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**CREATING FOR THE STAGE AND OTHER SPACES:  
QUESTIONING PRACTICES AND THEORIES**

Essays and contributions from the Third EASTAP Conference 2020

Arti della performance: orizzonti e culture

n. 13

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## **Arti della performance: orizzonti e culture**

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## *Table of contents*

- 7 Josette Féral, *Presentation*
- 10 Giacomo Manzoli, *Theatre for a Liveable World*
- 14 Claudio Longhi, *The VIE Festival 2020: Europe, and Yet, No Longer Europe*
- 21 Daniele Vianello, *The Third EASTAP Conference 2020. Context, Themes, Structure*
- 27 Gerardo Guccini, *The eBook. From the Call to the Editorial Project*

### *I. EASTAP Associated Scholar and Associated Artist*

- 35 Josette Féral, *Introduction*
- 37 Rustom Bharucha [EASTAP Associated Scholar], *Between Intercultural Pasts and Futures: Potentialities of Theatre in the Present*
- 55 FC Bergman [EASTAP Associated Artist], *Form as Content*  
In dialogue with Lisa Ferlazzo Natoli

### *II. Keynote Speakers*

- 67 Lola Arias, *Theatre as a Remake of the Past*  
In dialogue with Piersandra Di Matteo
- 80 Marco Martinelli, *Il principio-cattedrale*
- 87 Tue Biering, *Hostages of Me*
- 105 Marta Cuscunà, *Animatronica e componentistica industriale applicate alla scena*  
In dialogo con Francesca Di Fazio
- 116 Virgilio Sieni, *Sulla distanza. La città che viene*
- 118 Gabriele Vacis, *Drammaturgia dell'interazione*

### III. Questioning Performance: Theories and Practices

- 126 Piermario Vescovo, *Paradosso del performer*
- 140 Ragnhild Gjefsen, *Social Variation in Norwegian Stage Language*
- 151 Jasper Delbecke, *Revisiting the Scenic Essay*
- 160 Agata Tomšič, *L'Atlante della memoria come paradigma compositivo contemporaneo*
- 172 Sylvie Roques, *Du Tour du monde (1874) aux propositions contemporaines: métamorphose des pratiques scéniques*
- 183 Laura Piazza, *Riteatralizzare la scena: il caso di Achille Ricciardi*
- 191 Nadia Moroz Luciani et Véronique Perruchon, *Les concepts de Théâtralité et Performativité de la lumière – Trilogies d'André Engel (France) et du Teatro do Vertigem (Brasil)*
- 212 Laura Budriesi, *The "Lived Theatre" of Gisèle Vienne in Jerk (2008-2018)*
- 227 Arianna Frattali, *Da Genet alla Fortezza: un teatro post-drammatico*
- 239 The Two Gullivers (Besnik Haxhillari et Flutura Preka), *Performograpie. Le processus de création de la performance*
- 254 Davide Cioffrese, *Ontroerend Goed: Dramaturging the Performance of the Unsettling in Contemporary Theatre*
- 264 Erica Magris, *Viaggiare radicandosi: per un teatro europeo*
- 275 Maria Grazia Turri, *Londra 2018. Attori shakespeariani recitano la Commedia dell'Arte: lo scenario come spazio transizionale*
- 287 Selene D'Agostino, *Le Magdalena Project, un réseau international de femmes artistes de la scène: du nomadisme*
- 301 Annelis Kuhlmann, *Temporality as New Materiality for Performance Historiography. Dark room, Directed by Tue Biering*
- 313 Tomaž Toporišič, *Essay on Stage: The Artistic Practice Introducing a Germ into the Cultural Matrix*
- 323 Fabrizio Deriu, *M<sup>2</sup> del gruppo Dynamis. Un intervento pratico-critico sulla percezione dello spazio umano*

#### *IV. Performer's Body: The Dancer, the Actor*

- 335 Samantha Marenzi, *Fotografia e danza tra documento e creazione artistica. I due esempi di un atlante di figure e di un archivio di posture*
- 349 Mauricio Quevedo Pinto, *Under the Surface: Reading-Writing the Body in Performance Whilst Seeing under the Performer's Skin*
- 359 Raimund Rosarius, *Text-Trained Bodies at the Service of East and West? Praxeological Adaptation of the Stanislavsky System in Chinese and German Acting Conservatoires*
- 373 Eliane Beaufile, *Des mises en mouvement de l'écriture dans des performances contemporaines*
- 384 Giulia Taddeo, *The Age of Anxiety? Jerome Robbins, Maurice Béjart and the Choreography of Youthfulness at the Festival dei Due Mondi (1961)*
- 395 Lada Čale Feldman, *The Stratified Actor: Eichmann in Jerusalem at the Zagreb Youth Theatre*

