



FWC (Emil Hrvatin, Peter Šenk)  
 Begunsko taborište za državljane prvega sveta / Refugee Camp for the First World Citizens  
 Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, New York, 2004  
 Foto / Photo Tom Powel

# Strategies of (political) subversion in contemporary performing arts (Pograjc, Zupančič, Hrvatin: Three Cases in Slovenia)

**Tomaž  
Toporišič**

*WE ARE ALL MARLENE DIETRICH FOR  
PERFORMANCE FOR SOLDIERS ON PEACE  
KEEPING MISSIONS*

CONCEPT, DIRECTION AND  
CHOREOGRAPHY:  
ERNA ÓMARSÓTTIR, EMIL HRVATIN

CREATED AND PERFORMED BY:  
PETER ANDERSON,  
LIEVEN DOUSSELAERE,  
ALIX EYNAUDI, ALEXANDRA GILBERT,  
KATRÍN INGVADÓTTIR,  
GUÐMUNDUR ELÍAS KNUDSEN,  
ERNA ÓMARSÓTTIR, FRANK PAY,  
DIEDERIK PEETERS,  
VALGERÐUR RÚNARSÓTTIR

MUSIC CREATED AND PERFORMED BY:  
PONI

ADDITIONAL MUSIC:  
LAIBACH

COSTUME DESIGN:  
ELENA FAJT

LIGHT DESIGN:  
MIRAN ŠUŠTERŠIČ

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR:  
BENEDIKT AXELSSON

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:  
MARE BULC

SOUND DESIGN:  
XAVIER VAN WERSCH

VIDEO:  
JURE NOVAK, MARE BULC,  
EMIL HRVATIN

PRODUCTION:  
MASKA PRODUCTION  
AND ICELAND DANCE COMPANY

FIRST PERFORMANCE:  
REYKJAVIK CITY THEATRE,  
4. FEBRUARY 2005



MATJAŽ ZUPANČIČ  
*THE CORRIDOR*  
SNG DRAMA LJUBLJANA,  
B-51 (EX PONTO)

DIRECTED BY:  
MATJAŽ ZUPANČIČ

CAST:  
GORAZD LOGAR - DORIAN  
BOJAN EMERŠIČ - ADRIAN  
PETRA ROJNIK K.G. - NENA  
SAŠA MIHELČIČ - TAMALA  
PRIMOŽ BEZJAK K.G. - KIŠTA  
VALTER DRAGAN - NIKSON  
ANA RUTER K.G. - JANA  
JANEZ ŠKOF - MAX

DRAMATURGY:  
DARJA DOMINKUŠ

SCENOGRAPHY:  
JANJA KORUN

COSTUMOGRAPHY:  
ALAN HRANITELJ

CHOREOGRAPHY:  
MATJAŽ FARIČ

LANGUAGE ASSISTANT:  
TATJANA STANIČ

FIRST PERFORMANCE:  
24. SEPTEMBER 2004

*FWC REFUGEE CAMP  
FOR THE FIRST WORLD CITIZENS*

ARTISTIC CONCEPTUALIZATION,  
RESEARCH AND DESIGN:  
EMIL HRVATIN & PETER ŠENK

QUESTIONNAIRE:  
KATHERINA ZAKRAVSKY

RELIGIOUS ASPECTS:  
ANTON BOLE

CCR CAMP FOR CATASTROPHE  
REFUGEES MEXICO (WORKSHOP):  
MARISOL RIVAS VELÁZQUEZ  
AND CHRISTIAN SCHMUTZ

PRODUCTION:  
MASKA PRODUCTION, LJUBLJANA

The paper deals with three cases of strategies of political subversion developed in four recent events within the contemporary performing arts scene in Slovenia. Four projects by three theatre directors stressing the problematic of a new intrusion of politicised art into the Slovenian cultural arena, that until recently seemed to be avoiding the thematisation of political issues. Firstly, Matjaž Pograjc's *Everybody for Berlusconi*, co-produced by Betontanc and Jonghollandia, an interesting fusion of heterogeneous theatre concepts resulting in a hybrid form of performance that nevertheless can be vaguely defined as a theatrical form. Secondly, a play and a performance: *The Corridor (Hodnik)* by Matjaž Zupančič, staged by the Slovenian National Theatre in Ljubljana as a strictly theatrical event problematising TV, reality shows in particular. And thirdly, Emil Hrvatin and his two daringly conceptualised projects: *We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR*, subversively dealing with the seemingly marginal problem of entertainment projects for NATO troops, one of the most intriguing attempts to articulate the political in contemporary performing arts; and a post-conceptual project-exhibition called *FWC (Refugee Camp for First World Citizens)*, a trans-media case of examining the impact and (absence of) power of contemporary art within the logic of global politics. These three cases give rise to a vast field of questions about the current status of the politicised art of live performance<sup>1</sup> in the era of *telecracy*.

