

Collective Identity Provides No Insights

An Interview with Tim Zulauf by Katya Knoll

Katya Knoll: You are currently involved in staging the play “Die Schutzbefohlenen” (The Suppliants) by Elfriede Jelinek together with Gessnerallee, Fabriktheater Rote Fabrik Zürich, Theater Neumarkt, Schauspielhaus Zürich, and others. What attracted you to this project, and why have you decided to be part of it?

Tim Zulauf: The choice of the play as a general topic was made by the Schauspielhaus—even before what might be called the Syrian Refugee Crisis. This text has a long history of being staged in various ways. I was invited to join this re-interpretation for Gessnerallee, as migration has been an underlying issue in many of my projects. There is however always a weird mix of aesthetic reasons and content reasons or certain moral considerations behind the representation of a text like *Die Schutzbefohlenen*. For staging this text in Hamburg, for example, Nicolas Stemmann worked with “authentic” migrants, which in turn produced the question: “How can they transmit this very elaborate and delicate text?” Artistically it is quite challenging to perform. But within Jelinek’s play there is this idea of a collective voice of the migrants themselves who speak. So this has turned out to be the question of my project: “Who can understand and relate to this text? Which audience does it address? What kind of accessibility does it have?” That’s why I proposed an Open Call for all Zurich-based artists to collectively choose the most striking of all propositions. During the day of this collective jury a lot of discussions took place, and of course there were also suggestions to realize all the projects together without selecting the so-called most interesting one. During this process the group Kursk was chosen, with their idea to rework and correct Elfriede Jelinek’s text together with students of the Autonome Schule Zürich (ASZ). The text has now been reworked by and with migrants, and will be staged on this very “Schutzbefohlenen”-day, together with my video-documentation of the open-call procedure.

KK: Can you talk about your experience involving migrants in your artistic productions? On the one hand, art is not their area or may not be relevant for them, but on the other hand, this issue is raising so much interest in the art community. So maybe they should be part of artistic interpretations? Do you think it is something they can appreciate also as an occupation?

TZ: I participated previously in a play produced with the ASZ. Those were workshops together with migrants, where we were exploring what it is like to act and perform a text related to your own existential questions. From the very beginning, it was clear that this work would be shown in Gessnerallee. I was quite lucky, because in the ASZ I joined an already existing theatre group of migrants—recognized or not—who were interested in acting or expressing themselves on stage.

Working together produced a lot of serious questions: “Where lies the artistic value? Or is it just the topic of migration and illegality that people sympathize with? And do the scenes figured out collectively remain on a purely private level?” I find it very important that in such projects the so-called migrants are not used for identity politics, meaning that they “as migrants” are supposed to represent “the migrant”. But how it is possible? People come with various backgrounds—refugees, people fleeing because of climate change, war situations, lifestyle choices, so-called “expats”—positions within migration are diversified. Even I myself migrated with my family from Germany to Switzerland in the 1980s. All in all for me these collective identities do not provide any insights. These days I find it unnecessary to work with these labels. Instead of essentializing the backgrounds or routes of people, I would rather engage with various wishes, energies, and social engagements each of us comes along with individually.

KK: How do you see the situation for migrants in Switzerland?

TZ: If you look back, you see how fast the perception of foreigners can change. An interesting example is the attitude towards the Italian community. It changed quite a bit from the 1960s, when there was even a big anti-Italian movement culminating in the so-called *Schwarzenbach-Initiative*, in 1970. Sometimes these negative perceptions seem like politically constructed misunderstandings that are not really linked to what people are, what they bring with them, or how they help creating our societies. I would even call this a produced hysteria affecting every discourse. It helps right-wing politicians unify discourses and mobilize money and people to vote. Another example would be the struggle of Turkish migrants in Germany. But the degree to which they help develop the country is enormous.

