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Chapter 19

Daring to transform academic routines

Cultures of knowledge and their performances

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DARING TO TRANSFORM ACADEMIC ROUTINES

Cultures of knowledge and their performances

Jörg Holkenbrink and Anna Seitz

Since the 1990s, the Center for Performance Studies (ZPS) at the University of Bremen has carried out projects that facilitate an artistic orientation in academic contexts. Closely affiliated with the ZPS in Bremen is the *Theater der Versammlung* (Theater of Assemblage) (TdV), one of the first research theaters in Germany. TdV brings together students, scholars from all faculties, and professional performance practitioners to work together on a range of theoretical themes and questions that arise within various academic contexts, using the methods and means of performance. This allows for an intensive collaboration with people whose expertise is in a wide range of different discourses. The performances that emerge from this interdisciplinary process have been presented and discussed throughout the German-speaking world and beyond.

The following dialogue is the result of an encounter between philosopher and theater scholar Anna Seitz, and Jörg Holkenbrink, director of the ZPS and artistic director of the TdV. In this conversation, they discuss various ways in which a dramaturgical lens can help to enhance performative methods of research, teaching, and learning at the university where standardized processes of linearization that threaten the very principles of higher education are increasingly becoming habitualized to negative effect. Key to their fresh approach is an understanding of the mutual responsibility that both actors and audience (in the case of a performance) or teachers and students (at the university) carry, and the inherent risks of failure and vulnerability at play in both contexts. Touching on various formats of knowledge production (as opposed to mere transfer), as well as on the role of certain dramaturgical principles (including attentiveness to atmosphere and setting the stage for surprise), their dialogue explores the importance of being conscious of differences when transgressing the boundaries between practical-aesthetic and theoretical dimensions of presentation and assembly.

Holkenbrink: In *Puer Robustus*, his philosophy of the troublemaker (*Philosophie des Störenfrieds*), Dieter Thomä lets us know: “Anyone who employs the imagination to approach experience with concepts becomes active as a threshold entity” (Thomä 2016, p. 146). In the summer of 2014, at the Center for Performance Studies of the University of Bremen, you, Anna, led a dramaturgy project on the topic of the networked generation. The project involved a number of events, including the usual formats of academic knowledge production, but it also dared to break out of the academic routine in several respects. This breaking-out began with the twenty participating students being selected such that as many different

areas of study as possible were represented. Students from the fields of biology, comparative and European law, digital media, English-speaking cultures, educational sciences, German studies, history, computer science, arts education, cultural studies, comparative literature, philosophy, political science, and psychology were brought together to examine the question of what it could mean for them to be called “the networked generation,” each from the perspective of their own field. In that context, you set them the unusual task of choosing real or fictional prominent “network figures” from literature, film, games, or theoretical treatises to be their imaginary friends and to attend seminars with them that would enable them to find the trail of the concept or metaphor of the network. After attending the seminars, the students then joined into a continual dialogue with their imaginary friends about the content of the seminars, which they then worked out in written form. These explorations subsequently led to an unexpected shift in the direction of research. Participants in the project worked with a combination of socio-politics (which speaks of the network in the context of a potential “social death”), mythology (which speaks of the Parcae, the three Fates, the one who spins our life thread, the one who measures it, and the one who cuts it), and current technological utopias (transhumanists in particular, an influential movement in the United States, are trying to overcome the inevitability of aging with the aid of, among other things, artificial intelligence and its further networking). Within the large frame of the theme “Networked Generation,” drawing on these various sources gradually led to the crystallization of a transdisciplinary question: “What does networked life have to do with death?” The insights gained and the materials worked out over the further course of the project ultimately formed the basis for the presentation of *Am seidenen Faden* (On the silk thread), a performance that the *Theater der Versammlung* (Theater of Assemblage) continues to present as a work-in-progress at *trauerraum bremen*, an alternative funeral parlor, and which is seen as a continuation of the project by other means.¹

When I think about the course of the project again, it strikes me how much imagination and judgment, reason and intuition, practical-aesthetic as well as theoretical approaches and forms of representation are all interwoven. It reminds me of Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as a figure of thought for a hybrid form of systems that have until now been separate, of which Doris Ingrisch writes:

The difference between such hybrid approaches and additive or pluralistic ones lies in the willingness to allow touching and changing or, more precisely: to intend them. Reciprocal learning is a prerequisite and hence an attitude in which the so-called Other is regarded with appreciation.