Let us begin with one of the most frequently asked questions of the last decade, highlighted in the foreword to an issue of *Janus* magazine dedicated to notes on subversion by Jan Fabre & Henrik Tratsaert:

"What strategies do artists, dramatists, performers, philosophers, scientists and others put into effect to undermine conventions, and to pervert and question society's codes?"<sup>2</sup>

Let us add to this question, the answers to which can to some extent be traced within the reach of the projects we will discuss, statements by three contemporary art theorists commenting on the place of live arts in a global and mediated culture: Hans-Thies Lehmann, Philip Auslander and Guillermo Gómez-Peña:

1. "It is impossible to overlook the fact that, compared to earlier times, theatre no longer has the function of a centre of Polis, as a place of communal reflection on fundamental questions facing society. It can also no longer be a tool for confirming a national, historical, or cultural identity, and it simply does not work well and efficiently as political propaganda. Mass media are more efficient in all these matters; at least, they are faster as far as actuality is concerned."<sup>3</sup>

2. "But mediatisation is not just a question of media technology; it is also a matter of what might be called media epistemology...

Furthermore, as Pavis observes, 'the work of art in the era of technical reproduction cannot escape the socio-economic-technological domination which determines its aesthetic dimension.' It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine, or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media."<sup>4</sup>

3. "Spectacle has replaced content; form becomes... more stylised than ever, as 'meaning' (remember meaning?) evaporates, or rather, fades out, and everybody searches for the next 'extreme' image of 'interactive experience'. We are now fully installed in what I term the culture of mainstream bizarre... Change channel. From... TV specials on mass murderers, child killers, obsessive repetition of 'real crimes' shot by private citizens and by surveillance cameras, we've all become daily voyeurs and participants of a new *cultura in extremis*... Its goal is clear: to entice more consumers while providing them with the illusion of experiencing (vicariously) all the sharp edges and strong emotions that their superficial lives lack."<sup>5</sup>

Each quotation in its own way addresses a specific situation in which live performance found itself at the turn of the millennium. In a post-democratic world of global exchange, artists (along with theoreticians) are forced to adapt themselves to the fact that theatre (and live performance) "no longer has the function of a centre of Polis" (Lehmann). As a specific kind of an answer to this new, the marginalized position of art "in this horrifying era", in which "humanism has become either a mere corporate 'interest' or 'goal' or a trendy strategy for computer firms,"<sup>6</sup> artists produce their answers as a hybrid and fragmented form of politicised art. In Baudrillard's post-millennial world of the trans-political, trans-national and trans-economic, contemporary performing arts return to the tactics and strategies of the political. But this come-back is marked by an awareness of the small probability of having any influence on the macro world of politics and the media. It is also marked by the fact defined by Philip Auslander in his reinterpretation of Walter Benjamin as a new reality in the era of technical reproduction, in which live performance cannot remain ontologically pristine and cannot operate in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.

### *Everybody for Berlusconi*

Let us add to the statements quoted above a passage from promotional material for the production *Everybody for Berlusconi*:

"Betontanc and Jonghollandia are preparing a show about power and manipulation in the form of a congress dedicated to discussions about Berlusconi... A performance about miracles, the contemporary authoritarian regime of the media, about football, good food, democracy, TV shows, pornographic politics, Europe...mixed with Italian disco, soundtracks

from Italian B-movies, and variations a la Tarantella."

As is evident from the quotation, and to an even greater extent from the performance itself, *Everybody for Berlusconi* cannot be defined as a classic, transgressive form of political theatre, practiced by Ervin Piscator or Bertolt Brecht in the form of epic theatre. The project does not establish itself as 'leftist' political discourse criticising the hegemony of the media, politically based on a tendency "to identify with the teleological 'master narratives' of historical or dialectic materialism, in which the notion of politics is closely tied to ideas about the state."<sup>7</sup> What we are witnessing is more likely a "popist" and playful attempt to recycle the ideas of revised political theatre of Augusto Boal and its attempts to transcend the gap between the stage and the auditorium, the notion of the theatre becoming a process enabling the community to objectivise forms of repression in order to overcome them. The process of introducing the audience as a collaborative partner of the performers, that constantly presents itself throughout the performance, leads to the tradition of so-called radical performance in its various incarnations from the 1970's until the present, as well as to the highly recognisable everyday practice of mediated TV manipulation of the public and its fake freedom to decision making. By taking over and reappropriating a special representation of the discourse of TV shows, *Everybody for Berlusconi* inhabits one among numerous dispersed areas of politicised art. "The discourse on ideology and performance"<sup>8</sup>, which according to Herbert Blau, was initiated in the 20th century by Brecht and his critique of the bourgeois theatre, is thus transformed and marginalized into a form of spontaneous and improvised discourse on power and non-power of theatre in contemporary society. This discourse is characterised by playfulness, being more interested in surface than depth:

