

## Making Mute Relations Speak

By Steffen Andrae

Artistic montage, as discussed by directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Kluge, deals with questions regarding the relationship between individual elements, especially with respect to images and scenes. In radical montage, the respective components often point beyond their specific material substrate to some sort of socio-philosophical or historical constellation. As an aesthetic technique, montage draws attention to the fundamental problem of social and artistic form, to its construction, inner structures, and relation.

This issue is at the core of *Romeo vs. Juliet*, a work by Mailand / Innenhof based on three pieces from dramatic classics: *Antigone*<sup>1</sup>, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Woyzeck*. The prominent dialogues of these works are the artists as textual and dramatic substrate for their montages of discourse. However, the conversations between Antigone and Creon, Romeo and Juliet, and Büchner's Woyzeck and his doctor, are not staged in a conventional theater space, but, rather, in the public sphere: in the mundane reality of lectures and panels that focus on topics such as Germany's economic standing, the role of historical traditions in legal understanding, new developments in healthcare, and the state of leftist cultural politics.

At the moment when the actors unexpectedly take over the stage, both the organizers and the guests remain unaware that they are being turned into unwitting spectators of an art performance. The fact that only one of the speakers appears in each performative intervention increases the audience's irritation; the second half of the dialogue, along with the other interlocutor, is located elsewhere. The video recordings of the two halves, which are perfectly synchronized both temporally and performatively, were edited into a split-screen image that allows the dialogue to take place. In this montage, two clips (the respective recordings of the dialogue partners) are placed side by side on a large screen, displaying the dialogue. The artistic editing thus restores the spatiotemporal continuity that it had previously disrupted.

Despite the different contexts of the lectures, the reactions are remarkably uniform: whether at the Helmholtz Institute in Leipzig, the DGB Club in Hamburg, or the University of Bonn the performances are met with disturbance. After calls of "That does it" and "Could you please leave" fail to resolve the situation, initial bewilderment and amusement turn into irritation, anger, and, in some cases, even physical confrontations. Once the spectacle finally ends, visible relief and nervous laughter dominate (among the audience of the final video work, too). The planned programming continues seamlessly. The vehemence with which the presentations resume, quite true to the motto "the show must go on," is striking. In light of this insistence on continuity, one is compelled to ask: who is really performing here? The installation reinforces the impression of the lectures as a form of performative noise from the outset by juxtaposing them to each other not only visually but also audibly. The key to which the video installation is tuned consists of the cacophonous noise of discourse.

*Romeo vs. Juliet* offers countless possibilities for thematic connections due to its richness of material. The juxtaposition of lectures, on one side, and lectures with theatrical dialogues, on the other, provokes

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<sup>1</sup>However, Mailand / Innenhof do not quote from the original *Antigone* written by Sophokles but from the consecutive version by Slavoj Žižek.

questions about their discursive, argumentative, and political relationships. Does the critical evaluation of German rearmament following the so-called “Zeitenwende” comment on the idea of creating “continuity to shape the future”? What does the moral crisis of the polis, portrayed as a conflict of freedoms in the *Antigone* narrative, have to do with the much-discussed crisis of liberal democracies today? And is it mere coincidence that Antigone speaks in a place where the concept of tradition is examined in the context of legal history? Why isn’t she heard, when she might have something to say about guilt and justice to the gathered legal experts at the Free University of Berlin?

Similar connections could be drawn within the different health discourses which range from “Airborne Microplastic in a Changing Climate” and “How Technology Can Improve Health” to the dialogue between Büchner’s Woyzeck and his doctor. If microplastics are both a product and a problem of an advanced entanglement between technology and capitalism, what health benefits does this alliance still hold for us? Is the scientific authority embodied by Woyzeck’s doctor not a warning call against technologically advanced models in health economics? Both discourses emphasize human freedom and independence from nature. Woyzeck, however, couldn’t hold it in and pissed on the wall. Would he simply need a bit more preventive training and coaching to move beyond this stage of uncontrolled natural behavior? On the other hand, perhaps capitalism doesn’t rationalize too much, but too little. Given that the profit-oriented economic system devours its own foundations—namely living labor and natural resources—this thought seems plausible. Of course, these considerations can hardly be examined thoroughly in the exhibition. *Romeo vs. Juliet* opens up a range of problems but offers neither assistance nor answers—and that’s for the best.

