



MEDIUM PUT TO THE TEST. ON THE TOPOS OF REHEARSAL IN ART FILMS

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ABSTRACT

When examining the interrelations between art and cinema, theater must be taken into account: the mode of theatricality, long banished in fine art, made the rounds especially in those art films that dealt with the intersections of the social and medial staging of roles. In this context, one can find a special affinity to the topos of the rehearsal, since it appears suitable to reveal and press ahead with the dedifferentiation of "real" and "fictive" roles and actions. The rehearsal appears as an improvised and staged form of "making of" as well as a biopolitically charged model situation in which the practicing of socio-medial role identities under the prevailing power and hierarchy relations is to be made visible.

KEYWORDS

Art film | Rehearsal | Theatre | Performer | Topos

THE (SELF-)ACTIVATION OF MEDIA

When examining the interrelations between art and cinema, theater must be taken into account: The mode of theatricality, long banished in fine art, made the rounds especially in those art films that dealt with the intersections of the social and medial staging of roles. In this context, one can find a special affinity to the topos of the rehearsal, since it appears suitable to reveal and press ahead with the dedifferentiation of “real” and “fictive” roles and actions. The rehearsal appears as an improvised and staged form of “making of” as well as a biopolitically charged model situation in which the practicing of socio-medial role identities under the prevailing power and hierarchy relations is to be made visible. Moreover, the rehearsal offers an ideal “presentation medium for artistic work” (Matzke 2012, 78) and thus a field for defining work and authorship, particularly in regard to the tension between individual and collaborative forms of production. In this context, it is above all the filmed rehearsal that appears to offer a media-reflective perspective on the interrelations between the changing forms of organizing and presenting artistic work and institutional representation: Conceived as a “critique of the work,” the presented rehearsal is appropriate for reflecting upon and reworking questionable norms and conventions, especially in view of socially and aesthetically coded mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, in that it addresses production and reception conditions that usually remain invisible. Insofar as the rehearsal appears as a translation process from one genre, in this case theater, into another genre, in this case the art film, it is its status as a trans-medial, equally aesthetic, discursive, and social form of production that makes it an overarching topos within a media society undergoing transformation¹.

The reason for dealing with the interrelationship between art and cinema in regard to the topos of rehearsal in the following lies in the fact that both sides traditionally use it as a medium of self-reflection and transferal. This has to do with, among other things, early cinema having been partially developed from

theater and especially the drama traditionally serving as a resource for representational codes of fine art. It is therefore all the more surprising that the modern art discourse is characterized by a profound rejection of theatricality, which counted and still counts as illusionism and thus as that which adulterates fine art’s very own medium. At the same time, one could presume that this also manifests classical modernism’s defensive stance against genre (the melodramatic, comedian, burlesque etc.) and against the dominance of corporeality, the feminine, the other, and so forth. In this sense, theatricality is there to satisfy the viewers’ need for the spectacle, that is, to divert their attention away from the material and visual quality of aesthetic (picture) objects. These attributions may come as a surprise in view of the waves of performance art recurring on a regular basis since the early 1970s and even more so in recent years, but they also confirm precisely that for which the theater, film and video practices associated with it stand: for an image- and media-critical de- and reconstruction of dominating body and gender representations. But even in the late 1960s, at a time when the hitherto leading mediums of painting and sculpture were temporarily sidelined by space- and time-related presentation forms such as Minimal Art, renowned critics regarded the latter as unartistic because they were theatrical. Particularly the art historian Michael Fried, who was associated with “formal criticism,” attacked Minimal Art in his essay *Art and Objecthood* from 1967 for the reason that it neglected formal-aesthetic material and media reflectivity in favor of directly addressing the beholder. The way he saw it, minimalist objects behaved like actors eager to please the audience (Fried 1967, 12-23)². On the other hand, artists of Minimal Art, including the choreographer, dancer, and cofounder of the New York Judson Church Dance Theater, Yvonne Rainer, were of the opinion that there is no independence of the (picture) object from the viewpoint of the beholder: she maintained that each work implicitly and/or explicitly conceives a bodily vis-à-vis. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s study from 2008, *Being Watched*.

