

## War Dance(Around the Hole in Front of the Stage) For Miriam Bajtala

The song is over. The people are standing in front of the stage, staring at you. What do you tell them? Now. "Say something!" your inner voice says to you, "For heaven's sake, say something!" But what? The next song is called...it deals with...is all about...treats... and so on. Who wants to know things like that at all? Who needs this stuff? Information, reflections, interpretations. Titles, theses, temperaments. Just remember, it's time to feel bored. What time was it again?

But saying nothing doesn't work, either. The people are expecting something. It's written on their faces. You can feel it. Downright physical. As if you were being affected by invisible magnetic forces. As if some super magnet was switched on and, in the lab, everybody's coins were flying out of their pockets, their glasses coming off their noses, the fillings being pulled out of their teeth. That's the way it is. The crowd-puller comes on. And your words are immediately drawn out of your mouth. You can only see them buzzing through the air and disappearing in the space.

Then there is silence. Nothing comes afterwards. Not even bile. Your throat is dry. Why disgorge more? Everything is out. The song has been sung, everything has been said. Everything should be said with this! And if it isn't? Does this mean that everything that has been said, played, shown, done so far, was not enough? That must be the case. Because why would you go one better now if there hadn't been a gap to be filled, a hole to be stuffed. And then it happens: even if the gaps or holes hadn't been there before, now they are opening up and growing bigger with every word you say, with every word you fumble for, with every word you can't bring yourself to say. Whoosh. That was the left engine. Clonk. There goes the tail rotor. Everything is spinning. Mayday, tower, we're going down!

But what if the tower answers? If help is at hand? If somebody leaps to your aid and takes the helm? A mediator or confrontier, someone who steps in front of you, who settles the matter and, disarmingly relaxed, addresses the audience: "Well, you know, what these artists are really saying, and what you, ladies and gentlemen, really want to hear, is..." And then, ideally, he says what you yourself think, what you mean, what you might have said, but what you cannot bring yourself to say here and now, not for the life of you. Or maybe he talks total nonsense. But maybe it doesn't matter, either. The people will be momentarily distracted. Meanwhile, you can hastily fix your make-up. Tune your strings. Mentally prepare yourself for what's coming next... It works. But it feels anything but good. Why this stand-in? Does art need a diplomatic mission? Legal aid? Parental guardian? Advocate? What does the speech convey about the "need for commentary on art," if not the humiliating feeling of neediness? Help those in need. Because they cannot help themselves. Whoever needs food is hungry. Whoever gets it from others and knows that he must rely on them will start to notice that he is not just hungry, but that he is poor. In this respect, hardly anything is more offensive than being

told by others what you wanted to say yourself but have not yet said. Words received as gifts do not satisfy the hunger for words. Instead they only mark the recipient with the 'poverty of words' label. Because it's generally humiliating to get what you want. Even if you asked for it. Particularly when those who give you what you want mean well. It merely means that they have something, or believe they have something, which you do not have! In this case, words. They have so many words, and they whisper them loudly or speak them blatantly. And they are taking the words right out of your mouth. Making you fall silent. The good ones do. The helpers. Assholes! They'll be the first to go to the wall when the revolution comes.

But what then? What to use as replacement for the interpretation? First the work, then the punches? Like in the 1950s with the Pollocks? Work, drink, fight. And then make the best possible exit. With blood and tears. It's exhausting. And it doesn't solve the problem. But it stares the problem right in the eyes, as the bunny does with the snake, with a clenched paw and hard liquor within easy reach.

The void in the space between you and the others will never disappear. Even though people might still be dancing at the moment, the dance floor beneath their feet is always empty. It is particularly empty within this blasted circle which forms in front of the stage, as if everybody was just waiting for the floor to open up at any moment for Gustaf Gründgens or the devil himself to pop up from beneath the stage. This vicious circle will never go away, though it may fill up for a few moments at a time. Anyone who has stared too deeply into the hole in the audience will see it, even through the bodies of those dancing, glowing like a magic circle on the dance floor.