#### *V. Creating Text for the Stage: Theories and Practices*

- 405 Lorenzo Mango, *Studiare la drammaturgia nell'era della scrittura scenica*
- 413 Rosa Lambert, *When Text Becomes Movement: The Kinetic Quality of Writing*
- 423 Guy Cools, *Rewriting Distance: Live Writing. Let the Writing Write*
- 433 Rosa Branca Figueiredo, *Creating for the Stage: How Translation Functions in Trans-Porting Meaning Across Cultures/Languages*
- 440 Silvia De Min, *Quando la didascalia sale sul palcoscenico. Effetti compositivi di un elemento testuale che si fa personaggio*
- 452 Roberta Ferraresi, *"Ready-Made" Compositions. Dramaturgical Practices in Contemporary Theatre*
- 464 Carlo Fanelli, *Il ruolo dello spettatore nel teatro del Rinascimento: intrecci fra drammaturgia e immaginazione*
- 479 Isabella Molinari, *Dal pennello alla scena. L'Accademia degli Uniti del Cavalier d'Arpino (1608): pratiche e drammaturgie*

- 492 Mariagabriella Cambiaghi, *Da un osservatorio particolare: modalità di scrittura per la scena a Milano tra Otto e Novecento*
- 502 Patricia Gaborik, *Stirring the Collective Passions: In Search of a Dramaturgy for the Fascist Masses*
- 512 Wenju Zhu, *The Tendency of Sculpturization in Samuel Beckett's Revised Stage Writing*
- 523 Raffaella Di Tizio, *O Cesare o nessuno. Vittorio Gassman come autore teatrale: una pratica compositiva fra tradizione e innovazione*
- 540 Anna Barsotti, *Eracle di Euripide per Emma Dante: fra scrittura scenica e composizione drammaturgica*
- 552 Simona Scattina, *Il postmodernismo "intenso" di Emma Dante*
- 562 Lorenzo Donati, *Scrivere con la realtà. Il Giardino di Kepler-452 e il teatro neoepico*
- 575 Rui Pina Coelho, *Attempts to Change the World: Building Assemblies in Portuguese Contemporary Theatre. The Case of Gonçalo Amorim*
- 585 Francesca Di Fazio, *Drammaturgie originali per il teatro di figura contemporaneo. Il Macbeth all'improvviso di Gigio Brunello e Gyula Molnár*
- 597 Ioanna Lioutsia, *Contemporary Greek Theatre: How Crisis Spawned Drama*
- 604 Darija Davidovic, *Highlighting the Women's Side of War – Staging Unfinished Past. Crossing the Line by Dah Teatar Belgrade*
- 616 Luule Epner, *Writing for Postdramatic Theatre: The Case of Estonia*
- 626 Beata Popczyk-Szczęsna, *Creating for the Stage in the Most Recent Polish Theatre – New Biographies*

## VI. *Creating for Other Spaces: Landscape, Sound, Multimedia*

- 637 Stéphane Hervé, *Notes sur le théâtre et le paysage*
- 653 Doriana Legge, *"La messa in ascolto". Note per una proposta terminologica*
- 663 Magdalena Figzał-Janikowska, *Seeing Sound: Music Performativity in the Theatre of Georges Aperghis, Niels Rønsholdt, and Wojtek Blecharz*

- 674 Monica Garavello, *What if they went to Moscow di Christiane Jatahy e Lipsynch di Robert Lepage: quando il cinema entra nel teatro e ne espande i confini*
- 684 Elisabeth Viain, *Vidéo, séries et théâtre: la scène contemporaine exploiterait-elle la vidéo ou l'esthétique des séries comme un nouveau moyen de conquérir le public?*
- 699 Izabella Pluta, *Robot-Author. Composite Dramaturgy in Stefan Kaegi's Uncanny Valley*
- 711 Matteo Casari, *Il nō dei robot: l'artificio e l'empatia*

