

FAKE GUN AND THE NIPPLE OF DIONYSOS

On Metaphors of Theatre and Performance

A by-stander noticed a "long gun" in the hand of a "man" at the bridge of Halinen. Several police patrols were called there fast. At the site the police commanded with a loud voice that the gunman put the object down. It became clear that the gunman was a young boy who was on his way to school. The gun that had seemed real was a plastic ball gun. The boy had not threatened anyone with the toy gun. [...] When the situation had been settled, the police had a short talk with the boy—he was instructed to keep toy guns hidden at public areas. After that the police temporarily confiscated the plastic ball gun, which the boy said he needed for the Christmas pageant.¹

In the third issue (2/2008) of Esitys-magazine², I wrote a text called *Former Spectator* in which I claimed that theatre is history: that the auditorium (*théatron*) invented in Antique Greece and the separation of the spectator from the performance that followed were outdated as premises of art. The field of performance was already so diverse in its ways to encounter the audience that theatre as a concept did not correspond to reality, or at least that part which was politically or aesthetically topical. The concept of theatre resulted in a cluster of conventions that was limited in sensory expression (why especially looking?) and spatial expression (why especially rows of chairs?). Here I will expand and oppose my own claim by considering the history of both theater and performance art in terms of their *metaphorical* function, and use this frame to read three recent contemporary Finnish performances: *Conte d'Amour* by two theatre groups, the Swedish Institutet and the Finnish Nya Rampen, *The Wall* by two individual artists, Risto Santavuori and Eero-Tapio Vuori and *Plato's Symposium* by Reality Research Center, a

1 Iltalehti, a Finnish yellow newspaper, 2010.

2 Esitys [eng. performance] is a Finnish quarterly performance and live art magazine.

Finnish artist collective.

A metaphor means processing a thing through another thing, literally to “carry over” (gr. *meta* = over, *pherein* = to carry). It connects two different areas of conceptualization and enables thus for example addressing abstract issues through concrete phenomena. Theatre is a widely used *linguistic* metaphor, such as when life, an organization, a medical operation room or the world is called a theatre.

For a theatre maker, however, it is more characteristic to think of theatre as a *non-linguistic* metaphor. Then the form or the situation of theatre is the thing through which another thing, the surrounding reality, is processed – regardless of the content of the play. The non-linguistic metaphor is an experienced phenomenon *in situ*, it can open only through the corporeal experience in the theatre space: in the tensions between the auditorium and the stage, presence and absence.

What are the elements of the metaphor of theatre? If we return to the roots of theatre in Ancient Greece and reflect upon the first phases of it in the crossroads of language and situation, *theatron* was a place of viewing. This auditorium was coupled by the stage, *skene*. Amphitheatres were built, with the audience in a semicircle in front of the stage. At some point in history a wall was added behind the stage, interrupting the direct connection between the stage and the landscape, the world. Stories were performed on stage, bringing forth actors from the choir. Since then the form of theatre has been modified, but the basic ancient ingredients can still be seen: a space separated from the world, an auditorium, a stage. Maybe also a fiction, played by individuals stepping out from the choir.

In hindsight, the weariness towards theatre I expressed in *Former Spectator* was not connected to the metaphor of theatre but to the reading of that metaphor. As if the thing that is called theatre is on a treadmill, and thus in history in the cultural frame of thinking. You could say that the prevalent interpretation of theatre was to me interpretation of the history of theatre, not of theatre. *Theatre* is not history, but the word theatre is used for what is the history of theatre.

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*The bullet went into my arm and went out the other side. It was really disgusting, and there was a smoking hole in my arm.*³

The questions of the relationship between art and life (or reality), dealt with already by Aristotle, are approached through different metaphors in theatre and performance art, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Jacques Lacan: "Is the aim of art to imitate or not to imitate? Does art imitate the thing it presents?" Lacoue-Labarthe continues: "[...] even if art of course imitates the thing it presents, its aim is not to present its object. As it imitates it makes something else out of its object. The imitation is "fake". Lacan says that "the object is set in a specific relationship with the Thing, at the same time circling it and bringing it into both presence and absence"⁴. In the interpretation of the metaphor of theatre, imitation and mimesis are familiar tools. The stage presents and repeats the world, the wall separating it from the landscape separates it from the world at large. In the tradition of performance art the same thing has been approached from the opposite direction: the art work does not seek to imitate anything but to make visible and present a pure, often unrehearsed act of creation.

