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Addressing History: Performance Space as Memory Space

1. The City's Open Wounds

The little blue Rover 200 lies crashed and bonnet-down on the steps of Frankfurt's cathedral. Somebody has put a tire underneath the car body as if to cushion the crash. It looks pretty mangled. The boot lid no longer closes and a makeshift sealing covers the smashed window on the driver's side with plastic sheeting. Where there previously was the motor, there is a gaping void revealing an interior made of sheet metal struts and other hardware parts sticking out, which have long ceased to perform any function. A small spotlight on the ground bathes the unusually fascinating but rather ghostlike object in cold blue light. A man recounts an incident in Egypt. His voice can be heard from the wrecked car, resonating in the archaeological garden nearby and extending up to the platform in front of the SCHIRN art exhibition hall. The man recollects a scene he witnessed from behind the window of a dance studio in Alexandria, when protesters in a rally against the Mubarak regime were fighting a fierce battle with the police.

Meanwhile it has gotten dark, and the drizzle and cold of this February evening are creeping into my bones. I am one of the spectators of Claudia Bosse's outdoor "intervention, installation and performance" titled *Burning Beasts,* standing next to the car wreck in an area situated between the cathedral and the medieval Römer buildings in the city of Frankfurt am Main. Behind me is Frankfurt's huge red sandstone cathedral, whose windows are illuminated from within, glowing in orange-red as if the church's interior were being consumed by a fire. My gaze settles on the ancient stone walls and ruins of the archaeological garden in front of me, excavated during construction works of an underground rail line in 1972. The walls date back to an early Roman settlement and to a Merovingian royal court.

Towering over the historical garden is the building of the art gallery SCHIRN with its forecourt, a dish-shaped patch. More wrecked cars are up there. Other spectators watch in amazement how a couple of performers jump about the cars. On my right, I can look upon the fence surrounding the redevelopment old-town area, where the building of the headquarters of

Frankfurt's town hall used to stand until 2011. The decision to tear down the massive concrete building from 1974 was a by-product of the city council's more general resolution to reconvert the whole area into the historic centre it was before the Second World War. Behind the fence, a few steps away, sits the old medieval building of Frankfurt's Art Association, the Kunstverein. A narrow alley flanked by historical buildings - roughly corresponding to the course of the royal coronation processions in the Middle Ages, when the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire were crowned in Frankfurt's cathedral[1] - leads on to the Römer at the other end, which nowadays is the seat of Frankfurt's municipal authorities and political power. Not far away, beyond the sloping roofs of the old town hall, the tower of St. Paul's Church stands out. It is the place where the first German national assembly was held on 3rd July 1848 to debate on an early version of the German constitution called *Grundrechte des deutschen Volkes/Fundamental Rights of the German people*.[2] From where I am standing, one tower seems to dominate the history-charged landscape around us, it is higher than the huge spire of the glowing red cathedral – the high-rise building of the banking institution Commerzbank looming over Frankfurt's roofs. Fully illuminated in the bank's signal colour yellow, it is often mistaken for the cathedral, especially by tourists from the Far East on their first visit to the city. There is a particular stillness that infuses the area between the cathedral and the Römer. The historical fault lines and sedimentations of the City of Frankfurt am Main (and Germany as a nation) are nowhere else more manifest, exposed for all to see.

Burning Beasts is the title of Claudia Bosse's performative installation and urban intervention located between Römer and cathedral and produced in the context of the exhibition *Demonstrations. The Coming-into-Being of Normative Orders* at the Frankfurt Kunstverein[3]. The site-specific theatre project was conceived in close collaboration with the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Gießen. The production of Vienna-based director Claudia Bosse who runs her own theatre company called theatercombinat[4] features ten car wrecks planted on Frankfurt's historical site, fitted with loudspeakers in various sizes (by Marco Tölzer) from which heterogeneous text material such as interview clippings, soliloquies or literary texts could be heard. The sound installations surrounding the wrecked cars in the public space between Römer and the cathedral were open during daytime

