

Franziska Burger (Universität Bern)

Crossing Borders

An Interview with Cristina Galbiati
(Trickster^P, Novazzano) on *Sights*

The Ticinese theatre duo Cristina Galbiati and Ilija Luginbühl, alias Trickster^P, is well-known for its installations. For *Sights* – a ›wandering installation in public space‹ – nine blind people were asked to relate their individual experiences of the cities in which they lived. Participants in this urban installation receive a city map and tokens and head out to look for audio stations or ›sound spots‹ where, by inserting a token, they can listen to a voice describing a blind person's ›views‹ of the city via headphones. With each audio station visited, participants create their own sensorial and emotional map of the city, a map on which distance, colour and orientation receive completely new meanings.

Franziska Burger: What concept of theatre do you represent? What significance does the overstepping of genre boundaries have for you?

Cristina Galbiati: I'm not sure whether I can define which concept of theatre we adhere to. When we first started working together it was very important to define ourselves, but at a certain point I realised that definitions were becoming more and more restrictive. Plunging into the creative process without having to ask ourselves what genre or discipline we represent has become very important, and there's freedom in that. We are often asked if our productions can still be considered ›theatre‹. I don't know, and to be honest I don't care. What counts as theatre nowadays is a very complex question, and we are more interested in searching for new means of expression rather than in answering this question.

Franziska Burger: Which subjects interest you most for your work?

Cristina Galbiati: In the past we often took myths or fairy tales as a starting point. This allowed us to work with archetypes, something we were strongly interested in at the time. We were, however, more focused on the roots and evocative aspects of myths and fairy tales rather than on their narratives. *Sights* on the other hand was our first attempt at something closer to documentary theatre. For this project we worked with the personal experiences and perceptions of blind people rather than on a pre-existing topic. Changing the subject of our work – and thereby the perspective of it – is something which challenges us and allows us to discover new possibilities.

Franziska Burger: Your first works were created under the name Trickster Teatro. Those productions might be considered as belonging to the genre of physical theatre. Your latest works such as *.h.g., B* and *Sights*¹, however, were created under the new name Trickster^P: Was the change in name in any way related to your apparent shift in interest from theatre performance to installation art?

Cristina Galbiati: I don't think we have irrevocably switched from performance to installation art. It is very important to us to create projects which respond to the needs of the moment. This has a lot to do with what happened during our last project, and with the questions and doubts which arose then. After having investigated the possibilities of the performer's physicality, we felt the need to explore the physicality of the spectator in different spaces. At the present moment this is still something we would like to explore more thoroughly, but we also want to keep open the possibility of working with performers again in future.

The reason we changed the name from Trickster Teatro to Trickster^P was more a declaration of freedom than a statement of intent. We felt the word ›teatro‹ was too narrow as it created or raised certain expectations which prevented us from approaching new projects openly.

Franziska Burger: By removing the human actor from your works there has been a shift away from the body moving through space and



Sights, Trickster^P. Foto: Trickster^P

time towards a stagnation of the artwork. Now it is no longer the human body which speaks to the spectator but objects and a narrating voice transmitted through a different medium. Was this change precipitated by your desire to no longer give stage appearances yourselves, or by other interests?

Cristina Galbiati: Each time we begin a new project we usually set up some rules which prevent us from repeating the same experience we created with previous works. After having created *Come una preghiera* at the end of 2007, we felt that we had arrived at a dead end. Previously we had always tried to put the audience in the centre, but at that point we felt stuck in a form we could not overcome. I remember very well when, as an attempt to overcome this situation, my colleague Ilija Luginbühl suggested we create a work without live performers. I felt as if he were proposing to cut off a part of myself. It was a leap of faith,

and we had no idea where it could possibly lead us. The result was *.h.g.*, which I think has been one of the most important works for us precisely because it allowed us to discover possibilities we had never even considered before. We need to be challenged by artistic work, and the decision not to work with live performers was very much related to this need, more so than with the desire to no longer appear onstage.

Franziska Burger: In *La vita: avvertenze e modalità d'uso* or in *Come una preghiera* – the latest of your works, both of which can be considered physical theatre with human actors – you reduced the number of spectators to ten and twenty-two respectively, thus lending the pieces a feeling of intimacy. You took this reductionism to an extreme in *.h.g.*, *B* and *Sights* which were designed for one-person-audiences only. What role does the audience play for you?

Cristina Galbiati: I have come to realise more and more that we are not interested in political aspects of art but in the human being itself. The relation between the spectator and the artwork has been the focal point of our work since the very beginning. From this perspective the human being is both the subject and object of our work.

You mentioned intimacy, and I think that this has been one of the most crucial aspects for us from the beginning. We conceive of space as the link connecting subject to object. Space doesn't simply equate with theatre scenography. Rather, it serves a fundamental dramaturgical function in assigning clear roles to the audience. This is the reason we have never played frontally toward an audience, but always positioned the audience in spaces that affect their perception.

Franziska Burger: Why do you tend to work with special materials and objects that appeal to the spectators' senses of perception?

