

THE AGORA PROJECT

SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

At the center of this project lies an urgency of returning to the theatre and its function as an open space – an Agora – a lively and energetic market place of thinking together. The Agora is made of dialogue and confrontation. It is the space where relevant ideas are born and practiced in and for a public. Hence, Agora with its urban subtext is fundamental to processes of individuation and democratization. Both, as a real and a metaphorical space, the historic Agora has been an initializing junction for the emergence of key notions of European culture such as “public space”, “political culture”, “democracy” or “theatre” as a practice of (re)presenting ideas publicly. It is in this sense that the project aims for re-activating the historical notion of the Agora: to create an open space for thinking and doing contemporary performance in the light of dramatic shifts in our understanding of labor, communication, networking, creation and circulation of value, as well as of notions of property, identity and individuality. It is time for theatre to step down from the stage and reclaim the Agora, activate confrontations and dialogues that make us political beings.

The Agora Project will develop in four phases that involve research in discursive reflection and performance practice, a theater performance, a workshop, a symposium, and a book. Sophocles' *Oedipus* – will act as a triggering departure for the whole project, being also a special focus of the theater performance. *Oedipus* is chosen not only as one of the founding texts of the European theater, but as an early statement of the Western culture based on identity, nationhood, economy and politics of representation, fear and control. The performance titled *Oedipus, my foot* will be developed by a group joining young and experienced artists/performers directed by Dutch theater maker Jan Ritsema, and will be presented in two versions: in Kaaitheater in Brussels and in Pact-Zollverein, Essen.

The Agora Project will unfold in five phases distributed over the year 2011:

Phase 1: Performance 1 | Research and Creation: Fifteen artists/performers from Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Serbia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, The Netherlands and Greece will share a four week process of research, rehearsing, thinking and acting together before the Agora opens to the public in the form of a performance: *Oedipus, my foot* will be presented at Kaaitheater in Brussels on 21 January 2011 and in Pact-Zollverein, Essen in spring 2011.

Phase 2: Workshops | Discourse and Reflection: The second phase of the project functions both as a recapitulation and an expansion of the materials, discourses and experiences produced in the first phase. The Agora opens for the second time towards a wider circle of participants in a ten-day workshop period involving three internationally renowned scholars from the fields of philosophy, political and economical theory.

Phase 3: Symposium | Making It Public: In its third phase, The Agora Project opens to a yet larger public in the form of a four-day international symposium with three scholars and individual participants of Phase 2 as well as three additional guest lecturers, all invited for lectures, talks, presentations, and debate. The symposium will be attended by 50 guests, all hosted in PAF.

Phase 4: Performance 2: Another two-week rehearsing period with the core group of the fifteen artists/performers will lead to a new performance to be presented in Kaaitheater in Brussels and in Pact-Zollverein, Essen in late 2011.

Phase 5: Presentation of Publication: Materials generated and gathered during phases 1-4 will be published both digitally on internet and in printed material. The Agora Project is invited to present its publication in Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Paris.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE AGORA PROJECT

The Agora is the place where the voice of the public grows. An initial hub in the development of democracy and European cultural identity, the town square or Agora has been protected and understood as a place belonging to the people: the Agora is *us* and it is here that our political reality is literally and metaphorically actualized. It is in the Agora that authorities represent their power, but it is also the place from which insurrection emerges. The beautiful reality is that

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both the high and the low need the Agora to be open. Let's not forget that: The Agora is made of dialogue and confrontation; it is the open where political ideas are born and practiced; with its urban subtext, The Agora is fundamental to processes of democratization. It is the mother of the public, where bare life turns political.

However, at the same time, the Agora is the origin of theatre. The step up onto the stage is, on the one hand, just a means for a more efficient mode of dialogue, but at the same time the first sign that democracy as an open opportunity is closing. It is time for theatre to step down from the stage and reclaim the Agora, activate these conversations and dialogues that make us political beings. Today more than ever do we need a theatre that insists on the open, that is, on a situation that allows for excess, emergence of new voice, rupture or reconfiguration of positions and roles.

Dramatic shifts in our understanding of labor, family, communication, networking, circulation of value, notions of property, identity and individuality from the new spirit of cognitive capitalism force us to reconsider our relation to the Agora. Furthermore, these changes beg for examining our alienation and paralysis in thinking and acting in the urban texture. A more general transformation of how politics function is at stake here: if the decision-making process was once based on ideological assumptions, now all political decisions are governed and masked by the ethics of tolerance and consent above the ulterior motives of business-as-usual. To reclaim the Agora does not mean to resurrect structural notions of public space, but instead to invent new tactics of use, diversion, transformation and sustainable processes of change. We must not look back in the nostalgic wish to recuperate the lost union with a city, an ancient ideal of democracy as it were; we neither strive for unification of a community under a mission; we seek to activate and reinvest the thought and the practice of Agora so that the voice of the public can grow in the open – individual and shared.

