

30 Years of SPIELART
A chronology with detours

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The international SPIELART festival, an initiative of the City of Munich and the BMW Group organised by Spielmotor München e.V., has been running for 30 years. Its first edition opened in 1995 under the management of Tilmann Broszat, who was its director for 25 years.

After initially working in dramaturgy, Sophie Becker joined the programme team in 2013. She has been Artistic Director and Festival Director since 2021.

In the following conversation, the two discuss changes and continuities, companions, and things remaining to be done.

1. THE BEGINNINGS:

A NEW THEATRE FESTIVAL FOR MUNICH

SOPHIE BECKER Reading the first SPIELART programme opener from 1995, I am struck by the almost casual tone. Many festivals celebrate their founding myths, but you just went ahead and did it. What was your motivation?

TILMANN BROSZAT I was a huge fan of the Munich Theater-Festival (held from 1977 to 1985), initiated by Thomas Petz, whose manager I was from 1982 on. The festival was inspired by the famous Festival mondial du Théâtre de Nancy and showcased works by theatre companies and theatre makers from all over the world, including from Germany.

Our venues were the marquees of Zirkus Atlas in Munich's Luitpoldpark, the Englischer Garten, the Olympiapark, and later also converted former factories. Guest performances by Ariane Mnouchkine, Patrice Chéreau, Pina Bausch, Kazuo Ohno, Yoshi Oida, George Tabori, Dario Fo, and many others became legendary. I was even more enthusiastic when I became one of the organisational managers of the 1993 edition of Theater der Welt in Munich. That year, the triennial festival in Germany was curated by Renate Klett, and I

worked alongside Peter Brook, the Théâtre de Complicité, William Kentridge, Robert Lepage, the Wooster Group, and other important artists. That was a huge success, and afterwards I knew: Munich needs something like this! Back then, the canon and a specific educational standard were much more prevalent in municipal and state theatres than today. I was not happy about that, and I was always wondering why that was. I had the feeling that the stage was not up to date anymore, that pop culture was missing from theatre.

What exactly attracted you to the "festival" format? You could have staged theatre inspired by pop culture in a production house.

At the initiative of Thomas Petz and myself, Spielmotor München e. V. – in conjunction with the former Beck Forum under its then director Helmut Lesch – made a bid to run the Muffathalle. So, the idea of a production house was around. But a festival suggests the creation of a multitude of contrasting moments within a relatively short timeframe, because you invite a great variety of productions and formats. You generate diversity, while seeking for a common

denominator. A decisive factor was, of course, that at the time there were only few German theatrical productions that would work at such a festival. Therefore we envisaged SPIELART as an international event from day one, although – as you eventually and quite rightly pointed out – "international" at the time meant "European".

You studied sociology. How does this influence your relationship with artists? My understanding of curation, for example, has been deeply inspired by my former profession, i.e. dramaturgy.

When I was a student, the relationship between sociology and art had many facets. It began with the Frankfurt School, which dealt in depth with the "aestheticisation of politics" versus the "politicisation of art". And social processes involve representation and display. Always. Texts by Norbert Elias, Klaus Theweleit, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes were my constant companions, and they continue to resonate with me today, including in my assessment of artistic works. In fact, when interacting with artists, questions like "In which intellectual context and under what specific conditions was a work made?" were important to me, even though I lacked the actual dramaturgical language to verbalise them. For this reason, I decided to establish a festival dramaturgy, as you know ... Of course, I did a lot of "learning by doing," but that is normal, since sociologists are typical career changers.

Who actually came up with the name SPIELART? In the first edition, the festival title was spelled "SPIEL.ART", and many write "SpielART" still today. I, for one, don't like the idea of a dichotomy of art and play which the German name suggests, and I don't think this juxtaposition was intended.

My colleague Gottfried Hattinger proposed the name. The word was in use in everyday conversations, it was a reference to theatre plays, our host Spielmotor München e. V. and our artistic claim. The dot (full stop) was a fancy reference to the then quite innovative format of websites (.org). It seemed a bit silly, later, and we dropped it.

You said Munich needed a festival. What was the city like at the time? Even today it is difficult to get a feel of it, and I know that many artists share my view. At first glance, Munich seems rather uniform, monolithic, homogeneous. People once almost felt put off by its sleek beauty. The numerous construction sites in town have recently eclipsed this

impression a bit. Nonetheless, for many only the international Bahnhofsviertel district is truly inspiring.

Munich didn't seem like a very political place in the 1990s. We didn't have a problem with that; it's just how it was. It was a good time for the arts, a lot was happening, and there were other independent performance groups around like that of Alexej Sagerer in town.

What audience did you target in the 1990s?

Students, mostly. We also tried to attract the non-theatre-goers, with some success.

One sentence in the 1995 foreword made me laugh out loud: "The programme promises a compact overview of current trends in young theatre". The claim suggests poise and great confidence. Whereas, when I'm trying to put together a programme for the festival today, I am usually overwhelmed by the sheer number of productions on offer. Was it really possible to present a kind of canon of the independent theatre at the time?

Well, that does sound a bit self-aggrandizing. What we meant was that we were trying to provide an overview of theatrical styles that Munich had not seen before. We wanted to look beyond our own horizons.

Before the internet, people were probably unaware of how much theatre there was in the world, whereas today we are constantly reminded of all the things we are missing and have not seen. How did you do your research in those early days?