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[1] Frankfurter Kunstverein, Cluster of Excellence „The formation of normative orders" (ed.): *Demonstrationen. Vom Werden normativer Ordnungen. Eine Publikation zur Ausstellung*, Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2012, S. 271.
[2] Demonstrationen, S. 422.
[3] The exhibition *Demonstration* was shown at the Kunstverein Frankfurt from 20th January through 25th March, 2012.
[4] Vgl. www.theatercombinat.com.

from February 13th until 18th, 2012. During the week-long period, the performers also developed additional material for the performance as they went along. Many passers-by might have wondered whether what they saw was actually happening or merely part of the show. In the evening hours of February 17th and 18th, the site served as setting for a performance that linked the individual stages/stations of the walking installation by a movement choreography: Six performers[5] in the silver-coloured protective gear of fire-fighters leave the Kunstverein building, goose-stepping the flight of steps to the forecourt of the SCHIRN art hall, and then run off in various directions. Black stocking-masks and motorbike helmets lend them rather a futuristic than a violent appearance. The spectators are free to follow them around to one of the installation's seven stations with a total of ten car wrecks arranged in solo or group constellations. Some people in the audience choose to follow the performers, others just stay watching and waiting for the performers to reassemble at a later stage down at the archaeological garden.

Within the narrowest of spaces, capital and art, the church and the imperial cathedral, politics and power, the archaeological garden and the construction site of the historic old town centre of Frankfurt thus formed almost paradigmatic alliances in Frankfurt's most central place, where the city's historic stratifications might be experienced in just taking a few steps: one descends the stairs into the past, or ascends into (the present and) future. Walking back and forth, different points in time and different places thus become interlinked by physical movement, and undone at every unexpected turn the spectator may take. In the spaces in-between, at the place where I, as a spectator, stand at a given moment, the porousness of time makes itself felt: That's where Claudia Bosse has planted small "car bombs". As stumbling blocks and mementoes the car wrecks are indeed beasts, as the title suggests, or monstrances in the traditional sense of the word 'monsters'. Monsters are beings that point toward their abnormal physical shape thus drawing attention to themselves as signs of God or as a good or bad omen. Like actors on a theatre stage, the auto/audio sculptures make their appearance on the city's public stage addressing their audience from the loudspeakers.

In what follows, I shall discuss the performance's specific forms of creating space. How is space constituted in the performance, and, referring to the topic of my paper, how can one conceptualise the performance space as a memory space? How does the performance address history? In order to answer these questions, I shall focus on three characteristic

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[5] Along with the actors Catherine Travelletti and Nele Jahnke, the following theatre students from Gießen took part in the performance: Gregor Glogowski, Meret Kiderlen, Elisabeth Lindig and Arne Schirmel. Günther Auer was responsible for the technical set-up on location and the subsequent video documentation. Fanti Baum was production manager.

features of the performance which help me to develop my argument. First, on the acoustic or sound level, the text spoken is directed in space in two directions at the same time. Second, the text that the performers speak either live or recorded as well as the physical gestures performed are quotations from the media. And third, on the level of audience's position, the audience is included in the performance while all the time remaining outside observers. These three artistic strategies, as I shall argue, create an oscillating space that confounds the linear organisation of time in favour of a complex memory space.

2. Double Address

What does Revolution mean for you? At the cathedral's entrance showing in the direction of Frankfurt's city centre, we see two overturned cars wedged together at the hood sides. Light smoke rises from the wreckage. At the scene of the accident, we hear Judy Garland's voice softly singing *Somewhere over the Rainbow* – words of comfort and a small utopia after the crash. The song is interrupted at regular intervals. In between the music cues, a scenario of double perceptions and double hearing unfolds: Claudia Bosse's voice comes from a megaphone attached to one of the cars, reading out regulations for the maintenance of public order. Yet from the position between the cars another voice is audible asking the same question over and over again: "What does revolution mean for you?" Like in an interview or a street survey different answers are offered, yet the parts are all spoken by the same voice. The performer's voice let it be known that there is a lack of political alternatives and tells us of his desire to retreat into the private sphere, we hear about his plan to form a commune, and concerns are voiced that there might even be no point in doing that and that the idea that it might fail provokes a sense of hopelessness in him.

