

**Essay Marie Kleine-Gartman Pen 2007**  
*september 2008*

**Igor Dobricic schreef een pleidooi voor het durven spreken, voor een persoonlijke waarheid en voor een kunstpraktijk én kunstkritiek die de begrippen 'amateuristisch', 'pathetisch', 'vulgair', 'banaal' en 'irrelevant' durft te herzien.**

"Dat Lotte van den Berg de Marie Kleine-Gartman Pen aan mij gaf, beschouw ik toch als een afwijking van de regel. Ik ben dramaturg en choreograaf, sta buiten het centrum van het Nederlandse theater en Nederlands is niet mijn moedertaal. Ik druk me uit in het Engels. Marijke Hoogenboom is als lector Kunstpraktijk en Artistieke Ontwikkeling van de Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten een middelpunt vliedende kracht in het Nederlandse kunstenlandschap. Ze is me dierbaar als collega en vriendin, kan prachtig schrijven en doet dat te weinig. Aan haar geef ik daarom de Marie Kleine Gartman Pen 2007."

## **MISERY AND SOPHISTICATED, AN ARGUMENT AND A STATEMENT**

by Igor Dobricic

Anecdote

We were a small group of artists and art professionals who, in May 2007 had the privilege of following (and discussing) KunstenFestivalDesArts in a special programme organized by the Flemish Theatre institute. It was the last night of our tour. We "stumbled" out of the Flemish Royal Theatre in Brussels with a sense of dissatisfaction, following the long performance of "Telling Stories". For more than three hours, South African playwright and theatre director, Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom, had taken us on a strange, discomfoting journey through the "realities" of life in the townships of the post-apartheid era. And now, as we were getting our last drink in a pub across the street from the theatre, a strange unease, almost a sense of embarrassment was hanging in the air. Finally, people started talking. As I was listening to the others I had to conclude that in contrast to the prevailing opinion around the table, it seemed that my discomfort had very little to do with the content (or form) of the South African show. So, I kept quiet, projecting my vague feeling of unease onto the neo-renaissance façade of the theatre in front of me.

Then, over a second beer, somebody from the group asked me for my opinion about the show and I realized that while "scanning" the surface of the building my mind was already somewhere else. As I was taking another sip of beer, I paused, weighing my options. In response to the friendly inquiry and in defence of the work in question I could have opted for an affirmative tone concerning the dignity, relevance and affective power of the performance that we had just seen, making a plea for a generous and informed judgment about its aesthetical value. Or alternatively, rather than defending the "right to the cultural otherness" of the South African artistic production I could have picked up an opposing, attack strategy, deconstructing the neo-imperialism of a western art-market logic that is hidden behind fashionable terms like diversity and cosmopolitanism and is still exercising indiscriminate power over notions of aesthetic quality.

However, rather than doing any of that, and without fully knowing why, I mumbled a puzzling response (a year later, I can still recall it, almost word by word):

“It seems that the negative reactions of people coming out of the theatre tonight could be more or less summarized in five recurring terms: amateurish, pathetic, vulgar, banal and irrelevant.”

As far as I can remember, at that late hour and after a second beer, my elaboration of the subject after this initial observation did not go very far. However, that same evening, while saying goodbye to everybody, I made a “casual” promise that although leaving for Beirut the next morning, I would write more about the subject, and soon.

And I did, in the aeroplane already, while flying over the Mediterranean. My commitment towards a written elaboration was less a consequence of a personal responsibility to fulfil a promise and more a result of a growing fascination with these five words that were rapidly infiltrating my mind:

Amateurish, pathetic, vulgar, banal and irrelevant.

The text that follows grew out of the first draft conceived in a plane more than a year ago. Apart from finishing it in its e-mail form so that I could share it with others in the “Brussels group”, I have revisited the text a number of times during last twelve months. I have expanded parts of it and given it a title, I have shared it with a few friends, I used some of the formulations in my public engagements, but I did not imagine publishing it.

