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Theatre of Arranging Live Images

Tomáš Kubart

Hermann Nitsch. *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater* [Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries], 147. Aktion, 7 Mai 2016, 6:00 PM, Munich, Germany.

Hermann Nitsch prepared his 147th event – *orgien-mysterien theatre* (Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries) on the occasion of end of Munich’s exhibition in the Villa Stuck. The Munich architectural gem of ‘Jugendstil’ (Art Nouveau) took the show over from the Vienna Theatre Museum (Theatermuseum), where the exhibition took place between the end of March 2015 and the middle of January this year. His previous event, 146, took place at the opening of this exhibition in Vienna in March 2015.

In the last 30 years, Hermann Nitsch has produced about three events per year. Most of them related to the opening or closing of exhibitions throughout the world, and periodically *Pfingstfesten* (the celebration of Pentecost), which Nitsch held annually in early May in Mistelbach and Prinzendorf, both in Niederösterreich (Lower Austria). While the majority of Nitsch’s events mediates to the audience an experience with *Grundexzess*, the basic principle of Nitsch’s Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries, the event in Munich lacked excesses and abreaction.

Intensive reactions to inward experiences that can be seen, for example, in the recording of Nitsch’s 111th event in Vigna di San Martino in Naples 2004 (*Mit Leib und Seele – Neapel, Nitsch und Gänsehaut*, dir. Podgorski) in Munich’s event is missing. It’s subdued nature, however, not only related to the age of its creator (Nitsch celebrates his 78th birthday in August this

year [2016]), but above all, the 50 year-long process of the acceptance of his work by the general public and the art market.

Nitsch produced the event as a demonstration of sacrifice, posing himself as the recipient. In the garden of the Villa Stuck, organizers installed a small wooden platform (each such stage is made specially for every single event), where players were installed for roughly an hour and a half in different positions. Nitsch presents himself and his work as aristocratic; he was the only one present sitting on a chair (members of orchestra sat on chairs) facing the podium. On it they alternated male and female ‘offerings’ which were handled carefully (due to experienced and professionally acting Leo Kopp, Nitsch’s adopted son).

An important, and often repeated, element of Nitsch’s events is the ‘Crucifixion’ which consists of tethering a model to a cross, and the subsequent casting of ‘blood’ into his or her mouth. If the model does not flow ‘blood’ from their mouth and begin to wet their white robe flowing on a wooden floor, Nitsch has not achieved the desired effect. Blindfolded ‘sacrifices’ for men and women do not refer only to Oedipus. The blindfold is also a mask, which deprives the ‘victims’ of expression and identity while their bodies are being handled on stage.

Aristocratism is common for Nitsch; whom in the late 1980s considered the German magazine *Art – das*

Kunstmagazine's question of whether it is 'acceptable' for a modern artist to live in a castle. Nitsch, a lover of Michelangelo, Beethoven, Bruckner and da Vinci, bought a castle in Prinzendorf in 1971 after the death of his wife, Beata. The more prevalent this nobleness and grandeur is in Nitsch's events, the faster and more clearly they lose ferocity and rawness, which they displayed in the 1960s.

Animal innards are not being pulled out from freshly slaughtered animals and they do not smell, they are imported in a freezer-box. People are not pouring out real blood, but a liquid of red colour. Although Nitsch began these mimetic procedures during his exile in Germany, where he moved from Austria after 1968, it was only during the 1990s that his art of simulating reality reached perfection. Therein also lies part of the secret of his success.

During the period of Viennese actionism in the early 1970s, Nitsch's colleagues, Otto Muehl and Günter Brus, abandoned aggressive events full of human excrement, sex, vomit and blood. Nitsch modified his artistic product in such a way that it could attract the public. Muehl stopped producing events to devote and establish his own commune. Brus finished with his *Körperanalysen* (body-analyses), and returned to graphics. Neither Brus's nor Muehl's form of event could be accepted by the art world without losing their essence. Brus could not pretend to eat faeces, just as Muehl could not simulate aggressive sexual acts.

In their raw form, however, these events could never be accepted by the public; at the same time, however, the inertia got rid of any ethos of shock. This process also helped the rapid development of the film industry, the development of its domestic variants and especially the development

of homemade pornography and pornographic cinema as such. Currently there are a number of pornographic genres that go far beyond the perverse tendencies of actionists. These genres have helped create viewer resistance; also because the events of similar kind are effective only in the context of appearance before audience (live performance). The role of film as an intermediate medium loses its effectiveness in this way. And while both artists (Brus and Muehl) abandoned this type of event art, Nitsch modified his Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries in order to overcome the high threshold beyond which a large majority of the artists lost their dignity. His work largely lost the 'shock' label which had been bestowed on it, but it was received artistically. Above all, it is also accepted by art market.

In an interview with Britta SchulteJans in a German newspaper (SCHULTEJANS 2016) Nitsch recognized that when he came to Munich for the first time in 1969, it was primarily for him to escape Vienna.¹ Although in Germany he met with difficulties because his work, he has never been threatened with jail there, as was the case in Austria (after the event *Uni-Ferkelei* he was sentenced to six months in prison; this is why he left Austria). Public attention and the resentment, sometimes growing into hatred, have steadfastly followed Nitsch. When he organized *Sechs Tage Spiel* (Six Day Play) in 1998, he said he felt like he did when he was beginning his work; people started protest groups and demonstrated in front of Nitsch's castle. He did not avoid unnecessarily sharpened reactions and exaggerated expectations of the

¹ '[...] in Österreich war es für mich nicht mehr möglich, Aktionen zu machen.' (SCHULTEJANS 2016: 6)

public in 2016. Anger usually comes from misinformation about the form and intent of Nitsch's events. To this day, people stand against him, either with accusations of blasphemy, or animal cruelty. Even after all this time, the German press still describes the artist as 'scandalous' ('*Skandal-künstler*', SCHULTEJANS 2016: 6).

This 'controversial' artist has many plans; one of them is the re-enactment of his famous *Sechs Tage Spiel* of 1998, the concept he gradually built over 41 years (since 1957, when the first signs appear in the drama *Ein Bruntspiel* (A Forceplay)). Nitsch shows how poorly the Austrian society dealt with the questions of World War II. The ulcer of the Austrian Civil War, removing Engelbert Dollfuß (1934), the Anschluss (1938) and Mauthausen (or Gusen, Innsbruck-Reichenau) has still not been lanced, but Nitsch, who presented his work after World War II to which he reacted, was adopted by Austrians only in the institutional context. Even after 50 years of his career, Nitsch divides Austrian society. By exposing human instincts and the passions he touched the unconscious of each Austrian; and because the pain of World War

II and an awareness of guilt had not disappeared, the society turned against Nitsch with resentment and hatred.

Nitsch asks, if it is time his art is accepted as uncontroversial. He asks, if the Austrians have already accepted their past. But he asks gently, without excesses, arranged through live images, colourful and visual scenes that touch deep human emotions. If, after 50 years, the time has come for reconciliation, maybe Austrians will look on his work as autonomous art, without so much publicized and exposed desire to redeem their own conscience by the means of the law, faith or morals.

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