## VII. Collective Creations and Community Plays

- 724 Aldo Milohnić, *Collective Creation in Contemporary Postdramatic Theatre*
- 734 Annamaria Sapienza, *La scena flessibile: spazio e relazione nel teatro comunitario*
- 746 Marion Boudier, *From Stage to Page: Interacting with Joël Pommerat Writing Process. Documentation, Costume, and Prospective Dramaturgy*
- 755 Marcela Moura, *Les dynamiques complexes d'un laboratoire de Joël Pommerat*
- 765 Maria de Lourdes Rabetti, *La mediazione del dramaturg dal palcoscenico alla città: esperimenti cariocas*
- 775 Magdalena Hasiuk, *Le Théâtre Węgajty – de l'épopée et de la création collective aux collages de textes d'acteurs et au devised theatre*
- 786 Paolo Pizzimento, *La Divina Commedia dal testo alla pratica scenica: l'esperienza del Teatro delle Albe*

## VIII. Young Scholars' Forum

- 794 Jeroen Coppens and Stefania Lodi Rizzini, *Young Scholars' Forum EASTAP*
- 797 Laura Pernice, *The Scenic Reinvention of a Best-seller: Storia di un'Amicizia by Fanny & Alexander*
- 808 Ai-Cheng Ho, *Taiji Quan as a Technique to Enhance the Actor's Creative Energy in Space*
- 820 Gaia Vimercati, *«Hunger for presence»: nuove prospettive sui linguaggi della corporeità attraverso il circo contemporaneo*

832 António Figueiredo Marques, *"Moving People": Intermediality and Presence*

840 Raquel Rodrigues Madeira, *The Choreographic Between Stage and Navigable Network Space*

## *IX. Appendix*

852 Martina Sottana, *The Original Project of the Third EASTAP Conference*

857 *The Programme of the Third EASTAP Conference. Bologna, 27<sup>th</sup> February – 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020*

867 Abstracts

911 Biographies

936 Credits



## "Ready-Made" Compositions. Dramaturgical Practices in Contemporary Theatre

by Roberta Ferraresi

### 1. *The creative process in theatre and the "return of the real"*

«The return of the real» (Foster, 1996), «reality hunger» (Shields, 2010), «new realism»<sup>1</sup>: at the beginning of the new Millennium the Western culture has been overwhelmed by a number of unexpected tendencies in visual arts, literature, philosophy and theatre as well, that seemed to focus on the research of a different, and deeper, relationship with the so-called reality.

But a few years later, we must acknowledge, these new critical labels have often turned out to be too flexible: while very different practices and perspectives are described through the same homogeneous categories, they seem to elude any classification attempts according to the existing aesthetic paradigms, so the wide range of experiences that could be included in the "theatre of the real" is today one of the most evident characteristics of this phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

On the one hand, the amazing plurality of the «reality trend» represents an unprecedented opportunity to review traditional theoretical approaches, but on the other hand it provokes some critical problems in Theatre Studies, because – as noted by many scholars – the strong inclusive inclination of this «umbrella term» (Garde 2013: 178) push it to be all-encompassing and sometimes risks attenuating its potential critical efficacy.

Discussing about other significant "umbrella-terms" of contemporary theatre – such as «performance» and «post-dramatic» –, Lorenzo Mango (2015) recommends to *contextualize* this kind of concepts to better understand them. I'm going to observe some Reality Theatre's experiences putting them in a double context: observing such experiences, on the one hand, in relation to the

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<sup>1</sup> Among the other definitions of the reality trend that characterizes the European cultural and artistic production in the new millennium – i.e., in the mentioned fields of visual arts or literature –, the concept of "new realism" finds wide applications in different disciplines, from theatre – as we will see – to cinema, to philosophy (see Ferraris 2012 and Zenker 2019).

<sup>2</sup> In recent years many researches on this topic have arisen in Theatre and Performance Studies, for an overall analysis of the phenomenon see Martin 2013 and Garde 2013. Besides to attempt an important exhaustive survey of the theatrical neorealism, the two scholars have proposed two terms to describe it – respectively "theatre of the real" and "reality theatre" (the last developed together with M. Mumford) – that I'm going to use quite as synonyms in this paper; in the quoted publications, both of them have provided a critical overview of the problem which we are discussing.

artist's perspective, and, on the other hand, in the light of the different aesthetic genealogies that have emerged during the 1900s from the critical debate, with the aim to bring these theoretical concepts back to both their precise use within the artistic practices and to their specific historical identity.