(Ingrisch 2013, p. 35)

Now, Anna, as initiators of such projects, we can be seen from the academic order as trouble-makers, as malcontents, or as marginal figures. According to Dieter Thomä, this raises “the question of the direction of fit: Who adapts to whom? Does order make short work of the disturber of the peace, or does the latter cause it to change, does the trouble-makers cause an upheaval?” (Thomä 2016, p. 18). Let us assume for a moment that we are in fact disturbers of the peace in the best sense: Are there manifestations of crisis in academic education that can be understood better from the margins? And to what extent does the disturber of the peace, or trouble-maker, in his or her precarious marginal position seem “vulnerable, wounded, and wounding”? (Thomä 2016, p. 151).

Seitz: What does it mean, in light of the current university landscape, to be a disturber of the peace in this field? I believe there is, for the moment, no “peace” that one could disturb.

What there is, is uniformity, an evening or leveling out. But leveling out is something different from peace. It does not amount to a *granting of equal rights* but rather to an *equalizing* of diversities. Giving something equal rights is an act of empowerment, but making something equal means smoothing it out, sanding down its corners and edges, and hence can be seen as a violent act of cutting, and, yes, that is something that I would certainly like to disturb. Performative strategies are ideal to this end, because they are in a position to show what is missing. Moreover, we should not forget that a culture of knowledge cannot be thought of except as performative. Knowledge that is not “performed” is mere information. To paraphrase Paul Watzlawick: one cannot *not* act performatively. After all, everything has a performance; everything is performative. What we want to call a “performative act,” however, is a *consciously designed* act, a “showing doing” (Schechner 2002, p. 28). An exhibited action that *shows* itself *showing*, or *reveals* itself *revealing* (Prange 2002). Showing or revealing also means addressing someone and hence also showing interest in sharing something with the other person. Whether the context is artistic, pedagogical, academic, or other, “revealing oneself revealing” always involves a dimension of the naked, the unprotected, the vulnerable. Revealing oneself revealing is daring to interact, and as such an act of courage. It means putting trust in the judgment of others. A performative act is always an act of trust, trust in oneself and in the other. A performative act plays with the possibility of failure and with the risk of being rejected, in the hope of it working, of one being understood and connecting.

I often speak of the necessity of increasing performative methods of research, teaching, and learning at the university, because I observe with concern how processes of standardization are manifested in processes of linearization that scarcely allow deviation. Meanwhile, these processes of linearization have become manifest, in turn, in other social institutions as well, where university graduates as decisionmakers apply what they have learned: to even out through linearization. Such dynamics can sometimes have terrible consequences, for example in the area of health and social services, as shown in Ken Loach’s film *I, Daniel Blake* (UK, 2016). The noble goal of standardization processes at universities is, of course, to *guarantee* the *success* of methods of research, teaching, and learning. Under that maxim, it might seem a little strange to argue for risk and failure. Why should people subject themselves to the risk of rejection and the possibility of failure in performative acts? My first answer is this: in order to be able to surprise themselves and others with an object, an event. It ought to be obvious why this makes sense. In contrast to the research, teaching, and learning methods at universities, in life, things don’t necessarily evolve in a linear fashion, and it can’t hurt to practice being surprised. Moreover, isn’t it also the case that realization (in the sense of coming to know or understand something) involves encountering the surprising insight of a truth? And are we not then preventing the possibility of this kind of understanding when we eliminate risk and failure and hence surprise?

