

Meet me in Saint Louis (experiencing Goebbels) by Dr. Kersten Glandien

Keynote

**Heiner Goebbels Symposium: 'Music as Theatre, Theatre as Music',
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In 2007 I experienced Heiner Goebbels' *Stifter's Dinge*¹ – a piece situated in the uncharted space between music theatre and sound installation. By chance I wound up going three times in one week and to my surprise saw three different pieces. The work was automated, there were no unpredictable human factors on the stage, nothing, in fact, that might account for the radical difference in the three experiences: Surely it could not just be the calibration of my mood and circumstances that lead to such varied impressions. Although I am very familiar with Goebbels' works and often revisit my favourite pieces, such an extreme variation in experience came as a surprise.

I was reminded of an occasion on which I went to see *Black on White*² in London, after having already seen it in Edinburgh, and being shocked that the piece I loved so much, seemed suddenly flat and lifeless. As someone used to observing my own perception closely, I could not see what had changed: the musicians of the Ensemble Modern were as professional and as lively, as ever, the *mise en scene* was working well, but still – something was definitely missing. When I mentioned this to Heiner after the performance, he said: "Yes, I know, the audience does not engage". Frankly, I dismissed this answer at the time. Surely, an audience could not influence a piece that much. Or could it?

Ever since I met Heiner, I have been intrigued by his approach to things – both artistic and everyday. This approach clearly translated into his own work, which from the outset went against certain 'givens', those conventions in the art world that were considered common practice. This way of thinking against the grain, this taste for the unknown and for the exploration of unfamiliar territories led Goebbels over the years to the production of a series of innovative works, which revolutionised several genres, often, indeed, defying genre departmentalisation altogether.

Raised in an anti-authoritarian spirit and finding himself in the 1970s in rebellious times, Goebbels came to detest any didactic or messianic attitude in art. He certainly had no desire to lecture or indoctrinate his audiences, and disliked works that delivered messages that the public had to 'understand'. He intended to make work that empowered his public and inspired it. In an early text from 1983 he quoted playwright Heiner Müller, who called art's "primary political task [...] to produce spaces for fantasy"³ directed "against the imperialism of the occupation of imagination and the mortification of fantasy through the prefabricated clichés and standards of the media."⁴ This ambition runs through Goebbels' work to this day, and has lost nothing of its cultural relevance.

Of course, to rise above quotidian and habitual perception describes the challenge art faces at all times. The way art meets this challenge, however, changes along with its cultural context, and certainly acquires a whole new dimension in a culture that is increasingly dominated by mass media and light entertainment; in a culture of operational conditioning, technocratic obedience, mediated experience and heightened self-referentiality.

But, how to make an artwork today that inspires the fantasy of its audience? In times when mass media culture is global, and access to it is immediate and individual, contemporary mobilisation creates radically altered conditions of perception and creation⁵, as Peter Sloterdijk points out. Art needs to come up with strategies to address these new conditions.

Yet, how to counter the mental and sensory conditioning caused by such powerful, persuasive and omnipresent forces? How to avoid the clichés and standards that are re-enforced on a daily basis, that subconsciously infiltrate our sensibilities, dull our fantasies and distract our minds and emotions?

How to produce, in fact, a “space for imagination”? In other words, how can art not just capture our imagination, but push us beyond what we can imagine – as Xenakis once suggested.

This is certainly not just an issue of attitude or mind-set on the part of the public, but lies rather in the relationship between the encounterer and the artwork, and has therefore to be addressed by both.

Over the years Heiner Goebbels has created his own spaces for imagination, evolving a distinctive hybrid style that inspires in its audiences a particular kind of experience.

Since the 1950s and 60s artists have looked for ways to overcome the closed, rigid and prescriptive form of the artwork - along with the modernist attitude that informs it. And although in the 70s the lobby for modernist awareness-raising art was still strong, new strategies of communicating with the public and involving it in the art process were explored. As Umberto Eco already knew in 1959, “every execution of the work of art [has to be] divorced from its ultimate definition”⁶. It has to open “experimental horizons”⁷. In order for something else to happen, the work cannot be too coherent or too tightly knit – too self-sufficient – in the traditional sense of there being ‘nothing to be added or removed’ - that a work is ‘just perfect in itself’. Because, once all the work is done and perfected, all that remains is to comprehend and admire. An open artwork, on the other hand, requires the audience to engage in its creation.

