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Rimini Protokoll's Theatricalization of Reality

Frederik Le Roy

In 2000, Daniel Wetzel, Helgard Haug and Stefan Kaegi collaborated for the first time under the label Rimini Protokoll. *Kreuzworträtsel Boxenstopp* ('Crossword Pit Stop'), a stage production on old age and Formula 1 racing, initiated a string of acclaimed stage productions that have made Rimini Protokoll one of Europe's most prominent theatre groups. Rimini Protokoll is no tight-knit collective. For the founding members, the production of differences is more important than speaking with a unified voice. This model of productive dissent, of questioning and discussion, is also reflected in their work: their collaborations (often in different constellations or with 'outsiders') are project-based and pragmatic, often site-specific and focused on the exchange of particular ideas and experiences. Yet, despite their very diverse nature, their projects are mostly clearly recognizable as Rimini Protokoll productions. Over the ten years they have been working together, the group has been experimenting with a distinctive theatre poetics that is often designated as 'a kind of documentary theatre'.

According to Carol Martin, technological media play a vital role in contemporary documentary theatre as video, film or tape recorders are used to supplement the performed text and the performing bodies on the stage. Technological media are 'a primary factor in the transmission of knowledge' of documentary theatre because 'means of replication and simulation are used to capture and reproduce "what really happened" for presentation in the live space of the theatre' (Martin 2006: 9). In that sense, technological media in documentary theatre gesture beyond the presence of the performance toward a factual, historical or archival realm.

On 3 December 2010, in the context of this book on mutating media, I had a conversation with Helgard Haug to explore some of the intricacies of the use of different media in the work of Rimini Protokoll and the way in which technology was used to relate to what lies beyond the stage. As will hopefully become clear from the rendition of this conversation below, replication or simulation of reality is only part of the story of Rimini Protokoll's use of media. Rather than replicating reality to the theatre, one could say that they replicate theatre to reality, effectively pushing the boundaries of documentary theatre.

Transporting Media

Logging onto Skype for my interview with Helgard Haug, one of three theatre makers working under the Rimini Protokoll label, I am reminded of *Call Cutta in a Box*, a project the group made in 2008. For *Call Cutta in a Box*, the spectator had to enter alone into an anonymous office space that turned out to be an interactive theatre installation. Like in most offices, the centrepiece of the room was a desk with a telephone and a computer. While I was exploring the room the telephone rang and I was connected to a call centre operator 10,000 km away, somewhere in India. During the conversation that followed, that 'somewhere' became gradually more concrete: pictures of the office building in Calcutta where the operator was located appeared on the screen, as did a photo of the call centre agent himself and his colleagues. He asked me to picture the sounds and smells in the street in front of the building. He gave me details about his life and as the dialogue progressed I did the same.

Rimini Protokoll rarely work with trained actors but with people they call 'experts of the everyday'. Their expertise is not in acting but in the specific topic of the performance (Rimini Protokoll have already worked with truckers, secret service agents, model train enthusiasts, ex-Sabena personnel, policemen, urban scavengers, etc.). The experiences they convey on the stage or in performance installations are theirs and theirs alone and so are the stories they tell, the clothes they wear, the accents in their voices and the specific qualities of their movements. For this 'intercontinental phone play' Rimini Protokoll had hired a group of students to work as call centre agents, this time not to sell credits cards (like they usually do) but as 'experts of the everyday' in order to create a performance piece that reflects on the increasing interconnectivity between people, businesses and cultures in a globalized world.

Like the famed 'global village' or like the Skype interview with Haug, the piece would have been impossible without the help of media and technology. As Haug explained, to make present what is elsewhere is the role that media mostly play in the work of Rimini Protokoll, even in the stage projects:

Media are used first of all and very basically to transport life outside of theatre onto the stage. Photography, film and audio recordings defy the limits set by the stage: locations mentioned can be evoked through video or photographic representations. Material that was gathered during the research process, especially quotes from interviews with people who could not join the experts on stage, can be integrated in the performance.

