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"Everyone repeats the same rhetorical question: do we still need theater?"[1]
Notes on one theatrical scene and one work of theater

When in 2004 the complete translation of Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theater* started to circulate throughout the regional academic and artistic scene, the prevailing impression was that, finally, we might have received the answer to the question: what kind of theater is possible, and, furthermore, needed with regard to contemporary social life? Today, more than ten years after Lehmann's book was published in Germany (1999), and five years since the issue of its Croatian translation, it is necessary to requestion the effects of the introduction of the postdramatic paradigm, as well as of the actualization of the dramatic and postdramatic theatrical heritage. In the following notes I will try, as a theater director, to examine the specific principles – the ones that I recognize as being sensitive and/or potent in relation to my own work – which present the axis of a theatrical paradigm that I identify as characteristic of the local scene.

1.

The local theater scene should be considered alongside the current processes of its inclusion into the global order of cultural organization. Confronted with the problems of theoretically, ideologically, politically imprecise articulation, and invisibility in terms of the international art map and/or global market, as well as the absence of locally dominant referential apparatus, its agents are trying to exploit this transitional potential (in the social, but also the economic sense) of their own cultural space. Or, in other words, the weak

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[1] Jerzy Grotowski (Grotovski 1976: 35).

discursive ground of domestic centres of (theater) power present a unique challenge. Instead of tactical subversive actions that would above all trouble their positions, it is possible to perform and/or develop hybrid and context-sensitive artistic projects. Hence, Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theater* served, and often still serves as the axis of those ideological attempts to establish a critical, creative and theoretical, or productional and interpretative theatrical paradigm.

2.

The process of generating an art scene in a particular cultural space is a constant work in progress, as a consequence of which, it is hard to evaluate its success. However, ten years after Lehmann's book came out, it seems necessary to re-examine the *postdramatic* paradigm in regard to the current contextual circumstances (above all, domestic ones). This should be done not only in order to review it critically, but also to develop further the possibilities of responsible participation in those processes of constructing, performing and constituting a theatrical scene – in a way that would present it as a socially relevant one, in spite of the market mechanisms of depolitization which are, within the local context as well, already gradually taking over the cultural organization in general.

3.

In terms of the local scene, the paradigm of postdramatic theater has played a crucial role as the legitimating discourse that has included various performative actions into the body of theatrical discipline, along with which the needed referential apparatus has been staged. In other words, the dominance of a dramatic text and its ideology of a unique and well-ordered microsystem as the only legitimate one had been thoroughly brought into question, as a result of which the borders of theatrical arts territory have become more permeable. Now, it would be naïve to assume that hybrid practices had not managed to penetrate into the operative logic of the world of theater before; however, Lehmann provided them with visibility, whilst re-territorializing one entire field of art practice and theory. Instead of a centralized and hierarchically structured model (of art creation and perception), a new theoretical infrastructure was established – one that enabled the recognition of hybrid acts of theater production and reception. In this way, the language game, or

the suitable *images* of theatre (Wittgenstein, 1996), have been significantly re-defined.

4.

Nevertheless, the usage of the postdramatic interpretive apparatus and/or poetics has been facing certain problems. During the last ten years, the context of theater work production and reception has altered considerably. The current art world is highly influenced by the operative market logic, as well as by its mechanisms of spectacularization (Crary, 1997), which present the decisive conditions for the standpoint from which we have to review it critically. Hence, Lehmann's in-depth theorization today shows at least two weaknesses. The first one is the probability of its general, that is, un-critical application. The particular cultural circumstances are being overlooked, owing to which, the postdramatic paradigm could also be understood as a new uniting, or *grand* (hegemonic) universalizing project, in regard to the current market principle 'anything goes'. The second problem in the application of the postdramatic paradigm, in terms of the local context, is its post-procedural character, that is, its mostly interpretive usage, and the weakness of its intervention into the very processes of practicing theater, or its methodology.

5.

