The City as Stage, the Audience as Performer: “Tour Performances” by the performance group Port B in Tokyo

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Abstract

The Japanese performance group Port B, established in 2002 by director Akira Takayama, has often worked on forgotten or unknown aspects of the city of Tokyo without using professional actors, but ordinary people who are related to each theme of the performance. Its early works were performed in theatres or in other buildings, but since 2006, the group has been mainly conducting “tour performances” which do not keep the audiences in a conventional theatre but rather take them outside.

Although the history of modern theatre since the beginning of the 20th century includes many examples of performances which have been held outside conventional theatres, Port B’s “tour performance” follows a unique approach. The audience, either in small groups or even individually, visits various locations, always following different sources of information. Therefore, it takes part in the same performance at a different time. Each member of the audience is guided to forgotten or unknown places within the city where s/he discovers something, e.g. a new fact, or someone related to the theme of each “tour-performance.” Moreover, participants are required to talk with group members or those people related to the performance theme in certain places. Port B’s works transcend the conventional dualistic theatrical constellation such as stage and audience or performer and audience. The “tour performance” turns the perspective of the audience completely around, while the audience eventually revises her or his own image of the city.

The effect of this revision has ever been increased since the project *Compartment City Tokyo* (2009), because contemporary phenomena of the city of Tokyo are made the subject rather than simply its history. Port B’s audience individually watches interviews on DVDs that have been conducted with ordinary people - including children and non-Japanese residents - and is encouraged to talk to some of these people. As a result, s/he gains the impression that s/he is also an element of the city, not as a passive audience member, but as an active performer. Moreover, by using social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook, Port B’s recent “tour performances” refer to today’s urbanized living conditions in our era of media technology. In this context and in terms of the reversed relationship between performer and audience, Port B’s “tour performance” can be called a Brechtian Lehrstück for the 21st century. This treatment of the audience is very original and this is what distinguishes Port B from most current Japanese theatre groups,

which make neither its audiences aware of current social and political issues nor encourage them to be proactive as a performer themselves.

1. City as stage? Audience as performer? – A short observation of modern performances held outside of conventional theatres

The performance group Port B in Tokyo holds a highly original place in the contemporary Japanese theatre scene because of its “tour performances” which have been conducted since 2006. During each performance, the audience doesn’t stay in a theatre but experiences the performance while moving around the city itself.

If one recalls the tradition of modern performances taking place outside of conventional theatres, a certain era in Europe comes to mind. The convention that performances were held inside a theatre changed at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe through the work of avant-garde artists. In Soviet-Russia, Evreinov staged the mass spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace* in 1920 which was a re-creation of the October Revolution on its three-year anniversary. The same year, Reinhardt opened his Salzburg Festival with the performance of *Jedermann* held on the court of a local cathedral. Four years later, in 1924, Eisenstein staged Tretyakov’s *Gasmask* in a real gas plant. During the 1920s, landscapes outside of theatres were re-discovered as performance spaces.

The audience was rediscovered, too. They were no mere spectators who simply watch the performance. They were involved directly in the concept of the performances. The practice by the agitprop troupes in Germany around 1930 serves as a radical example: The troupes performed in public spaces such as courtyards of factories and restaurants and tried to interact with the audience after or even during the performance. (This practice influenced Bertolt Brecht to compose his didactic pieces, *Lehrstück*, which should be performed by the audience, so that they gain a critical view of contemporary politics.) Similar practices have continued after 1945, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, in experimental productions by directors such as Peter Stein and Klaus Michael Grüber at the Schaubühne in Berlin.

While Port B’s practices are similar to all of these performances, there are also remarkable differences.

2.0. About Port B

Port B, established in 2002, does not have a permanent ensemble. The one and only permanent member is director Akira Takayama who founded Port B after studying in Germany under director Klaus Michael Grüber.

The works by Port B can be divided into two categories. The first one (type-A) is performances held inside conventional theatres. They can be subdivided into two categories. A-1 is performances based on actual dramatic works such as pieces by Einar Schlee (Nietzsche *Trilogy*) and Elfriede Jelinek (*Wolken.heim*) and A-2 is performances based on field works which leads these works to resemble documentaries. And there are the type-B performances.