ON OIDIPOUS, MY FOOT

At the core of The Agora Project lies *Oedipus, my foot*, a combination of a theatrical show and the theatre as an open place to think together; Sophocles' *Oedipus* is based on the idea of one stable identity, of one individual, one destiny, one name, whereas in our version, this identity is never stable, it is always in search, always many, never fixed. In Sophocles' *Oedipus* the whole destiny can be fulfilled because time is linear, whereas in our presentation, time exists as one moment split in a myriad of possibilities – like time exists for people nowadays; everything is happening in the same time. In our version *Oedipus'* destiny is in his own hands and his destinies are many, none of which is the right one. Thus, we offer pluralism as a struggle of complexity by considering and showing the many options *Oedipus* could have chosen; we do this through mixing times and spaces. We want to show how it is to live out contradictory options, not one but many potentialities of "one can do something, but also not".

The main operation of the theater of *Oedipus, my foot* concerns constructing the public – the relation between the audience and the stage. We envisage building one open space, the theatre as a square, as a public space, an Agora in which we will reread and redo *Oedipus* together. *Oedipus, my foot* functions not only as an artistic means to research the metaphor of theater as Agora, but as a *real* Agora, where theater is a metaphor – toolbox and framework – through which we observe, reflect and act the Agora as a social space.

PARTICIPANT GROUPS - INNER AND OUTER CIRCLE

Jan Ritsema is the artistic and managing director of The Agora Project. In collaboration with 15 performers from Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Serbia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, The Netherlands, Greece etc. he constitutes the core team of the project, the "inner circle". This team will pursue all phases of The Agora Project, create and perform the work *Oedipus, my foot*, as well as coordinate the joint activities with the additional participants of phases 2 and 3, forming the "outer circle". The "outer circle" is composed of artists, arts students, performance theorists, philosophers and various experts from political theory and economics, who will contribute to further expand and contextualize the debate of the Agora. The expansion of the circles will follow in the aftermath of two events that annually take place at PAF: the PAF Spring Meeting and PAF Summer University. In these meetings, additionally 40-60 artists, theorists and cultural workers from all over the world take part.

A JOINT PRODUCTION

The Agora Project is a joint production of the French non-profit association PAF (PerformingArtsForum) and the Belgian non-profit association Avec Jan Jib Co. The latter acting solely as administrative association and the former providing a landscape in which the four phases of the project will be situated, produced and disseminated. That is to say PAF will function as a node; a point at which the project's different pathways intersect and interconnect a number of players

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crucial to the projects realization. The Agora Project is presently co-produced by the Kaaitheater in Brussels and the Pact-Zollverein in Essen.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO PAF

PAF (PerformingArtsForum) is a place for the professional and not-yet professional practitioners and activists in the field of performing arts, visual art, literature, music, new media and internet, theory and cultural production, and scientists who seek to research and determine their own conditions of work. PAF is for people who can motorize their own artistic production and knowledge production not only responding to the opportunities given by the institutional market.

Initiated and run by artists, theoreticians and practitioners themselves, PAF is a user-created, user-innovative informal institution. Neither a production-house and venue, nor a research-center, it is a platform for everyone who wants to expand possibilities and interests in his/her own working practice.

PAF is

- a forum for producing knowledge in critical exchange and ongoing discursive practice
- a place for temporary autonomy and full concentration on work
- a tool-machine where one can work on developing methods, tools and procedures, not necessarily driven toward a product
- a place for experimenting with other than known modes of production and organization of work

Since PAF opened its doors in 2006, the possibilities of both the space and its Open-Source "mentality" have attracted a growing number of individuals and institutions (collaborations, amongst others, with Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna; PARTS Performing Arts Research and Training Studios, Brussels; Excerce, Monpellier; SNDO Amsterdam, Ecole supérieure d'arts de Rueil-Malmaison, France; Werkplaats Nadine, Brussels; Laban Dance Center, London; Conservatorium Utrecht; APASS Advanced Performance and Scenography Studies, Antwerp; The University of Dance and Circus, Stockholm; Academy of Fine Arts, Trondheim; Universität Bochum, Institut für Theaterwissenschaften; Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Paris; Frascati, Amsterdam; Theater brut, Wien; 'tGasthuis, Amsterdam; Walking Theory Center, Belgrade; Inpex, Stockholm). In 2009, no less than 700 artists, students and theorists travelled to PAF in order to work, exchange experiences, network and contribute to knowledge production and dissemination.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO AVEC JAN JIB CO