1. Ibid.; the relationship between rehearsal and work is dealt with in detail in Matzke’s study.

2. For a critical reception see Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003.

Yvonne Rainer and the 1960's, demonstrates, precisely this poses a special challenge to choreography. The art historian cites Rainer's curt assertion: "Dance is hard to see" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 3). In other words, Rainer's turning from dance to film was connected with the claim to focus on the problem of spectatorship in her work. As I would like to show in the following reading of film sequences, the rehearsal plays a crucial role regarding the question of the interrelationship between perception and being perceived. But this does not mean that the

artists of Minimal Art, or even Rainer, maintained an emphatic relationship to the theater, quite to the contrary: Rainer's choreographies from the 1960s stand for a decidedly anti-theatrical rhetoric with their affinity for chance, the ephemeral, and improvisation. The common understanding of theater to which Fried also critically refers thus appears as the negative foil for those "post-dramatic"³ staging and presentation formats that could be called second-order theatricality and that overlapped with the concurrently emerging performance practice.

LIFE IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE CAMERA

In accordance with the minimalist questioning of the artwork as an isolated, hermetic entity, Minimal Art favored an at once visually and bodily organized relationship between work and viewer. The construction of multi-perspectival object-body relations meant to convey to the beholder both a real perception of spatial perspective and a situational standpoint may explain the special closeness of new dance at the time to Minimal Art. The example of *Lives of Performers* (1972), Rainer's debut film with which she advanced to a filmmaker⁴, makes it clear that the rehearsal apparently was and still is appropriate to merge choreographic methods with procedures of fine art in the medium of film. Comparable to the correspondences between the minimalist methods of fragmentation, accumulation, permutation, serialization, etc. and the choreographies consisting of mundane, found, improvised, and constructed movements, the rehearsal is also an open, repetitive, and at the same time determined exercise of movement and action units. The methods of chance and repetition worked out and/or performed in the rehearsal address and undermine the discriminability of production process and completed work. Starting with the (alleged) documentation of a dance rehearsal, the spectators become aware of the function of the rehearsal as a narration-generating matrix during the course of the film, which consists of four scenes.

Filmed by Babette Mangolte, *Lives of Performers* is the continuation of a collaboration between the choreographer/filmmaker and a photographer and camerawoman who later became a filmmaker and had previously recorded a number of Rainer's dance performances. The first scene showing the ensemble during a dance rehearsal in a gym is thus in line with Mangolte's earlier documentary film practice. If the dancers and the space didn't appear fragmented and assembled by the repetitive long shots and permanent camera movements, one could believe that this was the edit of an authentic rehearsal. The apparently also content-related cooperation between choreographer and camerawoman becomes a theme in *Lives of Performers* on the formal level, on which Mangolte intensifies the code of the documentary in such a way that the descriptively held scene latently transitions into the narrative: as if the camera were also subject to the experiment of the rehearsal, it successively scans the bodies, movements, and the space. Uniform-rhythmic pans evoke the character of a fragmentary, serial montage. The individual actors enter the frame only partially and briefly, before falling out of it again the next moment. Therefore, the camera seems to be guided by the situational events. This means that its style is more seeking than fixed, intent on capturing the improvisational character of

3. See, for example, Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999.

4. The work on Rainer's film was accompanied by a deep personal and professional crisis that had to do with, among other things, her dissatisfaction with the restrictive means of expression of the New York avant-garde at the time, from which she subsequently distanced herself.

