

Founded in 1981 by Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci and Chiara Guidi, the theatrical company Societas Raffaello Sanzio is a pioneering experience in Italian stage art. Through a series of aesthetic choices of strong ethical and political impact, it irreversibly altered theatrical convention. The company's general orientation, which connects all their works however varied they may be, is a concept of theater that embraces all the arts, where performance is completely open to all perceptual senses, like a system of forces. Works include: Santa Sofia - Teatro Khmer (1986), Giulio Cesare (1997), Genesis from the Museum of Sleep (1999), Voyage au bout de la Nuit (1999), Combattimento (2000).

Romeo Castellucci - We readily accepted the invitation by Fondazione Antonio Ratti because Marina Abramović and Ulay's work was very important for us when we were young. During our studies their work was really a kind of nourishment.

Marina Abramović - It's so strange for me, I just forget those days. Only when I'm working on my books do I feel so, so old. I never think about the past, I always think about what can be done in the future. So when they bring back their memories I realize this was a long time ago: Ulay and me. I've always heard about Raffaello Sanzio as the best Italian theater group. The first time I could see something of theirs was in Frankfurt, the *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and I was very impressed by their performance.

I would like to talk with you about the relation between performance and the theater. This relation is very different from the seventies through the eighties and now in this century. I remember my relation to the theater in the seventies was a pure hate-relation: I hated theater absolutely passionately. To me theater was something artificial, not true, there was always a distance between the actor and the public. Actors were playing something else, taking another role: the whole form of the theater didn't work for me.

In the early days of performance, this kind of direct relation with the public, the direct transmission of energy, was very important. The key was not to rehearse and not knowing the end. You are there, in the present moment and everything that happens in that moment is part of the performance.

The only thing you have to start with is a very simple and conceptual statement: "what you're going to do." Through the action of what you are doing in front of the public you actually reach different states of mind. For me at that time the most interesting side of theater was linked to personalities like Grotowski, in certain ways Tadeusz Kantor who actually worked with his entire family combining theater and life, and of course later on Pina Bausch who put the actors in very difficult conditions, which gave rise to emotions that were not played but really lived and experienced. She once had a dancer with naked feet and a very thin dress just run through the snow: the dance became very real and emotional. The idea is to create situations where dance can be really everything: sitting, standing, talking, smoking cigarettes.

In the eighties performance almost stopped existing. Artists like Jan Fabre started working with many performance concepts, taking certain performances as his inspirational material. Fabre also introduced long process theater pieces, where half the audience would leave. Bob Wilson was working on the same line, too. It was a very interesting situation, because theater started to become something else: the platform for the new way to see performance. This new performance mode also started happening in nightclubs and in the fashion world, and from there to theater, realizing another transition from a completely different side. Now everything is possible: art can happen in a theater and theater can happen in art.

Romeo Castellucci - We arrived at theater through a paradoxical way. We arrived through our visual arts education, through our readings of artistic literature. But in the end, we chose theater. We "happened to come to" theater, this is our condition. As when you end up by chance in an unknown square. We experienced theater as a discipline of form: a form of endocrinal energy released against itself. There is a masochistic line running through all of our work which consists in a never-ending re-birth. But we should clear the field of masochistic stereotypes. Masochism here is seen as a philosophical system, a system of relationships, a radical technology of the *Self* meant to uphold personal freedom.

With respect to the centrality of the idea of body and therefore of its consequent actions, theater clearly plays a seminal, central role in the whole of art history and in the entire history of human form.

Theater is historically one of the earliest forms with respect to both civilization and the human being; in childhood. The body has held center-stage in theater for at least two thousand five hundred years; body-consciousness in front of others, of other bodies looking, begins exactly with the stage.

Theater has become hateful because it forgot its nature when it let an anti-body in: the author, and the text he holds under his arm. In this way theater renounced its primacy.

What we have been trying to do in these years is to keep the scandal of the stage continuously high and vibrating. The word "theater" itself has to be continually reinvented, because it has completely lost its meaning.

Stage is a place of alienation and we shouldn't do anything to anesthetize this alienation. The problem of author, text and tradition of narrative theater has been instead to fill this scandal with *the* story, forcing the actor, and consequently his body, to be simply a repeater, tempering the energy of its matrix, of the stage itself. In this respect, the philosophy of Antonin Artaud is fundamental for art history and western thought; it cannot be overlooked. He existed and he said those things. He plunged the problem of

form in a bath of violence reawakening the matrix. This is where form becomes spirit.