So why did I change my mind and decide to present it to a public now? Certainly not because I believe it to be a “proper” piece of critical writing about theatre in a conventional sense. Without this introduction that offers an anecdotal background to it, the text that follows reads more like a “metaphysical pamphlet” than theatre criticism. However, there is something about its partial, subjective tone of preaching urgency that touches the core of the issue that I consider central to the realization of the political potential still dormant in performance practice today: the issue of the performativity of “truth”.

The reason for putting “truth” between quotation marks is that I have not used the term as an index of quasi-scientific accuracy, but rather as a cipher of ethical responsibility. The ethical responsibility to speak the “truth” cannot be a matter of personal opinion, the reliability of which is measured by the authority of the speaker. Instead, a “truth” is spoken only when the mask of authority is removed and a genuine expression of a personal desire for THE TRUTH is embodied in all its dangerous ambiguity. As such, taking responsibility for an expression of “truth” always contains its opposite – the possibility of untruth - an embodied struggle with a potential for failure.

To perform a “truth” as a personal ethical imperative in its dramatic core, rather than merely speaking about THE TRUTHS as a simple proliferation of “authoritative opinions”, is not simply a matter of degree - of giving more or less substance (or should we say body?) to our insights and convictions. It is rather that my insights and convictions ENTER the ethical regime of a “truth” only when they are disclosed as a lived action/gesture of my body, “pointing towards” the world. To perform the paradox of a “truth” as an indicative gesture of the body that is grounded in the present moment is to create a possibility for a “truth” to appear. The potential effectiveness of the theatrical event lies exactly in its power to enact a discursive proposition (a “truth”)

as an embodied gesture in the present moment. This is why the performativity of a “truth” should be considered as the real “truth” of a performance.

There are only a few discursive formats, apart from fiction writing in general and dramatic literature in particular that are, by their style and intention, dependent on the embodied acts – the practice of “truth” telling. In its present form, theatre criticism is certainly not one of them. However, in the degree to which they are embodied gestures, acts of speech/writing ABOUT theatre have the same potential for performing a “truth”.

More often than not, however, in writing about theatre, the vital and urgent risk taking that is inherent in making an ethical statement remains hidden, masked by the anecdotal, journalistic, quasi-documentary style which, while simulating causal immediacy, always betrays a hidden claim towards authority. The format of my essay, with the anecdote (in this introduction) being radically separated from the statement (in the main text that follows) is a stylistic experiment that seeks to address a question: can I, in the age of the mechanical reproduction of TRUTHS, still make a difficult and uncertain attempt to perform a “truth” personally and directly? Can I do that without immediately being labelled as confused, presumptuous and pathetic? Can I, in other words, transform general statements about THE TRUTHS of a performance into the urgent performance of a “truth”, here and now?

It is interesting to observe that artistic manifestos, political pamphlets and religious sermons are three highly unpopular genres today. In their ethical instability and their demand to be performed as statements of “truth” they are, in contrast to the normative ambition of a critical discourse, considered dangerous, almost obscene. Yet, to the degree to which they invoke incarnated acts in their performative desire to proclaim a “truth”, they are traces of a genuine ethical struggle. They do not hide behind the authority of a disembodied voice as they seek a dwelling in the immediate (and problematic) materiality of the body that speaks.

By offering the second part of my text in the format of a statement that comes dangerously close to becoming a manifesto, a pamphlet and a sermon, I am eager to perform my “truth”. My eagerness comes from a belief that all the relevant discourses on art in general and on theatre in particular should have this ethical urgency, not only to articulate, but more importantly to enact a “truth” of art.

Put in such sharp relief, these considerations in the field of critical writing come dangerously close to causing form and content to collapse into each other. To get back to the subject of this essay, it is probably valid to write critically ABOUT what is considered “amateurish, pathetic, vulgar, banal and irrelevant” in performance practice today. But is it valid to do that by exhibiting amateurish enthusiasm and pathos as a personal gesture of commitment to the meaning of what is being proclaimed?

Can I allow myself to have a passionate opinion instead of an opinion about the passions and still be heard publicly without cynicism? Can I, with a “shameless vulgarity” directly express, expose, embody, enact, my thoughts with all their mortal failings, and still hope for compassion and understanding?