the scene like a documentary. At the same time, a camera guidance of this sort confirms Lambert-Beatty's argument that Rainer's choreographic interest lied less in the body of the performer than in the gaze and the eye of the spectator (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 4). This transformation was evidently inspired by the intention of countering traditional strategies of involving the view that referred to Aristotle and Brecht with concepts of the gaze seeking to include the viewer in the performative events neither through seduction nor through enlightenment. With Rainer, this moment is pointedly emphasized by the interplay of professional performers and lay actors, since her focus is on the transitions between dance or performance conventions and daily and found movements. The camera thus becomes thematic as a tool participating in the "making

of" the film, setting the rehearsal in relation to the mechanical logic of technological reproducibility. The mediality visualized in this manner is logically attributed a constitutive character in regard to the body becoming performative. The self-activation of the camera technique linked to the mode of rehearsal can be compared with Godard's films in that the camera in this case also develops a structural narration of close-ups, revolving tracking shots, and long takes that is seemingly independent of the story. The events are therefore not mimetically "realized," but produced as and in the medium. Rainer's attempt to objectivize the medium as an expression of both affective moments and rhythmically structured movements emphasizes the making of a film (in the sense of a medium) instead of the making of a movie (in the sense of a genre).

LIVING FOR THE CAMERA

We will again encounter the performative (self-)activation of the medium in the topos of the rehearsal in contemporary art films as the question regarding the altered aesthetic and political significance of the now longstanding relationship between art and film within medially differentiated, or even post-cinematographic-performative exhibition activities. What began with *Lives of Performers* as a putting to the test of the interweaving of real, fictional, and media spaces, roles, and performance conventions, today no longer appears as *sine qua non*, but as a normative performance demand made on artistic productions between theater and cinema. They are not rarely at the service of the performative practicing of those flexible and self-reflective multi-identities that artists and media consumers share

— a moment that becomes a (meta) subject matter in the 2006 film *Rien du Tout* produced by Clemens von Wedemeyer in cooperation with Maya Schweizer. It is a 35mm film and video transferred to HD format — like most exhibition films — which was conceived as a spatial installation. Corresponding with the two media formats, two diverging topographies of the rehearsal are juxtaposed: theater stage and parking lot. As the media and theater scholar Stefanie Diekmann convincingly showed in her book *Backstage. Konstellationen von Theater und Kino*, the ensuing reversal of the gaze between stage and off-stage is constitutive of both the avant-garde "concepts meant to reorganize the theater space" and popular theater and movie fictions (Diekmann 2013, 19).

PERFORMERS OF LIVES

So the backstage situation has shifted farther outdoors compared with *Lives of Performers* – where it was still a gym. As with Rainer, the performers correlate with the transformation of role hierarchies here, as well: while the scene is initially dominated by a tyrannical director orchestrating an increasingly stalling rehearsal of a play about the suburbs of medieval Paris, the extras waiting off-screen successively come to the fore: they are pupils of a school located in one of the suburbs today regarded as a social problem area. Their dialogues giving the impression of a “bad,” because all too intentional improvisation are based on conversations that Wedemeyer and Schweizer had held with them during casting⁵. Comparable with the methods of Keren Cytter and Omer Fast, the filmic narration turns out to be a montage of script and minutes programmatically blurring the “demarcation line” between real and medial places. Corresponding with this on the formal-aesthetic level is the juxtaposition of 35mm film and video: while the theater rehearsal is shot with the gesture of sequence shots, the outdoor scenes filmed with video keep to the gesture of TV documentaries. In stylistic terms, they are therefore reminiscent of the images of rioting youths in the Parisian suburbs spread in the media just a few months before the filming of *Rien du Tout*: coming mostly from a so-called migrant background, their revolts were a response to racist exclusion and discrimination in the form of massive police violence particularly against young, male migrants. But the dialogues based on interviews are less an attempt at authenticating the performed roles than at ironizing the role images of the youths constructed by the media and politics. They talk about all kinds of things, from jobs at McDonald’s to their dreams of the future.

The nexus of mimetic and reflective registers of representation therefore raises the question of whether *Rien du Tout* addresses the social as media fiction and the social of media fiction. In this regard, the topos of the rehearsal also appears relevant in that it is not the format of re-enactment so highly popular in the 2000s. In other words, it is not a subsequent “remake” of a historical occurrence, but a mixture of artistic research and collaborative production

performed “in actu.”