Later I climb up the steps to the art hall's forecourt where another three wrecked cars are placed in turned-over positions. One car door is open for spectators to climb in. I take a seat in the load area at the back, and this time I am being addressed directly. The low voice comes from a tiny speaker in the front and I must concentrate hard in order to be able to understand what is said: Despite an ever widening gap between rich and poor in the current economic situation, the Germans are the most apolitical nation in Europe. The words seem to virtually bounce against the walls of St. Paul's Church, where citizens once fought for their constitutional rights.

Most of the texts used in the installation/performance are from interviews Claudia Bosse conducted with people who – either through personal experience or critical reflection –

have been confronted with revolutions and political upheavals. Apart from the Egyptian dancer from Alexandria, also scientists and philosophers from the Cluster of Excellence *The Formation of Normative Orders* at Frankfurt University were interviewed, who took a substantial part in the conception of the exhibition.[6] In addition, text material was used that may be characterised as self-inquiries on the topic of revolution on the performers' part. Although different in type, all the texts follow the same basic principle: They are both spatially oriented to address and reach people in the distance and at the same time they aim to address individual people directly nearby. Hence, a doubly coded perceptual situation arises – on the one hand, the voices seem to address individual observers in an intimate context, on the other hand they are being amplified and made public through megaphones. Thus, a space is opened up acoustically, that is simultaneously closed and open, intimate and public.

3. Quotations as Gestures

The interviews come from a tape and are heard from loudspeakers in or by the wrecked cars. The second type of texts used, i.e. the self-enquiries have two different sources of articulation: They are partly conveyed via the loudspeakers in the cars, but at the same time they are also spoken live by the performers on-site through a megaphone. What is said is thus characterised as a public announcement, but rather than making political statements or denouncing grievances, the texts used in *Burning Beasts* are of a more personal nature. "Zurich 2010. Paradeplatz. UBS. Commerzbank. Café Sprüngli. Migros Supermarket. Tram lines. Young people and families are sitting at the outdoor tables drinking coffee. Over here we have a mob of youngsters, maybe 17 or 18 years old. Over there we have nearly 30 police officers. Why have I chosen this video?" a performer asks herself. "Because so many people were just indifferently standing by, indulging in their own small moments of happiness." Another performer tells us about the picture of a young man sitting cross-legged on the bonnet of a car giving the spectator a friendly nod. "What I find interesting in this picture" he shouts into the megaphone, „is that one can already see the black pick-up of the Mubarak troops in the background, speeding up to crash into the car and kill people in a few seconds."[7] In terms of content the texts are characterised by the recurrent motif of a social crisis situation reacted to

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[6] From the crashed car on the steps in front of the Art Association building an interview with Professor Klaus Günther (Institute of Criminology and Philosophy of Law at Frankfurt University) could be heard. One of the speakers in the cars planted on the SCHIRN platform was Dr. Daniel Loik (Institute of Philosophy at Frankfurt University).
[7] For audio-visual impressions of the installation/performance follow the link to the video, from which the text excerpts are taken: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pvwwb0dRqg8 (last accessed: 13 January 2013).

by different forms of violence. From a geographical perspective, it seems to make no difference whether the trouble spot is located in the Middle East, in an affluent metropolis such as Zurich, or in certain areas of Berlin.

What is remarkable, though, is that in almost all descriptions cars figure prominently. This is the link to the crashed cars on the Römerberg, which endows them with a possible (hi)story, the symbolic residue of which they have become. The cars operate as material signs in that they are quotations from media images and represent second-hand perceptions. The same holds true for the physical actions of the performers. A masked performer is jumping up and down on the car door as if she wanted to smash the wreck to pieces. Gestures of attacking, of running up against building walls and cars are frequently repeated during the performance, which results in physical exhaustion on the part of the performers. One of them keeps punching a column, another thrusts his body against one of the wrecked cars over and over again as if he wanted to force open a locked door. Gestures – and one may very well understand the term here in a Brechtian sense as *Gestus* – gestures such as these are characteristic for revolutionary violence and as such they form part of our cultural memory. They are therefore visual and gestural quotations.

