



**Alice Creischer**, was born in Berlin (Germany) in 1960. She studied Philosophy and Germanic Philology at the University of Düsseldorf and Art at the Kunstakademie in the same city. Since the early 90s she has worked on a number of collective projects, many of them with the German artist Andreas Siekmann. She has published articles in *Spingerin*, *Texte zur Kunst* and *ANYP*. She was guest lecturer at the Kunstakademie München in 1997 and 1998. She now lives and works in Berlin.

**Question:** In your more recent work, the opera called *All of a Sudden and Simultaneously*, which was presented in a shopping mall in Kassel, the character you yourself portrayed presented the different chapters of the action. At the beginning this presenter or commentator, who seemed to emulate those poets who used to go from village to village, from town to town, recounting dramatised stories, gets the presentation under way by describing a galactic voyage, a sort of futurist journey through space and time to get to a universe in which everything is bought and sold, in which commerce and monetary exchange has reached the highest point and occupies the greater part of people's lives. We know that science fiction isn't a central aspect of your work, but certain forms of narration function as metaphors to do with the content of the story. How would you describe this opera in terms of content and a narrative model?

**Answer:** Actually, the thing you call "opera" is a musical performance, and the composer Christian von Borries really struggled to make us understand how reactionary the concept of "opera" is. The fact that I always make a mistake and say "opera" has to do, I think, with the performance model I associate with this representation. An "opera" in a mall, a shopping centre, demonstrates how out of place this project is in a reality like that. I imagine the performance as a sort of collage cut out from the reality of the mall and mounted in such a way that it lets the edges be seen. For us (Andreas Siekmann, Christian von Borries and me), it was particularly important that those shapes were clearly distinguished, and it was important in an antagonistic sense. All the participants were constantly accompanied by the paranoid security people of the shopping centre, who were going behind them all the time trying to erase all trace of their presence, and this added an absurd parallel game to the performance. The performance didn't set out to convince anybody with arguments, it didn't want to transmit anything, it simply wanted to be executed in this place and to formulate a "no". A non-committal "no", a "no" that doesn't call for any sudden change, that doesn't need to justify itself through the effectiveness that's always attributed to political declarations: to be didactic, to enlighten others, to change reality... as if it were that easy!

Furthermore, for me it was important to do this performance as part of Documenta. Firstly, because only through the image of Documenta was it possible to impress the management of the mall to the point of convincing them to embark on a project like this one. Secondly, because it signified, too, a break with the white cube and all its representative procedures and its reduction of content. I'm referring to that white cube which in big exhibitions closes in like a cloud around the actual capacity of enunciation. But, coming back to the visible borders of these events mounted within reality, for us it was very important to defend an anti-didactic concept, precisely in Documenta 12. Maybe the borders are also a form of freedom so that both sides, actors and public, can express themselves and be mutually perceived without having the obligation to pay constant mutual obeisance to the rhythm of the ideology of an aesthetic education. For us it was important not to be added to the location of the shopping mall, but to be a magnificent foreign body, because this foreignness also signifies freedom.

On the content of the performance: the narrative framework has to do with one strand of science fiction, which projects a society freed from work thanks to technological development. This is an idea that's disappeared from cultural memory. What the globalised economy has demonstrated instead is that technological rationalisation does not give rise to freedom from work, but to lack of employment, and extends work to countries where wages are low. I was interested in how this project of society, known since the Enlightenment, can be related to a present that completely denies it. For this reason we didn't want to depict any "utopia", whose historical horizon is "one of these days." What we did was to upset this horizon and to speak of subterranean tunnels, of parallel galaxies, which are close to us now, at this very moment, which constitutes a voluntarist proclamation to not waiting for a structural historical change. When, near the end, the boss of a jeans factory is taken prisoner—with a backdrop that quotes the taking of a 20th-century factory—this, for the actors of the piece, means:

This is a beginning but it's not enough.  
We wish  
for this to take place again and again  
all of a sudden and simultaneously  
and everywhere.  
As if time might shrink  
into this point  
into this point which blazes.

The characters in the performance are from science fiction, but at the same time they make explicit analyses of the conditions of production of the merchandise that one can

buy in the arcades. Nokia cellphones or Nile perch fillets. The “utopian” aspect of these characters doesn’t consist in the presentation of a better world, but in the fact that they expose the conditions of production of the merchandise in this place, and at the same time come up with a rejection of the model of the good life presented by shopping malls. The character called “State happiness” feels the need to vomit; Mister Lam buys all the Nile perch fillets and smashes them to pieces on the handrail of the shopping centre. The presenter says, “Each commodity is a huge scandal.” The utopian aspect of the characters consists in the fact that they pronounce on this scandal in the present, and that constitutes an act that is exhausting and dense, but also very pleasant.

