distance.

In the face of the recently oft-evoked dissolution of former certainties and norms, my thinking has paradoxically become clearer – as it is not the pillars of truth themselves that have fallen with the emergence of *Brexit*, *Trump* and other warning signs, but rather merely the media-hyped backdrops arising from the various “theatrical” machinery at work in the political world. The dissolution of such simulations of reality means that we will now be free to look straight into the inner workings of the infamous echo chambers that typically envelope us in alternate realities – they close in around us, leaving us no way to freely enter or escape. While this may not be a new concept, we now lack so-called *gatekeepers*: public figures and esteemed representatives of their various spheres capable of translating and serving as intermediaries. In lieu of this, we are at least able to get a clearer view from the outside. In particular, the recent US presidential election enabled interested parties a look at the world of political communication as an enigmatic yet influential sphere whose role in opinion-forming seems to be much more important than previously assumed.

Yet where do these deliberations lead? Perhaps to the determination of a contemporary artistic standpoint for myself and others? I hope so. As an artist who, due to his interdisciplinary nature, often feels pulled apart into several individual pieces, I find it reassuring to know that my activities – dramaturgy and dramatic art on the one hand, poetry and music on the other as well as some practical, research-based and written investigations of communication thrown in for good measure – are becoming more and more concentrated along certain leitmotifs, which have, over time, become increasingly detached from fictional constructions. My initial understanding of art as individually acquired skills and knowledge that are not yet bound to a specific function has been rounded out through my experience putting these unique creations to use in real situations. My formulation, expansion and exploration of a hypothetical *collective subconscious* gave way to the suspicion that this could actually be an already

existing sphere. And that suspicion ultimately led to this awareness of my truth. From now on, I shall no longer primarily concentrate on converting fiction into reality, but rather focus my energy on gaining access to that *collective subconscious* by approaching it from various sides – so that I myself may ultimately become a *gatekeeper*. This corridor between reality and fiction is where I believe the potential lies for a community enriched with knowledge, spirituality and an inherent sense of trust. It harbours potential for the advancement of civilisation towards a planetary society. Here lie the roots of my utopian dreams. As yet, this perceptual plane is merely a kind of transcendental echo chamber in itself. Yet by using the means of art in the way mentioned, it can be opened and thus help us put into perspective – or, at best, render impossible – the contemporary communications jungle of fake news, post-truths and anti-enlightenment surrounding us. At any rate, I feel at home here at this crossover. Here I am man, here I am crossing over. And from here I can see my *personal kaleidoscope of political art* unfold before me. Although I have been at home in the political activist art scene for years, it was not until I gained this new perspective that I was able to comfortably describe myself as a political artist – as someone who makes his ideas and emotions available to a collective, not in order to manipulate, but in an attempt to sensitise others to become consciously aware of the streams of data that go unnoticed in the everyday, increasingly disorienting and, in the worst sense of the word, diverting swarm of media-driven background noise surrounding us. All of my projects currently under development for the next couple of years are engaged in this process of crossing over – the purely fictional (a science fiction play and a new music project called “Die Vorahnung” (“Foreboding”)) as well as things largely situated in the real world (the latest Center for Political Beauty activities and a radio feature).

For the rest of this essay, I would like to invite you to meander with me as I visit a few concrete sources of inspiration and jumping-off points. In doing so, I intend to primarily concentrate on the world

of mass communication, which is indeed a broad field in itself. The theatre artist’s perspective is, of course, merely one of many possible approaches to offer; however, due to the brief nature of this excursion, I shall maintain it by way of example.

Theatre as a communication lab

I firmly believe in the scarcely exhausted social potential of a theatre which, in both the ancient and postmodern sense, is able to function as a transgressive realm of possibility for interdisciplinary cooperation across fields and perceptual spheres. The use of theatre as a communication lab in which an alternate reality construct is developed implies that the process of exploration must necessarily lead to a final product or some other kind of output, defined as such based on the idea of its subsequent transition into practical application. Thus, in my view, the final result could and should be an intellectual product capable of being productively, i.e. in a consciousness-expanding way, applied to the world beyond theatre as a political communications tool. This is the point where the theatrical process transgresses the borders of reality; the insight gained through theatre will begin to alter reality – albeit not until it goes hand in hand with a collective awareness of suppressed areas of communication.

Among many other developments, the year 2017 will be characterised by important elections in France and Germany. The election campaigns will once again bring forth gigantic media platforms. However, the directors – a complex construct of politics, media and the communications industry – have in many respects proven dysfunctional and obstructed by self-imposed determinants. It is therefore an unsurprising yet increasingly distinctive phenomenon that the established world of political communication should run into an invisible wall despite the wealth of expertise it has accumulated over decades. It no longer dares (or has not yet dared) to delve

into the sphere of collective memory and commonly shared desires, hopes and dreams – while the united front of right-wing populists and autocratic powers in Europe have evidently been quite successful at tapping into a *collective subconscious*, though they would not label it as such and of which they only scratch the surface rather superficially. At any rate, for many reasons they find it much easier to use contemporary media conditions for their purposes. In the case of Austria's FPÖ party, it became evident during the recent, seemingly never-ending presidential election how unscrupulously and arbitrarily it drew upon psychological tools of mass manipulation. In the end, it was not due to the fact that he used such means that Norbert Hofer failed. His failure rather seemed to be rooted in his glaringly obvious and undifferentiated approach to them. Nevertheless, this should not belie the impact that can result from the combination of autocratic party structures (less grassroots democracy = quicker decisions) and the activation of collective memories, fears and instincts.

