PERFORMING ARTS—INFLUENCING CHANGE

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Abstract: In the present political and socio-cultural situation in Slovakia, it is natural and necessary even to ask “what position do the arts occupy in this country?” and “what role do they play within the complex global atmosphere?” Art and culture should mirror the nation. Are we aware of that? Do we realize that art has the ability and the power to move? Not many of us realize this. This is a consequence of the permanent scepticism, apathy and resentment caused by the fact that this voice has never been heard. And this is not just the case in Slovakia. Yet even today there are certain groups of artists who still believe in the arts and their power. I think that giving up on this faith is the easiest thing to do. The decision whether to fight, rebel or actively participate is extremely complex and in many cases doing so may even threaten the freedom of the person. In this article I address the issue of whether art has the power and ability to change things. I draw attention to those socially engaging activities that could be described as performance art, which occur beyond enclosed areas and in public spaces; and in order to achieve change, they openly and nakedly attack individual consciousness and the subconscious.

Keywords: society; performance art; public space; engagement; artistic freedom; criticism

“Theatre is a place where you think; where you can question things and shake norms and stereotypes. It’s a total experiment; there are no limits.”
– Rabih Mroué, Lebanese performer, director, actor and playwright said in the interview for Schau ins Blau. (Wirth, Schamburek 2011).

Introduction

An almost empty stage: Just a table and a chair with a screen next to it. A man is sitting on the chair and a woman is standing at the table, with a book. She opens the book randomly and tells the man the page number. According to the page number, the man tells her how much time she has to describe what she sees in the book. Before she begins her description, the woman mentions the name of the artist who created the artwork in the book. Gradually, the audience realizes that this is a publication focusing specifically on body art. This is revealed through her reciting the names of Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Frank B., Herman Nitsch, Javier Perez and many others who use the body as an art object. The play, Who’s Afraid of Representation, is based on this reoccurring principle: the number...
of the page in the book sets the time in minutes and seconds in which the particular artistic object is to be described. This process of reproduction is somewhat distorted by the man, who walks from the chair to the screen, stands in front of it and begins to tell his story—the story of Hassan Mamoun, a murderer who kills first of all for politics, and then later because of religious antagonism, and who is eventually confronted with the fact that if someone kills a person, this action cannot be justified either politically or religiously. Such a deed can only be committed by a mentally disturbed man.

In Who’s Afraid of Representation, which was created in 2004 (it is still performed today—recently by Hebbel theatre am Ufer/HAU in Berlin), the story of murder, killing and death, combined with body art and self-destructiveness, violence, physical suffering, creates at first glance the impression of a parallel between reality and art. But this is not what the director wanted to achieve. Rabih Mroué, who is fascinated by body art himself, uses the story as an appeal to Lebanese society, which refuses to take responsibility for people such as Hassan Mamoun, and which rejects individualism and individual responsibility.

This is my personal body against the body of the community. Thus, the community will antagonize the individual body. This is why Body Art doesn’t exist in Lebanon till now.... I would like to see this kind of art in Lebanon because it might be able to produce a social shock. We still don’t have it though. My idea was therefore to deal with it in a different way, to reproduce these works by words (Wirth, Schamburek 2011).

Several of Rabih Mroué’s productions attempt to draw attention to the political situation in Lebanon, to its history associated with the civil war and the lack of freedom, which is a result not only of power politics, but also religious practices, and the constant pressure of society on the individual. He creates an engaged theatre, which is at the same time an artistic theatre. The social and society appeal of Who’s Afraid of Representation does not come at the expense of artistic value.

If we are to talk about one of the forms of art—about how it engages and involves civil society, then I agree with Rabih Mroué that art is not politics, nor a revolutionary tribunal. Art can have a powerful impact and change the thing that is at the centre of its attention. The only condition is that the people themselves, as individuals, have a sensitivity, perceptiveness and willingness to change the thing that creates discomfort.

In the present political and socio-cultural situation in Slovakia, it is natural and even necessary to ask “what place do the arts occupy in this country?” and “what role do they play within the complex global atmosphere?” Art and culture should mirror the nation. Are we aware of that? Do we realize that art has the ability and power to move? Not many of us realize this. This is a consequence of the permanent scepticism, apathy and resentment caused by the fact that this voice has never been heard. And this is not just the case in Slovakia. Yet even today there are certain groups of artists who still believe in the arts and their power. I think that giving up on this faith is the easiest thing to do. The decision whether to fight, rebel and actively participate is extremely complex and in many cases it may even threaten the freedom of the person.

In this article I would like to address the issue of whether art has the power and ability to change things. There are many artists and artistic groups that have not remained indifferent and who engaged in socio-political criticism. I would, however, like to draw attention to