

**Yvon Chabrowski at EIGEN+ART and Henna-Riikka Halonen at ART CLAIMS  
IMPULSE, Berlin, July- Sept 2009**

**By Louise O'Hare**

"I felt compelled to perform. Well, when I say perform, I was compelled to go out and do my engagements and not let people down and support them and love them... And in a way by being out in public they supported me, although they weren't aware just how much healing they were giving me, and it carried me through. ... Yes I did, yes I did."

A large flat screen TV shows a close up of a woman's face. Blue eyed, not quite pretty and not quite plain, her hair neatly tied back, she appears to be answering questions that we cannot hear.

Pauses in her monologue are followed by 'answers' - statements uttered in a manner which comes across as very measured; self declared, and yet at the same time reluctant and forced out – elicited confessions.

The oddness of her behaviour combines with the strange familiarity of her statements. They seem almost like clichés, like something we might have heard before. She continues -

"Yes, I did. I had bulimia for a number of years. And that's like a secret disease..."  
It is not long before the viewer pieces together the jigsaw and identifies the words as those of Diana Princess of Wales in her famous 1995 Panorama interview.

The actress is imitating the gestures and expressions of the Princess of Wales, re-making the original historic event, but in a clinical environment- her actions remain the same but all context- the interviewers encouragements, the famous face, the regal looking sitting room environment, is removed.

*An Interview with H.R.H. The Princess of Wales 2008* by Yvon Chabrowski is part of *Labor* a group exhibition at EIGEN+ART Berlin. 'Labor' has more collective or social implications than the word 'work', and the term resonates with the princesses' description of her function, 'performing' for the people.

The rest of the works in the exhibition more tenuously fit the theme, seeming to focus more on the actions, procedures and performances of war – perhaps implying it to be the ultimate social employment. Shonah Trescott's *Disaster* series; small canvases depicting contemporary military conflicts in the style of Goya and Velazquez, sit alongside Luise Schröder's double screen videos of the memorial day services commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, whilst the upper floor of the gallery features a wall installation by Adina Popescu – pinned up directions for a strange play featuring 'Leila' the first female hijacker and Olympia (the automaton from E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman*). Facing this hangs another work by Yvon Chabrowski *Entführung (kidnapping) 2007*. This staged photograph shows actors in the pose of abductors and the abducted- a scene of domination we have seen in countless news footage, made pantomime but no less intimidating by a notable lack of props; an invisible sword is held aloft with fierce intent and a non-existent gun rests on a tense hand, while the kidnapped man's head hangs in submission.

Outside of the gallery hang other signs of surrender, Anna Schimkat's white flags, their German national colours only marked by words and lines - *Schwarz Rot Gold*. These form a flapping bunting welcoming the gallery visitor, but seem less a gesture of assent, more a question about the legacy of nationalism.

The re-staging or re-editing of historical truths, may be another way to consider the works on display here, and perhaps this can be related to a performative reading of the term labor, as directed and repetitive actions. In this context the socialist connotations of the term "labor" bring to mind constructivist theatre and the biomechanic system developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Constructivism, with its utilitarian emphasis on art as a practice for social progress, its dismissal of illusion and 'pure art', for art's sake<sup>1</sup>, seems at odds with the very nature of theatre<sup>2</sup>. But Meyerhold's theatre trained actors in such a way that they might be described as *making actions* as opposed to performing them. The biomechanic technique was an intensely repetitive program, actors, trained as gymnasts and acrobats, practiced particular studies, such as "shooting a bow", over and over again until they became so internalized as to be meaningless to the

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<sup>1</sup> "The real participation of intellectual and material production as an equal element in the creation of communist culture" ... "The end has come to pure and applied [art]. A time of social expediency has begun." – Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists - Alexander Rodchenko and the Varvara Stepanova

<sup>2</sup> Popova, who worked on set design for Meyerhold was rejected by her more staunch constructivist colleagues.

expression of the individual. The actors expression was therefore completely subordinated to the directors will<sup>3</sup>, the actors functioned as part of a machine - perhaps *working* rather than acting.

We could consider the actors in the works by Yvon Chabrowski as *working* in this way. By straightforward mimicking or repetition of an action or gesture, the actors avoid adding their personal expression or interpretation. These performances could be seen as scientific investigations, enabling a distanced deconstruction of the original action itself, whether it is a pleading tone, or an aggressive stance.

However, as already mentioned, there is something of the pantomime about these works, a distancing caused by their isolation and use and improvisation, which instead of rendering them more clinical, more easy to decode, pulls their function into question, and makes the performances more akin to theatre than an analytic strategy. Chabrowski's Diana speaks in a lilting German accent, and the sword wielding kidnapper wears girly pink socks – continued study finds both scenes increasingly ridiculous – in manner both tragic and comic.

A similar gentle and probing humour is to be found in the work of Henna-Riikka Halonen, who has a solo show across town at a younger gallery, Art Claims Impulse. Three videos works are on display, each featuring scenarios staged by Halonen in unlikely settings; an abandoned caravan at London's Clays Lane Olympic development site becomes a platform for displaced travelers to sing the Olympic Anthem, Limerick Town Hall entranceway becomes the stage for Polish builders to construct a "Glass Mountain" and the diving boards and boiler rooms of the Edinburgh Commonwealth Swimming Pool, become the sets for a reworking of 'The Bathhouse' a constructivist play.

On paper *Glass Mountain 2008*, seems like a rather didactic comment on the numbers of Polish workers working in Ireland; a supplementary text describes how Halonen employed Polish builders to construct a "Glass Mountain", a wooden construction inspired by a famous polish fairy tale. However, the performance

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<sup>3</sup>“...the actor's own personality was eliminated and he was entirely subordinated to the director's will. Coached as gymnasts and acrobats and emphasizing pantomime rather than words, the actors threw themselves about in puppetlike attitudes at the director's discretion. For these productions the stage was exposed to the back wall and was then furnished with harshly lit, bare sets consisting of scaffoldings, ladders, and ramps that the actors used.” - <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/66138/biomechanics>

Halonen directs, turns out to be much stranger and open to interpretation than the 'plot' might suggest.