Thus we can conclude that today, in Serbia, because of the heritage of dramatic and postdramatic theater theory and practice, it is necessary to establish a context-sensitive platform that would (continuously) provide us with strategies and/or tactics for critical artistic theater work, despite the gradual *cooling* of its traditional media.[2]

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[2] The current unfavorable status of traditional artistic media could also be understood in terms of their *cooling* in the context of McLuhan's conceptualizations of 'hot' and 'cool' media. In his opinion: "A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'. High definition is the state of being well filled with data" (McLuhan, 2008: 25). McLuhan formulated his thesis with regard to assumptions concerning processes of informatization of society and culture, while today, it is possible to understand *high definition* as 'the state of being well filled' in terms of *spectacle* (in the way that Debords refers to it), or images, auraticity, desire. In other words, it is possible to conclude that the *cool* (traditional) artistic media are being slowly abandoned on account of the *hot* new-media experiences.

6.

If the traditionally established operative principles of theater arts have became inefficient as such (Ilić, 2009), and if the postdramatic ones have proved to be too general (regarding the particularity of one art scene), should we completely abandon these disciplinary self-regulations, or should we still work with/ on them? In one of his essays, Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1986) theorized and demonstrated a possible methodological interference in an order of knowledge. Derrida based his intervention on the assumption that we inevitably act in relation to the heritage, while its processing raises the questions of *critical relations* and *critical responsibility*. In his opinion, the way in which we address the heritage carries subversive potential, because it is through our approach that we penetrate into the very logic of understanding, or the acts constituting a specific order of knowing. Therefore, following Derrida's thesis, if we use existing notions as instruments, while refusing to attach to them the value of *truth*, and if we are ready to reject them at any moment, then their relative efficiency is being exploited, since they are destroying the old machinery to which they belong and of which they are parts. In this way the language of human knowledge criticizes itself. In other words, if we want to requestion critically, and furthermore, to act contrary to a certain (dramatic and/or postdramatic) paradigm, we must do that by re-using its own notions, logic, principles, that is, its own *language game*.

7.

How, then, should we approach specific artistic media? If we want to establish a theatrical paradigm that challenges the assumptions of its autonomy and ineffectiveness in the context of concrete cultural actions, we should think of and perform contemporary theatre as a post-disciplinary practice. By mobilizing the term 'discipline', we oblige ourselves to work on/within the existing territory of theater arts, that is, the "body of knowledge in the framework of the division of scientific work and academic specialization" (Bennett, Grossberg, Morris, 2005: 89), as well as with the operative principles of their procedures, which could be understood as "the group of regulations that defines the way in which the order of a collective is being maintained" (Mićunović, 1988: 42). On the other hand, following Lyotard's writings on postmodernism, the prefix 'post-' suggests "something like a conversion" (Lyotard, 2001: 363), which, among other things, implies an illegal appropriation of property belonging to another. Thus, we could conclude that by using the prefix 'post-'

we create an opportunity for a wide variety of legal and illegal (hybrid, over-turning, guerilla, and other) relations towards the heritage and the operative logic of the field of action within which it is being activated; whilst all those relations are, at the same time, being named as legitimate. In other words, with the prefix 'post-' we reject (as naïve) the presumption of the production and reception of art beyond and independently from a role that was tradition-ally prescribed to it by a culture; instead of which, we confront it differently, by using the existing language, notional apparatus and operative principles.

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8.

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Following Derrida's thesis, the understanding of local theatrical practices as postdisciplinary practices would ask for a new reading and/or creation of a new operative logic within the existing protocols and their principal proce-dures of performing, signifying, and *affectation*. Otherwise put, a perform-ance should be based on the following:

(i) the calling into question of the ideology of the dominant theatrical mas-ter-protocol; since the principle of *coherence* (or well-ordered unity) does not have to rely on the narrative pattern – the *story* (which is closed in terms of meanings); moreover, if we transpose this principle to the entire event (for in-stance, by including the place and time of the show within the unities of time and space), as well as to the audience, it is possible to base a performance on a structure opened for various 'readings', in which case the spectators become an integral part of it. Thus, it is possible to consider *coherence* in terms of cat-egories such as event, communicational exchange, active participation of the audience, and others.[3]