If you look at the discourses about the care for elderly people, you realize even nowadays: if we don't have migrating people helping to address these problems, we may just simply not find solutions for them anymore. Unless we completely change our ideas about living together and caring for each other. But I don't see that happening very soon... Still, within the care sector, we witness how certain recognition for a foreign workforce is growing—strangely enough often again connected with stereotypes like “really feminine caring women from Eastern Europe” and so on. Or it gets completely absurd and globalized, as for example with the idea of establishing German education centres in China for care workers who could then do an “internship” in Germany for a couple of years, help the elderly German society in between, and then are promised to go back to China with this precious German knowledge on how to care. A quite cynical idea of how to use a foreign workforce without any physical long-term presence at all...

KK: Why do you think even the most reasonable people are getting emotional about the issue of migration and its influence on our societies?

TZ: We are living here in wealthy societies that naturally get scared of potentially losing what we have. I see our contexts here as a combination of gated communities with a very pragmatic coating of myths like *Swissness* supposed to produce a collective identity that is not only one of collective egoism. The identity produced there is, of course, not a very rational one, it's more a tool of distraction. Why should the founding myths of Switzerland be of any

relevance for today's society with all its diversity in terms of languages and ways of living? These antiquated narratives are used as defence mechanisms against people who want to participate and therefore might pose a threat to the status quo. Strangely enough, it seems to be much more difficult to see what you actually win through the movements or in- and out-fluxes of people. And probably it is this personal, capitalistically individualized fear of losing wealth that leads many people to irrational anti-migration positions.

KK: Would you say that Zurich is more open with the huge proportion of foreigners living and working in this city?

TZ: I think Zurich has a very specific welcoming culture towards certain “wanted” foreigners. People here realize that they need international resources, capacities, and brainpower to build businesses further. If you want to have these qualified people here and “integrate” them (which is not an easy term—what does integration really mean?), you have to offer infrastructure and accessibility. But at the same time, there were so many discussions about the growing population of Germans in Zurich... I as a German get curious about how Germans feel when they get to experience this “discriminating” attitude against themselves. But as soon as it comes to asylum seekers or illegal migration, where the surplus-value of the human workforce is not clear, Zurich is for me a very repressive place. Therefore, I would say that there is an official face smiling at people who promise to develop the city professionally, but in daily life the acceptance of foreigners is not very high. In other Swiss cities like Fribourg or Geneva, you have quite significant migrant communities and you feel that there is a higher acceptance of various skin colours and cultural behaviours.

KK: Was this also the topic you explored at the Tunis Biennial—how did you come to work there?

TZ: To me the “Dream City” Biennial is a very interesting platform, founded in 2007, where under the Ben Ali regime they tried to open public spaces through cultural interventions. At the time, gathering in groups larger than four people was not allowed. With cultural projects you have a chance to bypass such laws. I started to do research and then went to Tunisia, never having visited Northern Africa before. First I thought it would be interesting to work with the historical spaces of the revolution, where certain events took place, and what the narratives around

these places could be nowadays. But through talking to people, I found out that looking back at these supposedly heroic times is not of really big interest right now. People think that the Tunisian “Jasmine Revolution” opening up the Arab Spring is overused as a way of legitimizing governments perpetuating often the same patronizing structures or enforcing religious manners.

I therefore shifted my focus to the relations between Switzerland and Tunisia. I knew that Switzerland had just a few so-called “migration partnerships” with other countries. I was interested in how they were established and why. The image around migrants from the countries of these partnerships was very negative. So through these agreements Switzerland had the possibility of repatriating people of these countries without having to deal with all the bureaucracy around the authentication of origins—but what did these countries get from Switzerland in return? In this context I also found interesting that Switzerland established internships to share its dual educational system, when people learn practical aspects rather than purely academic knowledge. In Tunisia, they still have traditionally more academic studying, but the problem is that many trained academics remain unemployed, as there is no market for their skills.

I then stumbled over a publication that the Bundesamt für Migration produced, entitled “The Moroccan, the Tunisian and the Algerian population in Switzerland” (“Die marokkanische, die tunesische und die algerische Bevölkerung in der Schweiz”). It includes statistics on the criminal activities of these populations and addresses cultural issues, education, professional training, and employment of these nationalities. So I thought: what if we change the perspective and read this Swiss booklet about “the Maghrebians” together with Tunisians? This is why one scene in the theatrical project I did in the framework of the Tunis Biennial was a group reading or “flipping through” this booklet. I also used two segments of Swiss TV news showing Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga in the process of establishing this migration partnership between Switzerland and Tunis—I wanted to see what happens if you upend the perspective onto news or knowledge that was originally produced for Swiss people.

