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## **(Dis-)Belief**

In search of a lost reality or playing with illusion.

### (1) Main argument

If one is to believe the trend scouts of the theater and of theater criticism, contemporary theater has been shaped by a »recapturing of reality on the stage« (Theaterkanal/Theatertreffen), by a »return of documentary theater« (Laudenbach: 11)<sup>1</sup>, even by a »Théâtre sans illusion« (Biet/Frantz: 565) since the turn of the century. In contrast to this, it is my assertion that this supposed »reality theater«, on its search for the real, has in fact – like Columbus who searched for India and found America – whether it likes it or not, rediscovered the inextricable ambivalence of the belief in illusion. It is not »reality strikes back«, as the Düsseldorf independent theatre “Forum Freies Theater” asserted in reference to present day theater during a conference in September 2006,<sup>2</sup> but rather »illusion«. Contemporary theater plays with »illusion«, one of the motifs criticized by the »post-dramatic theater of the real« (Lehmann 1999a: 67, vgl. 1999b: 183-193). Calculated or disturbed in their own calculations, theater makers who are particularly interested in reality or in the real reveal what it means to be entangled, as it were, in the media of theater and language (vgl. Chartin/Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy/Weber: 234). To begin with, I will attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the title of a roundtable at the „[Berliner Theatertreffen](http://www.theaterkanal.de/fernsehen/monat/05/204323382)“ in the year of 2006  
<http://www.theaterkanal.de/fernsehen/monat/05/204323382> (03/25/2007).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://www.forum-freies-theater.de/archiv/09sept/symposium.html> (03/25/2007).

give a short overview of the historical problem we are dealing with. The first part of this will consist of a short *tour de force* through various definitions of reality brought into the equation within the context of so-called »new documentary theater« or »reality theater«. In the second part I will briefly elucidate what illusion means in general and what it means in the theater in particular. Following on from this I would like to illustrate my hypothesis more elaborately using two examples of so-called »reality theater«: Stefan Kaegi's »bulgarische(r) LKW-Fahrt durchs Ruhrgebiet [...] Cargo Sofia Zollverein«<sup>3</sup> [Bulgarian Truck Trip through the Ruhr Valley [...] Cargo Sofia Zollverein] and Walid Raad's works »My neck is thinner than a hair: engines« (vgl. Nakas/Schmitz 96-103) and »I feel a great desire to meet the masses once again«. <sup>4</sup> Finally I will offer a few suggestions for a contemporary understanding of illusion.

## (2) Fictions of Reality, Realism and the Real

What do we mean when we speak of »reality«, the »real«, or, like the wonderful title of this symposium, »Monsters of Reality« on the stage? At the moment there is hardly another issue that one encounters so frequently on the fringes of the theater, on the independent stage, at festivals, in projects funded by government foundations, during symposiums financed by third-party funds, and at theater and media studies, performance and dance congresses. It is difficult to say when this recent search for reality, the real, a new »realism« or a new form of Documentary Theater began on the stage. At any rate, this search had already been underway for about a decade, was defining the stage in line with Reality TV, the Dogma 95 Manifesto and omnipresent self exposure on the internet, as Hans-Thies Lehmann published his »notes« with the title »TheatReales« in 1998. Here he placed Live

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<sup>3</sup> CARGO SOFIA-ZOLLVEREIN, Stage director: Stefan Kaegi, Rimini Protokoll. First show: [07/07/2006](#) at Choreographisches Zentrum PACT Zollverein, Essen.

<sup>4</sup> Lecture Performance. First show [at 06/23/2005](#) at »Theater der Welt«, Stuttgart.

Art with its creation of situations that urge the spectator to intervene, Performance Art with its questioning of illusion, and theater by groups like Gob Squad and directors like Stefan Pucher and René Pollesch – which he dubbed »Cool Fun« – into the context of this search and added them to the realm of »Post-dramatic theater«, which he had just constituted. This search reached the Berlin Volksbühne at the latest in 2002, when Carl Hegemann published a dramaturgical pamphlet with the title »Einbruch der Realität« – Invasion of Reality – and incited the fourth International Summer Academy in the Frankfurt Mousson Tower with the unexcelled title »True Truth about the Nearly Real«. In the following years this opened out into symposiums with militant programmatic titles like the mentioned one »Reality Strikes Back« or academically timeless titles like »Wege der Wahrnehmung. Authentizität, Reflexivität und Aufmerksamkeit im zeitgenössischen Theater« – Paths of Perception. Authenticity, Reflexivity and Attention in Contemporary Theater. Kassel's »Documenta« in 2002 as well as Stuttgart's »Theater of the World« in 2005 – accompanied by performances, exhibitions and a symposium – made it clear that there were points of contact with corresponding tendencies in the visual arts. The stars of the reality scene, along with Rimini Protokoll for instance She She Pop, Hofmann & Lindholm, Christoph Schlingensiefel or Hans-Werner Kroesinger, can be looked upon as being part of the establishment on German stages.

