

DOES SPEAKING TO A STRANGER CONSTITUTE A DIALOGUE

Performative interventions and political positions

BY ANJA RAITHEL

The artist group artillery works with performative interventions, poetic-political texts and dialogue-inducing actions in the public space. They paint with water on city paving stones and hang up "washing" in backyards. They interrupt lazy newspaper reading and invite neighbours to clip holes in their hedges.

The artist group artillery prompts us to be aware of our patterns of behaviour that challenge our ability to participate in unexpected social interactions or interim acts of solidarity. As they did with the action "Flower Power 2 - a Prompting" from 2002 when 50 bouquets of flowers were distributed on three large railway stations in Denmark, with the text: "Give the bouquet to another person before you leave the train/station". Can one be instrumental in bringing about contact with a stranger? And whom should one select? Contact to a stranger is the first step in participating in a new social relation. The flower bouquets can therefore be seen as a picture of social relations, which like relays continue and possibly spread mental shifts. In other terms, exchange and communication are key words when artillery intervenes in public spaces. As with the power relations between giver and receiver, between host and guest, together with the possibility of establishing meetings where these positions are more fluid, all are pivotal points in many of artillery's works.

Since the start of the group, artillery has had an interest in challenging the access of expressing oneself in the public space, in exploring and encouraging group actions in an individualized society. Over the last few years artillery has focused more specifically on possible unities as well as inclusion and exclusion in a multi-cultural Denmark. In the same period a neo-liberal wave washes over Europe. In Denmark, Venstre (Liberals) and De Konservative (Conservatives) win the election in 2001. The government's supporting party, Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party), becomes the third largest party in the country and the course is set for an increase in foreign anxiety and territorial policy, which leads to a pronounced tightening of the foreign nationals law. In the middle of a string of poor opinion polls the Social Democrats also sharpen their foreign nationals policy. The tone becomes sharper both in the ambit of the private, in the political debate and in the mass media, where the contrasts are clearly brought out: Either you are a halal hippy or a racist. The political context is meaningful when artillery drags current political and social problems over into philosophical statements rooted in the sensory, through their performative interventions, so they are displaced and become relevant.

WILL FOREIGNERS DISAPPEAR...

Odense 2003. The members of the artist group are all dressed alike and work with brooms and buckets. They paint poetic political statements with water on the floor of the square between the town hall and the church: "Will marriage disappear...will the law disappear ... will foreigners disappear ...?"

What is left? What happens when the Danish foreign nationals law demands that in cases of family reunification both spouses need to be 24 years old - and love is set up as a formula? What happens if the law disappears?

artillery's intervention is potentially open for anyone who wants to be involved. On the surface a number of questions arise, both concrete and more philosophical in type, which can have the effect of starting up our own reflections or dialogue. When a curious passer-by stops and talks with one of the artillery group, a situation arises where the spectators/participants and artillery are creating and influencing the formation of opinion together. But here it also becomes clear that the creation of meaning is a process, where the dialogue itself, engagement and discussion constantly changes, for example, our political or social viewpoints.

artillery aims to create space for wonder and doubt and loose ends. Otherwise democracy stagnates. The gigantic statements painted in the square between the town hall and the church are erased and changed by the sun. In motion, just like principals of rights or moral values, which in the heat of the ideology battle act like static matters. But they are up for discussion, perhaps right here in the square, in a public space, where both the resident and the nomad wander. Where a breeding ground can be created for plurality as a contrast to institutionalized racism, to political, judicial and religious control.

BUS ROUTE 4

Bus Route 4 operates from Frydenlund to Skåde. In Århus. Through various neighbourhoods and areas with a diverse make-up of residents. On this stretch in the summer of 2004 one could see seven towels in a number of backyards and gardens. With a word on each guest towel, forming the sentence: *EN HYLDEST TIL GÆSTERNE DER TØR BLIVE /*

A TRIBUTE TO THE GUESTS WHO DARE TO STAY.

They fluttered like newspaper adverts detached from their sandwich boards. In tabloid format. Infiltrating the half-private, half-public

spaces. But there were no senders. It could have been the neighbour and not artillery who were out playing tricks.

