

## **PRESENTATION AT THE MOBILE ACADEMY : WAYS OF NARRATION**

### **Only the Clouds Remained the Same. A Lecture on Methods and Recent Projects.**

Bettina Funcke in Conversation with Matthew Buckingham on Theater and Visual Arts,  
Narration and Walter Benjamin  
September 14, 2004

BF: What did you think when I invited you to come and speak in the context of an academy, not only a theater academy but also an academy with the topic folklore, and how did you feel it might relate to your work?

MB: I was interested because the model of a short external academic situation, which I have encountered a lot recently—probably because I have been in Europe more—is quite nice. I think it is very interesting from both sides: From the student's side because it's like a momentary reformulation—because what students see is totally different, they're outside of the normal academy—and the people teaching are usually people who don't teach that much or they also escape their academic context.

I think it is a really good model; in a short time a student can really learn so much. It is similar to the School of Common Property in Halle I recently participated in, which consisted of 5 or 6 workshops and was 5 days long. All the students came from other places to do them. It was a kind of a free Mobile Academy for me because I wasn't really involved but I saw a lot of the students and the teachers. It would be great if more people would organize these kinds of things. It also connects in my mind to the various "Freie Klassen"—different free classes at different art schools that I encountered as I've been traveling and teaching, and I have no idea where it started. So much about the model.

As for the theater context, it is always a part of my horizon somehow because as I was getting more serious about studying art, I was at the same time doing a lot of theater. As a teenager and in high school it was very productive. There was an English teacher who directed the theater and we did ten productions a year, so it was almost once a month that we got something going on. Everyone changed responsibilities all the time; it was almost like a company, so we would end up learning everything by the end of three years. At the time I didn't know that—I didn't realize what role it was playing in my own development. But a few years later, after I finished college, I was invited to teach very young kids in a children's theater run by artists in New Hampshire and quickly I realized what had happened to me when I was a teenager. The first time I went to the theater it was just one week and over the course of that week I had an awareness of how these children between the age of 8 and 18 were finding themselves in the process of making theater—it wasn't consciously based on making the production, of making the play but with some distance from my perspective I could see the way they were navigating the formats and becoming people in a way. So I started going back and I ended up spending six summers there doing different things with theater, workshops, and I wrote and directed several plays.

In my own work I have a very conflicted relationship with theater because there is so much potential in it as a form. But for some reason it does not get exploited in the way that it could at this cultural moment in many contexts, certainly not every context.

There is an enormous blind spot that seems to draw everyone in, when they're thinking about theater as it's been formulated in the majority and it isn't very interesting. But I really can't understand why a kind of hyper-position in art and theater doesn't get more monumental or becomes more vital or interesting. There are certain people who have found an interesting way to work. But I am surprised how at the time since I've lived in New York-I would say especially in New York-the division between art and theater as traditions got much more clear and divided, the way they weren't necessarily camps, and then people really tried to strengthen that.

It also happened with film and video-so-called experimental film and video art, theater, and even maybe because of when it came about, even about so-called new video or interactive video or net-art-that there is a kind of survivalist strategy in each expression and that it becomes institutionalized to some degree and separated. On the one hand there is a kind of amnesia that's a way of reinvention of the other disciplines within. There is a kind of shark of the other in theater, a kind of art and experimental theater in the art context, which was already very well explored 20, 30 years ago, so I find this kind of overlap then, which is actually not so much of an overlap in the end because on the one hand there is a huge gap and at the same time a weird overlap.

BF: Yeah. And the weird overlap is usually also based on so much misunderstanding and missing history, missing context, and that is also one of the reasons it would be good to have a series of visual arts lectures within a theater summer academy to transform something that has been an unnoticed exchange, a seamless inspiration between theater and visual arts, to something that we reflect while also formulating the differences to see how far apart these artistic practices really are.

MB: Yeah.

BF: You mentioned earlier that there were few artists who have done really well in exploiting the potential of theater. Do you mean visual artists?

MB: I should think of some...

BF: Oh you don't have to...