As the English titles “get real. documentary theatre past and present”, “Dramaturgy of the real on the world stage”, and the special issue of the journal “TDR” on “Documentary Theater”, edited by Carol Martin, prove, here we are first of all dealing with an objection to “the paradigm of post-modernism and its restriction of politics to acts of ‘transgression’”, as Mike Vanden Heuvel phrases it. These volumes prove arrestingly that this new search for the »real« is a global movement feeding on local issues, if nothing else borne on the wings of cosmopolitan oriented opponents of globalization and those excluded due to their class, their ethnicity or their sexual orientation. New Documentary Theater, based

on facts, manifests itself world wide in performances depending on all kinds of archived materials, in the utilization of autobiographical materials, in docu-dramas, in word for word documentations called “Verbatim Theater” and multimedia productions. Carol Martin differentiates between six functions of new Documentary Theater: 1. Recent disclosures of trials. 2. Additional accounts of historical events. 3. Reconstructions of events. 4. Connections between autobiography and history. 5. Critiques of the functions of documentation and fiction. 6. Discussions of the oral culture of the theater. Both mentioned recent volumes on the real on stage illustrate this enumeration with the texts of plays and productions as well as accounts of the processing of individual and societal trauma, revisions of spectacular judicial proceedings and reenactments of memorable parliamentary committees and political speeches.

However, reading these accounts and examples, the impression quickly asserts itself that political conflicts are often misused for the creation of entertaining evenings or that theater is mutating into a continuation of television by other means. What Carol Martin attempts in her differential essays seems all the more necessary: explaining the paradoxes of this new genre, naming its dangers and naiveties, and answering self-evident questions – what kinds of distinctive features does a theater that resorts to archive material offer in comparison to other media? Wherein lies the additional value of »documentations« using theatrical means? What distinguishes this theater from others?

Most of the examples listed can be identified as variants of that which Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call “Gegenöffentlichkeit” – literally: a counter-public, an alternative political public, not ruled by dominant economic forces. Documentary theater is thus seen to be superior to supposedly faster and more effective media, as it does not purport to be more objective, but rather more subjective. Perceived reality and social and political commentary appear here as a viable form of knowledge. However, the paradoxes of stage truths quickly

become apparent: that testimonies to reality can only appear as really real when they are medially conveyed – when they take the stage as film, video, sound or internet documents; that reality theater is, indeed, legitimized by way of facts, but has to choose these facts, stage them and in doing so supplement them with the gestures, glances, body language and spatial experience of actors and directors; and that, ultimately, its believability, the impression of »real life« does not originate in the archive. In other words, that we are always dealing with fictions of reality.

However, in this respect they confirm – and be it *contre coeur* – the very observation that shaped the term ‘post-modernism’ for Jean-Francois Lyotard. Carol Martin’s plea is to be understood as keeping with post-modernism’s misgivings with respect to closed systems, that »our obsessive analytical attention« is required in the face of claims of »being in possession of the entirety of evidence«. And it reminds me of Lyotard’s intermittent ennoblement of the “small” narrative against the “grand” narrative, when she argues for an extension of the concept of the documentary and against its universal definition, ultimately for an extension of the concept of Documentary Theater: »In actual fact, the discourse surrounding the question of what is documentary theater and what is not revolves around the question of how we sanction and privilege certain forms of information over others.«

Now would however be the point at which one would need to ask if this liberal and tolerant sounding relativism – a deduction, seemingly almost necessary, drawn from the established, unavoidable insight that what appears on the stage is a mediated and therefore also fictitious reality – does not unduly diminish the problem of new – and old – reality theater. Such liberalism only seems plausible as long as it is not applied to the denial of the Shoah or other crimes. But what happens if tomorrow negationists, invoking their right to bring under-privileged forms of information into the theater, set about rewriting German history in the spirit of right-wing extremist ideology?

