



Thoughts about “Interweaving Performance Cultures.”

Friederike Felbeck, February 22, 2011

In 1963, the Polish novelist and dramatist Witold Gombrowicz sailed from South America to Europe. He was bound for Berlin, where he was to take up a Ford Foundation fellowship, the first of a series of artist residencies meant to initiate a cultural revival of the recently divided city. For Gombrowicz, it was his first journey to Europe in twenty-three years. In his journal, he describes an extraordinary encounter: at the break of dawn, northeast of the Canary Islands, he sees in a distance the ship of Chrobry, sailing on her maiden voyage from the Polish harbor Gdynia to Argentina. Gombrowicz was on board as a correspondent. Bound to spend a short period abroad and then return.

But the outbreak of World War II disrupted his plans and tied his fate to Buenos Aires, where he disembarked. Twenty-six years and 332 days in Poland; twenty-three years and 226 days in Argentina; this is Gombrowicz’s tally on his return journey, when the two ships meet in his imagination and he becomes his own asynchronous vis-à-vis.

In 2011, in a charming house, that has already been nick-named “Villa Verflechtungen” or rather “The Interweaving Villa”, two flights of stairs, one originally intended for servants, the other for their masters, are the threads that combine three floors of offices and leisure rooms. A house built at the beginning of the 20th century, it is situated in the vicinity of pharmacists, biologists and zoologists near the Botanical Garden with its fascinating collection of microscopic samples. The immediate neighbors are beekeepers. During wintertime they host up to 30 populations, i.e. 600,000 of bees that in spring time will whisper about their secret knowledge in neuro-biology, on the brain and maybe share with the scientists how they organize long-distance flights without losing orientation.

The initial owner of the house was a retired cavalry captain by the name of Friedrich Bugge. At the time of construction, he was executive director of the Swakopmund Trading Company. Swakopmund by the way, now an amiable seaside resort in

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Namibia with the architectural aura of a North Sea bath, was once the capital harbor of the former German colony South-West Africa. The company's task and challenge was to entangle Berlin and Hamburg in the dealings with a distant corner of the world and make an orderly state out of this supposed no man's land, a bare and hostile landscape inhabited only by semi-nomads, farming or breeding animal stock.

In 1904, as many as 4,500 Germans had already settled all over South-West Africa with the Swakopmund Trading Company at the peak of its commercial operations and on the brink of fulfilling its hopes and aspirations. However, the uprising of the indigenous Herero and Nama in South-West Africa at about the same time marked the beginning of a three year long war and slaughter. It was a de facto genocide: one tribe was driven onto an arid steppe, the few wells surrounding them were sealed off by members of the Imperial German Protection Force and 50,000 to 60,000 people died.

An early, self-chosen official program: The Freie Universität Freedom Award presented to the former President of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, on 15 November 2010. The ceremony: respectful, polite. The speeches recall the courageous foundation of the institution: the protests, the determination, the unwavering quest for intellectual freedom and independence of ideological ideas that in 1948 already were beginning to strangle the re-opened University of Berlin (now Humboldt University) in the Soviet sector. Robinson describes her recent visit to a Palestinian refugee camp as a member of The Elders, a group of retired, independent statesmen who can speak freely and boldly. She turns to the few students present and encourages them, "Follow what's going on, because it's your generation!" When did university lose its glamour? Its verve? Its strength?

As scholars, we strive for accuracy. In our particular field of research, for a culture of new differences, linking overdue historical clarifications with new forms of performance. We embark on voyages to undiscovered lands and discover unrepresented, prosperous objects of scientific interest as we still share avant-garde hopes; yet we resemble gold diggers, colonial explorers or greedy children

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grabbing at samples of strange cultures and their expressions. They are merely mutations of our selves meant to sustain our own existence. On this ostensible path to turning ourselves into polygamous souls, we are more than ever in need of writers, artists and scholars – who with eagle eyes watch, analyze, consult and interfere in the process of transformation.

Once a week, in the afternoon the house is open for illustrious guests: all experts finding common ground in their deep concern for cultural policy. They are invited for high tea, apogee of the British Empire, while it rains heavily outside, flooding the fragile banks of piled sand. Sailors, condemned to do nothing while waiting during a calm, started interlacing the ropes lying in their hands, thus weaving their fancywork. Now, is this a calm or a turmoil?

To Gombrowicz, Berlin was like Lady Macbeth – constantly washing her hands. Now, the city is a greenhouse of ideas, famous for its voids: artificial, leftover or bankrupt while breathtaking neighborhoods as the hysterical skyscrapers at Potsdamer Platz and the ponderous Martin Gropius Bau make perfect platforms for red carpet events. What's the fuss all about, then? With so many histories of migration, travels and encounters already within ourselves, how can we distinguish between what has been borrowed, digested or excluded and what will be eternally different?

When the indigenous people of South-West Africa made it to a German stage it was in form of a burlesque, written in 1909 called "Punch as Herero". However, no Herero character was in the cast. The story went like this: Punch is getting drunk in a tavern when his money runs out. He solves his quandary with the help of some black shoe polish. Thus, in blackface, he acts out the part of a savage cannibal. And so he drinks on, paying for his beer with the entrance fees of the curious crowd.