For example, in the project you mentioned at the beginning, it was important to me that the students talked about things that really interested them and not just about things they believe they *ought to* find interesting. Finding out what really interests you can be a difficult research task in itself and is closely linked to a certain sense of nakedness and the risk of failure. When I research what really interests me, I am also revealing myself revealing and accepting the risk of failure and especially of rejection. The students of this seminar were particularly brave, because from the beginning, I worked with the slogan “death as a method.” After all, I needed a kind of code in order to convey to the students what the project was really about and that I was interested in their interests and that wasn’t just the usual empty talk but that I honestly meant it. This is why before the first workshop (i.e. before we actually met in person for the first time), I gave them the task of bringing along “last words”: that is, of researching

(not writing) a text that they felt expressed some aspect of themselves so powerfully that they might choose it if they had the opportunity before dying to communicate something publicly to humanity or to one human being. So it was no surprise that finitude and death came up repeatedly as tropes over the course of the project. Not because we had started with last words but because—seen from the perspective of life—death has the positive quality of provoking a readjustment of standards. The limited goals we spend most of our days chasing, such as, for students, earning “credits,” all these lose their meaning when faced with finitude; they recede into the background. You could say they make space, open up a perspective for the things we find truly important. The question is: Why is this disturbing?

Can you, Jörg, follow my chain of associations from “nakedness,” exposure, to surprise in relation to performative acts? What, in your eyes, is the added value or necessity of the performative?

Holkenbrink: It goes without saying that performing artists expose themselves in the theater and thus make themselves vulnerable, because it is a fundamental aspect of their profession. It is perhaps more necessary to explain that an audience at a performance can also expose itself and thus make itself vulnerable. Research and teaching at universities and academies are always a form of performance and hence there is a risk of harm, which all of those involved feel daily, without, as a rule, grappling with the associated effects and consequences. In your chain of associations of nakedness, exposure, and surprise, you emphasize the *productivity* of exposing yourself in performative acts. But if universities and theaters are primarily established as battlegrounds, isn't it high time finally to reflect on the conditions and possibilities of disarmament negotiations that could expand the latitude for the productivity of nakedness, as you call it, or reorganize the relationship between being protected and being exposed, as I like to call for? The educational sciences use the concept of the secret curriculum. The idea is that in addition to the official curriculum, the official education, there is also a secret learning, a secret education. While the official learning has an identifiable education with a certain intention, secret learning is structurally anchored, often happening unconsciously with individuals adapting to institutional structures. I once tried to take this concept from educational research and apply it to the theater, speaking of the secret curriculum of the admission ticket. Isn't it true that by constantly buying tickets the audience secretly learns to ignore its responsibility for the quality of a performance because it has “bought” the right to unilaterally judge the acting of the performers, the direction, the stage, and the dramaturgy? If we want to regain the theater as a site of *common* understanding of questions important for life, then there is no getting around thinking about how the possibility of a multilateral “disarmament” can be presented as an invitation rather than an obligation. And this challenge can also be applied to our initial theme: being conscious of differences when transgressing the boundaries between practical-aesthetic and theoretical approaches and forms of presentation.

Seitz: Could you describe the presentation of such an invitation using the concrete example of the aforementioned performance *Am seidenen Faden* (On the silk thread)? Who is disarming in these performances and how?

Holkenbrink: The Theater of Assemblage/*Theater der Versammlung* performs at the points where science and art intersect. One aspect of the process of rehearsing and performing as a process of research involves studying atmospheres and finding differentiated approaches to them. In this particular production, when the phase of staging began, we identified two risks we definitely wanted to avoid: first, that the theme “What does (networked) life have to do with death?” be treated in a fashionable, superficial, or purely objective way and, second, that the audience not be overwhelmed emotionally or, worse still, depressed. So we

