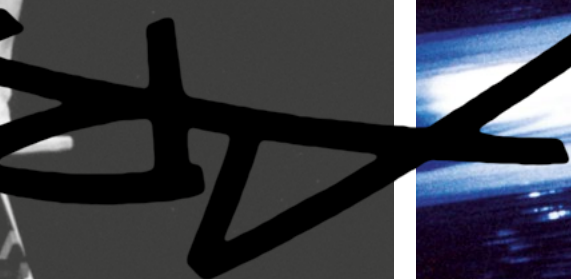
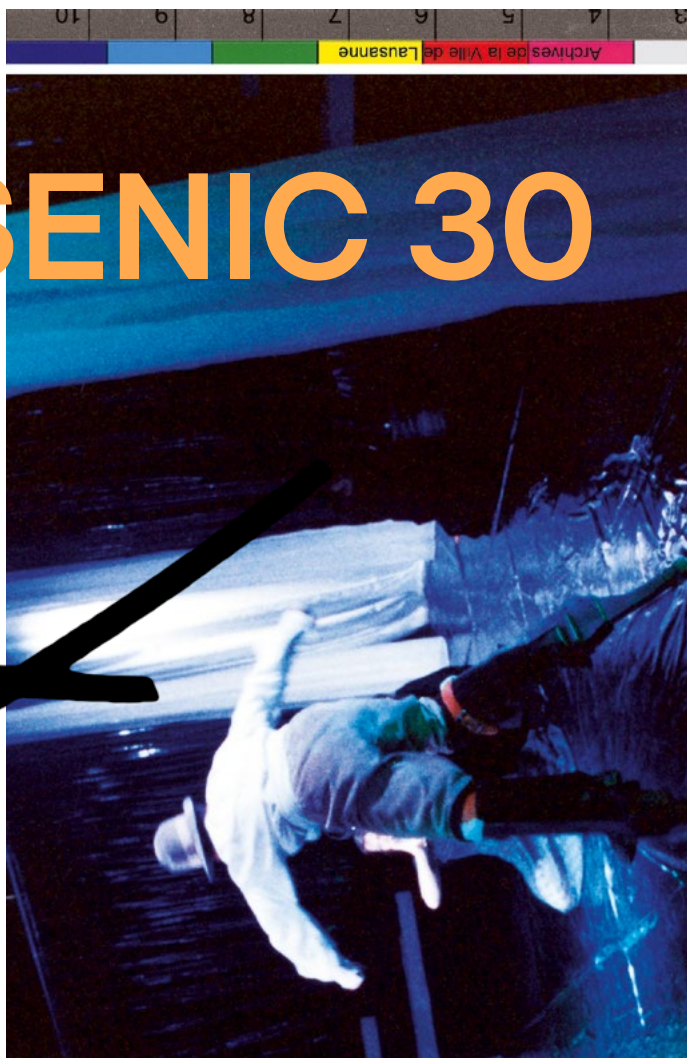


English

ARSENIC

ARSENIC 30



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Arsenic 30: why put together this book? Thirty years is a whole generation. The need to reflect feels legitimate, as much as the need to impart a history and to create narratives. During the 1980s, pioneers devised numerous large-scale cultural projects in French-speaking Switzerland, which considerably altered and enriched the artistic landscape of the time and remain a source of inspiration today. Several of these projects led to publications some thirty years later, including Belluard and Fri-Son in Fribourg, Post Tenebras Rock in Geneva, far° in Nyon, Dolce Vita and the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, and, further afield, the Centre culturel suisse in Paris. Each of these publications has approached its institution from a unique angle. Arsenic's approach is distinctive. It draws on its history and specificities to offer a series of reflections on the performing arts today: the way they function, their challenges, their cartographies and their evolution.

Patrick de Rham was looking to collaborate with someone from outside Arsenic, who was knowledgeable about the local context and the Swiss art scene, and he asked me to work with him to create this publication. We discussed what notions should be addressed and considered potential contributors; we chose individuals who are strongly involved in the cultural field, very alert to the artistic issues of the present and with in-depth knowledge of the way artists, institutions and networks function. Starting from specific keywords, we worked with each contributor to determine a direction for their piece.

Delphine Abrecht observes the relationship between the performing arts and the audience from her position as a researcher, artistic collaborator and audience member. Curator and researcher Daniel Blanga-Gubbay analyses the notions of hybridisation, performance, exoticisation and

consumption. Sally De Kunst conducts and shares sociological and philosophical research into the artistic value and functioning of performing arts companies. The assimilation of performativity by the performing arts is put into perspective through the careers of different artists by doctor of philosophy Florian Gaité. The vagaries of alternative practices, resistance and dissidence are explored by the curator and teacher Laurence Wagner.

As for the piece on the international involvement of Arsenic—which is both an incubator for local artists who are then exported abroad, and a venue that showcases innovative aesthetics from elsewhere—it takes the form of an interview that I conducted with Patrick de Rham, combining his experiences as audience member, partner, director of the institution and editor of the book. Over the course of our conversations, the scope broadened to include an exploration of the Arsenic's DNA.

Alongside these six in-depth contributions, which are quite free in their form and style, the publication offers additional insights. The accounts of the three previous directors—Jacques Gardel, Thierry Spicher and Sandrine Kuster—highlight a particularly significant aspect of Arsenic developed during their tenure. Thirty artists who have marked the history of the institution evoke, in their own words, both the experiences they have lived within its walls and the impact of the institution on their respective careers. The complete list of thirty years of programming attests to a liveliness that is both stimulating and dizzying. Finally, a selection of sixty images constitutes both a rich portrait gallery and a showcase of radical aesthetics.

We began discussing this editorial project in autumn 2019, with the structure and contents of the book becoming clearer in early 2020. What followed during the pandemic was quite

eventful: a very long succession of impulses, exchanges, interruptions, follow-ups, developments, plans made, unmade, remade or suspended. The pleasure that accompanies the publication of this book is all the more intense—and coupled with another complementary, digital delight. Indeed, the in-depth research carried out for the publication was also intended to provide the material for a new archival site—archives.arsenic.ch—which contains a complete directory of the Arsenic’s programme in inverse chronological order from 2022 to 1989. Each project is documented by an image and a bilingual French-English text. Two formats, over 1,200 projects, several generations.

10

FOREWORD

11

SIMONE AUGHTERLONY

**More
than
cake with
vanilla cream,
more than
silicone lube,
more than Rod
Stewart and Lil' Kim,
Massive Attack and
Jon Hopkins. I love
Arsenic more than
Vitra furniture, freshly
cut flowers, high fives
and cocaine. More
than a re-occurring eye
infection, more than a
finger up the bum or
a punch in the face. I
love working at Arsenic
because work there is not
just work but a burning
passion. A desire to
engage with the artistic
spirit that one feels
immediately on arrival.
Thank you Arsenic, it is
always a pleasure to
play with you.**

The first thing I
 picture when I think
 of Arsenic is "one of the last
 islands"...

Nowadays, as
 performances have
 become gentrified and
 theatres have lost their relevance,
 Arsenic is still a place that... vibrates,
 that is still trying to determine,
 like an undecided voter,
 which party it will vote
 for in the second round.

The atmosphere at
 Arsenic is friendly, and
 making my coffee at the bar
 during rehearsals is part of what
 makes me feel "at home".

MARCO BERRETTINI

Time
 A space
 And a little money
 Arsenic is to me
 The most precious
 necessity in what
 Virginia W. called
A room of one's own.

MAUD BLANDEL

**In
 both
 directions, neither
 too close nor too far apart.
 The stage/house relationship
 at Arsenic places the audience
 and the performance in an intimate
 relationship, favouring the attention to
 detail that characterises my work. The
 sobriety of this black box, of this almost
 naked space, the black seats and the
 absence of proscenium accentuate this
 sensation of one space for all.**

JONATHAN CAPDEVIELLE

Florian Gaité

Performing part: Theatre, dance and performativity

From post-dramatic theatre to performative dance, the performing arts have been moving in new directions for more than three decades, giving rise to new forms and critical issues. Notions of representation, performance, text and virtuosity, as well as the role of the audience, the “fourth wall” and the professional status of the performer are all susceptible to being questioned, suspected of conveying values deemed too bourgeois, academic or conservative, or even of playing into the hands of capitalist entertainment. This shift from the spectacular to the performative has been accompanied by a global crisis in the heritage of Western theatre. In the 1990s, several centres of creation in Europe, at once effervescent and alluring, organised the sedition. The Teatro Pradillo in Madrid hosted the first productions by La Ribot, Rodrigo García and Oscar Gómez Mata. Flanders reinvented dance at the crossroads of the arts¹, while the French scene² redefined it as the critical experience of a signifying body. This vast project of deconstruction accompanied a movement of decompartmentalization and transdisciplinary experimentation, in which the relationship between performing and visual arts was re-articulated. Finding the means of renewing themselves in the plastic practices of the body and of action, these playwrights and choreographers were no longer simply seeking to collaborate with visual artists but rather to establish a “disciplinary anarchy” à la John Cage, a sharing of methods, approaches and thoughts inherited from the Black Mountain College and the Judson Dance Theater³. All of them claimed, more or less, a common avant-garde theatrical or choreographic heritage⁴ that also included the great figures of body, conceptual and minimalist art. If the shadow of performance hung over European stages more than ever before, it has since become the marker of their evolution.

FLORIAN GAITÉ

The assimilation by the performing arts of this performative element enabled them to carry out a twofold project, i.e. to more firmly challenge the established norms, both of art and of society, while also exhibiting singularities never more evident than through the experience of the concrete body. The term “performance” indeed imposed itself in the vocabulary of the performing arts all the more so as it referred to a physicality considered to be the very essence of stage acting, while at the same time making it possible to go beyond the classical oppositions between private and public, action and discourse, everyday life and art. These expanded practices, at the crossroads of genres and registers, are thus intrinsically linked to a global critical project which, over the last three decades, has profoundly altered the landscape of the performing arts in Europe and around the world. With the action of singular bodies as a common thread, they give theatrical shape to the forms and questions raised by performance, while departing from the brevity and uniqueness of theatre’s mechanisms. The crisis of representation that they suppose reshapes the stage on which they are performed, which has become a plastic and urgent space in which singularities are played out.

Plasticity of the stage, bodies and sets

From Paris’ surrealist circles to Zurich’s Dadaists, Avant-garde performance soon established itself as a key discipline connecting the visual and the performing arts. In its wake, many of today’s directors and choreographers trained in art schools⁵, now teach in them⁶, or envision their performances from the perspective of visual arts. This confusion of genres is based on the sharing of common traits that encourage the performing arts to question, and at times to dismiss, their fundamentals, such as the narrative framework or the score. Indeed, performativity moves the show’s cursor towards its visual or concrete dimension, favouring plastic materiality and the bodily act. The stage becomes the place where events

manifest, brought back to their physical dimension, and the text becomes a pretext for action. To seize the stage plastically is to take scenography beyond its decorative function and turn it into a dramaturgical lever. The frank use of visual means in light, sound and costume designs then supports their artificial dimension in full awareness of their power of illusion. This type of performance, which finds its precursors in the Living Theater, the Bread and Puppet Theater, with Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman, which the critic Bonnie Marranca qualified as a “theatre of images”, most often takes the form of potentially contemplative tableaux vivants, marked by the minimalism of the dialogue and intrigue. This is the case of Romeo Castellucci’s plays, which focus on his questioning of the prohibition of representation, and on the stage as the site of its transgression, in the implementation of an overflowing plasticity, bordering on sensationalism. We can easily compare it with the theatre of Jan Fabre, Angélica Liddell or Rodrigo García, who borrow from performance its transgressive power in order to stage aesthetic shocks. In their respective works, the visual dimension of the performance is brought to a threshold of intensity commensurate with the pathetic effect it produces, such that one experiences a feeling of extreme sensitivity, the endurance of bodies and the exacerbation of their affects.

Soliciting the senses through the relaxed use of artifice does not prevent us from reflecting critically on the machinery of the spectacular. This ambiguous position becomes clear when this theatre of images draws from popular culture the means of subverting the alienating logic of entertainment. Philippe Quesne places this relationship between the contemporary individual and entertainment under the sign of disenchantment, a form of nihilism which colours the plastic power of his plays with a melancholy peculiar to the period, that of disillusioned subjects wandering in a world perceived as senseless. The reference to the world of media and to the

cultural industries is here intended to deflect its seductive power, to appropriate it, in order to better subvert its mercantile logic from within and to reveal the deadly aspects of consumerism. When Maud Blandel invokes cheerleading, when Jan Martens turns a gym into a discotheque, when Marco Berrettini, Mathilde Monnier or Émilie Pitoiset stage disco competitions and dance marathons, the performative is called upon to criticise the injunction to performance in our societies, the hectic rhythm of our lives, endured in spite of their celebratory atmosphere. Strongly marked visual universes, for example in the plays of Alexandra Bachzetsis, Théo Mercier, La Ribot or Marie-Caroline Hominal, can all act as an almost cynical means of invoking theatrical illusions to both give substance to the farce of the world and unmask its workings.