Chiara Guidi - I was struck hearing Marina speaking of hate, because this word connoted our work from the very beginning. In one of our first works [*Santa Sofia - Teatro Khmer*] there was even a character, Pol Pot of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia shouting all his hate to all the public, in an iconoclastic vision. And the question of iconoclasm was our problem. In any case, the incredible thing was that we really did hate theater, but from within, and we had to fight an enemy that lived inside us, and inside of which we wanted to live. Probably this hate and desire to cancel our relationship with theater – in the sense of its exclusive relationship with the author – over the years brought us to a particular vision of dramaturgy. Everything becomes a "dramaturgic" act: setdesigning is dramaturgy; knowledge of the body and how that body treads the stage is dramaturgy; sound is dramaturgy just as being silent is dramaturgy. The empty, dark theater is already dramaturgy. We were critical of and completely distrusted the text, which is usually considered the only dramaturgic act in theater. Therefore inside every one of our works, a perfectly controlled system of dramaturgy was born. So the hate you were speaking about, brought you to performances where the programmed unpredictability of the events was another form of control. Parallel to this, and with the same hate, we adopted a super-technique that brought us to the dramaturgic control of every element, coming to terms with reality, with theater as re-creation. Nothing could have touched the perfection of that creation. Even the smallest weakness could lead to collapse. This dramaturgical system came hand in hand with a concept of measure, of time, an architecture, and it allowed us to enter another world that in the end no longer belonged to us. It was a problem of the universality of form. Thus, the problem clearly shifts to the form, which has to be brought to a delirium, has to be driven crazy, unhinged, so that it can reveal, but not communicate. This has nothing to do with shows that illustrate or communicate; we don't have anything to communicate. The work became a field of forces, of experience, but especially – coming back to your argument, because we obtained the same result – it became a field of driving, percussive and, above all, emotional forces. The language of emotion is the universal language. So, technique has to find a rhythm that makes the body go crazy. The rhythm, the emotional drive affect the nerves and the living flesh. That is why the question of measure, of the architecture, is a matter of form. Furthermore, the form invariably establishes a language, creates a language. The word has a specific rhythmic architecture that belatedly yields a meaning, only after provoking an emotional experience.

Marina Abramović - As you said, I perceive your performances at a very emotional level. The words, the ways in which words are said, the silences between words, create images. You create incredibly visual spaces just with words. You don't need anything else. It's just the body, the space, the public and you manage to create intensity and capture the public's attention through the whole thing in a very strong way. Your way of using language gives it a completely new meaning. Once simple words are part of your context and are pronounced in your specific way, they become for us a completely new language. The only question I have is why do you need to use video material?

Romeo Castellucci - It's not really about a need. If I had to explain why, I wouldn't know exactly what to say. Concerning the work we presented in Como [*Uovo di Bocca*], we knew we would be working in an old church, a deconsecrated church, without God. In a certain way this space resonates with a wonderful silence and absence of God. I don't know why, but deconsecrated churches have an even stronger aura than consecrated ones. I think that in deconsecrated churches you can still hear perfectly well the old cry that "God is dead." The text of *Uovo di Bocca* consists entirely of an interrogation; the questions are all to a non-existent God. They are words coming from this unnamed God who positions himself at the center of language; words that can take on all forms possible because they are formless, as Marina was saying correctly. We tried to put on this presbytery, on the missing altar, a sort of diptych, a double altarpiece, with a front and a back side. The left altar-piece was absolutely true and real, it consisted in the bodies of two women vibrating, the body itself of the voice without any images, because images were re-created in the emotional sphere. The other side of diptych consisted in a condensation of images that were self-cancelling, by turning around on themselves; in a sound dimension that was pure noise, based on speed and within the concept of interference. Curiously the hypermorphism of the video, the stream of images didn't communicate anything; it was a sort of almost perfect reverse, played on the totally unreal level of the video flat surface. We came here to experiment, but maybe it didn't work. In one or two years we could understand better this kind of balance.

Marina Abramović - I am a horrible sort of minimalist and my advice to you is not to wait two years, because you don't need video. You have such an incredible power. You create sculptures in space with the voice. In many of your other works, as in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, you also have sculptural machines working, which I really think are fantastic. They are like mechani-

cal bodies in space. And then there are also the videos. Maybe when you have video, you should keep the voice at the same time, as if fighting with the screen, because every time the voice stops I feel this magic thread is cut and the machines come . . . There is an ongoing tension between the images and the voice. And what you create with the sound, with this new sort of language is absolutely fantastic. Sometime, I would like to see *Voyage* with just the sound and the machines you make. This is of course a strictly personal opinion but at the same time I know that in a process of developing, every artist needs to go through certain steps and can't just drop something because somebody suggests it: the artist has to go through this process. In my personal experience, I have found that mistakes are a very important facet of my work. Sometimes you can't do without doing things you strongly feel you have to do, even if you know already that they are really wrong. I think that's the kind of situation where you learn the most and that help the development of your work the most. In some situations when I was making really the biggest mistakes you can imagine, I knew I would get seriously physically sick for days, but I still did them. What role do mistakes play in your experience?

