



Intermedial Performance and the vertical perspective

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For a small theater with a tight economy, 30 years of performing is an exceptional achievement and Hotel Pro Forma has generated a unique experience of organization, cooperation, creative processes, leadership – and not least – a coherent oeuvre. Hotel Pro Forma has created some 40 major and several less comprehensive performances that in different ways examine conditions for perceptions that challenge the sensibility of the audience. In most performances Hotel Pro Forma is exploring the notion of beauty. Beauty is relational and needs to be investigated, sensed, and discussed at all times. Artworks are constantly changing and are included into new socializing relationships. Beauty is a subjective verdict and saying “this is art” implies that there is a (disinterested) enjoyment or pleasure in a work of art, as if this is a general judgment. Within the performance tradition, there has been a tendency to give up the concept of a work in favor of the relational, but this does not apply for Hotel Pro Forma. On the contrary, the concept of framing the work is a means by which to focus perception. Throughout the years Hotel Pro Forma’s various works have generated a network or community of partners, who are fascinated by the ongoing investigation of beauty as a means of focusing the senses.

The concept as a medial action

Hotel Pro Forma’s is rooted within the visual arts. As the name suggests, it is the form per se that is at stake and Hotel Pro Forma moves freely between theater, visual art, exhibition, and opera. One can look at Hotel Pro Forma as both art and theater. This is a point in itself that Hotel Pro Forma moves in an intersection of various trends within contemporary art and theater: performance, theatricalizing of the art, site-specific theater, post-dramatic theater, and reality theatre.

Hotel Pro Forma is embedded in the performing arts that emerged in the 60’ties. It is an art that is more concerned with action and presentation than with representation and content as we meet it in the psychological theater. It has mainly focused on materials, media performance practise, artistic communication actions in time and space, and in general rethinking the relationship between performing arts and spectator conventions. Hotel Pro Forma employs various media construction and manufacturing traditions as well as various spectator positions. It has contributed significantly to the process of rethinking the performing arts in which hearing and vision, space and image are separated and juxtaposed in new ways. This means that the works are polyphonic spaces whose basis is dissensus. This marks a difference from the theater concerned with a textual interpretation where sensory structures are organized in a common narrative hierarchy. The history of Hotel Pro Forma is a catalogue of imaginable ways to mediate diverse materials through which forms of perception are examined and combined in novel ways. It anticipates and

Why does Night Come Mother? 1989 (Roberto Fortuna)

extrapolates a number of the features, which have later been extended to other theaters. The history of Hotel Pro Forma is also a history of the development of contemporary theater with origins in the rules of beauty in an aesthetic relationship that goes back to Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Shift in paradigm in 1989

The performance *Why Does Night Come Mother* (1989) is a good example of the functional shift our hyper-complex society has helped to generalize. We perceive the work as an artistic communicative act in which the spectators observe something in a certain way, but in which they are also physically present in time and space. The performance takes place at Aarhus City Hall on a white floor while the spectators stand on balconies and look down. The audience can freely move about and occupy different positions. *Why Does Night Come Mother* was a pioneering work that challenged the position of the viewer. The work turned the spectator situation into an act that engaged the senses of sight, hearing, and proprioception, in a dynamic relationship between the theatrical and the observing self. At the sensory level the performance created the dilemma of dizziness and a shaky balance through a disturbance of the sensation of gravity, and the up-and-down orientation. But likewise the performance created a new relationship between the audience and the individual spectator. In this case, the sensation of singing, of choreography and light were brought together providing that the viewer looked down into “the depths”. *Why Does Night Come Mother* supported an awareness that interaction or interference between different media within the same work, creates an experience of different media behavior. But it also encourages an experience that senses and knowledge are mediatized in hierarchies that can be displaced and transformed. The explication of the different media behavior unleashes, so to speak, artifice as conventions that can be selected or deselected. This makes it possible to create contradictions or contrasts between different sensory forms within the same work, an approach to performance that raises a series of question. How does one change the optics of the spectator in theater? What is the relationship between reality and the imaginary world of fiction in theater? How can different senses like seeing, hearing, touching connect and become new rules and conventions? What is kinesthetic empathy? The following pages will try to shed light on and respond to these questions.

The work: Why Does Night Come Mother?