Criticism of the spectacular can take a diametrically opposite form by purely and simply disposing of it. The performative form is then mobilised for its capacity to put itself out without artifice, this time making an event out of the body's acts alone. The reduction of plasticity to its operative minimum finds its references in dance in Yvonne Rainer's "No Manifesto", in minimalist music or in Bruce Nauman's performances, while choreographic research returns to the exploration of fundamentals: the construction of space, the organisation of time and the use of ordinary gestures. It is then a question of reaching the point of zero theatricality, of invalidating the artifices of the show in order to produce conditions conducive to a reflection on the conditions of representation. The abandonment of the norms of the genre (costumes, music created for the play, lighting effects) and the harshness of this aesthetic, or its purity, help focus attention on the critical and conceptual load of the bodies present. The visible backstage and raw bodies in Jérôme Bel's shows, or La Ribot stretched out like a dying mermaid, signing her manifesto for motionless dance⁷, are all ways of minimising the seductive

power of the theatre and offering the spectator the opportunity to reflect on their expectations, whether fulfilled or not, and more broadly on the conditions of its reception.

Responding to the urgency of reality

The rupture with a space-time detached from ordinary time and the use of everyday gestures inscribe these performative forms in a regime of presence, of instantaneous figuration, which makes them more likely to keep in step with the present moment. Performativity replaces *representation* with the framework of a *presentation* more easily anchored in historical time, rendering the border between reality and fiction porous. The confusion between acting, an artificial technique, and the performative act, which is a priori non-simulated, opens up the performing arts to an interpretative realism which, taken to its extreme, takes on a quasi-documentary form. The "filmic performance" genre devised by Cyril Teste is directly inspired by the manifesto of the Dogma 95 filmmakers, who in that year publicly took a stand against illusionist art⁸. Filmed live with a hand-held camera and broadcast simultaneously, the action on stage follows the here and now of the show, the timeframe of narration merging with the timeframe of performance. Improvisation and openness to accidents are the markers of a type of performance that is being created partly as it is being performed, such as what Oscar Gómez Mata presents when he adapts a film by Lars Von Trier (*Le Direktor*). This is also the risk undertaken by Lætitia Dosch when she shares the stage with a horse whose reactions force her to reinvent her dialogues in real time (*Hate*). The performative regime provides them with the opportunity for immediate figuration, for a non-simulated presence that reflects the manner in which reality collides with us and obliges us to adapt, the way in which we "bump" into it, as Lacan put it, at that moment when the distance of representation or fiction no longer protects us.

The intimacy of the performative form with the present of its actualisation disposes it to act as a catalyst for the urgency of the world, linking together the individual act and the collective present. Milo Rau's theatre is a perfect example of theatrical realism, which elaborates its forms at the very heart of the lived experience. *La Répétition*, the first instalment in the series *Histoire(s) du théâtre*, in which he carries out on his own terms a "performative investigation" into his art, was directly inspired by a news item: the homophobic murder of a young Belgian man. In other productions, he casts people who are directly concerned by the historical events he brings up. He shares this approach with Fabrice Gorgerat, who evokes the massacre in Orlando and the catastrophe in Fukushima, or with Gisèle Vienne, whose work aims to translate the violence of our era in all its forms. Performance, a form of protest by definition, easily lends itself to denouncing the dysfunctions of the world and to awakening consciences. Just as Gina Pane's first *Actions* expressed her indignation at the passivity of individuals, just as the performances of Marina Abramović, Tomáš Ruller or Oleg Kulik denounced oppression in Soviet countries, performative dance and theatre manifest the same desire to be attuned to the historical context in which they are performed. In the 1990s the scale of the AIDS crisis strongly influenced the work of Alain Buffard and Jérôme Bel, who translated on stage the ordeal of the body, both ravaged by the disease and stigmatised by society. At that time, the nexus of sex and death was at the heart of the concerns of artists who turned their practice into a means of militant struggle, e.g. in favour of the rights and visibility of homosexuals people, such as Ron Athey, Franko B, Reza Abdoh, Bob Flanagan or Steven Cohen. The dramatic treatment of issues of race, identity, ecology, migration and security, to name just a few of the debates that have been shaking up our societies for three decades, thus offers a way to articulate socio-political struggles and acts, in its own way, as one of their levers of action. From public memory to private history, the shift in focus does

not alter this desire to grab hold of reality. The narrative of the self has thus imposed itself on the theatre stage by giving the situation of address the tone of a confession. This principle is particularly significant when Jérôme Bel asks dance professionals to transgress the unspoken taboo of speaking on stage⁹. This series of portraits presents the story of their journey, their memories, their feelings, as if it were about meeting the real man or woman hiding under the mask of interpretation. Without losing any of its authenticity, this form of exposure does not, however, prevent the recourse to autofiction. From *Adishatz/Adieu* to *Saga*, Jonathan Capdevielle thus makes a tragi-comic plunge into his own "family novel", integrating forgetfulness, falsification and rewriting, faithful to the way memory compensates for its losses. But the negotiation with fiction can be even more frank. *Rémi*, his first show for a general audience, takes the premise of Hector Malot's novel *Nobody's Boy* to tell his own story and, more broadly, to question family determinisms, the way in which the socio-cultural environment shapes personality. The autobiographical mode, to which the performative form lends itself, thus connects the artistic definition of performance to its sociological meaning, which can be found, for example, in Erving Goffman or Judith Butler, as a process of subjectivation. Indeed, the shared term "performance" helps articulate their dialogue. If the subject can be performed in the same way as a play or a dance, it is because the body and the work both refer to a common plasticity. From artistic performance to social or individual performativity, it is then a matter of saying how the body invents and transforms itself, makes itself singular, irreducible to a normative model.

As a critical counterpoint to the idea of identity, nowadays seized upon by populist, nationalist or conservative politics, singularity is what characterises a self-constituted subject whose personality is irreducible to a predefined social or political role. Its performance can therefore take on political value and act as a means of resistance to dominant representations. Focused on the subjectivity of the performer, the performative form introduces a regime of singularity that is no longer just the privilege of the professional. When individuals, whoever they may be, take to the stage, they enter a collective and visible field, but as soon as they use it in a performative way, their mere presence becomes a symbolic act, a claim to political existence. Performative works have thus become authorised spaces for all marginal, subordinate or minority identities lacking public expression.

Bridging the distance between performers and audience acts as a means of generating more immediate recognition and a more empathetic relationship between audience and performers. The abolition of the “fourth wall”, which usually keeps the two sides at a distance, contributes to level their relationship, enabling the audience to feel both more involved and potentially better represented. From a physical as well as a symbolic point of view, the audience no longer fades away in the darkness of the black box but is more fully taken into consideration, challenged and even involved in the apparatus. From directly addressing the audience to calls for participation, the performative forms affirm their inclusive project to foster the audience’s self-awareness. This approach involves in particular a levelling of the setting of the performance, reorganised horizontally in non-stage spaces. Among the first choreographers of her generation to take over exhibition spaces with such frankness, La Ribot thus imposed it very early on as an

organising principle for her *Distinguished Pieces*. The open, ambulatory form allows bodies to circulate in this way to level out the hierarchies between audience and performer: choosing one’s point of view, changing it at the end of each of these short works, stimulating attention by moving around works to energise the body and to encourage mobility of thought. For the Spanish performer, as for Pamina de Coulon, this levelling also questions hierarchies of knowledge and discourse, challenging academic classifications as well as phenomena of political appropriation and confiscation. This approach finds even stronger political resonance when the theatre literally leaves the stage to take over the public domain, in contact with urban life, as the situationists or the Living Theater did, and which has now become relatively common practice.

The inclusion of the audience can play out within the troupe or the company itself, by putting on stage very different bodies or bodies with unusual morphologies. But beyond that, it is also a question of putting in the spotlight non-professional dancers, singular bodies previously kept in the shadows. Jérôme Bel with a troupe of actors who have a disability (*Disabled Theater*) or with amateurs (*The Show must go on, Gala*), Massimo Furlan with non-professionals (*Travelling, Blue Tired Heroes*), La Ribot with performers who have Down’s syndrome (*Happy Island*), Romeo Castellucci with actors who are sick or have a disability (*Giulio Cesare*), Noé Soulier with the stage managers and editors of the Centre Pompidou (*Performing Art*), to name but a few, bring to the stage bodies that are usually invisible to remove them from their minority condition. The unpredictability, indiscipline and imprecision of the performers restrict the staging, forcing stage directors to adapt their methods and effectively challenging their authority. Acting then becomes a political act, and the theatre becomes an exhibition stage for diversity and social exclusion, anchored in a shared experience of the sensible within which power is distributed and class relations are defined. The

multicultural question thus imposed itself on Anglo-Saxon stages when it came to supporting the social and civic struggles of Afro- and Latin American populations. Nowadays, the situation is comparable, but in a very different way, for refugee populations (climatic, political, economic, etc.) or for queer and especially non-binary people, both in search of social recognition. With *81, avenue Victor Hugo*, a play created with undocumented migrants from Aubervilliers, Olivier Coulon-Jablonka places under the spotlight those whom we refuse to see, relegated as they are to the urban peripheries, while integrating them into a professional system that seeks to get them out of their precarious situation¹⁰. In another register, citizen involvement can take the form of a claim, that of a right to an image. Monsters of elegance and eccentricity, François Chaignaud, Steven Cohen or Mathias Ringgenberg, for example, define themselves beyond the binarities of gender and represent many subversive identities, in contrast to the hegemonic identities that break into the collective imaginary. In the context of the growing power of emancipation and social struggle movements (queer, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial), these oppositional figures impose themselves on the stage to manifest themselves in a strong sense and contribute to a revolution of perspectives.

The injection of the performative into performing arts over the last three decades has thus worked to defeat the injunction to performance, understood in its commercial dimension, as the watchword of our capitalist societies. This paradigm shift, this interplay of influences between practices that has led to thinking beyond the spectacular, has significantly modified the stage and its perspective as well as our way of thinking about dramaturgy, interpretation, writing and the relationship with the audience. To undertake the performative element of performing arts is therefore to renew the urgency of reality through the exaltation of stage presence, of the irreducible singularity of each body that (re)presents itself. More

than a decompartmentalising agent, able to bring art out of its authorised, even sanctuary-like domain, performance has above all imposed itself as the driving force of an inclusive movement, in which the lived body gives itself as self-reflexive and lends itself to criticism. The performative element then shares a common feature with the accursed share of existence that Bataille spoke of, in that it asserts itself as the possibility of a furious and gratuitous expenditure through which life proclaims its desire for expression.

- 1 Under the influence of choreographers such as Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Alain Platel.
- 2 Then led by Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Loïc Touzé, Myriam Gourfink, Alain Buffard, the Albrecht Knust Quartet and Boris Charmatz.
- 3 This filiation also includes historically, but more distantly, Dada or Fluxus performances and the happenings of Allan Kaprow.
- 4 We are thinking here, without attempting to be exhaustive, of Antonin Artaud, Bertold Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Tadeusz Kantor, Giorgio Strehler, Peter Brook, Patrice Chéreau, Ariane Mnouchkine, Claude Régy for theatre; Merce Cunningham, Anna Halprin, post-modern choreographers, Butoh choreographers and Pina Bausch for dance.
- 5 Let us mention here Romeo Castellucci, Philippe Quesne, Massimo Furlan, Pamina de Coulon or Théo Mercier, all of whom trained in art schools.
- 6 From HEAD-Genève, which counts La Ribot and Yan Duyvendak among its instructors, to Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, which has dedicated one of its workshops to dance, currently led by Emmanuelle Huynh.
- 7 *Pièce distinguée n°1. Muriédoise la sirena.*
- 8 Written by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg and proclaimed on 20 March 1995 at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in Paris, the manifesto sets out a radical ethic of the artist turned towards the direct translation of reality and the refusal of its deceptive transformation, even if it is driven by an aesthetic intention.
- 9 For example, Véronique Doisneau of the Opéra de Paris, Cédric Andrieux, a former dancer with Cunningham, or Pichet Klunchun, a Thai choreographer.
- 10 Initially paid by "passing the hat", without an employment contract, the performers, who were also invited to the Festival d'Avignon, were able to assert their professional status in order to resolve their situation.
- 11 TN: Contemporary Performing Arts Centre.

Taking a risk.

Sandrine offered me the main stage for a project she characterised as "dicey". But she was the only one who said: "OK, deal, we'll do *King Kong Théorie*". I liked taking the risk of being overexposed, of confronting what it means to be a young woman directing women performing a feminist text... it's the place of a birth and an emancipation.

ÉMILIE CHARRIOT

Dear Art

Scenic,

Thanks to you I am on the right path to:

**Owning my choices,
oddties and
limitations**

Keeping an open

mind and heart

Accepting spirituality and tuning a guitar

Not ever needing the instructions manual

Learning how to inflate more than one thing at a time

Thinking about when clothing is appropriate

and last but not least:

Knowing more about vending machine beer and natural wine.