In the past few years, there have been drastic changes in the world of communications: Media diversity has increased, audience range has dropped and interaction in social networks has increasingly gained in importance. Media (*one to many*) has evolved into social-media dialogues (*many to many*). The reader, spectator or user has evolved from a consumer to a producer. Successful political communication consciously plays with the knowledge that this situation has led to the dawn of a “post-factual” media age. The broadcaster and the audience use a framework of their own references and symbols to establish realities (echo chambers, bubbles) that are not as much based on verifiable facts or rationality as they are on exclusively shared beliefs.

On the other hand, the communications efforts of progressive parties, such as those in the German political landscape, have long been based on a consistent and utter underestimation of their addressees' instincts – particularly their ability to identify certain messages as the communications products of a small group. The instinctive knowl-

edge that in no way are all of the people who work in various areas or departments at the respective party involved in the communicative process has led to a general feeling of alienation.

The communications industry

In the communications jungle of oversimplified and pseudo-progressive messages, words, directions and contradictions that comprise the German political landscape, many key players have lost touch with one another, even those who had once banded together to sow the seeds of collective desires and hopes for a “better world”. While voters' intrinsic need for deeper, more authentic and more sincere public address dwindles, these politicians waste time on insignificant turf wars and trivial conflicts.

This corrosion of a once noble vocation can also be witnessed in the field of communications agencies and advisors – an industry that sets the tone and calls the shots for both economic and political public relations work and which is much too seldom perceived as a key player and narrative inventor. In painting public images of themselves, these agencies often emphasise how much they value interdisciplinary, out-of-the-box thinking. Unfortunately, however, their use of words often does not do justice to the words they use. The big “players” all too readily throw into the textual mix tried and trusted catchphrases intended to elicit certain associations. This ultimately gives rise to utterly mindless statements that praise “creative innovation that unites us all”, boast a “passion to develop and coach fascinating brands” or, as in political communications, proclaim that it's the “we” that counts. In addition, they rely on excessive use of words such as “vision” and/or “philosophy” in order to compensate for a lack of those very concepts, which are assumed to be too complex to be understood. Though this is not meant to imply that the authors of these statements are in any way lacking in intelligence or that the expertise they have gained is not substantial.

It is simply meant to highlight the apparent estrangement of an entire industry from its most important means of production: in this case words, whose actual, more significant layers of meaning and emotional implications are routinely truncated and replaced by weaker, more malleable simulations of themselves.

Judging from a bit broader perspective – with the aid of crossover competence and approaches – it is not difficult to predict that this endeavour will ultimately hit upon its natural limits, namely those posed by the long-established concepts of *authenticity*, *credibility* and *sincerity* – words that seem to stem from another age but that are most likely on the brink of an overwhelming comeback. The “laying to waste” of inexhaustible philosophical or literary resources is perhaps best explained by calling upon those exact sources: the power of habit, the law of idleness – these factors remain too powerful to allow the intellectual standards in the communications industry to be overthrown. They still uphold the epic misunderstanding that empirical communication with addressees and target audiences must necessarily preclude “messages” rooted in deeper metaphysical meaning. In this respect, the industry is clearly lagging far behind. They could learn much by looking to other areas of society: Where professional communication is indicative of deeper desires, wishes and hopes and combined with authenticity, it not only received positively but fondly as well.

If only a message could communicate the notion of a large community along with it; and if only we could then use it to gain access to a collective, timeless subconscious that lies buried beneath a layer of highly ephemeral streams of data; if only media sources, messengers and addressees could be internalised as one entity that is greater than the sum of its parts; the result would be a tremendously fruitful state of reciprocity. Not only would we be tapping into an utterly non-artificial sphere, but also taking seriously all of the participants of this extensive and, in the best sense of the word, “crossmedia”

correspondence. And there would be further, self-reinforcing synergy effects that would transform those former platitudes into real-life descriptions of prevailing processes: Only then would we be engaging in “innovative communication” and “vision management”.

One deeply ingrained, very German attitude is based on the assumption that we should seek to get our bearings “in these confusing times” by finding a suitable box for each individual thing. In some areas of life, this is not necessarily unwise, however: We often set up unnecessary and arbitrary limits on the path to one universally sought after and profound pillar of orientation, namely the realisation of what my life should focus on, what kind of imprints I would like to leave behind. It is precisely the world of professional communications that would benefit from the increased presence of such an overriding spirit of enterprise.

For this, as for other areas, the art and theatre community could develop and present an alternative world of communication and, in this interdisciplinary and synergy-seeking dream world of mine, install it in reality with the help of certain *gatekeepers*.