In contrast to the untroubled support of the numerous small narratives and in line with one of the fathers of post-modernism, maybe we should attempt to abide by that which in the supposed presentation of reality refers to a different truth, even if it cannot be conceived of as such, and ultimately to truth as the Other of presentation. In 1968, when Documentary Theater and the demand for literary realism or reality was at the height of its fashion, Roland Barthes analyzed what was to be observed under the auspices of realism: it was not a coming approximation of reality, but rather the attempt to create »referential illusion«, to forget the semiotic character of presentation in favor of the impression of an uninterrupted representation. However, according to Barthes, to the extent that the »real« – the manifold tangible details that showed more than that which has a function in a »realistic« narrative or production – was supposed to disappear, it inevitably resurfaced in a roundabout manner as a rest that was not completely subsumed in the economy of presentation. Barthes described this rest as a »Real(ity) effect«, with which he, if nothing else, was referring to the Lacanian »real«. Lacan's »real« is not to be confused with »reality« or »realism«. It is nothing other than a hint, manifesting itself in effects, at that which calls forth and steers presentations, without itself appearing within them: its grounds often traumatic and always to be conceived of as an »Ereignis«, an event. These grounds are not accessible by any other means than in distortion or misapprehension.

### (3) Recapitulation of the Historical Problem: Illusion.

But, to come back to the hypothesis I alluded to at the beginning: does recent so-called »Reality« or »Documentary« Theater even deal with reality or the real? I would like to assert – in spite of whatever the assertions and intentions of the artists are – that in most instances we are, in fact, dealing with much more (and

less at the same time), namely the question of illusion and the belief in this illusion. Before I illustrate this by using tangible examples, I would like to remind you of what we are dealing with when we speak of illusion – in and beyond the theater.

A straight straw that we see as bent because we have submerged it in water – this oft-cited example helps us to quickly understand what is meant by illusion: something that we believe in, although we know, or think we know, that it does not correspond to reality, a spontaneous belief in the unbelievable, or, as a philosopher wrote some time ago, “wissensresistentes Wirklichkeitsbewusstsein von etwas, was nicht wirklich existiert” (»a consciousness of reality, resistant to knowledge, of something that does not really exist« (Wiesing: 89).

Fabricating uninterrupted illusion – this formula describes in a nutshell the project and maybe also the phantasm of theater theoreticians of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (cf. Strube 1976. 204-215; Pavis: 167-168; Franz: 30-32; Ladzarzig: 140-142). In theories of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, this project emanates from demands for probability, naturalness, truth and the causal necessity of plot, and as the result of a supposedly eternal rule derived from Aristotle, of the doctrine of *Vraisemblance*, of the effects of compassion or the goal of moral education. Above all, this project is on the look out for totality. Whilst viewing a work of art, one should be able to see the world (cf. Kern: 172), and the viewer should – more or (in the case of Mendelssohn, Schiller and Goethe<sup>5</sup>) less – completely forget the frame by way of which this world becomes viewable. From a 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective the project of the doctrinaires of French classicism and 18<sup>th</sup> century aestheticians can be described as part of a teleological process that has its origins in early modern stage forms; its *teloi* are the 19<sup>th</sup> century proscenium, and its pendants cinema and television screens (cg. Haß 2005; Heeg). But put bluntly: 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century theater and image media work on realizing the utopia of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that can only dream of uninterrupted

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. [Strube 1971: 85 and 181](#); [Koch/Voss: 7](#).

illusion. Technical transformations like the abolition of illusion inhibiting stage benches, the development of the gas and later electric illumination of the stage and the simultaneous darkening of the auditorium, and, furthermore, the configuration of stage-design to serve fictional illustration, all contribute to the development of theater away from the 17<sup>th</sup> century discursive assembly room of intersecting gazes (cf. Biet 2002 and 2005) to that illusion building image space towards which early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde rebellions in theater practice would later be directed.

Brecht's practical exercises with and theoretical deliberations on illusion mark a turning point in the history of theatrical illusion and its disruption. His opposition to illusion is well recorded: theater should display distance to the illusionistic object by not letting the reality of its means – the body of the actor, lights, etc. – fall into oblivion during the presentation. However, the position handed down in the fragmentary didactic dialog or polylog of the *Messingkauf* (Brecht 1993, p. 695-869, cf. Brecht 1967: 500-657)<sup>6</sup> is more complex than the anti-illusionism that Brechtists have elevated to the status of doctrine. The formulation »abbau der illusion und der einföhlung« (BBA 124/88, cf. Brecht 1993: 719) – the disassembly of illusion and empathy – possibly intended as a chapter title that at the very least alludes to the location of the discussion, a stage, of which the »decoration langsam abgebaut wird« [of which the decorations are slowly being disassembled], appropriately describes that a ideology, built up over

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<sup>6</sup> The MESSINGKAUF is one of Brecht's most peculiar works of theory: Brecht was working on it between 1937 and 1955 and bequeathed it as a mass of fragments. While the editors of the 1967 edition of Brecht's writings tried to reconstruct the whole work in a readable way, the new Brecht edition gives a better idea of the fragmentary character of the work in progress and its different tendencies. One understands while reading it that the repetitions, corrections, contradictions, revisions and in the last instance the failure of Brecht in writing a teaching book deserves as much attention as the contents to be found in the texts. However by changing the organization of the material and introducing capitals into Brecht's writings it changes the typescript up to the point that it cannot be used any more. Therefore I will quote in the following text out of the typescripts to be found in the Brecht archive.