Avec Jan Jib Co vzw was founded in 2003, by theatre director Jan Ritsema. AJJC has since then produced five productions; *TODAYUlysses*, *Pipelines, a construction*, *BLINDSPOT*, *KNOWH2OW*, *Breeding, Brains and Beauty*, involving artists such as Bojana Cvejic, Sandra Iché, Mette Ingvartsen, Jefta van Dinther, Dirk Roofthooft and Sandy Williams. These productions have been performed in numerous European cities. The board of AJJC consists of prof.dr. Bart Verschaffel, prof.dr. Luc Van den Dries and Joost Fonteyne. AJJC is the economic and administrative center point of The Agora Project.

THE FOUR PHASES OF THE PROJECT

Phase 1: Performance 1 | Research and Creation

A way to read politics and operate politically is to examine the notion of property in all its registers and the mechanisms governing decisions about the distribution and management of property. However, a fundamental principle of democracy is the right to personhood (subjectivity), but also to transparency in decision-making. What does it take to divorce subjectivity from identity of the self and the idea of property? The initiating phase of the project researches these two problems in two events:

- A selection of fifteen individuals coming together in an open space; the Agora or the place of transparency, to produce a common/shared utterance on the potentiality of democracy and/or other modes of decision-making.
- The group's engagement in and "presentation" of *Oedipus, my foot*.

Phase 1 will take place 18/12/2010-23/1/2011 and culminate in a premiere at the Kaaitheater in Brussels on 21 st of January 2011.

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Phase 2: Workshops | Discourse and Reflection

The second phase of the project recapitulates the experiences and discourses produced in the first phase. Its goal is to reshape – translate and further – the perspectives, concepts, and analytical tools developed in the process *Oedipus, my foot*. Thirty-two individuals next to the fifteen of the inner circle will join the second phase in a ten-day workshop located at PAF. Additionally, three individuals with specific competences will be engaged in order to further elaborate the contemporary notions of public space, urban interventions, political and economical theory (Akseli Virtanen, Isabelle Stengers, Jacques Rancière et al. t.b.c.).

Phase 3: Symposium | Making It Public

The emergence of thought is per definition a social activity. Modernity and the Western civilization have cultivated the social practice of thought largely in relation to representation.. A Symposium etymologically proposes a shared and common ownership of knowledge, productive of a subjectivity that thinks together. A heterogeneous, dissonant but solidary "we" will "con-spire" – not to plot against the power, but to use the power of the "we" to breathe together (con - "with", spirare – "breathe").

A group larger than in the workshop of phase 2 will prepare and perform the symposium following Deleuze's method of the "drama of ideas". Instead of a competition in dropping new names and terms, the symposium will invest thinking outloud and together; ideas that are formulated and tested for the first time; visions that ask imagining and demanding the impossible; language that pushes the limits of the reasonable.

Like Phase 1, 3 and 4, the symposium will configure a template for documentation, both digitally distributed on internet and in printed material.

Phase 4: Performance 2

The fourth phase of the project summons the three previous phases as a process for the insurrection of play. The "play" here should be understood as the making of "world", not as drama or any other kind of representation. The "play" will be made by the spectators themselves. In a variety of open experiences the audience will no longer need to interpret or participate by way of interacting, but will directly become the producers in and of themselves, of their capacity to think, feel, act and hesitate.

Phase 4 thus aims at producing a post-spectacular formation of presence. The fifteen individuals will operate as triggers or catalysts or filters of this determination, in the role of spreading "play". The process will be initiated at PAF and thereafter will reappear publicly in Kaaitheater, Brussels, Pact-Zollverein, Essen and other venues.

Phase 5: Presentation of Publication

The fifth and final phase of The Agora Project will be to share it, or in a sense "expose" it to others in order for them to reuse, remix, share, think along the materials generated and gathered during all of the projects different phases. The documentation will be made available on the internet as well as in printed material.

For this last event The Agora Project is invited to present its publication in Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in Paris.

