Research report and reflexion

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**Title: ‘Costume Animator’ - The audience in costume (Who wears the breeches?)**

**Subtitle: *A reflexion on scenic research to costumes agency at the University of Hildesheim***

Abstract:

By reflecting on the authors own scenic research and performance *Costume Animator*, this thesis examines how participative settings have an extraordinary effect on the agency of costume. The way in which the extensive experience of costuming can be transferred to the audience members is revealed, thereby reinforcing the idea of costume as both a phenomenon and strong agent. Costume addresses the audience in a way that builds a new relationship and creates room for manoeuvre in both costume and the participant.

The author also stresses the importance for designers and artists to constantly challenge costume, tap its full potential and even stage it themselves.

Article:

Firstly, the context of the genesis of the project and the institutional background shall briefly be explained, because the study in costume performance and our project *Costume Animator* did not come out of the blue. In 2017 and 2018 the University Hildesheim was a catalyst for experimental and theoretical studies in costume performance for some master students in the institute of theatre. Besides the scenographic seminar *Body - Limit* the costume designer Mascha Mihoa Bischoff conducted a practical course *Costume in Motion.* Each participating student designed a proper experimental costume, thus temporarily becoming a costume designer.

This special attention to the field and topic of costume created better conditions for further progress of our work, and lowered the bar for participation within the discourses of theatrical science. Complementary to the genuine motivation as investigative costume designers, the faculty of theatrical studies paved the way for the realisation of this research project. Our main intention as two investigating designers for the setting of the scene of *Costume Animator* was to focus on costume as agent and topic as well as initial means of the performance. Thus motivated, with support from institutional promotion of culture and young talents, the project could be undertaken. In order to free themselves from the limitations experienced within the general theatric establishment, we decided early to review costume from a totalitarian perspective, regard it phenomenologically and therefore independent of conventional scenographic conceptions. In this sense, we manifested a distinct postdramatic approach to it.

The question of how to assign more presence to costume, amplify its visibility and excellence, and let costume appear performative and self-referential was essential; contributing to autonomy and significance of costume. In order to define costume as the principal agent of the setting, traditional conceptions of costume had to be abolished, primarily its one-sided use for dramatic roles. It also meant reconsidering the proper work posture, emerging from the background and making radical decisions. The agency was thus defined as an effective power, as a resort within a dynamic context, that actively rather than passively interferes in the setting, or even becomes the initial or creating element. Due to a continued ‘rebellion of things’ costume surpasses conceptions that would limit it as a passive instrument.

The central hypothesis of this scenographic investigation was the further assumption that the costume makes its strongest impact on the audience through direct experience. Not only the costume itself, but also the entire estranging process of costuming should therefore be reflected upon in a proper setting in the scene and thus lead to a heightened and more versatile perception of costume.

Considering the basic motive of *somatic costume* by Sally E. Dean, we wanted to create a setting that would extend the awareness for costume to all the senses and to the whole body. In order to facilitate this kind of experience we consequently eliminated the usual central agent: The actor, performer or dancer. This new setting with respect to costume aimed at generating an impressive, immersive and socio-cultural perspective turning the audience into participants of the performance. Our issue was: ‘How else can costumes be animated when the (trained) performer who usually wears it and sets the scene, is missing?’

Following this premise the project was presented at a workshop for so called ‘costume animators’. The title *Costume Animator* already hinted at the old dualism between the active performer and the passive costume: An animator was initially announced, but the act of animation considered also the possibility to ensoul and enliven the costume; the costume, with its own genuine purpose, inversely created an effect in those who are meant to animate it. It discreetly formed, differentiated and animated the acting subjects.

The fictional workshop *Costume Animator* contained, in analogy to a course in theatre, modules that were announced by a virtual entity. The disembodied voice of the audio track initially introduced itself as an artificial intelligence, called *M.O.R.P.H*.; supposedly created for the purpose of redesigning concepts of body, clothing and costume. This maintained A.I. provided required practical instructions and theoretical impulses to the audience, while simultaneously reflecting on everything on a spiritual level.

Like in an arts exhibition the specially designed, bizarre costumes were presented; hanging to be perused by the audience walking among them (figure 1). The aesthetic of the costumes was that of prototypes of secondary bodies with shrill colours ranging from mint green to salmon pink.The audience was informed that, having paid the entrance fee, they were automatically subscribed to the workshop. Then *M.O.R.P.H*. began to elaborate on the potentially high cognitive content (particularly with respect to the constitution of identity) and how the workshop would equip the participants with the perceptive skills and help them designing their own self-perception.