"For the moment, Silvio Berlusconi is the most gossiped about European politician. His personality says a lot about the development of European democracy, a democracy of New Europe, a constituent part of it being both Betontanc and Jonghollandia; a Europe of commercialism and populism, but also a Europe in search of utopian unity."

Politicised art produced by both groups only conditionally represent what Hans Thies-Lehmann defines with the term postdramatic, art that "can deconstruct, suspend, question the very notion, logical and teleological structure of the political itself."<sup>9</sup> It has to face the world in the era of globalism, described by the Mexican-American theoretician and performance artist as post-racial, post-racist, post-sexist, post-ideological of the multinationals after modernism. It has to face a new globalistic ideology, "a new trans-national multiculturalism that is actually devoid of 'real' people of colour, true artists, outcasts, and revolu-

tionaries.”<sup>10</sup> However, the weapons it chooses are not analytical, but spontaneous, intuitive.

The performance deals with Silvio Berlusconi by using the very weapon of his TV shows, a constituent part of his media-political imperium. It exposes the public to the ‘torture’ of participation and – following the logic of TV – separates it into two groups: those participating in a conference-quiz and those representing the spectators in a studio. By introducing the public to the domain of co-decision making about the future of the media magnate (voting for or against his elimination), the show exposes the audience to the fact that (deliberately or not) we are all positioned within control of the media, which is a form of political manipulation. But because the performance assumes techniques and methods of an extremely hegemonic media of TV while attempting to undermine its foundations, it exposes itself to what Jacques Derrida defines as follows: “By repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts...by using against the edifice, the instruments or stones available in the house...one risks, ceaselessly, consolidating...that which one allegedly deconstructs.”<sup>11</sup>

The performance moves itself around the dangerous borders of manipulability. In a process of quoting and appropriating the manipulative apparatus of the mass media, it exposes to various dangers its seemingly authentic and non-ideological approach to the political and its manipulation. It appears that it is not able to fulfil its aim of resisting the fact that we are living within the field of trans-cultural business, which translates any intercultural artistic action into the logic of exploitation by the trans-political, globalistic financial lobby. Thus it seems to become a predestined victim of the struggle with the mass media. Betontanc and Jongholandia share with American cultural activists the persuasion that theatre has to regain its function as a meeting place for art and social engagement. They are very like to agree with Peter Sellars and his statements: “We are responsible for the creation of an open and sincere forum, in which people can talk without any ideological prejudices.” “I deal with theatre to find out, whether democracy still functions or not.”<sup>12</sup>

A performance about the power of manipulation in the form of a congress about Silvio Berlusconi can therefore be regarded as a provisional solution for a possible strategy of future politicised theatre. In its appealing form and content it exposes itself to the danger of forgetting that – according to Guy Debord – we live in a society the nucleus of which is spectacle: “Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world...On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality.”<sup>13</sup> For those in power the micro-spectacle of the performance manifests itself as a pre-calculated artistic reaction that can become a victim of manipulation and is there-

fore restricted to small-scale political reactions. For this reason *Everybody for Berlusconi* only conditionally functions as shock therapy in the sense of the performance activism practiced by Gómez-Peña. It exposes the conditions of most of contemporary radical attempts in art, the very fact Emil Hrvatin describes in his introduction to a recent discussion about manifestations of the political in contemporary theatre (organized by Maska magazine) with the term “theatre without power”. A fact Gómez-Peña describes as a problem of any extreme and politicised art: today any fetish or taboo imaginable has already been inscribed on the web. Activist art has great difficulties to find boundaries to exceed. It is extremely difficult to find the neuralgic points of today’s society of the spectacle, in which even bin Laden could become an element of pop culture in Japanese anime in a few months.

The question asked by *Everybody for Berlusconi* is therefore: is the only role left to artists today - when every possible outer limit has been commodified in the mainstream - to reflect the impossibility of transgression?

