

The Obsession with Context

Dagmar Walser



From the first performance of *Pratthana* in Europe (as part of the official program at the Festival d'Automne à Paris / Japonismes 2018), at the Pompidou Center. Photo by Takuya Matsumi

More than once I longed to be somewhere else during the theater performance *Pratthana - A Portrait of Possession* on that mid-December evening in Paris. Not because I was bored and harboring thoughts of walking out. Not because of the French subtitles, which I got lost in due to my inadequate language skills. And not because the performance was getting too long for me, even though it's definitely a long piece. On the contrary, the experience got richer and more inspiring as the evening went on and I became increasingly drawn in by the story, or stories.

And yet, the one thing I kept missing that evening at Centre Pompidou is the audience in Bangkok, where the piece had premiered four months earlier. Which scenes had the audience laughed at during those performances? Who in the room was holding their breath in suspense? Who identified with the protagonist Khao Sing and the many actors who portrayed him, and at what points? What did people talk about after the play, and what did they not talk about?

There are some plays that already have a story before you enter the theater. I had been in Bangkok for the first time just a few weeks earlier while researching Southeast Asian theater and had formed my own first impressions of the challenges facing the local scene. I got to know some of the performers in *Pratthana* personally. I stood before the memorial of the massacre on October 6, 1976 on the campus of Thammasat University and tried to understand how the past and present meet in everyday life in contemporary Thailand.

I've also long admired the works of the Japanese artists involved in the production: Yuya Tsukahara from contact Gonzo and Toshiki Okada, who is present in Europe for years due to his work with his company Chelfitsch. In recent years, Okada had regularly worked with the Münchner Kammerspiele theater. I remember how strange it felt at the premiere of the first collaborative production in 2016, when the "German" actors adapted to the stylized Chelfitsch aesthetic and appeared to be performing "Japanese" bodies, which was something that no longer bothered me two years later during Okada's third Munich production. Had my perspective or the approach of the actors changed?

Bodies and spaces are always political in theater. And the local context for contemporary international touring productions is in essence a fragile one. It might sound obvious, but a theater production cannot exist without a specific audience. The audience's attention, specific frame of reference and emotionality turn a shared experience into a successful theater production. The performance is different every night, and different at every

venue. But what would I have understood better in Bangkok than in Paris? What would the mood and presence of the audience have conveyed to me differently in Bangkok?

Why did I continually think I simply lacked the context to truly understand the play?

And what does “understanding” even mean in art?

I watched myself as I almost obsessively responded to some of the props. The orange shoes, for example. It was almost spooky how they kept appearing. Sometimes they were projected onto the wall close-up and other times an actress strolled across the stage in them. Yellow is the royal color of Thailand. Red stands for the opposition. And orange? Even more obsessively, I watched the digital clock that showed the year we were currently in. No audience member in Bangkok would have needed to think about what had happened in Thailand in 1992, 2010 or 2014, where they had been at the time, or how they felt. They would have stored it in their bodies and remembered it collectively. Or at least that’s how I imagined it. How did the Thai audience react at the end of the play, which I thought finished abruptly on the day of King Bhumibol’s death in October 2016?

The preoccupation with one’s own perception is directly written into *Pratthana*, even more so than in other plays. A single theme pervades the play from beginning to end: the gazer and the gazed upon. The actors are an audience to each other. Observation and seduction merge seamlessly into surveillance and violence. The question of who has the right and the power to watch whom is a question that is indirectly addressed throughout. The tipping point between gazing and being gazed upon becomes an artistic strategy. And when the personal story of the protagonist increasingly becomes a reflection of a fragile social body, that body is multiplied by cameras and projections, and simultaneously broken down into many parts. From the trials of a single artist’s life, the picture of a traumatized society emerges ever more clearly.

Part of the power and attraction of international theater is that it confronts one’s own personal and cultural history of perception. So where does this urge to understand the “real” context come from? Does this reflect a Western attitude that assumes that we can or must be objective and distanced? Does this attitude perhaps even make it impossible for me to perceive another (non-Western) perspective without bias because I am looking for a unambiguous interpretation? Would it have been easier for me if Khao Sing had made a clearer statement about the painful struggles for democracy in Thailand if he were to take an aesthetic position and a political one? When does the interest and desire to understand something become an obsession?

Questions, questions, questions. Fortunately, the play had completely captivated me by now. I enjoyed the sound of the language, the enthusiasm of the actors and their different approaches. I immersed myself in the theatrical performance, which kept revealing new perspectives and spaces. I’m impressed by how Okada and Tsukahara, together with Uthis Haemamool’s script and the Thai performers broke new ground for everyone while entering new aesthetic territory. I became part of the action on stage and grew increasingly relaxed as I watched my own questions come and go.

Towards the end of the performance, when the protagonist himself moves around Centre Pompidou and walks among the icons of (western) art history on the fourth and fifth floor, he unexpectedly moves further away from me again, despite his fictitious physical proximity. What significance did this museum have for his artistic search for identity? Is it an escape to Europe or even a supposedly common reference point? In any case, this scene is further proof that *Pratthana* is not intended to be a “universal” biography of an artist. Instead, the potential of the play lies in its specific narrative, which can be viewed differently depending on one’s own position and perspective. What kinds of gazes would the Thai artist have received at Pompidou that a Swiss or French artist would not have experienced?

And so, as I reflected on that night at the theater in Paris, I would have also liked to be in the audience at the performances in Tokyo. I wanted to be there when the Japanese audience reconciles what they had experienced with their own understanding and knowledge, or lack thereof. What would I have learned from them and with them about their perception of the world and of art?

(Translated from German by Harry Bartelt)

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