

## **Bipolar project: Normal ist Anders / A normális különböző**

**August 2006 – April 2007**

### **Subjective evaluation of the project “Normal is different”**

#### **Some aspects of the cooperation referring to the four Hungarian / German laboratories**

by Mónika Bálint (Co-Curator)

##### **Aesthetic research – art and science: know-how or know what?**

A distinctive element of the laboratories in WINTERACADEMY 2 was the concept of aesthetic research, which connects artistic practice with education, and in some ways with science. In this concept, art can be seen as a form of cognition, investigation and reflection on the knowledge collected about the world, physical, psychological, social phenomena, etc. That means that art is not only mediated to the public / the pupils as a kind of mastership. The focus is also on how artists collect the information which is later reflected in their work. The importance of this approach will be stressed later in this text. This approach can be a strong perspective of the THEATER AN DER PARKAUE concerning art mediation, as well as a distinctive element for the WINTERACADEMY (in comparison to other workshops for children) as presented to the public and possibly to educational organisations.

In the beginning of the cooperation it was planned, that all artists would ask their future participants (the youngsters) to collect materials in their local surroundings. As the first elements of research, these collected materials would have been examined. Then, during the discussion of laboratory concepts and taking into account the experience the organizers had gathered during the first WINTERACADEMY, it was decided to have only small, or possibly no preparation work on the side of the pupils. It was argued that differences in the level of preparation between kids might have resulted in unequal positions. Still, some artists contacted their future participants before the start of the WINTERACADEMY, and I believe this preparatory work helped all youngsters to concentrate more on the theme of the laboratories, and to put themselves in the position of a researcher. The materials collected by students of laboratory 10, for example, were the basis of a fruitful start and could be used to develop situations and own standpoints for the youngsters. Also, they were used as part of the presentation at the end.

##### **Discussing “Normal is different” and power relations**

In the first preparatory meeting we shortly talked about the notions norms, normality and things related to them. We discussed functions of norms and their origin and how norms are formed in society. One statement claimed that: “norms are primarily constructed to make everyday life in society possible, where we do not confront each other every day, where

conflicts are less aggressive. That brings a lot of suppression into our actions.” (Reference was made to the works of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault).

Another statement was: “Norms are social constructions, and are based on some kind of written and unwritten agreement, common will”. During our discussion we also concentrated a lot on how social norms are introduced to kids and youngsters by both, the school system and their parents while they are growing up.

### Normality or Norms

Before and during the first preparatory meeting about the concept of the project “Normal is different” and about the notion “normal”, discussions concentrated more on the social construction of norms and the effect it has on social relations and the construction of identity. Apart from the similarities between the concepts, the work within the laboratories differed in the level in which personal, psychological elements were involved in the discourse. Some of the laboratories started to concentrate more on the notion normal vs. abnormal and on the psychological effects of being defined as abnormal, than on the social structures behind the construction of what is considered a norm.

### Transferring concepts into the laboratory work

During group discussions many references were made to the critical standpoint one can have towards social structures like norms. The connection between norms, power relations and suppression was an important element of this argument. It was then an interesting experience that these issues – although in a completely different form and on a more practical level – had to be faced again. The cooperation of all participants and often the work of the two cooperating artists raised issues like power relations, autonomy versus authority, and parallel versus hierarchical organizational structure. These were criticized by some artists taking part in the project.

In the process of creating the plans, each artist pair seemed to have much greater common understanding on a theoretical level, while - during the laboratory week - many differences appeared in how these ideas could be transformed into artistic practice and the work process with the youngsters.

### Tensions during production

Due to the lack of time during the process of developing material for the final presentation of the WINTERACADEMY, those artists with theatre background had to incall their experience in theatre making. This sometimes resulted in putting more control on what was developed by the group than expected and was criticized by their fellow artist, as it was seen as an attempt to take over the production or as an expression of authority.