200 years, is being disassembled, that the »Vormarsch [...] zurück zur Vernunft« (BBA 127/48, Brecht 1993: 803) – the advance back to reason – is being initiated. But only where something has been built up can it be disassembled, and Brecht’s assertive »no« to illusion and empathy is accompanied by a restrained »yes«, here and at other points: »es kann nicht schlechtweg behauptet werden, dass diese Dramatik oder irgendeine Dramatik ganz und gar auf alle illusionären Elemente verzichten kann« (Brecht 1993: 612f) – ›it can not be asserted that these dramatics or any other dramatics can utterly and totally relinquish illusionistic elements‹ – and the philosopher, his alter-ego in the Messingkauf, allows a weak empathy, although he acknowledges that he risks opening “dem ganzen alten unfug wieder ein türlein” (BBA 127/55, Brecht 1993: 823) – a little door to all that old nonsense.

In its distance to Brecht’s distance, the position to be found in his writings regarding the disassembly of illusion opens up a margin of flexibility that has been sounded out by theater practice interested in the real.<sup>7</sup> In this theater practice, the use of more recent media does not service the optimization of illusion, but much more its interruption and play with it. In different ways, we discover a framework that we would have to forget if the illusion were perfect, for example:

- in the video recordings in Castorf’s theater that do not reveal but rather disguise things differently<sup>8</sup>;
- in the imitation of non-illustrative film plots or choreographies on the stage that prevent the unmediated conduct of skilled illusionistic actors, for example in pieces by the Wooster Group’s<sup>9</sup>;

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. on the formulation »in distance to distance« [Lehmann 2005: 40](#). However it is evident regarding the passage quoted here that this attitude is already to be found in Brecht’s writings and not only later on as for example in the writings of Heiner Müller.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ulrike Haß (2004) on [Castorf’s ENDSTATION AMERIKA](#).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Müller-Schöll 2007.

- in the calculated conflict between the timing of music and dance, for instance in Grace Ellen Barkey's production *Chunking* (2005);

- in the inexplicable status of film that imparts – perhaps live – the concealed events of the evening in the theater auditorium, for instance in Heiner Goebbels's work<sup>10</sup>; and

- in the meticulous transcription of oral speech and its implementation in song in the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's cycle "Live and Times", held over ten evenings.

I could continue with this line-up, but I suspect that these examples are enough to deduce that a new concept is needed to incisively get to the heart of these contemporary tendencies to continually deny illusion and to persistently play with its possibilities in general. Following Jacques Derrida, according to whom deconstruction is about comprehending that we are entangled in »plus d'une langue« – in more than one language and at the same time in none at all (cf. Derrida 1988:31) – one could say that a theater that dismantles illusion always involves »plus d'une illusion«: more than one illusion, none at all. Thus I would like to observe two particularly impressive examples a little more closely.

(3) »Cargo Sofia ...«

(Rimini Protokoll, Stefan Kaegi)

A very popular and well known group of performers in search of reality on the stage is the group »Rimini Protokoll«, made up of Helgard Haug, Stefan Kägi and Daniel Wetzl. All three are graduates of the theater and performance

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<sup>10</sup> Heiner Goebbels: »Eraritjaritjaka. Das Museum der Sätze« (2004, cf. Koch 2006: 62f).

studies program at the University of Gießen. Their theater is sometimes described as a »theatre that explores reality«, others call it new »documentary theatre« and the most adequate name seems to be »documentary intervention«. The theater journal »Theater der Zeit« has described them as the founders of a new »reality trend on the stage«<sup>11</sup>. In fact, Rimini Protokoll's productions claim to explore the theatrical potential of reality today by either bringing various experts from real life (Experten aus der Wirklichkeit) onto the stage or by turning all kinds of different locations that resemble theater into playgrounds of theatrical exploration. In »Zeugen! Ein Strafammerspiel« (Witnesses. A criminal chamber play / an intimate play on criminals), the participants on stage are a defense lawyer, one of the victim's companions, a frequent visitor at trials, a court sketch artist, a lay judge and a defendant. They represent their roles in the trial in different but always entertaining and vivid ways. In »Sabenation. Go home & follow the news«, unemployed former employees of the insolvent Belgian airline »Sabena« reflect on their lives before and after their dismissal. »Brunswick Airport« and Cameriga stages the airport of Braunschweig and the Latvian ministry of foreign affairs. »Market of the Markets« (Markt der Märkte) invites visitors to follow the dismantling of Bonn's weekly market from a bird's-eye view perspective via a live broadcast, and in »Germany 2« the group invited citizens of Bonn to re-enact a debate in the Bundestag, the German parliament: the original recording was directly transmitted to the impersonators' earphones.<sup>12</sup>