Love.

RUTH CHILDS

**In the darkness
among the lowlives
In the depths of the Flon valley
A magic cage!**

PAMINA DE COULON

*“There is not one single form of opposition,
but a multitude of flights.”¹*

This text is structured like a ramble. It strides along, like a hiker, moving through certain theoretical landscapes and conceptual valleys. It is conceived as a wander down certain well-established paths, but also as a reflection on still fallow spaces that are resistant to travel.

The walker that I am first had to tread the paths where yellow, white and red markers allowed me to find my bearings, to align my steps with those who had paved the way, deciding that it was quite nice to go this way or quite practical to go that way. But once knowledge of the traditional routes had been tested, a certain weariness came to the fore. To this was added impatience, an infinite desire for discovery and a few small revolutions to find the impetus for departure and the desire to explore. Here are some observations gleaned along the way.

LAURENCE WAGNER

The forest of alternatives

The first space I walk through smells like stale beer, and at first my steps are slowed somewhat by the adhesion of the fermented liquid to my soles. However, fresh grass seedlings are layered over the hoppy vapours. The keys of this place have been entrusted to me with the possibility of cultivating a fertile ground and convening a whole city herein.

The place is steeped in stories that have infused it, and it is these stories that I want to hear. They resound like a loud dub sound check or like the desire and the need to allow visual, musical, theatrical, choreographic, performative, and curatorial practices to unfold outside the highways of bourgeois and fossilised creation.

Movements within this space are relatively free. One can enter day and night, forgetting time. Sometimes night swallows up the day and shrinks it outrageously. But the night is democratic, and the nocturnal life of the place holds sway over all the fauna that frequents it. In the black box of the theatre, once a concert hall, where the spectres of Nirvana and Lydia Lunch still hover, everything can be invented, mainly as a reaction, an opposition, an escape.

This posture seems fundamental to me, and I make it my starting point because it nourishes the very possibility of the alternative. When what is the norm is not enough, when the norm is what is validated by a certain majority often endowed with wallets, balls and power, we must reinject breath, movement and inquiry. The alternative, and especially the alternative in the performing arts, makes it possible to breathe this oxygen where futures are mobile and representations unpredictable. For in the norm's song book, the rules are too clear, instilled from early childhood and often relayed by school, State, church, and family... Their accomplices are plentiful, and the symphony is repeated over and over again, far too homogenous to convey the timbre of a life.

In the alternative lies the possibility of atonality, cacophony or simply the attempt to "sound" different. In the alternative lies the possibility of undermining conventions, stereotypes, and reminding us that what is agreed upon and established is a construction effected by the recurrence of certain systems of domination.

This is what the artist La Ribot, for example, does with her *Pièces distinguées* (of which pieces 27 to 34 were presented for the first time at Arsenic in the year 2000), which break down representations of "femininity", playing with them but also celebrating through performance the possibility of navigating through them as one pleases by pursuing a permanent metamorphosis.

31 In series 27 to 34, La Ribot endows the audience with a certain agency (the ability to become an agent), reminding them that, while they are spectators, they are also above all actors of their own gaze, bodies and relationship to the collective. The gesture has unprecedented political power, and the theatre's space makes it possible to initiate here not only a practice of artistic emancipation but also a practice of societal emancipation.

In my journey, I would like to underline this feature of the landscape: in the alternative, there lies the political. In the genesis and reception of alternative artistic forms, there dwells the ability to change subjectivities, or at least to learn about possible variants.

Possible variants that the choreographer Gilles Jobin also explores in the relationship to the body, namely in $A + B = X$ (which premiered at Arsenic in 1997). In this work, the body is celebrated as a potential generator of hybrid chimeras where reason allows itself to be lost in danced gestures that constitute new identities. It is as intoxicating theoretically as it is galvanizing aesthetically.

On the shores of committed action

The resistance is getting organised. On the stage, in the relationship with the audience and with new institutions. This leads me to a new space, not disconnected from the previous one since it is defined in its extension. It is a space of struggles. This horizon is so vital for me that it is often the motor of both physical and mental journeys. These journeys are themselves nourished by many authors, thinkers, philosophers, artists, activists and sometimes all of them at the same time. In this terrain, it is a question of giving resonance to contemporary struggles, of relaying them in the space of the theatre through artistic practices, but also of simply giving them the

voice, visibility and attention granted by the stage.

To make dissenting voices heard and transform them, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida would say, into a heteroglossia. To multiply and densify semantic interpretations. To show insubordinate bodies and to convey subversive representations, free from any colonial heritage. To complexify the world, to deconstruct it in order to rebuild it again in and through engaged artistic practices.

"Give what touches you the power to make you think", the performer Pamina de Coulon reminded us, quoting the philosopher Isabelle Stengers in one of her virtuoso spoken essays (*Fire of Emotions: The Abyss*, Arsenic, 2018). From affect, to attempt to generate thought and give birth to forms.

Going back a bit in time, a piece by Denis Maillefer that I saw at Arsenic in 2006 comes to mind: *Gênes 01*, based on a text by Italian author Fausto Paravidino. The play was a polyphonic representation of the violence of police repression during the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. The story revolved around the murder of the activist Carlo Giuliani by a *carabiniere*. And although the show could not redress this tragedy, it could at least provide material to heal, by relaying and investigating the excesses of supposedly democratic systems.

The edge of the margin

But since we are now reaching a summit with a bit of a view, I would like to take a sip of water and quote Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera (*Performance Saga*, Arsenic 2009). Speaking online on the NTGent website in May 2020 at the inaugural session of the *School of Resistance* initiated by director Milo Rau (*Five Easy Pieces*, Arsenic, 2017), she introduced the concept of *alegality*. The latter is of particular interest to me because it gives the opportunity to think not within

32

TOPOGRAPHIES

33 a framework allowed by the legal establishment but on the margins of it, in a space that has not yet been conceptualised by it. *Alegality* fills the interstices of the law, operating in the wilderness, where the establishment has not yet penetrated. In this sense, the alternative and the political in the performing arts are also an *alegal*, revolutionary tool, bringing into play the body of the artist in configurations unthought of or never done before. It is a workbench of inventions, a lever for ideas that have not yet had time to be recognized or banned (because they have been labelled "illegal").

Tania Bruguera, who is full of stimulating concepts, also talks about *est-ética*: a way of being and of defending an ethical commitment in order to bring about an aesthetic transformation. In this sense, many of the artists mentioned in this text or active on a stage such as that of Arsenic have followed a path that seems to me to be somewhere on the threshold between the hill of *alegality* and the valley of *est-ética*, where innovation germinates.

Meandering by this outcrop, we could evoke the director Oscar Gómez Mata and his company L'Alakran (e.g. *Optimistic vs Pessimistic*, Arsenic, 2005), who in his work likes to tickle the boundaries of the possible, of the representable. He is concerned with creating discussion and debate with the public, even if it means resorting to arguing. "The pleasure of creation is the power of transformation" was the statement that accompanied his play *Suis à la messe, reviens de suite* (Arsenic, 2011).

And transformation has many friends. The idea here is not to provide an exhaustive list, but rather to mention a few practices that employ this parameter. This is the case of *Bleu provisoire* by the performer Yann Marussich (Arsenic, 2001) and *Bleu Remix*, performances during which the artist substitutes the red of blood for the blue of an artificial liquid. The transformation is disturbing, while at the same time generating a body-sculpture that is as unsettling as it is unexpected.

LAURENCE WAGNER

Commenting on her show *Holes & Hills* (Arsenic, 2016), actress Julia Perazzini said: "I see identity as something in perpetual mutation, a mirror of the impermanence of things. A territory both real and imagined, a territory to be conquered". She also invoked the metaphor of landscape and its rolling hills to speak of the undulating nature of her wanderings and search for identity.

The ocean of time

The territory covered here is only partial, but at the end of this itinerary, here are a few final considerations so that the journey undertaken on this walk can be further explored.

In life or in the theatre, let us try to continue to unite communities, to show solidarity, to fight for equal opportunities, to lend an ear, to summon experimental knowledge and invisible or minority forces. To take care of each other, to make our desires come alive and to give each other strength within our respective and shared trajectories.

I conclude this text with the words of the author Ursula K. Le Guin from her book *The Wave in the Mind* (2004): "The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary."

**My
dear Arsenic, I
discovered within your
walls a kind of theatre I
had never seen before.
Frais mais déjà pourri by
Marijs Boulogne, the shows
of Marielle Pinsard... Steven
Cohen giving himself an
enema. A space of artistic
freedom that seemed
limitless.
IRREVERENCE—
EXPERIMENTATION—
HUMOUR—SURPRISE: FOR
ME THAT'S THE ARSENIC.
What I have not found
elsewhere is the community
of artists. WE WENT TO
SEE EACH OTHER'S
REHEARSALS, WE HELPED
EACH OTHER, WE ATE
TOGETHER.
Affectionately, and thank
you for everything!**

1 Paul B. Preciado, «Savoir_Vampires@ War», 2006. In *Multitudes* n°20, spring 2006.

For me
 Arsenic is like a
 hole, you have to sink
 into it, and it's often
 difficult to pull oneself out.
 It's also a terrace for taking
 cigarette breaks in the sun.
 Finally, it's the cutting edge
 of the very contemporary, as
 its visual identity indicates.
 Above all, it is trust without
 limits.

MARION DUVAL

**Arsenic
 Lentil Soup**
 Soak the
 lentils for a
 few hours or
 overnight. Sauté a
 pinch of cumin and
 a little chilli powder
 in olive oil. Add
 the lentils with their
 soaking water and
 stock, and cook them
 over low heat. Mix plain
 yoghurt with salt, garlic
 and lemon or orange
 juice. When the lentils
 are cooked, turn off
 the heat, add the
 yoghurt mixture, and
 serve immediately.
**Arsenic: hot, sour,
 sweet, spicy,
 creamy.**

YAN DUUVENDAK

I was brought to Arsenic by Gilles Jobin. We did a project together, *Blinded by love*, during a sleepless night, in the basement. We worked for 3 or 4 days, and I even left some works there, metal plates with cross cuts, the motif that accompanies my life and my art. Thierry Spicher was amazing, generous, passionate, and respectful. He was energizing, he loved performance, he was super professional, very pragmatic, and friendly. He came to the UK to see live art, and then invited me to present my solo *Oh lover boy*. Switzerland offers excellent conditions for artists, and Arsenic was even more special.

FRANKO B

39 Jacques Gardel
Creation of an alternative venue in Lausanne in 1989: Utopia or reality?

The Atelier de Travail Théâtral (Att), initiator and founder of the Centre d'Art Scénique Contemporain (CASC)¹¹, was created in 1981 with Miguel Québatte following my departure from Théâtre Onze. Our plan was by no means to open a new venue in Lausanne, but rather to develop our research into the art of the actor and the different avenues of theatrical creation. The opening of the CASC came about by chance and a series of unforeseen circumstances.

Our main objective was to set up a professional company following a three-year training programme with young candidates. During this training programme—whose aim was pedagogical, but also sought to establish our presence in Lausanne—we organised the first International Festival of Contemporary Theatre in 1984, which welcomed theatre companies from Poland, Denmark, Belgium, France, England, Italy and Switzerland. Ten thousand audience members attended the event.

Four years later, in 1988, when I was looking for a venue to present *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a combination of circumstances that it would take too long to recount here led the Municipality of Lausanne to make available to the Att a hall formerly used by apprentices in the building sector.

The discovery of this space, and of the entire building—which, in addition to the large hall, included other rooms and sanitary facilities—was a revelation. The place only needed a few tweaks in order to be converted into a public space. A dream for anyone who has ever pictured themselves in charge of a cultural venue! Except that for me, creation and research have always been a priority!

JACQUES GARDEL

Nevertheless, what prompted me to embark on this adventure was the idea of a venue open to theatre and dance companies, a venue that could become an alternative to official institutions—not to replace them, but to offer audiences other models of theatrical creation. The challenge was considerable, but feasible. The project piqued the interest of the authorities. Thanks to a relatively modest sum (140,000 Swiss francs) granted by the city of Lausanne, the Centre d'Art Scénique Contemporain opened its doors in January 1989 with the following objectives:

“To bring together theatre and dance companies and audiences in one venue, in order to develop an alternative to institutional models and offer a diversity of approaches to avenues of creation”.

The adventure of the Centre d'Art Scénique Contemporain, which over time would become the Théâtre Arsenic or Arsenic, is the story of a group of passionate and totally committed people, including those involved in the conversion of the site, as well as its administration, technical department and reception.

In addition to programming companies from French-speaking Switzerland, the CASC's beginnings were marked by several highlights:

- The *Prix romand des compagnies indépendantes de théâtre et de danse*, which took place from 1991 to 1995, consisted of awarding prizes to the three best productions of the year in French-speaking Switzerland, selected by a jury of thirteen members.
- Three further editions of the International Festival of Contemporary Theatre, in 1989, 1992 and 1994.