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PARTICIPANT BIOS

JAN RITSEMA

The dutch theatre director Jan Ritsema (1945) makes theatre that triggers these strange moments where thinking and performing meet eachother. Ritsema has directed repertoire from writers such as Shakespeare, Bernard-Marie Koltès, Elfriede Jelinek and Heiner Müller for big and small companies in Europe. He has dramatised novels from James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Rainer Maria Rilke and others. Pieces made in cooperation with others, such as e.g. *Weak Dance Strong Questions*, *TodayUlysses* and *Pipelines*, has met with a huge success in Europe. Ritsema is not interested in the big illusion and fiction machine through which theatre often is represented, but in the live presentation of bodies on stage that think and that provoke thinking. Theatre as the place where actors and audience in their live gathering can think together.

In 1978 Ritsema founded the International Theatre Bookshop in Amsterdam which has published more than 400 books. In 2006 he created the PerformingArtsForum, in France near Reims, an alternative artists residency, run by artists, in which every year some 700 international artists exchange their experiences and knowledge and create work.

XAVIER LE ROY

Xavier Le Roy doctorate in molecular biology at the University of Montpellier and has worked as a dancer and choreographer since 1991. From 1997 to 2003 he was artist in residence at the Podewil, Berlin. In 2007-2008 he was "associated artist" at Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier, France. In 2010 he is a fellow artist in residence at the MIT Program in Art Culture and Technology (Cambridge, USA). Through his solos such as: "Self Unfinished" (1998) and "Product of Circumstances" (1999) he has opened new perspectives for dance and his individual approach has radicalised academic discourse about the body and choreographic art. Le Roy develops his work like a researcher while simultaneously focusing on the relationships between process and product and his own involvement in the process. He regularly initiates projects to questions mode of production, collaboration and conditions of working in groups, such as: E.X.E.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S. (1999-2000), Project (2003), 6 Months 1 Location (2008). His latest works such as the solos: Le Sacre du Printemps (2007), Product of Other Circumstances (2009) as well as the group piece Floor Pieces (2009) explore the relationships between spectators and performers.

MÅRTEN SPÅNGBERG

Mårten Spångberg is a performance related artist living and working in Stockholm. His interests concern choreography in an expanded field, something that he has approached through experimental practices and creative process in multiplicity of formats and expressions. With the architect Tor Lindstrand he initiated International Festival, an interdisciplinary practice merging architecture and choreography/performance. He initiated the network organization INPEX in 2006 and is since 2008 director for the MA program in choreography at the Univ. of Dance and Circus in Stockholm.

MARIA HASSABI

Maria Hassabi is a New York-based director/choreographer/performer. Since 1999, she has created seven evening-length works and seven short-form pieces and has regularly collaborated with artists from various disciplines. Her work has been presented at venues such as PS122, The Kitchen, Dance Theater Workshop, Danspace Project, Ballroom Marfa, and internationally in Belgium, Vienna, Moscow, Madrid, Sarajevo-Herzegovina, Grenoble, Portugal, Cyprus, and Greece. She is a recipient of the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, 2009 Grants to Artists Award.

KRÖÖT JUURAK

Krõõt Juurak (1981, Tallinn, Estonia) is a choreographer, performer. She studied choreography at the Arnhem Institute for the Arts and visual arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy Amsterdam. Currently lives and works in Vienna. Her performances "Once Upon", "Look Look" (with Anne Juren), "A Text is a List of.." (with Ralo Mayer) among others have toured various dance and theatre platforms in Europe and beyond. She collaborates with the projects EVERYBODYS, Mychoreogrphy, PAF (PerformingArtsForum). Current projects include "Autodomestication" (affective labour - artists

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and household pets), "Hanging Garden Party" with Pelican Avenue; "Naked Performers" and "Happening" with Chicks on Speed, "Ride the Wave Dude" with Mårten Spångberg.

BOJANA CVEJIC

Bojana Cvejic is performance maker and theorist, working in contemporary dance and performance also as dramaturg and performer. She has published in performing arts, music, philosophy journals, magazines and anthologies and is author of two books, most recently "Beyond the Musical Work: Performative practice" (IKZS, Belgrade, 2007). With Jan Ritsema she has developed a theater practice in a number of performances since 1999 (a.o. TODAYulyses, 2000), and has collaborated with X. Le Roy, E. Salamon, M. Ingvarseten a.o.. Her own performance work includes directing five experimental opera performances, most recently Mozart's Don Giovanni (BITEF, Belgrade). Cvejic has been active in teaching in a number of European educational programmes (e.g., P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels), as well as organizing independent platforms for theory and practice in performance: TkH Centar (=Walking Theory Center in Belgrade), PAF (PerformingArtsForum in St. Erme, France) and most recently "6 Months 1 Location" (CCN in Montpellier). She is currently writing a PhD ("Performance after Deleuze: Creating 'Performative' Concepts in Contemporary Dance in Europe") at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University in London. Since September 2009, she is teaching contemporary dance and performance at the Utrecht University, M.A. program Theater Studies.