Hence, the rehearsal appears as a *modus operandi* in two respects: as a real, i.e., production-technical, and as a fictive, i.e., staged “in the making” of performance strategies that document themselves, so to speak, in the act of performance. The nexus of technology/method and subject/content becoming topical in the process is essentially based on a collaborative interaction between direction, performers, and production team: a condition in the face of which the theater director of *Rien du Tout* evidently fails and that is met – this is the message of the film – only by the (action-determining) act of the extras collectively appropriating the “script.” But the de- and reterritorializing search movement of the video camera does not mark a seamless and smooth transgression of the symbolic to the real, it is instead an inverse process: when the director enters the parking lot at the end, she becomes a supporting actress of the performance of the extras held in the style of a medieval spectacle that thus makes the theater rehearsal “history.” This inversion also takes place in the theater-historical references: for example, the figure of the tyrannical director and the male assistant hassled by her makes recourse to the piece *Catastrophe* by Samuel Beckett from 1982, but with reversed “classical” gender relations. Beckett’s expressly dystopic view of the possibility of social progress resonates in *Rien du Tout* in that the existing hierarchies are not broken apart simply by replacing the structurally male by female power positions; the plot implies that only by testing collaborative participation do structural changes become a realistic option. The motif of rewriting existing “scripts” characteristic of the rehearsal thus proves its significance on the aesthetic as well as on the social and media-related levels: which role images and performance registers are obsolete and exhausted, which ones must be revised or newly invented?

The dichotomous topography of the film is also reflected in media-specific regard. While the world of theater is represented by the 35mm film and is therefore associated with conventional cinema in material-aesthetic and technical terms as well, the video technology documents the world “out there,” the impersonal street, here in the

5. This and other information on the production of *Rien du Tout* is based on conversations with the two artists.

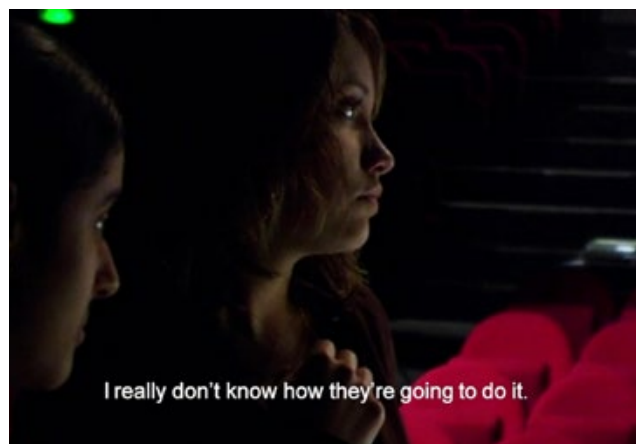


Fig. 01 · Clemens Von Wedemeye and Maya Schweizer, *Rien du Tout*, Château-Rouge Production, 2006

form of a parking lot that is obviously to be understood as an allegory. The documentary comes into play only in moments when extras recruited from a Parisian school in the style of a casting show and selected on the theater stage are filmed while waiting for the rehearsal. Such scenes apparently serve to show the youths alternating between one role and another in order to bring the latent differences between the seemingly unobserved and the deliberately performed gestures, gazes, and actions into play. The nested sequences of waiting, casting, and rehearsing are suited to generate a permanent state of deferral. The differences between social and fictive, real and symbolic roles thus turn

into a performative dialectics of de- and restaging, control and loss of control, plan and contingency. This applies to both the dialogues among the youths and the formation of groups. Therefore, the process of rehearsal staged in the mode of the documentary reflects the production process during the alleged run-up to filming. It reflects the conversations held with the youths during the "real" casting that are now practiced, as it seems, in the form of a cold run in front of the camera, like with Yvonne Rainer. The documentation of this process thus mediatizes the "reality" that the lay actors contribute to the film script and that in this manner becomes a changeable "narrative."