## The Corridor

Matjaž Zupančič raises similar questions in his play and performance *The Corridor*. In a form of – as it were – classical drama and theatre he examines the phenomena of so-called reality shows. He deliberately chooses live performance, namely theatre, as a medium that comments and deconstructs a currently highly exposed form of media, more precisely, reality TV. His starting point can be illustrated by Gómez-Peña’s statement: “Each metier, language, genre and/or format demands a different set of strategies and methodologies”<sup>14</sup> As an appropriate media he uses “pure theatre”

while deliberately avoiding the mixed media resources of today’s theatre, staging the corridor of omnipresence of reality TV imagery, the very space of media violence in an age of “humanitarian impotence” (Gómez-Peña). Thus he discloses the problematical status of the subject, which disposes of fictitious freedom offering itself as an illusion of interactivity, openness to participation, dialogue, intensified through electronic media of TV. He stages reality interpreted as an image of Auslander’s universe of TV, which is able “to colonize ‘liveness’, the one aspect of theatrical presentation that film could not replicate.”<sup>15</sup> Zupančič is fully aware of the fact that theatre has developed into an imitation of media discourses. The taste of today’s public is shaped by TV, which became a model and telos of theatre. Capital is no longer interested in the economy of representation of live performance. It concentrates intensively on the economy of media repetition as presenting itself as a representation of the reality of here and now. Zupančič starts also from the fact Auslander defines as follows: “What we are seeing in many cases is not so much the incursion of media-derived ‘technics’ and techniques into the context of live performance, but, rather, live performance’s absorption of a media-derived epistemology.”<sup>16</sup> But in spite of this, he makes a decision for live performance, more precisely theatre, that “in the economy of live repetition...is little more than a vestigial remnant of the previous historical order of representation, a hold-over that can claim little in the way of cultural presence of power.”<sup>17</sup> Aware of the fact that our concept of closeness and intimacy are derived from the firmament of TV<sup>18</sup>, he exploits this concept and the symbolic power of TV as a media that receives greater cultural presence and prestige than theatre in order to intrigue spectators and drive them into a state



Matjaž Zupančič, *Hodnik/ Corridor*, 2004  
Režija/Director: Matjaž Zupančič  
Produkcija/Co-production: SNG Drama Ljubljana,  
koprodukcija/co-production Kulturno društvo B-51 (EX PONTO)  
Foto/Photo Peter Uhan

of awareness of TV manipulation and its “electronic noise”, presenting itself as a reality which is more real than the reality of live performance.

The question posed by *The Corridor* is therefore a crucial question, which Auslander keeps repeating and answering throughout his excellent book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*: does live performance dispose of an ontology of its own, which is more sincere than the repetitions of TV? The answer to this question is no. In addition to this, his play and his performance expose a crucial question about the possibility of subverting reality TV in a live performance. This question is well-defined in a statement by Stojan Pelko: “The question of theatrical *Corridor* and the transmission of a TV dispositive to the stage is therefore primarily a question of whether it is possible for a live performance to intensify this production of real effects – or, on the contrary, does live performance merely virtualise this stage, while dealing with it as with a phenomenon and not as a production of events.”<sup>19</sup> The degree of subversion is – similarly to other cases of contemporary politicised art – relatively low. It is constantly accompanied by TV noise denying access to the intimacy of the event. But it nevertheless resists, as long as we face the fact that a live performance is being followed by a live audience facing the stage and forced to become a witness of – to quote Pelko once more – “watching on the stage a void of TV reality.”<sup>20</sup> The void of currently recurring surfaces of display without depth, defined by Debord as “the manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same

short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile, news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts.”<sup>21</sup> By means of purely theatrical media *The Corridor* thus – while speaking about *Big Brother* – opens up a picture of the deterritorialised ethics of the post-modern world and its cybernetic models of organizing reality, the real fabricated electronically, from matrices and memory banks, collapsing into a black hole, produced by the media: “Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality.”<sup>22</sup> Or once more with Debord: “Spectacular government, which now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories, just as it is the unfettered master of plans which will shape the most distant future. It reigns unchecked; it executes its summary judgments.”<sup>23</sup> And the society of *The Corridor* or *Big Brother* is permanently producing those quick summary judgements in the name of the people.