In those laboratories where one of the participating artists was female and the other male, and where the female artist had a visual background and the other had a theatre background, plus the female artist was German and the mail Hungarian, the problem of authority was in some ways understood as an effect of cultural differences and gender issues. Some of these arguments can be relevant, but considering that similar developments were seen in laboratory 7 (although in a less confronting way), where there was no gender

difference, and the artist with theatre background was German, I feel that the difference between the traditions of working methods and the heritage of the different fields of art might have had a more significant influence on this situation than culture or gender. Also, the situation might have been connected to personal qualities and group dynamics.

I think that the challenge of performing on stage (in view of the latent expectations of the public and the kids) had the effect that only three days could be used by the groups to finish their research and to discuss the material.

### Interdisciplinary work

I think that, if the artists had spent more time discussing not only the project ideas but the methods they wanted to use, they could have found the major differences between those working methods and, consequently, could have found more solutions to realize a common plan. However, I also think that in many occasions the existence of this difference let them create interesting situations and material. In Laboratory 7, for example, each of the artists had discussed the same issues with the students individually, each using their own methods. In the end, however, they were able to transform these parallel productions into one harmonic performance on stage.

One of the experiments of this project was exactly this kind of interdisciplinary cooperation, which has let us gather so many important experiences. Therefore, I believe that the WINTERACADEMY team should continue in this way, only the process of preparation has to be reconsidered. Also the tools to motivate the artists should be expanded.

### Own research / laboratory-assistants

In the preparatory phase, the artists seemed to be less motivated to concentrate on their own research. In the plans it was proposed that artists consult with experts from other fields. It was possible to get in touch with professionals or researchers from "outside", but in the end the contact was reduced to discussions among the project-team: organizers, curators, artists and theatre pedagogues. The cooperation with the theatre pedagogues was mainly restricted to methodological issues although it was thought that they take part in the phase of the laboratory conception. It turned out that their integration into the communication between the two artists was not that easy or just not possibly. It was hard enough for the two artists to stay in contact and to develop a common idea by mail or phone and during one personal meeting in Berlin or Budapest. So in the end, the role of the theatre pedagogues in the bipolar-laboratories was primarily defined as assistance.

### Collaboration and participation:

Many artists in the project, including the curators brought similar genres of art with them. In their own artistic practice many of them had been doing collaborative or participatory projects before. (The proposal of Annette Kraus was one, which can be seen as relational art by definition – N. Bourriaud 1998)

This is important, as theatre projects in some way always have to be collaborative, although the forms and the level of involvement in the collaboration can be different. In this case, the difference between theatre makers and visual artists can be seen on both, a practical and a conceptual level. For theatre makers, the collaborative work is sometimes more of an elementary need. Production, however, will vary by the level of authority involved in it, and by how the role of the participants is defined.

In the case of the visual artist, the element of collaboration with an involvement of others, the public (participation) is a kind of artistic statement, and is born with the concept of the artwork. It might be an element of social critique, where control is questioned. It is also a critique of a more individualistic standpoint, concerning the position of the artist in the production of the artwork and how his or her work is related to the public, the viewers.

Still, the process of collaborative “production” is something, which the visual artist may not have enough experience in. Therefore, these situations are the tools of research and the process is itself an important thing. Sometimes the process is the artwork and the “material outcome” is replaced with documentation. In many cases this can be problematic, but it is one reason why in our case the visual artists might have felt that this role was changing, as the day of the public presentation came closer and closer.

For theatre makers, the situation of working in a group, with the “troupe” is very “natural”, and the problems might have arisen from, let’s say, having too much experience. Many elements of work and methods become automatic. The act of choosing a new group may not be enough if one wants to reconsider one’s own role as an artist as well as the role of the public. There were significant differences in how far the artists were able to give up their autonomy in favour of the cooperation.

