

# 1+1 does not always make 2

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An industrial premises on the Zorrozaurre peninsula in Bilbao: four days, four interpreters, a scene director, three video cameras and an artist. All the technical staff are in dark clothes, from grey to black. It doesn't seem accidental. Everything appears to be meticulously orchestrated. "*Good job I wore black today*" is one of the first things I think as I enter the ZAWP (Zorrotzaurre Art Working Progress) Hangar in Bilbao, to see the rehearsals and public presentation of "The dangers of obedience". Artist Itziar Barrio proposed I write a text on this project, which is unfolding as part of BAD, Bilbao's Theatre and Contemporary Dance Festival. I am confronted by a work, based mainly on dialogue between the cinematographic and stage-and-theatre, which encompasses different frames of reference, forms of representation and languages. Indeed, the postcard announcing the work presents the disturbing project title through a play of colours, and torn disarranged words.

"The dangers of obedience" is appropriated from the title of an article published in 1974 by psychologist Stanley Milgram<sup>1</sup>, summarising and explaining a series of fascinating but appalling social psychology experiments carried out at the University of Yale. According to Milgram, in a country officially supposed to be a democracy, two thirds of the population are capable of executing any order proceeding from a higher authority. Barrio resignifies the title and assigns it to a non-existent outcome, in order to recreate the construction process of a scene in real time and live, for the audience attends some of the work sessions and everything is broadcast on line through streaming. There is no previous script, though one does emerge from the process. Nevertheless, there are questions that function as a conceptual thread that runs through the practice: the human need to create rules under which to organise the entire human collective and reality itself, the binomial of authority - obedience, the construction of collective conducts, the process of group creation and power dynamics. These problematics are conjugated within the different frames of reference of this evidently experimental project.

## First frame of reference

Juanjo Otero readapts Lee Strasberg's<sup>2</sup> method to develop an interpretation workshop with the actors and actresses. Based on the Stanislavskian notion of conflict as an engine for the dramatic, improvisation as methodology, and through the antagonist-protagonist concept, a group dynamic is set off to construct a final scene to show the audience on the last day. Izaskun Fernández, Urtza Zuazo, Gabriel Reig and Maitane Muruaga, embody roles previously defined in different exercises. Someone who has an objective and urgently asks for something (hero/heroine); someone who denies this request (villain); someone who is in league with the hero (soldier); and someone who wavers and adapts (seafarer). Each performer works on a process of identification

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<sup>1</sup> The experiments began in 1961, months after Adolf Eichmann was judged and sentenced to death for crimes against humanity during the Nazi regime in Germany. Milgram devised these experiments to answer the question: Might it be the case that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were only following orders? Could they be considered accessories? Milgram wished to test how much pain a normal person would inflict on another simply because this was asked of them for the purposes of a scientific experiment. Iron-handed authority imposed itself on the strong moral imperatives of the subjects (participating) against harming others and, with the cries of the victims ringing in the ears of the subjects (participating), authority subjugated with increasing frequency. The extreme good will of adults to accept almost any request ordered by authority constituted the study's main discovery.

<sup>2</sup> Under the direction of Lee Strasberg, from 1952 onwards, the New York Actors Studio founded in 1947 by Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis, achieved world-wide recognition. The Studio is known for its work teaching the Method, an approach originally developed by the Group Theatre in the 1930s following Konstantin Stanislavski's innovations. The famous method revisited by Strasberg focuses on relaxation and concentration to connect with sensorial memory (related with the senses) and emotive memory (associated with life events experienced) in the construction of the creative process. The Method elevates improvisation to the status of the acting methodology par excellence and makes conflict the fundamental engine of action.

with her or his assigned role, closely watched by Otero, who has marked out a series of dynamics and exercises.

Starting out from the theatrical metaphor of sociologist Erving Goffman<sup>3</sup>, where social life is analysed as a stage, with its actors and its audience, we are witnessing a stage approached as social life which is in turn tackled as a stage. Metaphor of the metaphor. Performers in their capacity both as people and as characters. Actors and actresses who participate in a theatre workshop eight hours a day over four days. Cooking and eating together as a ritual of the ordinary, attempting to lay aside their characters' masks. Both in moments of social life and at points when they conscientiously interpret characters, the essential does not consist of knowing what the performer "really is", but of comprehending how to produce one impression or another that will serve as reality and how to go about making that endure.