In *Why Does Night Come Mother* the audience is standing on a balcony on the 3rd floor in the rectangular aula of the City Hall. You look down on a white floor, on which the performers occupy different positions; you see a pole, a rope, a perspective pattern, a chair, etc. In front of the spectator an image forms. When the actors place their legs on a pole, it looks as if he is standing but it also look like that when he has his feet on the other side. In an instant, it seems as if the performer is hanging with his feet on the ceiling, but after a few seconds it is as if the image is restored and he is back on the floor again. The same happens if the actor lies down with his feet on the short side of the floor. After some time one realizes that the performer is standing on the bottom of a shaft and is looking up. The brain adjusts our eyes, and we feel our material world is weighed to the ground. It is an experience that stabilizes our space and perspective. Since the direction in which we are looking coincides with the direction of gravity, the performance is playing with our

acquired perception of up and down. If a performer is climbing a rope, he will fall down if the rope is removed. But here he is hanging and hovering in space like an astronaut. The performance springs between the sensory-formed spaces of illusion, our knowledge of the real construction of the space and the contextual framework of the City Hall. This affects our kinesthetic sensation and sensitivity to such an extent that it causes dizziness and uneasiness, but also a different sensation of the subject. When the audience is leaning over the railing, something surprising is happening. The stage set is surrounded by a number of heads, all of which look down and we only see the backs of their necks apart from the actors who suddenly look up.

During the performance poems by Søren Ulrik Thomsen are read aloud and are sung a capella. With respect to the architecture that both forms and does not form part of the work, the borders of the work are variable and difficult to define since the spectators are staged as part of the work. The performers have different skills: an opera singer, three gymnasts, but no actual actors. A very black man is walking silently about saying nothing: a stranger, a refugee. The performers are not acting psychologically and there is no dramatic narrative or conflict. They perform specific actions: they walk, stand, lie down, and climb and this creates a number of tableaux from the position of the spectator. The performance is qualified through the changing perspective of the staging and the performance gives associations to a Cubist work in which different visual perspectives are broken into a polyphonic organization with no center.

Likewise, recitation, music and singing are aural compositions. But the two compositional forms are juxtaposed and not subordinated to one another. The scenic arrangement imitates the so-called depth model, which is a classical notion that the meaning of a work can be interpreted as a substantive depth. Here the depth is very specific and one might be tempted to say it is a parody of hermeneutic content analysis. The depth of the work is a sensuous construction of the room. There is nothing behind it as a unifying narrator or a deep psychological content as an organizing center. But the work is not only form or surface. The work is a network of connections localized in space and defined by the relationship between the audience, and the performers on the floor are both real and imaginary. The time of performance is without any progression and is almost static. For the audience, there is no question of empathy and identification, but of physical sensations of closeness and remoteness. The visual act is rooted in the individual spectator linked to the transition to night and darkness with metaphors related to night and death (falling asleep). The spectator can choose to look down on the floor or look at the other spectators, associate to the one children's song and to childhood. Or perhaps the spectators are reflecting their own relationship to the depths, listening to the music and singing or contemplating the endlessly dark or alien, between the symbolic and the concrete? Even though the optic of the spectator is vertical, the horizontal perspective is always linked to a context. We can choose to focus on one picture or jump between them. The performance has an inherent self-reflexivity in which the individual sees himself while looking, and at the same time perception is evading the control of the subject. The work can be considered as a passage or transition between the subject and the community of *sensus communis*. The depth is neither tragic nor ironic or perhaps both as a form of ambiguity. In any event, it can be

painful and shocking to take such a vertical, divine (ironically) position of a helicopter perspective.

When a theatrical performance finishes, the applause usually brings the spectator out of the fictional space and characters that have died reappear as actors. It is the actors who receive the applause, not the fictional characters. We applaud the actor's performance. But here it is ambiguous. The performers are lying on the floor and when bowing they sit up and lie down, sit up, then down again, waving, and red roses are being thrown down to them. In that very moment the illusion suddenly returns and it's like looking into the pit where the dead lie and say goodbye – or are they about to resurrect? We applaud and as the light slowly fades, they fall into the realm of the dead or they float away.