Here, the assumption is that the contemporary theatrical scene appears to be so jagged because its different trends have been mainly examined from the point of view of the products, and that this kind of experiences can demonstrate instead relevant convergences by switching the perspective, that is by studying them from the point of view of the composition processes. The aim of this contribution is not to attempt a comprehensive overview of these phenomena, or worse, to review the entire field and its main critical interpretations: my only purpose is to highlight a specific path through the "Reality Theatre" identifying some important difference between various artists, works and experiences that, as I said, can emerge from observing their stage-writing methods.

For that purpose, I'll take into consideration as case studies a few dramaturgical practices experimented by some contemporary artists which, despite of being broadly representative of the "theatres of the real" and of their concerns, express some peculiarities useful to discuss the homogeneity of this theoretical label:

- the re-enactment in the work of Milo Rau and the IIPM between 2009 and 2011 (from their first work on the Ceaușescu to *Brevik Statement*);
- the dramaturgy of the spectator developed by Rimini Protokoll and in particular by Stefan Kaegi between 2013 and 2016, after the first phase of performance labelled under the name of the "expert of the everyday" (i.e., in projects such as *Remote X*, *Situation Rooms*, *Nachlass*);
- the "sampling" technique used by Agrupación Señor Serrano from 2012 to 2016.

## II. *Writing methods: research (theatre) and (mediated) sources*

First, the writing process of these theatre groups is based on a very particular procedure of sampling from reality: it's well known that many Reality Theatres *quote* – instead of representing – facts, stories, images<sup>3</sup>, and that these "reproductions" in most cases come from instruments of historical

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<sup>3</sup> The definition was proposed in Mango 2019 for the work of Milo Rau, but it can be easily extended to other Reality Theatre's artists here considered: think for example to the bio-narratives included by Rimini Protokoll in their performance developed with the "experts of the everyday" or the image landscapes built by Agrupación Señor Serrano for each of its projects.

and socio-anthropological as well as journalistic inquiries because of their use of interviews and/or archival documents.

As the artists testify, their creative process takes place as a long and intensive, often traveling, field research, based on the practice of residency. However, their approach is not akin to the widespread «artist-in-residence» paradigm but rather to the «worker-in-residence» model defined by Aldo Milohnić (2012) for Rimini Protokoll<sup>4</sup>.

In this perspective, the creative process expresses a strong relational quality, not only because it focuses, on the one hand, on meetings with experts and witnesses, and, on the other hand, on collective writing, but also because the aim is in some way to modify the reality – or at least the perception or the narratives of that reality – in which it takes place.

As Milo Rau said about his work with the IIPM<sup>5</sup>, it's a «research theatre» in the literal sense, blending the traditional meaning of the term between art, humanities, and science (while also the concept of «process» acquires a slightly different connotation).

Another shared characteristic between the experiences labelled under the name of Reality Theatre concerns their object: that is, of course, reality, often put on stage through elements "sampled" from the surrounding environment. But these kind of theatres of the real are not (only) documentary theatre. «Realism does not mean something real will be represented, but that the representation is itself real» (Milo Rau). «We really are not interested in whether someone is telling the truth, but rather how he presents himself and what role he is playing», says Daniel Wetzel about Rimini Protokoll. While for Àlex Serrano theirs is a theatre that «deals with reality but exploring different levels of fiction» and thus «serves to question the reality itself»<sup>6</sup>.

Here, the objects of enquiry are not "only" facts that really happened which theatre has to represent as authentically as possible. Rather than concrete events, indeed it's a matter of their representation: of how those facts have already been told, mediated, transmitted<sup>7</sup>. The subject is not the reality at all, but precisely of the «media» (Mango 2019) or «scripted» reality (Malzacher 2010).

In these cases, the real elements sampled from reality are not objects, but «simulacra» (Deleuze

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Milohnić (2012) these methods are very different from the approaches to the creative process developed by experimental theatre in XX<sup>th</sup> century and in the contemporary and are closer to – when don't they even prefigure, following Paolo Virno – the new working conditions in the Post-Fordist age.

<sup>5</sup> See Le Roy 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Rau 2018: 177 (from an interview ed. by Rolf Bossart published in 2015 on «Theater der Zeit»); Malzacher 2010:82 (from a private conversation between the author and the artist); Serrano 2016:25 (interview without editor).

