

**New Authenticity and Emergency in Performance:
Fake, Arts and Politics**

Knut Ove Arntzen

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NEW AUTHENTICITY AND EMERGENCY IN PERFORMANCE: FAKE, ARTS AND POLITICS

KNUT OVE ARNTZEN¹

Abstract

This article raises the question of authenticity in the arts with regard to artistic strategies, playing with simulacrum and the interaction between authenticity and fake. Examples are taken from art projects, ritual events and theatrical productions.

Keywords: *documentary, "faking or not faking", simulacrum, authenticity, documentary strategies, rituals as fake. Walid Raad, Rabi Mroué, Hotel Pro Forma.*

On the documentary, the aura and the emergency incident

The notion of authenticity in arts may be treated in a variety of ways theoretically as well as practically, and I will here not be trying to present a complete survey of this complexity. What may be true – or supposedly untrue – may at least be said to be the object of wondering and thematising as part of the new development within arts, an object related to the question of new authenticity and the political. It is possible to regard this as result of the free play with irony and effects, something close to allowing illusion to be something to play with in a manner reflecting the virtual character of illusion, precisely as described by Jean Baudrillard (cfr. Baudrillard 1999).

In relation to his theory of the *simulacrum*, it is legitimate to talk of a *re-mimeticizing* or re-making of reality as surface phenomenon within

¹ University of Bergen, Norway; <knut.arntzen@lle.uib.no>.

post-modernism, in which search for fervency and truth will necessarily have to take an illusory enacted character. This play or act initiated is reflecting and playing upon the surface so characteristic of post-modern art in general, with all its criticism of authenticity as romantic cliché – and as such a transparent phenomenon.

There is no more a question of “fake” or “non-fake” pretending or not pretending, but rather a question concerning the political function of arts as an elaboration of truth through fictionalizing of truth. In the last decades this has been documented in a lot of cases, and especially known in this context are the novels by Karl Ove Knausgård in the *My Struggle*-series, although it is not from literature I will take my examples but rather from visual arts and theatre.

Lexically, *documentarism* may be defined as a term for use of authentic documents as important elements in literature, drama and films.

“/.../Documentary drama is based on empirical facts that are illustrated by the use of authentic documentation in form of written, visual or auditory material.”
(Vestli 1991, 130-131)

Elin Nesje Vestli has presented this as related to such a definition and thus being an empiric dimension, that is: the use of materials cut directly from newspapers or other primary sources. It is talk of a conscious search for circumstances and contexts that invite us to feel the individual as being “authentically” present in the fictionality of arts while contemporarily using this feeling as material (autho)biographically. The individual or artist’s subjective experience is what it is all about, and through this also the experience the artist is able to transfer to the viewer in form of an interactive and virtual play disengaging the artist in relation to the documentary facts, or not having the conveying of these facts as a purpose.

If we look on how a term like authenticity is treated in a European continental and modern aesthetic tradition, we have legitimacy for use of the term in the manner this presentation requires. Walter Benjamin has claimed that a thing’s authenticity is the essence of what may be derived from a durability imprinted by its function as “silent witness” and expression of experienced history (Benjamin 2001, 168-169). This is an authenticity conveyed as sort of “the aura of things”, the charisma

from something of patina or something apparently pure or authentic. Richard Shusterman says it so:

“/.../Such experience had what Walter Benjamin called *aura*, a cultic quality resulting from the artwork’s uniqueness and distance from the ordinary world.” (Shusterman 2000, 18)

Umberto Eco raises the question of arts and the feeling of authenticity through comparing the direct encounter between great art and architecture, such as in the primary encounter with Herculeanum and Versailles, compared to its replicas in peripheral countries like California with all its copies of European architecture. I suppose that what he aims at is exemplifying the degree of proximity to what affects you, and that primary exposure to arts is more an authentic experience than the secondary or tertiary encounter with its replicas.