In the following decades, artistic approaches were devised to facilitate the creation of open and dynamic works, to step across genre borders and to abandon exclusivity in favour of inclusiveness. Looking at Goebbels’ oeuvre, we notice not only the huge variety across his artistic practice, but also the hybridity of each individual work. In the last forty years he has worked in numerous genres – playing in rock and blues-bands, running an alternative brass orchestra, performing in an experimental duo and an avant-garde-rock band, as well as initiating a whole range of alternative music projects; he has composed works for small ensembles, large orchestras and an opera; produced sound installations and prize-winning radio pieces and, most importantly, invented his own music theatre concept. In many of these fields he challenged existing genre conventions, and created ground-breaking works, as he moved towards the complex pieces he now constructs.

From the beginning Goebbels collaborated with other musicians, engaging in collective forms of production - often with a strong improvisational component. This work method he carried over into later projects, carefully choosing his collaborators according to their particular abilities and talents, selecting people who would uniquely shape a piece and securing thereby invaluable external input and diversity. Often starting with a few initial ideas, a loose set of topics and a handful of texts, they embarked together – under Goebbels’ guiding hand - on the development of the piece. In this, Heiner sees himself as a “reactor” rather than as an “inventor” or a “visionary”⁸. [In his own words: “one does not invent, one finds”.] Thus in the initial phase of production, ideas and elements of performance are accumulated through a flexible process in which collaborators make suggestions, try them out, reject or accept them, improvise, throw things into the mix to see what happens, and invent routines in the process⁹. Performers, set, costume and light designers, pyrotechnicians, robot and sound engineers are all equally involved: contributing to a complex and multifaceted conglomeration from which a piece is built that „one person on his own cannot invent all that anymore”¹⁰, as Heiner once said.

Contrary to the modernist tenet that innovation is the basis of artistic creation, Heiner believes that “all imaginable ... musical material has already been discovered”¹¹ and that “[a]s of now the ‘artistic self’ can only articulate itself through shifts.”¹² These shifts – in perspective, pace, combination and context – drive experience into the unknown. This applies to the process of creation as well as that of perception. For Heiner, then, it is crucial “How one quotes, combines, estranges, uses or twists music ...”¹³ and as he probes, filters, selects and combines the assembled material, new correlations

and new connections reveal themselves. This *How* transcends the sum of the accumulated material and is the essence of Goebbels' work¹⁴.

Heiner works with fragments and samples – with prefabricated splinters lifted from various sources: snatches of text, snapshots of images, transposed gestures, plundered musical debris, even entire pieces – all of them, irrespective of their high art or popular origin, taken out of their original contexts and confronted and combined with others. When composing music he connects live with recorded material, acoustic with electronic sound, composition with improvisation, sampled material with original compositions, and mixes genres – like rock, contemporary art music, free improvisation, classical and folk music. Let's listen to the magical high-heel walk passage from

Audio clip [2'53"] La Jalousie, 1991.¹⁵

Despite the radical mixing, Goebbels' composition technique has nothing to do with the arbitrariness that is so prevalent these days. His keen cultural intuition, and a fine feeling for arrangement, underwrites a precise choice of elements and ways to combine them. And this is what we perceive as his signature. Goebbels' way of composing is ... essentially influenced by cinematic techniques such as montage, "cutting, ... flashbacks, close-ups, changes of perspective; ... the use of sound tracks; ... the power of the image; narrative value, and so on."¹⁶ By using such techniques to assemble fragments he taps into our cinematic patterns of perception and transfers them to the stage.