The performance *Museum: Zero Hour* (2004), which made a housing complex in Takashima-Daira in Northwestern Tokyo its subject, is a good example of the type A-2. On the stage, an actual female resident of this housing complex reads a text out loud which tells the audience about the previously unknown or forgotten history of this district. The audience learns that there had been a prison on this site before Japan's era of modernization during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and that many people were killed here. Keeping in mind that the housing complex is famous as a place for suicides today, the audience wonders about a possible connection.

Another example is the project *Re:Re:Re:place* (2005). The performance was staged in a building in Asakusa, located in the northeastern part of Tokyo. The building is next to the Sumida River, one of the most famous rivers of the Tokyo metropolitan area where many Japanese literary works such as Noh theatre pieces, have made their subject. The audience learns about these literary works while different people tell the history of Asakusa and of the Sumida River. One of the storytellers is the former station master of the Tobu railway Asakusa station. In this way, the story and the history of this district are closely connected through the people who act during the performance.

All performances belonging to type-A have been held in conventional theatres or inside buildings. From 2006 onwards, Port B has been creating more type-B performances. They are not staged in a conventional theatre, but in different places all over the city. For this reason, they are called "tour performances."

To date, many "tour performances" have been conducted on various topics. One project called *Compartment City Tokyo* (2009) can be regarded as a turning point. This paper analyses Port B's "tour performances" in four chapters; (1) three projects prior to *Compartment City Tokyo*, (2) *Compartment City Tokyo* itself, (3) recent projects following *Compartment City Tokyo*, and (4) the present development of this work.

2.1. The first "tour performances"

The very first "tour performance," *One Way Street – Travel to Sarutahiko* (2006), was held along a busy shopping street in Sugamo in North-Central Tokyo. Everyone in the audience received an audio player at the starting position and then walked along the shopping street, which is famous for its shops catering to elderly female customers. Following the instructions of the audio player, participants were taken to different places such as a watch shop, a shop for hearing device equipment and a doll museum. All these places are related to the human life span. At each place, a story is told through the audio player. Sometimes, participants are even asked to tell their own story in front of the staff. This walk proceeds only in one direction: imitating the fact that human life is irreversible. At the end of this tour, participants are guided to a shrine called *Sarutahiko*, dedicated to the God of Travel. At the end of human life, *Sarutahiko* serves as the guide to the other world.⁽¹⁾

(1) One could argue that the audio-tour *One Way Street* might be similar to *Call Cutta* by Rimini Protokoll (2005). Its audience is guided from the starting point to an office in a building in Berlin receiving directions by

One year after *One Way Street*, Port B realized its next project called *Tokyo/Olympics* (2007). The audience was put on the famous Tokyo sightseeing bus “Hato-Bus (Pigeon Bus)”, and visited different locations. All of them are connected with the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games and with the concept of “games” in general, such as a Go parlor, which is popular among elderly men, or a video game arcade. On the bus, Ms. Oikawa, a former Hato-Bus tour guide, explains each spot and talks about her experience during the ‘64 Olympic Games. An elderly Go player and a young video game player also join the bus and add their comments. The people that are being watched are not only the Hato-Bus tour guide and the two game players, but also the audience itself. A cameraman driving in a streetcar next to the bus, and also on a train in front of the parlor salon asks for the audience’s attention via a radio microphone. He then takes group photos which are later handed out to the audience at the end of the tour. The final locations the bus passes are the Yasukuni Shrine and the skyscraper Sunshine 60. This shrine commemorates those soldiers who died in wars fought in the name of the Japanese Emperor and who died for the Japanese state since the Meiji period. The skyscraper stands on the grounds of a former prison where war criminals from the Second World War were executed. The Hato-Bus or Pigeon-Bus, the pigeon being the symbol of peace, drives along these locations. The audience is asked to think about the connection between the history at the end of the Pacific War and Japan’s economic development around 1960 (i.e. prior to the Tokyo Olympic Games).⁽²⁾

The next “tour performance” following *Tokyo/Olympics* was called *Sunshine 62* (2008). Takayama expanded one particular part of the Hato-Bus-tour: the skyscraper Sunshine 60. The number 62 was chosen because the performance was held 62 years after the Tokyo War Trial where Japanese war criminals were convicted. The main part of this “tour performance” is the visit to about 15 locations in the area surrounding the skyscraper. From each location, the building can be seen. The audience moves in a group of five and visits each location

a person on the phone. At the office, the audience can see the face of her/his conversation partner on a monitor, and then s/he can enjoy a talk with her or him. It turns out that the conversation partner is actually talking live from Calcutta, India. In this case, however, the main theme is not the city of Berlin, but the people in the call centers in India who serve clients on other continents. The aim of the performance is not to rediscover the city or think about the history of the city.