Romeo Castellucci - Some say that making errors means being errant.

Angela Vettese - I was struck mostly by the technique, the discipline, because I would like to learn more of it. Self-control and self-dominion should be intended in a paradoxical way, not directed to restraint but to the contrary, to an explosion of the emotions. Nevertheless, I have to say that for people used to contemporary art, theater always turns out less synthetic than we expect: you could communicate the same with a shorter length.

Marina Abramović - I think it is absolutely true what you said about self control on one side and the explosion of emotions on the other side. There is a very famous statement of Maria Callas, whom I adore: "When I perform, the most important thing is that half of my brain is in complete control and the other part of the brain is totally loose." The most important thing is to keep the balance between these two completely contradictory states. That is really the magic of a good performance, because you should have a fantastic technique – as in your case – but at the same time you have to be completely mad. When Chiara was screaming, one second later she had her breathing in complete control and her voice was normal. Another interesting moment of your performance and that I liked so much – and I think there should be more of such moments – is when Romeo sat backstage and started applauding. It was something completely unexpected and

new. Even if the category of new in art has a controversial aspect: every year there are hundreds of books published with the title "avant-garde art" and every time what was new one year becomes old-fashioned the next. We have to look beyond the appearances: it doesn't matter, for instance, if two people are standing at center-stage and look old fashioned, like something you've seen hundreds of times before. What is important is what happens in terms of the energy released in the space between them and you. That experience is the only thing that counts.

Giacinto Di Pietrantonio - In my opinion the Raffaello Sanzio group has never tried to work on originality, even if they are always extremely original, and always give you something you don't expect. On the other hand, I think they've always worked on "origins," both in their themes and in their approach to theater. The reason maybe lies in their close involvement with visual arts. I've always seen them as visual artists rather than representatives of theater, because they transform everything into images, even words, creating a powerful *unicum*. It's like being in front of a painting.

Student - In this perspective, how do you see the relationship with the public?

Romeo Castellucci - Socrates used images to unveil a mechanism. Every form of artistic representation has to confront itself with the mechanism of the public. An artwork becomes interesting when the viewer is pushed inside the work. In this sense artwork and theater become a place of alienation, intended etymologically as "going to another place." Every work in theater, as well as every work in the history of art, including Marina's performances, implies the presence of others, either stupid or intelligent. This relationship becomes more interesting when it is "armed." Try thinking about *Las Meninas*, about the Lotto paintings or about Courbet's realism: they all have an "armed" relation to the public. Not to forget some of Marina and Ulay's works, where public was quite in danger. The energy of the public, of who is in front of the artwork, should be part of the same sphere of energy, as a further act of dramaturgy.

Student - In your opinion, is there still a definition of performance? Is the theater a good place for performance? How do you take the fact that public has to pay to attend a theatrical performance?

Marina Abramović - It is like asking for a definition of art: there are as many definitions as there are performers, as there are artists. In my opinion performance is the mental and physical construction made in front of the

public, in which the artist steps in and performs. I also think that performance has to be done for the public. For me, performance without the public doesn't exist.

Romeo Castellucci - Referring to the place of theater and to the relation with a paying public, I find that theater could be the only place possible, because at the same time it is the worst one. Since a perfect place for theater doesn't exist, every place is possible. There is something wonderful about this relationship with a paying public that in some ways brings the art of theater near to prostitution. It is a truly ancient and atavistic link, it's the flesh trade, which makes it miserable, true, and moving. I would be paralyzed if I had to choose the ideal place for a performance, because every ideal place is hateful.

Student - How do you build your theater work and how do you deal with trance?