With this work, “La porte portable”, I was also interested, in a more tangible way, in spaces like the specific small library Sidi Bou Medien as a place of education and academic knowledge that also has a room for children’s books. There I tried to explore a more “naïve” approach to these spaces and questions of public and private places: I imagined some

slightly absurd perspectives from the future onto questions “right now”, like: “What is the educational proposition of Switzerland for Tunisia?” and “What is the knowledge you store and the knowledge that public spaces like this library share?” We found, for example, children’s books in this library that are purely propagandist, from Ben Ali’s times, but they are still there and nobody really cares. So, for local people my narrative should offer the possibility to draw future perspectives, which is difficult for them to do now, but not without falling back onto what the real political power-games are—in this case between Switzerland and Tunisia. I was looking for possibilities for people to explore this state of in-between spaces, different times of being active and reflective.

KK: You choose to work in various artistic formats. How do you select which one goes best with a topic or issue you want to explore?

TZ: In this particular case with the library narrative, I thought it is curious to see actors in an everyday situation that is somehow slightly translated into a fictitious situation. We had loudspeakers installed, and you could hear the microphoned actors in various parts of the small building. This is a means of accessibility, but it also somehow splits the voices from the bodies and creates a feeling that the performance is there and live, but it feels like there is a time in-between, like it is not really present. It is mediated, somehow dissociated. But as an audience or as a user of the library you often suddenly stand next to the actors and their acting. And at the same time there were still real visitors going into the library and learning there with their earplugs on. So I tried to avoid any threshold: people could do what they usually do in the library, but suddenly they were also involved in a narrative, in another experience of time. This is why I tend to work more with actors rather than producing a film. Performance inscribes itself differently in the space. It is not a monitor or projection in a space, but it is people using the space in ways that are somehow not usual. You cannot even say what separates your personal space and the acting space any longer. This format seemed adequate to a political situation like the one in Tunis, where you lose track of what has already been achieved, what is repeated, what is reactionary or even fictitious, and so on.

KK: In your project “Caregiving Caretakers”, you explore today’s status of care work. Now that people in post-industrial societies are aging, how do

you see the status of care work and the role of women and “emerging countries” in it?

TZ: I have always been interested in looking at what is often seen in our society as “immaterial” and therefore seemingly not productive work, because you do not immediately see the outcome of this work in the form of a product—like with cleaning and education, sex work, or care work. This topic is very much linked to ideas of value and status of women in society and what our paradigms and cultural constructions are to look at this work as “feminine”, and often something that is not paid because it was in patriarchal traditions always done for free. Then I also have a colleague, Sarah Schilliger, who did extensive research and emancipatory efforts with Polish migrants working in the Swiss care-giving system and how these people are sometimes even misused in this job. Besides, on a personal level, I was thinking about how my parents are growing older and what is going on with them. I tried to link the issue of unpaid labour, that is simply done by someone traditionally, and the fact of the real need for these workforces. Basically it is all about a paradox: Swiss society needs an estimated 30,000 care workers for the elderly by 2020, but the recognition for this job is close to zero. The only measure to change the image of this work is through a certain academicization of the job profile itself. That shows quite well how helpless our societies are in establishing new forms of appreciation...

More generally, I have an ongoing interest in how you stage something that is in itself very abstract. This is something I was also exploring in Tunis as well. How do you treat something like international relations, and how they are formed? In the case of care work, it’s all about a certain neoliberal rhetoric of quantifying and qualifying every single working step, or even singling out discrete units of that work—which is completely absurd and does not reduce costs as wished but produces new kinds of neoliberal bureaucracies. I tried to focus on how I could link these abstract questions with how it looks physically and what you can tell and show about this work. Therefore, it was good to see how the caregivers who came to the performance actually reacted to it. They would start laughing at some phrases or situations where other spectators would not, but look at *them* instead not understanding what could be funny. So this interaction within the audience created a new level of what the play is about: audience is part of this, and suddenly you reach another level of comprehension.

