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The Wielkopolska¹: Rewolucje [Wielkopolska: Revolutions] project is an act of opposition. It opposes political theatre concerned solely with transmitting certain subjects regardless of their audience and any potential for social inclusion. It opposes the fact that artists representing the trend for socially engaged theatre ignore those they claim to speak for: the marginalized, ignored, downtrodden and excluded. It opposes superficially democratizing practices that remain trapped in the circles of a well-educated metropolitan middle class. It opposes the monopolization of Polish theatre by a single mode of production that restricts the scope of aesthetic and cultural interventions.

Wielkopolska: Revolutions came out of my disappointment following the European Culture Congress,² where I curated the performative programme, *Trickster 2011*. The project was intended to map the more embarrassing areas of European identity and voice a criticism of Eurocentrism and its celebration. In producing *Trickster 2011*, I came to understand that political proclamations through art are unreliable and unless they are linked to a genuine grass-roots movement, will achieve no social impact. The potential subversiveness of *Trickster 2011* had then been diluted within the elegant, safe framework of the European Union celebration, transformed into an elitist, institutionalized and conventionalised undertaking.

It was a good moment to reconsider my curatorial strategy and to move away from declarations of social and political engagement, and towards genuine action. I wanted to move beyond the art production and organization system in which I had worked to date (the title *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* is a reference to the film *Matrix: Revolutions* by the Wachowski brothers, and is intended to invoke 'revolutionary' activities outside the dominant system). At the European Culture Congress, I had met Agata Grenda, the newly appointed director of the Department of Culture of the Marshal Office of the Wielkopolska Region, who proposed that I create an original project in Wielkopolska with only one stipulation: that the work would need to take place in other locations in addition to Poznań, the regional capital. At the time I thought the idea of working outside of a major city seemed eccentric, alien and strange, but also attractive – and I decided to focus my work on

1 Wielkopolska is an administrative region of west-central Poland.

2 A key project of the Cultural Programme during the term of the Polish Presidency of the European Union in 2011.

villages and small towns. I already felt then that, as a curator, I wanted to move away from socially engaged art to socially engaging art.

The first stage of the work (which has been repeated in subsequent editions) was to survey the terrain: field trips and meetings with local activists and politicians, community choirs, pensioners' clubs and hobby circles, directors of local community centres and social-work organizations. This allowed me to create a map of interesting phenomena, important social, economic and cultural issues, microhistories marked by remembered and forgotten places and events, which later translated into work in a children's home, a remand centre and a nursing home, and specific projects involving a senior citizens' choir, a local rock group, a farmers' wives association, an astronomy club and a firemen's brass band.

In the field, my status was that of an outsider. With all certainty, the institution which sponsored the project (the Marshal Office of the Wielkopolska Region in Poznań) helped to garner public trust, backed up my credentials and legitimated my work. At the same time it created distance – on occasion I was treated as a representative of the authorities, someone like an inspector sent to assess a local coterie.

From the very beginning, the category of otherness formed the core of the project. The artists I invited to work with me, including theatre-makers Michał Borczuch, Bartek Frąckowiak, Agnieszka Jakimiak, Jolanta Janiczak, Wiktor Rubin and Weronika Szczawińska, and choreographer Mikołaj Mikołajczyk – had worked mainly in established theatres with professional crews, and only director Wojtek Ziemilski and director-choreographer Cezary Tomaszewski had significant experience with participatory projects. Like me, they didn't find Wielkopolska's rural areas to be familiar territory or a normal working environment.

From the start I anticipated that these meetings, and their artistic outcomes, would be unpredictable. Everyone involved in the project brought new cultural and aesthetic codes into our shared space that broke with the established order and introduced ambiguity into our communication, our value judgements and hierarchies. But, as philosopher Zygmunt Bauman writes: 'Ambivalence confounds calculation of events and confuses the relevance of memorized action patterns'.³ The artists' interventions were like a virus capable of attacking modes of behaviour and value systems. This virus had nevertheless to be introduced cautiously and monitored – but not censored – as this was the only way to make our critical and participatory strategies chime together with the various groups with whom we worked.