### ***We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR***

*We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR*, a performance by Emil Hrvatin and Erne Ómarsdóttir, described by Helmut Plöebst as “a parade case of conceptualistic choreography of this decade (...), a perfect performative plateau and highly artificial moving picture with provocative dance and theatre elements,”<sup>24</sup> is a part of Hrvatin’s research elaborating the legacy of Jan Fabre’s post-conceptual performance of

the 1990-s and creating a platform for a dialogue with the essential premises of performance activism and oppositional art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his artistic collective La Pocha Nostra. With his project FWC (discussed below) it represents an interesting example of a possible strategy for contemporary politicised art that could – according to Mikhail Epstein and his theory of proto-formations in culture – lead to a new politics of the performing arts beyond the paradigm of post-modernity. The starting point shared by Hrvatin and Gómez-Peña is the awareness that “future is again advancing on us, not with an exclamation mark this time, but rather with a question, to which there is not and cannot be a known answer.”<sup>25</sup> In projects by Hrvatin and Gómez-Peña the First, Second and the Third worlds meet in the vague future of a common history of – let us say – Marlene Dietrich, refugee camps or immigrations. Both artists are more than aware that the traditional boundaries between politics, culture, technology, finance, national security, and ecology are disappearing. In this situation, they propose a concrete artistic answer to the question Richard Schechner asks in his book *Performance Studies, an Introduction*: “If globalisation was treated as performance, what kind of performance would it be?”<sup>26</sup>

From among various competing scenarios, they chose one that is not very optimistic, and which undermines post-colonial mimicry with its own humanitarian jargon. Gómez-Peña and Hrvatin are both fully aware that extreme art has a problem, that using on-the-edge tactics of shock therapists they would have little left in their armoury to shock. They are also aware that every fetish imaginable has already been inscribed on the web. They know it is very difficult to find boundaries beyond which to push, that there are hardly any margins left in a time when ‘gang members’ are being utilised to publicise Nike, that – according to Gómez-Peña – every possible outer limit has been commodified within the mainstream.

The artistic strategies applied by Gómez-Peña and Hrvatin/Ómarsdóttir/Šenk (and to some extent also Betontanc/Jongholandia) share some evident similarities. They all subvert today’s hardly existing and highly blurred borders between art and politics. Gómez-Peña’s *Newly Discovered Amerindians* exposed uncomfortable parallels between international arts festivals, colonial expositions, museum displays and tourist expeditions. The project created a parallel world of art commenting on the state of ethics in post-colonial society. It also performed the task of a living artistic situation commenting on the impossibilities of a straightforward political art as a means of revolutionising and changing global society’s vices. Hrvatin/ Ómarsdóttir/Šenk share with La Pocha Nostra a common denominator: “the desire to cross and erase dangerous borders including those between art and politics...ultimately to dissolve borders and myths of purity”.<sup>27</sup> But this desire uses tactics of the politi-



Matjaž Zupančič, *Hodnik/Corridor*, 2004  
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Foto/Photo Peter Uhan

Erna Ómarsdóttir, Emil Hrvatin  
*Mi vsi smo Marlene Dietrich FOR / We are all Marlene Dietrich FOR*  
 Maska Produkcija, Ljubljana in / and Iceland Dance Company, Reykjavik, 2005  
 Foto / Photo Marcandrea



cal that differ from those of *La Poca Nostra*, “robo-baroque” or “ethno-techno-cannibal aesthetic” (to use two terms by (Gómez-Peña).

In *We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR* Hrvatin/Ómarsdóttir take very seriously “a situation we name an artistic program for soldiers at the front”. They start from the fact stressed in Mare Bulc’s statement about paradoxes of appropriating the logic of ideology of peace-keeping forces: “It is time that the Blue Helmets received entertainment which is just as global and multicultural as the peace forces

themselves.”<sup>28</sup> They are trying to “renovate genre itself, as well as to change the potential public’s perspective on war. In order to achieve this goal, we firstly have to completely identify ourselves with the situation. The next step consists of an over-identification that artistically results in the creation of a distance, and produces in the context of the real either fanaticism or a feeling of discomfort. The performance will take upon itself this ethical risk, which the spectators will have to face. It will not make any moralistic or persuasive efforts.”<sup>29</sup> They prepared a project “that will

consist of elements of dance, dance theatre, physical theatre, live concert and media event” and will “constantly balance between a real and fictive event” while using “a military binary system to create situations with distinctions between program for soldiers/program for officers, motivation for war/motivation for peace...” They employed strategies that challenge “the audience to empty their minds of all thought, an interesting stylistic technique in a performance that has a systematic overload of images and symbols that are continually broken up, creating a sense of chaos and cheerfulness that are in perpetual conflict.”<sup>30</sup>

