

# Time's Imprint

Ulla von Brandenburg in conversation with Laure Fernandez and Yoann Gourmel

Laure Fernandez — We've just been looking at the maquettes for your Palais de Tokyo exhibition. The first thing you mentioned was the wooden floor and the noise it makes so as to "activate the viewer." Regarding your work, the question often arises of the uncertain position of the spectator, whereas it seems to me that you're offering a crossing of different kinds of spectatorial experiences.

Ulla von Brandenburg — For me the question is always to do with knowing what art is. How remote and how close is it? I try to de-hierarchise, to blur the definitions: can we touch or use or even destroy this thing here in front of us? The fragility of art—but of life as well. I enjoy making pieces that are inviting, even if I have a problem with "participatory" art. At the heart of the exhibition are five spaces outlined with fabric containing objects and representing different aspects of our lives. Performances take place every Saturday, turning the exhibition into a walk-in theatre piece: there's no longer any distinction between visitors and actors or artworks and props. I want the actors to set up an attraction with their ways of gazing and speaking, while letting the viewers choose where they want to be. The same goes for the interpretation: there's not *a* story, but

rather proposals, associations, fantasies you can follow or not. There are also the objects—pieces of chalk, fish traps—enlarged and looking a tad absurd. I like this idea of changing scales, which is about hierarchies. A theatre set gives you a fixed perspective, one that was exaggerated during the Baroque, when everything revolved around the king. The exhibition is a total work of art, offering a 360-degree field of vision. Maybe you can even enter from the back and leave via the front. Changing perspectives interests me.

Yoann Gourmel — In your work everything happens as continuity, as echo. The Palais de Tokyo exhibition is made up of four parts: at the entrance are pierced curtains hanging like a preliminary passageway; a stage that opens out into five colourful environments, forming what you call the "huts," where performances will take place; the film shot at the Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang, in the Vosges; and lastly a labyrinthine installation featuring undersea films. These works are embedded, with recurring interplay between props, objects and actions. How did you envisage the interconnection, and what was the starting point? Did everything come from the discovery of the theatre in Bussang?

UB — The starting point wasn't the theatre in Bussang, but the urge to bring the rural and the marine into an urban setting—to try to create a world at the other extreme from the Palais de Tokyo. To change the values and the perception one might attribute to it. Benoît Résillot, one of my collaborators, talked to me about Bussang. This country “theatre of the people” run by the residents intrigued me. And there's its backdrop, of course, that gives onto the forest and eventually becomes an artificial set in its own right. This conjunction of nature and culture, this reversal—bringing nature into culture rather than culture into nature—is what interests me for the Palais de Tokyo.

YG — The objects you present—fish traps, hayricks, fishing rods—also reference human activities, and work in particular.

UB — Nourishing work. Things that have been used and still are, but which we lose sight of. What are our needs? To sleep—the quilts cover us; to eat and drink—the bowls; to write—the chalk; to avoid prying eyes, and to change—the enlarged fish traps considered as “transformation cages.” The main space comprises five environments corresponding to five types of activity: action, figure, ritual, night, habitat. Thinking in terms of a total artwork, I write the text and the music and I look for a story. This isn't a total work of art in Wagner's sense, though. I don't believe in individual genius. I envisage all these aspects as part of a collaborative enterprise. Just as I enjoy working with things that recur, I enjoy working with people who keep

coming back, reappear in work after work, age as I'm ageing—and as the works are ageing. All of that is alive. As in my film *It Has a Golden Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon* (2017), we do lots of improvising. We take notes, we film, then we write, using what emerges from the rehearsals. By working together we can increase our strength and mental capacity as human, even if the authorship issue crops up at the end.

LF — Two questions occur to me here. On the one hand, regarding the organisation of the time frames between the making of the film in Bussang and the work on the performances at the Palais de Tokyo: can the two be dissociated? And on the other hand, there's the question of homogeneity. In an interview you said you were trying to “homogenise,” which surprised me because I have the opposite impression—that in fact you're working on heterogeneity, on different materials found or suggested by the performers. Is this related to your idea of a totality?