- 41 – The opening of a literary cabaret, “Le Crachoir”, which ran from 1993 to 1996, directed by Domenico Carli.
- A *carte blanche* collaboration with the Théâtre populaire romand in La Chaux-de-Fonds, which consisted in welcoming Charles Joris' team for one month, during which they presented several of his productions.

In 1996, when the Centre d'Art Scénique Contemporain became a Foundation, I left the adventure, which had lasted seven years, during which I personally produced six creations.

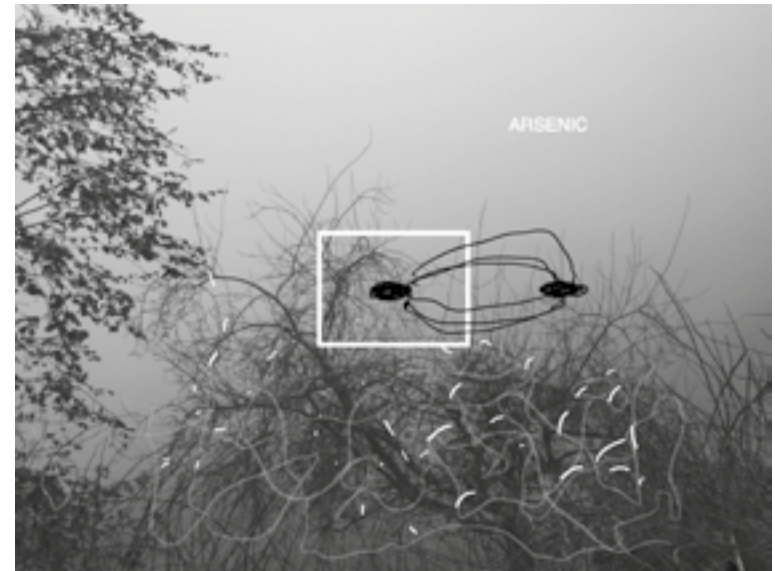
After major transformations and investments, Arsenic has become an official institution on the same level as the Théâtre de Vidy. The positive aspect is that the sustainability of the venue is now guaranteed!

Yesterday's utopia has become today's reality!

A little over twenty years ago, Arsenic was the only place where it was possible to create, to invent offbeat, singular projects, projects that were not specifically related to the stage. It was a place of permanent questioning where it was possible to see unique artistic projects that had no place elsewhere. It was a committed, festive laboratory that radiated a special energy. We worked there for almost 15 years, each time with immense pleasure.

MASSIMO FURLAN

RODRIGO GARCÍA



**Arsenic
*da caña****

**Arsenic is a venue
for contemporary
performance work that
aims to spark a global
response. Here, we
come up with strategies
for infiltration.**

**Just like the singularity that lies
at the heart of a black hole, of an
intense gravitational force: Arsenic
*da caña!***

* DAR CAÑA IS SPANISH SLANG FOR SOMETHING THAT
PROVOKES AND STIMULATES.

OSCAR GÓMEZ MATA

Thierry Spicher

Without a title but with much fanfare

When the brand-new Foundation Board of Arsenic appointed me director in 1995, I did not fully gauge the extraordinary combination of circumstances that would turn this place into one of the epicentres of European emergence (and possibly more).

What transpired is the result of two bits of chance, sifted through the local context and harnessed to serve a volunteer framework programme.

So, it all began by chance (well, almost, my years at Fri-Son having served as a crucible).

It was by chance that the global framework conditions of the late 20th century had led sub-cultures and even counter-cultures—such as English club culture, German-speaking squat culture, counter-cultures in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, and alternative or autonomous centre cultures elsewhere—to be ripe for the leap towards institutionalisation. After many years spent inventing and investing in alternative venues, bringing them to life and applying horizontal discipline, an entire generation of artists and cultural workers was ready to take over the stamping grounds of legitimate art.

Chance encounters, too: first and foremost, that of Gilles Jobin and La Ribot, which in turn led to that of Lois Keidan, Maria Carmela Mini and Laurent Goumarre, followed by many artists, programmers, journalists and other opinion makers. Thanks to all these energies, an ephemeral family was born, and Arsenic became one of its homes. We were rich in the essentials: spaces in which to create and stage time in abundance, an audience, critics and, above all, gracious and not-too-cosseting friends—the only worthwhile kind. What

THIERRY SPICHER

is more, our geographical position, sheltered from the salons and somewhat on the fringe, offered the peace necessary for one of the conditions of true research, in art as in everything else: the right to get it wrong, to fall with the chance to learn from our mistakes in order to progress and from time to time succeed, find, move, surprise (call it what you wish).

Local circumstances also proved to be precious allies.

When it came to already legitimate forms of artistic expression and well-established aesthetics, the opening of new venues, the development of pre-existing venues, the conservatism of flagship institutions and the increase in resources enabled many powerhouses to find a roof elsewhere than at Arsenic. We outsiders found its doors open and its stages free (well, almost).

The fallowing of the Rock Urbaines festival made it possible to invent the Urbaines and thus to implement a tool that would prove to be a wonderful sounding board for the emerging and interdisciplinary forms that we wanted to highlight.

The trust and total freedom awarded to us by the venue's tutelary authorities, as well as the unfailing commitment of a tiny team that was foolhardy enough to always give that little bit more, made it possible to bring about a voluntarist framework programme, which perhaps ultimately explains the evolution of Arsenic between 1996 and 2002.

I spent seven wonderful years there, with incredible colleagues, and if I had to do it all over again, I would do it all the same—only worse.

PS: We had a lot of fun, too.

Diversity prevents inbreeding and pushes you forward, anything seems possible. Stuck between Van Acker and Pinsard, you invent things, cobble together thingummies—you try to be honest. The place makes diverse forms rub up against each other as an enormous energy carries you: in this maelstrom, you move forward, you are given space and time. I was happy there.

Arsenic
place for the exercise of art, where
the one
constraint is the
is given to us.

For me
is the most
conductive
and only binding
absolute trust that

FRANÇOIS GREMAUD

49 Sandrine Kuster
About "Performances en tout genre"

Because so-called 'independent' artists did not recognise themselves in the artistic approaches of the Lausanne institutions of the time, Arsenic opened in 1989 to become a space dedicated to theatrical research, to innovative and experimental forms: a contemporary performing arts centre for artistic discoveries and risk-taking.

Successive artistic directors have cultivated this precious DNA, unique as it is in Western Switzerland's performing arts landscape, actively participating in expanding its influence both within Switzerland and well beyond our borders.

Thus, the "Performances en tout genre" (Performances of all kinds) programme, which ran for three editions between 2004 and 2007, embodied the artistic characteristics of the venue. It was vital to offer a place for these kinds of expression to exist, seeing as they were hardly represented in theatre programmes at the time, except in a few festivals or art schools.

The name "Performances of all kinds" made it possible to explore performance in the broadest sense of the term, without confining it to the strict definition established in the 1970s, and also to host short forms and site-specific performances.

The first edition was developed with Yan Duyvendak, a performance artist and teacher in the 'art-action' section of the École des Beaux-Arts de Genève, now called the HEAD. This programme continued over three seasons with the collaboration of Andrea Saemann, a performance artist active in 're-enactment' practices and the history of female performance.

Performance that involves the body directly, through the latter's interaction with materials or the animation of

SANDRINE KUSTER

apparatuses, that allows this connection with direct, immediate action, gives the spectator the opportunity to be its witness and privileged recipient, generating an active and unique audience-artist relationship. Performance is a physical, poetic and aesthetic experience. It places the body directly in the grip of time and space in an intense and intimate relationship with the spectator. The body thus reifies a form of poetic, and consequently political, insurrection.

As performance has the ability to reveal the present moment, the interpretative framework it develops subsequently allows us to appreciate other forms of scenic art such as theatre or dance, making the spectator more sensitive to the presence of bodies and the deepening of space-time. This art comes 'before' theatre, before the creation of characters, or the interpretation of a text. It comes 'before' dance and the development of movement in space.

In this sense, performance is the queen of the performing arts disciplines—and Arsenic is the structure that, since its very beginnings, has welcomed this kind of scenic form. From the moment you walk through the doors of Arsenic, you know that an extraordinary adventure, a unique sensual and intellectual experience is about to take place.

The spectator is ready for it, and knows that they will emerge somehow 'displaced', yet inhabited by the vital sensation of having been immersed in the unknown.

**We always
love to come to
Arsenic for shows—
to be honest, I think it's one of the venues
where the fewest people leave during our
shows... People seem to dig our references,
they are fun and up for crazy experiments.
Plus: there have always been great parties
with good DJs after our
shows... And I have always
associated our shows
here with a nice dive into
Lake Geneva—I really
hope we get back
there soon to
make *TANZ*
happen after
CoVid!**

**For
me, Arsenic is
a place for showing and
sharing.**

**There I have always had
the feeling of having the ideal
mental and physical space to
present projects; the public is
super informed and up for new
experiences. My attendance
varies, but each time it's a pleasure
to return. While I'm waiting on
the stage, I like to know that the
audience has to first go outside
in order to enter the room.**

MARIE-CAROLINE HOMINAL

Olivier Kaeser:

We have spoken to several people who know Arsenic well. Each has their own enlightening personal perspective, which is nevertheless but a fragment. It turns out that you are certainly one of those who know Arsenic and its history best, since you have accumulated experience as an audience member since the end of the 1990s, as a cultural partner—in the role of director of Les Urbaines—from 2007 to 2016, and as director of Arsenic since 2017. Moreover, for the preparation of this publication, you immersed yourself in the list of shows and artists presented since 1989, which gives you a complete and precise overview of Arsenic's 30 years of programme. This interview will attempt to offer an understanding of the dual international role that Arsenic has developed over the course of its history: on the one hand, as an incubator for artists from French-speaking Switzerland who emerged here before maturing elsewhere; and on the other hand, as an importer of innovative artistic sensibilities from other European countries. As this dual role is inseparable from the spirit and functioning of the institution, we will be analysing Arsenic's very DNA.

PATRICK DE RHAM IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVIER KAESER

I. Fundamentals

When you look at the list of artists who have presented work at Arsenic over the last 30 years, what is your most significant observation?

Patrick de Rham:

At first glance, you notice the presence of practically all the artists who have made the contemporary French-Swiss scene renowned internationally. They created or co-produced many of their shows here, often from the very beginning of their careers: the 2b company, Marco Berrettini, Émilie

Charriot, Lætitia Dosch, Yan Duyvendak, Massimo Furlan, Oscar Gómez Mata, Marie-Caroline Hominal, Gilles Jobin, La Ribot, Joël Maillard, Denis Maillefer, Yann Marussich, Andrea Novicov, Marielle Pinsard, Dorian Rossel, Philippe Saire, Nicole Seiler, Cindy Van Acker, Velma... and I am likely forgetting some (AN: my apologies to them).

How do you explain this phenomenon? Do you think there is a common “Arsenic spirit” that persists, regardless of successive directors’ different personalities?

Although these artists owe their success primarily to the quality and originality of their work, of course, it is no coincidence that so many of them people the history of the institution. I say this with humility, because most of these artists were successful long before my arrival at the head of the institution. The directors who preceded me had a very good nose, but it is also thanks to the great freedom offered by Arsenic that many artists have been able to develop very unique positions on the international scene. Thierry Spicher instituted a format of systematic aesthetic risk-taking, based on trust: horizontal, sometimes very poetic or transgressive risks, transdisciplinary exchanges, in which we see visual artists and musicians beginning to take possession of the performative medium on stage, and the arrival of outsiders in the field of the performing arts. Arsenic has also invited foreign artists with unconventional approaches—some may remember the performances of Franko B bleeding out in front of a stunned audience, the English artists of Artsadmin with La Ribot, the first plays of Jonathan Capdevielle or Gisèle Vienne, the poetic tinkering of Philippe Quesne or the cheerfully irreverent world of Zerep. Then comes the inclusion of the queer referential landscape by François Chaignaud, Vincent Riebeck and Florentina Holzinger or even Trajal Harrell, and other approaches that challenge the idea of normative storytelling, such as those of Dana Michel, Samira Elagoz and Ligia

Lewis, not to mention the head-on shock of Ann Liv Young’s performance at Les Urbaines. These numerous colliding aesthetics echo the radicalness of certain Swiss artists, linking the works created here not with the commonplace of a somewhat bourgeois globalised scene but with approaches that are rich with political alternatives. When this happens, we can’t help but imagine we are taking part in something bigger than just another Swiss contribution to the market: a truly international constellation of new societal and cultural offerings.

Ultimately, there is therefore no “Arsenic aesthetic”, but rather a number of contemporary aesthetics that come together in a place that is first and foremost at the service of its artists’ concerns. Arsenic is practically the only venue in the region (along with the Théâtre de l’Usine in Geneva and certain festivals) to have a so constant mission and support for this contemporary and transdisciplinary line of the performing arts. This is an enormous asset in terms of developing a presence that is legible at the international level. Thus, it seems to me that, “fundamentally”, there is an “Arsenic method”, based on the empowerment of artists, with ambitious goals, which has been passed down through the different tenures.