There were festivals back then, albeit fewer than now, and we always relied on word of mouth from colleagues. I travelled to watch the off theatre and fringe parts of the famous festivals of Avignon and Edinburgh. And I asked festivals and theatres that featured interesting artists to send me their programme booklet's. The Goethe Institutes were a good reference, too. They also provided chuchotage (whispered interpretation), as subtitles were rarely included.

What criteria did you apply when reviewing and selecting the entries?

The productions had to surprise me, they had to either stray beyond a traditional theatrical approach or undermine it.

In retrospect, I would say that the TheaterFestival featured the "big names" of the time, whereas SPIELART was more experimental. Is that right?

In the beginning we really wanted to get away from the "festival circus", which already existed at the time. We made sure that our programmes did not include the "big names". We even considered the idea of naming SPIELART the "No Name Festival". Eventually, though, we realised that it is quite difficult to do completely without established or better-known artists.

The word "risk" recurred regularly in the welcoming addresses of many of the past festivals.

We were under a lot of scrutiny by traditional theatregoers and the cultural supplements of newspapers and magazines. Several times we wondered whether the spectators would be able to appreciate a particular production. Was a play fully-formed or still at the experimental stage? In

retrospect I have to admit that we sometimes showed projects that had not been thoroughly thought through. A second layer of risk was that we were dealing with a new genre. In the first few festivals at least, we

focussed more on form and less on content, because the aesthetic dimension seemed much more exciting to us than a story or plot. We knew that form and content go hand in hand, but there was this primacy of form for us.

I'm not seeing this aspiration to show something on stage that's never been shown before. I would say that for my generation new formats were no longer such an urgent issue: there were enough already there for us to process and work with. I was not so much interested in novelty as in the open questions of our times. Are you thinking back to any particular formats or experiments, regardless of whether they ultimately worked or failed?

Sure. For example, CLAIR DE LUZ by Insomniac Productions from 1995, where you couldn't tell anymore, whether you were watching a movie or a play. Or Roy Faudree and his mesmerising solo DUPE. Of course, we had to invite him back in 1997 to create another piece with Munich-based artists.

The use of computers, monitors or video on stage was a novelty at the time. People discussed passionately how it should be done, or whether to do it at all. Some strongly opposed the use of video on stage, arguing that if you did, you might as well go to the cinema. We argued against that critique, because we felt new media was becoming increasingly important, and, thus, mattered to us, too.

Though your attitude toward new media seemed quite ambivalent. In several prologues, you acknowledged that we live in a media and information society, yet simultaneously you deplored the media “overkill”. You dedicated the entire 2003 festival edition to one question: IS IT REAL? In the introduction to the programme, however, you referred for the first time to a political event: 11 September 2001, and the wars that followed. Interestingly, here too you emphasise the “ubiquitous media analysis” rather than the terrorist attack. Was 11 September a turning point for you?

It was evident from the very first moment that 9/11 would be a major turning point, a global political event with major implications. Regardless of the shock: the images of the attack itself were already iconic. We will never forget those images. And yet, they did not have an immediate impact on artistic works.

To conclude this survey of the early years, here is another practical topic: Why did you decide to schedule SPIELART in the autumn?

We had pragmatic reasons: there are too many events held in summer. And in fact, we wanted to organise an autumn event. Originally, SPIELART was to be held in November. Internally, we labeled it a “working festival”, which was meant as an attitude, in an almost monasterial sense.

When watching a play with a glass of beer in my hand, and at 30 degrees celsius, I keep wondering whether it would also work on a chilly and rainy day in Munich. I guess that is why I tend to prefer productions that are more “compact” than “atmospheric”.

It also matters how we engage with the audience: cold weather and darkness are obviously obstacles to overcome. Would I change that if I could? I’m not sure. The autumn season is definitely a characteristic marker for the festival. It adds a certain gravitas.

2. COMPANIONS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CO-CURATION

SOPHIE BECKER Right from the start you were a duo, but it makes sense that we only come to Gottfried Hattinger this far in. Many long-time SPIELART visitors believe that he is a phantom, anyway, since he always remained in the background. Please tell us about your collaboration.

TILMANN BROSZAT From 1993 to 2001 Elisabeth Schweeger was Head Dramaturg at the Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel and Director of the Marstall Theatre, where she presented an experimental music and drama programme, and she suggested that I meet with Gottfried Hattinger. He was the Artistic Director of the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz from 1987 to 1991, and I thought it would be a good idea to have an expert on media art on board. Especially in the first two festival editions, Gottfried interjected this extremely relevant aspect – as we both considered it. He knew artists from previous collaborations and proposed their names for our programme. While I was still busy just hunting for shows.

How did you reach agreements?

There were no rules. We discussed things, and, if necessary, sometimes decided to skip certain projects. The programmes of the first festivals were relatively balanced. Gottfried chose certain productions, I chose others. He focussed on the night programme and series featuring soloists. Later I had to take some decisions single-handedly. In those days we only rarely had videos of productions we could have reviewed as a team. This trend continued over the years, because I was the only curator involved in the network projects, which increasingly formed a key focus of the festival. Gottfried Hattinger conducted his research mostly in Germany and Austria. Thanks to him we discovered Heiner Goebbels’ STIFTERS DINGE and God’s Entertainment. Let me add that Sigrid Gareis, formerly of the Siemens Cultural Program and later founding director of Tanzquartier Wien (2000 – 2009) and the Akademie der Künste der Welt (2011 – 2013), joined us repeatedly as programme partner for individual series and projects, like Input (1995), Actor (2000), WOODSTOCK OF POLITICAL THINKING (2009), SOCIAL FICTIONS (2011), SHOW ME THE WORLD (2015).