As tokens of recognition for various forms of public protest, both the images described and the gestures performed stand for acts of resistance, barricades, political struggles. Put to use and re-arranged in the here and now of the performance event, these images of a revolution have literally (become) materialised. It is significant, however, that the specific way they are (re-)used does not so much affect or refer to the level of content, to that which is depicted or narrated. Rather, the act of telling itself is stressed in that the form of the narratives consists in individual descriptions of press photos and other media material. The visual contents thus acquire a subjective slant and bring attention to the personal attitude and point of view of the teller, and not to the story told. Expressions such as "what I think is interesting in the picture" are indicators the speakers frequently use to shift the focus towards the personal. The texts are subjective and personal re-appropriations of *media images*, which in the very act of appropriation will lose their objectivity.

Here, the dual nature of photographic images becomes evident. By drawing closer to the spectator specific incidents, at best revealing aspects one would not have been able to perceive without the image and which would have – strictly speaking – no existence without it[8], these images make things perceptible in the first place. However, they still "reify" what

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[8] See Sibylle Krämer: *Medium, Bote, Übertragung. Kleine Metaphysik der Medialität*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2008, p. 261-276.

they depict, especially by introducing a frame that cuts off the contexts. Roland Barthes remarked that everything that happens within the frame is bathed in bright light, while that which exceeds the frame must remain in the darkness of non-existence.[9] Photographic images thus provide access to the world whilst at the same time producing and altering that which they depict. Describing images from a personal perspective as part of the performance lays bare what is usually taken for granted – the medial nature of the image. In the re-mediatization process of translating pictures into language, other transformations take place. Re-written and framed in a different medium, we look at these images in a new way. The pictures can no longer claim objectivity in depicting the world "how it is (or was)", because in a radically subjectifying move, the performance offers us a range of perspectives on upheavals and crisis situations in the public space, which are mostly incompatible and inconsistent, carrying their own context, thus defying any closure towards a cohesive or conclusive horizon of meaning. For what has the Arab Spring in Egypt got to do with burning cars in residential areas in Germany? How are they connected to the protests in Zurich's city centre? In their insistence on perspectivity, the fragmented, incongruent descriptions do not follow a causal logic, thus resisting any kind of totalizing operation. The space thus established by the use of quotations is made up of individual spaces that overlap on the site. Each performer brings in a different political context giving it his or her subjective perspective. The space consists of conflicting perspectives that may not be unified.

4. Observing the Observer, or: Showing the media apparatus

A small procession – it could also be read as a protest march – sets out, slowly moving from the entrance of the Kunstverein at the back of the reconstructed historic buildings that separate the Römerberg from the art hall SCHIRN, to the Fountain of Justice and back again. The red car wreck in front of the Kunstverein is gradually set in motion. One performer gets behind the wheel and four others push-start the car, while the actress Catherine Travelletti is kneeling on the car top forcefully reading from Montaigne's "Of a monstrous child" in an excited voice. The text is about a weird encounter with an infant who has "a double body relating to one head", as Montaigne writes. In the Middle Ages such deformities were interpreted as favourable prognostics for the king, signifying his capacity of "maintaining

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[9] Roland Barthes: *Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein*, in: Roland Barthes: *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn,* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990, S. 94-102, loc. cit. p. 95.

these various parts of [the] state under the union of his law".[10] Again, the text is a quotation, topically related to revolutions and violence through issues of power and rulership addressed in the fragment recited.

As the procession finally gets on the move, more and more bystanders and spectators are joining in, slowly following the red car with Travelletti sitting on top of the roof declaiming as though she were a human loudspeaker, or even the monster of which she speaks. Owing to the spectacular nature of the event, the procession-performance is accompanied by a slew of media photographers. Wherever one looks or walks, there are already countless photojournalists keen to shoot spectacular pictures of the 'revolution in art'. Unexpectedly, this adds a further dimension to Bosse's installation performance: Not only are the texts of the performance based on visual material, but the material's source of origin is also reflected through the presence of the photographers. The original images thus generate fresh images, which in turn objectify and mythologize the event for which they initially served as a point of departure. Moreover, while the event is still taking place, it has already become part of the mass communication apparatus that no longer distinguishes between an event and the images created of the event. Taking part in an event thus equals becoming part of the media coverage, which is the event. The audience acts as an actor. The observers move to the fore in front of the camera, which thus essentially produces what it purports to merely depict.