The fall of the Wall

The performance takes place in September 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the advent of the web as well as the beginning of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989. This suggests a historical context and a political dimension to the work in relation to post-modern globalization and the emancipatory possibilities of perception in a theatrical community. The political is not to be found in the work's "content" but rather in its "engine" which displaces perception and the relational.

But the performance can also mark the beginning of a performative paradigm in the theater. The direction and the relationship to the spectator are not organized from the director's "normal" place in the middle of rows four or five. In this performance, there is no single point or place from which the performance can be 'controlled'. The physical movement of the spectators and their individual perception are outside the control of the director. The eye forms a two-dimensional image (R2), but the brain corrects, and we sense three-dimensional (R3). Somewhere in-between is a stage where forms or shapes are available in R2,5 – an intersection between surface and space, a relief stage, which seems more open and exploratory. In that intersection meaning emerges, corresponding to an unfinished and more definite, thoughtful phase of perception.

Hotel Pro Forma establishes a special process of experimenting in parallel with the music and the vertical. In this case, the director has worked with a storyboard, which is a series of images, texts, and movements that were developed on a test rig with podiums of a few meters in height. For good reasons the aula was only available for short periods of time and the elements had to be compiled in a couple of days at Aarhus City Hall, where it was only possible to work during the evening.

Dramaturgies

Why Does Night Come Mother points to a theater paradigm with different dramaturgies, which exist in a differential space, the basis of which is dissensus. *The dramaturgy of the actor is the actor's score*. The director's dramaturgy is the point of departure for staging with a combination of mediality and disruption of the senses of the spectator. *The dramaturgy of the performance* is the grid of relationships between the actors in the space, the light, the music, and the audience. *The dramaturgy of the spectator* is the subjective summary of information, attractions, and affections that the performance

creates. *The production of dramaturgy* is a matter of organizing the concrete arrangements of performance in terms of choreography. It is a distinct point that these different dramaturgies are not consensual and are worked out separately. This points to a key question: when and how will a stringent context arise that means that the work is finished? *Why Does Night Come Mother* can be considered as a focus change or paradigm shift in relation to intermedial performing arts. The performance re-inscribes reality in the participatory process that takes place in the body of the consciousness of the spectator. At the same time the performance is a staged construction with an audience taking part. The performance destabilizes the balance of the spectator's sense of vision. On the one hand, we have an overview position, and, on the other, we lose the overview and stability of vision. This means that you cannot trust our act of vision and creates a kind of disturbance of the symbolic order. Disruption is like a cut in our vision, which allows access to the real. It is a sublime experience in which the subject loses and re-creates itself. This can be considered as an affective experience of the relationship between loss of order and the recreation of new lines of connection. This duality acquires an extra dimension from being in the middle of a power center, the City Hall. This perceptual surprise between body and significance is further enhanced in relation to the Berlin Wall. Destabilization of a symbolic order through a shaking of our vision is a thematic feature we recognize from other works such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We can briefly summarize the concept as an extension of kinesthetic empathy: That means a perception of the subject's possible inner and outer positions in space. In this way the performance is moving imaginary walls, functionalities, and authorities on a sensual and multi-media level. Nothing is as it was.

The magical effect

“Often I am asked what the performance is about. One can of course respond regarding the specific themes, but one could also say that it is about logistics, practical, pragmatic, and technical solutions to the series of complex issues. You can also just say that performing arts in the best case are about creating magic to design extraordinary, rare moments outside time and place where everything is merged into a unity, or where everything is rearranged through a small explosion, and then falls back into place, perhaps with new insights as a result”. (Dehlholm 2009)

What does it mean to ‘create magic’? Magic is when the artwork itself begins to generate significance. This constructs a surprising and un-natural relationship between the spectator and the artwork. The work stages the positions of the spectators through its contact mode. The gaze of the performing work meets each subjective eye in the audience. Deleuze speaks of art as affects and percepts, as ‘blocks’ of sensations, something dignified, which is self-made in the work as a constitution of reality. One can comprehend Hotel Pro Forma's works, not as specific insights in the world, but as a socializing process creating new connections or separations to provide knowledge about art processes, methods, effects, and experiences of time, space, and movement. The work is a network of actions that performs a kind of communal dissonance, which is very different from the Aristotelian unities. The mission of art is to be an autonomous, sensuous intervention and a sanctuary from daily life. It is the magic of art to provide a sensation of the infinite, of death, and of the imaginary in a specific, limited form. That is why the aesthetic experience has a socializing

role. The theater creates a concrete metaphysics linked to materials, acts, and modes of vision. Hotel Pro Forma's special feature is a sharp focus on the gaze of the work, which often coincides with that of the spectator, and therefore sees magic as pure genesis. Such a "gaze" characterizes *Why Does Night Come Mother* in which the spectator looks down on the stage from an Olympian height.