This has nothing to do with the need for commentaries. Commentaries are like conversations on a first date. Excited stammering. Words that get excited because they know that they are being spoken in the knowledge that they are second-rate, but out of the necessity to speak. Getting straight to the point would certainly work. But those who act immediately no longer feel the reasons for acting. Only postponement provides the satisfaction of knowing that you want something from each other, something more than merely colliding with each other in the darkness. The feeling, maybe also the illusion, that an ego is communicating with an ego only develops at the point when the gap opens up in conversation from which the two parties only emerge as people with voice and character in the attempt to close this gap through talking.

It depends on whether you want this.

The courage to leave gaps?

Or politeness and stupid fuss after all?

But if I do not wait and ask, how else would I know your name? Mine is not Verwoert. I only sign it because it is allegedly my name. The natural father of my paternal grandfather was really called Viereck. Yet, I would not really like to face you here as Viereck. Although it would be more honest. But what business of yours is my family history? That was 100 years ago in Cuxhaven. German navy. Submarine fleet. Half my relatives are at the bottom of the ocean. You just go on without them. You must. We have to, after all. Or don't we?

Maybe we don't. It is never wrong to think pragmatically. But in this case, for once, it is not necessarily correct. Because, in principle, there can be no peace between artists, between artists and their audience, and even less with those who think they could mediate between the fronts. Critics, curators, gallery owners. Don't shoot the messenger? He'll be the first to go down! If the man at the piano doesn't get hit by the first beer glass, the saloon will never start to liven up at all! So will there be peace? No! This would be a lie. But does it necessarily have to be all-out war? It's unnecessary. Between war and peace lies the true cradle of art: the war dance. It is a round dance around the vicious circle on the dance floor. With clearly defined roles. If I am the hero, you are the chorus. If the chorus speaks, then we are the heroes, all of us, heroes for a day. Your words. My words. From silence to silence. Competing with each other. The texts in your videos are bloody good. They are so polished that they reach the ear directly and become verses without needing meter. But a war dance is not a dispute that can be won. Ultimately, there is neither payoff nor agreement. Maybe there isn't even an ending. And it goes on like that, round in circles. From shot to answering shot. From speech to counter-speech. From you to me. From all of you to them. And always back into the empty midst of the dance floor, where there is neither an I nor a you, neither a we nor a they, but only the bare floor to dance upon.

The principle determining the war dance that neither connects nor separates is that of emulation, mimesis, imitation. Who anyone is at any one moment, and who will be someone else just a moment later, is regulated through the faces you make and the expressions you produce to imitate the faces of others, like a mirror made flesh. So we dance around each other with hatchet raised, paint our faces, and repeatedly, for example, grab our own nose with a grim face. I certainly don't know you. But I know you quite well. My nose. Your nose. Andrzej Żuławski, Dušan Makavejev, Stevie Wonder. They know. Your plants know more about you than you think! So, good luck.

Under normal circumstances, the problem is always that it's impossible to duplicate yourself. Because that's what it would take. Your one self makes the art. Whenever you need it, your other self grows out of your forehead, puts itself beside the first self, and makes speeches about it, while the first self continues doing what it likes best. This duplication is normally blocked by the law of modern logic, according to which a person or a thing cannot be what it is and what it is not at the same time. This law is null and void during the war dance, and replaced through the form of imitation. And then you can be like the plant from which the plant grows anew as a second plant, for example. Or like the insect that looks like a plant. Because the plant looks like the insect. Either way around. This is neither a model nor a suggestion. It is a requirement of the practice that you must face if you are to step between Miriam Bajtala, Miriam Bajtala, Miriam Bajtala, Miriam Bajtala and a whole chorus of other people who are writing or speaking texts by or about Miriam Bajtala into the vicious circle in the empty center of the dance floor and must now, damn it all to hell, additionally duplicate yourself. Two to three times. At least. And that's just in

this round. Maybe more often if the round dance changes direction again and continues to rotate, time and again, in the opposite direction.

Now what? Now, come on!

Jan Verwoert