As a consequence of their use of archival documents and of real-life 'experts', the work of Rimini Protokoll is often labelled 'documentary theatre'. However, the label is appropriate only to a certain extent to catalogue Rimini Protokoll's practice. Haug remarks that 'documentary theatre' has been a handy tool to distinguish their projects from more traditional forms of theatre with fictional or fictionalized characters. But

the term ‘documentary’ can also be misleading, as it might suggest that reality is presented as it really is or was; as if the theatre can become a transparent window on reality. Rimini Protokoll, however, are more interested in the way reality is mediated and transformed, not only through the personal memories of the experts on stage but also through the very fact that it is shown in the frame of theatre. Haug emphasizes: ‘The struggle between theatre and reality is an essential part of the work.’

Constructing Authenticity

Already during the documentation phase of a project, this media awareness plays a crucial role. As they look for and meet people who will become the living, breathing and acting archives of the everyday on stage, the members of Rimini Protokoll first take written notes. Haug: ‘Recording something or somebody influences the situation. Rather than recording the original statement, we ask somebody to repeat it and make a video statement.’¹ From the outset, the ‘real person’ is doubled as his or her original expression is immediately refashioned into a recorded one: the person copies him- or herself for the registration device. Once the experts become part of the performance, they retain something of this first moment of self-representation on tape. However, whereas the video or voice recording can be reproduced in the absence of the person, on the stage the person is present again. The expert is both himself and a stage performer. If the experts on the stage appear authentic, this authenticity is a dramaturgical construct or, as Florian Malzacher rightly remarked, the stage projects of Rimini Protokoll always present a ‘scripted reality’ (2008: 39-42).

Not only are the experts’ lines and dialogues not spontaneous but rehearsed and repeated every night with each new performance, their stage presence is also mediated by the theatrical frame. This gap between the person in ‘normal life’ and the person on stage, between the self and the self performing him- or herself, is a crucial feature of Rimini Protokoll’s theatre aesthetics. It will even be accentuated by the interjection of self-referential statements in the performance or by the use of theatrical devices akin to Brecht’s alienation techniques.²

When I ask Haug how Rimini Protokoll projects relate to oral history, journalism, documentary or storytelling (disciplines their work is often compared to), she answers that ‘we always link back to theatre, even if we work in or on different media. For us, the reference to theatre and to its artificial frame and traditional setting is always crucial.’ It follows that when Rimini Protokoll initiate a project, they do so not only out of an interest in the subject matter or in the experts on stage, but always also to explore the codes of theatre. With *Wallenstein* (2005), for example, they started specific research on the relationship between text and performance. The research on dramatic texts and Schiller’s dramaturgy in *Wallenstein* was continued with *Karl Marx: Das Kapital, erster Band* (2006) in which they challenged dramatic codes with the idea of ‘staging’ a major classical text that everybody claims to know, namely Marx’s famous treatise on the economy. *Breaking News* (2008) closed this trilogy on the relationship between original text and perfor-

mance: instead of an existing text, daily newscasts from different major news channels broadcast live on the stage on several television sets became the score of the performance. 'It turned out like a media critique,' Haug says, 'but it didn't start like that, since our first question was about the functioning of text in theatre.'

Becoming the Camera

Still, a Rimini Protokoll project is never an autonomous, self-standing work that deals only with the medium of theatre. Their performances are permeable events: not only does the reality of the everyday fill the theatre space, theatricality also leaks into reality. For their project *Hauptversammlung* ('Annual Stockholders Meeting', 2009), Rimini Protokoll invited the audience of HAU (Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin) to buy shares from the car manufacturing company Daimler AG or become a proxy of an existing shareholder. The shares they bought subsequently served as theatre tickets: as shareholders of Daimler they gained the privilege to participate and vote in the company's yearly stockholders meeting. About 200 spectators attended the meeting together with 8,000 other small and big shareholders at Berlin's main conference centre. The point of departure of this project was simple: Rimini Protokoll declared that the shareholder meeting was theatre and found a (legal) way for people to attend it as a theatre performance. During the actual meeting they didn't intervene (even though they had the formal right to sign up to ask questions) but just observed and organized side meetings with experts of this theatre. The mechanism of their intervention was not unlike that of the ready-made: the shareholders meeting became a 'found performance', a real event that was framed as theatre.