### Collaborative work in the theatre:

Collaboration in this project had to be realized on different levels:

Collaboration among

- the artists in each laboratory,
- the youngsters of different nationalities,
- all artists, curators and organizers in the preparatory work,
- artists, assistants and the theatre team during production,
- the two institutions, KIMI and THEATER AN DER PARKAUE.

Some of these relations were discussed earlier or will be later in this text.

During the preparatory phase, the collaborative work with the theatre team and all the other participants was often discussed by the artists in relation to their autonomy. Group discussions were often time consuming. Artists claimed that this was leaving them much less time to develop their proposals, especially concerning the time they could spend with their work partners.

The organizational team and the theatre pedagogues were stressing the importance of discussing project plans, concepts and the working methods proposed by the artists in collective meetings of all participants. In their point of view, this was probably a “democratic” act, in which each participant had an equally important say. Additionally, part of the preparation was the discussion of methods, experiences, and concepts to help each other in developing complex laboratory plans and to avoid problems which might arise during the WINTERACADEMY week. The preparation was important as not all artists had experience in teaching or working with youngsters.

After a while, however, most artists felt that the series of presentations and discussions was not only too time consuming (which made them feel underpaid), but also a restriction of their autonomy. Many of them, especially visual artists, felt over-controlled. In the eyes of the Hungarian artists, this was at first mainly seen as a result of cultural difference. Later, it became clear that most German artists had a similar point of view. So, most artists of the bipolar-teams agreed, that the high level of control is connected more to the structure of the theatre, the organizational background and the working methods behind the WINTERACADEMY than to cultural differences.

## Role of the artists

During the WINTERACADEMY, a new, more complicated situation occurred to us. The following roles were mixed in the position of each laboratory leader:

- autonomous and professional artist who has all the knowledge and experience to create an artwork, which is defined by the public as of high quality;
- a personality with a distinguishable style and world view, who can add new positions to the conceptual development of the project (dealing with the notion of normality and the development of project plans)
- a master of his or her profession who is able to transmit his or her knowledge to the kids / youngsters, something like a teacher
- a group leader or director, who is able to keep the group together, and who gives the upcoming ideas a aesthetic frame.

Concerning the last point, visual artists, who were often concentrating more on the process than on performance, definitely had a drawback. Also those artists with no teaching experience could have felt disadvantaged, although most of the youngsters were old enough, so that they could be treated as adult participants. As time was rather short, I believe, most artists did not make the attempt to teach new skills, as this was not the aim of the laboratories, anyway.

Although being able to film, make photographs, dance, paint, or act probably attracted some kids. The aim of the laboratories was to show artistic production, not to teach it, and also to show how the world can be examined by means of art.

## Students

One of the main elements of the bipolar-cooperation was that not only Hungarian artists were invited to cooperate in the project, but also Hungarian youngsters at the age of 16 – 20. To provide equal conditions for all youngsters in the laboratories, the working language was English. The German youngsters had to take this condition into account when applying for the WINTERACADEMY.

For the Hungarian team this condition was an element, which let them select the pupils. All pupils were interviewed in English, so only those students could take part, who were able to communicate in English fluently.

The organisation KIMI is in contact with schools from five cities where they organize drama classes in the general educational system. Youngsters for the WINTERACADEMY were chosen from these schools. Although a maximum of three students was selected from the same class, some had known each other from different drama events.

The disadvantage of collecting participants from drama classes was, that they had some experience in drama and acting, while most German youngsters did not. Sometimes this background divided the laboratories or developed tension. On the other hand, the Hungarians were highly motivated, and therefore often more active than the Berlin youngsters, who did not have the reward of travelling, and being selected from their classes (due to their knowledge of English and interest). The motivation of the Hungarian students could sometimes help to drive the work process forward.

For most Hungarian students the opportunity to see different ways of working and to meet different forms of art was a good experience and could solve the problem of different artistic backgrounds. In laboratory 7, the Hungarian students could involve themselves more in the production of visual materials, which was new to them. In this group, some German students had experience on visual fields of art, therefore they were happy to get involved in performance.