From amongst the numerous successful productions, which have received many awards and a lot of enthusiastic reviews, I would like to draw your attention to a site-specific work that was created by Stefan Kaegi in 2006, titled »Cargo Sofia ...«. The third word is always the name of the city where the production takes place. It was shown all over Europe and rightly supported by many institutions all over the continent. As I would like to show, it is one of the most convincing answers to the question of how one can narrate anything about

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. [http://www.dramaturgische-gesellschaft.de/dramaturg/2005\\_02/24.pdf](http://www.dramaturgische-gesellschaft.de/dramaturg/2005_02/24.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. [http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/project\\_frontend\\_index.php](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/project_frontend_index.php).

the economic matters of our time, how one can stage the nameless agents in these matters and how one can illuminate their laws. From the outset, Kaegi intended to show »Cargo Sofia ...« for several years all over Europe. One of the stations was the choreographic center »PACT Zollverein« in Essen.<sup>13</sup>

As if they were goods, 47 spectators are put onto the cargo area of a truck, which has been turned into a tribune. Driven by two Bulgarian truck drivers they explore the surrounding area and are at the same time confronted with the world of wage slaves, of truck drivers who drive as German employees and are paid according to the tariff in force in Bulgaria. Their task is to transport freight from low wage countries in the European east to the metropolises of the west. One side of the cargo area of the truck is made out of glass and thus has literally been turned into a fourth wall, behind which events take place that can be observed by the spectators sitting in their showcase. The truck's path takes the spectators past non-places<sup>14</sup> like a container terminal, a dispatch and a parking lot popular with truck drivers at the edge of the city. The mundane highway turns into everyday theatre and the theatre into an entertaining lesson in globalization. On a screen that is let down when there is nothing special to see outside, we are told the story of the Swabian businessman Willi Betz, who bought the formerly state-owned Bulgarian transport enterprise »SOMAT« after the radical upheavals in the east and, using permitted and forbidden means (wage dumping, bribes, illegal authorizations), rendered the trucker business cheap and dangerous for all involved. A highway patrol officer talks about his daily controls of overtired truck drivers and dangerous-looking cargos. At a dispatch, the spectators are taught about the complex logistics of truck drivers by a besuited man standing on a loading ramp and talking through the open rear door of the truck. While being carried around as the night's cargo the spectators hear recorded statements about what would happen if truck drivers were finally paid fairly: transport costs

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<sup>13</sup> I refer myself in the following description to the show in Essen on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. on the notion of the *non-space* Augé (97-144), who argues that this is an appearance which is specific for our time which according to him should be called »Surmodernité«.

would rise, the outsourcing of huge sections of production would no longer be profitable and job cuts in central Europe would be stopped.

»Cargo Sofia Zollverein« can be perceived as a kind of »Sightseeing tour« that takes in amazingly strange places and areas close to the familiar city and roads we thought we knew. It is possible to view it as a »sensory seminar evening« as one journalist put it. We learn that one container can either transport 10,000 suits or accommodate two foreign workers. We find out that the coal on the platforms of a freight depot in the middle of the former »Kohlenpott« (the ruhr area, literally: the coal pot) is imported from China, and that there are 7000 articulated trucks in western Europe being driven by east-European drivers paid according to east-European wages. Listening to the stories of two drivers one gets an idea of their little pleasures as well as of the loneliness of a trucker's life. One sees the prostitutes standing on the streets, a trucker who transports cars to Georgia and passes time by drinking hard liquor, and learns about the legal and illegal drugs used by the truckers in order to stay awake. This is one aspect of the evening.

But these interesting encounters with a neighborhood that has become alien would not really be enough for a full-length theater evening if they were not part of a clever sampling of a total of five stories being told synchronously and artistically and continuously interrupting each other. First of all there is the story of a fictitious truck journey from Sofia to Essen, which leads from Bulgaria across Serbia, Italy and Switzerland. It is constructed out of anecdotes and original recordings that are illustrated with film extracts. It provides a vivid image of the fictitious journey with its waiting times and little adventures with corrupt customs officials at blocked checkpoints. Secondly there is the crime story of the expanding Swabian enterprise. It starts out with the foundation of the company in the fifties, includes the curious construction of the businessman's private villa in the middle of the company's premises and culminates in the story of a legendary police raid in 2003. Thirdly, the two truck