When paging through the history of performance art it becomes clear that it was created through the art of painting. The act of painting was made visible, the moment of its creation performatized by artists from Jackson Pollock to Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow, Carolee Schneeman and Ana Mendieta. If the metaphor of theatre stresses the simultaneity of presence and absence, the metaphor of performance art seems to state that there is no mimesis, there is only the present as it separates itself from the world and exists inside the frame of the art work.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write that metaphors have an experiential background, born from corporeal experiences. They are essentially based on the observation of simple

3 Interview of Chris Burden, W Magazine 2008.

4 Lacoue-Labarthe 2001.

bodily relations, which give a spatial direction to concepts.⁵ For example happy is up, sad down: my hopes were high, I'm feeling low. Metaphorical directions are not random, but originate in our bodily experiences: the body of a happy person straightens up, the body of a depressed person droops. "Lakoff says that more abstract thinking can mostly be understood as metaphorical transitions from the areas more directly connected to perception," says Tiina Onikki.⁶

Similar metaphoricality in a non-linguistic form has been found in music. Mark L. Johnson and Steve Larson write about how the movement of music is connected to movement in space: pitch, for example, is experienced as rising or falling.⁷ Teacher of harmonic singing Iegor Reznikoff explains the physical foundation of this metaphor: when you palpate the back of a person singing a scale up and down, you can feel how the resonance rises and falls along the spine.⁸ Pitch is in the body as height. Also the forms of performance have metaphoricality rising from the body. Just as singing a scale resonates in the body and gives a different relationship to rising and falling than the words *rising* and *falling*, to sit in the auditorium gives such bodily and conceptual understanding which the *auditorium* as a word can not reach. (not sure I follow this...) And to step on stage is an act revealing the foundation of theatre and giving a relationship to life that is not reachable any other way.

If performance art can be seen as a *present* counter-movement to theatre, the moving image does the same through absence. In video the original situation is usually gone, both in time and place, and only the surface repeating that situation remains. But the illusion of reality is often more strong in videos than in stage pieces: the fiction can seem like fact more easily, the feeling of the real is less contradictory and the actors don't seem like actors. Film imitates life quite obviously and openly, but can still create a strong feeling of life present.

5 Lakoff & Johnson 2003.

6 Onikki 1992.

7 Johnson & Larson 2003.

8 Reznikoff 2004/2005.

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This is a fake gun. Therefore, this is not a gun.

[...] the modifier FAKE preserves certain kinds of the properties of GUNS and negates others. To summarize:

FAKE preserves: Perceptual properties (a fake gun looks like a gun) Motor-activity properties (you handle it like a gun) Purposive properties (it serves some of the purposes of a gun)

FAKE negates: Functional properties (a fake gun doesn't shoot) History of function (if it was made to be a real gun, then it's not a fake).⁹

Lakoff and Johnson use as one of their examples a fake gun. The sentence "this is a fake gun" transforms the concept of a gun. A fake gun is not a gun, but it has to resemble a gun enough, in the words of Lakoff and Johnson a fake gun has to retain the motor-active attributes of a gun (you have to be able to hold it as like a gun) and it has to fulfill certain qualities of a gun (f. ex. You have to be able to threaten with it). What makes a fake gun fake is that it doesn't function like a gun - if it can shoot you, it is a real gun.

Fake gun can be used as a metaphor about the relationship of theatre or performance with life. In theatre it is also concrete: if someone is shot in the play, it is done with a fake gun, or if a real gun is used, it is not shot for real. If people are married in a play, they are not married after the show. Performance art challenges this structure of imitation and absence. Chris Burden is shot by his assistant with a real gun in his piece *Shoot*, and after the show he has a hole in his arm. Burden commented on his pieces afterwards, referring to the request of Marina Abramovich to re-perform his *Trans-fixed*-performance: "I never thought of my things as theater. They were like scientific experiments. There's no second

9 Lakoff & Johnson 2003.

time.”¹⁰

Still, even if the shot in *Shoot* is real, it also imitates a real shooting. If Burden would be held hostage by a terrorist group, made to stand in a room and shot through his arm, wouldn't it be more real, less absent? Doesn't *Shoot* imitate life, where shooting through the arm is not art but violence? Or, if two children would reconstruct *Shoot* for a performance art festival and the other would shoot the other with a toy gun, wouldn't it still be performance art, even if it is an unashamed imitation? I think that also performance art is always imitating, that even in a performance art piece absence and the fake gun are present, disguised as a real gun.

