

ACTING THINGS
JUDITH SENG

PROLOGUE TO ACTING THINGS

The triggering moment for ACTING THINGS was a May Day holiday spent with friends in Southern Germany. Amid the foreign folklore of the festivities, I discovered a scenery with surprising connections to the themes that occupy me in my work. A group of men and women danced around the tall maypole, performing the traditional Bandltanz in which a fabric is braided and then de-braided by the movements of the participants. The choreography of the dancers and the shape of the fabric were directly connected; they constituted a moving and changing unity of interactions between materials and people. More than a folkloristic fertility ritual, I saw a dancing production process and asked myself: what would an object look like that was created in a process like this one? Would the production of a material result change the nature of the dance? And what perspectives open up when we look at work as a social ritual, and production as a dance or a game?

ACTING THINGS AS EXPANDED VIEW OF THE MATERIAL

My work deals with objects and spaces and how they reflect, initiate and possibly change sociocultural processes. Sometimes, the work manifests as objects that attempt to influence such processes or make them visible. Other times, I directly design the process by which an object or space is created. I thus work both with material whose physical existence can be sensually experienced, and with immaterial systems and processes that are often beyond sensual perception and cannot be directly experienced. Whereas materialized results can be revisited over time, a process is ephemeral and may appear never to have taken place at all if it is not documented and thereby materialized – only then can it be continued and be shared beyond the memories of those involved. Sociologist Bruno Latour describes how closely objects and processes are interlinked despite their very different manifestations and qualities: *»If things, or rather Dinge, are gatherings, as Heidegger used to define them, then it is a short step from there to considering all things as the result of an activity called »collaborative design« (...). This activity is in fact the very definition of the politics of matters of concern since all designs are »collaborative« designs – even if in some cases the »collaborators« are not all visible, welcomed or willing.«*¹ Latour also calls for new forms of representation that do greater justice to the processual nature of things. *»However, what history also shows is that we are a long way from being able to provide for things, that is for matters of concern, a visual, publicly inspectable space that is as remotely as rich, at least as easy to handle, and as codified as what has been done over four centuries for objects conceived of as matters of fact.«*²

One could also say that our view of things is determined less by the »what« and increasingly by the »how« – how we produce, consume and use, how we experience things and how they affect our lives. If we want to design (not plan, manage and control) this »how,« it seems essential that we make those less tactile, often fleeting elements of processes visible and thereby tangible and formable. The challenge, then, is to transform the qualities we value in the material and make them available for the processual – for the design of processes of creation, for example. These qualities include an ability to store histories and memories, intuitive and ambiguous readability, inherent laws that can be sensed and the capacity to be experienced physically and multi-sensorily, to name a few.

If we consider processes of creation from the perspective of the performative arts, other elements come to the fore as formable »materials«: the individual agendas of the actors, their histories, psychologies and bodies, including their senses, instincts, emotions and desires. Understanding processes of creation as malleable choreographies reveals the potential embedded in the shaping of interplays of social interactions, spaces, objects, atmospheres, narration and »rules of play,« which mutually depend upon and strengthen one another. If nothing else, these processes of creation provide a dramaturgy for the narrative that shapes social identity. Though these elements may seem like themes and materials of the arts, they nonetheless flow into even the most impersonal, economic creative processes, usually informally or in hiding.

The *Bandltanz* is a central motif in ACTING THINGS, because it reveals the processual and the material as a performative unity and thereby makes visible what curator Anselm Franke describes as »a continuity between the stable object and the event.«³

ACTING THINGS AS REFLECTION BY DOING

The consideration of everyday processes as performance opens up a space removed from daily life and its functional requirements. Marten Spanberg uses the term »immaterial performance« to convey the fact that this is possible not only in a theater or exhibition space. »*Immaterial performances through a precision in naming contexts, in accounting an environment or a frame, and through those processes manifest something as performance.*«⁴ What is essential is the freedom to shift our perspective on everyday life, thereby revealing the way we do things as a malleable performance, as game, as dance. Even the ritual of the *Bandltanz* was, prior to its existence as a tourist attraction, an integral part of everyday life that nonetheless set itself apart from everyday actions. It has been practiced for centuries to manifest the passage of time during the year and make the transition to the fertility phase experienceable. In a comparison that Émile Durkheim draws between ritual and theater, some common elements come to light that seem essential for a creative approach to shape the world: the risk of entering unknown and uncertain territory and a certain inefficiency and aimlessness in search of new and different possibilities. »*Not only do they [ritual and theater] employ the same processes as real drama, but they also pursue an end of the same sort: being foreign to all utilitarian ends, they make men forget the real world and transport them into another where their imagination is more at ease; they distract.*«⁵

The ACTING THINGS project initiates tangible experiments in a laboratory situation. Using the production of objects as an exemplary process, it seeks to develop new perspectives on processes of creation by staging workflows differently and shifting common emphases. The focus is less on representing the process as a »making-of« but on the setup of the experiment itself, which explores the process of creation using performative, theatrical means – thereby making it visible and experienceable. The setup, in other words, reveals the potentiality of things and spaces, the effectiveness and power of their materiality to initiate and unveil processes and experiential spaces. One could say the experiment is conceived as a modern ritual, a simulation test, a prototype or – to use the language of theater – as an act of slipping-into-a-role and, by acting-as-though, looking at the world in a new way; as an attempt to transform by ways of doing, experimentation, reflection and comprehension into visible, tangible and materialized outcomes. The result is an experiential space for the protagonists themselves in which others can participate and share.

Judith Seng

1 / 2 Bruno Latour (2008)
A cautious Prometheus? A few steps towards a Philosophy of Design. Lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society, Falmouth, 3rd September 2008

3 Anselm Franke (2012)
 Talk about objects as situations with Elke Marhöfer moderated by Judith Raum, Salon Babette, 19th of December 2012, Berlin

4 Märten Spänberg (2006/2009)
Immaterial performance: Knowledge, Everything, Frames, Change www.martenspanberg.org, 21.12.2012

5 Émile Durkheim (1915)
The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Oxford

This book presents the practical experiments
of the project **ACTING THINGS** as well as
ACTING THINGS ISSUES that invites different perspectives
to discuss emerging questions around the topic of the project.

ACTING THINGS

BANDLTANZ PRODUCTIVITY AS CULTURAL RITUAL **8**

A woven structure is created by the movement of the dancers in the traditional dance ritual which has been performed for many generations every 1st of May in the South of Germany.

ACTING THINGS I PRODUCTION THEATER **20**

A theater stage is turned into a temporary factory in which guests produce tables themselves to dine on them together.

ACTING THINGS II DIALOG **40**

Several encounters between a dancer and a wax material investigate the interplay between forms of action and shapes of material. With dancer Barbara Berti.

ACTING THINGS III OVER WORK **54**

A process between dissolution and fabrication is staged over 3 days in the former print shop of the Amerikahaus Berlin. With dancer Barbara Berti.

ACTING THINGS ISSUES

OBJECTS AND PROCESSES

74

Talk with choreographer *Rhys Martin*,
musician and improvisation theorist
Christopher Dell and curator
and writer *Joshua Simon* hosted by Judith
Seng at Salon Babette, Berlin

PRODUCTION AS ASTHETIC EXPERIENCE

80

Examples of Ecological Design.
By art scientist *Johannes Lang*

MATERIALITY AND INTERFERENCE ART

84

in Relation to *Acting Things*
by Judith Seng.
By cultural scientist *Thomas Düllo*