

Anne Bonfert und Hanna Voss: »Outside of Your Day-to-Day Comfort Zone«. An Interview with Ant Hampton on *The Thing – An Automatic Workshop in Everyday Disruption*.

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»Outside of Your Day-to-Day Comfort Zone«

**An Interview with Ant Hampton on *The Thing –
An Automatic Workshop in Everyday Disruption***

The Thing – An Automatic Workshop in Everyday Disruption is an unsupervised workshop in four sessions for eight to twelve people. Created by Ant Hampton and Christophe Meierhans, *The Thing* is designed to elicit proactive behaviour from its participants, triggered merely by the contents of a suitcase. Any action taken by the participants will however always involve at least one other person. In light of global problems such as environmental damage and the sense of powerlessness individuals feel when faced with them, the workshop provides the participants with the stimulus to reach out, to leave their comfort zone.

Hanna Voss: As a first but by no means simple question, in order to get an idea of what drives you as an artist: What are you interested in when creating art?

Ant Hampton: That's a big question of course, but I think that I am both dedicated and addicted to liveness. I am interested in what you can only do live. If you can do something better with a film or a book, then it really is better to do that. In making theatre it quickly became clear to me that it's kind of a fool's game, in the sense that you spend all your time and money making work and once the explosion is over, that's it. If you're lucky, you might have quality photographs or maybe a video, but they're not really of much use to anyone.

Anne Bonfert: Looking at your artistic biography of the past twenty years or so, 2007 marks a turning point. In 1998, you and Silvia

Mercuriali founded the performance company Rotozaza. You were working with many different artists at the time and, in a series of scenic arrangements, you explored the use of instructions given to unrehearsed and often non-professional performers via headphones. While those productions were generally presented in front of an audience, in 2007 Rotozaza developed *Etiquette* – a performance for two people which takes place in coffee shops and which is still performed in sixteen languages around the world. This production marked the beginning of your work on more intimate arrangements for only a few people, often only two, performing for themselves. So, there was no longer a non-performing audience watching. This was your first so-called Autoteatro-performance. Can you please describe what the term means in a little more detail?

Ant Hampton: Ten years ago, when we made *Etiquette* and first started using the term ›Autoteatro‹, it was mostly to set our work apart both from other people's – Janet Cardiff's for example – and from formats like audio-walks which I often found inspiring but also considered fundamentally different. The idea of Autoteatro didn't appear out of the blue, however. In fact, it had a long development. In 1999, I was invited to create something for a festival in Paris, I was in my early twenties and only just starting out. I didn't know what to do exactly, but, I had a kind of intuitive urge to work with a friend of mine in Paris, Henri Taïb: I liked the idea of seeing him on stage somehow. But he wasn't an actor at all – he had never done anything on stage and I knew he wouldn't want to accept the responsibility of rehearsing and guaranteeing a performance. Then I thought that perhaps if I just asked him to follow instructions live, with no rehearsal at all, in front of an audience who understands that he's discovering everything at the same time as them, then maybe that could be interesting. We called the show *Bloke*. Right from the start we decided to record all the instructions, so nothing was live on the constructed side; it was all completely fixed. The only variable was this human reaction to the instructions. Which meant that once we had made the piece we could try it with other people, which we did and also carried on doing. It took me a while to realise that there was a practice to explore there, not just a single show.

Hanna Voss: You began working independently from Rotozaza in 2009. Since then, you have realised a number of Autoteatro-performances in collaboration with other artists. *The Thing – An Automatic Workshop in Everyday Disruption* is your first work with Christophe Meierhans who, incidentally, was also a guest at the two previous AUAWIRLEBEN festivals. The world premiere of *The Thing* was in December 2016 in Reykjavík, the French language premiere was in Paris in April 2017, and now the German language premiere is in Bern. The following description is from the AUAWIRLEBEN festival website. It reads: »*The Thing* is both a theatre performance and a workshop. There are no actors but all those present are participants who follow a prefabricated script. In four episodes they try to play another version of themselves« (AUAWIRLEBEN 2017).¹ Could you please tell us something about the concept and how this idea came up?