(ii) the re-distribution of the work organization, which is traditionally based on the autonomy of its phases. In this way, we could undermine the ordered sequences: text – directing – performance, or producers – artists/performers – audience, while aiming to question those mechanisms of hierarchical struc-turation that are inherent to the theater, or, in other words, the performance and representation of power positions (in terms of race, gender, class, etc). In other words, it is possible to apply the principle of consistency (which is typi-cal for the dramatic paradigm) to the entire machinery of a theater show – by making it visible (as a body that does not hide, but rather exhibits its machine-

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[3] The example of this sort of intervention is the scene of the 'auction' of used, almost worthless objects, which are being bought by the audience during Rene Pollesch's show "Pablo in der Plusfiliale", which was performed in Belgrade at the 39th Bitef festival.

organs and their functioning), and/or by inscribing open references to specific outer circumstances into the very body of a performed piece.[4]

(iii) the conceptualization of the *effects* of each particular performance, since the principle of *plausibility* can also be understood as the impossibility of an identical repetition of the show, due to the unpredictability of performances. Here, we are addressing the constitutive role of each particular performance, contrary to the presumption of their neutral repetitions. The principle of *plausibility* therefore does not need to be based on the assumption of the plot's probability and/or the possibility of an identification with an analogous image of the world (Ranciere, 2005), but rather on the recognition of concrete cultural roles and patterns, realized during the game in which we participate as players entitled to by the artistic practice and/or regime by which it is identified.

Thus, a theater work which would deal critically with its own disciplinary heritage could consider a certain (conclusive) thought, but should not be led by the mechanisms of representation (*mimetics*). Instead, in a relation to the particular situation, it could problematize its own event-ness and the experience of it. Hence, once again, the needed action is not the one that would be directed towards a new model of art production and reception, but rather one that would be focused on the re-articulation of the operative principles of its own media.

9.

In order to further examine the suggested interventions, I will look more closely at one theater work, which I prepared and performed together with visual artist Vojislav Klačar during the period of December 2008/January 2009: *X Parliamentary Elections in the Kingdom of Koreta*, performed at the Dom Omladine Gallery in Belgrade.[5] For that occasion, Klačar and I used the theatrical regimes of performing, signifying, and effects which were invested into the gallery space. This piece was realized over a period of 14 days, and in a following way: the first day was dedicated to the announcement of pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral events and processes, and was followed by the

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[4] The projections of the interviews with all participants in the process of a theater production, emitted during the performance of "Life no. 2" (written by Ivan Vyrypaev, directed by Anja Suša, performed at the Belgrade Drama Theatre in 2007) could be understood as the principle of *consistency* applied in this way.

[5] See the publication issued under the same title: Klačar, V., *X Parlamentarni izbori u Kraljevini Koreti*, Belgrade 2008.

congresses of political parties and coalitions, as well as the reports from those congresses (10 days for 10 electoral lists); on the election day, the results were publicly announced; while the last exhibiting day was dedicated to the post-electoral comments. The space of the gallery had been divided into three units: the first one was the entrance, and the second consisted of a small number of seats and the screen (with the recordings of the conversations that took place in the third unit). The third unit (or the "stage"), which was not visible to the audience but into which the viewers could peek (through the narrow gaps in the wall dividing the second and third units), was the place in which the art-ist (Klačar) held a conversation (one per day) with a different member of the audience (who was randomly chosen) about the announced themes (reports from the congresses, electoral results, etc.). The gallery was open every day during a certain period of time (one hour), while during the rest of the day (when the space was closed to visitors) this piece was created; the inner-party and parliamentary elections were also performed inside the gallery.

10.