Hotel Pro Forma is concretist and concerned with the materiality of art, form, and mediality. The theater is related to, for instance, Duchamp's readymades, which showed that it was possible to present real objects within an artistic framework. But this also applies for bodies, actions, and skills, thus creating a focus on these elements and how they are presented. The orientation towards real elements is a feature of great significance in Dehlholm's work. Physical space, the reality of the performers, and the reality of objects that are not artistically processed are elements of this as an art form. The theatrical performance in itself is regarded as an action and a real dimension of the work staged for an audience.

All this creates a transparency between theater and reality. Reality presented as something concrete, tangible, and familiar, but staged in a relation between the arts and the very definition of art is an important framework. This means that Hotel Pro Forma is a particular art form or genre, a mixture of visual arts, theater, literature, and music that redefines both the stage and the technicians of the performing arts through action with changing, provocative, and cleansing functions. The performances thus create a reflection of the concept of art, the autonomy of art and genesis as form and network. As opposed to classical theater Hotel Pro Forma has several different layers of staging: staging of text and theme, the staging of the construction and the real context of the performers, the staging of the props, and the staging of the auditory, the visuals, and the choreographic. All the different layers are processed separately to become a polyphonic expression of parallel voices.

The effects of authenticity

Often the notion of authenticity pops up in the description of Hotel Pro Forma, also in its own description. Generally, one might say that it represents a common characteristic of creating a special sensual relationship between the spectator, fragments of reality, and materials brought on stage. Authenticity is a feature linked to the modern concept of art. Just like the aesthetic, the authentic is a subjective sensation of a piece of reality that emerges in a special way and arouses wonder, whether it is the individual acting or it is optic or acoustic sensations. This is a non-conceptual sensory experience in which life as re-created emerges in a moment like that, which is what it is. Contemporary art can be seen as an arena for authenticity effects or, as Roland Barthes calls it, 'reality effects'. Within the framework of art representation we find instances acting as if they have been forgotten. There is a broom on stage or a vacuum cleaner in the corner of the museum as if it has been forgotten and not for our sakes. The discovery creates a moment of reality experience. That is something outside the representative and does not signify anything, but is what it is, and that is why it contains some kind of concealment or secrecy.

Hotel Pro Forma is associated with a particular credibility that differs from the illusion manufacturing of theater, where the audience are absorbed in the work and forget they are in a theater. It is a special contact mode that creates a focus on the meaning of the artwork.

Hotel Pro Forma uses a different approach, which is, so to speak anti-illusive. There is no explicit intention behind the production; on the contrary, it is as if the unpredictable and random materialize as something self-sufficient or even valid, something that has its own authority and is purged of conventional encoding and interpretation patterns. The performances are obviously designed but are sensed as a particular real reality that attracts attention. There is a special proximity but also a surprise that creates distance. A particular curiosity is aroused, which is non-conceptual. The materials, operations, and compositions of the substance create a reflection that motivates an afterthought. The purification of the material is silent and creates an increased presence, which is non-intentional, a disruption of the sensation. The unspeakable or silent 'speaks' but in a 'secret language'. This may be an experience of confusion, sublimity, or loss of control, which creates another sensual relationship as a tactile haptic perception. Hotel Pro Forma's purification ritual focuses on materials, process, hierarchies, forms, media, and the susceptibility of the spectator. At the same time a number of traditional devices are reversed and rethought to create the distinctiveness of the work. Hotel Pro Forma's special approach differs from most theater – perhaps not in principle – but in practise by a strong and visible conceptual approach to materials, form, and precision. But it also differs from avant-garde, performance and Fluxus by not being particularly interested in the excess and the deconstruction of work and art. On the contrary, Hotel Pro Forma cultivates the art and the concept of an artwork as something ceremonial and distinguished.