Towels to dry oneself on, when one has washed one's hands in order to maybe get dirty again. The size of the towels, typography and the word "TØR" (= 'dry' & 'dare') referring indirectly to the old slogan from the tabloid newspaper Ekstrabladet, "Ekstrabladet dares where others don't". The newspaper has never been afraid of a populist phrase - and often washes its hands after having wiped the phrase off on someone else.

But who dares to enter a dialogue, who dares change the prevalent norms for social conduct? On the towel 'TØR' appeared in small writing: "70% of the Danish population has never greeted an immigrant". Sometimes the large text steals all the attention, so only the stereotypes remain and cling to each other. Anything written in small type disappears and with it goes differentiation. When is one no longer a guest in a country, and does one take off after several years if one is continually treated as an unwelcome guest?

GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBOURS?

A more direct intervention in the typography of the printed media and the opinion-forming columns is artillery's project "Good fences make good neighbours?" from 2005. Over two months the readers of the weekly newspaper Køge Onsdag came across a number of peculiar statements. Neighbours with adjoining hedges were, amongst other things, invited to clip a hole in the hedge and maintain it year round. Even though the readers chose not to carry out the action, the statement probably created a number of images, where privet-fascism is cancelled out by a more playful acceptance of neighbourliness.

Such "do-it-yourself-projects" could have even encouraged an anarchistic council worker to mow the following sentence: "to open my space my language my country my culture my state and myself" with his/her lawnmower in Lovparken, Køge's fortification. But it was artillery who in Køge Onsdag in February, in between debate pages on the election victory of the right-wing parties in 2005 and the estate agent columns, printed a large picture of this particular text in question in Lovparken. The text reflected on a maybe utopian ideal of giving space for openness, diversity and change (1). A space under construction.

The picture was placed between a debate article on tax capping, reductions in foreign aid and on an increasing difference between the rich and poor in Denmark, together with estate agent advertisements, which are implicitly concerned with ownership, status and power. This context had an impact on the experience of artillery's virtual new-staging of the park area, of course. The new-staging of a well-known area maybe became encumbered with doubt from the readers' side. Did it really look like this now? Was it a debate article challenging mental and physical change?

Seen in conjunction with one of artillery's other contributions in the newspaper, where speech bubbles on either side of a wall announce respectively "protected" - "rather, restricted", an investigation of the premises for limits and co-existence are drawn. Identity - both the individual's and the country's - is formed by limitations. We attain our identities via our relation to other people; on whom we are dependant because they are complicit in defining ourselves. We constantly develop territoriality, both mentally and physically. Sometimes it produces a repressive tolerance, where tolerance is dependant on whether "the others" are fenced in, controlled and accommodated. If there is to be space for all agendas and diversities then this demands an immense flexibility, an openness towards the inconstancy of identity, nation, and world. The fact that artillery intervenes virtually and physically in localities and places helps maintain the place's meaning for the development of the communication process. They are also involved in underlining the possibility of realizing more idealistic ideas.

When artillery, together with the Danish Refugee Council's volunteer group in Køge, designs an advert seeking people of Danish or other ethnic background as contacts for refugees in the area, the advert has the concrete purpose of realizing the idea of exchange between permanent residents and newcomers in Køge. At the same time the advert is a link in artillery's "Good fences make good neighbours?". In this way the whole "Køge project" contains a number of statements which challenge reflection on border problems between individuals, cultures and countries, but which are also, in a concrete way, challenges for action.

Like a red thread through most of artillery's newer projects, their fundamental question therefore is: "Does speaking to a stranger constitute a dialogue?" What is needed to establish a dialogue? artillery develops new thinking on forms for exchange, where presence, surplus and the will to be curious are the cornerstones. If you involve yourself, are attentive and invest your viewpoints, so it is maybe possible "to open my space my language my country my culture my state and myself". An opening which is of vital importance in order for democracy to contain heterogenous and conflicting viewpoints, which are constantly renegotiated.

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(1) The text is a paraphrased fragment from the reflections on hospitality by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, where it is stated: "to open my space, my home - my house, my language, my country, my culture, my state and myself".