“/.../But the fact is that our journey into the Absolut Fake, begun in the spirit of irony and sophisticated repulsion, it now exposing us to some dramatic questions... The condition for the amalgamation of fake and authenticity is that there must have been a historic catastrophe, of the sort that has made the divine Acropolis of Athens as vulnerable as Pompeii, city of brothels and bakeries.” (Eco 2001, 404)

Out of this, Eco deduces a final momentum; the absolute “deception”, what will possibly be present in pop-culture through its play on kitsch and pastiche. In my opinion, this deception may be said to be manifest in post-modern art’s play with surface and the virtual. This play with surface has produced a reaction apparent in the rejection of mere cultivation of surface. The reaction manifests itself through various forms of religious and esoteric preoccupations, so as the interest in the esoteric and initiation rites connected to the New Age Movement as well as in the Hare Krishna-movement and in new ways of getting socially and culturally conscious. When established directors and dramaturgists from post-modern theatre leave theatre work as aesthetic art-production and dedicate themselves artistically and socially to helping street kids and drug addicts, this is clearly an indication of this. This should have been the case with one of the central workers in the Japanese technologically oriented theatre company known as Dumb Types. You may add that Robert Wilson for long had a wish to start a theatre school

in Brooklyn, New York, for the youngsters of the area, in cooperation with Brooklyn Academy of Music, a project that today is a reality and is known as the Watermill. I see this in connection with some sides of the pop-community I have been discussing earlier. An interesting pendant to this development is the exhibitions and multimedia productions shown in the Hare Krishna centre of New Delhi, something to which I will be returning.

In 1990 the theatre company known as Los Angeles Poverty Department came to Amsterdam. The company acted on Ritsaert ten Cates' last festival at Mickery this year, at the Touch Time festival. The company consisted of social clients from Los Angeles, the name of the company was a paraphrasing of the name of the renowned LAPD – Los Angeles Police Department. The purpose was the allowing of social clients to play themselves on stage and thus develop their consciousness of their own situation. If we suppose that pop-culture has spread throughout the layer of countries and economies that are half-way to establishing a large middle class in the other world, that is, in East Europe and in East and South-East Asia, we may see a variety of the connection between religious traditions, new technology and pop-culture. This applies to for instance a certain commercialising of the Icon in East-Europe, and to the dynamic development of club-cultures in cities like București and Odessa, especially in the 1990s This pop-cultural approach is expressed also through video-arts and karaoke-videos, we may experience it at pubs in the remote East, in cities like Bangkok and Hong Kong who have developed their own particular karaoke-culture.

However, in Asia, we may discover certain forms of temple rituals with pop-cultural elements and use of new technology. One blatant example combining most factors mentioned above is the large Hare Krishna-centre in New Delhi, India. It is called ISKCON, International Society for Krishna Consciousness. There, in the large multimedia exhibition we see fake figures of paper-maché like material grouped in enormous narrative reliefs. As visitors, we experience a very advanced use of video-installations, as well as use of voice-over techniques with an almost elaborate scientific commentary voice. It is Krishna's birth and life that is portrayed in this multimedia-show. The monk functioning as a guide is obsessed with the message that we should not touch the figures, because they might brake

asunder. Then we go from show room to show room to experience the history of Krishna (my visit to ISKCON was in 2002.)

A lot of video art has also been shown in connection with pop-cultural installations at large art exhibitions with emphasis on Asian art, this was the case with the exhibitions *living in time...* in Berlin and the *Hot Pot* exhibition project in Oslo in 2001. There have been many festivals in Europe presenting shows originating in a mixture of Asian traditions and elements from pop-culture and performance, such as at Festspillene i Bergen (Bergen Festival) or Kunsten Festival des Arts in Brussels.

In the following survey, as example of autobiographic realisation through the press which could be regarded as “press performances”. So, I will mention the story of Andy and Anastasia alongside with the artistic and performative project *In the event of Emergency* in London, the summer of 2001. I will also comment upon an exhibition and a show by Hotel Pro Forma in Malmö in 2000 and Copenhagen 2002, that has religious undertones – and I will mention the Lebanese artists Rabih Mroué and Walid Raad and *The Atlas Archives* as further examples of faking an artistic expression. These are also examples of a new authenticity in the converging point between fake, presentation and the authentic. The basis of this new authenticity is aesthetic transcendence with emphasis on the thematic paradoxes rather than aesthetic perfectionism. This gives legitimacy for new feelings, new engagements and “a new world image”: The idea of the global unity transgressing the national-regional mythologies on religion and belonging. This new authenticity I will define as floating between the “emergency event” and the artists’ play with the outmost experience of “the deceit”. Some more examples of this will be supplied in the following paragraphs.

From Andy and Anastasia to Hamlet and the slaughtered family

To deceive – or not to deceive – that is the question, one may say as an allusion on the quotation “to be or not to be, that is the question” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Uttered so, the question is containing suppositions on “acting” (in the transferred sense), deception and pretending. This is something connected to the question of illusion and authenticity in arts.

