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Akira Takayama, Port B, Walter Benjamin (and the Theater)

I am particularly pleased about this chance to once again return to Frankfurt: to the Mousonturm, which I associate with wonderful memories of collaborating especially with Christine Peters and which is now again directed by a friend, Matthias Pees. And it is here that Akira Takayama is implementing a project that I am no less looking forward to than everyone else here too. After all, it also embodies a bit of theatre utopia by so successfully bringing together very different artists. I have followed Akira Takayama and his work for more than a decade, and have never concealed my admiration for this type of “theatre“. We were introduced to one another during my very first visit to Japan, then met up every once in a while either there or occasionally also in Berlin or in Vienna.

And although I do not feel at all comfortable with being announced as the “pontiff of postdramatic theory” in the programme (I have no missionary intentions or stocks in postdramatic theatre) – Akira’s theatre certainly does have little to do with traditional dramatic theatre. The first that I heard about his work was what he told me about a project of his featuring poems by the young Bertolt Brecht. A colleague and friend had introduced us to one another and the last thing that I would have expected was a young Japanese director standing in his flat telling me about his obsession for these texts. Moreover, Akira then explained to me that the structure of the performance was designed in such a way that the audience could comment on what they had experienced after the first part and that these comments would be integrated into the second part. So right from the beginning, opening up the theatre both conceptually and as a space has been a central motif of his work.

I have not been able to experience many of his pieces for myself – the ones that I did were “Sunshine 62” and the “Referendum Project” in Tokyo, where I was actively involved in one of the events, then “Compartment City” in Vienna, where I had the chance to introduce Akira to the similarly radical theatremaker Josef Szeiler. At the HAU in Berlin, I saw the redesigned video installation of his interviews with Japanese pupils – this version is also on view in Darmstadt and I heartily recommend that you go to see it. Other pieces of his I only know from video documentations, e.g. an impressive reading performance of Heiner Müller’s “Horatian” in which the Japanese audience was not only confronted with the Japanese text both in sound and writing, but also with Müller’s extremely condensed German text.

Many forms of contemporary theatre ceased to be clearly distinguishable from a political act, an interactive installation, from some kind of documentary activity, from video art. Yet, I am of the opinion that Akira remains fundamentally dedicated to theatre: as the only art form that exists plain and simple as an activity that is shared by creators and spectators and which therefore always and inevitably appeals to a social, human, and cultural responsibility. And as an art form that has, like no other, the potential to allow the dialectic of community and individual to be truly experienced and to not only remain an intellectual motif.

What can be said about the specific character of this theatrical oeuvre? Perhaps it makes most sense to begin with the name that Akira Takayama chose for his theatre group or rather for the network in which he works: Port B. The ominous B not only stands for the name Walter Benjamin, but rather more precisely for Port Bou in Spain, where Benjamin took his life on the run from the Nazi henchmen. The name indicates the same awareness for catastrophe that Benjamin envisioned in his famous angel of history and which already nourished Akira's thinking and art long before Fukushima. The angel of history in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is driven backwards from the beginning of time by the storm of what we call "progress" into a future that he cannot see. Instead he gazes back upon history as it presents itself to him in form of a continually growing, immeasurable succession of catastrophes and scenes of devastation. He is unable to do anything other than behold them with fear and sorrow and in this he is akin to art. Undoubtedly, he would prefer to pause, call out "stop", heal. But the storm of time, of progress relentlessly drives him always further into the future.

This is an apt description of Akira Takayama's theatre. His topic *is* the catastrophe of human society, that which drives the majority of bodies on this planet into hunger, anguish, sickness, torment, forced migration and death. Into the catastrophe of war: the war of competition, of technology, of political powerstructures.

In its association with suicide, the name Port Bou simultaneously reminds us of another tragic dimension of the theatre, a true constant throughout time. Exorbitant persecution to the limits of tolerability caused Benjamin to overstep another boundary so as to protect his inner self from annihilation.

Since 2002, this theatre has thus been created under the name and label Port B. Naturally, it is not easy working in a country such as Japan - a country that has practically no funding for theatre and in which theatre

criticism is not a profession, because it is impossible to make a living from it. More often than not, this role of the critic is assumed by academics, who do so out of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, we can say that Port B have reached a certain level of international fame. It is important that we also lose a few words here about the significance of the Festival/Tokyo and its director Chiaki Soma, who has managed over the years to predominantly present pieces that transcend the limitations of conventional art. Romeo Castelluci was there in 2011, for example, and René Pollesch, as well as a series of Japanese artists, who, after the catastrophe in Tohoku, also questioned radically their work in terms of their own personal responsibility. In this, Akira was also once again one of the most rigorous. He declared that the only form of theatre now possible is one that is not actually theatre anymore. Theatre today must - and his words deeply inscribed themselves into my memory - "hide itself". Perhaps this best describes the artistic practice demanded today by artists, who seek to remain faithful to their sense of responsibility *and* to their art. Theatre must hide – that does not mean that it must disappear. Instead, it means that it must take on forms and occupy spaces in which it is not immediately expected and perhaps not immediately recognised. It takes place where the limitations of what we conceive of as theatre are reached and crossed. Art cannot be art, when it is only art.