**Q:** In the MACBA show an improved version can be seen of a big work that was shown two years ago in Bremen: the *Apparatus for the Osmotic Compensation of the Pressure of Wealth During the Contemplation of Poverty* (2005). This huge installation seems to function as a mechanical apparatus (as the title suggests) and as an analysis of various layers of the genealogies and dependencies of what we now call “globalisation”, as well as the colonial projects implemented by different European powers from the Renaissance onwards. This piece of work seems to me, on the one hand, the excellent outcome of an analytical production of knowledge and, on the other, a playful and complex arrangement of forms.

Firstly, I’d like to ask you about the “philological structure of the work,” namely the connectivity of ideas between the experience of extreme poverty from the perspective or the situation of an old European point of view.

Secondly, I’d like to ask you about the mechanical metaphor that the camera in the work seems to replicate. Forming a contrast to its mechanical appearance, a high degree of craftsmanship can be distinguished. The work denotes a caustic consideration of the spread of photography as a universal language and the modern expansion of colonialism. Industrialisation (the building of the railways in India) appears alongside the heavier versions of manual work (the mining of silver in Potosí) and the myths of the machine appear alongside the archaic myths of the earth as a spiritual force in people’s everyday life...

**A:** In this work there’s a central situation: one person, characterised as a sort of romantic military man, observes another person who’s dressed like a beggar woman. Between them there’s a black sheet of glass, a black hole. This arrangement dramatises a situation I lived personally

during a trip to India. Below I cite a passage from a letter to the Colectivo Situaciones, in which Andreas Siekmann and I describe that experience:

We visited Matura, with its temples to Krishna, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra: we saw the Taj Mahal the red fortress, we paid our guide in the restaurant, the driver left us in the station and went. We waited for our train without the usual bubble of services and immediately the beggars surrounded us... It was like we were anaesthetized. We couldn't give money, nor drive away the beggars. We might have supposed that all the actors of this scene depend on a "yes/no", "money/no money" as a reply. The fact is that one relies on what one has learnt to overlook... At last the train arrived. We got on, sat in our seats and looked through the barred windows. I remember I couldn't put my elbows on the armrests of the seat. The two of us were very occupied by something we didn't want to call shock but—and here we have different opinions—a sense of shame or disgust. It was a disgust with myself, the one who looks at poverty. Like white blood corpuscles that are occupied with the rejection of foreign bodies. It was a sense of shame that spoke, if you please, of not having been in this place, and in the event of having been, if you please, not as a person but maybe as an eye, a machine, a video camera that observes the platform and whose data will be evaluated afterwards.

In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss compares his South-American and Indian experiences. His trip to India took place in 1947, just before independence. What alarmed him in India is the image of the imagined future itself... He speaks of the beggars and their daily presentation of urgent needs. He describes his own fears and how he assuages them. It's the hunger that "accounts for the tragic intensity in the beggar's gaze as his eyes meet yours through the metal bars of the first-class compartment, which have been put there—like the armed soldier squatting on the footboard—to protect you from the mute supplication of a single individual who could easily be transformed into a howling mob..." But the serenity that this fantasy presents does not last long. The army that promises security is not comforting. "The tone of a beggar calling out 'sa-HIB' is astonishingly similar to the one we use in French when rebuking a child with the word 'VO-YONS' (Come, come), increasing the volume and lowering the voice on the last syllable. It is as if he were saying, 'But it is obvious, there is no getting away from it, here I am begging from you and by this fact alone I have a claim on you. So what can you be

thinking of? Why don't you do something about it?" The call Lévi-Strauss describes, this personal appeal to us, is so resilient and so strong that finally—if we go on observing and cannot or do not want to act—we are compelled “to deny that our adversary is a human being.” Yet neither are we human beings, but—living money. “All the primary situations which establish relationships between people are distorted; the rules of the social game are falsified and one doesn't know where to begin.”

Letter to  
Colectivo Situaciones,  
2005.