Chiara Guidi - The discourse about how we build our work is very compli-

LA SOCIETAS RAFFAELLO
SANZIO INCONTRA
MARINA ABRAMOVIC
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MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND
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cated and involves many fields. I think that the question of art is an everyday problem of extreme solitude. Romeo, Claudia and myself work separately, accumulating materials, ideas, writings, and sounds until everything catalyzes around one theme. When the subject can be summed up in a title, it attracts and makes necessary a series of inputs: that of Romeo's notebook with ideas about direction; the rhythmic and dramaturgic structure, which usually are my task, and the text and body movements, which are Claudia's job. The incredible thing is that the theme catalysing and unveiling our ideas gives rise to other ideas until we reach a point of complete saturation. At the beginning our performances last five hours, but they could go on for even ten, considering all the ideas we wrote. There is a real accumulation of material. Then begins the patient task of defining the subject, when we have to reject and eliminate a lot. It's in this rejecting that I see the mistake mentioned by Marina before, because the mistake is an excess, an excessive florescence no longer necessary. When all the energies are directed and unveiled by that title, knowledge of the matter starts to explode and we have to go into the deep of it, because that matter is the enemy.

Claudia Castellucci - Trance means to give yourself over completely to an external force you should welcome. In this sense we don't follow trance, because we don't recognize any external force to the point of welcoming it entirely. External forces are total and multiple. Our aim is to defend ourselves from these forces. You can understand an example thinking of the word "quantity." The quantity of forms in the world is in my opinion the sum of all the forces, and it is something that overwhelms me. To the contrary, I should contrast these forces. Therefore I neither practice nor believe in trance, because I don't follow any religion. Nevertheless, the problem is to be free, which could well be the condition that comes closest to trance as intended here: that is, to be free of any duty, any reasoning, any idea. That means to be as faithful as possible to our design, exactly because there are many forces trying to make us be reasonable. Furthermore, trance as we know it in western world is something either impossible, because there is a lack of seriousness towards the unknown, or it becomes an amateurish practice in order to feel good. Feeling good is a duty, but it can't be the duty of art because art is not a pharmacy.

Marina Abramović - I am interested in trance for its idea of transformation. Lama dancing, for instance, lasts one week from the sunrise to the sunset and it's the most extreme physical activity. If you see the physical build of a monk doing this non stop dance, you realise he could never do it under normal conditions. When the dance starts, he puts on a mask and in that

moment he transforms himself into divinity. That means that his quality as a normal person disappears and he becomes like a super-self, and in this new condition he can actually push his body over its limits. Coming back to our culture, in performance there is the possibility in front of the audience to come into this kind of transformation, from a lower self to a higher self. We can consider that "trance" but at the same time it is the energy of the public that we absorb and give back. This transformation is essential to elevate the quality of performance. I think this is one of the variations that trance can assume in our culture, not having a religious meaning. All phenomena concerning the public and their reaction to performers, for example, during rock concerts, has to do with this idea of trance.

Chiara Guidi - It is a question of concentration, of how form in a certain moment during a performance can dictate a rhythm. This concentration doesn't transform me, but deforms me. It's a question of deformation, of forcing the matter, and not of the matter transforming me.

Student - Your work develops along a continuous rhythmic *crescendo*. How do you control this *crescendo* and how you put an end to it, how do you conclude your works?

Romeo Castellucci - The *crescendo* is part of a musical and prosodic language that we often adopt. We try to construct a dynamic, a sort of unbeatable rhetorical diagram. The problem of the end is very interesting and difficult, because it contains a sort of farewell and leave-taking. Every time it has to be conceived very well, because it is not a fraction of an action, as it can be in performance.

Marina Abramović - For me all performance has to be in permanent *crescendo*. This can also be accomplished in silence, in the absence of action.

Chiara Guidi - I think the problem goes by rhythmic units. Every moment has the problem of the *crescendo* and how one *crescendo* can blend with another in this transitory zone. The crisis lies exactly there, between the two *crescendos*, and this is the most attractive zone, because there a hole forms, a silence which is a weight, which drives you away. But it is also silence which alternates drama with the perturbation of something stupid, so that it become possible in that very point to derail the usual meaning of things. Therefore you can find another meaning, another language, so this thing surprises and excites us.

The problem of the *crescendo* is how to create these holes and inside them

how to continue to reject the same work. Probably our aim is to show and then to hide, because there is nothing to explain. So the whole question is about subtraction, about rhythm. The problem of rhythm unifies all the arts. The rhythm sinks into chaos, and this is the most dangerous point for the artist and the artwork. But is exactly here where is possible to hide and unveil.

Marina Abramović - I think chaos is a very important point. Recently in Dublin I saw the reconstruction of Francis Bacon's studio. It's an extremely small space in total chaos, you can't even walk. In a documentary, he says that chaos for him is very important because only in chaos can he breed new images. That's why I understand your need to accumulate materials. Chaos is necessary to get to the essence.