It also has to do with the personal and with the personal memory. What does it imply to refer to a memory in arts? Is it a true or a false or constructed memory, or is it something in between?

In *Friday Review*, the magazine of the newspaper The Independent, London, there was a feature with the charming title "When Anastasia met Andy" (16.08.2001). The feature applies us with a media presentation of a story that in itself is both apparently fictional and theatrical, and that in a metaphoric sense focuses on my idea of the new authenticity, connected to the cliché of "life and arts". The story presents us to the young Russian ballerina Anastasia Volochova and the financial funding of her by young British-Russian businessman Antony Kerman (known among friends as "Andy"). Andy had spent lots of money on enabling Anastasia of keeping public dance performances. The amount of money spent of his fortune in order to do this was in no way small. In the meantime, his marriage had broken, and he persistently claimed that it had nothing to do with his relationship to Anastasia, that this relationship was in no way intimate, he only wished to give the young Russian ballerina his support. I myself is liable to ask myself the same question as indicated by the Independent's feature story; could this possibly be right, that there was no "intimate relationship" between the two? Was this a question of deceiving or not deceiving?

When the KIT (Copenhagen International Theatre) organised the 6th summer theatre festival in Copenhagen in 2001, its programme included a presentation of the Hamlet-production by Lithuanian director Nekrosius at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore. The programme was named *Solo 2001*. The presentation said in writing that in a time when mainstream is investing in large productions, complex structures and events within almost every form of art, for *Solo 2001* the aim was searching for a creative source. *Solo 2001* really searched for the creative artist.

"/.../It becomes a tribute to the artist and the direct contact between the artist and the spectators." (cfr. Arntzen 2004, 71)

This raises the question of what it implies to say that a performing artist represents or is on search for the source of creativity in relation to acting and theatre. And also: to what degree is this about "deceiving or

not deceiving"? Since the 1930s of theatre has been in search of how the artist's belief in a personal truth may be expressed in the actor's external presentation connected to the character taken. This cult of truth is a search characterised by inspiration from Konstantin Stanislavski's methods for acting.

As a metaphoric term transparency may be important in order to comprehend the turn towards a new authenticity playing on the neo-political as well as on strategies from pop-community. New Age, new interest in mysticism and religion becomes another approach to understanding authenticity in a perspective transcending post-modernism in its mere play on the virtual. This transcendence has to do with "common" or "joined" experiences. It expresses itself as pop-community in for instance the production *Calling Laika* by German-English pop-ambient company Gob Squad. They staged a kind of act on a circular outdoor space beside the theatre Frankfurter Schauspiel (Theaterplatz, Frankfurt am Main, 1998), using torches and fire to signal to possible intelligent extra-terrestrial beings that there is life on Earth. ".../And if there's someone up there give us a sign", as it says in the show. The spectators were placed in cars driving around the acting area. It is, as I see it, a similar type of intimacy and sense of belonging in the intimate and sensual theatre texts of Jon Fosse and Sara Kane. Intimacy and biographical information or memory processing floats together in the idea that the human being is the centre.

How authentic, then, is the authentic? What is important is the way intimacy is perceived as a personal material, or as biographical information. An increasing part of theatre, film and visual art is concentrating around this question. This process contributes to new art-disciplinary strategies and practices in very different directions, like for instance in the productions by the German stage director and playwright René Pollesch, working in a style which Therese Bjørneboe names "discourse-theatre" (Bjørneboe 2002), like in the production *Insourcing des Zuhause* (Insourcing Homeliness) with its use of office chairs on the move for the spectators, placed in the middle of an open space in order to enable the spectators to be interactive.

In 2001 I took part as observer in a visual art project in London named *In the event of emergency*, a project that took place in Southwark,

London's old dockland area. Close to Southwark Park is a closed down church that was built 80 years ago, the first British concrete church, and later deconcretised and partly abandoned. For two periods of time groups of artists gathered for the purpose of working on a performative installation in the closed down church. One of their works especially attracted my attention. It was based on material coincidentally picked out of a container. It was a load of images portraying a man with special interest in cars. He had allowed photographers to portray him in countless situations having to do with cars, and it was obvious that the photo collection had been his "personal collection of memories". The pictures were laid out and grouped in relation to an individual psychological map that aimed at showing a supposed journey, directly and metaphorically. The photo collage showed a lot of situations in different geographical areas, desert areas included. Out of this we saw a globalisation aspect in it all, contrary to the supposition that it "may have been all about a mother having died" or been about "Europe" or "Tower Bridge in London".