The participants were then asked to select one of the costumes from the collection as a permanent partner for the duration of the project. Already at this point strange feelings were intentionally provoked, by the adjunction participant-costume, and the aspect of subordination of the subject under the costume. The number of participants was limited by the number of costumes; to remain a member of the audience without a costume was not an option. The costume was the basic requirement which in its vagueness did not provoke contradiction, but nevertheless produced odd sensations. The calling to a definite selection of a costume entailed additional insecurities among the participants that emanated from the objectlike creations: the costumes were inhabited by various very particular characteristics not to be found in conventional clothing. Their agency was materialised through the particular intention of the designers, who inscribed a variety of functional and dysfunctional qualities that were not easily anticipated into the costumes. Therefore the costumes themselves became principal contributors to interaction and communication as the workshop progressed, without letting the rules become clear.

The objective of the now beginning first module was to come to terms with the recalcitrant costume and the changed physical experience. The various costumes were conceived to create specific effects and provoke certain sensations, and configured to be worn by persons of different physique. ‘Yet, which part of the body is it intended for? Is it fitting me? How do I put it on? And, what will happen to me wearing it?’ Decisions had to be made and their implications could not be anticipated. The respective costume element duly contributed to those uncertainties. In many ways the costumes did not represent known, self evident objects with an obvious utility.

The shapes, materials and details were amorphous and the affirmation to wear them as a costume particularly challenged creativity and good will in the participants to perceive the objects as costumes. The voice *M.O.R.P.H.* put it that way: ‘The costumes are an invitation to mediate between inner, bodily experiences and the mind.’

The first dip into the costumes provided quite unusual results. Textures and odours became apparent, adversities with size and cut were registered, people started to exchange glances and first comparisons were made, and so on. A costume shaped like a stuffed sausage presented a particular challenge: it was a long, narrow tube, a bit like a birth canal, where the wearer had to force his way through.

The part which was announced as ‘Module one’ was intended as a kind of meditation to facilitate an open encounter and possibly an approximation to the costume, however odd and strange it would result for some participants.‘Where are energies, where resistance?’ The participants could become acquainted with characteristics of shape, material and manufacture and locate themselves in the costume. ‘Does it tickle? Is it an agreeable sensation, or not? Where does the body meet the costume, is it heavy, does it itch?‘ They were invited to follow the impulse of the costume, to let it guide them.

For instance, there was a magnetic bodysuit equipped with metallic fibre and parts of metal; with the magnetic effects mainly on the fingers. The person wearing was not always in control, but captured by the magnetic powers that influenced his or her movements. New phenomena appeared wearing a costume: There was an outfit sensor lights to be turned on or off through the fabric, but impeded sitting or lying down. Another item had an integrated neck massage appliance and various massage modi to be selected, but there was a three kilo battery which needed to be carried around, showing the boundary that energy gave to the function.

There was a helmet with a mounted vaporiser bottle and scented spray. The cord attached to the bottle made it difficult to use, which in turn declared it the main quality of this costume. Thus, triggering the spray and the following olfactory sensation were in a certain way elevated to identity-establishing constituents. Another wearable object was made from pieces of a flexible insulating tube, which was invited to wear as a belt or as a necklace. However, the performance of the pieces with a length up to two metres resulted uncomfortably and difficult to control; they tended to ravel and offend. It was a real challenge moving around with it and sorting out the many long and uncontrollable ends. Rather than a useful object this costume was a dominant thing, provoking a physical encounter with other participants.

By means of rhetorics lending from meditation practice and physical training, it was possible to evoke a feeling of acceptance in the group: the condition imposed by the costume demonstrated analogies with the body itself; an agent with interesting functions, but also with its own set of regimentations (figure 2).

The costumes were not usual things, or articles easily put down. One stuck in the costumes and some of them were impossible to put off without help. A thick pullover, for example, was seamlessly connected at the arms to a pair of crutches. The hands could only reach the handles of the crutches, so it was extremely difficult for the wearers to free themselves from this costume. Time and again help was needed from us, the costume designers in the role of assisting staff. One participant was so impeded by her costume that her glasses fogged up and she had to rely on the ‘service personnel’.Collisions with costumes that limited vision with elements like goggles or optical distortions, or costumes with great extensions had to be handled by us.