Ant Hampton: The idea of the workshop originated in Brussels talking with Christopher about a piece I've made called *Someone else* (2015) which essentially encourages the audience to go out in the city and have a conversation with somebody they wouldn't normally speak to. The resulting experience would, I felt, be more interesting than anything I could come up with as an artist just then. So the piece was essentially a challenge, a suggestion: »Why not do this thing?« But it's also possible to think about it as a work of art in the sense that it gives you a kind of legitimacy to act differently and to experience something out of your day-to-day-reality or comfort zone. Christophe and I spoke about this a lot and he suggested that there are surely many other things one could do which would constitute the same kind of ›norm-breaking‹, both for yourself and for the world outside yourself. *The Thing* – your Thing, whatever that turns out to be – does not happen within the workshop. The workshop positions you at the end of it, ›ready to jump‹. That's something you understand halfway through the workshop when you open a box file and read some handwritten pledges by people from other cities, other countries even, who have finished the workshop and write about what they intend to do. They are like ›Things-in-progress‹. We call that folder ›the Book of Things‹. These pledges of intended Things are anonymous and of course very

personal, but they are signed with a phone number, and at the end of the second episode, having read quite a number of them, the group decides on three people to call. There is a phone in the suitcase, so you then call people who have finished the workshop in other cities, in other countries, time-zones etc. These people then suddenly get a call from someone in the workshop saying: »So, have you done this Thing yet? How did it go? Are you still thinking about it? Do you have any advice for us here right now?« So, there is a double jump in time: Not only do you understand the full arc of the piece from where you are to the end of the workshop, and how it finishes. You also realise that the workshop doesn't really ›end‹ and that there is a sustained accountability due to the prospect that, at some point in time, you may receive a phone call like this. This also gives a sense of solidarity. Everyone is in it together, a kind of intimate and growing movement.

Anne Bonfert: How did you develop this workshop? Did you participate in the workshop yourself to try it out? How do you get feedback about the dramaturgy and dynamic of the workshop?

Ant Hampton: We've gone through about two years of testing with different student groups and art academies. We've always had to say: »We are very sorry, it should normally be automated, but we are going to be here, pretending that we are not here, taking notes for four days in silence and then having feedback lessons at the end.« Here in Bern is more or less the real premiere because it will be the first time that neither of us is in the room.

Anne Bonfert: What kind of opportunities arise from being a participant?

Ant Hampton: I can only speak for myself. In conferences such as these, there are often these plastic bottles and plastic glasses. Everyone knows the problem of plastic in the world. But even in a place like Switzerland, even here there is this profusion of plastic, and among the people and institutions who apparently know best. I might want to say: »Enough! From now on, we'll have glass bottles and actual glasses and

wash up afterwards.« But of course this is the kind of thing we don't do. The workshop asks first of all, why on earth not? And secondly, what would be the best way of actually taking that leap? What would ›best‹ be? A way that wouldn't just make a point but which would be effective, beautiful on its own terms, maybe even viral?

Hanna Voss: As a last question, could you please tell us more about the political impact of *The Thing*?

Ant Hampton: The impact depends entirely on what the participants come up with. But in terms of what drove us to create *The Thing*, there's certainly an activist impulse. Broadly speaking, it seems the convergence of art and activism ends up falling between two camps: One involves long-term work with particular communities, which we have a lot of respect for, but that's not what we're doing here. The other often results in rather short-term interventions, single actions, one-offs. That often involves careful antagonism or disruption, but it can also embrace hope and optimism, as well as humour. I think that's more where we are with *The Thing*, certainly in terms of time anyway: there's a strong focus on what's waiting for you to be done, right now – where there's nothing stopping you on an organisational or financial level, just yourself. Things you can do to yourself. Things you can do to the world. Doing the Thing is about finding where those two cross over.

But we also try to avoid simple binaries; Christophe talks about “tri-lectics”, and in fact when the group works to develop criteria for the Thing, they end up with a triangle: the three points are DISRUPTIVE, INCLUSIVE and BEAUTIFUL. These terms can be as contradictory as they are complimentary. And each has a plethora of sub-terms for consideration, but when you're thinking about what your Thing might be, your thoughts end up pinging around this triangle from pole to pole, never allowing themselves to rest on one alone.

Notes

- 1 Vgl. AUAWIRLEBEN 2017. Translation from German into English by the authors.

References

AUAWIRLEBEN (2017): »The Thing – An Automatic Workshop«, auf: <https://auawirleben.ch/de/2017/programm/the-thing-an-automatic-workshop> (letzter Zugriff: 1. 11. 2017).

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