MB: I think I'll start the other way around: I am almost never uninterested in what the rest of the group does but there are some productions I like more than others. They were able to create a difference, working on a kind of hybrid lane, at a time when almost everyone was doing that-in the early 1970s-and they managed to keep hanging on to something without... I mean it is very institutionalized, but on the other hand this work could only exist in a kind of hybrid space, and instead they managed to reinforce the theater, they managed to reinforce the field that they worked in.

BF: The field being theatrical as well as visual arts?

MB: Yeah, I mean that, unfortunately, they are up to almost the same thing. They seem to have the need to protect something nobody else is interested in, so they end up being the only ones. In a way they have an island as well, which is sad, but at least I find what they do or their island more interesting than the other islands because I think they stopped-what they did successfully was that they stopped. They don't take the important things for granted, the relation to the audience or the text, and so on. And specifically in terms of art, I think it's hard for me to actually come up with names...

BF: Every example I could think of would be too specific. Since there are only islands it is very hard to pick one or two to as examples.

MB: Especially in the art context when artists work more towards the theatrical mode then this question of amnesia comes up a lot. The art context is not so insulated but it is insulated enough that if you move a little bit more towards the theatrical mode you don't share a common history any longer. There is a huge history of artworks that people didn't experience because they disappeared since they were time-based. So it is inevitable that younger artists repeat a lot of things as they get interested in that. In a way it boils down to the cultural blind spot again.

BF: Recently, enormous interest developed in finding ways to document this part of ephemeral art history, especially starting from the 1960s onwards. I'm sure you can find these elements already earlier, for example in Dali's Surrealism, which could also be considered part of this history. Most of the archiving-work happening right now is about finding ways to document these time-based, lost pieces. Like the Robert Whitman book, for example-I don't know if you have seen that-it was one of these challenges of how to recreate the integrity of an oeuvre which was largely time-based. And all the dancers and performers of the 1960s are getting their books published now, too, Trisha Brown, Joan Jonas...

I would like to come back to the question of folklore, which I thought was such an unusual and strange topic; I still find it edgy and not easy. It always unfolds differently when you start to think about it. Did it make you feel skeptical or did you feel rather curious about it?

MB: No, I thought it was quite good, actually, because for me it brought to mind a way I didn't think that it could possibly be folkloric... So, feeling confident about that I thought much more of folklore as a means of communication. Well, I guess also because of my interests, just thinking more in a direction of navigating with narrative, recognizing narrative as a constantly operating condition, and emphasizing the role of fiction within that kind of communication model. So it made a lot of sense to be invited because it feels like a combination of things that I was already working with.

BF: Yes, this is exactly why I asked you to participate-not only because I thought it would be interesting for you but also because I thought that you have a lot to offer to the students in relation to the topic: narration, and its presence, the constant overlap of various forms of narration around us. It is so important to make one aware, especially artists.

MB: It also fitted very much with a workshop I was doing recently, which was the title of my talk, "Only the Clouds Remain the Same," that I never actually got to. But with some students I've been doing reading seminars. I've been looking at Walter Benjamin's essays "The Storyteller" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Even if they were written quite close together in time, they're extremely contradictory. In "The Work of Art" essay, telling means writing quite a lot about at least the potential of change, even revolution. On the other hand, "The Storyteller" essay belongs into the context of the loss of story through technology in the media. They're almost polemic, you can't believe them. You cannot have a dialectic model because they don't allow a lot of room for each other, even when they were written only one year apart, and they're really quite of the same writing material.

BF: Maybe they should always be published together?

MB: Yes, in a way, they really go together. But they go together in a way that gives the reader a lot of work to do, which is good. It's interesting to read those with students. And that was the title for the talk "Kingkong Was from the Storytellers".

BF: But it's also a code for "The Storyteller"?

MB: Yes, it's a paraphrase, just an alternative phrase in "The Storyteller" where Benjamin tries to stage a metaphor for the shift in social culture before a war and afterwards. He says the only thing that remained the same were the clouds, that everything else has totally changed. The analogy is that people's needs or their social construction is also similar to what it was, but there is this kind of gap where people can't navigate through narrative the same way they did before the war. Being able to navigate experience through narrative has seemingly been relativized so much through the devastation of the war. The empathy and all the dynamical storytelling have somehow been relativized. According to the essay it's hard to put meaning in that kind of storytelling.