drivers show photos of their family and tell anecdotes from their lives which are transmitted directly from the drivers cab into the shipping space via headphones and cameras. The fourth story is the fictitious journey the spectators are participating in. And finally there is what one might call a fifth story, the story which makes all of the other stories suspect, the story shared by truck drivers and spectators, their common experience of the evening structured by Kaegi's *mise-en-scène*. Whereas most of the earlier works of Rimini Protokoll offered more or less traditional empathy theater played by non-actors, here we find a permanent playing with the beginning and end of illusion. The truck with the spectators encounters a young woman several times, who is at first singing live in a park and later transporting some packages on her bike on the pavement next to the street. After having bid farewell to the highway patrol officer and having left the dispatch, the spectators once again encounter the police car and a truck from dispatch on the highway. The boundary between that which is real and that which produces the impression of reality becomes fluid and one begins to doubt whether this documentary theatre is really documenting anything at all. It becomes clear that what is at stake is something altogether different from the documentary plays of Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt or Rolf Hochhuth: the performance is not just the imitation of reality but also a reflection of the images of reality and their production. Whereas former works of Rimini Protokoll conveyed the impression that the whole world was a stage – in line with the »Theatralitäts-Forschung« (theatricality research) of German universities – this production suggests something different to the spectators: that the theatrical in reality means that it is impossible to make a statement about reality which is not already contaminated by reality's *mise-en-scène*.<sup>15</sup> Theater, or rather the theatrical (theatricality in another sense), appears as both access to the world and at the same time its dissimulation. In the end both become questionable: theater as well as the world. It is uncertain whether presentations like »Cargo Sofia

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. on the very specific notion of theatricality I use here: Müller-Schöll 2002: esp. 45-71 a. 183f. as well as Weber 2004.

Zollverein« can be called theater, or that what they show can be called »reality.« However, in that Rimini Protokoll establishes doubt with regard to that which it is supposedly just presenting, , the group picks up on that epistemological doubt that Brecht once expressed when he said that a »simple ›rendering of reality«« says less than ever about reality. »A photograph of the Krupp factories or the AEG yields almost no information about these institutes«. Whereupon he asserts that, following the logic alluded to above: »There is in fact ›something to be constructed«, something ›artificial«, ›contrived««. <sup>16</sup> With the discovery that an approximation of reality needs to elevate depiction itself above being mere depiction to being the actual issue, that this approximation does not just have to approvingly accept illusion but rather must calculate with it, Kaegi's work approaches the conceptual art, the photographs, video works and lecture performances of the New York and Lebanon resident Walid Raad, in which the almost sole issue is first of all depiction, by way of which the undepictable is also represented.

#### (4) Walid Raad – Reminiscence within the Medium

Walid Raad's subject matter is war – the war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991, with which he grew up, and the current war against terror, as well as the traumatic events associated with war, inasmuch as they have a collective, historical dimension and, together with all of this and above all, the way that film, video, photography and theater claim to represent this psychological and physical violence. He undertakes and explores representations of violence by constructing the illusion of writing history, securing traces, identifying victims and archiving minor stories on the fringes of mainstream history. All of his works can be seen as historical documents of an imaginary archive that is serviced by an

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Brecht 1992: 469; cf. as well and departing from here Kluge: 203.

equally imaginary foundation, the »Atlas Group«, of which Raad describes himself as a founding member – further members are, however, nowhere to be found. As far as I know, Raad never explains that which becomes gradually evident during the course of observing his »historical documents« exhibited mainly in art galleries, and abruptly so during his lecture performances – we are dealing with entirely fictive, manipulated or ›falsified‹ material.<sup>17</sup>

One brief example: in the series »My neck is thinner than a hair: engines«, we see photographs on panels on the wall of motors lying in the midst of more or less bombed out cityscapes, surrounded by at times small, at times large groups of people. Next to the photographs are their reverse sides, on which official looking stamps, notes and signatures seem to confirm the authenticity of the pictures. In museums, Raad completes the series, which he also demonstrates in a lecture performance, with the note:

»The only part that is left over after the detonation of a car is the motor. It is thrown for several hundred meters and lands on balconies, on roofs or in side streets. During the wars, photographers staged a competition to see who would find and photograph the motors first.« (Zit. nach Nakas/Schmitz: 96).

Motors, the remains of – as we read – 3,641 car bombs dropped during the wars (ebd.), become allegories of an unrepresented suffering and terror which tends to be betrayed, falsified, kitschified, and loaded up with hackneyed emotionality in every one of their representations, becoming a repetition without prefiguration, a representation without mimetic character, a writing or trace that, like ruins, has been left behind by violence as a mark of destruction that safeguards aniconism. What we learn of reality is not represented in these images and is not the subject matter of Raad's installation\_ which presents so to speak the mere materials on which these images are based.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. the selected bibliography of publications by and about Walid Raad in Nakas/Schmitz: 133. The following depiction is based on a personal encounter with Ra'ad within the framework of the »Performer's Guesthouse«, Theater der Welt/Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, June 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of 2005. Cf. as well the homepage of Ra'ads: [www.theatlasgroup.org](http://www.theatlasgroup.org).