<sup>7</sup> See: Mango 2019, Zenker 2019.

1968, 1969)<sup>8</sup>, so we can argue that such narratives of reality would be chosen precisely for their ability to show – often through quite sophisticated reproduction techniques – the *difference* between the original and its copy, and to unmask the dynamics of simulation widespread in the contemporary world.

This achievement can be useful to trace a possible, specific genealogy of the "theatres of the real" that dates back to the practices of selection, decontextualization and reframing of real objects experimented at the beginning of the last century by Marcel Duchamp or Bertolt Brecht, and that goes through the political and performative rework of these approaches a few decades later according to the question of mediated reality.

But as Hal Foster (1996: 212) noted, unfortunately over the years it has been discovered that these spaces of freedom are not enough to resist or to deconstruct the Society of the Spectacle: the «petite difference» between the original and the copy can also be transformed into a commodity and be consumed. Furthermore, in this way we'll risk to enhance only a few attitudes expressed by the dramaturgical practices that we are examining (as their potential deconstructive aspiration, while they seem to maintain a close, even mimetic relationship with the surrounding); or at least to go back to a series of traditional dialectic tensions which many of these artists displace, and even explicitly reject: for example, the relationship between mimesis and the autonomy of art, presentation and representation, as well as to the dichotomy – now increasingly shifting – reality vs. fiction.

Therefore, to analyse the phase of the source selection by identifying the distinction between the different kinds of "realities" at the base of the works of the IIPM, Rimini Protokoll and Agrupación Señor Serrano is important but not enough to define the specificity of the practices we are dealing with. To understand better their peculiarity, we should go on in studying their writing process.

### *III. Dramaturgical treatment and editing techniques: blending the boundaries between process and product*

In these theatre practices considered under the aegis of the "new realism" there is something more than the traditional opposition between the truth and its representation. My hypothesis is that the particular relationship – quite different from the other previous or contemporary experiences – they establish with the reality can clearly emerge going on with our analysis of the writing process:

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<sup>8</sup> See also: Caronia 2009; Lepecki 2016; Martin 2013; Mango 2019; Sacco 2017; Zenker 2019.

looking at a following stage than the selection of the dramatic sources, that is their dramaturgical treatment.

Take for example the IIPM: in *Breivik's statement* the main (*male*) character is played by an actress and *Hate Radio* spreads songs from the '90s not included in the original RTLM broadcastings (Zenker 2019, Wind 2017). Or think about the role of the audience in the latest Rimini Protokoll's productions: in *Situation Rooms*<sup>9</sup> both the actors and the viewers re-enact together some true stories, but the dramaturgy of the spectator is conceived to bring about an explicit – even if regulated – element of randomness within the reality evoked on the stage. Or finally consider the "models of reality" used by Agrupación Señor Serrano: of course, they correspond to the performance's dramatic sources, but they constitute also its main dramaturgical device, when further "models" are assembled on the stage, and juxtaposed or superimposed to the existing ones (i.e., in *A House in Asia*, the last house of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan – the "original" – is represented by both its first reconstruction built by the U.S. Army, the one created for the film *Zero Dark Thirty*, and another similar model that is the maquette used during the show).

These examples, if viewed as products, seem to be very different from each other, but if we observe them from the point of view of the dramaturgical treatment, we can recognize at least one shared point: it's all about the practice of editing (the everyday).

To describe this kind of techniques in the field of the visual arts, at the beginning of the new millennium Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) proposed the concept of «post-production», of course taking it from film and media theories and practices. As other editing techniques, it's a procedure that readdress the act of creation between the principles of originality and deconstruction, focusing on the relationship that it establishes with the past and with the world conceived as archives (of images above all).

Twenty years later the launching of this idea in the realm of the visual arts, in the midst of the digital age, perhaps we can also test the most suitable notion of "mashup", which originated in the music industry to describe a particular approach to composition that always starts from pre-existing elements, and which is today the paradigm of the logic of the web 2.0<sup>10</sup>. The concept, today well recognized to describe a particular way of living, programming and re-programming the Internet based on the principle of recycle as well as on bottom-up strategies, could be the current update of

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<sup>9</sup> See Gusman 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For the relationship between the "theaters of the real" and the current development of the Internet see: Garde 2013, Martin 2013.

the idea of the ready-made (as Bourriaud has defined the post-production), right in a historical moment when the so-called "cultural appropriation" is spreading all over the world, beyond the borders of art, performance and theatre.