Retrospectively, what would you say: do festivals need a signature approach? Or do they benefit from a variety of styles?

We did not use the word signature, but we were trying to create a “Gesamtkunstwerk” [a total work of art]. We called it a “journey through a festival landscape”. I still like some referencing – in terms of content or form – between some individual productions, if not necessarily between all of them, so that a holistic picture emerges.

I feel the same. I have been influenced by dramaturgy. Although of course we have to be aware of the audience: it is unlikely that a single spectator will attend the entire programme, and most visitors will automatically establish their own connections or relate in their own way. Maybe I’m romanticising the past, but in those days, I remember that you asked most of the artists to block the whole two weeks of the festival, and then we would put together the programme. On a (self-) critical note I would add that “robust curation” always overrules the artist. Their works are shown in a context they cannot determine, which nonetheless has a significant impact on the reception of their work. The power gap is probably the reason why we have both engaged with the position of artists in the festival system in different ways. In recent years, the issue of sustainability has also played a much greater role, and rightly so. Festival directors try to organise tours so that we don’t have to fly in an artist for one evening only. Cost sharing is another advantage of coordinated planning. And yet, last autumn I kept thinking that we were playing logistics games. I need pinpoint timing, because I need the artist in Munich on the exact day I have the suitable venue for their show. I guess, I can still work on dramaturgy and reference, but it gets increasingly difficult.

Can you tell me more about your collaboration with the co-curators, since you have taken this approach to a whole new level.

There are various reasons for this. I need to be able to passionately defend all SPIELART productions if they are challenged. I owe that to the artists – my individual reason for having invited them. However, this puts my judgment and my convictions very much in the spotlight, which is a position of power I struggle with, because in Munich there is no international performing arts centre that could serve as an alternative or corrective.

In 2021 and 2023 Eva Neklyaeva was one of my SPIELART co-curators. I asked her to join the team for precisely this reason: she is familiar with aesthetics and artistic scenes, including performative, physical, and atmospheric working methods that are less familiar to me.

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We repeatedly discussed the way we looked for projects. Neklyaeva, like Gottfried Hattinger, was very clear about what interested her, whereas I wanted to scout as widely as possible to get an idea of what had evolved since the previous SPIELART, even though I often had a hunch that an artist would not be a good fit for our programme. I often refused to invite artists Eva Neklyaeva insisted on, until I really understood why we had to show them. On the other hand, Julian Warner had a background in music and a penchant for political populism.

I see the biggest difference between your work and mine in the geographical and, thus, cultural horizon of SPIELART.

After Matthias Lilienthal joined the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2015, many of “our” artists began performing there, and we took more extensive research trips. Having the time to do these trips is a rare privilege and a positive effect of the biennial rhythm. However, true internationalisation was only possible thanks to our partnership with co-curators, including in particular Boyzie Cekwana, who joined the team in 2019. I talk through most of the fundamental issues with him.

The co-curators translate local theatre landscapes in a literal and figurative sense, while simultaneously challenging the established practices of a European festival.

Boyzie Cekwana and Julian Warner as well as Ogutu Muraya and Mallika Taneja (all involved in the 2021 festival edition) – are artists, a perspective which is equally important to me.

Yet, we rely on very different forms of collaboration with the co-curators; some implement their own projects, while others are involved in the overall concept or realisation of the festival as such. In each festival, I try to figure out how much freedom each co-curator needs and how much guidance I have to provide. I am interested in constantly challenging the festival as such, knowing that for purely pragmatic reasons some parameters are non-negotiable.

The invitation of co-curators is an innovation that has changed the festival for good. I can really feel that, and I like it very much.

But didn’t the transition from Gottfried Hattinger to me over several years also make a big difference? He was your generation, I am not. I

remember fierce discussions, because I thought that we had too many male artists in the programme. I accused you of more or less exclusively considering works made by men, and the numbers proved me right. But then I re-examined my own viewing habits and realised that I intuitively attended a disproportionate number of female productions. That said and looking back, I'm amazed at how naively and simplistically we cut the world into "men" and "women": when I plan my next trips, I leaf through programmes and tick off what I find interesting, which is by no means a neutral process. Of course, you end up with art that relates to your own realities – whether it reflects it or completely contradicts it. Even though they were tough at times, I wouldn't want to have done it without our disputes, because they helped me develop better-informed opinions. However, it took me a while to appreciate that. In 2019 you were the manager, and I was the artistic director of the festival. We had agreed on a clear division of labour, and we had the programme ready within a relatively short time. And yet, something was missing. The negotiations – with the co-curators, but also generally with ideas that come "from outside" – has become a vital part of my work in recent years.

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3. CONTINUITIES AND NETWORKS

SOPHIE BECKER Back to the chronology: Forced Entertainment has been involved in the festival since the second edition in 1997. Gob Squad, Jan Lauwers, and Romeo Castellucci joined us later and have been part of the festival for years. You once taught me to only show an artist two years running if their second piece is better than the first. I soon abandoned this principle. And you favoured continuities, too.