In his lecture performance »I feel a great desire to meet the masses once again« that had its premiere in 2005 during the “Theater der Welt” festival in Stuttgart<sup>18</sup>, Raad tells of an extended police and FBI interrogation on his return to Rochester International Airport after a short domestic trip. The immigrant of Arabic origin quickly comes under suspicion and – as it becomes clear to him in retrospect – is at risk of being deported, interrogated and tortured, like for instance the in the meantime well-known German citizen Khaled el-Masri from Neu Ulm. The rest of the performance compiles only a scantily veiled trace of the impacts of American intelligence agencies in their handlings of predominantly Arabic terror suspects, to a large extent still unheard of in 2005. Raad is a suspect due to nothing other than his art, his pictures, worthless in the eyes of his interrogators: pictures of himself, naked in front of skyscrapers in New York, of dead animals, of the security warnings on various airplanes and of precisely those Lebanese car bomb explosions, identified by way of Arabic inscriptions. It is only when the interrogator realizes that he is dealing with an artist that Raad is released. He says that what saved him was the fact that the policeman was a hobby painter in his spare time.

Raad sits with his laptop in front of a screen during this lecture performance and little differentiates him to begin with from the managers, commercial representatives and professors, who avail themselves of easy to use power point presentations during their talks. But it quickly becomes evident that, contrary to appearances, this form is a part of the concept. Its minimalism allows Raad to remain as flexible and autonomous as possible<sup>19</sup> and simultaneously reduces that »Himmelsrest des Scheins zu tragen peinlich« [“That in spite of everything it remains an embarrassment for art to bear even the slightest trace of semblance” [Aesthetic Theory, p. 104] which, following Adorno’s verdict on

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<sup>18</sup> My depiction refers to the performance on the 23rd of June 2005 in the art museum Stuttgart.

<sup>19</sup> Ra’ad’s minimalism is comparable to the strategies of quite a number of Lebanese artists who are interested in the political, as for example Rabih Mroué or Ali Cherri.

Dadaism, is inherent to artistic attempts that strive to reject this semblance and yet remain »cut off from [the] real political effect« that originally inspired them (cf. Adorno: 104). That Raad presents his narrative in the Stuttgart Art Museum and not, for example, in front of the US armed forces headquarters in Stuttgart-Vaihingen, i.e., as a public demonstration, can be justified by the fact that he intentionally leaves art in this space dedicated to art, in order to assert the possibilities of art, to defend the exploration of illusion that he pursues in other works. Proceeding from the idea of his own playful beginnings – as a boy who took photos for pleasure and, without any benefit to himself, collected what he found in his home town of Beirut, marked by war; as a young man who studied art, later moved to the USA and acquired US citizenship – he rapidly approaches the event that took place in the fall of 2004, the focus of his power point performance: the interrogation and the practices of American intelligence agencies. In this way, the strange title which remains unexplained for the length of the performance – »I feel a great desire to meet the masses once again« – can be understood as – if nothing else – an ironic commentary on an action, the political intentions of which amount to nothing as long as the injustice to which it testifies affect masses that are not able to appear as masses because they are comprised of innumerable, globally dispersed, marginalized and isolated cases. The excited, well-to-do premiere audience, which accepts his report in lieu of the coveted »masses«, becomes a lively sculpture in this performance, whether it likes it or not, and attests *modo negativo* to the illusionary character of the desire expressed in the performance title.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, what this conceptual lecture performance makes evident is the political dimension of Raad's play with illusion: in this play, the real emerges as a void between the well-known story, told with newspaper images, and Raad's

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. on the definition of illusion departing from the motivation of a belief by wish-fulfillment Freud: 165. Freud's definition of "illusion" and his conception of the belief in it can be compared to the ones which will be further developed in relation to Kant and Marx in this text. Not unlike Kant and Marx Freud claims that illusion is not defined by its relation to reality but that it rather has to be regarded as an inevitable and even necessary deception.

other, artistically invented stories, told with the same pictures. The child and later the artist's play with the futile rests of unknown stories is the beginning of a revocation of that »transcendental illusion« (Derrida 2001a: 86), that is at work, undetected, in all medial forms of »realistic representation« – in documentations, journalistic reports and police protocols. Raad uses reality to denounce the perplexity of certain preconceptions of the world – for instance the world of a narrative principle: of the linear plot progression tied together causally – and does so by way of nothing other than an insistence upon that which must appear bizarre, absurd, awry, or, to put it briefly, as meaningless to somebody who unceasingly believes in the illusion of »reality«, or even suspicious like the character introduced during the lecture performance. Phrased differently, Raad is carrying out a deconstruction of belief in a single history or rather: story, authorized and propagated by means of economic, political and – as the evening on interrogation illustrates – police power. By constructing another, so to speak homeopathic illusion he also lets this one history appear as an illusionary one . In such a way this promotes contemplation on the power of images and on the belief in illusion. »The story that you tell yourself and that you endow with attention and belief« he writes »might not have anything to do with what happened in the past, but it is that story that might be meaningful in the present and for the future« (zit. nach Nakas/Schmitz: 24).