(2) With regard to *Tokyo/Olympics*, the troupe of playwright and director Shûji Terayama realized the performance *Yes* (1970) which was held in a theatre and in a room of an apartment house while the audience moved to the latter location by the Hato-Bus (Interestingly, the bus guide Ms. Oikawa was associated with this performance, too). On the bus, actors appeared and performed. This was an attempt to bring a theatrical event into daily life, so that the boundary between fiction and reality is blurred. Port B’s *Tokyo/Olympics* is therefore not the first production using the Hato-Bus. But it is very original because no professional actors were on board Port B’s Hato-Bus. Compared to Terayama’s *Yes* which kept the audience in her/his role as an audience, the audience of *Tokyo/Olympics* could influence the performance any time if they wanted to. In Terayama’s case, too, it is not the aim of the performance that the audience experiences the city of Tokyo in a new way and rediscovers its history or status quo.

following maps which are handed out. Each member is required to take on a role, so that someone is in charge of reading the maps, taking pictures or following the schedule by using a stopwatch. In each location, the audience finds or receives texts, audio materials or lectures by different people. Participants can read or listen to the history of the skyscraper and learn especially about the discussions that took place before the building was built. There are different approaches to the history of the executed war criminals (For example, at one location, a Buddhist monk says that all people become Buddha after their death, no matter what kind of life they have led). At the end of the tour, the audience visits a stone monument in a park next to the skyscraper. The monument is hardly known among Tokyo residents, but this is the exact place where the war criminals were executed. At the end of the performance the audience is under the impression that the skyscraper itself is a huge monument or even a cemetery stone erected for the war criminals.

2.2. Turning point: *Compartment City Tokyo* (2009)

All of these three “tour performances” – *One Way Street, Tokyo/Olympics*, and *Sunshine 62* – let the audience rediscover forgotten facts, forgotten stories and forgotten history of the city. Port B’s next project *Compartment City Tokyo* (2009), however, followed a different approach. This time, Takayama was interested in the aspects of the “here and now” and in contemporary phenomena in Japan rather than in history. He focused on the following themes: the contemporary sex industry, homeless people and so-called “internet-café-refugees” who had lost their homes due to their low income and who now have to stay or rather live in internet cafés. The project was conducted at and around Ikebukuro West Gate Park, in Northwestern-Central Tokyo. Many people pass through the park next to the Ikebukuro station terminal, and a considerable number of homeless people live in the park permanently. For this performance, a temporary one-story building was set up in this park, serving as the central location. The performance consisted of the main part and of an “optional tour.”

In the main part, the audience enters the temporary building that looks like a sex-video booth. The building is open for one week, 24 hours a day. At the reception, the audience receives an explanation about the system and can select DVDs to take into one of the video booths. Surprisingly, the DVDs are not sex-videos but recordings of interviews with people passing through or living in the park. In each recording, a person answers 30 questions about her- or himself such as “What did you yesterday?” or “Is life in Tokyo convenient for you?” The last question is “Who are you?” The audience can also stay in this building overnight watching these DVDs, or s/he can just sleep there.

In addition to this main part, there is an “optional tour” called “evacuation training”. At the reception, the audience receives a map and is asked to proceed to another location. This “optional tour” performance is based on an actual fire that led to many casualties that occurred in a video booth store in Osaka. At the end of the “evacuation training,” the audience is guided to one story of another building and to a so-called “match-making café” that is again related to the sex industry. The audience sees several people behind a magic mirror who were among

the persons who were interviewed for the DVD. They are seated in a closed room evincing McDonald's, which in Japan is also famous as a temporary evacuation space for homeless people. The audience is asked to select a person. Then s/he is invited to one of the booths where s/he talks with this person for ten minutes. They are not professional actors, but for example a girl who likes costume play or a real homeless woman. All of them are in some way connected to this park. The audience is also asked to answer questions about her- or himself. Again, the last question is "Who are you?" In this way, the audience encounters a piece of reality of contemporary Tokyo, which includes her- or himself. S/he is never a passive audience, but active on the stage "City Tokyo" as a performer.