It seems that these urgent questions, while shaping the form, also reflect the real content of the statement that I want to make. If I had had these questions so clearly formulated in my head a year ago, while sitting in a pub across the street from the Flemish Royal Theatre, maybe I could have found the proper words to answer back

on the spot. Or maybe, even, I would have felt inspired (or drunk) enough to climb on top of the table and shout a "truth" without reservation, without decorum, as if it were a sacred revelation or a political slogan.

### Statement

Death turns me into an incompetent amateur. There is nothing more meaningless and banal, more vulgar and pathetic, more kitsch and obsolete than the immediate spectacle of my living/dying body performing its incompetence to the world. And the fact is – while alive my body IS dying all the time. Mortality is not an (im)possibility located in some undetermined future to be imagined or ignored at will, mortality is a process that I live and witness while I am living it, every second of my life. The banality/vulgarity of death is constantly with me, expressed through an unstoppable stream of clumsy, awkward, idiosyncratic, "amateurish" gestures, representations of the essential fact as it is performed by my organism from one moment to the next. The asymmetric instability of my posture, the slight trembling of my voice, the sweat that is trickling down my back, the unfocused blur of my gaze are, at this very moment, threatening to betray my vulnerability and subvert my composure. My ongoing struggle to keep on reading, speaking, being and not admitting the discomfort of the body is growing touchingly ineffective. My confused gestures, which give temporary shape to what is at hand, lack consistent meaning and do not clearly address anybody in particular. They are doomed to be interpreted as being pathetic, banal, vulgar and irrelevant. If you decide to follow these gestures rather than the content of my words, their naive and desperate urgency, their clumsy trivial form, will re-direct your attention away from the sophisticated utopian prospect of "what is coming after" – the pure and truthful meaning; towards the melancholic, meaningless misery of what is already lost - my own body - through the future inevitability of death.

As long as dying is an insurmountable and unbearably banal fact of life for all of us (including politicians, intellectuals, cultural producers and their public), "the afterlife of the soul" (as much as political promises of a better future) essentially only exists as a symbolic strategy of "avoiding the fact of death". Most belief systems are founded on the elaboration of this strategy of avoidance and every cultural/artistic elite is based on privileged access to it. Utopia as a guarantee of progress is a socially sanctioned truth of existence. Throughout its history "high art" has willingly, or most of the time unwillingly, served this truth by offering sensual articulations to it. And yet, a cultural/artistic vision of utopia is not really closer to the pathetic and immediate representation of the fact of death than the political rhetoric of progress. In this sense both the rhetoric of politics and the rhetoric of art address what is coming after - some ideal future, rather than what has been before and has already been wasted.

Labels like banal, kitsch, vulgar, bad taste, trivial, applied as value judgments to what is considered populist and low, are symptoms of the determination of "high culture" to do away with the unbearable, humiliating presence of body-death. The elite of course knows how to elevate banality and kitsch into something sophisticated, but it is not able to descend towards it, to accept it as it is, in its immediacy, at the critical point where it is essentially related to innocence and naivety. And what applies to death is in equal measure applicable to sex as the other side of the coin. Death (violence) and sex (desire) are two things the elite cannot bear to look at without getting embarrassed about them and consequently turning them into "something else".

Duchamp's "Urinal" could easily be interpreted (as it very often is) as a superior artistic gesture releasing an object from its profane use, so that we can contemplate it in its abstract beauty. Yet, to a degree, we can only guess at Duchamp's intention; it is much more likely that what he primarily intended by bringing a toilet into the gallery

was not to elevate a urinal to the realm of abstraction, but to make us critically aware of the uncanny power of the artistic context to neutralize the profane potential of an object.

Considered from this perspective, instead of daydreaming in front of Duchamp's urinal we should feel compelled to resolutely question the legitimacy of the sophisticated context in which it has been inserted. The unsophisticated expression of anger and the involuntary laughter that "ignorant" people experience when confronted with this signed piece of porcelain is a more powerful aesthetic reaction to it than the quiet moment of contemplation. To piss into it out of the confusion or pure madness would, in my opinion, be an even stronger dedication to the original gesture of the artist.