At first glance, we could say that this was a visual artwork (which was sug-gested by its appearance inside a gallery). However, this work chose the theat-rical medium as its primary instrument. All the conventions that traditionally constitute a theatrical work were present: the space was divided into the space of the audience and the space of the 'fiction'; the piece had a fixed timing (one hour), and formally it was repeated (the camera that recorded the conversa-tions, which were emitted in parallel, was static, while the chosen frame was the same every night); then, there were the performers and their lines, etc. On the other hand, if we decide to "read" this work literally as a theatrical work, the following trespasses are occurring:

(i) A dramatic narrative is undoubtedly present.[6] The piece starts with the announcement of the events that will follow (*exposition*), and it culminates through congresses (particular different *peaks*) until the parliamentary elec-tions (the *moment of ultimate tension*). Should we choose to follow one charac-ter, his/her political destiny depends upon his/her position achieved after his/her party congress, as well as the outcomes of other party/coalition congresses; while finally, the possibility of him/her getting into the government depends upon the results of the entire parliamentary elections. However, this potential

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[6] The paradigmatic example of the traditionally established *valid* construction of a dra-matic plot is certainly Freytag's pyramid (Đokić, 1987: 445).

dramatic entity, independently from the evening performances that are being 'repeated', is stretched out across all 14 days of the exhibition. The audience is provided with the experience of the entity only if it visits the exhibition every day, during which the experience itself has been moved from the space of the scene (*fiction*) towards the field of reception. In other words, each member of the audience decides upon how many particular performances s/he will visit, and on what days, by which s/he re-constructs his/her own entity (it is possible that the visitor chooses one political party and/or coalition, attends the report from their electoral congress, and then, in accordance with that choice, follows/reads the other electoral results).

(ii) Not only were the usual working phases not carried out as autonomous units, but they were performed within a single time and space framework. The text of the show was only partially prepared. It was also created during the performance, with an unprepared guest (a member of the audience), and since it depended upon the conversation, the questions as well as the cultural role which that guest (either more or less deliberately) invested became a part of it. The staging (or *directing*) was based on the selection of the camera's position, that is to say, on the *frame* itself, while the possibility of control as well as the preparation of the show (the rehearsal phase) was minimal. At the same time, the transparency of that act (the choice made) was achieved with the presence of the screen, due to which the assumed invisibility of the director, had also been, as such, rejected.

(iii) The particularity of each performance, contrary to the assumption of neutral repetition, was achieved by means of different topics, but also through the high level of *permeability* – the audience was allowed to access the space of the scene (*to trespass*), and furthermore, the material appearance of the work (which was emphasized with the screen as the final point of the performance, and the recording as the only material trace of the piece) depended directly upon the guest – his/her questions during the conversation, but also her/his looks, rhythms, gestures. The guest was thus the constitutive element of the performance. S/he influenced his/her partner (one of the rules of the stage), s/he was present at/by the screen (the visitor inscribed him/herself into the piece) and what is more, without him/her, or the audience, that single evening event, as the segment of the entity, could not have happened – it would not have been postponed, but irreversibly unperformed.[7]

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[7] For more information visit: http://koreta-making.info/eng_x_parlamentary_elections.html

11.

Going further, we could say that, whilst looking at *X Parliamentary Elections in the Kingdom of Koreta*, we could examine more carefully the effectiveness of remaking those traditional theatrical conventions gathered around the principle of *plausibility*.[8] One of them is the conception of *the fourth wall* which is characteristic of the representative, or *mimetic* theatre and the proscenium stage – in other words, that ideology and practice of signifying which we identify as 'realistic'. *The fourth wall* stands for the missing wall (in terms of the space, this conception refers to the portal and proscenium lines that together form the frame of the partition), and therefore, it enables the performers' play, by providing them with the possibility to forget the presence of the audience (Gadamer, 2001). On the other hand, according to the key hypothesis of theoretical psychoanalysis, *the fourth wall* can also be understood as the screen for the projection of the phantasmatic borders of the meaning. Either way, it presents a unique ideological and political construction. It is the line of separation between the space of the stage and the auditorium, or between the orders of fiction and of reality (the imaginative and the real) – being that which is constitutive for both of these (separated) spheres. Thus, *the fourth wall* presents the axis of the inclusion / exclusion of artistic skills in terms of the general division of social activities. And, as such, it is the precondition of a successful exchange – the investment and consumption of a desire and pleasure.