How was this method formulated over time?

These foundations are rooted in the fertile experimental ground established in 1989 by the first artistic director of the venue, the theatre director Jacques Gardel. Just after the arrival of Maurice Béjart in Lausanne, to whom substantial funds had been granted, Gardel, alongside an associative committee composed mainly of artists who did not have access to Vidy, founded the Centre d’art scénique contemporain in the former mechanical workshops of the EPSIC, which soon came to be called by its nickname: Arsenic. As its name indicates, the venue was imagined as a creative centre, a multidisciplinary laboratory founded by alternative artists

for alternative artists, vectors of social transformation. These ideas blossomed with the arrival of Thierry Spicher in 1996, who radicalised and internationalised the concept. He instigated important transdisciplinary exchanges, the programme became more international, and the venue and its artists established a strong presence on the international stage. He was a key figure in the development of the venue, and Arsenic of today owes much to his vision. However, it was the arrival of Sandrine Kuster in 2003 that brought political recognition and enabled the institution to truly grow. She worked extremely hard to promote the successes and potential of Arsenic, which led to the decision to renovate and expand the venue in 2011 as well as to increase its budget. She initiated an excellent synchronisation with the first graduating classes of the performing arts school La Manufacture and nurtured a fruitful collaboration with Vincent Baudriller, the newly appointed director of the Théâtre de Vidy. The latter in turn provided a home for the more established artists of this now flourishing scene, creating space at Arsenic and thus resolving the funnel effect that had developed over time, with emerging artists squeezing in alongside established artists.

This method, based on the urge of the artists, mixing freedom, loyalty, relationships, confrontation and ambition, has been carried on continuously, and regularly brought up to date, by the venue's four successive directors. My ambition is to preserve and renew this experimental flame, to place artists within an international artistic referential context, by deepening political and societal lines of inquiry and reinforcing exchanges with the new performing arts scenes as well as with contemporary art and between "academic" and "popular" arts, social movements and activists. After five seasons, almost two of which were obliterated by the Covid health crisis, I am beginning to see the results.

What impact did taking risks with the programming, which allowed little-known artists to present highly experimental work, have on the life of Arsenic?

A fundamental influence. The venue cultivates complete trust in the artists' experiments, their autonomy and that of the audience. Thus, Arsenic has never had any inclination towards the star system of contemporary performance—admittedly, Rodrigo García has been seen here, and Milo Rau, who was only programmed once, as well as Romeo Castellucci in the 1990s, when he was still unknown. Very few famous actors or dancers have trodden its boards, or at least not at the height of their fame; it has played host to very few works from the repertoire or adaptations of well-known works. Arsenic cannot therefore capitalise on what I would call the "pre-validation" of its content, which is rarely Chekhov, *The Rite of Spring* or Titeuf, never Isabelle Huppert or the latest Patrice Chéreau. I say this without contempt: there can only be an Arsenic because there is such diversity in our cultural heritage. But great men or great myths are simply not a part of our DNA.

This is the challenge of the contemporary. It is not about denying the past, but each work must win audiences over on its own, without swaying them in advance. Arsenic's audience has understood this so well that it might even be disappointed not to be surprised, or not to be confused. Arsenic has always been careful not to force the interpretation of its shows. What is conveyed here, I believe, is rather the freedom to think, to debate, to hesitate, to dream, to contemplate or to hate, while feeling like you are at the heart of the action. About fifteen years ago, the philosopher Jacques Rancière theorised the intellectual and aesthetic emancipation of the spectator. The great trust that Arsenic has in its artists is also a trust in its audience, all its audiences.

Ultimately, beyond the shaping of common concerns, it is rather the affirmation of differences that has built the identity of this creative centre. What is expected of the artistic act is resolutely of the order of displacement rather than comfortable immobility. Of course, this position requires a great deal of vigilance and self-questioning on the part of the curator, as well as a sustained effort towards ensuring accessibility and inclusion. This horizontality must be worked on constantly, accepting that Arsenic's actual or potential audiences are also a source of movement, learning and enrichment for us.

III. Transdisciplinarity

You mentioned the notion of transdisciplinarity, which is a very important part of Arsenic's DNA. Can you explain why and how it is encouraged and developed?

If we go back to the 1990s, in addition to the theatre and dance that already coexisted at Arsenic, hybrid forms and atypical formats began to flourish: performance, body art, lecture-performances, *tableaux vivants*, performative installations, multimedia, musical theatre, etc. The artists would assert their idiosyncrasy, their difference, valuing the notions of originality or transgression rather than excellence. In parallel, a few other institutions in the French-speaking part of Switzerland helped to encourage this transdisciplinary and international openness: the Théâtre de l'Usine, the GRÜ and La Bâtie in Geneva, the Belluard in Fribourg, the far° in Nyon, the CAN in Neuchâtel, the Centre culturel suisse in Paris as well as numerous off-spaces. A paradigm shift took place whose effects are felt to this day. The idea of expertise was eschewed in favour of the concepts of emergence, crystallisation, and even unlearning.

In this context, while “pure” forms such as movement and text were by no means ruled out, the aim was to broaden the possibilities open to artists and projects. If you look at the programme of Arsenic some twenty years ago, you will find a large number of endeavours that challenged the framework of their respective disciplines: in lieu of a show, the audience might have attended an unusual concert (Velma), an interactive experience that bordered on the forbidden (Elodie Pong), a “reenactment” of scenes from popular culture (Massimo Furlan, or early performances by Yan Duyvendak), choreographers who situated their questions elsewhere than within the usual codes of performance (Yann Marussich, who worked on control of the immobile body; the first works by Cindy Van Acker, who focused on muscle movements hacked by electric shocks; Gilles Jobin, who developed a vocabulary of horizontal bodies on the floor and conceived his scores as algorithms). In a similar spirit, other artists revisited vocabularies considered vernacular (Arthur Kuggeleyn, who loops MTV-style pop movement sequences in twisted and doped-up universes; Marielle Pinsard, who systematically includes DJs in her theatrical spaces and makes multiple references to the world of television).

It sounds almost banal to say it today: trying to think beyond the framework of disciplines—and therefore institutional frameworks—signifies not only non-conformist forms but also questioning these forms' societal references. To take more contemporary examples: New York choreographer Trajal Harrell's mix of postmodern dance and voguing or Swedish choreographer BamBam Frost's mix of urban, club and contemporary choreography references are attempts to share histories—the official histories of the dominant socio-cultural groups, and the ignored histories of groups that have been dominated, colonised, racialised or made into minorities—that go far beyond a simple exchange of choreographic vocabularies. The distinctive performances of Julia Perazzini,

Lætitia Dosch or Kayije Kagame also go beyond simple formal innovation, telling the stories of the construction of their authors' sensibilities and their place in society.

When two disciplines become permeable, not only do their forms influence each other, but their contexts confront each other: a visual artist who has taken up choreography—such as Eddie Peake, who is mainly active in biennales, galleries and art centres—approaches and looks at the danced object in an atypical way. In addition, choreographers such as Alexandra Bachzetsis, Mårten Spångberg or Alex Baczynski-Jenkins, who come from the world of dance, have found new thematic and formal possibilities in museums and art centres in recent years that they did not have in theatres. The world of visual arts has been quite transformed by the aesthetics they bring. Currently, in addition to the usual network of theatres and festivals, Arsenic has more and more joint artist projects with art centres such as the Centre d'art contemporain in Geneva, MoMA PS1 in New York, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Auto Italia in London, the Schinkel Pavilion in Berlin or the museum projects of the Viennese festival ImPulsTanz. We also co-produced the video work by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz that represented Switzerland at the 2019 Venice Biennale and are increasing the number of video-performance co-productions this 2021–22 season thanks to special funds encouraging the diversification of media in the wake of the Covid crisis—art films by the Alpina Huus collective, Giulia Essayad, Sabrina Röthlisberger or Astrit Ismaili.

In traditionally established artistic fields, certain ideas—such as the relationship to the audience, the notion of expertise, the relationship to heritage or to an often-mythologised history—are rarely called into question. This brings us back to the question of dominant views, the white, bourgeois, male, hetero “gaze”. To challenge these views, today's artists are feeling the need for new narratives and new, undisciplined,

non-standardised, minority or alternative forms. This results in great potential, but also a responsibility to be sincere and relevant to the contexts addressed: there is an indisputable correlation between aesthetics and ethics. Without this, the idea of thinking about this kind of transversal freedom simply as a formal, opportunistic toolbox would seem to me to lead to cynicism, loss of meaning, and cultural appropriation.

IV. Characteristics

What characterises the artistic, human and financial support that Arsenic offers to artists? How does it differ from other models?

With a budget of 2.3 million, Arsenic is within the Swiss average for an institution that co-produces independent companies. It is a budget comparable to that of theatres such as the Grütli or the Théâtre Saint-Gervais in Geneva, lower than that of the institutions that represent the large independent “Freiszene” in German-speaking Switzerland, such as the Kaserne in Basel or the Gessnerallee in Zurich. Of course, it cannot be compared to the budgets of institutions that are responsible for productions, such as the Swiss-German Stadttheater, La Comédie in Geneva or the Théâtre-Vidy, which have budgets seven to eight times higher.

To my knowledge, Arsenic has long been the venue that co-produces the most creations by independent companies in French-speaking Switzerland—around twenty per season. The production budgets of these creations, to which Arsenic makes a minority financial contribution, are managed directly by these companies and depend mainly on their search for funds: subsidies from cities, cantons, the Loterie Romande, sponsorship. The artists therefore have a great deal of independence in terms of budget and method, which contributes to the artistic freedom previously mentioned. In turn, the architecture of the place gives them freedom of format:

the building has no less than seven continually occupied rehearsal and creation spaces, including four public stages, enabling many different modes of presentation. In keeping with this philosophy of trusting artists, there is little supervision or coaching, and emulation is encouraged. Arsenic also contributes to international co-productions and endeavours to host part of the work that goes into these shows in the form of residencies. When you also take into account the five companies and several associations with similar objectives, including the Les Urbaines festival and the Association vaudoise de danse contemporaine, whose administrations occupy our premises all year round, that makes for a lot of people permanently on site. The artists meet in the café or in the studios, their varied approaches thus entering into contact with one another. This capillarity is one of our greatest assets.

V. International

From 1989 onwards, Jacques Gardel began to develop the Festival international de théâtre contemporain, which he had founded five years previously. This desire to inscribe the local scene within a broader movement was already present. What do you think of this aspect of his work?

Gardel recognises himself in the ideas of Grotowski—of whom he was almost a contemporary—such as aesthetic ruptures and challenging the theatrical apparatus. He founded the Théâtre Onze in 1969 and the Festival international de théâtre contemporain in 1984. He was well connected with certain international scenes, as his programme shows. Arsenic would logically become one of the festival's venues in 1989, and I imagine—I have not spoken to him about it—that he aspired to connect his programme with other independent contemporary stages whose aesthetics seemed to him to converge within the same alternative lines. It was in this context, in particular, that Romeo Castellucci was invited in 1994.

63 *It was mainly Thierry Spicher who put together a radical programme of artists from abroad. How did he go about this, and what were his most significant contributions?*

From the outset, Thierry Spicher's ambition was to develop Arsenic as an artistic hub in Europe. But when he was appointed in 1996, he lacked expertise—by his own admission. He therefore sought a lot of advice, notably from the Théâtre de l'Usine in Geneva, programmed by Yann Marussich and Gilles Jobin. He cleverly followed the networks of his artists and thus laid the foundations of a programme in the form of constellations. He clearly understood that, in order to have a voice in an increasingly globalised market, one had to be able to exchange and propose but also welcome, confront and affirm. It is interesting to note that his management of the venue—in step with the spirit of the start-ups of the time, which bet on the profitability of emerging processes—received the Strategis prize, awarded by the business world.

Can you give some examples of how Arsenic and the success of its artists connected the institution internationally at that time?

Among the first artists, of course, was Gilles Jobin, who encountered success from his very first show, *A+B=X*, created during the Les Urbaines festival in 1997, and which toured to The Place in London, to Montpellier Danse and to the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. As he was living in London at the time, his network, and that of his wife La Ribot, connected Arsenic to the ICA and to English live art. Massimo Furlan created his first performances in Lausanne, including the famous *Numéro 23* football match, which then toured around Europe, for example to the Théâtre de la Cité internationale in Paris, the Kaaaitheater in Brussels and the Festival d'Avignon. The rock collective Velma, who originally came to Arsenic to debut their first album, also toured extensively to multidisciplinary venues: Vooruit in Ghent, HAU in Berlin,

La Ménagerie de Verre in Paris, Kampnagel, tanzhaus nrw and Mousonturm in Germany. Marco Berrettini encountered great success within the same type of networks and then found quite important co-producers in France, until *No Paraderan*, which shocked critics and audiences at its premiere at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris for the 2004 Festival d'Automne, and marked the beginning of a lean period before a very successful comeback in recent years.