TILMANN BROSZAT Indeed. Forced Entertainment repeatedly got a *Carte Blanche*, at a time in which I could not know whether their next project would be better than the last.

How important are those continuities? On the one hand you want to be loyal to the artists, on the other hand, we need change to give the next generation a chance.

I have often deplored the fact that SPIELART is held biennially, because it has always been difficult to achieve the kind of continuity

a festival like this needs. If you don't want to show the artist's next work immediately and you skip a festival edition, then four years have passed in no time. We had continuity with household names such as Romeo Castellucci – even though he was quite controversial. Jan Lauwers was already well-known, and we helped Forced Entertainment and Stefan Kaegi establish themselves. It was important to me that the audience has

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points of reference. That they know three or four names and watch artists develop over the course of time. But innovation has always been our mission, either by showing artists who have never been to Munich before, or in later years, by hosting the network projects.

The two-year cycle further complicates the question of how to work with the artists, because I can show my respect and appreciation only through guest performances or co-productions, and I have only few "spots" to offer. In a production house I would have other opportunities to support an artist. Time and again we invited artists to be co-curators, to learn from their specific expertise. We also asked them to give feedback – for the festival in general or for specific programmes. In addition, we offered fellowships and (remote) residencies.

I was unhappy with the biennial rhythm quite early. I had the feeling that something was missing. This was one of my main motives to start the FIT network, the Festivals in Transition, so that we would have something meaningful for the festival between individual editions.

During the run-up to SPIELART 2019, I had severe pain attacks caused by my disease. I was even afraid I would miss the festival. That really worried me. After all, we only "materialise" for a very short time. How do I define my work beyond the specific and all-consuming festival period?

4. EASTERN EUROPE AND FIT – FESTIVALS IN TRANSITION

SOPHIE BECKER An initial programmatic change I identify between 2001 and 2005, when there were several Eastern European

plays, especially Polish ones, on stage. With polska@spielart in 2003 you even had a special programme focusing on contemporary Polish theatre.

TILMANN BROSZAT The Berlin Wall had just fallen, and the theatre scene in the East was a complete unknown for us. But now, at the end of the Cold War, we wanted to build bridges. After years of censorship, the independent theatres and performing artists in Poland primarily presented the image theatre inspired by Tadeusz Kantor. This was compatible with our approach and very much in line with the media focus of the first festival editions, which also opposed the dominance of language. The Polish scene, however, found itself increasingly under pressure even after the end of communism, as enthusiasm grew for the West German drama produced by Thomas Ostermeier and others, and the German reception of the "Young Writing" authors of London's Royal Court Theatre.

We already mentioned the networks: FIT – Festivals in Transition premiered in 2005. What was it all about?

Not only did I find fascinating art in Eastern Europe, where I travelled extensively, I also met my colleagues, the curators of the young festivals established right after the political transformation: Baltoscandal (Rakvere, Estonia), Homo Novus (Riga, Latvia), SIRENOS (Vilnius, Lithuania), Divadelná Nitra (Nitra, Slovakia), Krakowskie Reminiscencje Teatralne (Krakow, Poland), 4 x 4 Days in Motion (Prague, Czech Republic), and EXODOS (Ljubljana, Slovenia). Their ways of working impressed me, how they talked about their projects, what they wanted to do. I was interested in the political discourse in the countries, in the Baltic states, and how they dealt with the ethnic Russian minorities, for example. Plus: having grown up with the Western European left-wing, I could not ignore their contempt or disregard for the resistance movements in Eastern Europe, especially Solidarność in Poland. This became an increasingly relevant issue for me. I felt it was important to support the local scene, which was still barely established in its cultural and political environment. At the time, Michael Thoss was with the Allianz Cultural Foundation, a wonderful person, and a very generous man. I convinced him to sponsor journeys to Munich for all these colleagues, without

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expecting output. We spent three days debating everything under the sun, until we realised that we had to put the festivals first: why were we doing this, anyway? Subsequently I flew to Krakow with Lydia Hartl, who was then the Cultural Commissioner of the City of Munich. She gave a speech to local politicians in support of the

Reminiscencje Teatralne festival. In 2005, we began hosting debates about the meaning and purpose of our festival activities. We arranged symposiums with audiences and local stakeholders, including cultural policymakers, sponsors, theatre

directors. Next, we addressed the pressure and deficits we all felt. We noted how helpless old-school theatre critics were when faced with the new genre of the post-dramatic theatre. We organised international workshops in 2007 for this very reason. Each festival named one or two young journalists. They formed a group, travelled from festival to festival, and described what they saw, usually under the auspices of Lyn Gardner, then a renowned theatre critic for The Guardian in London. At the same time, we presented exemplary results from these workshops at different festivals. This was a major boost for our cooperation; we were in constant dialogue, and new festivals in Helsinki (Baltic Circle), London (LIFT), Bergen (METEOR) and Lisbon (Alkantara) joined our ranks over time. We subsequently used the same approach in our collaboration with young curators. There was a young Finnish colleague we didn't know yet – Satu Herrala – who co-organised a 'festival within a festival' with locals in Munich. In the next round we focussed on the artists. A group of them, chosen by the participating festivals, was invited to deal with supra-regional social issues in their respective hometowns. This project – with Julian Hetzel, Tania El Khoury and others – was showcased in Munich in 2013 in the CITYWORKS – ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS IN URBAN SPACE IN 10 CONTAINERS. The FIT network projects were very important to me, because they were a counterproposal to the (self-) critically seen "shopping mode" taken by European curators, by hosting independent initiatives, which addressed the overall creative environment of "festival making". FIT encouraged initiatives and new ideas, developed and implemented with a young generation of artists, critics and curators instead of always relying on tried and tested methodologies. However, this could only happen thanks to additional funding from the European Union, the

German Federal Cultural Foundation and others. Fundraising has always been an important part of my work.

