Bojana Kunst

ON RESPONSIBILITY

“Here we remain in our absence,” members of the Zagreb-based group BADco. write in the description of their work entitled Responsibility for Things Seen: Tales in Negative Space. In a unique way, this responsibility for obstinately remaining in absence occupies the centre of work of this group that has been creating extremely intriguing theatre performances for the past two decades. Namely, in their artistic activities, they often detect, lay out and stage the regimes structuring representation and perception in contemporary culture, and in so doing, they point out the interrelatedness of artistic, media and production-related images of our time. Hence, their theatrical elements and procedures are never devoid of thorough political reflection: movement, presence, space, speech, image are always intimately related to their social, imaginative and insurgent power. At the same time, however, BADco. does not create performances thematising or representing topical social problems. They prefer to situate these problems at the margins of the intelligible and the visible, and in so doing, they significantly transform and transpose their intelligibility, imaginability and representability.

Namely, nowadays, artistic imagination is deeply intertwined with the accelerated rise of capitalist and production-related images of the organisation of life and sociality, which is also why it is often standardised into acceptable insurgent and critical formats that can be easily disseminated on the contemporary art market. The members of the BADco. collective successfully avoid this transparency and widespread intelligibility of the political problem that art is supposed to draw attention to (as is often desired). They achieve this, above all, with their detailed explorations of those theatrical modes of staging that are also closely related to the articulation of the theoretical and philosophical questions raised by each new performance of theirs. Instead of staging a problem and thus making it visible, they prefer to speculate about it with their theatrical creations; thus, they reveal the dynamics and complexity
of the question at issue or the theatrical interest that – by means of raising the question – reinvents the very mode of posing this question. Their interest in the organisation of perception, collective movement and asymmetrical community-related phenomena, their interest in labour, movement, bodily energy and rhythm, and in forms of life, is closely related to the constitutive role of such topics in contemporary capitalism. However, this relation can only be grasped if we speculate about these topics, that is, if we say more about them than is actually possible at this moment, at this time – if we see these questions themselves as the theatrical and artistic stuff from which to mould new forms and as an invention of the modes of exchange between the performance and its viewers. It is no coincidence that BADco.’s performances can be viewed as choreographic and theatrical reflections that challenge the viewer’s attention and the economy of theatrical exchange precisely through their complex understanding of the theatre event. The choreographic and movement-related elements, images, spaces and atmospheres of their performances concern the ways in which we the viewers are present in theatre and the ways in which we are attentive there: our attention always separates and multiplies presence, it multiplies what we are attentive to. The performances thus invite us to speculate, to watch them stubbornly at the edge of the visible, and it is precisely this characteristic that actually renders them political. Or, alternatively, in contrast to the widespread tendencies of contemporary capitalist culture, which often offers us commodified political art, BADco.’s performances demand from us, above all, to think and watch co-responsibly. Our spectatorial presence is thus not self-evident but rather collaborative and responsible; our attention is closely related to invention. This kind of thinking is not an abstract intellectual activity but rather an active and stubborn way of following the fragile materiality of the performance all the way to the limits of its visibility, a way of following its consistent analytical and thought-related principles, through which movement is also organised and space is measured and theatrical time is moulded in a new manner.