#### (5) (Dis)belief

If, in Kaegi's case, it was important to reflect on the question of whether materials from reality do not simply invoke an illusionistic appearance of reality, in Raad's case the question is whether theater, in the generation of illusion, does not nonetheless reveal something about reality. If, as in the first case, the belief in the presentation's accurate depiction is successively shaken during the course of

the presentation, in the second case a belief in the realistic content in even the purely imaginary and fictitious – in the illusion that we have already conceived of as such – gradually emerges. Put together side by side, both cases reveal something about the relationship between illusion and reality, which one could perhaps describe as a Kantian insight: illusion can paradoxically be conceived of as the »necessary« or »objective appearance (Schein)«, as a misjudgment of reality that simultaneously constitutes the only possible access to this reality.<sup>21</sup> It resembles that which a young Marx described with the concept of ideology (cf. Marx/Engels; de Man), as psychoanalysis within the concept of the phantasm. As a necessary deception, illusion retains its right to exist inasmuch as it is itself a reality, even if the object of illusion does not correspond to any reality, even if, per definition, the real is missing. Play with illusion in contemporary theatrical forms suggests that it is time for another concept of truth and another notion of reality, a concept, that no longer attempts to conceive of truth and reality according to the model of *adequatio intellectu et rei*, but much more as completely undefinable yet not inexistent variables. Although, or maybe because they continually escape us, we must hold on to them, although not so much in the mode of possession as in the mode of belief in an illusion that is continuously being disassembled.

The French actor and essayist Daniel Mesguich illustrates the paradoxes of the belief in illusion, which must always be a dis-belief, with the following hypothesis from the psychoanalyst Maud Mannoni: »We are not frightened of a wolf mask in the same way that we are frightened of a wolf, but rather in the way that we are frightened of the image of the wolf that we carry inside ourselves.«<sup>22</sup> Mesguich adds that in the theater we neither believe, nor disbelieve, nor directly watch, nor directly listen. On the contrary, we see and hear the child or the idiot in us who believes. Jacques Derrida analyzes this remark with the comment that

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. on Kant: Deuber-Mankowsky 2006 and 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Derrida 1993: 6.

in the moment of observing the believing child or idiot in us, we are also observing identificational memory as well as absolute separation. In the theater we experience partition – partition in the sense of participation as well as in the sense of division. The transition from the participating child to the adult carrying out division appears to him to be indefinable and irreducible. Which is why he ends his commentary on Mesguich's remark with an unanswered question: »What is an act of believing in the theater? Why does one have to believe in the theater? One must. But why?« (Derrida 1993: 6)

The philosopher of »deconstruction«, a different kind of dis-assembly, seems to be referring to two things: firstly, his repeated reference to the fact that the phenomenon of »believing« in the theater interests him – but also of »believing« in film, as he notes at another point (Derrida 2001b: 78) – might indicate that for Derrida the division of the spectator of illusions into, on the one hand, the believing child and, on the other, an instance of reason that knows of the illusion, represents an exception in the history of the decentered, modern subject. In theater studies, this assessment could be related to the curious fact that the illusionary stage does not emerge until the development of the theater in the early modern era with its beginnings in the Renaissance. As a heuristic hypothesis following on from Derrida's remarks, one could say that theatrical illusion is co-original with the history of the subject of the modern era and inseparable from its development. (It should be mentioned in passing that the relationship between the belief that founds illusion in a quasi-transcendental way and the formation of communities would need to be considered in this context.)

With view to the relationship between theater and media we would ultimately need to hold onto Derrida's remark that the examination of illusion is an examination of being-in-the-world, but also with its theatrical (medial) constitution. Precisely because we are already entangled in illusions (and more precisely, because we are all entangled in illusions in different ways), we will never be able to completely eliminate them. A residue of belief will sustain

itself. And on the other hand, precisely because we will never be able to sincerely persist in a single illusion and will never be completely submerged within it, when faced with another belief, belief becomes (dis-)belief. What remains is a knowledge of the simultaneous inevitability and eternity of the disassembly of illusion in (dis-)believing play with it.

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