By avoiding overly clear correspondences, the installation shifts attention to questions of artistic form and its relationship to the social order. This concerns, first of all, the role of art itself. If art, as the title of the Leipzig panel suggests, wants to be “more than just entertainment,” it must answer the question of what this “more” actually entails. If the forced collision of dramatic characters and public situations is understood as a metaphor for art, then according to Mailand / Innenhof, art’s role seems to be that of a troublemaker. However, the “theoretical and practical creation of situations,” which echoes a situationist self-understanding, doesn’t only target scientific or political events. It also aims at the so-called cultural sector, and thus at itself.

In implicating their own production, Mailand / Innenhof contradict the contemporary directive that art should become a political-moral tool—a prevalent view that Juliane Rebentisch recently exposed as a neoliberal demand for impact, which requires the humanities and the arts to provide immediate proof of their social effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the idea of art as a heroic troublemaker is only embraced to a limited degree in *Romeo vs. Juliet*. Art can disturb, and it does—but it fails: It is neither able to stop the ongoing societal machinery, against which it appears as an anomaly, nor can it rely on its autonomy, which it increasingly loses as part of the collective economic and moral system. We see no heroes here, only fragments speaking into the void. Almost.

*Romeo vs. Juliet* raises the question of form social critique. The foundation for this is the montage of the

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2013, p. 170 (our translation).

video installation, the way it arranges separations and connections. While classical cinematic montage cuts images one after the other, the cut here takes place within the image itself. The collisions therefore occur primarily within the shot rather than in the sequence of shots (this applies both to the individual lecture scenes and to the large dialogical scenes composed of two lecture scenes). By juxtaposing different locations, lectures, and characters, the installation creates a rich, though somewhat disorienting, field of forces. A range of constellations can be discerned here, from discursive contradictions and thematic connections to dramaturgical clashes. *Romeo vs. Juliet* is a highly dynamic montage in a state of stasis.

The social theoretical substance of the work is particularly innervated by the collision of objectivity and sensuality. The disruption of collectively established dramaturgies (the lecture, the discussion panel) is not a trite intervention by artistic guerilla activists. Rather, the poetic dramaturgy introduces a form of the Real into the cacophony of symbolic orders, temporarily suspending the authority of linguistic and social norms. However, in relation to this order, the Real remains mute, even though it speaks: the actors may declaim, but they are not heard. They represent an impenetrable outside that presses into the inside of an order from which it gets expelled as quickly as possible. The incommensurability between dramatic performance and public lecture mirrors the relationships between the isolated publics themselves; the fragmented characters are, in a way, an aesthetic reflection of an atomized society. Moreover, the distance of the invading Real from the established order not only marks the gap between reified societal fragments, but also the distance that we, as actors, maintain toward the problem of mute social relations.

The theatrical interventions in *Romeo vs. Juliet* are not only destructive in nature but also possess a highly synthesizing function. The individual parts, which stand isolated from one another in the installation, are brought into relation through the dialogue: they suddenly begin to communicate with each other. The separation between them is temporarily suspended. However, to interpret this with the simple image of “art building bridges” would be too simplistic. By both sharply juxtaposing and mediating between scenes, the work draws attention to troubling societal processes of reification: the ongoing disintegration of the public sphere, the problematic schematization of scientific discourses, the increasing fragmentation of societal subsystems, and the resulting virtualization of political action.

The temporary suspension of separations through dialogue is particularly paradoxical in that the invading characters and dialogues are, in fact, fictional creations. What breaks into reality is actually the fictional. Yet, precisely within the theatrical nature of the performance, glimpses of other, more successful forms of social relations emerge. The intrusion of this fictitious reality, shaped by world literature and art, into the reified order of lectures, discourses, and institutional responsibilities not only exposes the muted state of social relationships but also raises the question of whether the many alienated ties between people and their institutions could be shaped differently. The poetic life of the artistic interventions seems as unreal in the face of the “real theater” of history as the idea that those conditions could be transformed into human-scale dimensions. And yet, one might wish to briefly linger in the fiction, where the dissociated parts speak to each other like the two lovers. *Romeo vs. Juliet* ultimately expresses the desire to disassemble the world into human relationships. “This utopia”, as Alexander

Kluge writes, “is realistic.”<sup>3</sup>

*transl. by Steffen Andrae and Anna T. Gregor*

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<sup>3</sup>Alexander Kluge, “The Realistic Method and the ‘Filmic’”, in: *Difference and Orientation*, p. 159.