Allow me to comment silently to this view by showing to the review of the project by the Evening Standard. When the second part of *In event of emergency* had taken place, the Evening Standard Review read as follows: "/.../It's like a modern-art equivalent of Big Brother; 13 artists are sequestered together for a week in Dilston Grove, a deconsecrated church in Southwark. The squabbles! The intrigue! The burgeoning romances!" (16.08. 2001). Or, put in other words, this is how it is whenever deceiving or not deceiving is the aim, even where the *Event of emergency* is concerned.

In a feature on "L'idé de communauté" ("The idea of community"), the journal *Parachute*, issued in Montréal, has raised the question of how arts may re-formulate the issue of social values from a trans-national perspective. Where this is concerned I chose to describe the mentioned installation of visual art in the Southwark church as an expression of – or gestural variation of – the search for understanding of the individual, personal expression. In *Parachute* it is expressed as such:

"/.../Gesture proceeds from the profound individuality of each and everyone. It carries individuality into the world and offers with each passing moment new modalities of community. In this sense, gesture is political action. Marie Fraser reminds us of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on community and otherness, how they develop with the introduction of individual values inside the public sphere.

Individuals express their potential through gestures that point to political actions." (Parachute 2001)

We have been able to detect an enlarged interest in the personal, in direction of the personal biography, the individual and not the least in family values in relation to artistic expressions. Family values were thematised at a conference in Landestheater Memmingen, Bayern, in October 2001, under the title *Die geschlachtete Familie*, in connection with a production of Bertholt Brecht's *Mutter Courage*. The conference was about historical and social perspectives on the family, but there was also a desire of focus on the development of the family in our time as such, and of the need of reconstructing a supposedly de-constructed perception of the family. As a theme, the family is being treated in many current relatively new productions from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the 2010s.

Michael Laub's production from 2001 was known as *Marasalla Slammer/Heartbreak No 5*, where he from the basis of Indian soap operas and films shows how family life and love relationships are being treated in Bollywood films, that is, and the big Mumbai (Bombay) film studio films. You may also recollect the Indian film produced for the European market, *Monsoon Wedding*. The relation between fake and truth has become part of the new authentic, what may had been true but maybe isn't.

Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué and Hotel Pro Forma's "Jesus_odd_size"

In 2006, the Lebanese performance artist and choreographer Rabih Mroué made the production *Make me stop smoking*, it was a *performance-lecture* or monologue production presented as a scientific lecture with video and still-presentations. Mroué is very much inspired by another Lebanese, Walid Raad, living in New York, who through the project The Atlas Group Archives has been shocking the world with his narratives between fake and reality, that is, narratives placed between a constructed "reality" and "true" historical events. In Norway Raad has performed at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo as well as at BIT Teatergarasjen in Bergen, and through Network for Stage Arts he has been conveyed to Black Box in Oslo and Teaterhuset Avant Garden (The Avant Garde Theatre House) in Trondheim.

In Oslo the audience reacted harshly when they understood that The Atlas Group Archives was a fake archive.

Rabih Mroué (born 1967) appears as more post-modern and theatrical in his approach and is more at play with his material than Raad. The production *Who is afraid of Representation* was made by Mroué in 2004 and had many comments to a Lebanese society affected by civil war and all the social implications of this to relationships between social groups in Lebanon, as well as relationships between Lebanon's religious groups. The production was set up at BIT Teatergarasjen in 2006. In *Make me stop smoking* Mroué is thematising how history writing has to do with building up identity and how historians contribute with their way of interpreting historical events, almost as if it was possible to gather historical events from a large fictive filing system. It is enough to look at how Norwegian historians have been rose-painting Norwegian history in the service of nation building in order to comprehend how urgent this is to address. Mroué began working on these types of productions in 1990, his aim being focusing on the relation between different levels of language in art and theatre, exploring the possibilities of communication emerging between them wherever the political and economic context is important. The latter approach leads to confrontations with the censorship authorities in Lebanon, although Lebanon is one of the Arabic countries that have appeared most tolerant and liberal in spite of the profound crises that have been appearing with regular intervals. Lately in his native town Beirut Mroué has never been able to get further in his production than to the premiere, before the censorship authorities have prohibited further presentations of his productions. As a result he travels to Europe, where it is possible for him to work within the large production organisations such as Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin. His fake statement is that the Lebanese Civil War was the event that made performance art appear as an art form.