At the end of 2021, Eva Neklyaeva suggested that we should examine Russian imperialism in the context of our research on colonialism. As a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we decided that this was too ambitious a project, and we dropped it. However, we had already arranged several preparatory meetings, and some of our colleagues in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe were annoyed by this, despite all friendliness between us. Their criticism was that West German cultural institutions who had taken an interest in the local scene after the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, had since "moved on" to the Middle East and Africa, which was in part due to funding structures. They felt that having lost interest in Eastern Europe, we were now once again knocking at their door. This allegation was not entirely unfounded.

I can totally understand your fascination with a specific local scene. My focus shifted to South Africa, at a meeting of the SHARED SPACES network organised by Boyzie Cekwana in Durban in 2016. There, I had to face all the challenges of cooperation between "the North" and "the Global South". We spent an intense week, but afterwards I worked with all participants in one way or another. I also enjoyed the performances I saw on that first research trip. It was an extraordinary experience, although I knew that I couldn't invite them all to Munich.

5. OUT OF CONTEXT: INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS IN MUNICH

TILMANN BROSZAT "Context" is a topic I definitely want to talk about. What risks do you take when you remove a work of art from its context in order to show it here? Are we even allowed to do that?

SOPHIE BECKER An important question, which is usually asked in connection with the so-called "Global South". I've seen works from Eastern Europe, where I felt I lacked the knowledge to judge. My background is music. There, many are scared by contemporary composers, while they are convinced that they intuitively understand Bach's St Matthew Passion or Beethoven's late string quartets ... Of course, you cannot transfer every production to a different context. Some pieces are relevant in their environment, yet incomprehensible in a different one. It is not a matter of quality, but it certainly also

applies to some Bavarian productions. I tend to assume that there is "something" in the works we show that resonates with Munich. However, the audience is not homogeneous. I remember when we first presented nora chipaumire, some traditional theatre buffs were confused, while listeners who had grown up with music videos could easily relate to the production. I always try to find a balance between pieces that are accessible because they deal with the subject matter in a documentary theatre approach, for instance, and works that require some movement in the audience.

When it comes to the question of context, the age difference between us matters, too. When I started curating, I used the internet for my research. I had social media and e-mail at my disposal. It provided an abundance of knowledge but by then it had become impossible to offer the overview you had promised in your first festival edition. I have a German passport, national borders are, thus, irrelevant for me. My only constraints are my travel budget and my time. Since traveling has always been easy for me, I imposed a few rules on myself pertaining to my journey preparation, and my way of moving around in the respective countries. However, I never saw Central Europe as the natural radius, a homogeneous unit, and then found myself confronted with the question of translation and context for the "rest of the world".

I would have loved to invite a project I saw at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow. Unfortunately, this was impossible. It was a tribute to chansonnier Vladimir Vysotsky. Everybody in the Soviet Union knew him. He had died ten years earlier. The ensemble went to visit the cemetery and then organised an event at the theatre. The audience was in tears. I wish I could have put both – the performance and the audience – on a plane to Germany.

I remember evenings like this: Oliver Frlić in Rijeka (Croatia), or a show dedicated to domestic violence in Nairobi (Kenya). I was convinced that it would be impossible to trigger the intensity both works had generated in the context for which they had been made. This would have damaged them and that's a convincing argument against showing them in my view. On the other hand, the fact that a theatre evening here might "not be properly understood" – whatever that might mean – would not be a decisive reason for me.

We showed Sello Pesa BAG BEATINGS in 2019, a production I had seen in Cape Town before. You were rather puzzled by the work ...

Well, they hit punching bags in an extremely aggressive way, throughout the whole performance. In my perception, these bags transformed

into human beings. Sello Pesa did not comment on the intention, but the performance might have been a reaction to xenophobic assaults against Nigerians and illegal immigrants by Black South Africans. Nevertheless, most spectators read the piece as a comment on racist attacks against Black people. Could a production that is deliberately performative and very open in this form be the subject matter of a – serious – misunderstanding? Isn't it rather about violence and all the terrible things that people do to each other? In general, I find the desire to understand everything "correctly" very German, and I agree with Heiner Müller: the work is always smarter than the author.

6. A NEW GENERATION: THE MENTORING PROJECTS

SOPHIE BECKER The second pillar of your programmes, in addition to the FIT, were the mentoring projects.