In spite of initial feelings of constraint, the participants began to explore the possibilities offered by the costumes; an approach that was expressively encouraged. One item, for example consisted of a body with a pillow filled with styrofoam pebbles sewn to its side. At first it was perceived as hanging disadvantageously from the body, then the wearer found it to be a comfortable cushion, letting himself drop down to relax on it.

The already mentioned crutch-top obliged the wearer to a stooped posture, but also invited creativity: it provoked a four legged movement, creating an associative space for a potential change of character through costume. One participant selected an overall sporting highly flexible, broad rubber stripes in various lengths. After a lengthy and intensive period of acquainting herself with the costume, she started to develop ways to create interesting effects through movement. She began to explore the musical potential of the costume by applying tension to the ribbons and playing them like strings. One overall was like a limpet, with hook-and-loop tapes all over the costume. Another piece, a foam rubber cylinder with beige plastic fringes lead to another kind of irritation. Depending on how one fixed it to the body, it worked as another extremity, e.g. a phallus. One person, willingly or not, produced exactly this effect, before locating it on his back in order to free it of any sexual connotations. A costume for two, sewn together at the legs, compelled two wearers to coordinate their movements, making its dominant character apparent. The initial perception of the costumes as an odd and strange thing changed in a sense into something acquired, something assimilated.

In the course of the first module it became clearly visible how costume influenced and conditioned posture, movement and appearance of the person wearing it. Some of the costumes had impeding and slowing qualities, others demanded a creative and dynamic approach of the wearer.

Priority in the detailed examination of the new physical image was the inner perspective, not a potential role model, such as a fat person, a four legged animal or a cyborg etc. The associations and representations were left to the respective participant at this time.

Costume furthermore became a bridge, a mediator which connected the participants together. The fact that everyone had their own and unique access to experiment and interaction was a true ice-breaker for each of the participants. Those moments of exchange and physical contact through costume arouse strange feelings, reflected upon blind spots and taboos in our culture: We don't talk much about what we wear, how we are wearing it, and generally deal with it in a rather one-dimensionally way. Through the process of identification with the various dimensions of the costumes, something could be gained in terms of our capacity to relate, and establish a close relationship with the costume

The second module focused on a further development of the idea of the interrelationship with the costume. Motivated, as well as confused by *M.O.R.P.H.*`s theoretical phrases, the participants were invited to the conception of costume not as a fixed idea, but to understand it more flexible than one possible form of appearance. The focus should have been on a creative and productive game with the design of costume. So, as a next step of the interactive performance the participants were asked to further develop their newly discovered self-image, that was based in the physical qualities of the costumes. Through the act of costuming the gap between the self and the different costume-self should be explored in a productive way.

For this purpose, a large box with a variety of materials from various sources was presented. There were handi-crafted articles, fragments from costume deposits, articles of clothing and accessories from charity- and secondhand shops, or simply from the rubbish. These items were to be chosen freely by the participants and added to the costumes (figure 3). They had intentionally been gathered with the idea of creating a contrast to the costumes from module one. In order to further develop the qualities of the costume matching the wearer's imagination, new decisions had to be made, action had to be taken and the unruly materials of the costumes challenged craftiness and creativity.

Costume again appeared stubborn here: the box did not offer any preconceived solutions, but asked for improvisation with clothes pegs, safety pins or gaffer tape. Under these circumstances and with a limited time frame, with a lot of effort the participants reached at rather questionable results. ‘Did all this effort really improve the appearance of the costume? What was the idea behind the modification anyway?’

One message was: ‘Let yourself be inspired by the materials’. This alluded to another way to animate the costumes or put some life into it, let a spirit emerge from the material and let it imbue ideas.

Some participants tried to use the materials to embed the costumes in common conceptions like gender for example, or make it more comfortable. Some wanted to amplify the experience from the first module or they tried whatever came out of the box. If the trousers with the cut off leg did not fit with the foam belly of the costume, maybe it was able to be fixed to it somehow, or be reused in another way. Most participants now extended their relationships amongst themselves, they chatted and supported each other, as suggested. The whole procedure offered new opportunities but also responsibilities to deal with the newly acquired conceptions. One consequential insight was therefore: The more something is open to design, the more it screams to be designed.

During the second module the group still offered a rather whimsical spectacle and the participants continued to be confused in their encounter with fragmented, unstable and undefined subjectivities. The most common promise of a costume, an effective change or temporary metamorphosis of external identity, was hard to fulfil in this case. Whoever looked for a definite identity or even a role model could only have been met with frustration. The various layers of costume, such as the proper clothing of the participants, the costume-body from the first module and the provisionally applied bits and pieces resulted in a heterogeneous and contradictory spectacle (figure 4). A bias towards the wild and ambiguous state of being that abandons orientation on stable forms, themes and conditions was intended.

