

THE PERFORMANCE SPACES OF IRMA OPTIMIST

I first performed as Irma Optimist in the Museum of Contemporary art in Tampere in June 1991. Since then, I have applied theoretical, mathematical approaches to my artistic activities. Mathematical chaos, which formed the basis when preparing the works, means unexpected order and periodic variation within spaces of a certain system – of a performance, for instance.

I also used female optimist humor in my works. Dynamics of language games and events became the nonlinear spatiality of my works. In my performances *Body Omega* (1998), *Hysteresis* (1998) and *Private Pythagoras* (1999), I focused on starting and maintaining a spatial event.

As a spatial process, the performance *Private Pythagoras* also connected with the esoteric Pythagorean mathematical thought. The thematic of the work is best described as a structure of differences within fragmentary topology. It is realized within a net of geometrical subsets. The most important elements of the work were a triangle-shaped fishnet pinned inside the performance space and my computer program *Pythagorean tree*. On those elements, the specific physical and imaginary questions of the performance were exposed.

My bodily mathematics

First, I changed my studio to *Studio Là-bas→*. After that, *Là-bas→* also started to develop into a living structure for performance art and other forms of experimental art and culture. In the first ever event at *Studio Là-bas→* in August 2000, my video of *Private Pythagoras* saw its premiere.

That crystallized the connection between my previous work and the events of the new millennium. That experimental art needed a bodily-mathematical space for its transformation was to be important to those events.

Là-bas→ has changed the ideal space of Euclidian geometry into jagged forms described by contemporary mathematics. Euclidian analysis does not penetrate the essence of irregular forms that have been found from mathematical space through fractal dimensions.

To imagination, a fractal shows a way to perceive infinity. Paradoxes, such as infinite length within a finite area, or irregularities, such as infinite surface area of objects with zero volume, have created a nonlinear experimental space also for some of my performance commentaries, which I have presented in the context of art history, for

instance related to the views about vacuum and space held by Kazimir Malevich, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein and the Finnish artist Helene Schjerfbeck.

My performances also deal with inner similarities of forms and the organized structure of a hidden form. Gottfried Leibniz already imagined a drop of water containing a whole seething universe.

In performance works, dynamical events install themselves as traces of themselves. My bodily mathematics is a complex combination of sexual and gender dynamics, structures of female and male, personal autobiography, cultural border crossing, communal ruptures and overturns.

I am interested in the way Edmund Husserl has posed his question about the original essence of geometry. My interest arose from a point of view presented by Jacques Derrida in his introduction to a French translation of Husserl's works. How do language and writing act as conditions of probability for ideal objects?

Shapes, which we call geometrical, have evolved as ideas in human thought, not in nature itself. My problem and task has been to link the forms of thought with the sensual world in my works.

Phenomenological thinking of space and spatiality, which includes, for instance, kinesthetic phenomena and their variations, is also something Edmund Husserl has given me. Other representatives of the phenomenological-existential tradition, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have likewise provided important ground and starting points for my work.

Of my bodily time

My greatest influences, when it comes to pondering on memory and remembrance, on inner experience within layered time, are Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. When conceiving a performance, I have also often thought about the techniques of editing and formal solutions used by film directors. Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, Jacques Tati and Ingmar Bergman have influenced my thoughts on how to organize, present and perform the event that is my work, my performance.

The practice of organizing my performances "cinematically" is connected to the idea of life in the postindustrial society being cinematic, which comes from Jean Baudrillard. New technological environments and paradigms of research have produced a

fatal perspective. I transferred it into performance as productions of parody. It was about deconstructing the seductiveness of computational efficiency. My performances *Gin Platonic* (2002), *Rational Man* (2002), *Optimization of Postmodern* (2003) have satirized the postmodern neo-positivist and neoliberal scientific discourse.

Another strategy is to lay aside the deconstructive, circulative movement of multimedia performances altogether. In that case, the starting point for performances lies in the experience of groundlessness that is basic to all things bodily.

I have come to propose a kind of hypothesis on performance and performance artists. A work of performance art could be described a visible artifact, whose realizations requires the bodily. Each time, it becomes a temporary part of the artist's way to reflect the world.

This reflection mechanism I see as sculptural event, whose space-time equals to the lifetime work of the artist. Bodily time becomes the artist's material, the director of the artist's activity, a resource and an object of a living event.

Of my fractal dimension

I have spoken about performance space, which I see as a functional description of the real world projected into the space of performance. In performance space, things no longer remain as they were in the real world. Although they seem same, their function is different. Rather than viewing science and art through the lens of objective causal relations, I perceive them synchronically, as a structure operating between things. Structures are meanings attached to language, either subjective orders of signifiers or exact ones, like formulaic mathematical symbolism.

