

## Theatre as an mechanism of views

### The performance artist Helena Waldmann

by Arnd Wesemann, Kaleidoskopien I, 1996

Photography hardly had been developed when light streamed into the theatre. As soon as electric stage light had been invented, a photographic emulsion developed for the first time. No matter in which order: since then, since 1850 there has been competition between artistic mediums. First between painting and photography and then between theatre and diorama. In 1908 Edward Gordon Craig tried to make profitable use of this competition for theatre. He wrote programmatically: 'The actor sees life like the camera does. He tries to create a picture, which surpasses a photographic image.'

When light came to theatre and photography learned about lighting - both caused realism to emerge, which since then has determined the way all representative art sees itself. As long as living people are present on stage, theatre defines itself as representative, that is realistic art.

Film needs lighting and consequently it needs a dark cinema. Richard Wagner was the first to turn out the lights in theatre. Since then, film and theatre have been dwelling side by side in closed rooms. Both have been indulging in their realism and have been pretending to be representing theoretically the art of viewing.

As everyone knows, the most important difference between film and theatre is that cinema shows a projected image and the stage shows an unprojected one. The line cannot be drawn much closer. In both cases, the audience is sitting in properly arranged seat rows, arms crossed, looking in the same direction. This architecture offers few opportunities for new ways of looking at old problems like projection and image, and new problems like virtuality and the virtual processes.

Helena Waldmann is among those who are researching more and more successfully the art of seeing and developing new modes of perception. Born in 1962, she first served as a director and 'blasting expert' in the Schauspielhaus Bochum under the direction of Frank-Patrick-Steckel. They fought for space hitherto claimed as unplayable and the use of non-dramatic texts. She went her own way which resulted among other things in a collage of texts by authors of the satirical journal 'Titanic' Wiglaf Droste and Max Goldt. '*Ungeduscht, Geduzt und Ausgebucht*' ('un-showered, Christian-named and booted') got the public going. From the narrowness of theatre seats they broke through to the daylight of the foyer area. When not distracted by sheer laughter, the view of the audience turned around corners and worked its way up galleries. There it was, rediscovered, the view freed from orderly rows.

After having said goodbye to peep-hole stage and dramatic text she became known by a performance of the prose text '*the malady of death*' by Marguerite Duras which was also used by Robert Wilson and Elke Lang in 1993. However, neither of them

'adjusted' the text so precisely to theatre purposes as Helena Waldmann did. A dancer, lying on an 8 metre long foil filled with translucent materials and multicoloured gelatine, leaving coloured traces while moving. This reminds us of the bed, in which Duras' protagonist gives herself over almost mutely to serve her lovers voyeuristically. In Waldmann's play the public is lying on the floor: 1.50 metres beneath the translucent foil. Although this is pure theatre, the audience perceives something similar to a liquid film emulsion, as emulsions are generally developed on the basis of such gelatine. The naked body of the dancer (Kiri McGuigan, later Florence Perrin) presses itself into the emulsion and leaves marks. Due to the crystalline nature of the gelatine not only the marks appear to be 3-dimensional. The derivative of film-technology itself has changed the stage into a 3-dimensional screen - 'an overhead-performance for comfortably bedded horizontal viewers' (Malve Gradinger). They perceive the dancer like a close-up, within reach. However, contrary to what usually happens in theatre and on stage, the body is not 'represented' in a realistic manner. Indeed, it seems to dissolve into fragments. The view is broken, it clings to details: the spongy wet hair of the dancer, a breast suddenly shining through, the interplay between colours developing an independent life caused by the warmth of the body and the light.

Quoting Helena Waldmann: 'The audience is meant to feel they have a theatre image of their own which they do not have to share with anyone else from a distance.' Thus, as a side effect, she reduces the seats (that is number of viewers). In '*sainte-sebaste*' and '*circuit*' in 1995, the audience is seated on a revolving stage - in reach of the actress. In the middle of the stage there is a small round glass table. The Jamaican dancer Angélique Wilkie wrapped in blood-red ribbons is figuratively being 'dis-entangled' by the movement of the stage and the body is being exposed. It is being tortured by arrow-like attacks from the corners of the room. The attacks in which the audience participate come from 4 podiums situated around the revolving stage. Music, voice, light and a huge eye. An attack made by the basic elements of theatre symbols. The similarity to film cannot be denied. The view of the audience is driven around by the revolving stage like in a slow camera panning shot. The view moves on from shot to shot, not unlike a sequence of pictures on a film reel, including the audience in a rotating kaleidoscope.

The huge eye in '*circuit*' is a genuine eye, full of expression, sometimes winking, sometimes staring. A view being recorded by a live camera, being projected into a one meter wide parabolic ball - viewing 'back'. This view is the main point in '*face...à*' 1996. The subtitle reads: '*erotic phantasmagoria of the lonely eye*'. This time the view is not panned around in a circle but is being directed into an invisible room by a mirror inclined by 45°. Again, the audience is lying on the floor looking into a 14 metre deep room. The mirror changes perspectives and lines of power. Like the revolving stage it deprives the viewer of his orientation in space. Similar to what one experiences in cinema, beneath the mirror one never knows exactly where one is: inside the film or in front of it.

The mirror transfers the theatre into a 2 dimensional film and additionally reverses the view. What one perceives in the mirror is actually happening side-inverted on the

stage. Thus, what becomes visible on the stage seems to be almost like a tv-screen. Apart from this Helena Waldmann believes: 'In the same way as one can enter a body through the eye, one can enter a room through a mirror - the point is, both are unreal.' The mirror makes the room desirable because unattainable. It wants to be 'looked through' and behaves like a body itself.

In film the projection evokes desire by mere movement of pictures. In *'face...à'* a projection by mirrors is employed to interpret a highly erotic text. The audience beneath the mirrors wears headphones. One earphone is transmitting the text to the part of the brain responsible for language, the other is transmitting the breath pauses to the part of the brain responsible for the processing of images. By separating the auditory space from the visible space two lines are drawn through the body of the viewer: a vertical line in viewing range embracing not the own body but exclusively the mirrored body of the theatre. A horizontal line which virtually cuts the whole body in two halves and separates the auditorial reception from the visible one, like a soundtrack is separated from a filmtrack.

Due to the closeness of the mirrored room and the separation of the eyes from the body (the audience cannot perceive itself in the mirror) the eyes gain an unusually increased activity. Two dancers are moving in the room, Anna Huber and Armin Dallapiccola. Even if their bodies stop moving this does not stop the viewers from watching. Again a cinema effect is called forth: when a film camera reports only little movement and does not move itself, the mere projection keeps the attention of the eye.

No realism is necessary to evoke this effect. Every deceiving image every phantasmagoria is self-sufficient. They need no similarities or meanings. They are empty like deceiving images and so the dark room behind the mirrors is kept dark on purpose. A lightbeam can only be embodied when projected on a surface, for example a body. If the body steps out of the lightbeam very quickly it will, however, leave an effect on the iris. It will produce a deceiving mirror image in the eye of the viewer.

Only with the combination of a precise light design, sudden visibility, and a sculpture-like halt of bodies the iris will be widened. Photographically speaking, the effect will be an exposure of the image. This double exposure results in a brilliant image of the bodies emerging from the darkness, precisely dissolved.

Waldmann takes 'image dissolution' literally and manages to reverse the earlier mentioned citation by Craig: 'The viewer watches the stage like a camera does. He tries to create a picture which surpasses a photographic image.' This includes the perception that the eye itself acts like a camera, even in the situation of a theatre viewer. It only requires one thing to become a camera: a mirror.