Albeit there were transformations that successfully dealt with that extremely indefinite state in an innovate way, thus finding new possibilities. Some of the participants did not try to reproduce a recognizable result, but entered into a stage of free play. Therefore in this module, where the childish fancy dressing was encouraged, the desire for the absurd and the grotesque became obvious. Anyway, everybody had to enter into an unusual interaction with forms and materials. This called for a lot of flexibility and imagination, especially if one tried to come up with something conceptual. A game of give and take between the costume and its wearer was established, questioning the obsolete one-dimensional relation between subject and object, that emphasises the utility and availability of the object for an almost god-like subject.

Another reason behind all of this modeling and transformation was the idea of a metaphorical body full of blind spots, ultimately out of reach of one's own perception. The mentioned loss of control and the insecurity of their own appearance was momentarily compensated by the task at hand but a new set of problems later arrived due to a complex environment with a new set of regulating codes.

While introducing module three, *M.O.R.P.H.* stated: ‘A self-projection can only succeed when it is sustainably refined into a true identification through validation from the environment’. So the last module of the performance was intended to lead from the acquired body (module 1), over the further development of the self-projection (module 2), to a stage of reflection and revision from outside. The objective of module three was to get to the meta plane, to acquire double vision, to synergise self-reflection and reflection from outside, although never coincide.

*M.O.R.P.H*. announced that in a simulation of a ‘social’ and ‘contemporary’ setting the state of perception in a *double vision* (Monks, 2010:2 ff.) should be reached, by comparing the felt body (sensual perception) with the projected, or identified body (alien ascriptions). For this purpose a fashion show was emulated and fashion- and advertising slogans were sampled and reproduced. This contextualization with the world of fashion produced the necessary surface of friction for the further course of the performance. The participants were confronted with a situation of contrast, which ‘module two’ had already prepared: The classic approach to costume is not corporal, but is externally designed by individuals or in relation with a collective, and mainly based on a visual set of values. During module one and two the participants still had the freedom to decide what they wanted to see in their costume arrangement, and what they wanted to be in it; in module three they were exposed to a prefabricated situation with its powerful set of conventions and prepositions.

The many layered and chaotic costumes and their wearers were challenged by an image of a fashionable representation and confronted with a kind of market mechanism. This generated a tense situation that resulted in many comic and absurd moments: people unsystematically wrapped in tatters tiptoed, hobbled and crawled on the imaginary catwalk while fashion show citations and o-tones from fashion merchandising advertisements were replayed. This caused either a charming interaction or a hard rebound with the outfits (figure 5) The scene produced a division in the group of ‘models’ between the ones visibly inhibited by conceptions of conventional beautiful fashion, and the talents who lent a bohemian air to the show situation with their free spirited attitude of performing at a avantgarde-haute couture fashion show. In their case, anything seemed possible and bizarre textile experiments were elevated to desirable symbols of status.

During the *Costume Animator* fashion show, it was hard to determine which part of the group coincided more with reality. It was more important to percept one's own resilience and capacity to act. Both aspects were essential in order to comprehend their own agency in combination with the agency of costume – a critical encounter with ascriptions without excluding oneself from participation and from the possibilities of intervention and subversion.

In the last scene *M.O.R.P.H.* and the two performing costume designers, distinguished each participant of the workshop as a successful animator of costume, rewarding everyone with a set of ‘double vision glasses’, recycled 3-D goggles spray painted with red glitter. The objective of this acknowledgement was to symbolise a new acceptance and an extended concept of both agency and materiality in costume, with the hope that the participants would bear this mind in the future.

After the performance (it was shown four times in total) we received some feedback from participants, who were pleased to have surmounted their hesitations in joining this interactive performance; saying that albeit the unusual setting they easily found access to that intense encounter with costume and context. They also dispelled our doubts that the costuming and the individual costume might overstep boundaries, or evoke a feeling of exposedness in some. Moreover, the reflection and the new format was well adopted and our audience expressed a desire to pursue it further.