*We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR* builds its form of “radical performance” on the extensive usage of “over-identification”, a strategy practiced in all its consequences in the 1980’s and 1990’s by “the post-socialist politicised art”<sup>31</sup> of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (Laibach). The source of its strategy is the production of a feeling of “uneasiness” raised in the spectator by various means: firstly, by hypertrophying the ideological impacts of the mechanism of the hybrid genre of so-called “entertainment for soldiers”; by the overheating and simultaneous re-appropriation of the entertainment machine for soldiers, turning it into its opposition: the anti-production of pro-war effect. Secondly, by a deliberate bombardment with various signs, a super-saturation of various channels of communication through representation (sound, speech, visual signs, media technology...). The performance thus creates “a visible gap between signifier and signified” as the source of its potential as a “credible language of opposition”.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, a new politics of the performance, understood in terms of Philip Auslander, is created, a live performance “exposing processes of cultural control”.<sup>33</sup> This control cannot be avoided, but we are nevertheless able to temporarily confuse its self-evident nature. The performance thus enacts one of the two great ‘narratives’ or forms of political theatre (transgressive and resistant) in its 20th century history, namely, resistance.<sup>34</sup> Thus it links itself with the field of political strategies of performance, analysed widely in American performance studies (Auslander, Blau, Schechner, Fuchs, Birringer, Carlson, Wright et al). Its strategies arise from a presumption that any cultural action is already inscribed within a global discourse of polis and therefore cannot exist outside the predominant cultural formations, and the fact that meta-criticism is no longer possible, and no strategy of resistance can be employed outside this dominant system.

*We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR* persistently undermines the firmament of the dominant. The starting point for this tactic is a quotation from the well-known song by John Lennon *Imagine* (1971), which becomes material for cyclic repetitions, commentaries, derivations, and appropriations: “Imagine no more armies, no more military industries, no more war profiteers, no more defence budget, no



Erna Ómarsdóttir, Emil Hrvatin  
 Mi vsi smo Marlene Dietrich FOR / We are all Marlene Dietrich FOR  
 Maska, Produkcija, Ljubljana in / and Iceland Dance Company, Reykjavik, 2005  
 Foto / Photo Marcandrea

more military bases, no more Americans.” The song becomes material for a strategy of the performance consisting of radical appropriations and deconstructions of various performance styles, modes of address, performance frames, and realms of representation. All rules of performance are broken, the public is exposed to the ‘violence’ of representation and repetition, which can be linked to the violence of the society of the spectacle. The napalm of representation is closed by the quotational intrusion of the real: a soundtrack of the song *Life is Life* as performed by Laibach (*Opus Dei*, 1987) with a simultaneous video projection of video clips depicting short scenes about peacekeeping military groups.

“We gave all the best,  
 And everyone lost everything,  
 And perished with the rest.  
 Life is life”<sup>35</sup>

### ***FWC (Refugee Camp for the First World Citizens)***

Instead of their own aesthetics, Hrvatin/Šenk pretend to be researching in their project *FWC (Refugee Camp for the First World Citizens)* the politics and aesthetics of a specific by-product of the post-millennial global world: that of a refugee camps for citizens of the First World. Following Giorgio Agamben and his theory of the camp, they re-appropri-

ate in their play of sliding signifiers the Western or First World idea of the camp as a state of exception, and explore the paradoxes of this parallel legal system they describe as “an ex-territorialized site where the usual legal system does not apply. And yet, exactly as such, it is a site or even a non-site to which the regular legal system can turn any time.”<sup>36</sup> Understood as temporary settlements for the Second and Third world citizens, they produce “a low quality of life that often does not meet even minimal living standards. But it matches the image of the refugee, usually seen as a poor, desperate, exhausted, deprived person...”<sup>37</sup> According to the policy of the UN, the isolation of camps is recommended in order to avoid possible tensions between refugees and local population. In contrast to this, Peter Šenk and Emil Hrvatin propose and elaborate in their “platform for artistic research into the demilitarisation of capsular societies” a model of an anti-isolationist *Refugee Camp for the First World Citizens*: a first settlement that is ready to accept possible refugees from the First World. Thus they invert the actual situation of existing refugee camps, and develop what seems to be utopian, yet very concrete proposal for a prototype that can be applied anywhere. They deliberately chose Slovenia, advertised by its government “as ‘safe and peaceful land’, a land that according to the same government ‘does not feature on the map of possible terrorist attacks’...This makes Slovenia a suitable loca-