set ourselves the task of creating an atmosphere that enabled all involved to question life by grappling with their own finitude and to come out of the performance feeling strengthened. The choice of a performance space played an important role in this regard. The *trauerraum bremen* funeral parlor, as a living site of calm reflection in the center of a lively neighborhood, itself radiates a warm, pleasant, and open atmosphere, in which family members and friends of a deceased person can find the space and time that make it easier to accept the reality of their death. During the phase of research and exploration, the actors worked as, among other things, assistants at funeral ceremonies at the *trauerraum*, which enabled them to experience its approach to design and atmospheres. These experiences were then used in the rehearsal process. For example, they influenced how the audience was greeted, the arrangement of the space, the structuring of time, the acting, and how the discussion after the performance was opened up in the form of a “memory stage” on which the audience members could, if they wished, allow spontaneous images from the performance to enter their mind’s eye and then be conveyed to the other people present. Here, the performance does not really involve a continuous storyline or narrative. Instead, it lines up fields of association in which the audience can connect the external images of the staging with their own imagined images. Because these associations and their combinations can be arranged and perceived in very different ways, what we have found is that most viewers experience the exchange afterward as extremely enlightening. Within this basic atmosphere of openness, however, the atmospheres can also change. Serious, sad, and cheerful phases and moments alternate; though to what extent this happens, or when and how often cannot be predicted. The three Fates, who already appeared in the dramaturgy phase, control and weave together the diverse elements of the evening. As “the drunken sisters” (Thornton Wilder), they spin the thread of our lives in a contemporary way: sitting at a computer, like modern DJs. They “program chance” by interweaving or reprogramming in real time the digital codes of their Web or weaving machine—a machine that can, by means of recordings and other forms of playback, sonic interruptions, and interventions, among other things, crucially influence the flow of the performance and the study of the life patterns addressed in it. Against the backdrop of information technology and digital media in our project, the composer Joachim Heintz invented this sound machine, which during the performance enters into an interactive exchange with the performers and the audience and whose programs repeatedly lead to unpredictable changes. The staging is also a fragile collage of performatively presented poems, whose fleeting presence is put in play. The audience also controls the performance, for example, by introducing moments of silence and inaction. There is an opportunity to try out lying in a coffin. The performances are designed as a joint research process in which the oppositions of active and passive, doing and enduring are made fluid. In the field of philosophy, Gernot Böhme contrasts the idea of autonomy with that of sovereignty:

If the autonomous human being understands himself from the perspective of its self-determination and regards everything that threatens this self-determination and calls it into question as not part of him, then the sovereign human being is one who can allow something to befall him.

(Böhme 2012, p. 7)

Studying atmospheres and finding differentiated approaches to them, playing with the active and the passive, with doing and enduring, are examples of why it makes sense to link theoretical approaches and forms of depiction with practical-aesthetic ones. The artistic interventions do not illustrate a preexisting theoretical insight. Rather, they represent a kind of

interruption in the usual scholarly formats, one which opens up a creative space and makes it clear how much the emotional influences research. Lived experience and knowledge are combined in the research process. Cooperative scholarly seminars participate in the performance. And if we see to it that academic and non-academic audiences mix, and that different generations meet at the performances, then this can be understood as an invitation to “disarm” that helps bring together different cultures of knowledge into a dialogue (see also Holkenbrink & Lagaay 2016).