TILMANN BROSZAT Four mentoring projects were born, because we did not want to only feature famous names. And we were wondering how we could derive benefit from the potential of the artists we know for the next generation. Some suggested young artists for a new production, which we then included in our SPIELART programme. We used different formats: Mentors for WHAT'S NEXT (in 2007) were Romeo Castellucci, Tim Etchells, Heiner Goebbels, Jan Lauwers, Cornel Franz, and Johan Simons. CONNECTIONS (in 2009) had Kirsten Dehlholm, Dirk Pauwels, Nataša Rajković, Meg Stuart, Tim Etchells, and Anna Viebrock at the helm. CONNECT CONNECT (in 2011) was under the mentorship of Alain Platel, René Pollesch, Philippe Quesne, and Ong Keng Seng, who were invited to name an artistic duo each. In the 2013 edition of CONNECTIONS institutions acted as mentors, instead of individual artists, namely brut (Vienna), CAMPO (Gent), Gessnerallee (Zurich) and SPIELART (Munich). Pieter Ampe, Simone Augherlon, Phil Hayes, Helene Hegemann, Hermann Heisig, Florentina Holzinger, Thom Luz, Geumhyung Jeong, María Jerez Quintana, Kate McIntosh, Monster Truck were among the artists they proposed.

You hosted the FIT from 2005 to 2018, and the mentoring programmes were organised between 2007 and 2013. Looking at the preambles, I realise that the tone changed between 2009 – the first edition I was involved in as website editor – and 2011: the festival was getting more political.

In 2009 our discourse programme WOODSTOCK OF POLITICAL THINKING coincided with the fallout of the financial crisis. It became a highly emotional event. Artists suddenly realized that they had to express themselves politically and take a stance, not only in their creative work, but also as individuals concerned.

In 2011, our performance and discourse programme SOCIAL FICTIONS was overshadowed by the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. There had been political projects before, often documentary theatre productions, which unlike performance art put concrete content on stage. But now there was a clear shift towards strong politicisation in the art and theatre scene, which we could not and did not want to resist.

In 2013 I curated WAKE UP!, a programme on the topic of the Euro crisis. For my research I visited the theatres of Rome and Athens, which were occupied at the time. In 2015 we wanted to discuss „Artivism“, and published an open call for the discourse and performance project of ART IN RESISTANCE in the Gasteig. The pro-

gramme was a turning point for me. A speaker at a public debate on „Artivism“ I attended a short while later said that instead of asking questions and talking we would need affirmation and action. I was shocked, because her statement reminded me of

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Richard Wagner and his ban on questioning. I still consider my work political, but I equally insist on the autonomy of art, and its capacity for reflection and controversy.

At some point you stopped dedicating the middle SPIELART weekend to discourse. CROSSING OCEANS was the last one, in 2017.

For the festival edition of 2021, Julian Warner conceived and designed a two-day artistic conference followed by a march through the city. Its motto was GLOBAL ANGST. With his initiative he raised the discourse to a whole new level: instead of attending a series of talks and performances, the audience would participate in a fully staged event. But I myself actually began to have doubts, which persist to this day. I am looking for other forms of knowledge exchange and encounter, and I am glad to do this in collaboration with others. Our traditional frontal discourse formats are all too often mere "proxy discussions" performed in front of a largely passive audience. I clearly distrust – at least for the time being – the grand gesture.

7. NEW ACCESS AND CHANGING PERCEPTIONS: A FOCUS ON INTERNATIONAL SCENES

TILMANN BROSZAT CROSSING OCEANS, as a result of two successful applications for funds granted by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, marked another turning point in SPIELART's programme.

SOPHIE BECKER CROSSING OCEANS was our first profound exploration of the topic of colonialism. And the content came with new approaches. I remember that you were surprised that history was a key theme in the lectures of many artists from Asian and African countries. At least at first, you saw this as rather regressive, while I interpreted it as coping or revision: to shape the future you have to take three steps back and take a different turn. During my research in South Africa, I was confronted for the first time with indigenous positions and rituals. They clearly informed my curatorial approach, not least concerning readability, interpretation, and the perspective of the spectator. In adopting and presenting contemporary and / or queer rituals, the artists stood up against Western rationality. However, as with participatory formats, you could also get the impression that conflicts are being covered up, to avoid having to act them out. Another innovation in 2017 marked the last festival weekend, when we began to "look into the future". Instead of a large closing production we showed works by younger artists at different locations. After a nameless premiere in 2017, **NEW FREQUENCIES I** and **II** followed in 2019 and 2021 respectively, then **NOTHING TO DECLARE** in 2023, and this year we will present **BIRDS ON PERIPHERIES**, our first attempt to produce these weekend shows in a group of co-curators.

Earlier, we talked about South Africa, and you observed that you are sometimes more interested in scenes than in individual artists. This supra-individual perspective is intriguing. Would you say that aesthetically spoken some styles are attractive, whereas others are not?