tion for refugee camps for First World citizens.”<sup>38</sup>

*The First World Camp* deals with what Gómez-Peña describes as globalisation’s dark side. The fact that “entire Third World countries have become sweatshops, quaint bordellos, and entertainment parks for the First World, and for the inhabitants of the Southern Hemisphere the only options for participating in the ‘global’ economy are as passive consumers of ‘global’ trash, or providers of cheap labour or *material prima*.”<sup>39</sup> Hrvatin and Šenk are also more than aware that the traditional boundaries between politics, culture, technology, finance, national security, and ecology are disappearing. The politics of art they employ are the very tactics of the UNHCR, NATO and other trans-national organisms of the so-called “humanitarian” power. Their persuasion (which is of course linked to the arguments of Agamben) is that phenomena like refugee camps are moving to the centre stage of today’s society. The future they predict as very possible and to which their project is consecrated and kindly invites governments to join, is a mirror image of the situation we have been living in for the last few decades. If Epstein comments on the contemporary society, “the future emerges as a soft form of negativity, as a vagueness within any sign, or diffuseness of any meaning,”<sup>40</sup> they give to this soft, vague form of negativity a clear and organised picture: the Refugee camps for

Citizens of the First World. By taking these camps as Agamben's bio-political paradigm for the contemporary West, they replace the classical artistic belief that art creates a parallel world with the statement that "the camp is always a parallel system, literally a 'para'-system". The analytical approach to contemporary political reality they apply in their project has some similarities to Mikhail Epstein's analysis of post-communist Russia with "post-communism rapidly moving into the past, on the very heels of communism". They agree with Epstein that "there is a need to go beyond the confines of both Utopia and its resonating parodies. The post-communist epoch can count only a few years to its name, having suddenly bogged down in the protoplasm of some new, unknown social system."<sup>41</sup> The question raised by Epstein's statement about contemporary Russia can be easily applied to the global situation after the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the cold war and events following the golf war, September 11th, and recent events in Iraq.

Hrvatín/Šenk seem to be proposing that we are living in Debord's era of theomnipresence of the society of the spectacle, the power of which "already seems familiar, as if it had always been there"<sup>42</sup> This society wipes out history and witnesses an era of a new, unknown social system, defined as post-democratic, post-racial (and some other denominations Peña uses) or – in Agamben's terms – "a global civil war, whose battlefield is social life in its entirety, whose storm troopers are the media, whose victims are all the peoples of the Earth."<sup>43</sup> As the communist and cold war histories remain in the past this only means – as Epstein puts it – "that the future has been cleansed of yet another spectre, or idol, and such cleansing, or demythologisa-

tion, of time is a proper function of the future."<sup>44</sup> In the FWC project, the future advancing on us "not with an exclamation mark this time, but rather with a question" is clearly foreseen and in process of a detailed elaboration of its various possible aspects. In so doing, the project relates to Giorgio Agamben's concept of the camp "not as a historical fact and an anomaly that... belongs to the past, but rather in some sense as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we still live."<sup>45</sup> The project takes the very fact that – according to Agamben – the sovereign power of the camp is founded on the ability to decide on the state of exceptions, and is thus a structure in which states of exception are continually realized. It also starts from the assumption Slavoj Žižek makes when commenting on the new American and global attitude to prisoners of war and immigrants: "Today, as a term denoting exclusion, *homo sacer*, can be seen to apply not only to terrorists, but to those who are on the receiving end of humanitarian aid (Rwandans, Bosnians, Afghans), as well as to the *Sans papiers* in France, the inhabitants of the *favelas* in Brazil, and the Afro-American ghettos of the US."<sup>46</sup>

By a proposal to invert this fact, the project undermines the state of exceptionality, and with it, the very bio-political paradigm of the contemporary west. By proposing a refugee camp situation for individuals from the First World conceptualised as a network node that generates integration and interaction between refugees and local people, a prototype that can be applied anywhere, the project *per negationem* addresses the very fact of the bio-political paradigm of the camps which Agamben defines in his famous statement: "Inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every

political status and reduced completely to naked life, the camp is also the most absolutely bio-political space that has ever been realized – a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without mediation. The camp is the paradigm itself of political space at the point at which politics becomes bio-politics and *homo sacer* becomes indistinguishable from the citizen."<sup>47</sup>