In the above mentioned work, this borderline is not absent (visibly deleted), but its effects are carried to their extremes. The wall, as a real physical obstacle, was placed in the middle of a gallery space. What is more, at the same time it blocked the gaze (peeking through the gaps on both sides of the wall required an effort) and enabled it (the screen was hanging on it). Thus the wall, as the line of the separation and place of the juncture of two simultaneous orders (of fiction and reality), was not only materially present, but was also the central site of the event, since the act of trespassing had been its very

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[8] It would also be interesting to think of *X Parliamentary Elections in the Kingdom of Koreta* in terms of visual media. Briefly, in accordance with the tradition of organizing exhibitions, the only objects present inside the gallery were the walls (which were dividing the space) and the technical equipment (a television screen, a camera, a microphone, etc.), while the material trace of the work was present there only as a segment of the performance (the recordings were not replayed). Hence, it is possible to conclude that this piece, from the viewpoint of visual artistic disciplines, was based on spatial re-organization (of the actual space of the art gallery and/or art institution), or its re-ideologization and repoliticization.

condition. Hence, we could conclude that the entire investment of the artistic practice had been, in this case, organized around that wall, as the screen of the projections of the desires that were coming from both sides – the one seducing, by watching, and the other seduced (on the other side of the wall, where the screen was hanging, the camera was placed as the technological / media extension of the human eye). In other words, the performance of the entire work had been directed towards the challenge and accumulation of the unspendable surplus of the pleasure of transgression.[9]

12.

Different issues gathered around the assumed importance of *plausibility* were addressed by the participants at this artistic event. The *role* (to follow theatrical language) of the author, source of *Koreta*, was performed by the artist himself, and the role of the guest, by the member of the audience – of that very audience. These auto-performances obtained the status of *representations* thanks to the camera, for which the play was performed, and the screen which enabled the transmission, that is, for the viewers for which the recordings were emitted. *Plausibility* was thus achieved as the effect of an image/gaze, rather than of a technique.[10] It was imposed as 'literal', which brought other conceptions into question – those of *plausibility* as an artistic category and/or value. The questions of fictionalization and representation of identities became (seemingly) irrelevant, on account of the taking over of those already existing and active cultural roles. Altogether, it seemed as if the mechanisms of recognition and identification were happening by themselves, free of the machinery which, in the case of a traditional theatrical show, enables them. However, the performance of *X Parliamentary Elections in the Kingdom of Koreta* did not refer to the conceptions of documentary material in the arts (with a denoted order of signifiers). It was plausible as a result of a literal usage of the disciplinary language within which it operates, while it appeared simply as what it is – an artistic practice. It was as if the practice provoked the regime of art perception to invest the beliefs immanent in real life, while aiming to outplay it during

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[9] According to Bataille, a successful and completed trespass/ is one that "perserves the prohibition in order to enjoy it. The inner feeling of eroticism asks from the one who is experiencing it to feel, in an equal measure, the anxiety that is the base of the prohibition and the desire that leads to its neglect." (Bataj, 2009: 34).

[10] In his essay on Schumann, Barthes writes about virtuosity: "virtuosity is an image rather than a technique" (Barthes, 1991: 294).

their mutual crossing, due to the un-readable surplus produced during the act of exchange, that is, during the very experience of it.

13.