That's a lot of questions! I am fascinated by local scenes, e.g. New York in the 1960s, and especially in a cultural policy perspective. In which conditions can creativity thrive? I guess it has to be a blend of collective collaboration and external encounters or influences from the outside, or else it becomes too individualistic. I was intrigued by the vibrant scene in South Africa, not least because it raised many questions. The audience there is usually very vocal, which left me puzzled, especially in view of the very solemn atmosphere in

European theatres. But: The South African performing art scene is very diverse. You won't detect a uniform style there. Another reason why I am interested in local scenes goes back to the years 2017 and 2019, when several famous artists from the African continent

were invited to visit. I read the invitation as a somewhat neo-colonial gesture: a curator travels around the world and brings "the best" to Europe. And considering your commitment to Eastern Europe, I asked myself how we can empower the local

scene. One way were the mentoring programmes hosted by Boyzie Cekwana and Ongutu Muraya in 2021, which focussed on an exchange between African countries before they sent their shows to Germany. We also offered internships for light designers and organised visits to watch performances and to network. This process of sharing and exchange transformed the festival. And yet, I never travel without having doubts. I ask myself: what are you hoping to find, upon setting out on a journey? To what extent are you using artists for your own plans and concepts? At a public debate at the Instituto Cervantes in 2009, Lola Arias said that since she is Argentinian, people always expected her to write plays about the dictatorship, while rejecting her proposal to stage **ROMEO AND JULIET**. Their argument: "Sorry, but for this we have our own artists."

8. CHANGING RECEPTION, CHANGING AUDIENCES

SOPHIE BECKER A few years ago, you made the point that you worried about an audience that would eventually lose their curiosity. At the time, I did not quite understand your concern, yet it kept me thinking for a while. Can we take curiosity for granted? Or are people only curious, when they are doing well and are open to innovation? In other words: should we argue that we ought to be curious when we are suffering, in order to find solutions? Or are there two different kinds of curiosity, which aim at different kinds of art?

TILMANN BROSZAT When we started the festival, we didn't have an audience. We had to think about how we promote the festival, and which theatrical forms and themes could attract which audience. We also discussed formal questions, like the fourth wall or the role of the spectator in the performance.

A lot has changed in our way of addressing the audience, especially in recent years. Our PR methods are different, and we are starting from new positions in outreach or urban dramaturgy, for example. In 2009 we mainly produced printed matter, then the website became increasingly important. Social media came and is here to stay. Over the last few years we have introduced programme presentations and workshops, and since 2017 (once again) we have an independent festival centre. We have also stepped up our accessibility efforts.

If I am not mistaken, since 2010 in their applications for public funding our British colleagues have to demonstrate that their theatres also perform social activities, for instance, activities targetted at youth or collaborations with social and psychological care facilities. Of course, removing barriers to accessibility is a job for society as a whole. Though I have always been critical of mixing the art discourse with social themes.

I think linking a social component to funding is wrong. Otherwise, however, the reports are preceded by a moment of self-reflection, which I don't think is wrong in principle. Money for cultural institutions should not be taken for granted. This is taxpayers' money and it comes with an obligation. But I am sceptical of the claim that theatre should depict current politics in order to be relevant. In 2022, several theatre-makers received calls from politicians or public authorities asking

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9. 30 YEARS OF SPIELART: WHAT'S NEXT?

SOPHIE BECKER You were responsible for the content of twelve SPIELART editions. What is your conclusion? What has remained, what has changed, what did you modify, and how have you adapted?

TILMANN BROSZAT Let me try and answer with some key words: one constant has been the permanent challenge of the context-check. Will an audience in Munich understand a performance that has been produced elsewhere? Another constant is the joy of working with artists and peers.

Something that has changed for the worse though is that pan-European funding for artistic productions has dwindled significantly. And the curator's work has become more and more of a profession. Today you can even study to become a curator. The most radical change is however, that the cultural sector is no longer perceived

as a bridge builder, but as leverage for political interests that clearly go beyond the sector, even to the horrific perspective of cultural wars. So, I do not envy you your role.

What did I change? I might have contributed to a shift in the city's outlook and expectations of theatre since the 1990s – and I have helped a few artists find their way. How have I changed? Well, obviously, when the staging of politics and spectacle replace the real political discourse, the interest in "theatre as a utopian space of possibility" is waning somewhat, and the focus of inquiry shifts (once again?) towards the analysis of reality beyond the art industry. We have talked a lot about your curatorial methodology. I wonder: what has changed since 2020 in your view?

I often joke that the world was still intact in your time, and that disaster only struck when you left SPIELART at the end of 2019. Our work has changed, and I am much more caught up in responding than in designing. I do reflect on this though, and don't think it's become a problem yet, because the very nature of my reaction allows for enough creative freedom, as long as I know the limits of what I can and want to represent. In recent years, I've been thinking a lot about the question of how we engage with the audience. Since the pandemic, I have seen a lot of exhaustion, and recently, due to political events, also a sense of uncertainty. From a European perspective, the future does not look bright at all. However, we are an international festival, and, unlike many other regions of the world, we are doing quite well. The "global majority" also holds us – the West – responsible for the plight we all face. Striking a balance in our work in view of this dilemma is not always easy. We spend a lot of time solving problems and enduring

uncertainties. Nevertheless, I would like to talk about failed dreams and wishes for the future. Was there a project that you could not realise? An artist you “chased after” for years?

Absolutely. I was a huge fan of Alain Platel. I was dying to show his project BERNADETJE with young people on stage in a big, real, working bumper car facility. Unfortunately, it never happened. For whatever reason.

How long did that stay with you?

Quite a while, in fact ...

There were several instances where I was convinced that a certain artist would be the perfect fit for SPIELART. But then we encountered countless difficulties, we had bizarre misunderstandings and received absurd counterproposals. Eventually, I began to understand that it was not to be. It was apparently just a fixed idea of mine.