The paralysed progressives

To a decisive point, politics and the media run on words – whether spoken, under discussion or written down. That is why, regarded from the “outside”, it indeed makes sense when seemingly misguided *political correctness* is blamed, typically by right-wing groups, as the principal cause of the fact that “people no longer feel the liberal establishment speaks to them”.

I recall a critique of an intellectual history manifesto, in which the author lamented that the word “Abendland” (“Occident/ The Western World”) had not been adequately “reclaimed so as to distinguish it from its use by [the far-right political movement] Pegida” in the text. My first reaction was: What will be next that has to be reclaimed in opposition to Pegida? I, for one, fundamentally reserve the right to

reclaim my own brain in opposition to Pegida instead of rushing into a frenzy of blind obedience to current political correctness trends by labelling centuries-old terms with warning signs – reliable terms which have the ability to elucidate undertones and trigger manifold associations in various contexts precisely because they have often been filled, imposed and bestowed with so much meaning before. Ultimately, such a development would simply end in disastrous semantics which would bar any possibility of exclusivity.

If we imagine these words to be haunted houses, I would hire a parapsychologist to exorcise the evil spirits and then just come to terms with the rest. The art critic referred to above would probably prefer to simply tear down the houses altogether. Incidentally, the other day a speaker at a Pegida event used the term “love thy neighbour”. What is God going to do now?

In the *wording* and *framing* of the Center for Political Beauty’s activities, we’ve always considered it important to take on a timeless perspective, that is, to engage in metaphysical correspondence with the dead, the living and the as-yet-unborn. Thus, it is an intrinsic component of our “theatrical work” to rededicate, re-appropriate or revitalise terms. Generating a retrospective view of the present opens up a no-man’s-land of sorts, much like the space in between the images which – by the current state of things – will a few decades from now stand for the Europe of our times and those images designed to pre-emptively prevent that type of retrospection. It is here that we can come up with new ideas, promote different ways of thinking and engage in a battle of ideas and images that, for a brief moment, renders current contexts impossible – ridding ourselves, deliberately and wilfully, of would-be scientific, sociological, political, cultural and economic constraints.

In this respect – freed of circumstantial constraints – theatre can restore such a will while additionally providing ideas and perceptions

able to expand the common denominator of our “way of life”, which always seems to pop up again in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack, distinctly better than when we rely on the same old gestures of solidarity at football matches or are encouraged to continue pursuing leisure activities as “signs of our freedom”. The objective is, for instance, to somehow counter the images of dead refugees on Italian shores, which have left lasting impressions in our minds, with something that does at least some justice to Europe’s humanistic tradition and upon which we can nurture hope that our utopias may become facts. This is where my own fervent, artistic interests tie in, as I strive to find ways to access a *collective subconscious* – that is, a sphere which, in contrast to the Freudian understanding of the unconscious mind, values fellow human beings and a timeless community just as much as individual desires, hopes and dreams.

Incessant media background noise, however, can smother collective hopes, desires and dreams. I defy it by dreaming aloud! However, the only place (as yet) able to provide the right conditions for this is the largely limitation-free space posed by art. Replenishing the wonder in the spiritually barren countenance of our present-day life could be one of the loveliest tasks that contemporary theatre faces. It can and should provide intellectual developmental aid to politicians, media representatives and communications advisors – with the significant advantage that they would be able to accept this aid largely without losing face, as it is merely cultural enrichment!

This can also be recognised as a serious contribution to the struggle against the sneaking sense of political apathy in our society; after all, decreased voter turnout is first and foremost a manifestation of a loss of confidence in those people with the legitimate power to make far-reaching decisions. Ensuring the regeneration of this confidence is both deeply romantic and urgently necessary to counter “postmodern indistinguishability”, such as that of political parties, with visions and instil decision makers with “internal motivation” – in the hopes that

they may once again come to inspire (as well as polarise) the people and that voters will once again recognise and utilise their potential to make courageous decisions as to fundamental political tendencies.

I believe it is my job and the duty of other artists to venture into a place “where the paths are not marked, where the terrain has become uncertain and which is not penetrated by as much evenly distributed, universally familiar light as before”, as the French philosopher François Jullien, whose focus lies in exploring correspondence between Far Eastern and European philosophy, expresses it in his text “Vom Abstand zum Gemeinsamen” (“From Disparity to Commonality”)¹. The aim is to take on a new perspective which differs from that “in which thought is embedded and thus no longer actively carried out, from that which has been so well assimilated, integrated and accredited that its fundamental suppositions and underlying partiality have long since been buried and forgotten [...] and thus taken as evident.”

Here, at the crossover between reality and fiction, between politics and art, between action and idea, is where I will stay. Here, there is potential for great things, beneficial things. Here, we will be able to break through useless and paralysing perceptual borders. It is only here that I hear the entire sound and see the entire picture – in all of us.

1: French original title: De l'être au vivre, lexique euro-chinois de la pensée

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Translation by Lynnette Polcyn

Text #7 in “We Write, Right?” a project by gold extra