UB — You're right about heterogeneity: I enjoy bringing together materials and things from different contexts. Here we have the theatre, peasants, fishermen. Homogeneity has more to do with the image—with the use I make of 16mm film as a filter.

LF — So there's no connection with the way you assemble the elements?

UB — I don't want people to get the impression of things being unrelated. These things come from different domains, but they create a whole world. There's an echoing story. This

is also what's conveyed by the fabric collages—the patchworks.

LF — To come back to the first question: do you treat the periods of work with the actors between the creation of the film and the development of the performances as separate? Or do you as a group see both as part of the same impetus?

UB — Right now the focus is on the film. We've planned the camera movements in the theatre and shown them to the actors. Then there's the story: a microcivilisation living in this theatre in Bussang, cut off from the outside world and with its own economy, the things it makes. Until the day when a ritual is interrupted and the doors of the backdrop open. And there's the forest. The film also questions our immediate situation: do we want to change it? Are there other life possibilities? If so, how to go about it? At the end of the film the members of the group carry objects away in a procession through the forest and disappear—until they reappear in the Palais de Tokyo, where they're going to live and occupy the space for a time. Here we find elements of my earlier films, such as *Chorspiel* (2010), in which a family is living in a forest, unaware of the existence of an outside world until the arrival of a drifter upsets everything; and *Die Strasse* (2013) with its stage street of white house fronts where a newcomer discovers the customs of a village. Not really grasping what he's seeing, he tries to help the villagers, but fails each time: the problems are the community's, not his.

LF — This figure arriving from the outside—a frequent feature of your work—isn't seen as a threat. Rather as a window onto an otherworld or a duplicate of the spectator, discovering a community whose codes are unknown.

UB — Exactly. Once again it's a matter of the points of view one adopts so as to see the world differently.

YG — Your films often include distancing effects as a way of exposing illusion. The group you're filming is also a *mise en abîme* of your work process.

UB — The group is us as well. For practical reasons I've never played in my films, but this time I'd like the people who are helping out with the project to appear. I'd like the film to hold up a mirror, raise the issue of what the story is; because the film's a fiction, but not solely that.

LF — For you this fiction interconnects everything, and not just the film?

UB — This fiction continues in the exhibition, which in a way is the second chapter, except that the visitor discovers it first. There are several things related to these time frames that we haven't talked about yet, starting with the shruti box, a musical instrument with a colonial history: it's an Indian adaptation of the harmoniums of the English colonists. You can hear shruti boxes in the film, but I'd like them to be visible in the exhibition space, playing automatically—especially when the actors aren't there—to introduce different temporalities until we actually come to the film. Secondly,

the actors are going to have doubles—stuffed puppets representing them—when they’re not physically present. This idea comes from a book by Monika Ankele on psychiatry around 1900.<sup>1</sup> Ankele describes women in asylums making life-size doubles of themselves or of men. Another woman mentioned in the book is Marie Lieb, a patient in charge of the laundry at the psychiatric hospital in Heidelberg. She stole sheets, tore them into strips and used them to make shapes and words. I want the exhibition space to be transformed in time on the same basis. We’re going to put together a catalogue of signs—symbols, letters—to spread on the floor, and every Saturday the strips (or ribbons) will grow like mushrooms. As in the Baroque the ribbon is a miniature of the curtain; and it’s a recurring feature of my films and installations.

YG — The imaginary realm of your films is timeless. We’re faced with coded acts reminiscent of archetypes and rituals. What role do these rituals play for you today?

UB — We don’t have enough rituals in our society. I miss that and I try to invent them to give life meaning—to understand what happens between birth and death. Rituals exist as milestones in all cultures, but ours in the West are feeble or tied to religion. It’s not easy to see the meaning of this life, because only some of its transformations are named or ritualised. The issue of clothing is

relevant here too: what suit or what hat should I wear? For what occasion? I like rituals treated as everyday matters. It’s not just a matter of repeating them; they must be challenged too.

LF — Ritual as a tool for re-bonding. It’s a way of interconnecting solitude and the group. I was reading the book about the theatre in Bussang;<sup>2</sup> one of the difficulties for this “theatre for the people” has been getting through a century with two world wars: there’s been a loss of belief in humankind and its capacity to come together and exist as a group.