During the following decade, under the direction of Sandrine Kuster, a new wave of artists gained international recognition. For example, she curated numerous small forms by the Gremaud/Gurtner/Bovay collective, as well as Lætitia Dosch's first solos, giving the artists a space to present after they performed at the Les Urbaines festival—let us note, in passing, the lasting importance of Arsenic's complementarity with this trailblazing festival in this process of emergence. These artists, as well as Dorian Rossel, Émilie Charriot or Joël Maillard, will go on to enjoy great success on French stages. *Conférence de choses* by François Gremaud, for example, quickly went to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in partnership with the Centre culturel suisse, and then to the Sélection suisse at the Festival d'Avignon, and has toured continuously for almost ten years, with nearly 300 performances to date. In the field of dance, this was also a flourishing period for the artists of Arsenic, with numerous tours by Cindy Van Acker, Simone Aughterlony, Marie-Caroline Hominal, Lea Moro and Nicole Seiler.

Sandrine Kuster also explored other networks, for example giving visibility to the “new French contemporary scene”.

Sandrine Kuster faithfully followed the work of a generation that flourished during her tenure: Philippe Quesne, l'Amicale de production, les Chiens de Navarre, François Chaignaud and Cecilia Bengolea, the beginnings of Gisèle Vienne, Jonathan

65 Capdevielle, le Zerep. She also developed connections with Portugal, inviting Marlene Monteiro Freitas at the beginning of her career and including Arsenic in the “Open Latitudes” network, with the Latitudes Contemporaines festival in Lille, the Vooruit in Ghent, Materiais Diversos in Portugal, and multidisciplinary institutions throughout Europe.

In 2015, she created the *Programme Commun* with Vincent Baudriller of the Théâtre Vidy, later joined by Philippe Saire of the Théâtre Sévelin 36. This Lausanne-based platform, which offers a dense two-week programme, has become an annual meeting for Swiss, francophone and international curators.

At the same time, during the 2010s, the context of contemporary performance was undergoing a major transformation. A good fifteen years after the internet and low-cost flights became mainstream, this globalisation of exchanges changed aesthetics: regional differences faded and gradually gave way to transnational and even transcontinental artistic communities. While the union of alternatives, dreamed of by Gardel and made a reality by Spicher, may have found its expression therein, it happened to such an effective degree that a new mainstream rapidly took hold. Countless festivals and venues programmed the same projects all over Europe, developing an ideological conformism strongly resembling the bourgeois mindset that these movements fought against. Local and international geographical axioms became blurred, the formal references of alternative culture and of cultural industries and public institutions were redistributed, and new political oppositions and dualities emerged with the queer, decolonial, environmental, #metoo (many directors and choreographers were themselves denounced by the movement), Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion or the yellow vests movements. Eurocentric culture was clearly being challenged by the growing influence of schools of thought coming from Africa, Latin America or Asia, while at the same time suffering from the

omnipresent influence of American culture via social networks. The beginning of my tenure in 2017 corresponded to this moment: a moment of re-articulation of the independent scene and its values.

In this period of multiple upheavals, how do you continue to position Arsenic and artists in the European landscape of contemporary performing arts?

I am developing this position with a sense of continuity, notably thanks to the faithful companionship of some of the artists who have made the history of the institution—others have gone on to develop larger productions at the Théâtre Vidy—but also, of course, by accompanying a new generation of Swiss artists who are flourishing: Maud Blandel, Tamara Alegre, Ruth Childs, Julia Perazzini, Old Masters, Marion Duval, Pamina de Coulon, PRICE, Teresa Vittucci, Jeremy Nedd and Kayije Kagame, among others. International co-productions have included Florentina Holzinger, Ligia Lewis, Ofelia Ortega, Alex Baczynski-Jenkins, Samira Elagoz, as well as Jonathan Capdevielle and Yves-Noël Genod. I have also included performative works in the season's co-productions—by Anne Rochat, Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, among others—as well as hybrid projects, between installations and performances, brought in by the art curator Elise Lammer: Julie Monot, Garrett Nelson. Arsenic's networks reflect the venue's location at the heart of Europe, with personally quite a few contacts in Northern Europe: for example, ImPulsTanz and Tanzquartier in Vienna, HAU and Sophiensæle in Berlin, MDT in Stockholm, Moving in November and Zodiak in Helsinki, Parallèle and Actoral in Marseille, Nanterre-Amandiers, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Vooruit and Stuk in Belgium, Kanuti Gildi SAAL in Tallinn, as well as NAVE in Santiago de Chile.

There is a lot to be discovered when delving into the rich and varied history of an institution, as you did while preparing for this publication. Has this historical and documentary work led you to new reflections about the future of Arsenic?

Arsenic was built in a moment of transition between the end of postmodernism and its ironic, sometimes cynical, spirit, that is, the end of an era which traded in the ethos that “anyone can use anything”, and the advent of more recent reflections centred on identities and sincerity, in phase with artists' many origins, activisms and communities. The driving force behind its innovative programming, and behind contemporary arts over the last 30 years, is essentially that it offers a means of expression to non-majority or non-normative aesthetics. As early as the 1990s, rock, pop and club aesthetics found validation on contemporary performing arts stages, followed by absurdist, minimalist or DIY frames of reference, and subsequently, more political approaches: feminist, queer, hip hop and pan-African forms, among others. For some, this work is only just beginning. To curate work at Arsenic, you cannot base yourself on stable expertise, on acquired knowledge: it is necessary for the institution to constantly question its position and work on its inclusiveness towards new frames of reference. It is therefore necessary for us to find transversal criteria to define artistic quality, showing ambition and humility at the same time, since we have everything to learn from these multiple fields.

These dynamics colour the relationship that artists and institutions have with their audiences in different ways. After having been seen as the locus of fulfilment for the individual, the artist genius or the visionary curator, the contemporary art venue is starting to be understood as a place for the inclusion of communities—artistic, political or socio-cultural—which

vouches for both its progressive role and its role as refuge for those who do not find their place in more normative environments. Arsenic, like all other art venues, is therefore faced today with a double challenge, which is sometimes perceived as contradictory: to be a “safe space” that can welcome diverse communities in a peaceful manner, but also a place that allows for the confrontation of different visions and sensibilities, aesthetic clashes and radical approaches. The discourse of a community can sometimes shake the certainties of the majority, just as the sensibility of a magnificently maladjusted individual should be able to shake those of that community.

Many institutions are approaching this moment of transition in a very academic way, organising speeches and conferences, giving a platform to philosophers, academics, specialists in cultural studies or gender studies, and organising debates and round tables. For my part—without in any way denying the personal interest I have in these ways of thinking—I find it limiting to give these too much weight. I observe that the transversal tools that have been developed here at Arsenic have always functioned more by contamination or confrontation of emerging movements rather than by their theoretical crystallisation. I find these tools highly relevant in this era of paradigm shifts. In fact, I prefer to continue to give a platform to the artists and their work, confirming Arsenic as a space of experimentation, visibility, opportunity and networking for the inception of artistic movements, which in turn will be fully understood later, when they are theorised by those whose role it is to do so.

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ARSENIC, AN INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ARTS

69

LA RIBOT

**Mmmmmm
Arsenic... In the summer of 2000,
I was not yet living in Geneva,
Thierry Spicher had invited me
for a residency. There were
about twenty of us
artists developing
our projects. We
all ate together at
the same time, which
stimulated connections and
exchanges. We helped, observed,
irritated and sometimes
quarrelled with each
other, but I am still
friends with most of
the people who came that
summer from Los Angeles, Berlin,
Madrid and La Chaux de Fonds. Long
live Arsenic!!**

Dry, sterile, frozen, incapable of
doing what was expected of me—writing
these innocuous lines—

I was ruminating on an old
popular saying
when I suddenly
remembered a line I
had heard years before at Arsenic,
in a show by Sophie
Perez and Xavier
Boussiron: "Watch your
pussy". For a brief moment,
this memory soothed me.

JOËL MAILLARD

It was my
home, as simple
as that. At home, with
friends, Antoine, Massimo,
Phil, Thomas, Isa, Pierre-Isaïe,
Sarah, and the others. We tried very
hard. We knew it was possible. We
smelled of smoke going home every
night. One day Spicher loaned his
cat for a trial run. One day,
with Shin/Berenice in
a red velvet dress, we
watched in the office
as the towers fell. We lived there.

DENIS MAILLEFER

What's fun
 is to shake up this
 good old theatre that
 often smells musty.
 Arsenic is a curious poison.
 Curious about everything.
 We were lucky enough to
 perform regularly in Lausanne, and
 surprisingly, whatever play we put on,
 the audience would always laugh at
 the right time. It had never happened
 anywhere else.
 Sandrine, Patrick, Ivan and the
 whole team, how can we
 thank you for that?
 Not everyone has
 a free spirit, nor
 a taste for risk
 dipped like a
 meringue in
 Gruyère cream.

SOPHIE PEREZ / XAVIER BOUSSIRON

One evening
 I walk into the foyer:
 three naked people
 wearing beards, breasts
 and penises, sitting on a
 sofa, are staring at us...
 At the time, what I knew
 about performance was
 pretty much limited to Les
 Inconnus. For me this place
 would become the symbol
 of an altered consciousness,
 of highly beneficial
 hallucinations, both as a
 spectator and as a creator. I
 was able to give voice to my
 risk-taking side...

JULIA PERAZZINI

This
 place,
 endowed
 with
 polymorphism,
 brought me so
 much in terms
 of encounters,
 artistic curiosity, culture
 in performing arts. Thank
 you to our "theatre coaches",
 Sandrine Kuster, Thierry Spicher.
 Thank you to this space, this "black"
 box that hews so closely to our fictions.
 My savagery had walls that I could
 accept. I found a little place on
 earth. Often in the dark. To
 me, to be oneself means
 to be free. Between
 the lines, this means
 something, in
 my story, when
 I remember
 that my
 grandparents
 were still
 slaves in
 Guadeloupe
 in the 1930s.

Delphine Abrecht

*"Theatre is a relationship, not a product."*¹

[& 30 footnotes as candles]

The relationship forged between the performing arts and their audience, which I, like others, experience in a variety of capacities (spectator, artistic collaborator, researcher, friend), is particularly interesting to explore at Arsenic.

As an adventurous, multi- and transdisciplinary centre that hosts both in-house and touring productions, Arsenic allows one to observe a variety of different modes of address without compartmentalisation and to be confronted with "a contemporary theatre which, in a stimulating way, seems to opt for giving its spectators a sense of responsibility"².

Fluidity/diversity

This engaging relationship can be glimpsed first of all in the diversity of the theatre's offerings. In a venue where the hybridization of forms has long been regarded as a given³, one can, for example, buy a ticket for a walk in the woods, an insurrectionary spoken essay or a game to be played in the city⁴. Although some of the performed works are short⁵, durations are also readily extended. One thinks of Anne Rochat's performance walk *TOPO* (2018), broadcast in real time (24 hours); of the complete *Conférence de choses* in 2016, where Pierre Mifsud guided us through a joyful verbal maze of eclectic subjects (8 hours); or of the 333 hours of Michael Mayhew's performance *333* in 2002, open to visitors 24/7 for a fortnight, for a rather unfettered exploration of Switzerland's borders and frameworks⁶.

Within this diverse mix, Arsenic's spectators are also very free—to the point where they are sometimes invited to do without the presence of performers⁷. The variety of works on offer owes much to the infrastructure of the venue. In addition to the classic Salle 2 with its tiered seating, the large,

fully modular Salle 1 houses one of the first black boxes in Switzerland. The Studio and the Labo, with their flat seating areas, can accommodate more flexible or unusual forms, while the three rehearsal studios on the first floor can easily be used for showings, not to mention the nuclear shelters, which can be used in exceptional cases: it was here (at a time when the entire venue was not up to code, which made the exception the rule)⁸ that Massimo Furlan, an artist who is representative of Arsenic, serendipitously began his career as a performer in *Welcome dans monabri d'artiste* (2000)⁹. Thierry Spicher had invited him as a visual artist and scenographer, before rebook-ing him for a striking performance at La Pontaise stadium¹⁰.

Indiscipline/eccentricity

The venue's openness to artists from the margins, to singularities out of tune with the rest of the world, stems in particular from its partnership with Les Urbaines, which has endured for more than twenty years (1996), in the context of which the two aforementioned works took place. This free festival, which has been hosted since its beginnings on the stages of Arsenic (among other places) and which has set itself the mission of discovering emerging and alternative aesthetics, has enabled many outsiders to find their first audiences, before being supported in a more institutional manner by the performing arts centre. This desire to pave the way for eccentrics persists at Arsenic, which is currently run by a former director of the festival. For Patrick de Rham¹¹, it is not about targeting an audience, generating consensus or meeting expectations, because the invited artists tend to ask questions more singular than those already on the agenda.

Of course, this gamble on singularity, on eccentricity, implies a special relationship between Arsenic and the spectators. For the latter too, it is a question of taking chances, of discovering artists that they can follow over time, of taking "risks" encouraged by the theatre's attractive pricing¹². Arsenic audience

would probably be disappointed if it was not disconcerted. And although most visitors tend to be especially young¹³, the refreshing or surprising side of the performing arts centre usually manages to transcend its trendiness, since that aspect is associated with the pleasure of saying "wow, so you can actually do that!", whose impetus can also defy any fad¹⁴.