In the video, the builders, ominously dressed in matching hooded uniforms of white painters overalls, appear to be in costume and are immediately readable as actors, rather than workers being filmed. Too many of them are working on this one job, so they become lumbering figures – their actions seem self-conscious, oddly stilted, and their movement clumsy. The creation of the "Glass Mountain" itself seems both senseless and portentous – drawn out and seemingly significant this hut construction will provide no obvious function, neither shelter or beauty, so for what purpose is it being built?

By using the context simply as a starting point, Halonen's videos develop a strange confusion of meaning, where original references become tenuous, and the action 'on stage' seems to develop its own logic and narrative. The videos sit somewhere between a directed work, and the documentation of a set up situation, the product of an experiment.

By working with 'non-actors', perhaps Halonen desires that the builders will follow instructions rather than 'act', 'work' rather than 'perform'.

Halonen takes this constructivist pursuit further in *The Bath House*, where the Junior Edinburgh Diving Club are used to enact a version of a play by Vladimir Mayakovsky originally directed by Meyerhold himself.

Even on paper one can easily imagine the humour of this endeavour. The swimming pool, in its utilitarian metal and tiled splendour makes a constructivist stage set that Popova would have been proud, whilst Halonen's eye for exquisite shots of this imposing space follows the troupe of children as they enact peculiar scenes.

This improvisation – the use of the pool as a stage, and children as actors- evokes a similar feeling of 'pantomime' suggested in the Chambrowski works, an imitation that gently mocks or subverts the seriousness of the original stance.

We find four girls in matching swimming costumes and hats, crouched on top of a diving board peering at some kind of blue print, we giggle nervously as Halonen films the shaking of the diving board steps as children traipse to the top, and we

watch from the basement as legs akimbo the young divers struggle back to the surface. Perhaps the moment they rush up for air is a point where we can see them not acting? Though as sportsmen they are still 'performing'.

As *The Bath House* develops the original script becomes impossible to discern, and any narrative threads that do remain lose their meaning in the spectacle that unfolds; a breathtaking diving display followed by and the appearance of "The Phosphorescent woman" (a girl in a luminous wet suit), seem to move the story forward but make little sense.

Not that this matters, in fact the interest comes in watching the performances rather than what is being performed or described.

The wonderfully awkward movements of builders the *Glass Mountain* are mirrored in the line of children shuffling in unison towards a girl playing "Optimistenko" the Aid to the "Bureaucrat", there are numerous amusing little puffs of stage smoke, and a strange scene shows the children sitting in the spectator stands, (their ranks increased by the inclusion of blank faced lifeguard dummies) berating the artist in tones of giveaway scriptedness -

"Its supposed to be socially engaged but when do we get to show our moves?" ...  
"We are working late and it's not even Beautiful"

Elements of performance - participation and delegation have been much discussed with regard to contemporary artistic practice, yet normally as a social or political exploration, rarely in relation to what is surely the key facet of these works; the way they entertain. 'Labor' when related to performance can evoke the actor as paid entertainer- working to keep his/her audience amused.

Within this text I have twice described works as 'pantomime'<sup>4</sup>, a word which comes from the Greek "mimic all", and has come mean the art of portraying a character or a story solely by means of the body<sup>5</sup>, such as the physical comedy of Chaplin's Little Tramp<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "mimic all" (*panto-* - all, *mimos* - mimic) - wiki

<sup>5</sup> In the strict sense, a **Greek** and Roman **dramatic entertainment** representing scenes from life, often in a ridiculous manner. By extension, the **mime** and **pantomime** has come to be in modern times the art of **portraying a character** or a story solely by means of body movement (as by realistic and symbolic gestures). Analogous forms of traditional non-Western **theatre** are sometimes also characterized as mime or pantomime. - "**mime and pantomime**." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 29 Jul. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1452384/mime-and-pantomime>>.

“Pantomime” however is now more commonly used to describe a “distinctly British”<sup>7</sup> form of comic theatre, normally performed at Christmastime, which incorporates song, dance, buffoonery, slapstick, cross-dressing, in-jokes, audience participation, and mild sexual innuendo.

Rather than focusing on the statements that Chambrowski and Halonen might be making with regard to exploitation, and control, by looking at their use of *slapstick*, *dressing up*, *in-jokes*, *audience participation and collaboration*, we might gain a better understanding of their tragic-comic effect.

It is interesting to note that these aspects of performance are not normally associated with trendy galleries or performance art, but instead with a somewhat ‘unclassy’ and unfashionable form of popular entertainment.

**Labor** July 10- September 5 2009

EIGEN+ART Auguststrasse 26 D - 10117 Berlin

Tuesday - Saturday 11am - 6pm

**Henna-Riikka Halonen** July 15- August 15 2009

ART CLAIMS IMPULSE Lübbener Strasse 5, 10997 Berlin

Wednesday - Saturday 4pm -9pm

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<sup>6</sup> Meyerhold’s theatre is also often described as “pantomime”- again implying action rather than words. Meyerhold was known to have drawn on the techniques of the **commedia dell’arte** early Italian improvisational theatre based on the comic retelling of clichéd tales from which our current conception of Pantomime can be seen to have grown. – paraphrased from **biomechanics**.  
Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 29 Jul. 2009  
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/66138/biomechanics> "**commedia dell’arte**." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009.  
Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 29 Jul. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/127742/commedia-dellarte>

<sup>7</sup> wiki again