From the beginning, artistic quality was the fundamental aim of the project. I wanted to avoid the tactics of cultural animation, which is dominant in Poland and in which aesthetic effect is secondary to the process of social integration. This is why I invited artists who boldly experiment with the language of theatre to join my project, ignoring their lack of experience in participatory projects. I agree with critic and historian Claire Bishop, who opposes treating participatory projects solely in terms of their social impact.⁴ I suggested subjects and locations

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 1.

4 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, 2004, (pp. 51–79) p. 65.

to the artists intuitively, but often related them to narratives defining each of their specific artistic practices. In *Wielkopolska: Revolutions*, the artists could enter a genuine social space and confront issues which they normally approach under laboratory or institutional conditions when they are working exclusively with other professional artists. For example, Michał Borczuch, a director whose theatre is principally concerned with childhood and immaturity, worked with the occupants of a children's home; Mikołaj Mikołajczyk, a choreographer and retired dancer who had up to that point in his career used his personal experience of ageing and the disabled body in his solo performances, created performances involving the elderly.

The participants were not treated as amateurs – I am fond of the idea of Stefan Kaegi, founder of the Rimini Protokoll theatre collective, who sees non-actors as ‘experts on [sic] particular experiences, knowledge and skills’.⁵ We did not hold auditions, which makes *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* different from the typical practices used by directors Bartosz Szydłowski at Łażnia Nowa Theatre in Kraków and Marta Górnicka⁶ in her *Chorus of Women*, staged at the Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw. We would engage a specific group, with its entrenched habits, internal relationships, pressures and conflicts, all of which would come to the fore during our work and determine the dynamics of the creative process. But to limit the creative process to relationality and participation seemed to me unfair. Such thinking conceals doubt about the possibility of applying a critical and aesthetic strategy in participatory projects. It seems dangerously close to ‘stooping’ to the level of the poor and excluded, then creating a hierarchy in the relationship between artists and participants where the artist assumes the role of educator and therapist.

This is a subject Bishop also touches on, pointing to the artist's adoption of the role of ‘good soul’, delivering sermons, educating⁷ but also submitting to self-censorship what can be revealed and what is taboo. This form of censorship – which we discussed on a number of occasions with the artists as part of our process, as we sought to avoid hypocrisy and expose uncomfortable truths while at the same time remembering that the project should treat its participants as equal partners and afford them respect – was also a problem of the audience, which was accustomed to seeing theatre in an institutional context. After presenting the project *Jakiż to chłopiec piękny i młody?* [*Who Is the Lad so Comely and Young?*]⁸ by Jolanta Janiczak, Wiktor Rubin and Cezary Tomaszewski, I

5 Florian Malzacher, ‘Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity: The Story of Rimini Protokoll’, in *Experts of the Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, ed. by Miriam Dreysse and Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), (pp. 13–43) p. 23.

6 See ‘I’m “Calling Out to You”’: On the Choral Theatre of Marta Górnicka’ in this issue of *Polish Theatre Journal*.

7 Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents’, *Artforum*, 2006, pp. 178–183 (p. 183).

8 The title of this project is also the first line from a ballad, *Świtezianka*, by Adam Mickiewicz.

heard comments that our trip to the nursing home⁹ where we met with senior citizens evoked audience associations with visiting a zoo. This reaction appears symptomatic: in theatre, we look at symbolic ways of presenting old age, sickness and death, we see able-bodied actors on stage and we watch plays as part of an elegant audience, in smart buildings in city centre. The confrontation we presented with real suffering embarrassed our spectators, as if they had been caught looking at pornography. The realism of the event transformed their aesthetic experience into an ethical one, which led to confusion and incomprehension.

The alienation I referred to earlier also applies to the Wielkopolska: Revolutions project itself, because it defies categorization. For example, in 'The Best of the Best 2014', the annual review of Polish theatre compiled by the journal *Teatr*, Aneta Kyzioł, a reviewer for the magazine *Polityka*, described the project as one of the year's most interesting alternative theatre events. The Wielkopolska: Revolutions project clearly has no connection to this form of theatre, which is rooted in 1960s student avant-garde activities. There have also been instances when I as the curator of Wielkopolska: Revolutions have been recommended, as a specialist in amateur theatre, or invited to appear as an expert in theatre education.