Outreach/Non-outreach

Within this heterodox atmosphere, the relationship with the audience is largely unsupervised; at Arsenic, the works are relied upon to speak to the public. This laissez-faire attitude has recently been further reinforced: no more show introductions, season presentations, programme notes or Q&As. The spectators are invited to experience the shows in an unmediated manner, without being told what to see or think. While the venue occasionally hosts the independent collective "(c) ouverture", founded by young art enthusiasts who invite the audience to participate in a free exchange on the works after the show, peripheral activities otherwise consist in understated occasions to host city residents, such as organising musical evenings or Christmas parties with people from the EVAM (Vaud Organisation for the Reception of Migrants), welcoming the demonstrators of the Feminist Strike, hosting Tuesday is Danceday, or opening the foyer every midday to neighbourhood workers.

In this vision of outreach as being equivalent to offering as much space as possible, the current director is also as keen as his predecessors to give the artists complete freedom (even though they have been selected, but that is another debate) and to discover the work on the evening of the premiere, alongside the rest of the audience. An attitude that is not universally applicable, but which constitutes a first step towards a change, which might prove necessary, in the way we consider conviviality, (non-)mediation and pedagogy¹⁵...

Arsenic's free-thinking side undoubtedly feeds off its Swiss roots, having dismissed any aim of aligning itself with a certain French scene. No weight of heritage, nor legacy: "Unlike the French, who struggle to emancipate themselves from Racine or Molière, we don't have three centuries of theatrical history weighing on us. A bit like the Flemish, we come from nowhere and can thus invent an innovative independent theatre", explains Sandrine Kuster¹⁶.

Switzerland is also rich in terms of its geographical position, which allows it to have an eye on other cultures¹⁷, and given the mix of languages found within the country itself. Local artists are more likely to focus on a concept, a sentence, an idea or a situation around which they meticulously weave a micro-world¹⁸ rather than on sacred texts or pompous myths (Rousseau led the way regarding this form of distancing). The Swiss mistrust of grand declarations, of "showbiz politics"¹⁹, of the overly simplistic or the overly tragic is perhaps reflected on its stages. Rather than by frontal imposition, depth is brought in from the edges. It is the concept that is asserted, allowing the substance to filter in through capillarity, leaving it to the spectators to activate it, to make it expand on a larger scale. In this traditionally Protestant country where anyone can read the Bible at home, perhaps even more so in the canton of Vaud where people "say 'if you can't, you can't', but [where they] do as [they] please"²⁰, this way of working singularly around a singular element may liken this "local" relationship with spectators to the spirit of idiocy dear to many artists in French-speaking Switzerland²¹. Idiocy meant here in its first sense: "*Idiôtès*, idiot, meaning simple, particular, unique [...]. All things and all persons are idiotic if they exist only in and of themselves [...]"²². To practise such a stance is to accept at face value without prejudice, to experiment, without subordinating oneself to the intellect²³.

This authentic and instinctive approach (which requires a

certain rigour) can perhaps be compared to a "sincerity that almost contradicts theatre"²⁴ present in the work of many artists programmed today. Does its Swiss side come from the fact that it requires a letting go that is sometimes easier to achieve in relative comfort, which Switzerland has been able to preserve in its cultural milieu? In any case, it creates a relationship between artists and the public that is in keeping with the federalist make-up of the country—and which amounts to speaking *among* the people rather than to them or on their behalf. A "1:1 scale"²⁵ that truly makes theatre a relationship much more than a product.

Digital cultures/alt stage cultures

Could the alternative, singular or "alt-cultural" aspect of Arsenic, thanks to or in spite of its poisonous name²⁶, contribute to the health of its audiences?

At a time when we live with the permanent crutch of our smartphones, the risk of withdrawal or seclusion is great. Recommendation algorithms, personalised ranking of information, orientation of movements, body measurements... Disappointment, missteps, errors, discoveries, surprises and confrontations are kept at bay. The internet giants offer customised recommendations from tens of thousands of personalised genres²⁷—a meticulous tracking system that predicts the public's tastes and writes scenarios based on these results. Elsewhere, on other tabs, viral tweets replace continuity²⁸. On these sanitised playgrounds, which provide their daily dose of satisfaction and indignation, the experience we had of time, space and otherness is altered.

But doesn't this make the act of going to a real place at a specific time to see human beings playing, telling stories, talking, exposing, mocking or laying themselves bare, an important adventure? Doesn't it make my physical presence among other bodies looking at the same thing at the same time as me, with varying reactions (whether surprising, similar, annoying, or

incomprehensible), a particular experience of my subjectivity within a group? And make the risk that it may move me, bore me, confuse me, or even that it may not speak to me or not please me, a precious risk?²⁹

Finally, in the time of global lockdown in which I am writing these lines, “a crash-test of our capacity to live by techno-proxy”³⁰, it has become keenly apparent that the social adventure we experience as spectators of living art is a breath of fresh air that must be preserved.

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THEATRE IS A RELATIONSHIP, NOT A PRODUCT

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DELPHINE ABRECHT

- 1 Andreas Kotte, “Les spectateurs dans le système théâtral Suisse”, in T. Hunkeler, C. Fournier Kiss and A. Lüthi (dir.), *Place au public. Les spectateurs du théâtre contemporain*, MétisPresses, coll. “Voltiges”, 2008, p. 86.
- 2 I shamelessly quote my 2012 Master’s thesis, entitled “The relationship to the spectator in contemporary theatre: Towards a new involvement?”, which was based on performances from a single season at the Arsenic, which I saw then and still see as an ideal structure to offer new perceptual experiences.
- 3 Thierry Spicher, director between 1995-2003, sought to reinforce the idea of the “laboratory theatre” after the creation of Arsenic under Jacques Gardel. He favoured hybrid forms, welcoming in particular the underground Anglo-Saxon live art scene and promoting interfaces between the performing and plastic arts.
- 4 See respectively *The Wind in the Woods* (Massimo Furlan, 2016); the *Fire of Emotions* trilogy (Pamina de Coulon, 2014, 2017 and 2019); and *invisible* (Yan Duyvendak, 2019).
- 5 I am thinking, for example, of the “minimalist musical” *Les Potiers* by the Gremaud/Gurtner/Bovay collective (2015, 35 min.), or Gilles Jobin and Artanim’s virtual reality dance work *VR_I* (2019, 25 min.).
- 6 In a cross-shaped space designed as a kind of bunker (around the theme of Swissness), English artist Mayhew invited the public to visit him at any time. He would then skilfully trample on local values, creating chaos, generating noise and dirt, and not respecting his professional contract to be there at all time. [Source: Patrick de Rham, former spectator].
- 7 This was the case for François Gremaud and Victor Lenoble’s *Pièce sans acteur(s)* (programmed in 2020 and postponed), Yan Duyvendak’s works *invisible* (2019) and his *Virus* (2020), and Nicole Seiler’s audio-walk *Palimpsest* (2018). In 1998 Spicher also programmed Felix Ruckert’s *Eden Projekt*, where the audience was left to its own devices for 45 minutes in front of an empty stage, even though at the same time, but in a different room, eight performers were performing for them.
- 8 Arsenic, housed in a former mechanic workshop, whose rough aspect, according to Thierry Spicher, fostered the most innovative and cutting-edge inventions, was renovated between 2011 and 2013 under Sandrine Kuster. While the building has not lost any of its radical character, upgrading it to code means that some of its uses are now more closely monitored.
- 9 In *Welcome dans mon abri d’artiste*, Furlan presented an installation featuring a pop record he had composed, a suit and a disco ball. Since the installation lasted only two days, he may have been encouraged on the second and last day to head over there, put on the costume and sing live—which he may have done, thus beginning his career as a performer. [Source: Thierry Spicher —who adds that this may be a programmer’s wishful interpretation].
- 10 *Número23*, Les Urbaines, 2002. Furlan replayed alone and without a ball the final of the 1982 football world cup at La Pontaise: a match with 450 spectators assisted by commentator Jean-Jacques Tillmann and broadcast live by TVRL.
- 11 ...whom I would like to thank for our interview on 11 March, from which the quotes included here are excerpted.
- 12 I am thinking of the “The price of risk” promotion launched when Sandrine Kuster arrived in 2003 to lower the financial barrier, i.e. a flat rate of CHF 13. Under Spicher, it used to be possible to get ticket prices based on one’s taxable income, and today’s rates vary between CHF 10 and 15—almost half the cost of a cinema ticket.
- 13 In Olivier Moeschler’s study “Les publics de la culture à Lausanne” (“Lausanne’s cultural audiences”), led in 2018, Arsenic appears in second position in the list of the City of Lausanne’s cultural institutions with the youngest audiences, that is to say with a median age of 30.
- 14 Among many examples, I am thinking of the Duval/Mermet/Patouillard trio’s recent choice to perform, without any significant updating, the play *Avant la Retraite* (programmed in 2020 and postponed), by author Thomas Bernhard (who died in 1989) in the contemporary centre that is Arsenic. The previous play by Marion Duval and Aurélien Patouillard, *Hulul* (2018), a show for all audiences that defies categorisation, also seems to foster a refreshing feeling beyond trends.

- 15 On this subject, see Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Harper & Row [1972] and *Tools for Conviviality*, Harper & Row [1973]; Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Paris, Fayard, 1987; or Isabelle Stengers, “Le droit d’apprendre”, in *Silence*, December 2005.
- 16 Sandrine Kuster, interview with Gérard Cordonier, “La Suisse devient vraiment un pays du théâtre”, in *24heures*, 17 September 2016.
- 17 Thierry Spicher was keen to internationalise the programme by inviting performers from abroad with rather radical approaches. Confronting local artists with performers like Franko B, extracting litres of blood from himself in his show *Oh Lover Boy* (2001), shook things up and gave confidence to some local outsiders. Sandrine Kuster continued with this mission of bringing local creation up to international creative standards with cutting-edge guests.
- 18 To give just one example, I am thinking of the aptly named show *Le Monde* by Old Masters (2019), which like the Geneva collective’s previous works (*Constructionisme*, *Fresque*, *L’Impression*) recreated a cosmogony that was both closed and complete.
- 19 In March 2020 Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset declared, in implicit reference to French politics: “This is politics not showbusiness”.
- 20 “But as you can see, it’s a hundred per cent Vaudois! It’s not often riled, a bit indecisive, mostly likes the happy medium, says ‘If you can’t, you can’t!’ and goes its own way.” Written by Jean-Villard-Gilles in his poem *La Venoge* (1954). [Translator unknown].
- 21 François Gremaud, who has been talking about it for more than ten years, is undoubtedly the first local artist to have claimed and publicised this philosophy with respect to the performing arts.
- 22 Clément Rosset, *Le Réel. Traité de l’idiotie*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977, p. 50.
- 23 In his book *L’Idiotie*, Paris, Beaux Arts SSA, 2003, Jean-Yves Jouannais sees a relationship to idiocy in the Dada movement—created in 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland.
- 24 These are the words of Patrick de Rham during our interview (“After a period of post-modernism when artists wanted to show their critical power in relation to the world, we are returning, I believe, to a search for sincerity”). Let us add that the post-dramatic era and stage writing, where no fable pre-exists the performer, have undoubtedly led artists to redefine both their acting and their “I” and generated more personal works (see my article “Real or fictional in theatre: An outdated distinction?”, in *Arsenic(album 08, 2017)*).
- 25 See Olivier Bosson, *L’échelle 1:1. Pour les performances conférences et autres live*, Van Dieren, coll. “Par Ailleurs—Riponne”, Paris, 2011. This work, published in a Lausanne collection, also premiered at the festival Les Urbaines 2012.
- 26 “The dose determines the body’s reaction to the poison: a minimum dose is required for an effect to be observed in the body, and after a certain dose of poison, the product becomes toxic. However, small doses of the same product can have positive effects: for example, exposure to low doses of arsenic may have a positive effect on health, hence its use in animal feed.” (<https://www.futura-sciences.com/sante/dossiers/biologie-poisons-histoire-1676/page/2/>)
- 27 “Quirky TV Shows Featuring a Strong Female Lead”, for example, on Netflix
- 28 See Christian Salmon, *L’Ère du clash*, Fayard, 2019. In 2007 the same author published *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (La Découverte). According to him, political communication and marketing have now moved from story to clash, from intrigue to serial transgression, from suspense to panic, and from sequence to a timeless series of shocks.
- 29 “I don’t know, but go see it, I look forward to discussing it!” Arsenic is one of the few places I know where you can suggest to someone to go and see something you didn’t necessarily like...
- 30 Alain Damasio, interview with Nicolas Celnik, in *Libération*, 31 March 2020.

