

Comment vivre ensemble Notes on Tele_Trust

By Marijke Hoogenboom

I was recently fortunate enough to be present at a performance of *Tanzstück#4*, by the French Director Laurent Chétouane. This dance piece is based partly on a series of lectures written by Roland Barthes entitled *Comment vivre ensemble* (How to live together).¹ The five performers try time and time again to form a group. Their efforts fail and they remain individuals, ultimately separated from one another. Intrigued by the subject matter and the source of inspiration for the piece, the next morning I purchased this slim volume in German translation of Barthes' first lectures as a professor at the Collège de France, from January to May 1977.²

Barthes' approach is fascinating in that his quest for a way of life that 'reconciles solitude and sociability' takes the form of a journey to physical locations in a selection of historical novels: the room, the bourgeois apartment, the grand hotel, the cavern and the desert.³ Barthes argues that the everyday life of a subject or a group is always bound to specific types of space. In this, he gained his inspiration from a form of society known as idiorrhythmic monasticism that he had 'discovered by chance'. It was practiced from the 15th century onwards by Orthodox monks on the holy Greek mountain Athos. Monks adhering to this way of life are permitted to follow their own rhythm and live separately from one another. They only come together for religious services and prayer – but even this is completely voluntary. To Barthes, life on Athos represents what he calls the *phantasma*, a desired zone that he situates between two extremes: the solitude of the hermit and the inevitable communality of the monastery, or the family.

When Barthes gave these lectures in 1977, contemporary movements were emphasising – demanding – openness and individual freedom. But rather than speaking

¹ *Tanzstück#4: leben wollen (zusammen)* by Laurent Chétouane was also performed in Amsterdam in October 2010 at Frascati theatre.

² Barthes, Roland, *Wie zusammen leben: Simulation einiger alltäglicher Räume*, Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2007.

³ Barthes discusses the following novels: André Gide, *La séquestrée de Poitiers*; Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*; Palladios, *Historia lausiaca*; Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*; and Emile Zola, *Pot-Bouille*.

of collectivity and connectedness, he placed the ability to develop a sense of distance from the other at the very centre of humanness; being alone together.

I experienced Tele_Trust at three stages of development and at three different locations: Frascati WG, at a public presentation during the Crisis programme; at the Balie, during the ElectroSmog Festival; and finally, when I participated in a Socratic Dialogue in the artists' studio, together with the ARTI research group.

I see it is essential to the intention of the work that on all three occasions, the perception of Tele_Trust (the donning of the DataVeil or the observing of others while they did so, becoming part of the network) was never isolated, it was never solely about the physical, interactive situation. Each test installation was accompanied by an exchange with the audience and an invitation to them to contribute to the discussion about the subjects Tele_Trust makes tangible. The work organises its own openness, not only through the opportunity for the audience to participate, but also – especially – through the desire to catalyse a stream of reflections and responses that can feed the developing story that is Tele_Trust.

I contend that Tele_Trust, just like the literary examples that Barthes draws on, examines the issue of how to live together, how to relate to one another and how, in our everyday online and offline lives, and in private and public spaces, we continually determine the extent of our involvement in or distance from the group. For this reason, I am particularly interested in the low-tech and human-resource aspects of Tele_Trust: all those factors and circumstances that lie outside the refined system, but which are nonetheless essential to the realisation of the work. And while it is true that Tele_Trust provides a practical interface and poses concrete questions – ‘How do we trust each other?’, ‘Do we need to look each other in the eyes?’ and ‘Do we need to touch each other?’ – the environment Tele_Trust creates transcends the perspective of the single individual and impacts on the space we occupy, whether in the public or the virtual world.

It is salient that in doing this, the artists place faith in the ancient logic of transformation and play. The audience is seduced into the theatricality of the situation: the artwork is a staged setting that invites us to participate in a playful experiment, a living scenario that generates a willingness first to behave as if we have secluded ourselves from the environment in the burqa and then to personally express ourselves on the nature of

trust.

The test installations at various locations bore witness to the extraordinary care and intimacy invested in the design of this human interaction: the proffering of the veil, the explanation of the system, the assistance when donning the garment/equipment. Everything possible is done to ensure that the user is at ease and has all the information and instruments required to operate. In this way, Tele_Trust organises an inevitable sense of tension between the actual situation on the ground (inside/outside public space) and the suggested online connection (the network); between the personal guidance of users and the voluntary contact with a virtual community on the screen.

Each installation of Tele_Trust starts out from the desire to create a situation in which people can approach one another with a sense of respect and engagement. Only in the second stage is the individual left to his or her own devices and required to act according to his or her own intentions (or 'rhythms', as Barthes would say) and encouraged to determine whether or to what extent there is a connection with others. I see the way the artists place Tele_Trust in the world and offer it to an audience as a crucial artistic statement about the potential for living together – or, more urgently, the necessity of surviving together.

Of course, Roland Barthes would not have been the man he was if he concluded a series of lectures such as *Comment vivre ensemble* with too positive a message or too comforting a depiction of idiorhythmic life. Though the final lecture in the series is devoted to the concept of Utopia, Barthes draws the conclusion early on that his social *phantasma* can only exist in art, between the seclusion of the artist/artwork and the community of the audience.

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