I always wanted to reenact the Munich “Räterepublik” as a public event.

Wouldn’t this be a proposal for Rimini-Protokoll, and the next festival edition?

Also, I always wanted to have choirs perform in Munich’s courtyards.

That all sounds doable. Whereas my unfulfilled wishes are structural in nature. On the one hand, we are constantly dealing with the issue of “spaces / venues”, and the lack of a performing arts centre. Sadly, many productions, especially the bigger ones, such as Florentina Holzinger’s, typically bypass Munich, because we lack the facilities to stage them. At the same time, it is increasingly difficult to access free and open spaces in town. Finding a non-theatre venue for a performance, a square or an empty storefront, has become so time-consuming that it keeps us busy for months. Just hearing the word “festival centre” gives me sleepless nights.

If performing arts halls existed, we would have the perfect festival centre. Like Praterinsel back then, where we staged exhibitions and performance projects and, of course, parties.

We both repeatedly considered the option of moving the festival to the outskirts. What kept us from leaving the city centre was the calendar – it’s a festival of the autumn season – and that it would be more difficult for the audience to reach us. Munich also has its distinctive cultural axis stretching from the Residenztheater and the Bayerische Staatsoper to Münchner Kammerspiele, Muffathalle, and the former venue of the Gasteig. We thought it important to assert our position with our base at Rosenheimer Platz. I wonder what will happen now that we are relocating the festival centre to the Bahnhofsviertel, near Munich Main Station. Well, let’s turn back to my wishes for the future: I would love to build a “truly” international network spanning several continents, as an academy for the exchange of knowledge. Many artists have their own residence locations today. Whereas in the past, the “Global South” was often excluded from co-productions because there were not enough subsidies or institutions that could finance co-productions – and the money is available in Europe. Today there are resources, e.g. rehearsal spaces and accommodation. I am keen on this kind of curatorial approach and production, which would hopefully work on a more equitable basis than what we used to do.

We have discussed time and again that theatre-makers (re)write history. They see their work as awareness-raising in the face of the national narrative(s). Understanding theatre as a space of possi-

bilities could mean reimagining history, let me call it “counter-factual documentary theatre”. A bit like Stefan Kaegi’s THIS IS NOT AN EMBASSY (MADE IN

TAIWAN), though even one step further: inviting artists to rethink a particular historical situation. What would have happened if the Berlin Wall had not fallen? Where would we be today?

This year’s programme includes a film by Serbian director Mila Turajlić. One scene shows representatives of the newly independent countries “entering” the UN: a big announcement, applause, and an amazing spirit of euphoria and optimism. Turajlić then juxtaposes this with images of today’s meetings, with the delegates sleeping or playing with their cell phones. I was reminded of Antje Schupp’s EMPTY CHAIRS. Inspired by the many empty chairs in Human Rights Council meetings in Geneva, the artist wants to create a People’s Council. Of course, we could talk about this for quite a while. Despite all the minor and major problems, for me theatre is without alternative. And I don’t really believe you when you say that your interest in “theatre as a utopian space of possibility” is waning ...

Tilmann Broszat studied sociology (diploma), social psychology, and philosophy in Munich and Aix-en-Provence. He was the managing director of the Munich TheaterFestival (1982 to 1985) and, in 1992/93, the managing director of the Theater der Welt festival in Munich. From 1986 to 1993, he worked as a producer and co-owner of ART BUREAU Munich on international theatre productions and co-productions. From 1986 to 2022, he was producer and managing director of the MÜNCHENER BIENNALE FÜR NEUES MUSIKTHEATER. From 1995 to 2019, he was also artistic director and festival director of the SPIELART Festival Munich, which he founded. In 2008, he received the Theatre Award of the City of Munich (together with Gottfried Hattinger). In 2013, as part of a team commissioned by the City of Munich, he developed a programme and operating concept for the Kreativquartier (Tonnen- und Jutierhalle). Since 2024, he has been a member of the jury for independent theatres in the state capital of Munich.

Sophie Becker studied dramaturgy at the Bayerische Theaterakademie at LMU Munich, majoring in theatre studies, musicology, and modern German literature. She then worked as a dramaturg at Theater Aachen, the Sächsische Staatsoper Dresden and the Bayerische Staatsoper. Guest dramaturgy engagements took her to the Bayreuther Festspiele and Salzburger Osterfestspiele and to De Nederlandes Opera in Amsterdam. Since 2008, Sophie Becker has been a lecturer at the Bayerische Theaterakademie August Everding for Dramaturgy, and since 2016, she has been deputy programme director in the directing class. Since 2009, Sophie Becker has been working for the international theatre festival SPIELART, first as a dramaturg and member of the programme team, since 2016 in artistic direction, and since 2020 as artistic and festival director. Jury activities (selection): German Federal Cultural Foundation, General Project Funding (2011–2013), Tanzplattform Deutschland (2012–2014), Politik im freien Theater (2018), Fonds Darstellende Künste (2019–2021).

Imprint

For the purposes of German media law, editorial responsibility is held by Spielmotor München e.V.
Lothstraße 19
D - 80797 München

Registry of associations Munich
VR 9568

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Gestaltungsbüro Hersberger SGD

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SPiE LARTI MÜNCHEN FESTIVAL



Eine Initiative der Stadt München
und der BMW Group