As much as he sees improvisation as the creative motor of his work, he deeply mistrusts its structuring power. When composing, he follows "internal coherences in the material and connections"¹⁷ between fragments. And "even if they are not consciously decipherable by the listener"¹⁸, they still enable the audience to "combine the elements subjectively in very different ways."¹⁹ Heeding Hanns Eisler's suggestion to push beyond the familiar and then come back to it²⁰ (*Fortschritt und Zurücknahme*), Goebbels allows the audience to follow and enables them to feel out or "breathe [...] in the incomprehensible" – as Canetti would say. The hierarchy of perception is thus undermined and the power of association released. Encounterers are encouraged to find their own pathways through the fabric of the piece, opening it up to their own imaginations and experiences.

Heiner often works with three or four topics at the same time, intuiting subtle connections. In his music theatre piece *The Repetition*²¹, for instance, he follows the connections between repetition, voyeurism, jealousy and seduction – drawing on texts by Kierkegaard, Robbe-Grillet and Prince (the artist formerly known as). In *Max Black*²² he ponders by way of Wittgenstein, Valéry and Lichtenstein on vagueness, the enigma of thought, exploration and obsession. But these topics are mere moments in the work, lines of flight that inspire associations. Texts merge with music, sound processing, gestures, movements, light, projected images, costumes and stage installations. Conventional dominance of plot, or dramatic development, based on text and the reinforcing doubling of means give way to a juxtaposition of fragments from different media. In Heiner's theatre of experience linear perception becomes spatial and individual senses become engaged in a multi-sensorial spectacle. Goebbels considers theatre to be "the most complex form of art"²³, an idea that finds opulent expression in his opera *Landscape with Distant Relatives*.

Video clip [3'44"] Landscape with Distant Relatives, 2002.²⁴

Heiner's pieces are filled with poetic moments that stay with you: lit empty tea bags rising into the air; a flute playing a duet with a whistling kettle; stage doors suddenly opening onto the outside world; a balloon turning into a skirt; the rhythmic sound of high-heels on a pavement; the ceremonial unwrapping of a Koto; small blue flames running across the stage; a gentle rain falling into large pools of water. The list is endless.

No single means is primary here. All are equal in the creation of the event. The resulting hybrid composite of fragments constitute an inclusive conglomerate that resonates on an experiential level, but not – as frequently suggested – in the way of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*²⁵ – in which the components of different genres are finely tuned and carefully synchronised in order to create a coherent, harmonic and subsequently closed whole. Goebbels goes to great lengths to keep the form of the

piece open – “to allow the audience in”.

This flexibility and openness infuses his work process too and is often still apparent when a piece reaches its final stage. This requires of performers and collaborators that they be able to deal with the artistic uncertainty such openness causes.

The relations between fragments produce intensities²⁶ and it is these that make the drama - not the plot, or some linear movement towards a dramatic climax. At the point of intersection between two diversities, poetic energies are released that push imagination beyond itself. This confrontation of alterities abrogates habitual patterns of imagination and perception and opens up a free space in which imagination, new associations and unaccustomed experiences can thrive.²⁷

The distance between fragments is essential for creating openings for the imagination. Goebbels uses distance as a crucial formative means, because “[d]etachment from the material [...], gives ... [new] phenomena the chance to develop.”²⁸ New discoveries and experiences are made possible, and Heiner passes on these explorations to his audience. By sustaining alterities, fields of tension unfold in which associations can form. Distance detaches us from the familiar and allows us to look again. It prevents our habitual mechanisms of perception from automatically kicking in, and undermines conventional behaviour patterns that are reinforced by daily routines, or subliminally implanted into our sensorium by the media and technologies we so readily embrace.

Goebbels uses distancing techniques such as the clash between form and content. Cassiber, for instance, always retained a playful musicianship, even when dealing with harsh topics, as in the piece ... in einer Minute (... in one minute)²⁹, which evolves around a quotation taken from Schönberg's A Survivor from Warsaw.³⁰ In Black on White and Landscape with Distant Relatives the members of the Ensemble Modern leave their traditionally static positions to sing, read, act, talk, dance and run around while continuing to play their instruments.

Video clip [2'30"] Black on White, 1996.

In a culture in which perception is fast and diffuse (Benjamin), time becomes a vital factor. By shaking up habitual temporal relationships - for example, by slowing the pace - our distracted senses have a chance to focus.