KK: What is your main focus and idea behind your work? What do you expect from the audience who comes to see your performances? Is it a reflection on current issues in society?

TZ: There is a strong interest in proposing another type of knowledge, which is not just facts and figures. But some mental-physical connection that you can use as a kind of knowledge, and that has a strangeness through this linking of different segments or domains of society. So it’s about how to create a new way of gathering people around something artistically produced that is not already known or already part of these spectators’ lives, not owned. And because it is a strange or queer, transversal way of looking at things, I hope it’s offering new relations between people and fields of knowledge. If there could be an ideal, it would lie in establishing new relations in the way people feel, in the discourses, where you feel that we relate, but that is not pure information or explanation of things. It’s also about what aspects of reality you can uncover with what way of using your words and your physicality and your feelings, so that the language is crisscrossing usually separated fields within society. And this crisscrossing is something that I am interested in.

KK: What are you looking for in your future projects, what are the issues you would like to explore further?

TZ: We have all these institutionalized art and culture spaces that produce many possibilities in a very refined way of looking at things and discussing things. But often the very basic problem is the accessibility of these spaces to broader audiences. Much of our cultural work tends to stay very esoteric, and sometimes even deliberately demands you to decode it in one specific way. And I think there should be some steps taken to create more accessible spaces, where you can talk without losing the artistic edge of what you are doing. For me this is something quite difficult to grasp, because it is being looked at as a contradiction: the artistically crisscrossing thinking on one hand, and the gesture of openness or accessibility on the other. If we don’t bridge these oppositions, even topics like *migration* become “à la mode” cultural innovation, which has to be treated only in this or that way. We need to establish some other real formats; otherwise it is just an overly self-centred self-reflection. Practically, I hope to go on with the research work that I started in South Africa, which relates to the question of historical guilt that Switzerland, like other countries and companies, has

through supporting the apartheid regime for way too long. The lawsuits that groups like the South African Khulumani Support Group are conducting seem very exemplary and crucial for many post-colonial struggles: they ask in how far there are reparations and compensations to be made and paid without which a new era of overcoming global inequality and even racism will not be possible.

Captions

1 KMUProduktionen, *Pflege und Verpflegung – À bout de soins – Caregiving Caretakers*. Performance: Vivien Bullert, Christoph Rath, Meret Hottinger, Elisabeth Rolli; Festival Belluard Bollwerk International, Gessnerallee Zürich, Kaserne Basel, Tojo Theater Bern, 2014–16. Photograph by: Andrea Thal.

2 KMUProduktionen, *La porte portable*. Performance: Najoua Zouhair, Abdelmonaam Chouayet; Biennale “Dream City. Art et lien social”, Tunis, 2015. Photograph by: Tim Zulauf.

3 KMUProduktionen, *Striche durch Rechnungen. Zur stadträumlichen Verlagerung von Sexarbeit in Zürich*. Performance: Andreas Storm; Les Complices*, Biennale Bern, Shedhalle Zürich, 2013–15. Photograph by: Andrea Thal.



Tim Zulauf (b. 1973) is an author and the director of KMUProduktionen. At the Venice Art Biennale, the dramatisation “*Deviare. Vier Agenten. Part of a Movie*” was part of the official Swiss contribution. Currently the stage production “*Pflege und Verpflegung. À bout de soins. Caregiving Caretakers*”, an exploration of today’s status of caregiving work, is on. Ongoing research on legislation and counter-narration in the distribution of space takes place within “*Shifting Territories*”, investigating social housing strategies in the post-apartheid era. His most recent production “*La Porte portable*” explored the political and mental relations between Switzerland and post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Katya Knoll (b. 1983) has been living in Zurich since 2015. Before moving to Switzerland she had a long-standing career with a consulting company in Russia, during which she was responsible for marketing activities. She has always been interested in finding a link between art and business worlds and is currently exploring this topic within the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.