Cristina Galbiati: We have a holistic understanding of the spectator as an entity comprised of mind, body and memories. Working with different materials and objects enables us to create theatrical experiences which envelop the spectator on different levels simultaneously, engaging him/her intellectually, sensorily and emotionally. For us a piece

only starts working when we achieve this. And in a way the individual spectators themselves become performers of sorts during the process.

The physical texture of spaces and objects plays such an important role in our work because it is through these that we enter into a relationship with the audience. This may seem paradoxical, but sometimes I feel we can get in touch with the spectator in a more human way through physical perceptions than we can by placing a performer onstage.

Franziska Burger: How did you develop the idea for your project *Sights*, and how does the project work?

Cristina Galbiati: With *Sights* we wanted to explore the possibility of putting the audience in motion by inviting them to subjectively experience spaces which had been charged with new meanings through artistic intervention.

We asked ourselves how the audience's relation to the artwork would change if we gave them a specific but simple task like walking. There are various studies about how the act of walking affects human perception and cognitive processes, and we wanted to investigate that. In *Sights*, audiences are invited to walk through the city, map in hand, in search of sound spots where they can listen to the voices and words of blind people who describe what it means for them ›to see‹.

Franziska Burger: Has the project changed your personal understanding of ›seeing‹?

Cristina Galbiati: When we started the project we had almost no knowledge of blindness. Our fascination with the possibility to perceive the world with senses other than that of sight was what interested us in the first place because we felt it resonated strongly with our work. By working with blind people, we realised that the image we had of blindness was a completely romanticised one and that the way in which they perceive reality relies on far more than simply compensating for their lack of sight with the other senses. What I learnt was that sight doesn't involve only the eyes but also the brain and its

capacity to acquire and process images, which means that any human being, no matter whether blind or not, has a completely subjective way of seeing which is conditioned by his experiences, memories, education and so on.

Franziska Burger: What role does each city's particular urban environment play for the installation? Do you have to adapt the installation for each new location?

Cristina Galbiati: In each city we interview a few local blind people and combine their texts with the others we already have in our archive. The most challenging aspect about creating installation art designed for specific urban environments lies in making use of the peculiarities of the environment itself. The journey we provide is always a medley between well-known and obscure urban areas. In a way it is like trying to discover the soul of the city, and of course no city resembles another.

Franziska Burger: You present your performances and installations all over the world. What makes them so relevant or compatible? Why do you think that works based on European fairy tales and myths, in particular *.h.g.* (based on Hansel and Gretel) and *B* (based on Biancaneve/Snow White), work in other countries and even on different continents?

Cristina Galbiati: I would say there are two reasons for this, the first being that the formats we use are unconventional enough to be able to both involve and intrigue the audience. I am increasingly of the opinion that the audience is in search of intimate experiences of self-contemplation. And this I think is strongly connected to the second reason, which is the fact that we speak about human beings. Even though our works are based on European fairy tales, our focus lies less on story-telling than it does on archetypes. It doesn't really matter which fairy tale you begin with because the same archetypes and metaphors underlying the story can be found in many different cultures. This allows us to speak to very different audiences.

Franziska Burger: Is touring the global playground inspiring or limiting?

Cristina Galbiati: Definitely inspiring! Meeting the audience is a very important part of our work because it is the only way to deeply understand what we are doing and to grow artistically. We are based in a small village in the canton of Ticino which is a great place because there isn't much to distract us from the creative process, but it can also be very constricting. Becoming self-referential is a looming danger for all artists, especially for those working in secluded areas like ourselves.

Meeting audiences from different backgrounds and in different contexts is what allows us to keep our work alive. Even when working on specific installations, the artistic process as such never comes to an end as new issues arise which allow us to question our work.

Franziska Burger: How much does the trans-cultural comprehensibility of the subjects you choose and the work you produce matter to you?

Cristina Galbiati: Despite the importance of touring internationally, we don't think too much about distribution when we create something new; I mean, distribution is not something that influences our artistic choices. I feel privileged in this respect because over the years we have always been able to create what we wanted without having to worry about the exigencies of touring. And this is a great privilege not all artists have. And again it is a matter of freedom. I'm aware for example that in the past few years we have had to decline international invitations to perform *B* because the set is too big and heavy to be shipped out of Europe. Of course it's quite frustrating when this happens, but I consider it more important to create sets on the basis of artistic choice rather than logistic necessity.

Franziska Burger: Having at first performed only in Switzerland and Italy, you slowly began showing your work in other countries. Is this in any way connected to your shift in interest from movement to installation?

Cristina Galbiati: I don't think so. For example *Rapsodia per giganti*, which we created in 2004, toured outside of Europe a lot as well. What has really changed over the course of the years are the different contexts we are invited to. Our most recent works have been touring contemporary theatre and performing arts festivals, while earlier works like *Rapsodia per giganti* were presented in more popular contexts. But I think this is because our work has developed over the years, and not because it fits neatly into a specific genre.

Anmerkung

- 1 *Sights* was attended on May 6th 2015 during the AUAWIRLEBEN Festival Bern.

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