Seitz: If I have understood you correctly, Jörg, you are arguing for strategies of presentation and forms of assembly that make us conscious of a mutual influence that is always present in performances and shared responsibility for the entire process *while at the same time making it unavailable*. If we now transfer this idea back to the performances of knowledge in the academic realm, it suggests that, just like in the theater, there could be a secret curriculum here too that causes us to forget the mutual influence, the simultaneity of doing and enduring, of responsibility and unavailability and so still tempts us to speak of producers and recipients and now perhaps even of providers and customers. Just as there can be no theatrical performance without an audience, there can be no seminar, no lecture, without students, and no conference paper without listeners, who in a process of mutual influence produce something together that at the same time eludes the control of the individual. If one considers courses or conferences from this perspective, it is surely surprising that most participants by no means act as if they shared responsibility for the success of an academic event. In fact, it seems rather as if there was a knowledge provider who delivers goods whose reception can be accepted or refused by the customer. Mutual influence, in the sense of an “autopoietic feedback loop” (Fischer-Lichte, 2004), seems to have fallen out of fashion; that is, contemporary academia has lost interest in the emergent exchange of knowledge or thoughts, of discourse, including its ability to surprise and thus produce new ideas. We recognize a good theatrical performance by whether it stimulates thinking, and whether it is pugnacious; in the current academic landscape, by contrast, a good theory almost presents itself as being indisputable, not abiding contradiction, which would contrast with the dialectic ambition of the production of knowledge in some paradigms. For that reason, criticism is being welcomed less and less, and is—on the contrary—often perceived as degradation (something to which you alluded, Jörg, in your association with the battlefield and your proposal to disarm). But shouldn’t performances of knowledge also be trying to stimulate thinking? Shouldn’t they have the ambition to open up spaces for thinking rather than presenting definitive results of thinking? The way the academic landscape is currently presenting itself is, of course, nevertheless produced together by all participants. As I said before, one cannot *not* act performatively. The question is simply whether or to what extent this is a conscious or unconscious process. What I call the linearization of research, teaching, and learning methods often leads to “performative contradictions”: that is, forms or formats that contradict their own content. Holding a multiple-choice exam on the importance of applied learning in educational processes would be one such example. Content-wise students are expected to learn that applied learning is important, but simultaneously, in a more or less subliminal curriculum, the *form* in which they are evaluated teaches them that learning by rote is still more important, because that’s what earns them credits. Psychologically, they end up in a sort of double-bind situation that entails a paradoxical instruction for action (Watzlawick et al. 1967). The task of performative methods of research, teaching, and learning would then, in my view, be to sensitize people to contradictions of this kind. It would mean to encourage a “school of perception,” and strive for formats with *performative evidence* that make it possible for people to experience that performances of knowledge are also incumbent on the knowledge of autopoietic feedback loops.

We would all benefit from experiencing situations in which it makes a difference *who* has assembled for a performance of knowledge, and in which it is noticeable how those assembled are influenced by the situation as well as, conversely, have an influence on it themselves. It is a question of acknowledging the balance between what is planned and how things actually emerge. According to this view, performative methods of research, teaching, and learning would not exclude surprises but rather welcome them, which I regard as a necessary condition for cognitive processes. It would be about *making* oneself vulnerable in order to *cause* something to happen, in other words, about being sensitive and receptive to the unknown. Therein also lies the opportunity to confront different forms of knowledge, such as scientific and artistic knowledge, or cognitive and sensory knowledge. When different forms of knowledge are brought into dialogue with one another, one all but provokes the moment of emergence and contingency; a space of possibility results in which something can happen because gaps form, because the gears do not mesh seamlessly; interferences result, incalculable superpositions of wave movements that reinforce each other or cancel each other out. Therein lies opportunity and risk. It then becomes an act of responding to and approaching one another, in which different forms of knowledge reveal mutually the marginal zones of their logics; that is to say, they offer a performance of knowledge in the sense of vulnerability.

Holkenbrink: What consequences can be drawn from our reflections thus far on the theme of “knowledge cultures and vulnerability” for the evolution of university education, for imaginative and productive play with the “rules” for studying? With an eye to self-exposure, the education scholars Thomas Ziehe and Herbert Stubenrauch offered the following observation of everyday life at the university back in the 1980s:

The risk of being evaluated, criticized, upset, and injured by the new cultural ambitions has to be addressed, both outwardly and inwardly. It seems to us that this sort of protective mechanism lies in the widespread tendency to *withdraw* one’s own actions. Those who do not expose themselves cannot be pinned down either. Those who cannot be pinned down avoid possible aggressive depreciation. [...] As withdrawn and unclear as the behavior called for is, often the mortality with which the behavior of others is judged can be just that clear and aggressive. Precisely those who behave in very withdrawn and very unclear ways can thereby reveal a way of thinking and judging that constantly moves in dichotomous opposites and patterns of categorization! Those who expose themselves, those who stand out, are quickly said to be “dominant,” “placing themselves in the foreground,” “boasting.” The group watches over itself, indeed does not allow anyone to step out of line.