## Second frame of reference

The first thing the cameras recorded was the casting with ex-students from BAI, Bizkaia Drama School, to select the interpreters. It is no accident that this video became the first material result of this work, perfectly representing the experiential notion that imbues the whole project. As Jesús Carrillo says in reference to the piece "Casting: James Dean (Rebel without a cause)" by artists Cabello/Carceller, the casting process contains potentially liberating elements: firstly, aspects of rehearsal, test, contingency. And second, its up-front performance component, which does not conceal its theatricality, artifice and masquerade<sup>4</sup>.

The scene construction exercises and leisure moments are recorded, by two camera operators, Eva Mateos and Txemi Alonso, and captured by three photographers: Irune J. Orbea, Eva Zubero and Zigor Barayazarra. The camera incorporates voyeurism in the story's conventions, thus combining visual pleasure with narrative<sup>5</sup>. The stage is the same, an industrial premises, adapted for the stage, colour white. The framing is another matter. The eye of the camera is what now constructs the narratives and Otero (and even Barrio herself) have also become characters. The gaze of the black box glides throughout the whole space and not only captures what it sees but recreates it. The performers are no longer alone creating a scene through improvisation. The camera is a creator, an author, that frames reality.

After Goffman, but now using his cinematographic metaphor, what is of importance here is precisely the setting, the perception of the situation, the framing. It is what enables the performers to share, in general, a common definition of reality. By using the cinematographic metaphor, Goffman is not now limited to the concept of interactions as in the theatrical metaphor but concentrates on the notion of experience<sup>6</sup>, of great importance in this project. The joint preparation of meals as well as the act of eating has significance as a social liturgy, as a moment of relaxation even though it is also retransmitted on line. This evokes reality shows and their pretension of representing reality. In this era of communication ecstasy, the present condition of the world is one of hyper-reality, in which people's behaviour and images from the communications media are mixed. Simulacra that constitute an over-sized

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<sup>3</sup> Imagine a person before another individual or before a group. Goffman suggests that we consider that, in this kind of situation, we find ourselves before a performer who carries out a performance in front of an audience and adopts expressions so as to control the impressions of that audience. These expressions are of different types: Goffman identifies explicit expressions (verbal language), indirect expressions (gestures, body postures); he makes us pay very special attention to what he calls objects (the material elements the individual has about him or her: clothes, accessories) and finally the medium (the most stable material elements: furniture, scenery). According to Goffman, the aim of the performer is to propose a definition of the situation that presents some stability, and produces a break in the interaction (Nizet, Jean and Rigaux, Natalie, "La sociología de Erving Goffman", Melusina, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Carrillo, Jesús, "Casting" in "CABELLO/CARCELLER En Construcción", Catálogo Sala Veronicas, 2004

<sup>5</sup> "Alicia ya no: feminismo, semiótica y cine", Teresa de Lauretis, Ediciones Cátedra, 1984

<sup>6</sup> Our only orientation must be a preparedness for experimentation, given that we do not know what our body is capable of, what effects it can produce, or the point to which our territory can extend, we must test it out. Larrauri, Maite, "El deseo según Deleuze", Tandem ediciones, 2000

reality where simulation is not restricted simply to producing unreal objects, but manufactures objects and experiences that seek to be more real than reality itself. A camera recording and an audience at home in front of the computer observing every movement, turns these actresses and actors into characters even when they are not supposedly acting. The borders between characters and individuals dissolve before the cameras and, sometimes, in a conscious fashion as a method of experimental work, as in Peter Watkins' *La Commune* (Paris, 1871), where the director produces a recreation of the events that took place during the Paris Commune and relates them with the present moment. To do so he receives collaboration from non-professional actors and actresses who themselves investigate what happened at that time. Perhaps it is not possible to get away from the notion of character. “*Todo son vidas*”, sings the rapper Xhelazz, including imagined ones.