An example of what that can look like is "Compartment City". As visitor, I step into a vehicle, for instance, into which a row of small compartments has been installed. In my compartment, I can watch DVDs containing interviews with young people. Each interview is no more than 10 minutes long. Before entering the compartment, I selected my choice of DVDs by simply by following my predilections, the impressions made on me by the faces and then taking them with me in a small shopping basket like in a store. The situation is enticingly private and cozy and yet simultaneously precarious. I notice how I take in the information and at the same time watch the gestures: the facial expressions, the pauses and hesitations in the answers - "Is there something that you are proud of?". And I gradually notice how the individuals, who I know almost nothing about, blend into a group. Only to then again appear as unrelated as solitary individuals. I notice other people entering, hear them in the compartments beside me. A desire to speak with them wells up, but I do not follow through. I am free to choose. After listening to six or seven interviews – putting on the headphones, inserting the DVD, taking it out, putting a new one in – I stand up, leave the compartment and choose a second "round" of human speech and human faces. Basically, the system is simple: the same 26 questions are asked over and over again, so that after a while one begins to look forward to what

the young people will answer to this or that question and how they will say it - "Do you believe there will be another war?"

Of course, it would be simple for a trained intellectual to look down upon the sometimes shockingly naive, sometimes harrowingly clichéd opinions, to notice the parroting and conformist views in much of what is being said. But it is precisely this which holds up a mirror to our own helplessness, that which has basically - after all and in spite of so much experience and knowledge - not gotten any further concerning the major issues of our day and age. And the youthfulness of the interviewees lends a strange innocence to this moment of them having their say, the sound of voices usually left unheard. Theatre deals with guilt, responsibility and reality. According to Heiner Müller, the duty of art is to make reality impossible. However, in doing so art can simultaneously and paradoxically create a space of innocence, whose provocative power can be greater than all judgements and verdicts.

It is a game, it is play and play it will remain. I am free to make my choices, free to pay attention to what I will and yet I sense, even in my memory, that something peculiar grows out of it, something which can be described as akin to Marx's "consciousness of species": *Gattungsbewusstsein*. The German artist Thomas Ruff once produced a series of oversize portraits, faces against a neutral background, pictures resembling huge passport photographs. They impressed me greatly, because they – as I believe: fully in keeping with Walter Benjamin's work – contain a melancholy reflection of the lives lived by the human species, the melancholy of mortality engraved in their faces. Simultaneously, my attention, my gaze, the awareness of co-existing with others is awakened by their absolute normality and ordinariness. Perhaps this is also a form of art that hides itself, that informs us about the human nature hidden in normality, hidden in the passport photograph.

Some of Akira Takayama's pieces are more directly political in their approach than others, but ultimately his work always embodies more of an anthropological rather than directly political voice of criticism. I would like to speak here also briefly about *Sunshine 62*, a political-historical guided city tour or rather: exploration that I was part of in Tokyo. Helene Varopoulou, who also participated, wrote a text about this experience from which I cite here:

"The tour performance *SUNSHINE 62* by theatre group Port B in April 2008 in the Ikebukuro district of Tokyo, was an urban project that revolved around *Sunshine 60* - at that time the highest building in Tokyo. This skyscraper had been erected at the very site of a former prison for

war criminals of the Second World War. In order to save the institution of the Japanese imperial system after Japan's total defeat, the prosecution and execution of those responsible among the Japanese political and military elite (...) was simultaneously functionalised into an act of expiation, which deeply ingrained itself into the collective memory of Japanese post-war society.

Takayama Akira confronted us with a wanderer's gaze onto the constantly shifting cityscape. The audience walked around the Ikebukuro district for hours in small groups, whereby each spectator had a small task to fulfil (reading the map for example or keeping an eye on the prescribed time for each leg of the journey). Based on instructions, the audience engaged in a topographical, historical and political act of *mapping* in a shared search along a succession of individual stations. Each of the visited locations contained traces of different time periods and realities. (...) Parallel to this journey, participants were presented with a series of different views of the Sunshine 60 skyscraper, moments that encouraged seeing the building from unexpected perspectives as a monument of literally overbuilt and concealed history (through a tiny window, behind a cemetery, sideways from a balcony, etc.). These different perspectives were also irresistibly reminiscent of the famous 100 Views of Mr. Fuji along the Tokaido Road by the Japanese master Hokusai. (...) At the end of the tour, the participants were asked to express their own position, their relationship to issues in the war crimes trial. In a theatrical, technological and virtual space, each person should or could speak aloud in a kind of personal verdict, whether they thought that the convicted were guilty or not.“ (Helene Varopoulou, Theater und Landschaft, in: THEATER IN JAPAN, ed. by Hirata Eiichoro and Hans-Thies Lehmann, Theater der Zeit Berlin 2009, p. 159-169, here p. 163/164)

I still distinctly remember the strange unease that overcame me in that situation at the end of the tour, speaking the word “guilty” aloud into a microphone. There it was, my own voice, one that I should not forget even when only being an observer. The unease did not come from having any notable doubts concerning the guilt of these persons, but rather from realising at that moment in a rare clearmindedness, that justice alone is not all, but that the step from observing to judging never loses its monstrosity. And in this sense, theatre, unlike real political life, is not about judgements, no matter how well substantiated they may be, but always also about unsettling the act of judgement itself. About voices that must become foreign to us in order for us to hear them better. The voices of the ghosts of history and the ghosts “from the future as well” (Brecht) and likewise, for example here in Frankfurt Evakuieren, ghostly

voices from our own present and our own surroundings, which are only supposedly familiar but may be in reality entirely unknown to us.