During rehearsals of Stifters Dinge, Heiner and his collaborators became particularly aware of the extent to which “seeing and listening are two very different things, often excluding one another”³¹. They became curious about the way we experience things - about the psycho-cultural mechanisms of perception. Such observations require subtlety and time. So they slowed the pace of some scenes and made the artistic means sparser. These slow passages (in Stifter's Dinge,) allow our minds to travel and our senses to sharpen.

Video clip [2'20"] Stifters Dinge, 2007.

Duration and intensity (Bergson) are vital in this scene: a fine suspenseful scratching noise carries it sonically, while a vast pool of rippling water casts reflections onto five pianos already over-projected by the image of an old painting, which is slowly, section by section, scanned by a small moving screen - all set in the vastness of the installation space, which we literally inhale. Then, delicately and unexpectedly, a gentle rain sets in.

Given time, we find our own paths through the scenes before us, a phenomenon that cannot easily be conveyed in a video recording. Physical space plays a crucial role here.

Like Bourrioud's semionauts³² we are joining Goebbels in his voyages of discovery through landscapes: Landscapes with Argonauts³³ or Distant Relatives³⁴, to Despoiled Shores³⁵, through rural landscapes with wine plantations or the urban-scapes of Surrogate Cities³⁶. We encounter Landscapes with man being killed by a snake³⁷, painted landscapes, textscapes, and soundscapes³⁸. Journeys can be strange, where a Man in an Elevator³⁹ is spirited to a distant continent. There are journeys of exploration with Hapless Landings⁴⁰ and expeditions into the past⁴¹ and we encounter exotic names like Hashirigaki⁴² or Erraritariitaka⁴³, which remind us of foreign cultures. These travels are shared adventures, encounters and meetings – in our own neighbourhood or far away in some

distance place - in Saint Louis, why not.

Stifter's *Dinge* combines the experience of slowness – which Heiner often borrows from the past through his choice of texts – with the experience of vastness. Although the audience still finds itself facing the work, the expansiveness of the space - as well as the proximity of audience to the installation and the parity between the public and installation spaces - shift the piece further away from theatrical performance and make it semi-immersive. Over the last decades space has become essential to contemporary art – since it makes the senses work together and integrates the encounterer into the work. “[T]he new spatial thinking is - as Sloterdijk stresses – an uprising against the shrunken world. With the rediscovery of slowness comes the rediscovery of the dimension of locality”⁴⁴.

By sharing his or her experiences with the encounterer an artist becomes a facilitator of experiences – experiences that are different from the mediated and speedy perception of mass culture; experiences that are direct, involving and synaesthetic. Goebbels' work has these qualities – in spite of the proscenium-arch-presentation of most of his theatre pieces. “Here the form of the audience is still a collective one” - and he values that collective energy: the “great concentration and great tension, that exists when there are 100 people sitting and waiting for something – since it is from this tension, and this imagination, that the piece is made.”⁴⁵ [And] To answer our initial question: Yes, in Goebbels's open works the audience certainly can influence a piece profoundly.

Goebbels wants to inspire and “to offer [his own] experience with the material to [his] audience”⁴⁶. Often following an intuition of what a relation between certain components might be, uncertain at times of what those elements may have in common, he embarks on an exchange, a voyage of discovery – and receives in return different experiences on part of the encounterer. I have never come across another artist who is so utterly pleased when confronted with an unusual, even a ridiculous, reading of his work, a reading that has not yet occurred to him, or that introduces a new twist to the story – and thereby transforms it.

As art becomes an immediate experience (John Dewey), the exchange of experiences becomes crucial. This is not only a real opportunity for the arts today, providing them with a unique cultural function, but it ultimately points to the core of Goebbels' artistic drive as well as to the global response his work receives.