Like a fake gun preserves some of the qualities of a real gun and denies some of them, a performance preserves some of the qualities of life and denies some of them. Performance alters the concept of life. It has to resemble life enough, but it cannot function as life does, it does not kill you.

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*I thought then, that in a way theatre is a gun as well. I thought that we will tell the truth, that we have the right answers. In mid-nineties I started to re-think things and now I feel that theatre is a gun that I am pointing at myself.*¹¹

The art works done in Finland now that are labeled as live art (fin. *esitystaide*) or contemporary theatre, place themselves mostly in between these metaphoric models. They use the performative structures offered by theatre, performance art and video art. The process and/or the staging of creating live art pieces contain many theatrical elements: auditoriums, practice, dramaturgical thinking, lighting design, directors. On the other hand elements underlining imitation are often avoided: fictional characters, plays

10 W Magazine 2008.

11 An interview of the Lebanese theatre director Rabih Mrouén. Turun sanomat, a Finnish newspaper 2008.

and epoch sets are rare. As in performance art, in esitystaide it is habitual to be on stage “as yourself” instead of a character.

In 2010 I saw *Conte D’amour* by Swedish Institute and Finnish Nya Rampen. I sat myself in the auditorium and was told that I can come and go as I please: visit the toilet, have a cigarette outside or buy a beer at the bar. On stage there was a scaffold, the ground floor of which was covered with a translucent veil. Throughout almost the entire performance, the performers were behind the veil. A live, two-camera video feed of their actions was projected on the wall of the upper floor. The performance was about the family of Joseph Fritzl, who imprisoned his family to their basement for 25 years; the space covered with the veil represented their living quarters.

The metaphorical structure created by the performance was both theatrical and video artistic. The performers were both present and not. They were in the basement, in the underworld, and on our level. We saw only the surface, but we felt and heard the depths below. Violence was distanced because of the medium, but at the same time recognizable in my own body. Theatre was not history, it was disturbingly present.

In 2011 I went to the performance called *The Wall* by Risto Santavuori and Eero-Tapio Vuori. Several times. In this performance we sat in chairs set in front of a window that framed (?) a giant brick wall. I sat there one hour after another, sometimes alone with Risto, once with my son and two other fathers and sons. The performance gave a lot of responsibility to the spectator, also to the evaluation of its’ theatricality. I sat and watched, I was in the role of the spectator for sure. As in *Conte D’amour*, the stage was not simply recognizable: there were not a horizontal stage but a vertical wall, there were no performers moving on it, just the movement of light and my mind on the surface of the wall. It created a reduced theatrical situation, where I was watching events on the stage, but that stage existed mainly inside my consciousness. I would call it theatre of the consciousness. It pointed straight at my face with the metaphor of theatre. However *The Wall* didn’t create an illusion, it offered the spectator only the present act, the watching of the wall. Thus it used the metaphor of performance art, but because it used it only as a tool, which helped the spectators to open up their inner stages, I would place it closer to

theatre. When I asked Santavuori whether *The Wall* was theatre, he replied with a question: "If the National Theatre would show as a sort of Cage variation a play, in which no actor would come on stage for 4'33 minutes, would it be theatre?"¹²

In October 2014 I stepped into the installation *Unnamed* by Markus Kåhre in Kiasma Contemporary Museum in Helsinki. The room had a table, a chair, a bench, a table lamp and a mirror. I went in front of the mirror, but nobody was reflected on it. I looked at the wall in the reflection on the spot where my image should have been. I stayed watching at the wall. How does *Unnamed* differ from *The Wall*? Is *The Wall* theatre, but *Unnamed* not? Santavuori refers to collective spectatorship: when watching together we "at least study the phenomenon of theatre from the auditorium". Would the piece by Kåhre be more theatrical if I watched it with someone? I don't think so. What if the artist had defined the time that we watch it, or suggested that we should spend more time on it? I feel that with collective spectatorship that would change the situation. Then the piece would be in relation to the phenomenon of theatre, even if it were executed in the context of visual art.

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*In Bethlehem many had a Kalashnikov. I didn't ask, what play was on.*¹³

Using the metaphors of video and performance art, *Conte D'amour* and *The Wall* answer the question of whether theatre is history from two different directions, and in both cases the answer is no. No, if the metaphor of theatre is taken seriously and re-evaluated. *Conte D'amour* and *The Wall* re-evaluate it in a way that is relevant to the contemporary historical situation - by creating tangents that pierce several metaphorical models at the same time; that perforate simultaneously both present and absent, real and fictional bodies.

