

# IATL student as producer performance grant 2010

## bodies in / of crisis: staging the 'wende'

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### The project set-up

Within this PhD project, experiences of body practice in daily life are transcended through studio-based physical performance work. The research questions arise out of the context: Collecting material for a history of daily life in times of crisis poses the question of who is relating what to whom. How do people relate to their own history? Can culturally specific knowledge be transferred across time and cultures? Who would want to listen?

The body of the performer is questioned to relate physically to the knowledge and insights gathered through interviews with GDR women about their crisis experiences after the fall of the Berlin wall. Consequently, anthropological questions on belonging and coping, identity and body performance, narration and memory are tackled.

### 'I know, what you mean' – the potential of translating experience across cultures and disciplines

During my work at the IATL, I collaborated with non-Germans to explore the daily life of East German women during the fall of the Berlin wall, asking for the potential of anthropological insights and transcultural relevance. Within a multi-cultural performance setting, we explored the body as culturally and socially inscribed. Self-exploration through durational work with objects and physical movement was used to connect to experiences, which are at once alien and common to the performer (waving flags, using a broom, handling plastic bags and the like).

Interestingly enough, there appeared to be nothing alien in the material given to the performer. Actually, what seemed to be alien was easily ignored or incorporated into the performer's own playful disposition towards the practice. There was no hierarchical learning process involved. In this regard, the process of transcending the material did not involve giving away knowledge. It could be defined as a process of 'grabbing whatever one chose to belong to one's own handling of the situation'.

Since performance-based learning is a way of experiencing cultural practices, it also poses anthropological questions of belonging, coping and remembering. As far as I have learned from working within this specific performance setup, the habitual processes of gaining knowledge – in copying, selecting, converting, transferring, ignoring – are not easily discernable, neither for the spectator, nor the performer. The process of transcendence just 'happens' as a half-conscious self-experience. It is an artful event in itself, but not sufficiently traceable to its roots and not reproducible as such. Consequently, to work on the process of transcendence with the notion of making it transparent and therefore scientifically deducible, poses a fundamental question: Could this be one of the constructed division lines between science (as transparent process and reproducible experimental setting) and art? It is, after all, producing knowledge, but framed in fundamentally different ways. So far, one can detect the cultural processes related to the integration of alien cultural knowledge within the performance setup. This points towards a successful experimental framing of the research question. But what does this mean for the production and staging of scientific knowledge within the PhD project? This is one of the evolved major research questions to be interrogated further.

### Problems of relating verbatim material to the performer's body at work

I was also interested to research into the distinct qualities of thinking through performance practice versus thinking through reading and writing. This concerned especially the transition from the more conventional empiric research carried out as part of the project to the experimental performance research.

The prototype, even though just work in progress from a performative perspective, was extremely helpful in confronting problems of translation between the verbatim material gathered and the performer's body at work. It became obvious that different kinds of narration make it difficult to stay close to the original material: the narrated body practices and experiences. The performer has to transcend the material in order to relate at all – even to just copy practices into the performance environment. It could be said that this confrontation already conditions a metamorphosis and that the real-life experiences of the women already gain a fantastic, dream-like quality. Therefore, a more discipline-oriented framing of the work carried out would produce 'better' results, i.e. more conventional material, easier to relate to. So why do we still stress the importance of interdisciplinary research, if we are not actually able to accept the queer knowledge and 'stuff' coming out of it?

The next workshop in the UK will deal with this issue by working on the notion of gardening as a social frame for the discussion of the core research concepts mentioned above.

As a consequence from the knowledge gained within the performance workshop, I am also currently attempting to organise a workshop in Germany with some of the interviewed women. This is done in order to get closer to the narrating body – which is possibly a body of the past narrated through a justifying body of the present. This is an attempt to fill in the empty space of visualised body practices, which is so easily filled in by imagination and acquired cultural stereotypes through the performer.

### Relevance to my learning experience

To sum up the relevance of this performance workshop to my learning experience, three major insights can be discerned:

1. The scientific and the performance processes have to be framed, described and therefore visualised in order to protect the frame: conventional scientific research / experimental performance. Giving these a defined time and space within the overall process beforehand, adds to the process of researching into the question set: On the one hand, it ensures the freedom to explore without reflecting and analysing all the time. On the other hand, it provides for a starting point, selects the performance circumstances and a reason to work, to perform.
2. It is so hard to look at oneself all the time whilst performing. Yet, taping the work does not help much to remember the moment in the later analysis process either, since it is already a different take on the process by the camera observer. There seems to be the need for a remote performer: at once exposed to the performance methods and setting, while not wholly involved in the process. I am now moving away from the idea of me being this performer-analyst. Instead, I am thinking about getting somebody else to do it and develop the performance environment with me. It would produce more knowledge on the position of the researcher within the transitional process.
3. Working it through scientifically does not suffice, we still have to perform it as well. The idea of being able to 'skip' certain processes by thinking it through beforehand has to be abandoned (in preparing the performer, omitting certain interim workshop results). The scientific preparation and framing of the performance environment is not enough. Indeed, it provides a safer surrounding by cutting certain questions short or postponing certain inherent conflicts towards a later analysis, but it is still necessary to go through the whole workshop process and to then look at it again and again to produce a knowledge which is original to the performance process and cannot be thought through in theory. Therefore, it is double work. My research design until now has been put at stake through the performance process: to cut short two distinct work processes and intelligently blend them together to produce practice-as-research in an adjustable PhD format. The profoundly different qualities of learning – arising from the different processes of thinking and reading versus working it through – are fundamental to the shape of the results. They are filters for the imagination to suck in and relate to the material posed.