By being stripped of their ideologically contaminated, blind, habitual, everyday use, objects, gestures, faces and behaviour do not regain their innocence. On the contrary, they lose it. Because innocence is not a "purity" of function, thought and emotion. Innocence is simply a lack of self-consciousness. As such, in life, innocence most often reveals itself in the touchingly confident, naive and often ridiculous repetition of the impure - predictable, banal actions, images and situations - our only ineffective magical defence against death. The pleasure of relieving oneself into the toilet bowl gives THE REAL gestural meaning to the object, the one that precedes the meaning of its function, not to mention its abstract beauty.

The predictable reaction of the elite to this "romantic invocation of innocence" is to argue that there is nothing authentic or naive in the banality and vulgarity because it is entirely based on clichés; the predictable and mechanical repetition of common ideas/images/fantasies/actions that simply re-enforce the ideological status quo. In my opinion, clichés, common ideas/images and fantasies precede functionality or aesthetics; they are testimony to our shared struggle with death. They reveal our 'sameness' as the banal, but vital triviality of common cultural formulations; and in their idiosyncratic use, these also disclose our isolation and loneliness in their turn. As I have already pointed out, proclaiming "death as inevitable" is the ultimate cliché (just think of a skull as a tourist souvenir). But to conclude "we will all die" is also the only fact of life that we all truly share. This merging of cliché and fact, of sharing and isolation that is implicit in our existential failure and is experienced by every human on earth turns common mechanically generated ideas and quasi emotions into cultural icons that are more real (and effective) than the sophisticated utopian projections that are to supplement them.

A great deal could be said about the rarely remarked upon paradox (that Flaubert, Duchamp, Beckett, Pasolini and Genet, among many others, were acutely aware of) in which, by the virtue of their ignorance that turns them into such incompetent political subjects, "innocents" are almost the only ones capable of expressing 'as-it-is', essential (political) facts that are hidden inside the vulgarity of sex (desire) and death (violence). On the other hand, most contemporary art, by escalating the puritanical sophistication of its procedures more often than not serves the reactionary purpose of avoiding the subject. This is why amateurs, in all their lack of sophistication (both in the audience and on stage), are closer to the REAL than the elite will ever be. Being unprotected against death by the mantra of sophistication, they cannot afford the luxury of excluding the habitual, the banal and the pathetic from their behaviour. Their symptoms (as improvised, immediate solutions to an ultimately unsolvable problem) appear naked on the surface. They are their only and oh, so human line of defence. The only problem is that innocents very often talk to innocents, far out on the periphery, away from the temples in which the incense of sophistication is burned in

front of immortal gods.

In the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” two swindlers arrive at the capital of the empire and convince the emperor, who is keen on dressing up, that they can weave a cloth and design a garment of such refinement that it will remain invisible to all those who are stupid and unsophisticated. In the coming weeks and months the two swindlers appropriate a fortune, given to them for the material and their labour, while doing nothing but PERFORMING the empty gestures of sewing behind the half transparent curtain. When they finally bring the non-existent garment to the emperor, nobody, including the ruler himself dares to admit that there is nothing to be seen. So, when the appointed day for the public procession comes, before running away, the two swindlers dress the emperor in nothing. Completely naked, he parades down the main street of the capital in front of his silent subjects. It is a child that breaks the spell of vanity by pointing her finger toward his bare flesh, calling it by its proper name.

It is not the role of art to dress the emperor beautifully. The function of art is exactly the opposite – to expose him to the public eye by deceiving him into getting naked. This is perhaps the lesson that we need to learn if we are to once more discover how to make art relevant.

Therefore, if there is one possible function for sophistication in contemporary culture, it should be to play the dubious role of Andersen’s swindlers, developing strategies to bring the pathetic fact of mortal nakedness to the palaces and the temples. To perform mystery play about the Emperor's New Clothes to the emperor himself. So that as king (we can hardly imagine him as a queen), he cannot but be forced to become an innocent child, pointing his trembling finger towards his own bare body on stage. So that he can become his own subject, outraged by the slow decay of naked flesh. So that he can learn the skill of unconditional compassion and thus become a good ruler of the realm, which is nothing more than his own dying body.