If we aim to achieve critical impacts by postdisciplinary actions, in spite of the imperatives of arts translation into new media formats, in what way could we apply those assumptions once we approach artworks that we consider traditional, such as institutional repertory theatre? Even the places of soft resistance (in terms of one particular work, or the local scene in general) to the current regime of signifying/reading theater shows, are important, and independently from the intentions that are causing them and/or their capacity to overturn. They are important because they point to the body and borders of the existing disciplinary territory, while the act of noticing them is shown to be a symptom of a need for a (new) paradigmatic shifting. We could neglect them, by accepting them as necessary obstacles, or we could comprehend the potential subversive effects of the uncertainty of a live performance in general. In other words, those suggested interventions could be understood as the effects of *stitching* (*point de caption*),[11] or else, as Šuvaković writes, as the intervention of a newly introduced signifier that by itself does not bring meaning, but for that reason exactly – as a signifier without a signified – effects a miraculous reversal of the entire field of meanings, and redefines its readability. Or, as Žižek puts is: "The fundamental effect of the *point de caption* is that miraculous shift (…) by which the thing which was the very source of the chaos becomes the proof and the testimony of a triumph" (Žižek, 2008: 143). Nonetheless, the signifiers without the signified (due to their non-representative character, that is, their resistance to inclusion in the field of representation) often fall under the register of excessive experiences, and the current dominant paradigm is only strengthened by overcoming them. Therefore, it is necessary to create a specific atmosphere, one that would not (only) lead to structural changes and/or changes in terms of the content,[12] but which would initiate the re-ideologization of the gaze directed towards those coming and/ or already performed performances, in order to enable the comprehension of the potent experiences of live performances. And by those beliefs that are

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[11] Here, we refer to Lacan's notion of *point de caption*.

[12] On the local scene, examples of structural re-articulations in terms of the content, and in spite of the institutional repertory organization of the scene, could be the theater shows directed by Ana Miljanić: "The Brothel of Warriors" (CZKD, performed at the Bitef Festival in 2001) and "Pornography" (Belef Festival, 2005).

gathered around and mobilized by the conceptions of "live performance", we refer here to the actions of (different) interventions of *stitching*, within the already existing (local) field of theatre arts. In other words, what we should aim at is, on the one hand, the comprehension of those miraculous changes when it comes to the experience of art, and their potential clustering around a possible coherent position of art production and perception; and, on the other, the specific operative logic of a postdisciplinary paradigm that would enable a constant shifting, in order continuously to question and examine the conditions and the effects of art event-ness, or which would persistently generate new (unexpected and uncertain) shifts. The postdisciplinary theatrical paradigm should thus enable practices that are, owing to their field, always performed as context-sensitive, or as critical and proactive.

14.

Everyone's rhetorical question: *Do we still need theater?* is becoming increasingly present owing to current technological and market imperatives. Artistic practices, being un-readable, un-translatable, un-inclusive, appear as the *spectral* surplus of the present world of the (*hot*) new media presence. Nevertheless, exactly because they are un-adaptable activities, they are the ones that reveal critical potential. Hence, it is their heritage we need to mobilize in order to enable radical experiences of the impossible – the problematization and requestioning – despite the current neoliberal cybernetic order (Baudrillard, 2001) that aims at, and attains, total control of contemporary social life.

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Summary

This paper addresses questions of theatrical heritage, while aiming to investigate the possibility of doing and perceiving contemporary theater, as well as art in general, as relevant social practices. When it comes to theater, in regard to contemporary ways of life, it appears that a new platform is needed – one based on the memory of dramatic and postdramatic theory and practice, which would enable strategies and/or tactics of context-sensitive artistic work. While examining the example of one theater work from the local scene, the main focus of this essay is on the effects of the current language game of the world of theater, and the significance and potential of its re-articulations.

Vlatko Ilić

**„SVI PONAVLJAJU ISTO RETORIČKO PITANJE:
DA LI NAM JE JOŠ UVEK POTREBNO POZORIŠTE?"
BELEŠKE O POZORIŠNOJ SCENI I JEDAN POZORIŠNI RAD**

Rezime

Ovaj rad pokreće pitanja pozorišnog nasleđa s namerom da ispita mogućnosti stvaranja i prihvatanja savremenog pozorišta i umetnosti uopšte kao relevantnih društvenih praksi. Kad je reč o pozorištu, imajući u vidu savremene uslove života, ispostavlja se da je potrebna nova platforma – ona zasnovana na nasleđu dramske i postdramske teorije i prakse, koja će omogućiti strategije i/ili taktike za umetnički rad koji bi bio osetljiv na kontekst. Ispitujući primer jednog pozorišnog rada sa lokalne scene, ovaj esej se fokusira na efekte tekuće jezičke igre sveta pozorišta, te na značenje i mogućnosti njegove reartikulacije.