2.3. After the project *Compartment City Tokyo*

Following *Compartment City Tokyo*, the "optional tour" of this project was further developed into the next project, called *The Complete Manual of Evacuation Tokyo* (2010). Different locations were chosen as "evacuation areas" which were all near the 29 stations of the Yamanote circle line in Tokyo. The audience was considered as "refugees" and required to visit them individually, starting with Yes-No questions on the project's own website (for example: "Have you ever made a complete circuit of the Yamanote Line without a destination?"). After answering all questions, each participant was recommended her or his personal "evacuation area" and was asked to go there. All of these 29 locations are remote from today's hectic daily life in Tokyo, and the audience experienced completely different time-flows in the city at each "evacuation area". Locations from previous tour performances were integrated into this program again. Among the evacuation sites are also a room in a normal apartment house, a mosque and a small shrine on the roof of a large department store in Shibuya, a popular and bustling station on the Yamanote line. The audience experiences locations and communities they mostly never knew existed in Tokyo. S/he is not only a spectator, but a visitor, and s/he is required to communicate with the people living in these communities. Participants can also take an active role and create a part of the performance themselves. In fact, some audiences were so inspired that they started a party to thank the performance staff, and some organized a later performance at one of the evacuation sites. In this way, new communities were created, while Twitter and Facebook were used to connect the audiences.

The project *Compartment City Tokyo* has also developed further on an international stage. Already during preparation, one of the artistic directors of the performing arts festival Wiener Festwochen in Vienna, Austria, was interested in the project. It was adapted in a Viennese version for the festival in Vienna in May 2011. The video booth was installed in the Ressel-park, a park near the Karlsplatz and the Vienna Opera House (see Photo 1). Just as in Ikebukuro, many people pass through the park and some homeless people can be seen in the underpass to the opera house. In the video booth, the audience could watch DVDs with interviews recorded in both Tokyo and Vienna. The questions in the interviews were similar to those in Tokyo, but it was remarkable that people in Vienna answered each question in great length, so that the answers from people in Tokyo seemed rather empty in comparison. The "match-

making café” was also set up in a building just near the opera house (see Photo 2). Interestingly, according to director Takayama in a dialogue with the author in May 2011 in Vienna, some audiences including journalists in charge of theatre critics refused to choose one of the persons inside the closed room and avoided the opportunity to talk with her or him. This brings up the question as to whether either the Tokyoites are in general not restrained enough, or that maybe the Viennese are too restrained. It is interesting to notice this difference in the reaction of the audience = the performers.

2.4. Present development

The interviews from *Compartment City Vienna* were further developed into the core part of the newest project of Port B: *Referendum* (2011). A referendum has never been held in Japan and its necessity is currently discussed in terms of the accident at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant after the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011. Planning of this project started just after the earthquake, and Takayama carried out fieldwork in Austria. He visited the Zwentendorf nuclear plant near Vienna, whose construction had been finished but its start-up was terminated by a 1978 national referendum.

The project which was conducted in October can be called a “one-month installation.” Its main part could be experienced by entering a four-ton truck. It was parked first at 11 locations in and around Tokyo including Sunshine 60 (The locations are characterized by keywords such as life and death, present and past, or victim). The truck moved on to four cities in Fukushima prefecture before finally returning to Tokyo (see Photo 3). The truck was equipped with eight private video booths. The audience put on headphones and watched DVDs which were recordings of interviews conducted with junior high school students in Fukushima and Tokyo (see Photo 4). More than 150 students had answered the same questions (in total around 15), such as “What does it mean to be an adult?” “What do you think will become of Fukushima?” “What did you eat for breakfast?” “What would you do if you were the Prime Minister?” The audience then moves on to a ballot box and ballots in the corner of the truck. The paper is, however, not a ballot but instead includes some of the questions which were answered by the students in the interviews. The questions were now directed at the audience, and s/he is asked to write down her or his own ideas and opinions. Also, similar to the previous project, the internet was again integrated into the performance. The submitted voting papers were scanned and uploaded to the project’s own website.