In the project they propose to elaborate together with partners from several European countries and regions they are constructing a new paradigm of camps not as factories of death but, as Hannah Arendt puts it, a mode of life "outside of life and death", a mode of life they propose to First World individuals as a possible Noah's Ark of the post-September 11th, 21st century bio-political situation. As with Gómez-Peña's performance activism it is hard to imagine how the politics Hrvatín/Šenk's project might produce will serve as a real alternative to that which it contests. But is this not the case with most of today's subversive approaches to art? Was it not true also of the post-modern, post-socialist, politicised art in Second World Countries? And was it not the case also with the trans-, neo- and historical avant-gardes, the political theatre of the 70-s, 60-s and 50-s, the politicised art of the 1990-s and 1980-s. Fabre's question, which I quoted at the beginning, therefore seems to lead us to nothing more than a new series of questions.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Auslander uses 'live performance' in connection with 'mediatised performance' in his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, and links it to Jameson's definition of 'mediatised'.
- <sup>2</sup> *Dissident Voices / Notes on Subversion*, Janus. 16 / 04, Antwerpen, 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann. »Political in Postdramatic.« *Maska*, letnik XVII, št. 74/75: p. 74.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Auslander: *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Routledge, London, 1999: p. 32, 40.
- <sup>5</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña. 'The New Global Culture'. *The Drama Review* 45, 1, New York, 2001: p. 13.
- <sup>6</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña. 'The New Global Culture': p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Baz Kershaw. 'The politics of performance in a post-modern age' *Analysing performance*. Edited by Patrick Campbell. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996: p. 138.
- <sup>8</sup> Herbert Blau. *To All Appearances. Ideology and Performance*. London, New York: Rutledge, 1992: p. 28.
- <sup>9</sup> Lehmann: p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña. 'The New Global Culture': p. 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: p. 135.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Sellars, interview for ARTicles Online.
- <sup>13</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994, p. 12-13.
- <sup>14</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña. "Navigating the Minefields of Utopia". (A conversation with Lisa Wolford). *The*

- Drama Review* 46, 2 (174), New York, 2002: p. 73.
- <sup>15</sup> Auslander (1999): p. 13.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*: p. 33.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*: p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*: p. 159.
- <sup>19</sup> Stojan Pelko. »Tema na koncu hodnika.«, *Hodnik*, gledališki list Drama SNG Ljubljana, 2004: p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 43.
- <sup>21</sup> Guy Debord. *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*: <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html>
- <sup>22</sup> Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle* <http://www.bopsecrets.org/S1/debord/1.htm>
- <sup>23</sup> Guy Debord. *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html>
- <sup>24</sup> Helmut Ploebst: 'Wenn Kämpfer Entertainment brauchen' *Der Standard*, 5. 3. 2005.
- <sup>25</sup> Mikhail Epstein. *After the Future: the Paradoxes of post-modernism and Contemporary Russian*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995: p. 330.
- <sup>26</sup> Richard Schechner. *Performance Studies, an Introduction*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002: p. 223.
- <sup>27</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña. 'The Performance Activism and Oppositional Art of La Pocha Nostra'. *Janus*. 16 / 04, Antwerpen, 2004: p. 53.
- <sup>28</sup> Mare Bulc: »Who is Going To Entertain the Blue Helms?«, *We are all Marlene Dietrich FOR*, Handbook, Maska & Iceland Dance Company, 2005: p. 57.
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.maska.si/siScenska.php>
- <sup>30</sup> Pall Baldvin Baldvinsson.
- <sup>31</sup> See: Erjavec, Aleš (ed.). *Post-modernism and the Post-socialist Condition*. Berkley/Los Angeles/London. University of California Press: 2003.<sup>32</sup> Dorrian Lambley.

- 'In Search of a Radical Discourse in Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7:29, February 1992.
- <sup>33</sup> Philip Auslander. 'Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre' *Theatre Journal*, 39, March 1987.
- <sup>34</sup> Terminology used by Hall Foster in his book *Post-Modern culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1994.
- <sup>35</sup> <http://www.lyricsfind.com/1/laiibach/opus-dei/opus-dei-%28live-is-life%29.php>
- <sup>36</sup> *Dissident Voices / Notes on Subversion*, Janus. 16 / 04, Antwerpen, 2004: p. 77.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*: p. 78.
- <sup>39</sup> Gómez-Peña, 'The New Global Culture': str. 9-10.
- <sup>40</sup> Mikhail Epstein. *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Post-modernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995: p. 335.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid*: p. 330.
- <sup>42</sup> Guy Debord. *Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle*: <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html>
- <sup>43</sup> Giorgio Agamben. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*. (Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000: p. 99.
- <sup>44</sup> Epstein: p. 335.
- <sup>45</sup> Agamben. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*: p. 40.
- <sup>46</sup> Žižek: "Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?" *London Review of Books* 24.10 (23 May 2002).
- <sup>47</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*: p. 40.