(Ziehe and Stubenrauch 1982, pp. 102ff.)

The linearization of research, teaching, and learning methods that you have observed, Anna, may have increased today this hidden, aggressive protective stance which, conversely, may even be partly to blame for the linearization. By contrast, anyone who wants to encourage a “willingness to allow touching and changing” (Ingrisch) in the fields of knowledge production must, on the one hand, be prepared to look out for rifts within the institutions and, on the other hand, have the courage, inventiveness, and energy to organize the flow of streams of knowledge through these cracks. For example, in Bremen, Performances Studies can, programmatically, only be studied in combination with studies in another department. There was a conscious decision not to set up a Master’s program. The structure of studies is set up in a way that students from different departments come together to work on interdisciplinary projects and bring the subject matter from their specialties into the performative work of

the center. Conversely, the students are taught performative methods that they can learn to apply to their specialist backgrounds. They begin to productively relate practical-aesthetic and theoretical approaches to reality to one another—an ability that they can also use later in their professional practice. This professional practice can, on the one hand, lie in the artistic field, in which the integration of different forms of knowledge is becoming increasingly significant. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that competencies that until now have been specific to the arts will play an increasingly important role in non-artistic professional fields as well (see Goehler 2006). Another possibility is being a performer while also working in a second or third profession. The American co-founder of Performance Studies as an academic discipline, Richard Schechner, imagines a wealth of such theatrical connections in his writings on the anthropology of the theater, in which performing artists have a second or third profession:

but this does not mean that his skills as a performer are amateurish; far from it, a connection to a community may deepen all aspects of his art. The flexible treatment of time and space—the ability of one space to be transformed into many places through the skills of the performer more than through the illusionistic devices of the scenographer—goes hand in hand with a transformational view of character (role doubling, role switching) and a close contact with the audience [...].

(Schechner 2003, p. 185)

Seitz: In conclusion, we can say, following Julian Nida-Rümelin, that our education system should find its way back to equal recognition of different forms of knowledge (but without equalizing or leveling out their differences):

Our education system as a whole is a bit shaky cognitively, because it does not focus on the formation of personality. The individual way of life represents not just cognitive abilities—that would be an intellectualist error—but also emotive sensitivity, aesthetic approaches to the world, emphatic assumptions of ethical practices, abilities to judge, decide, and adopt emotional stances in equal measure. Accordingly, our education system needs fundamental reform.

(Nida-Rümelin 2014, p. 64)

His reference also applies to the connection between education and the image of human beings, so that we should ask what image of the human being, what normativity, forms the basis for our education system? And do we agree with it? It is an interesting idea in this context that anthropology traditionally viewed human beings as fundamentally distinct from animals. When viewed as distinct from animals, our rational abilities are overemphasized, leading to the shakiness that Nida-Rümelin criticizes. I believe, therefore, that it is time to develop an anthropology that views human beings as distinct from *machines*, which focuses again on our capabilities for situationally justified assumptions, for deviation, for sensitivity and hence also calls for a democratization of forms of knowledge or leads to an “unconditional university” in Derrida’s sense (Derrida 2005). We could ask what is the difference between artificial intelligence and artistic intelligence? That would also mean making it clear that machines follow rules and people make exceptions, raising the question: How can we teach this ability to make distinctions (instead of teaching how to act like a machine)? How can we teach and learn something like *translinearity*, that is, situationally based subversion which represents itself in the recognition of moments, in inclusion and exclusion, in the

capability of emergence and is reflected in respect and equal recognition of different forms and cultures of knowledge?

Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg and Alice Lagaay

Note

- 1 See <https://www.tdv.uni-bremen.de/performances.php>, 30.09.2019.

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