Again, Port B has constructed a performance which encourages the audience to be proactive themselves, to shape the performance. Therefore the audience acted as performer.⁽³⁾

3. Conclusion

To sum up, the Port B audience is taken around the city following instructions and there

(3) The performance has been accompanied by around ten forum talks. Takayama and a guest speaker, e.g. a poet or an architect, talked and the audience could join the discussion and exchange opinions.

are no professional actors involved. The “tour performances” can therefore also be compared with contemporary art installations. Landscapes or objects in daily life are framed by certain contexts and shown to the audience. One could even say that the landscapes and the objects perform without human action. Moreover, Port B’s audience is also confronted with ordinary people just like themselves, whom they probably never would have met had they not participated. As a result of taking part in these “tour performances,” the audience must look at landscapes, objects and people in daily life differently. The impression during each performance lasts very long. The audience is also required to reflect on each topic seriously and critically.

Actually, the audience is always the starting point when producing the “tour performance”. In an interview, Takayama remarked that “[t]he term ‘theater’ comes from the ancient Greek word ‘theatron,’ [...] It means ‘place of seeing,’ and refers to audience seating. It’s important that the word is still used because it doesn’t mean a play performed onstage, but a place where people gather to see and think about something. [...] Though we didn’t present a play, we offered a spectacle for audiences to see, listen to and think about. For me it was theater in the original sense. I think a lot of contemporary theater has strayed from this” (Grunebaum 2011).

On the other hand, the majority of Japanese contemporary theatre performances is based on a fictional story for entertainment purposes only and aim to represent it without special concern to current social and political issues. This kind of entertainment is consumed by a passive audience. On the contrary, Port B’s audience is guided to and occasionally forced to take a closer look at social and political issues. Through this treatment of the audience, Port B’s “tour performance” differs greatly from any other genre of Japanese contemporary theatre.

Some audiences of Port B feel quite uncomfortable because they would rather prefer to remain passive. According to Takayama in a dialogue with the author, some participants of *Tokyo/Olympics* were not able to discover meaning in the performance by themselves and quit the bus ride before the final stop. Some audience members at *Compartment City Vienna* showed open rejection to the project. But for the audience who is interested in serious issues, Port B’s “tour performance” offers a new option because a piece of reality can be experienced and occasionally s/he can even talk with a person in reality. On the other hand, people who are not (or would not like to be made) aware of serious issues and would like to forget uncomfortable and inconvenient facts could be a rather difficult audience. With regard to *Tokyo/Olympics* Eckersall mentions that the performance “was not so much about the memory of the past, but the vantage of forgetting” (Eckersall 2010, p.38).

Port B’s “tour performance” intends to prevent the audience from forgetting or being unconscious and aims at encouraging her or him to a critical view on current social and political conditions. Rather than being just a mere city, the city is the stage and serves as an information infrastructure. The audience is the user of this infrastructure. “Tour performance” will continue to sharpen the view on the system and circumstances in which the audience lives. The audience is required to reflect on each topic seriously and critically, s/he is encouraged to

comment on it or do something, so that s/he becomes the performer. In this respect, the “tour performance” by Port B can be called the Brechtian Lehrstück for the 21st century, because it educates the public and helps them to reflect on serious issues of contemporary history and politics.⁽⁴⁾

In fact, in *Referendum* in Fukushima city, a woman who first thought the truck was a catering car, finally watched many DVDs to find out to know what her son should think about (Masaki 2011, p.120).⁽⁵⁾ In conclusion, in terms of numbers of audience, many people can be politically motivated rather by the “tour performance” than by performances in conventional theatres, simply because many people hardly visit a conventional theatre.

(4) In a panel discussion Takayama himself referred to Brecht’s Lehrstück as an inspiration for Port B’s performances (KUMA / HAMANO / TAKAYAMA / UCHINO 2011, p.53)

(5) Because of the very unique ballot and the participation of children or non-Japanese residents, the project *Referendum* is just a virtual referendum without any impact on political power. But the interviewed students and the audiences have given their original, individual opinions which have been archived on the website. This process and the fact that the original “voices” from Fukushima and Tokyo in 2011 have been archived and can now be read by people all over the world must be considered meaningful as it presents a record of ordinary people’s voices regarding contemporary Japanese politics.

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