This black hole was the starting point of the work, which begins by probing the historical dimension of it via two interconnected phenomena in colonial economy: the silver of Potosí and its journey in the direction of India. At the same time, these two examples were near to me because they concern my own experiences of travelling. It's a question, then, of a constant search to balance one's own experiences with their historical constitution. The work is constructed as if it were an optical apparatus, a laboratory with different lenses. This is related, on the one hand, to that situation of congealed observation. On the other hand, photography and its apparatus have a decisive role in colonial history. Thus, there is in the work a sort of parallel narration of the optical recording of poverty, criminality and race as an “osmotic compensation of the pressure of wealth.” This begins with Bentham's panopticon and reaches as far as the images of colonial history I use. I, too, employ the technique of hand-coloured black-and-white photography that was very widespread in India at the end of the 19th century.

**Q: Later on in the show we come across works that are to do with the dependency (not to say, in euphemistic terms, the “relationship”) between political figures in charge of the administration of national or local communities and speculation in the German context. You must be aware, as surely our readers are too, that a number of examples of this refined and highly obscene interdependency have recently come to light in Spain.**

**A:** Your question relates above all to the video *Die krumme Pranke*. This is a joint work I did in 1997 with Andreas Siekmann, Josef Strau and Amelie Wulffen. The work came out of the context of a discussion about the reconstruction of Berlin as a new German capital. This work also recreates two scenes from Peter Weiss' novel *Ästhetik des Widerstands* (The Aesthetics of Resistance). Among other things, the novel is about the strategies and concepts of Communist resistance in Berlin during the period in which fascism was

beginning. The parallelism is exaggerated but consciously chosen. It represents a polemical reaction to the process of national ideologisation that began to occur in Germany in the 1990s and which for many of us was unbearable. This new national ideology was accompanied by a spectacular, and equally authoritarian and mediocre, architecture that spread with the euphoria of unification. It is difficult to describe how one feels when one has to be a daily witness to this rebuilding and its infamy. There was a group of people who followed each of these developments, commented on them and did different oppositional actions. But a moment arrives when one is exhausted. The video isn't only about this rebuilding and all the corruption that surrounded it, but also about the state of mind of the people who were protesting against it. People's heads explode. They're transformed into chrysanthemums that wander about the city. In one of the scenes a text is inserted: "Does each act of resistance only demonstrate to itself that it's there? In point of fact, you are not here." The chrysanthemums declaim: "First, liquidate, next, a ban on the party, constitutional protection, detention in solitary confinement and a ban on holding public office for ex-members of a terrorist organisation. Do those for whom one speaks know this in reality, or do we still have something up our sleeves, on the underside, at a small scale, that tries to float in the air and be profitable?"

Q: To end, I'd like to ask you about the presence of two seemingly contradictory dimensions in your work: one is the scientific, analytical, legal and distant approach of facts of common interest on a world scale. The other, the histrionic appearance of characters in your work (how much of this is due to your interest in the theatre?) in your many performances; the devices from comic strips that you use; the way in which a contestatory attitude is expressed through exaggerated dramatisation; and the ridiculisation, per moments, of the elements employed, the absurd and the elegant ordering of the narratives. How much does your work owe to the literary traditions of German Classicism or Romanticism?

A: During the research we talked a lot about literary concepts that appear in both Romanticism and Mannerism. This involves literary collage, that is the *Concetto*, an obsessive handling of sources, that lavish world depository in the form of erudition. Then again, in Romantic literature we have a constant dialectic between drama and comedy, the serious and the banal. This dialectic fascinated me because it amounts to a possibility to go beyond political experience without flattening it, without sublimating it. I don't know if this is enough to preserve a certain sensibility.

In recent years a debate has often occurred about the possibility of transmitting political information in works by artists. Regarding this, I've ascertained that the mere facts don't speak by themselves, but that on the contrary they desensitise people, whatever the design with which they've been presented. The unexpressed gap between the facts and the way they are transmitted is already a symptom of this desensitisation, in which political reality is not experienced but is limned in, in the hope that by means of this others might experience it. I believe that literary form is necessary in order to be able to narrate a political reality or the model of an historic disinterestedness. If one understands poetry as a way of condensing time, then this is a possibility of insisting, within the changeability of the world, on a "now" whose disproportion constitutes an aesthetic programme. I don't know if I've been able to describe this with precision. Anyway, right now I've been thinking a lot about this form of condensation and historical negativity. Maybe because no other option exists. In 1930, I'd have had another opinion on this, for sure; in 1848, no. For me, it's important to historically balance contemporary political reality and the particular state of mind within it. There are relative factors, but also constants that are amazing.

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