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Desiring Powerlessness and Radical Change.

Technologies of Power,
Affect and Judgement in the
Dispositifs of Art and Theatre.

International Conference organised by the Research Project
“Theatre as Dispositif”. Funded by the German Research Association (DFG).
Located at the Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft, Justus–Liebig–
Universität Giessen. Project members: Prof. Dr. Gerald Siegmund, Dr. Lorenz
Aggermann, Georg Döcker, M.A. Date and place: April 12–14, 2018,
Giessen, Germany

The recent European discourses in the arts and particularly in the performing arts are marked by an astonishing paradox. Almost every art event nowadays suggests that it serves as a carrier of political agendas while the societal effects of art boil down to little or no visible change whatsoever. When Slavoj Žižek spoke at the Wiener Festwochen this May, he addressed this contradictory situation by talking about documenta 14, Venice Biennial and similar art gatherings, there turning the problem around by asking: “Why are you saying that you are just an instrument in the reproduction of cultural capital, when you are really just an instrument in the reproduction of cultural capital?!” (2017) Or are we?

The present uncertainty concerning the political effects of art seems to be rooted, essentially, in the complex nature of power and its specific contemporary technologies, which are, of course, equally operative in the non-artistic societal field. Recalling Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories of Subjection* (1997), in which the philosopher unfolds a Foucauldian theory of the reciprocity of subjectivity and power, the subject can be understood as existentially depending on the conditions of power that it needs to internalise in order to come into being. Why, then, do subjects in society and art develop a “passionate attachment” to that which subjectifies them? Power, we might suspect, is an ambivalent effect, which, on the one hand, subjectifies the subject-to-be from the outside, but on the other hand equally emanates from a desire of being subjectified.

Aren't these the very dynamics that create much of the power of capitalism or more precisely of the capitalist use of cybernetic control for its purposes? As Franco “Bifo” Berardi suggested in a lecture in Kassel last year, Facebook — famously one of the Big Four of digital capitalism, which also include Google, Apple and Amazon — could only become a worldwide player because “Facebook is us. We are the cognitive workers who are daily producing the machine.” (2016) So why do we not stop using it?

The conference “Desiring powerlessness and radical change” is organised by the DFG-funded research project “Theatre as Dispositif”. Contextualising its work in the tradition of Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian philosophy and theatre studies, the research project considers the realm of theatre, dance and performance to be constituted by apparatuses that produce, and possibly display and shift effects of power in the three fields of production, staging, and perception.

Fundamental issues and questions suggested for the conference therefore include:

- the modes of power operative at a given moment in European history both in societal apparatuses and in relation to theatrical and performative apparatuses;
- the way that modes of power organise specific forms of affectivity and judgement in theatre, dance and performance;
- the way that, very specifically, the modes of sovereign power, discipline, and control (cf. Foucault 1977, Deleuze 1995) produce forms of subjectivity and knowledge;
- and the strategic link between the modes of discipline and control on the one hand and affective and reflexive dimensions on the other as they have unfolded since the 18th century in the case of discipline and since the end of the Second World War in the case of control.

The very different, but equally important analyses by Bernhard Stiegler on psycho-power (2010) and Franco “Bifo” Berardi on affectivity and impotence (2009 et al.) further seem to suggest that affectivity, nowadays, has become the core operational field of technologies of power. In this light, it seems to be necessary to inquire about the specific pleasure that can be gained from being governed on an affective level and how hopelessness is being turned into a desirable spirit or state. In the case of theatre, dance and performance, the interrogation then might focus on why and how a sphere of hope is being created that is never realised and maybe mustn't be realised if the performing arts are to remain art. Are the performing arts, and is art in general to exist only in a state of non-realisation or hopeless hope?

Adding to the analyses of the contemporary situation of powerlessness, the conference also aims to highlight diverting principles, dynamics and tendencies, that is, signs of radical change. Is powerlessness, as Žižek holds, really all that we desire? If the subject is produced by a turn, as Butler suggests, can it also turn away from the site of its subjectivation? Can power mechanisms of discipline and control also be taken away, and what could be the consequences of such acts: a suspension of power, a different distribution of power, different technologies of power or even a condition without power?

With regard to art and theatre, dance and performance, the historic and contemporary practices — independent production and rehearsal structures, artistic projects and formats — that possibly reshuffle power or do away with it completely would need to be brought to the forefront. Finally, the idea of a state without power, that is, a free state of being, could be contextualised as the founding promise of the modern discourse of art and aesthetic freedom, provoking the question about a possible understanding that we can have of aesthetics in the here and now.

We invite contributions that investigate the outlined issues and questions in the form of a paper presentation. Please send us your abstract of a maximum of 300 words plus a title and a short bio–bibliography to the three e–mail–addresses mentioned below. Deadline for submissions is October 2, 2017. Travel costs and accommodation for the period of the conference will be covered by the organising institution.

You can get in contact with us through e–mail by writing to:

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Please do not hesitate to reach out to us if you should have any questions.

Mentioned sources:

Berardi, Franco “Bifo”. 2016. “A Short History of the Humiliation. National Workerism and the Showdown of Two Centuries of Colonialism.” Lecture. Symposium *A New Fascism?*, Fridericianum, Kassel, December 16: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=Yvej59cNi78, last retrieved February 27, 2017. 01:06:00–01:09:00.

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Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories of Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1995. „Postscript on the Control Societies.“ In *Negotiations 1972–1990*, 177–182. Trans. by Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia UP.

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Stiegler, Bernard. 2010. *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. Trans. by Stephen Barker. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2017. “The Courage of Hopelessness.” Lecture. Festival *Wiener Festwochen* May 20: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNIW3HnNqlk>, last retrieved May 29, 2017. 00:07:30–00:09:00.

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