There are several reasons why I'm suggesting to look at the notion of "mashup", hoping without stretching too much the disciplines and the meanings involved, but with the aim of enlightening some important aspects of the "Reality Theatres" I'm examining.

First of all, we said that the works of Milo Rau don't represent but «quote» the world, and such an affirmation – that can work also for the other artists mentioned above<sup>11</sup> – implies that the reality's fragment they sample are then inserted within an autonomous discourse about it. The quotation – also understood in the Benjaminian sense of the term – is not only a matter of editing in a traditional way. Secondly, if these approaches – as editing, post-production etc. – pay a particular attention to the creative process, they also contribute to a significant redefinition of the ideas of the author and of the spectator, as well of their mutual relationships.

Eduardo Navas (2012), a researcher who has studied the sampling techniques, has identified some characteristics of the mashup practices which can be interesting for us because they could be helpful in distinguish such editing strategies from the existing ones.

For example, these techniques seem to blend the traditional opposition between process and product because they leave the original source (code) intact or at least recognizable, without manipulating or changing it (they operate only by inserting new elements into it). Thus, the mashup practices take on themselves the pre-existing objects – that is the reality – or at least can provoke some kind of «reality effects», as Roland Barthes called them (1968). At the same time, they express a strong regenerative attitude, because – as Navas noted – they foster or rather imply further interventions by anyone who wishes or needs it. In such a way, the product remains open, and become – or more precisely always *is* – a process.

The special relationship that the mashup practices nourish between the level of the production procedures and that of its outcomes is perhaps the element that distinguishes them from other editing processes developed in the XX century, and, conversely, it's what brings them closer to the specificity of the theatrical "neorealism" that we have examined within the wider landscape of the "theatres of the real"<sup>12</sup>. In such perspective, we could reflect a little differently on the issues involved

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<sup>11</sup> See also Milohnić 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See Fischer-Lichte 2008, which expresses a deep reflection about the theatrical practices that in the last decades have tried to blend the boundaries between clearly opposite conditions and categories.

in assuming this kind of editing techniques within the creative process.

The theoretical frame of the mashup could welcome and even reshape an attitude expressed by both the visual artists included under the aegis of post-production and the "Reality Theatres" that we are discussing here. Their performances are not only the result of a given process of production, but they are also conceived to become themselves a «place of creation» (Bourriaud 2002: 11): while it shows «realism as a process» (Mango 2019), vice versa the show declares itself as part, or, better, as an instrument of, as a *source* of the process of creation itself, like the other dramaturgical phases, levels and features.

Then, the artistic practices mentioned above express a range of hybrid experiences between creation and fruition which paradigm for Bourriaud can be retraced in the figure of the DJ, and that now we could observe under the aegis of the concept of the "prosumer", that literally means the always shifting conditions between the author and the spectator (thinking however that Walter Benjamin more radically linked this attitude to the historian's work, to cite another important reference for the "theatres of the real" that we are examining). In a similar but quite different way, in the mashup approach someone who is seeing, reading, or listening can always become the one who is speaking. The aim of these practices is still to sampling from reality for drawing on "something" new. Not exactly "something", but a new action. It means that they encourage a direct and explicit intervention on the modification of the reality, with the purpose to change it.

If the few examples mentioned above state the great difference between the three theatre groups and their dramaturgical practices, they also show another possible common ground: all of them represent, re-enact, repeat something that really exists or has happened (and remains very recognizable within the performance), but *explicitly* in a different way. As Domenico Quaranta (2009: 51) reflected «isolating the re-», in cases such as these it's not only a matter of past or present: «the idea of repetition is just one of the concepts implied by this particle», «there are other interesting ideas which run alongside it, such as "response", and "reaction"» – which means that is also (maybe above all) a matter of future.

#### *IV. Changing the world: a question about the art, a matter of language*

The procedure of creating a ready-made consists in selecting an object from the everyday life and in reframing it as a sculpture, without any other intervention traditionally linked with the artistic gesture. However, ready-mades can't be fully defined or understood "in context", only looking at

their strong connection with the reality or the non-artistic realm. They are not – real and/or fake – objects, nor copy nor only a kind of provocation. «A work might not be a physical object but rather a question», reflected Rosalind Krauss (1981: 73): a question that Marcel Duchamp posed to himself and to the audience «about what exactly is the nature of the work in the term "work of art"». So, it was strictly and above all a matter of art.