Thus, we also trace the fragile materiality of the event to the limits of its visibility in the gallery set-up of Responsibility for Things Seen: Tales in Negative Space, which the members of BADco. created for the Venice Biennial in 2011.
and which we were able to see at the Aksioma gallery in Ljubljana in 2013. This set-up, which the members of the group describe as a continuation of theatre by other means, can actually be described as a kind of a sum of their numerous analytical and dramaturgical principles. In the doubled gallery space, which we enter through a replica of the external gallery wall and thus find ourselves in a negative space of sorts, that is, in a duplicate space, cameras record the comings and goings of the visitors. In various ways, all five video screens, which we can only access individually, juxtapose traces of movement, which is never simultaneous. On the screens, we can observe ourselves together with the traces of other visitors before us, we can watch a recording of the choreography by the dancers of the BADco. group, or we can observe an algorithmic succession of live camera recordings, which mixes the currently co-present elements of movement in space into ever new sequences. The viewers/visitors are present together with the images, their presence is thus revealed through a fragmentary delay; the viewers create and observe their own traces; their presence thus seems far from theatrical presence, whose essence is precisely the co-presence of bodies in the same space.
However, this fragile materiality of the image – the virtual and algorithmically calculated co-temporality and fragmentariness of presence – is not so far from choreographic and analytical approaches that characterise other theatrical creations by the BADco. group. In the performance *Deleted Messages* (2005), the theatrical co-presence of the dancers and the audience shapes the algorithmic parameters of communal movement of the theatre event, which is shaped by the performers with their unpredictable individual choices and by the random movement of the viewers in the space. In the performance *1 poor and one 0* (2008), the members of the group go back to the first film ever made, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, to analyse its cinematic structure directly on stage. The working bodies in this show are the choreographic bodies that, by means of the relation between labour and the body, also lay out the relation between image and movement. The installation set up at the Aksioma gallery in 2013 can also be experienced theatrically, even though it contains nothing but the visitors and their images. This does not happen thanks to theatre inhabiting a gallery space but rather because, above all, in BADco.’s work, theatre itself is the site of the production of images and virtual possibilities of the body; their theatre is often structured cinematically and visually, and it interferes with our perception in various ways. The structure of their performances is sometimes algorithmic, at other times it depends on unpredictable links, and is often random, dispersed and multifaceted. As such, many of their performances are far from a one-dimensional narrativity and linear dramaturgical structure, and they create the theatre event as a complex synchronisation of actions, shifts, speeches and movements, always guided by a concrete political interest.

At the same time, *Responsibility for Things Seen* reveals another extremely important principle of BADco.’s work; the group shapes all their analytical principles and their attitude toward the space and time of theatre precisely through a special relation to choreography and movement. On one of the screens, we can watch choreographic sequences of the members of the BADco. group; however, among them we also recognise ourselves, or the images of other visitors in space. This is not just about the aesthetic image of movement-related material or choreography, which refers to something
external; we must interpret such choreographic sequences in close connection to the traces of movement in the same gallery space. The movement of visitors, their traces, delays, virtual images, the directions left by them in space – all this can be also described as a choreographic organisation of space; it is only through the movement of observers that space is established, even though it is somewhat negative, absent. This is a space in which we have been before and, at the same time, still are; our movement haunts this space like a ghost, and the space records this movement. In an idiosyncratic manner, this installation shows us how, in the world of an endlessly increasing number of images, which are constantly recorded by almighty surveillance systems, we are also, paradoxically, responsible for these images with our movement. And it is precisely this – the movement of the body, its energy, labour, effort and its capacity to create new virtual images and theatrical forms – that is one of the basic materials for the speculative processes in BADco.’s performances: movement manifests itself as a materialised idea, while choreography appears as a specific organisation of material and space; in fact, movement is the true thought of the performance.

At the same time, the sequences of movement in *Responsibility for Things Seen* point to another dimension of BADco.’s work, which also affects the way in which their artistic pieces are constructed. Namely, one of the more important analytical principles of the group’s work is their collective work on the performance that follows the asymmetrical dynamics of their members’ different proposals and approaches to a chosen theme or political problem. The appearance of the footage of BADco.’s members in the installation is thus not entirely accidental; rather, we can interpret it as an authorial index of sorts, which points to the collective authorship of the installation. At the same time, this index establishes a relation between the key group dynamics of the movement of its members and the dynamics set up by the visitors through their movement. For work to become work and for the negative space of the installation to acquire its material coordinates, there are always more of us required, even if we are absent in our multitude.
BADco.
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