In laboratory 10, where both laboratory leaders had a theatre background, the different level of acting experience between the two national groups developed some tensions within the group during preparation.

For a few Hungarian students, who expected having to show their acting skills, the final presentation was a little bit disappointing.

### Organization

The bipolar project “Normal is different” was organized by two very distinct organizations, different in structure, aims and means. At the same time, we decided to create a parallel working structure for this project. The fact, that both curators didn't belong to the partner-organizations, and were not regular employees of either institution was a similarity itself. In addition, both sides provided one member responsible for organization (Sascha Willenbacher and Imre Keserű). One distinctive element was the rest of the team. On the Hungarian side Anikó Remsei was responsible for the budget, and financial stuff only. All other organizational matters were done by Mónika Bálint and Imre Keserű. On the German side, a separate organisation was responsible for financial and strictly organizational matters. This structure proved to be very effective in organizational matters and could cope well with the size of the tasks. On the German side it was a real challenge to deal with the project and the public presentation where the work of around 150 people (including kids) had to be managed. On the other hand, the structure was not flexible enough to answer the needs of all artists. It was also sometimes problematic to deal with the physical distance and differences in language / communication methods / ways of working. Also, the Hungarians were often not able to keep the time restrictions which were important for the German organizational team.

Other problems arose on the level of planning. The structure on the German side, and the level of advancement in planning restricted the organizers' ability to convert the plans and to integrate the proposals of their partner. There was a strong will on both sides to cooperate, but some ideas and proposals could not be integrated on a practical level.

As I mentioned before, some tensions appeared during the preparatory meetings between the artists and the organizational team. Control was another aspect, which restricted the cooperation among the teams of the two institutions. The cooperation was built in order to bring international participants to the WINTERACADEMY, into an already existing structure. The organizational structure of the theatre, and the concept of the WINTERACADEMY was something already given. Also the role of the Hungarian participants was defined to create a parallel structure to that of the German project team. This fixed structure often proved not to be flexible enough. Similar to the view of the artists, who felt their autonomy was restricted in some ways, the Hungarian team felt they were not able to add their experience and professional concepts to the project as much as they wanted to.

The first difficulty concerning organization and communication issues arose when the partners were developing the “Ieporello”, the flyer to advertise the program in schools in order to win future participants. Because of the forecoming Christmas holidays and the time that was needed for printing, distributing, and collecting applications, this material had to be prepared in a rather early state of the cooperation. It was one of the reasons why the artist pairs had to create a common idea in a short time.

So the artists had to send in their short texts for this publication, as well as some other data. Just before sending in the last version for printing, there was some reconciliation. Due to lack of time, however, the last version was not sent back by the German organizers for a last proof-read. Viewing the accomplished material only weeks later, the artists had to find out that their texts had been changed in some way. The aim of the German team had been to publish material that was attractive to kids and youngsters, but they did not have the time to

finalize the text with the artists. At this point, everyone felt that the organization and its inherent control might narrow their artistic autonomy.

As regards to the public presentation in Germany, the organisation was really professional and dealt well with the size of this task. Also they were able to create great publicity for the event, which is not true of the Hungarian team, as almost no public was present at the presentations and discussions in Budapest.

### Communication

Many issues that I have mentioned before are, in one way or the other, connected to communication matters. Therefore, I want to mention only two aspects. One is language: although it was decided that the language of the project will be English, as the bipolar project was concerning only 4 laboratories out of 10, this was a task which often failed to be kept in mind. For those Hungarians, who needed translation when discussions turned to German, it was often hard to react in time and to follow all arguments.

Another aspect is Email as a tool of communication: This worked well for most of the time, although sometimes replies and information were coming late, which was taking back the development of the project. However, similar things happen in every co-operation.

Mónika Bálint

Budapest

2007-03-27