Hotel Pro Forma, Danish project theatre, with Kirsten Dehlholm as artistic manager, showed their project *Jesus_c_odd_size* for the first time at Malmö Högskola (2000), and later the project was realised anew in Copenhagen in the Nikolaj Exhibition Space (Nikolaj Udstillingsbygning), an exhibition location ordinarily spoken of as Nikolaj Kirke (The Nikolaj Church). It was a combined stage production and exhibition where the whole exhibition building was taken into use. The spectators walked from

room to room viewing the different objects and tableaux. A map over the different plans in the exhibition buildings had been hung up. You were supposed to enter through the main entrance and pass women possessed by spirits, then walk towards St. Andrew the disciple, you then passed an information stand and walked inwards to different main tableaux that culminated by the Communion Table, where the great tableau was visible at some given points of time with the twelve disciples robed in timeless garments. In the space beside the Communion tableau it was shown a film by the visual artist Richard Sandler, a film showing Redemption preachers at work on Times Square New York before the restitution of the area at about 1990.

The Russian photographer Sergei Gitman was represented with his large fresco-like colour photography that he called *Prison image*, a photographic presentation of the tuberculosis department of a Russian prison for male prisoner. In an astonishing way, this reminds us of the stage image from Moxim Gorki's drama *The Night Hostel*, and might had been the preparing sketch for the stage image for that production. The team of this whole project the way it was presented, as both an exhibition of international contemporary art and a series of live tableaux, was human suffering, with basis in the dogma and teachings of Christianity. This was visually most strongly present in the tableau called *Golgata* with three creatures plastic hung up in a kind of plastic bags. The effect of this was that the plastic squeezed bodies and faces tightly so that they appeared as if they were dead or suffocated. It was a tremendous effort from the actors to hang like that for such a long time and was proof of the strict discipline that marked the whole of the project. Conceptually Kirsten Dehlholm was in cooperation with the dramatic Gritt Uldall-Jessen and the Belgian painter Lawrence Malstaf, all the three of them were being represented with their own works such as objects or installation.

Playwright and performer Gritt Uldall-Jessen took part in this as a performance artist with her Mary Magdalena-monologue. Dressed in a costume she turned around in a circular way with a staff that was held out in a way that created writings in the sand, and it was possible to read the text in a manuscript that was placed on a pedestal beside her. Two army vicars from the Danish army and navy also took part in the production by wandering about among the audience, starting by giving

communion to those who agreed to accept it. This provoked a powerful reaction from the Bishop of Copenhagen, Erik Norman Svendsen, who immediately came up with a prohibition that denied the two vicars to give communion. This happened to the regret of Kirsten Dehlholm, who saw their giving communion as an important part of the production. To the Danish newspaper Politiken she therefore said:

“/.../We are producing an artistic production about Jesus and Christianity. We are engendering this topic so closely, that we are concretely adopting the rituals of Christianity into the production. We want to raise some questions to every individual and try to make the spectators make their opinions. That is exactly why it appears challenging when the spectators enter the production and are surprisingly presented to the communion.” (Politiken, 16. 3. 2002)

The bishop on his behalf defended his decision by showing to the fact that the communion is an act of sublime clerical service,

“/.../and the theatre production is fiction. I strongly wish to keep these two categories separated. There is really no wrath from my side...”. (Politiken 16. 3. 2002.)

But then again we touch the question of deceiving or not deceiving. This is not to be understood as of the bishop should not have the right to defend what he may see as the integrity of the Danish National Church in refusing the field vicars the right to give communion, but if that was his aim, he should have made this clear in a more obvious manner.

Conclusion

With these examples I have tried to illuminate the implications of arts playing with the authentic in the tension between faking and non-faking. There is no more the matter of being documentary in the sense that reality is reproduced in a one-to-one-relationship, it is rather so that arts plays with reality as material. The more authentically it is reproduced, the further away from reality it comes for the simple reason that the aura is left behind, the aura that Walter Benjamin spoke of as an “imprint of reality” or that Umberto eco understood as *The Absolute Fake*. Recently, with the

election of Donald Trump as American president, we have witnessed how these mechanisms are working in real time when the fake is transferred from the artistic level to an operative function related to the old play formerly known as a charade, in order to confuse the opponents and create new truths – fake truths. In this we detect the tension John D. Caputo has labelled truth as a search for wisdom in a postmodern time (Caputo 2013) to what James Ball calls Post-Truth in the meaning “how Bullshit conquered the world” (Ball 2017). And then we have arrived at a new phase in the play with the authentic: it has become politicised.

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