At the same time that I encountered the incomparability of participatory theatre with the established organizational formulas in Polish theatre, I saw symptoms of a growing fashion for practice of this type. The Malta Festival in Poznań, which for years has served as a theatre trend-setter, introduced social theatre to its programme. But the festival did so under special circumstances: all these performances were shown on an open, free-of-charge stage, surrounded by festival restaurants and bars. The organizers did not provide especially good technical support: the majority of the performances staged there had terrible amplification, projections were barely legible while performances were loudly heckled by disinterested, drunken audience members. The presentation of participatory projects organized in this way creates a kind of ghetto of 'second-class theatre'. Presented superficially in hopes of democratizing the theatrical space, this approach effectively deepens the chasm between participatory theatre and 'real' professional theatre, which then retains the prerogatives of 'high art'.

This example, of tactics used in the introduction of participatory projects by the Malta Festival, is a symptom of a powerful hierarchy in Polish theatre which takes on a wide variety of guises. Public theatre in Poland is identified solely with repertory theatres managed by state and local authorities and maintaining permanent ensembles, and it the organizational formula of a given theatre, not its range of activities, which determines whether it fulfils its public mandate. Repertory theatre is the monopolist, the incumbent, and it receives over 90 per cent of state funding.

The discussion around public theatre does not really apply to theatres operated by non-governmental organizations. In Poland, such

9 The artists designed a performance comprising a visit to a nursing home: a unique encounter with a space lasting several hours, during which the public, equipped with maps, viewed communal areas (the lounge, sports hall, beauty parlour) and private rooms where the residents performed micro-scenes or simply received guests, talking and behaving as themselves.

organizations survive from grant to grant, their employees exist as pariahs of the system without full-time contracts or benefits, fighting for a meagre slice of the state funds set aside for culture. The monopolization of theatre productions by repertory theatres, and the simultaneous monopoly of one approach to creating performances, has an impact on the aesthetic dimension of the performing arts in Poland. The list of institutions for which the government feels responsible, which is to say those receiving its financial support, does not include those which are implementing an alternative organizational formula: production houses, auteur theatre, independent collectives creating hybrid and intermedial forms, and relational and participatory art. Repertory theatres do attempt to stage this type of work, of course, but they often provoke conflict within their permanent ensembles which see this form of practice as an aberration. Such attempts are also not well understood by local authorities who are managing theatres.

Public theatre, identified in Poland with repertory theatre as noted above, is seen as an institution linked to high art circles, the elite. Artists who represent it are educated at one of three drama schools which are dominated by traditional teaching practices, psychological acting and an emphasis on professional theatre ethos which frequently leads to mannerisms in acting and directing skills. The programmes at these academies practically never include meetings with artists from outside of repertory theatre circles or representatives of visual and performance art. To bring people on stage who are not possessed of classical training carries connotations of amateurism, despite being a tradition well established in Poland by Tadeusz Kantor and his Cricot 2 theatre. This is certainly another reason why participatory theatre, with its 'experienced actor-experts', is treated with suspicion.

The elitist nature of theatre creates a powerful hierarchy among audiences who visit this institutionalized temple of art. The theatre continues to suffer from a division separating enlightened artists (those who create and present art) and the audience that listens to their monologue and thus becomes 'aware', 'sensitized' and educated. The philosopher Jacques Rancière wrote of the symbiotic relationship between art and politics: art becomes political by managing that which is shared by a given community. By establishing a 'regime of the arts' which orders and imposes hierarchies on our visible world, this relationship includes or excludes phenomena, objects, thoughts and people.

In this sense, I would like *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* to be read as a political project as much as a participatory project. The politics of *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* is about expanding aesthetic boundaries to include 'other acting', is about an attempt to dissolve the opposition between stage and audience, between artist and 'ordinary person', the centre and the margin. This is the mediation / creation of a common language with people who, despite their country's declarations of democracy, are not full-fledged citizens of culture because of where they live or their social background. This is ultimately a reconfiguration of Rancière's 'regime of the arts',¹⁰ expanding our field of vision to include that which remains invisible in theatre: poverty, sickness, social ostracism and marginalisation.

10 This term has been first used by Rancière in his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska

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