NETO MACHADO

Neto Machado is an artist from Curitiba - Brazil. He has a Theater B.A. degree from FAP – Arts of Parana; he was fellow at Casa Hoffmann Center of Movement Research, curated by Rosane Chameki and Andréa Lerner, in 2004. He is part of Couve-Flor Minicomunidad Artística Mundial (cauliflower mini world-wide artistic community - www.couve-flor.org), collective interested in producing creative situations for independent artists. Works within in the performance field and collaborates with different artists such as Xavier Le Roy, Thiago Granato, Sandro Amaral and Cândida Monte. His work has been presented in different parts of Brazil and abroad.

PERRINE BAILLEUX

Perrine Bailleux is a singer and song-maker who lives and works in Paris. After studying business, and sharing her time between business consulting and visual arts explorations, she dedicated 3 years ago to D.I.Y solo music-making under the name of perrine en morceaux. She performed about 90 solo concerts in Europe. She is about to release her first album with American label Earsnake (Philadelphia, USA). She is interested in changing what pop can possibly mean. www.myspace.com/perrineb

EMMA KIM HAGDAHL

Emma Kim Hagdahl is choreographer and dancer based in Stockholm. She was educated at the University College of Dance, Stockholm and at Laban Contemporary Dance, London. She was a visiting student at ex.e.r.ce at CCN Montpellier, joined mychoreography and received the DanceWEB scholarship at ImPulsTanz Vienna International Festival in '08. She is the president of the network organisation Inpex and part of the editorial team for The Inpex – the world's first newspaper for choreography and dance and for The Swedish Dance History. Emma is working with Almost There in the Urban Connection Festival at Dansens Hus, tours with Fox n' Wolf with the swedish fashion label Weekday, choreographs solo works, and is part of the curatorial team with Embassy of for the Movement Research Festival 2011 in NYC.

LUÍS MIGUEL FÉLIX

Luís Miguel Félix is educated in theater and has been working mainly as a performer for choreographers. He was a DanceWEB scholarship recipient in 2007 and highlights his participation in the educational program ex.e.r.ce 08 and the consequent involvement with 6M1L (Six Months One Location). Currently touring Juan Domínguez' piece Blue and collaborating with Xaver Le Roy in his most recent piece.

TEA TUPAJIĆ

Tea Tupajić was born 1984 in Sarajevo. Studied theatre directing and radio art on 'The drama academy' in Zagreb. Works independently on the theatre and gallery projects performed in Zagreb and abroad. Currently working in collabora-

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rations with Jan Ritsema and Petra Zanki. In the year 2009 she was artist-in-residence at Tanzquartier, Wien. Writer and guest editor for the magazine 'Frakcija'.

MARCUS DOVERUD

Marcus Döverud is working as an artist and performer in the field of choreography, performance and gastronomy. He moves between different stages dealing with bodily, spatial and sonic utterances and their interrelations. Marcus was educated performer at the University College of Mime and Acting in Stockholm (teaterhogskolan.se) and has his MA studies in aesthetics from Södertörn University (sh.se) and has operated in amongst other the contexts of; Inpex (inpex.se), Weld (weld.se), PerformingArtsForum (pa-f.net) International-Festival (international-festival.org), Stockholms stadsteater (stadsteatern.stockholm.se), Färgfabriken Gallery (färgfabriken.se) Restaurant Landet (landet.nu) the above mentioned organizations, institutions and groups, each and all of them made up by a singular constellation of individuals.

CHRISTINE DE SMEDT

Christine De Smedt's artistic work is situated between dancing/performing, choreographing, coordinating, organizing and curating artistic projects. Being a member of the company Les Ballets C. de la B. (Gent, Belgium) she has produced her own work since 1993, a solo, *La force fait l'union, fait la force*, a traveling project in the Balkan, *Escape Velocity* (1998) and a large scale project, *9x9* (2000-2005). Christine collaborated for several years with Meg Stuart - Damaged Goods (1995-1999). Recently she worked with Mette Edvardsen, Mårten Spångberg and Xavier Le Roy, amongst others. Between 2005 and 2008 Christine collaborated with Eszter Salamon, creating *nvsbl, dance#1/ driftworks* and the group project *Transformers*. Currently she is working on a project involving portraits of different artists, and is engaged in various artistic collaborations.

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