12 Santavuori 2013.

13 The discussion forum of Aamulehti, a Finnish newspaper 2010.

According to Aristotle, the roots of western theatre (or at least of tragedy) can be traced to the worship events of Dionysos, the god of wine and ecstasy.¹⁴ I am writing this essay after returning to the metaphor of theatre in my own artistic practice. In 2013 I was preparing a mystery play called *Plato's Symposium*, which was based on the dialogue by Plato, but also on those roots of theatre: the ritual parties that transformed into art pieces. In Nietzschean terms our piece was theatre born from the battle of Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Incarnations of Apollo and Dionysos even performed in the play.

In September we visited a conference of theoretical theatre in New York, which stated in their press release that it "began with the simple conception of "theater" as a public site for insight [...], tied intrinsically to theory or 'ways of seeing.' This conference is based on the premise that performance is not just an artistic medium, it is also a vast and complex conceptual/ philosophic structure (multiplicitous, logarithmic, exponential, quantum)."¹⁵ In our piece, we used the terminology of theatre: it was a mystery play, the audience were protagonists, among the scene titles there were mimesis and anagnorisis. The background structure of the piece was ritualistic, but it was also theatre, even explicitly. It could be called a theatre historical piece: inside it theatre was not history, but the history of theatre was present. Not as a nightmare from which to wake up, but as a foundation to rely on.

The ritualistic base structure of the performance posits it close to performance art in its focus on *the present*. In our group we approached the relationship of ritual and theatre by stressing the meaning of an action over what it looks like. The audience was involved in the action: they for example ate, tattooed themselves and kissed. These were performative but also real actions, as would suit the tradition of performance art. Reznikoff writes not only of the movement of music inside the body but also its effects on the "movement of the soul": "It refers to the permanent changes in our consciousness which goes through states, for instance, of happiness, joy, exultation, sorrow, tears, anxiousness, wrath, fear, courage, peace, and so on: emotions which correspond to different psycho-physiological

14 Aristotle 1997.

15 Theatre as Theory 2013.

inner states and different expressions of the voice"¹⁶. Similarly the tradition of performance art challenges theatre by expressing that after the performance the people involved have irreversibly changed, and the hole in the arm cannot be wiped away. Shooting, being shot and witnessing it have transformed the souls of the ones experiencing it and there is no turning back. Reznikoff's singing does this subtly, a tattoo needle underlines it.

Metaphorically *Plato's Symposium* culminates in the moment of piercing the nipple of Dionysos. Ritual artist Jani-Petteri Olkkonen performed as the body of Dionysos. The piercing of the nipple was literally a theatrical and theatre-historical act, where the divine father figure of theatre moves through his own katharsis. At the same time it was bodily true: blood flowed and the human body had an irreversible hole. For Olkkonen it was first and foremost a personal ritual. Reflecting the character of Dionysos everything started to flow: blood, wine, vomit, emotions. A couple of days later one of the protagonists described the effects of the performance to me: "It got me menstruating". The scene shook the audience for a reason and raised relevant aftertalks about the question of violence. Was it violent? From the point of view of the play, it wasn't, it was part of the work of the actor. From the point of view of the fake gun convention it was, it would be more suitable to act the piercing, mime it. From the point of view of performance art it wasn't, because the act is valuable. And neither from the point of view of ritual or the performer, because it was a consciously chosen, carefully considered, professionally executed and personally meaningful act. Visually - maybe, depending on the spectator, because the references of blood flowing are multiple.

The moment was important, because it happened in the intersection of metaphors: the theatrical, the ritual and the performance-artistic. The needle punctured not only the nipple of Dionysos, but also the metaphorical structures of performativity. Like in art history: ritual became theatre, an act became a performance, theatre became live art and eventually all were mixed. After this my statement on theatre being history seems even more sloppy. It has provocative value in the context of art politics: the definition of

theatre be should be questioned. But theatre as such has meaning; not at the moment of the piercing, but the whole time before and after. Theatre as a metaphor is meaningful through performative piercings; I give the performances described above as examples. If performances are not interested in being theatre, or if they are named "theatre" without a relationship to the metaphor of theatre, the concept has lost its power. If they take the metaphor of theatre seriously, it has a reason to live.

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