If we bring this question into our field, it can help us to identify the peculiarity of the dialectic between reality and fiction developed in the theatre writings that we are examining.

As many artists has highlighted and as various scholars have noted observing the self-reflective attitude expressed their performances<sup>13</sup>, the goal of all these "neorealistic" experiences is not (only) about the society, the surrounding world, or its possible representations: indeed, it's strictly a matter of experimentation on the theatrical language. It's not by chance that Rau and Kaegi among others have openly distanced themselves from the documentary and/or applied theatre with which their works has sometimes been associated). Frederick Le Roy (2012) said about the Rimini Protokoll that despite the intense relationship between their projects and the social context, their research after all is still about a deep, declared questioning of the specificity of theatricality.

Considering all these three groups, we can argue that their inquiries shape a series of attempts to *remediate* (Bolter-Grusin 1999)<sup>14</sup> the language of performance through facing – once again, as happened on various occasion along the XX century – the current processes of media development and social changes. At this point, the question could be: which kind of specific? That is: what is the aspect of the performative language which these artists are improving as the dominant element of the theatre experience in the digital age? By choosing fragments of mediated reality as sources of the dramaturgical process and bringing them on stage neither totally disassembled but not even authentic, the writing processes we have considered testify that it's not a matter of deconstruction of the reality for analytical purposes, nor an assumption of it in terms of representation (if we continue speaking according the two opposite polarities emerging from the twentieth-century critical debate). If we look at the editing techniques used both in Milo Rau's re-enactment, in Rimini Protokoll's dramaturgy of the spectator, and in the image sampling developed by Agrupación Señor Serrano, we realize that they are different practices but the aim is quite the same: beyond the instances of the representation and deconstruction, their program seems to be in all cases to stage

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<sup>13</sup> See: Jones-Heathfield 2012 (eds.); Le Roy 2012, 2017; Mango 2019; Martin 2013; Rau 2016.

<sup>14</sup> For remediation in theatre, see Chapple-Kattenbelt 2006 (eds.).





a new, potential *construction* of the reality, imagined by starting from the existing world through countless negotiations between multiple authors and different communities of spectators. So, the deepest goal of such projects is above all to provoke an effective intervention in the transformation of the reality (or, at least, of its images, narratives, memories)<sup>15</sup>.

Unlike Brecht's epic theatre – another important and recurring reference of the "theatres of the real" –, all these groups do not intend to show the reality as modifiable, but – staging it as modified – they leave a possibility open: that is an empty space for a question, but not only in an artistic sense. So, today theatre can be an "interstice" – in the Marxian sense of the term – between the reality and its representation: a physical and theoretical place where we can test modalities of exchange and of relationship that can be different from the current ones; a liminal space where we can experiment some possible alternative between fiction and reality (Fischer-Lichte 2008, Zenker 2019) or between what has happened and the way we talk about it, citing Milo Rau (2018: 178); an environment we can completely reshape – instead this is Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) again – in order to give us back, through art, the world as an experience still to be done.

In some way, this is what Walter Benjamin (1999) wished for the art in the '30s, when he was facing what we can consider the beginning of this story. Looking at the theory of epic theatre, which not only dealt with topical themes, but also attempted to analyse the ways in which they were represented and narrated (even through very advanced technological tools for that time), the philosopher warned against an art that claims itself political only because of its contents. Instead, he recommended an intervention – that was still to come – on the means of production. The aim was – and still is – not only to represent or even question the world, but to change it (inside theatre but also and above all outside it).

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<sup>15</sup> Despite in the last years the three theatre groups I'm considering seem to have distanced themselves from the writing practices described here, some of their recent performances have appeared to move forward along that path. I'm thinking about some productions which they are creating in these months or that have premiered while I was preparing this intervention, such as *Conference of the absent* in which Rimini Protokoll are going to test a kind of "remote direction", the new Milo Rau's "community-based" reenactments of Western myths after a few years of working on the device of the "allegorical doubling" (Le Roy 2017) within the *Europe Trilogy* (but of course also his trial-based projects concern more our future than the past: see Jonas Bens *et al.* 2019), as well as *The Mountain* by Agrupación Señor Serrano, which today can be considered in some way a "manifiesto" of the discourse I'm reflecting on.

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