Endnotes

- 1 H Goebbels, *Stifters Dinge*, 2007, installational music theatre.
- 2 H Goebbels, *Black on White*, 1996, music theatre.
- 3 H Goebbels, ‘Der Kampf gegen die Phantasie- und Geschmacklosigkeit als primäre politische Aufgabe’, in K Frederking & K Humann (eds.) *Rock Session 7. Magazin der populären Musik*. Rowohlt, Reinbeck near Hamburg, April 1983, p.103.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 P Sloterdijk, *Sphären III. Schäume*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt | Main, 2004, p. 505.
- 6 U Eco, ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’ in C Cox & D Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music*. Continuum, New York / London, 2004, p. 171.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Goebbels in Heiner Goebbels: *The experience of things*, Documentary by Marc Perroud, ARTE / ZDF 2003.
- 9 K Grünberg in Heiner Goebbels: *The experience of things*, *loc.cit.*

- 10 H Goebbels, 'Gegen das Gesamtkunstwerk: Zur Differenz der Künste' in W Sandner (ed.), Heiner Goebbels: Komposition als Inszenierung. Henschel, Berlin, 2002, p.136.
- 11 H Goebbels, 'Prince and the Revolution', Argument 175, May 1989, p. 421.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 H Goebbels interviewed by Thomas Delekat, 'Hilflosigkeit, Langeweile', Die Deutsche Bühne 3, 1996, p. 21.
- 14 Simon Rattle in Heiner Goebbels: The experience of things, loc.cit.
- 15 H Goebbels: La Jalousie. sounds from a novel, 1991, composition for ensemble.
- 16 Goebbels, 'Prince and the Revolution', p.425.
- 17 H Goebbels, 'Das Sample als Zeichen: Zwischen Klischee und Gedächtnis', MusikTexte 71, 1997, p.12.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 H Goebbels, 'Opening the Text', Performance Research, vol 1, no.1, Spring 1996, p. 55.
- 20 Hanns Eisler's concept of 'Fortschritt & Zurücknahme'.
- 21 H Goebbels, Die Wiederholung | The Repetition, 1995, music theatre.
- 22 H Goebbels, Max Black, 1998, music theatre.
- 23 Goebbels in Heiner Goebbels: The experience of things, loc.cit.
- 24 H Goebbels, Landschaft mit entfernten Verwandten. Opera for Ensemble, Choir and Soloists, 2002.
- 25 H Goebbels, 'Gegen das Gesamtkunstwerk', op.cit. pp.135-141.
- 26 'intensity of ordinary things' (Alexander Kluge)
- 27 K Glandien, '... sound's dream of us. The SoundArt of Douglas Henderson', in Douglas Henderson: Poets and Superheroes, Galerie Mario Mazzoli, Berlin, 2012.
- 28 R Römer in Heiner Goebbels: The experience of things, loc.cit.
- 29 Cassiber, ... In einer Minute, on Beauty and The Beast, ReR London, 1984.
- 30 A Schönberg, A Survivor from Warsaw, 1947, op.46.
- 31 H Goebbels in Heiner Goebbels: The experience of things, loc.cit.
- 32 N Bourriaud, Postproduction, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2002, p. 12.
- 33 H Goebbels, Shadow/Landscape with Argonauts, 1990, radio piece.
- 34 Goebbels, Landschaft mit entfernten Verwandten, loc.cit.
- 35 H Goebbels, Verkommenes Ufer | Despoiled Shore, 1984, radio piece.
- 36 H Goebbels, Surrogate Cities, 1994, composition for orchestra.
- 37 H Goebbels, Landscapes with man being killed by a snake, 1997, music theatre sketch.
- 38 H Goebbels, Out Of a pearl river delta experience, 2009, tape composition.
- 39 H Goebbels, Der Mann im Fahrstuhl | The Man in an Elevator, 1987, staged concert.
- 40 H Goebbels, Ou bien le débarquement désastreux | Or the hapless landing, 1993, music theatre.
- 41 [travels, journeys, expeditions - Heinrich Schliemann, Joseph Conrad].
- 42 H Goebbels, Hashirigaki, 2000, music theatre.

- 43 H Goebbels, Eraritjaritjaka musée des phrases, 2004, music theatre.
- 44 P Sloterdijk, Im Weltinnenraum des Kapital. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt | Main, 2005, p. 399.
- 45 Goebbels in Heiner Goebbels: The experience of things, loc.cit.
- 46 Goebbels, 'Opening the Text', op.cit., p. 57.