Helgard Haug says about this project: 'we went and simply watched what normally cannot be watched. The spectator becomes the camera.' 'Simply watching' entailed a transformation of both the watcher and the watched. The watcher was encouraged by Rimini Protokoll to develop a gaze that documents this event as if he or she was a 'camera or microphone'. They gained an unmediated, first-hand experience of an event that is normally only accessible to the layman when it is mediated by reports in newspapers or newscasts. In addition, they also get the opportunity to observe those parts of the meeting that normally are not open to journalists, like the question round or the vote to (re)affirm the board of directors.

'Making the audience conscious of the effect of their observation and the different ways they can look at it' is an aim in many of Rimini Protokoll's projects. The presence of an audience among the 'normal' shareholders also changed the nature of the event. Rimini Protokoll's declaration that the event was theatre becomes a speech-act or performative utterance: the huge dais bearing the Daimler logo became a stage, the management became protagonists in a drama about a car company in trying economic times, the shareholders became actors in a participatory mass spectacle and the length of the event (no less than ten hours) made it into a genuine 'durational performance'. The presence of a theatre audience inevitably added a meta-reflective layer to the stock-

holders meeting, something the organizers of the *Hauptversammlung* disliked. One of the directors of Daimler, aware of Rimini Protokoll's presence, acknowledged this from the get-go when he opened the meeting with the words 'this is not a spectacle nor a theatre play.' But just like the drunkard's repeated denial of being drunk only serves to demonstrate his inebriation, the director's denial that this serious meeting had anything to do with theatre only boosted the audience's awareness of the theatrical codes at work.

Significantly, the project drew a lot of media attention: different media interviewed Haug, Kaegi and Wetzel; clips of activists disrupting the meeting were shown as if they were part of the performance (which they were not); the director's dismissal of the project was televised.³ 'This discussion on the public forum was for us entirely part of the performance,' Haug says, for:

While only 200 people were 'audience members' at the meeting, their presence contaminated the way others looked at this event. We planted the seed of something bigger that lies beyond the performance itself and that can start a reflection on modes of looking and perceiving these events as theatre.

To use the concept of this book: the news media were mutated into an annex of the theatre project.

This contamination of the news media has been an important facet of other projects of Rimini Protokoll as well. In 2002 they made *Deutschland 2*. For this project a parliamentary debate taking place in the Bundestag in Berlin was transmitted (on an audio/telephone-line) live to a theatre in Bonn where 237 audience members (all citizens of Bonn) each played one of the 237 members of parliament. When their double in Berlin took the floor, an audience member in Bonn would repeat their every word. Wolfgang Thierse, then president of the Bundestag, had prohibited the use of the former Bundestag building in Bonn where Rimini Protokoll had first planned to make the live recreation of the parliamentary debate for fear this 'live copy of a parliamentary debate' would debase the parliament. Reminiscent of Daimler's director, he stated that the parliament was not a place for theatre. Rimini Protokoll diverted to Bonn's Bonn-Beuel Theater but the seed was planted. Not only were the audience members incited to negotiate between their own personal opinions and those of the parliamentarian whose every word they were mimicking. The media debate that preceded *Deutschland 2*'s 're-presentation of representation' (Matzke 2008: 110) also incited non-audience members to reflect on some of the crucial questions of democracy. Where is the parliament? What is the space of politics? What constitutes political representation and how am I as a citizen represented? What are the codes at work in the theatre of politics?⁴ The media contamination made it possible to expand Rimini Protokoll's proposition to the spectator to look at a segment of reality (in this case the space and performance of democracy) through the speculum of theatre.

The Intimate Collectivity of Radio

One of the most striking ways Rimini Protokoll does this is by using a medium and a genre that now seems outdated: the radio play. There are some similarities between theatre and radio play: like theatre, a radio play happens at a specific moment in time. Unless you record the broadcast, you have to tune in at the right moment. Unlike in theatre, however, the listener does not share the same space with the rest of the audience. Haug explains: 'The paradox of radio plays is that on the one hand the amount of people you reach outnumbers the audience in a theatre, while on the other hand it is a very personal medium because it allows for very direct address.' The radio plays of Rimini Protokoll can be divided into two groups. The first type are original works that bear no relation to their theatre projects.⁵ The second group does have a relation with plays but are not, however, 'bonus tracks to the performance, but independent works.'