CONCLUSION

Following Annemarie Matzke's study *Arbeit am Theater. Eine Diskursgeschichte der Probe*, one could say that "not the systematic rehearsal work is narrated, but the crisis as that which eludes the order" (Matzke 2012, 24). The interface of theater and film therefore appears as a medial site in which the prevailing order flounders; the half-staged, half-improvised rehearsal in the parking lot represents precisely that which is excluded by the perfection demanded by the theater director: making performance conventions permeable for social interaction, something which Yvonne Rainer, more than thirty years earlier, sought to achieve through a meta-medial connection between rehearsal space and stage space: the motif of the reversal of the gaze thus given suggests precisely what the juxtaposition of parking lot and theater stage evokes: a de-hierarchized mediatization of institutional and social space – a moment that makes it difficult for the viewers to distinguish between seemingly documentary improvisation and seemingly staged rehearsals. One occasionally gains the impression that the role of the youths consists in (re)staging the act of self-performance demanded from them in the deliberately amateurishly played gesture of the rehearsal. Waiting to be given roles, they become lay actors of a mediatized life that apparently can no longer be represented by theater: "Lives of Performers" has turned into "Performers of Lives."

In this sense, one could apply what Ruby Rich wrote about Yvonne Rainer's filmic concept in a modified form to Wedemeyer's *Rien du tout*, as well: "If the performer could not be separated from the performance, nor the performance (with its "ordinary" movement) from daily life, the how to sort the [performer from the performance]? Thus rehearsal time was now screen time [...] The unity of the film derives from its constant themes of artifice and deception, as manifested in [theater] or film, [...] art or life" (Rich 1989, 4).

The omnipresence of performance has made not only theater and film, but also art and life, more similar to each other. The fact that the social appears as an effect of a medial de-differentiation does not make it authentic. Thanks to the reversal of the dominating gaze order, it is located at the transitions between filmic illusionary and institutional real space, which are also reflected in the double plot line of the presented events.

Nevertheless, the topological vectors of *Lives of Performers* and *Rien du Tout* run in opposite directions: for while Rainer sought the path from the space of the minimalist dance stage to the cinema screen, in the case of film installations such as *Rien du Tout* the path leads back to the usually minimalistically designed world of the exhibition space. In so-called "post-cinematic"⁶ film,

6. See Sabeth Buchmann/ Helmut Draxler/ Stephan Geene (eds.), *Film Avantgarde Biopolitik*, Vienna: Akademie der Bildenden Künste, 2009; here especially: Thomas Elsässer, ">Konstruktive Instabilität< oder: Das Leben der Dinge als Nachleben des Kinos?," p. 87-119 and Stephan Geene, "1967, Zeit und x-beliebige Filme," pp. 236-263.

its temporally coded screening overlaps with the spatially coded exhibition. The illusionism-critical transformation of objects to actors inherent in the (theatrical) *dispositif* of minimalism and the attendant integration of the viewer in the spatial and/or medial events, now turns against its own core: for it is the so-called “real space” of the viewer that becomes the object of a decidedly illusionistic *mise en abyme*. The work on media role stereotypes addressed in the “real” rehearsal thus reaches toward the spectator whose productive collaboration in the accelerated transition of the exhibition space to an interactive “event space” is attributed increasing symbolic value: for the balance between the “visual” and “performing arts” inherent in the tradition of Minimal Art appears to be shifted in favor of the latter, thus feeding the discourse on media specificity back to the techniques of medial (self-)activation.

In this sense, both *Lives of Performers* and *Rien du Tout* engage in their own specific ways with the ambivalences of an artist’s life, of which the modern media society makes an example. For the lives of performers seem to be suitable in a privileged way for being repeatedly tested and evaluated according to the criteria of virtuoso media competence: a moment demanding the permanent willingness to learn, implying the will to shape one’s own body and work performance in a more convincing and effective way. In this respect, it is a mixture of conventional competition and neoliberal-style “work on the self” that plays a role in the multilayered role conflicts based on social asymmetry, which Yvonne Rainer and Clemens von Wedemeyer address. They use the format of the rehearsal to analyze precisely this condition and to connect the work on the intersections between aesthetic and social media with the question of whether it possesses the potential (which must be called political) of emancipatory (self-)transformation.

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