This interactive structure I call a dynamic system. My own field of research has its context in research on dynamical systems. Chaos theory that I use is one of the models to formulate dynamical systems. Chaos theory brought forward a new concept of dimensions that is no longer an integer. We have a conception of zero-dimensionality (a point), one-dimensionality (a line), two-dimensionality (a plane) and three-dimensionality (the world we live in). But a fractal dimension is a quantity in between integers.

Of my chaos

Phenomena apparent in performances are also dynamical systems, only their dimensions vary. They can be presented as consecutive spaces advancing in relation to time, or side-by-side, synchronically. A performer can consciously direct and control the situation into an

unpredictable direction. Coincidence has a different meaning. It means that something coincidental distortion changes the course of a performance. The difference lies in the aspect that chaos can be seen as a decision made by the artist.

The negative value-aspect assigned to the chaos in everyday language does not concern the concept of mathematical chaos. I have developed a discreet model of chaos mathematically by using delay and relay as complex systems. I have modeled its dynamics as a difference equation.

In my art, I have also utilized parametric products of these diagnostic and numeric tools in the beginning of the 1990's, such as in my performance and exhibitions *Mrs. Goodwili in Dynamical Space* (1993), in my performance *Space Office* (1994), in my exhibition *Female Mathematics* (1994) and in my performance and video *Only for the Money* (1995). What is essential here is how mathematics has been influencing the structures of my performances. I have also applied other areas of mathematics to my works, for example with my idealization of Cantor dust in a performance in the festival *Never or Now Performance Art* (Bergen, Norway, 2011).

Of our difference

What is interesting about the system behavior of a performance, is its instability. This also has to do with the concept of a work being constantly renegotiated. For instance, my performance *Only for the Money* (1995) hinted at how social, psychological, ideological and political practices deal with art as production and as a relationship with a customer. The space of a performance work can be a distraction to the presentation of contentment in culture. An artist needs the creative ability read the ongoing process in different contexts. This is also connected to the question of the artist's relation to audience.

Instead of paradigmatic regulation, the relationship can be alive spatially. Whether the space is a black box, a gallery or a street concludes nothing. What is conclusive is the motive for action – an intention which transcends and surpasses the obvious and the formulaic. Significance comes from separating oneself from fixed structures of presentation.

For festivals, events, galleries and cultural centers, often organized or maintained by artists, various environments and locations have been found, for instance in old industrial milieus. I mention one example, an old aluminum factory occupied by workers in Buenos Aires, to which the occupiers had invited artist to organize a cultural center. I performed there in 2004 at the festival *In Transit*.

Of more withdrawn places in the countryside I recall a crater of an ancient

volcano in Transylvania, in which *Living Art Festival AnnArt* took place. I performed there in 1996 and 1999.

In situations like this, an artist, through a work, connects with a lived space, which creates planes for perceptions and conclusions. Discussions start among artists, emphatic situations involving artists and local people occur. Possibilities for communication outside the institutional channels of the art world develop. It is not necessarily about projects but rather friendship. Performance lives like the *Fluxus* tradition, based on interaction.

Of our world

These contact situations occur in a world shaken by massive crises and problems, in the center of which is the effect that the market forces and exploitative economics of global capitalism are having all over our planet.

The maelstrom of militarism is also everywhere to be seen. To me it was very moving and meaningful to see the artists of the 5th *Nippon International Art Festival* (1998) visit together the memorial built for the victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Oppressive control and harassment practiced by authorities and police can also be strikingly prominent, like I have seen when performing in Byelorussia, South Korea, United States or Mexico. It causes special problems for performance artists trying to transport their work materials and equipment across borders. In Israel, militarism is everywhere. To add to that, the Israel embassy in Helsinki asked me for interrogation after my visit to Israel, something I have never experienced before or since.

I have also witnessed the enormous problems caused by population growth and concentration. Ecological, socio-economical, infrastructural and logistic problems escalate both in small and in great dimensions. Like in South China, where I performed at the festival *Guangzhou Live* (2010), two hour's train journey away from Hong Kong, a route by which hundreds of millions of people live. Performance artists witness and experience a process that puts the value of Earth's biodiversity at stake.

The struggle to correct this catastrophic development is on. It is a movement for preservation of life. My personal conviction is female-optimistic. My creed is reflected in performances with which I have participated in interdisciplinary, critical discourses. I am fond my memories of *Open Hills Festival* (Bulgakova, Kaluga, Russia, 2009), a festival of alternative culture, just to name one example.

Personally, I have been willing to act as an organizer of contact situations and provide forums for them: I was twice the organizer and curator of the *Amorph!* performance festival (1998, 2001). With my son Lauri Luhta, I started *Là-bas→*, a permanent project, structure and platform for performance art and new live forms of media art. *Là-bas→* has been active for 12 years in the form of events, festivals, workshops and lectures. *Biennale Là-bas→ Concept of Performance*, the second *Là-bas→* biennale, takes places in Helsinki, April 25–29, 2012.