This self-referential scene in which the performance reflects upon its own conditions, also has implications for the concept of space. The car with the actress is, of course, staged. Although the followers of the procession are not seated in a traditional theatre space to watch the actions on stage, the car nonetheless establishes a stage with the spectators watching it from an aesthetic distance. The car with the story of the monstrous child takes place in a fictional space in front of us. With the arrival of the photographers, however, the borders of this imagined, or other space breaks down. The photographers remind us that we are not separate from the staged action, but actually part of it belonging to the same space. As observers we are ourselves observed from another vantage point and included in the picture or scene. As in the theatre where the separation or split between stage and auditorium is unified by the theatre building as such which encapsulates both the auditorium and the stage, this observation in the second degree effectuates a re-entry of the outside world, reality, or, to be more precise, the social situation both the actors and the audience share. The crossing of

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[10] Michel de Montaigne: *Essais II*, Zürich: Diogenes, 1992, S. 594. (engl. z.b. im Internet http://essays.quotidiana.org/montaigne/monstrous_child/)

frames or borders from fiction to situation draws the attention of the audience to the site the performance takes place in. The here and now of the site we are in is by no means neutral. Rather, it is saturated with context and history that is allowed to come to the fore and become part of the play. Thus, the re-entry of the social situation within the fictional realm is also the door through which memory re-enters into space. In my next section I would like to concentrate on this.

5. Topologies

So far, the space I have described is a characterised by the two poles of proximity and distance. Both perspectives are structurally and simultaneously embedded in every part of the performance, creating conflicting spaces for the spectator and listener. Like a telescope, the installations zoom in voices, personal stories and statements, while at the same time the space is zooming out to expand without limit. Using different terms, the same telescopic arrangement could be described as artistic strategy, which produces incongruities and perceptive mismatches between: public and private, interior and exterior, between individual (subjective) perception and shared reality, between observing and being observed, between the particular and the "big picture", between media-communicated observations by others and my own first-hand experience of events, and, not least of all, between history and present.

The re-entry of the social situation within the realm of fiction leads to an opening up of performance towards historical contexts that are, in reverse, brought into play by the fictional level. Once the frames have shifted and opened up, contexts appear and memory is triggered both on an individual level of each spectator ("what does revolution mean for you?") and on the level of the specific site the performance takes place in as my introduction earlier on suggested. As the quoted texts indicate, *Burning Beasts* does not tell a story. The installation/performance does not seek to create a closed fictional space, although it makes use of fictionalized material. My point, here, is that the fictional elements of theatre are necessary to trigger the social and the memory of the space. The area between cathedral and Römer turns into a veritable play space: a space played with by the performance and a space for people to play, while bringing back into play the issue of history, revolutionary potential in a contemporary context. Being played with, the space also plays its part. "The space presents itself to us. (…) It is not concealed, quite the contrary, it is made visible after all",[11]

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[11] Ebd., S. 306.

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while attending and participating in the performance. Between autonomy and heteronomy, between being excluded and included, the social and historical re-enters the fictional performance space and draws attention to itself and its constitution.

Both acoustically and visually, the space oscillates. It is in motion. Forever shifting from near to far, from close to distance it never comes to rest or to be "in itself". This oscillation here includes the organisation of time, past and present. The memory space of theatre is not a space of monuments commemorating past events of a heroic nature. In this oscillating or trembling space memory comes to the fore. Memory here does not mean a (dramatic) presentation or re-presentation of something that had already happened, but as an interference with the present, a disturbance of the way things are organised and done in the here and now. The car bombs block habitual passageways, they make you stop and think reconfiguring the space by intervening in its spatio-temporal organisation. The audio-level literally addresses political issues in a historically charged location thus asking the audience to position itself while playing with the material presented.

