

Lucienne Cole, Melanie Gilligan, Pil & Galia Kollektiv

THE SENSIBLE STAGE

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In 1998 the Berlin-based band, Die Tödliche Doris, presented their 1982 debut album translated and performed in sign language. This act of transformation from an aural to a visual language, from a sensory to a bodily communication articulates the dominant theme in Doris's work, that is "the information society and its blizzard of signals. 'We have breached these topics through sounds and the way the sounds develop,'" states Doris founder and stalwart, Wolfgang Müller (1) thus posing an interesting question – how does sound develop into non-sound? And furthermore, how might this non-sound provide a stop to the 'blizzard of signals' presented by what they call, the 'information society'? While there are complex ways of exploring these questions, one thing that is strikingly obvious is the way in which this performance uses both the common language of gesture (in his *Mnemosyne-Atlas*, Abby Warburg provides a good treatise on how bodily gesture becomes a common language within a culture) and the silence of a language that we do not speak. Opening up this rent between a commonality of a shared language and by extension, experience, and the impossibility (or falseness) of declaring a common experience, is at the heart of concern for *The Sensible Stage*.

The French political philosopher, Jacques Rancière describes what he calls a 'common sensorium' as "ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of etc." (2) The Tödliche Doris example provides an illustration of this idea both in the way it opens up questions of commonality and shared experience, but also in the way in which it engages in the act of reframing itself. For Rancière, this reframing is what enables art to be political – an encircling, partitioning or redefining of the space around itself: "it is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the way in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven in a commonsense, which means a 'sense of the common' embodied in a common sensorium." (3) While this act of reframing is also present in the work of Pil and Galia Kollektiv, whose work, *Better Future, Quad-Shaped* juxtaposes Die Tödliche Doris's *Tanz im Quadrat* with Samuel Beckett's television plays, *Quad I & II* and Bruce Nauman's *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (Square Dance), they are critical of the idea that this might provoke a common experience as a kind of democratising force. For them, reframing becomes a re-enlivening in which modernist themes and images are remixed with punk and other contemporary referents: a process of rescuing the "humour and critical vitality that have been subsumed by the canonisation and commodification of modernism". (4)



Lucienne Cole's work also reworks popular culture referents and the way in which these produce desire and "highlight slippages between fantasy and reality in everyday life." (5) Her engagement with the productive power of popular culture to form and inform subjectivities is complex and self-reflexive – she recognises her own ability to stage herself in relation to the cultures with which she engages, using her background in dance and in theatre to do so, and at the same time is able to convey the mass empathetic appeal (and power) that these have in relation to identity and iconography. Her work, *Dance to the Music* is an example of this powerful combination; a short performance in which she tap dances to The Smiths' *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*, it is both a spectacle that we may watch from a safe distance but are never quite able to remove ourselves from the vulnerability of a shared empathy with the performer herself. This commonality of being both a spectator and participant is echoed through her engagement with DIY and artist-culture, and is particularly related to her performance for *The Sensible Stage – Hi Fidelity Hi* – in which she recounts meetings with record collectors alongside her own personal anecdotes, while playing records from their collections and inviting participants to bring along and play their own. She states that collecting and playing records is often seen as a solitary pursuit but that it is also something to be shared. Lucienne makes no definitive statement as to the outcome of the participatory element in her work (other than enjoyment), declaring that she is a "believer in art as entertainment, able to exist and thrive in a multitude of contexts. ... My focus ... engaging people in public places and spaces." (6)

The question of this 'common experience' is taken up again although in a different way in Melanie Gilligan's *A Miner's Object*, a story that unfurls a conversation between a miner and his adviser who, upon the discovery of a strange, unknown object, discuss whether our subjectivities are materially given (the result of our physiology) or are the result of experience. Exploring the social and material qualities of knowledge through the form of a story as told by a storyteller could be seen to be skewing the debate in favour of the social production of knowledge – storytelling is after all, a prime example of the way in which the social flow and exchange of information engenders experience. Walter Benjamin states in his famous essay, 'The Storyteller': "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (7) Yet the two conversants remain convinced of their individual positions and we as audience are left with the thought that the answer lies somewhere between the two. As Wolfgang Müller of *Die Tödliche Doris* says: "the interpretation, or definition, happens in the listeners' head anyway." (8)

The three performances that make up the programme for *The Sensible Stage* are so different that they can't be seen to comprise a programme in the usual sense of a coherence in theme, medium or method. But this itself is the point – a desire to disrupt the smoothness of transferral from experience to experience from event to event, and instead to articulate the way in which an event might or might not *make* certain things – experiences, knowledge. It is this experience of the event *as event* that is of interest, rather than any attempt to make an argument for the relative merits of a particular type of event or a particular outcome. Furthermore, various aspects of the programme might



indeed be seen to articulate the polarised stances that modernist and post-modernist attitudes would take on the matter. As artists Pil and Galia Kollektiv state, “we are obviously quite critical of the notion that knowledge can be democratised by a simple reduction to a shared participatory experience.” (9). And their work is a powerful illustration of the way in which the reframing and layering of references can provide a stop within the constant flow (blizzard?) of information and production of experience and knowledges today. Living in an economy that trades on experience and the easy and productive flow of experience to experience and of experience to knowledge, *The Sensible Stage* seeks to provide a pause within this stream in order to examine (and to enjoy) the particularity of these events in themselves.

- (1) Kopf, Biba, ‘Once upon a time in Berlin’, *The Wire*, p.27.
- (2) Rancière, Jacques, “The Politics of Aesthetics” (2004), <http://theater.kein.org/node/99> Accessed 23 October 2006.
- (3) *ibid.* In this way, Rancière derives his notion of the political from an Aristotelian stage in which politics exists because it occupies a space in which people are able to speak and speak politics, and art exists within a similarly declared partition.
- (4) Artist’s statement, September 2007.
- (5) Artist’s statement September 2007.
- (6) *ibid.*
- (7) Benjamin, Walter, ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999.
- (8) Kopf, Biba, *op.cit.* p.27.
- (9) Email correspondence with the artists, 21 June 2007.