As such, the radio play is used to revisit the experts that were in a performance, to underline different aspects from a topic addressed on the stage or to retell the story from a different angle. For the radio play *Welcome to you!* (2009), Rimini Protokoll explored the story of a South Korean girl doing an online DNA analysis to find out who her parents are, a theme briefly touched upon in the performance *Black Tie* (2008). For the *Karl Marx* radio play, the listener is taken to the coulisses of the performance but also to the kitchen of a Rimini Protokoll member to listen in on a discussion between the experts of the play. *Deutschland 2* sheds light on the workings of the German parliament through dialogues with voters, candidates for parliament and functionaries of the Bundestag (e.g. an usher and an interpreter).

Radio also presupposes a greater control over the material. Haug points out that it is one of the most flexible media, because voices and sounds are so easily cut up or rearranged in post-production.

Using 'mediated' documents is a totally different way of making use of the material we have. The situation of authorship changes: there is more freedom. We make more extreme decisions and play with the material people have given us. That is one of the main differences between working on stage with people versus working on radio plays (often with the same people). Theatre and radio are in that sense two extremes in our work.

Even though these are the two extremes, she adds that 'in a lot of projects we mix both approaches.' What this means is that Rimini Protokoll's stage plays often have a montage structure: monologues and dialogues are alternated with musical numbers, projects, or short choreographies. Radio, on the other hand, is 'theatricalized', which means that Rimini Protokoll highlight the machinery of the medium they use, as they do in their stage plays: 'when we work in radio we refer back to the rules of the radio play.'

Growing and Shrinking

‘One of the strengths of theatre is that it is not bound to one specific medium or restricted to one form,’ Haug says. For Rimini Protokoll, theatre in a way is the medium *par excellence* because it can move beyond the designated theatre space to infuse reality with theatricality. Their aim is to invite spectators to look at the world from a theatrical perspective – a theatrical gaze that is sensitive to the dramaturgies of social and political events and of the personal lives that are involved in those events. Ultimately, the experts of the everyday that are the protagonists of almost every Rimini Protokoll performance are everywhere. Rimini Protokoll only amplify their presence. As Haug notes:

People on stage are really growing or shrinking. Somebody ‘small’ or ‘insignificant’ can grow to become small again at the moment of applause. They leave the theatre like anybody else and step outside without the spotlights and without the amplified voices. It makes you realize that there are many, many of these people that you can give the right frame and make them grow.

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NOTES

- 1 This working method during the documentation phase is fairly recent, as they used to record every conversation. Now, however, some form of scripting is initiated already at the first meeting with an expert.
- 2 In *Das Kapital*, for example, dialogues are interjected with self-referential pointers like ‘Kucinsky says’. These theatrical techniques have a double effect: on the one hand, they point to the rehearsed nature of the dialogues, showing that the words are not spontaneous or natural expressions of the experts, actually undoing the authenticity of the words. On the other hand, this alienation paradoxically also underscores the authenticity of the person speaking these lines. The theatrical device not only shows that the expert is *playing theatre* and hence is ultimately an actor even if he or she is playing him- or herself, it also highlights the person behind the role. Alienation shows at least two poles of a character: the construct and the constructor.
- 3 Some of the newscasts dealing with *Hauptsammlung* can be consulted on Rimini Protokoll’s website (<http://www.rimini-protokoll.de>).

- 4 To accentuate this even further, Rimini Protokoll made a spin-off of this project in HAU: an interactive installation called *Deutschland 2 Trainer*. In this installation you can practice mimicking the different parliamentarians on your own, or with friends or strangers.
- 5 For example: *Apparat Herz. Sondersendung zu Passierscheinfragen* ('Heart Machine. Special Broadcast: Permit Questions Phone-in', 2001), *Undo* (2002), *Alles muss raus!* ('Everything must go!', 2004), *Zeugen! Ein Verhör* ('Witnesses! An Interrogation', 2004).

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