6. Methodological Implications: Between Fiction and Situation a Space for Reflection

With the insight that fiction breaks down, while at the same time it is needed to trigger memory, some methodological implications need to be spelled out. Let me therefore conclude with some methodological remarks. Confronted by or rather involved in such a theatre performance, the question arises: how can we analyse it? From what I have said, it has become obvious that analysing the performance just by the texts it uses falls short of the richness of means and strategies it employs. There is no closed space of representation established by a fictional story embodied by actors or performers. Contrary to Freddie Rokem's model of performing history, I hold that it is not the embodiment and energy of the actor that brings history alive verifying a dramatic fable from the position of a witness. In the performance I have used as an example of the relation between theatre, memory, and space, it is the unstable und uncertain position of the audience between the signs and the material dimension of the theatre that brings memory into play. The semiotic model based on structural linguistics with the aim of constructing meaning from the performance text, here has a limited reach. Although the texts used share the paradigm of media representations of revolution or political protest, although the performance works with cultural citations to be read and understood, I have argued that it is not primarily the content that is central but the attitude the performers articulate by presenting a subjective approach to the images described.

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The text asks questions instead of building up meaning. A performance such as *Burning Beasts* draws our attention to the fact, that meaning of signs is not a cultural given but that it is highly situated and dependant on the specific context the signs are used in. Signs are site-specific, too.

If constructing a consistent interpretation from the polymedial systems of sings the performance uses is limited, instead of semiotics we may resort to phenomenology to describe the experience we have while attending the performance. This is what I have done when talking about the three examples. I have taken my subjective position as an exemplary viewer and listener to describe my experiences of the performance. I may thus take the performative route like Erika Fischer-Lichte or Barbara Gronau have done to consider the performance to be an installation for participants to deepen and intensify their perception of spaces, atmospheres and bodies.[12]

As with semiotics, here, too, the approach is limited. I may describe the phenomenon at hand as they appear to me, but that does not take the reflective and reflexive dimension of the performance into account. The performance does not only provide an experience; it also makes you think about something that is not given or here, but which is nonetheless essential to the performance – memory as a dimension of the performance. For one, if the performance is neither an autonomous work of art nor a heteronomous experience, we as theatre scholars must also be open to heteronomous contexts and theories. Such as theories of space and topology deriving from sociology like the one from George Spencer-Brown or Niklas Luhmann I have used to underline the re-entry of the situation by the crossing of borders, or theories of media or photography to understand the use of images in the performance.

Yet, in order to understand the performance as an aesthetic experience or, to put it more traditionally, as a work of art that implies reflection, thinking, or even judgement, only a radical understanding of phenomenology will get us further. The things that present themselves both on a visual and an acoustic level present themselves as something – that which we see and hear. But this truism implies that they also present themselves NOT as something else they might also be. The things we experience are always already masked to appear as something. They are on a very basic level always already engaged in the theatrical activity of feigning, sembling or the being "as if". The word "as" implies they never present themselves fully or "as such". They may always be something other. The theatre may bring this absent or hidden dimension to our attention. It may destabilise the ontology of things by

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[12] Barbara Gronau: *Theaterinstallation. Performative Räume bei Beuys, Boltanski und Kabakov*, München: Fink, 2010, S. 16.

focusing on their absent dimensions. It is here that memory of theatre lies. In phenomenological theory, one either focuses on the text or image as an aesthetic object thereby neglecting the framings and its material conditions. Or, on the reverse, one focuses on the conditions of coming into being of the aesthetic object thus by force neglecting the aesthetic object. In performances such as *Burning Beats* there is, however, no either or. Because the performance realises both perspectives at the same time (a phenomenological impossibility), an effect of double exposure is created that opens the performance up to its other dimensions: the dimension of memory. The multiple perspectives that the performance throws on political or social realities past and present prevents that the things the texts talk about are ever given as such. Facts and observations are played with in the space in between fiction and situation as absent realties evoked by the signs and given to experience with out ever being, without ever consolidating themselves into fixed entities or meanings. As absent yet present they reflect upon their own conditions of coming into being. As a text the performance remains radically open. As an experience the performance remains incommensurable.

It is this absent dimension of the phenomenon I have focused on with the idea of memory. The things we see and hear both in everyday life and in the theatre are never only themselves. The performance by Claudia Bosse opens this gap between presence and absence to make the absent historical come to the fore. She creates a haunted space, a space of ghosts that draw attention to the fact that we are never at one with our being, the times we live in and, above all, the space we create and inhabit. The palimpsest of memory is a figure or trope of the not being-one, not only of a heterogeneity of texts overwritten but also of space and time being densely populated with absences that make themselves felt und heard in a theatre performance.