Limitations of the performance included the exaggerated theoretical discourse, mainly by the voice of *M.O.R.P.H*, as well as a certain lack of experience with dramatization and directing. It also became obvious that the performance could not put focus on stage costume (its dramatic role and the figure of the actor). The absence of traditional functions made it hard to relate to costume concepts as a whole. On the one hand, this was fully intentional to show costumes’ unreflected possibilities and modalities of perception, and emphasize on the practical everyday context of fashion. On the other hand, a productive friction of the patrons (dramatic / post dramatic costume) did not emerge, or at least not to a certain extent. The performative approach of *Costume Animator* could certainly be seen as partially overbalanced, but in retrospect it proved to be compensating and rich in demonstrating costume simply as an arts practice, independent from the conventional conception of it as an servile instrument in a performance. It produced the missing ‘other extreme’, compared to a classical theatre situation.

To be assumed, as an investigative result we could therefore view our hypothesis as confirmed by our dramatic experiment. Costume not only dominated the setting in scene thematically, but assumed a principal, unusual and active role. The costumes were consciously alienated from their classical designation as a role indicator and detached from the figure of the actor, exploring new interrogative construction and contexts. The element of participation gave way to a new conceptual and contextual orientation and revealed some unusual potentials of costume, triggering great attention and astonishment in the audience.

In settings like *Costume Animator* the audience is able to explore costume from a different angle, particularly from inside. The material premises as well as the influences of collective codes that costume represents are directly experienced through anyone who wears it. Costuming the audience shifts the focus of costume from an external perspective, with a mainly visual perception, to an immersive and holistic experience. It addresses all the senses, thus also leaving behind the old sensory hierarchy which is, in respect to costume, focused on the symbolic and semantic function of it; to be seen, read and interpreted to underline role identity.

With reference to thinkers like Hartmut Rosa, the costume staged in a participatory form and process-related manner can generate a forceful and universal resonance.The situations caused by the costumes call for multiple reactions, the costumes demand answers on both the level of vestural codes and substantial planes.

Simultaneously, costuming the audience directly renegotiates our relation to things. The generic view on costume is strongly questioned and, when immersed into it, we can experience a kind of autonomy of simple things. The deeply ingrained belief in the wider social context in mere utility of objects is also undermined by this kind of performance strategy.

It furthermore proved interesting to take part in a performance where the social structure between students and teachers accidentally became significant: Two reputable professors participated in the play among mostly student attendees. Their transformation through costumes contained an element that was both irritating and exciting, especially for ‘the others’. It was a constant change between a vanished person of authority and a relapse to the structure of power. A reference to carnival in an original sense of suspended rules was accidentally established.

Costume experienced directly by the audience can in addition be seen as a return to ritual dimensions. The ritual force that costume can deploy in a sense of a real transformation is a central aspect of *Costume Animator*. An entire avalanche of hierarchies and conventions can potentially be set off by reorienting costume in performance.

Up to now, costume-discourse performances like *Costume Animator* are rare, and accordingly there are not many approved methods. Although the performance suffered from a theoretical overload, the project resulted in being fundamental and beneficial for our understanding into the process of accumulating knowledge within the field of arts.

Outside of our student investigation it remains difficult to pursue and develop such approaches and formats, because the common criteria of promotion and the institutionalized theater are dominated by so-called contemporary and socially relevant subjects. But to subordinate costume under other subjects seems erroneous to us for the moment; we want the inscribed subjects to emerge from costume, we want to allow them to talk for themselves.

Nevertheless, up to now this point of view does not find enough legitimacy. ‘Auto-determined costume’ – this exigence is still viewed as superficial and affected by a prejudice that is deeply ingrained in our western culture. The closeness to trivial culture, like carnival or fashion events is difficult to justify in the environment of academic and ‘high’ culture. An artistic discourse like that needs strong and prevailing argumentation. This demonstrates the importance of empowerment of costume even more, as well as the necessity of costume performances being initiated by costume designers. Only this authorization can obtain the respect the costume merits as an equal medium in the arts and in its relation to the human being.

**References**

Monks, A. (2010), The actor in costume, London, Palgrave Macmillan

**Infos about the Performance *Costume Animator:***

Concept and realisation: Annekatrin Utke und Dorothea Kurtz

Music: Melissa Benno

Photography: Danilo Kurtz

**Links:**

Trailer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAYr76nc7ZA

Full recording

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hgSv71ooTo>

***Author biography***

Dorothea Kurtz is a German costume designer, artist and also a scholar of applied theatre studies, working in Hannover, Lower Saxony and in her home region in northern Bavaria. She is working in various fields of culture and artistic activism, in particular with topics related to sustainability and environmental protection. After studying costume design in Hannover she graduated from the university of Hildesheim with a Master of Arts (‘Inszenierung der Künste und Medien), analysing the perception of costume in her master thesis.