UB — What’s a community? The people as such doesn’t exist. I think we’re all rather alone today. What do groups take shape around? Sport, ideas, common interests. But there are other bonds, and communities trying to live other lives, even if this doesn’t always work.

YG — Isn’t your rapport with rites and rituals a way of criticising our technician (or technological) society, with its belief in individual and collective emancipation via the machine and progress?

UB — My critique bears on the idea that what counts is the visible, the thing that can be proved. In our technocratic, neoliberal society everyone has to contribute in order to be valuable. But what does it mean to “be valuable?” We live in a society of fear and plunge into a functionalist system to avoid asking questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Monika Ankele, *Alltag und Aneignung in Psychiatrien um 1900. Selbstzeugnisse von Frauen aus der Sammlung Prinzhorn* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> Bénédicte Boisson and Marion Denizot, *Le Théâtre du Peuple de Bussang. Cent vingt ans d’histoire* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2015).

YG — I was there at your first session with the performers. You talked to them about Aby Warburg and how the study of the Hopi snake ritual saved him from being committed.

UB — To overcome their fear the Hopi re-enact what frightens them, and Warburg did exactly the same: he relived his own story for an audience. This act of catharsis is a key moment in the theatre. Why does the theatre exist? For reliving something. Replaying is the very basis of theatre. We replay something that scares us in order to transcend it.

LF — Do you imagine the weekly performances at the Palais de Tokyo as, in fact, a kind of reprise—actions replayed every Saturday?

UB — The performances are built around three consecutive ten-minute modules which include manual actions: tearing up fabrics, and rolling and unrolling them. I like this idea of handling as ritual.

LF — That also seems like a ritual to me because it involves doing something over, calling up a memory of a gesture. You were saying that with the performers you were looking for a gestural or choreographic vocabulary. Is this vocabulary also rooted in handling objects, and thus in a bodily memory?

UB — Manual work is important for me. The body and the hand *make*. This is what Richard Sennett says in *The Craftsman*, when he explains that the head, body and hand have now been separated.<sup>3</sup> In the film

we show everything we make: the stuffed puppets I mentioned earlier, for instance, which serve as doubles for the actors. There are also abstract movements taken from dance that can relate a different story.

YG — In the exhibition the gestural memory is backed up by the memory of the objects you use; and by the memory of the materials: in particular the recycled pieces of fabric, which have their own relationship with the history of your early works. Fabric as a multi-purpose, adaptable element is part and parcel of your vocabulary, but I have the impression that this is the first time you've pushed its re-use so far.

UB — Fabric is the material best suited to preserving time's imprint, because information, even genetic, can penetrate deep into its fibres. Light undoes fabric's colours. A vibration is transposed, invisibly. I believe in the imprint of the past and history on objects as they travel, are worked on, and pass through many hands.

LF — Your exhibitions are not solely about scenography. They're also a "dramatised" experience of space in which a number of temporalities collide.

UB — I often say that my installations are not exhibitions, but spatial mises en scène. I like the idea of the circus: the big top in its crates and the troupe travelling from town to town.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Exhibitions like that are my dream: turning up with the fabrics, and the tent you can fold and unfold. Mises en scène wherever you happen to be, no two exhibitions alike, a show in place for three months. That's an economy I find interesting.

YG — That economy is also a relationship you yourself have with the production of your work when you re-purpose existing pieces, unstitching and restitching them. As if a sculptor decided to unmake a sculpture then make it again. You're working on the same material, but differently, like a new composition.

LF — You use the term composition. That chimes with the thinking of anthropologists like Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold, and the idea of "composing worlds."<sup>4</sup> This is something that could apply to your work: composing from the existing, taking hold. You talk about de-hierarchisation, of putting small objects and significant references on the same plane. You mention little mises en scène: might they be a means of reuniting, of recomposing? The stage in the structural and symbolic sense; in the sense of what you bring out of it.

UB — But above all a stage the spectators are invited onto. Everything happens on stage. In recognition of where we are and what our past is, individually and collectively. In telling ourselves, we're like this and we live here like this because this story took

place. Not in saying I'm making the world over: the world is there, I'm a product of this world and I'm showing my way of seeing it.