### Third frame of reference

As well as being interested in the processual, Barrio is also concerned with aesthetic experience and the narrative capacity of objects and this will set off new frames of reference. In fact, during the process, the objects already construct their own stories: the T-shirts that represent the interpreters' roles with symbolic phrases (“always with you”, for instance). There are other objects to which, in addition to their use value, Barrio contributes an allegorical charge: white tables and chairs from Ikea, monitors, headphones used by the actors to shut themselves off from the others. Faced with the classical conflict between form and content, Barrio resolves these disquisitions with a system of dosage, being more or less formalistic depending on the different stages of the work. Objects that have a function of aesthetic value and at the same time generate their own narratives through movements or phrases that crop up in the work process and which Barrio makes use of. Speaking of the artist as producer in the terms of Walter Benjamin or the artist as ethnographic in Hal Foster's terms, controlling the practice of the daily in an analysis of otherness<sup>7</sup>, Barrio is aware of modes of production and of modes of representation as part of her profession (life) as an artist.

The project is located in places common to contemporary artistic practices. In the art system's exhibition spaces and within the spacious territories of public art: a factory space, the Internet, a drama festival, daily life. “The dangers of obedience” also refers to the art system. Within a drama festival programme, an industrial hangar is transformed into a spotless space, reminiscent of a public laboratory or, ironically, a “white cube” decked out with white tables and chairs, under powerful spotlights. Barrio's objective is neither an escape from art nor a romantic reconciliation with life, but rather perhaps an examination of the conventions of both systems, of the dialogue and tension between the two. She is interested in realities and in showing their limitations and ambiguities as truth, through analysis of their forms of representation. So, art, film, television, the performing arts and the Internet take the floor as work tools and objects for experimentation and analysis. Her interest not only lies in the story that upholds the realities but in its recreations, its techniques for showing them or fictionalising them.

After the most process-based part, Barrio examines the different contexts that relocate the process, the experience. During a residency at the ISCP, *The International Studio & Curatorial Program* (New York), the artist works on results that stimulate a rereading of what has already occurred: a video, an installation with white Ikea chairs with a phrase salvaged from one of the exercises (“*She looks at me and I decide what to do*”) that constructs a story, also salvaged. A large-scale photograph that expresses movement, vivacity and the arrival of a crucial moment, bearing the title “*Everybody is looking for something*”, as an obvious reference to the hit «*Sweet Dreams*» by the British band Eurythmics, which already formed part of the exercises

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<sup>7</sup> Foster, Hal “El retorno de lo real. La vanguardia a finales de siglo”, Akal, 2001

and was heard in the public presentation of the scene. Music is an essential element in Barrio's work, as are references to so-called popular culture.

### **The frames are countless**

Another frame would be the actual text. Another when the project is repeated in other places or just when the first pieces begin to appear as a result of the process. And the audiences inevitably shift the setting.

“Audience”, generically, and “spectator” too, are terms that are conventionally employed in the art world to refer to the subjects of art reception. Their generic nature presupposes an undifferentiated homogeneous mass of receivers. Pluralising the term stresses the peculiarities and concrete needs of the individuals that make up different social groups. There are spectators of the work process at the rehearsals, observers of the cohabitation process on the Internet during the four days the exercises last, people who attend the theatre piece when it is presented at the ZAWP, and audiences who see the project in its entirety.

Jacques Ranciere says that the condition of being a spectator may be a bad thing, since you are obliged to stop at appearances, ignoring the production process behind that appearance or the reality it covers<sup>8</sup>. Since the audience does not have access to the truth it will heed the appearance, adds Goffman<sup>9</sup>. In the case we are concerned with, however, we are offered the possibility of being acquainted with what underlies the appearance. The camera's gaze and the spectator's gaze intersect, come together and rest the one upon the other. The gaze of the audiences becomes another creator, an author of narratives. When the piece is presented to the audience at the ZAWP, actors, actresses, scene director, camera operators, technicians, artist and myself, too, are extras. Performers who know themselves to be fictitious, just like the characters in Woody Allen's comedy “God”, setting off a pretty complex play of levels of unreality. Will someone appear, as happened in Allen's work, and introduce themselves as author of the audience?

There are many ways of approaching this work that Barrio presents as a process, as experience, a journey between two points. Somehow, this text is itself a part of that between-two, something that ensues between two things that encounter one another, my perception of what has occurred, my references and Barrio's. And, altering perception (the frame of reference), as has been seen throughout this text, the reality is another. Because 1+1 does not always make 2, the dangers, but the interest too, lie on the side of what ensues.

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<sup>8</sup> Ranciere, Jacques, “El espectador emancipado”, Ellago ediciones, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Nizet, Jean and Rigaux, Natalie, “La sociología de Erving Goffman”, Melusina, 2006