BF: Did Benjamin write "The Storyteller" before "The Artwork..." essay?

MB: I think it was a few months after.

BF: So Benjamin was optimistic at first and then pessimistic?

MB: Yes, and then probably optimistic again.

BF: And so on.

MB: Yes. No, it's really not a resolved relationship... Maybe in some other summer academy, it would be interesting to see the two essays in comparison.

This was another immediate thing that I thought of: the way most students that I read the essay with react very much against it. They really say this essay is too nostalgic, it's too pessimistic, narrative still functions, and so on. Which is true, I think, but at the same time we do have to deal with some of the other points that have been made there, especially in terms of the media. I thought a temporary school addressing the narration would also deal with that. The points developed in these essays are extremely strong in relation to recent events around the control of information, control of narrative, like the war in Iraq and the whole notion of fighting, war, and terrorism and these things. If it boils down to the narrative level it doesn't make sense. It can't be narrativized. I think that is part of the point Benjamin makes. A place like Guantanamo Bay doesn't have a story. You can't make something out of it, you can't argue with it. It is external to political narration. The same as Putin's reaction yesterday to terrorism in the school: the announcement that 80 regional governors should now be appointed by him. Now I'm really going off...

The level of control of narrative as things grow together, as space gets smaller, becomes even more acute. In other words, as the time is needed to communicate a story, narration forms a kind of crisis: it either gets silent or somehow is transformed. I think it's always been a question.

BF: But maybe also because we have the extremist stories now, silencing all the other stories. There is still room for the narration of terrorists, so-called kidnappers- and execution-videos, threatening and confessing videos. They are given a surprisingly large space in the arena of narration. But then all the other totalities in between, total control or total anarchy, are basically muffled.

MB: I think it's a good exercise to try to imagine news stories that we didn't hear the last three years because it has been such a market-shit with so called top-five stories every day.

BF: That almost sounds like turning Benjamin's "The Work of Art" essay upside-down because it has now been used by the side he didn't mean to address or describe. The revolution is being made from the other side, and almost with his arguments.

MB: I think it would be interesting to read the essay in relation to recent media control, to see if he makes any analysis. There is a kind of way that's not addressed so directly in the essay. It's so much more about the effects of reproduction than it is about the pressure that controls reproduction.

BF: Even so, it was written in a time when Benjamin must have just seen Leni Riefenstahl's film Olympia, and the text is so much about film. I read it recently and I was surprised how much he is actually talking about film. I assumed that he must have been influenced by seeing Riefenstahl's style of filmmaking, which would already have been the other revolution.

MB: Although, I don't know, maybe... By that time he was in exile, in Paris I suppose. So he may not have had so much day to day access to those films. Although this film transcended propaganda and the war, it was also playing in New York. Maybe it was playing in Paris.

But in any case, that dynamic that is described can be analyzed that way I think: the control of the media as opposed to the opportunity of the media.

BF: Suddenly "The Storyteller" essay reaches an entirely different urgency in its pessimism, or in its conservative position.

MB: Right. I think that a nostalgic tone is in the essay but it is also the easiest to jump off now. On the one hand, if storytelling has survived as a practice, we don't have to worry so much about nostalgia-that's more superficial-but rather worry about political interpretations of narrating that he is also addressing, that he is also very concerned about. So that's more useful and interesting for students.

BF: So, for the next academy, I'll invite you to do a reading seminar.

MB: Okay.

Matthew Buckingham, artist, New York/Berlin

Matthew Buckingham's installations question the role of collective memory, using photography, film and video and audio technology. Buckingham often starts with a seemingly everyday or forgotten artefact from the past and then explores its connections to the present. He does this by examining the representative power and effect of pictures and stories. This genealogy becomes evident to the observer inside the spatial / architectonic structure of the installations.

Bettina Funcke, New York

Bettina Funcke has published numerous texts about contemporary art and culture and works as an editor at the Dia Art Foundation in New York. She writes regularly for the art magazine Artforum and her texts have appeared in catalogues and magazines. She is currently earning her doctorate in philosophy and art theory at the College of Design in Karlsruhe. She curated a series of lectures on the Visual Arts for the Mobile Academy.