YG — The worlds you come up with are *in-between* worlds, because the system and/or the conventions of the theatre are part of the codes you use. As visitors we're capable of identifying them. We're embedded in a system that enables the invention of this world while at the same time distancing us from it. For instance, this is what happens when we pass through the curtains at the entrance to the exhibition: this is the symbolic equivalent of making a stage entrance, of crossing the threshold of a fiction. And yet, once that step taken, we find ourselves confronted with everyday objects, which accounts for our confusion as to the nature of what we're seeing.

UB — There's also the question of the observer and the observed. The ideal state would be to be neither object nor subject, but both at the same time. No more allotting of roles.

LF — To come back to this concept of *in-between*: without essentialising, you're working on something that's of the theatre but not in a theatre, of the photographic but without photography, of the moving image but with tableaux vivants...

UB — I was wondering if it would be interesting for me to direct in a theatre. The rules are already laid down and what I actually want to do is show a new way of functioning, a new approach to space. At the Palais

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold, *Être au monde. Quelle expérience commune?* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2014).

de Tokyo I didn't want to use the walls, but rather to work with the floor, to make forms emerge and "grow." Create a kind of island, an autonomous entity that doesn't necessarily react to the architectural setting—an idea you could plant anywhere, like a critique of the white cube and its illusory neutrality. Every place has a history. Either you play on it and include it in the narrative, or you tell yourself it doesn't matter where I am, I've got my circus tent to put up wherever I want, wherever I can. A way of hailing space and camouflaging the institution.

LF — How come there's always this temptation to address some aspect of a medium from a different angle?

UB — I've made a lot of silhouettes and it's exactly that: I make sediments—residual, near-abstract shapes. Your question strikes something like the same chord: how best to show photography? Obviously not with photography itself, which is a matter of functions, of habitual mechanisms and ways of seeing, whereas we must transcend the habitual in order to see clearly. This fits with what you were saying about temporality, and that's one reason why I use 16mm film: to shake off temporality.

YG — Your work is embedded in a history of forms. Naturally, the coloured curtains are a reference to theatrical history, but they can also be associated with the history of monochrome painting, or Brazilian art of the 1960s. The forms you generate in your films and watercolours are rooted in conventions, but offer translations of them. The pierced curtains become

a metaphor for photographic optics and the making of a frame, at the same time as they summon physical engagement.

UB — I'm not working with art history, but with history. For example, the holes in the curtains at the entrance to the Palais de Tokyo represent the history not only of photography and the camera and optics, but of 1970s design and Verner Panton as well. And there's no ranking of the sources.

LF — You play with different systems of representation.

UB — A kind of collage.

YG — By way of concluding I'd like to address the last part of the exhibition. After the curtains, after the huts—these stages that form hermetic but still porous worlds—and after the film shot in Bussang, we come to a labyrinth of faded blue fabrics, and are faced with a series of underwater films bare of all human presence, apart from sinking, body-related objects: a shoe, a dress, a mirror. As if we'd arrived after the shipwreck, to be faced with objects left to their own devices.

UB — These signs, these objects all around us, have been released into the sea. They plunge, they move differently in this environment. These are signs of our existence.

YG — All the objects on display in the huts are potentially usable, but these films suggest that the objects released into the water will no longer be so. After those seen as tools capable of unifying shared activities, the exhibition closes on a more dreamlike

note regarding these objects, which vanish, never to be used again.

UB — For me it's a matter of giving them a second, free-standing life that could be a window onto new stories.

LF — Weighing up all the interconnections, not placing humankind above the rest. Here something other than the human is keeping life going.

UB — It's a kind of letting go: we don't have everything in our hands, things slide away and are going to keep on sliding away. Perhaps there's a melancholic, troubling side to this, but for me it's also a huge curiosity, the sea, so deep and full of all these things we can't see. We're plunging into the invisible, as if into our unconscious. The sea as a kind of fourth wall we can walk through, an impenetrable, inaccessible world where other rules apply, rules we don't necessarily understand.

*Paris, November 18, 2019*

Translated by John Tittensor

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**Yoann Gourmel** is a curator at the Palais de Tokyo. He curated Ulla von Brandenburg's solo show.