**Arsenic is
an institution that
genuinely cares what the
scenic arts today can be
or could become. Visionary
in its approach, it is like a
home to so many artists,
allowing them to forget about
institutional structures by believing and
supporting their ideas beyond measure.
Truly.**

Art scenic,
 art see nick, art
 in the nick, where
 art is put on trial. Arsen
 hitch, without a glitch, that
 is to say with no defects.
 It's also the place where
 deafening obviousness is
 turned upside down (the effect
 of a Larsen iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii):
 Larsen ic, larson nic, Larson
 Nicky, or the inversion of that
 dubious character. And so,
 Arsenic appears to us as
 the prophetic location of
 a prophecy by Jean-Pierre
 Brisset.

ANNE ROCHAT

I first went as a
 spectator to see my
 mother perform
 And then also...
 Under Gardel to install lights
 Under Spicher for the first
 explorations with the Collectif
 Demain on change de nom
 And with Sandrine
 Kuster for a warm
 companionship and
 complicity
 Daring, attentive,
 supportive
 A happiness shared with
 so many companies
 Anything seems possible
 Simple, direct and joyful
 The kind of place that makes you
 feel good.

DORIAN ROSSEL

**Arsenic
is a space in
which I've always
been allowed to be
totally myself. A driving
freedom, the basis of
many of my creations and
fundamental friendships,
but also of my experiences
as a spectator. It is a nurturing
and benevolent soil, the source
of all experimentation.**

NICOLE SEILER

Sally De Kunst

*The underside of the iceberg:**Call for a revalorisation of art practices and institutions*

“Ooooh, Dutch theatre performance world, eat your heart out!”¹ On 14 February 2020, a post by Dutch artist Renée van Trier appeared in my Facebook feed. “Thank you Arsenic for this co-production, trust and respect for my art. Very happy to work with you and the great team. The Netherlands can definitely learn from this.” This enthusiastic quote demonstrates the “follow the artist” principle, which has been the consistent mission of Arsenic since the 1990s and under its different directors, including Thierry Spicher, Sandrine Kuster and, currently, Patrick de Rham: hosting conditions were and are modified each time according to the needs of the artists. This open and curious attitude has meant that over the years the boundaries between different disciplines have become more permeable. Arsenic, Centre d’art scénique contemporain²—defined as such from its foundation in 1989—is thus in line with the evolution of performing arts in Europe since the 1990s: breaking with the canonised idea of theatre to create interdisciplinary forms. Performing artists no longer make theatre or dance pieces, they also create performances, installations, guided tours, rock concerts, football matches, human libraries and even smartphone applications. Since the mid-90s, different generations of Swiss artists co-produced by Arsenic, each with their own particular, sometimes offbeat style, such as Velma, Massimo Furlan, Gilles Jobin, Marielle Pinsard, Yan Duyvendak, Nicole Seiler, François Gremaud, Lætitia Dosch, etc., have enjoyed critical success abroad. Porosity between disciplines has become so commonplace that the funding commissions for theatrical and choreographic creation of the City of Lausanne and the Canton of Vaud merged on 1 May 2015, becoming the “Commission for the Performing Arts”.

SALLY DE KUNST

This hybridity has also led to another way of working in the performing arts: a modular system has emerged in which temporary teams are assembled for each production. Most artists work together in different constellations and are hired on the basis of fixed-term contracts with various organisations. In this way there is less expense and more artistic freedom. However, there is a downside to this creative independence. Though the artist may well have become the neo-liberal worker par excellence—flexible, autonomous and with the capacity to anticipate, adapt and be sustainably productive—this emancipation often leads to precarity and insufficient social security. In its response to the *2021–2024 Cultural Message* of the Swiss Confederation, the Corodis (Commission romande de diffusion des spectacles)³ writes: “The precariousness of workers in the performing arts has increased over the last 10 years, and their prospects for occupational pension benefits are seriously affected.”⁴ Even if most artists and performing arts professionals in French-speaking Switzerland acknowledge that they have access to more means than in many other countries, we can nevertheless speak of “well-managed precariousness”, as Michaël Monney, administrator of the 2b company and touring manager for the Nicole Seiler company, puts it.⁵ While those who want to build an artistic career nowadays have the opportunity to carry out their projects, they must have a wide range of skills and knowledge, such as networking, fundraising, marketing, labour laws... Creativity is often equated with problem solving. And the competition has become stiffer: as there are more and more artists and companies in French-speaking Switzerland, available subsidies and co-productions are therefore spread thinner, each artist or company receiving less financial support.

Today’s artists are all competing in the market with their accumulation of projects, as performance philosopher and

theorist Bojana Kunst points out: “Project always denominates not only a specific term, but also a temporal attitude or temporal mode, in which completion is already implied in the projected future.”⁶ Artists and cultural workers therefore find themselves in an eternal state of projection; projects can only be completed if funding is secured, while the next projects are already being set up. To procure resources, performing artists in French-speaking Switzerland are heavily dependent on public and private subsidies and on co-production funding by subsidised organisations. In Lausanne, for example, companies can secure a three-year grant from the city and/or the Canton of Vaud, or funding per project. Budgets need to be supplemented with funds from the Loterie Romande⁷, Pro Helvetia—the Swiss Arts Council—and various private foundations in Switzerland. In addition, companies or artists can arrange co-productions with theatres and/or residencies. In this multitude of partnerships, as an artist it is not easy to maintain control over the circumstances and modalities of creation. Discussions that centre on the vulnerable position of the artist today therefore pertain not only to the socio-economic reality or power relations in the field, but also to the artistic consequences of the way this system works, reckons sociologist Delphine Hesters.⁸ In short, under the guise of the artists independence, the art world is particularly at the mercy of the neo-liberal value system.

Sarah Thelwall, a consultant in the non-profit sector, outlines four types of values in the visual arts: artistic, intrinsic to the objects and ideas commissioned; social, the process by which art is valued within the art ecosystem; societal, the broader social value made tangible through the public, education and participation; and finally, fiscal, which ranges from the initial costs of producing the artwork to its sale value on the primary market, followed by its resale value on the secondary market.⁹ In the context of performing arts,

we could attribute to the latter value the artist's employment and salary, their commercial representation and revenue. Above all, fiscal value is a gauge of the "success" of an artist in our Western and neo-liberal society: the path of an artistic career is still expected to be linear and constantly rising. Moreover, investment and return, attendance figures and the number of published reviews are easier to express in measurable units than, for example, the justice, beauty, innovation or intelligence of an artistic work, as sociologist Pascal Gielen explains.¹⁰ It is therefore time to question this value system, as Sarah Thelwall proposes in *Size Matters*. In this study, Thelwall describes how a number of small visual arts institutions in London produce a lot of value, but this only becomes palpable ten to fifteen years after the initial "investments".¹¹ These institutions are working with artists who are not yet recognised and are developing new methods of organisation—therefore taking a lot of risks. However, it is not these small institutions that benefit from the immeasurable value that their work creates, but rather the large institutions, which pick out artists at a later stage, appropriating methods supported and created by others. This observation can be extended to other artistic fields and other geographies in Europe—including Switzerland. Such deferred value deserves to be taken into account, and the interdependence of the artistic ecosystem—among artists, institutions and cultural policy—would benefit from being much more clearly defined.

This is the "underside of the iceberg" to which Patrick de Rham, director of Arsenic, refers: "Those activities which are unrecorded and invisible, yet vital to the development of many cultural and social projects."¹² Sarah Thelwall calls these the "intangible assets"¹³: the list could include, for example, individual and organisational expertise and experience, research skills, network, hospitality... In addition to funding—co-production amounts ranging from 10,000 to

91 25,000 francs (including performances)¹⁴—Arsenic mostly makes available to artists assets that are less visible to a larger audience: rehearsal space for six to nine weeks, overseen by the technical team, and access to the stage two to four weeks before a premiere. There is a lot of freedom during these rehearsal periods, explains Patrick de Rham: he stresses that he does not want to supervise the pieces. He sees his role more as that of a host, someone who encourages the artists to do what they want, who asks questions, but keeps expectations modest. A key value is trust: Arsenic takes risks, even if the work is emergent and sometimes "the vocabulary to describe these new practices is missing at the time."¹⁵ To do this, Arsenic has been able to forge a pact with the public, who trusts the institution to discover artistic projects, according to Patrick de Rham.

Further proof of this trust, Arsenic's relationship with most artists spans "a medium- to long-term period". This is important, since meaningful connections are only possible if there is enough time and space to explore them, which is not always the case in our artistic field, where working constellations change all the time and projects follow one another at high speed. However, many artists today are adopting other ways of creating and presenting their work. Arsenic has therefore also integrated more informal moments of sharing in its programming: works-in-progress or end-of-residency presentations, performative installations, in situ projects... These correspond to a change of direction to which many artists can attest, according to Delphine Hesters: instead of delivering finished individual works, they are rather developing sustainable artistic "practices".¹⁶ This sustainability is also reflected in the relationship with the artists who are in residence for three years (currently: Claire Dessimoz, Pamina de Coulon, Maud Blandel, Audrey Cavellius and Gregory Stauffer), who have their offices at Arsenic, next to the management's office.

They can knock on the door at any time to ask questions, says Patrick de Rham.¹⁷ This unstructured porosity also extends to the other associated artists: Arsenic team gives them administrative advice, helps them to put together funding applications and budgets, finds theatres for them to tour to... Moreover, Arsenic is home to Les Urbaines and La Fête du Slip, among others, but the premises are also used by Fleur de Pavé, an association that provides assistance to sex workers in the neighbourhood, as well as the EPFL and the EVAM. Hospitality, the basic principle of collaboration that equalises the balance of power between organisers and guests, is therefore a very important value at Arsenic. Here, the activity is concentrated in the foyer, as many of the artists can attest to: every lunchtime one can share a meal with the other occupants of the building. It is “an exchange based on difference”, says Patrick de Rham, “the difference between diverse artistic families, both local and international, and between people from different socio-cultural backgrounds”.¹⁸

These few examples show that we should develop ways to measure a greater variety of values delivered by arts institutions and artists. In the history of institutional critique—in a multitude of texts and lectures—the ecosystem of the art institution has been analysed, and a wide variety of theoretical hypotheses for the future have been proposed, but these rarely take the form of concrete scenarios. So, what can we do? Art researcher Rachel Mader makes an interesting appeal, proposing to recognise “molecular politics”: changes in hegemonic structures are a protracted process in small, meticulous steps.¹⁹ Our future analyses of the art ecosystem—in which artists, cultural workers, institutions and other partners are interdependent—would therefore do well to make us all aware of these molecular steps and to trace the impact of the values associated with them. As Pascal Gielen says: “Being an artist is not an individual fate,

93 such as proclaimed by entrepreneurship; artists should be able to fall back on collective structures of solidarity.”²⁰

- 1 TN: Adapted from the original post, which read: “Ooooh Nederland Theatre Performance world, you can suck a point on this!”. The artist used a literal translation of the Dutch expression *ze kunnen er een puntje aan zuigen*.
- 2 TN: Contemporary Performing Arts Centre
- 3 TN: Swiss-French Touring Commission for Performing Arts
- 4 <https://corodis.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/f21-2019-09-17-ofc-consultation-message-culturel-reponse-corodis.pdf>
- 5 Interview with Michaël Monney, 24 April 2020.
- 6 Kunst, Bojana (2013), ‘The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making’, in Petrešin-Bachelez, Nataša (Ed.), *Manifesta Journal #16: On Regrets and Other Back Pages*, Amsterdam: Manifesta Foundation, p. 112.
- 7 TN: The Swiss-French Lottery
- 8 Hesters, Delphine (2019), *D.IT (Do It Together): De positie van de kunstenaar in het hedendaagse kunstenveld*, Brussel: Kunstenpunt, p.72. (In her study, Hesters analyses the position of the artist in Flanders and Brussels.)
- 9 Thelwall, Sarah (2011), *Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*, London: commonpractice.org.uk, p.24.
- 10 Gielen, Pascal (2013), ‘Institutional Imagination: Instituting Contemporary Art Minus the Contemporary’, in Gielen, Pascal (Ed.), *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, Amsterdam: Valiz, p. 27.
- 11 Thelwall, Sarah (2011), p. 28.
- 12 Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.
- 13 Thelwall, Sarah (2011), p. 6.
- 14 This is one of the current debates in the field of the performing arts: theatres co-produce plays when in fact, these are pre-purchases. The Corodis has created a glossary on this subject: <https://corodis.ch/corodis/lexique/>
- 15 Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.
- 16 Hesters, Delphine (2019), p 59.
- 17 Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.
- 18 Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.
- 19 Mader, Rachel (2013), ‘How to move in/an institution’, in *Oncurating.org – Issue 21: (New) Institution(alism)*, Zurich: ZHdK, p.40. (In her text, Mader refers to Oliver Marchart.)
- 20 Gielen, Pascal (2013), p.30.

No other direction than that of Arsenic had the intellectual skills to understand that musical projects such as ours had to be considered and classed at the same level as the edgiest contemporary creations. It was this consideration that enabled us to tour on the most prestigious European theatrical stages. And it is this same policy that Arsenic pursues today with other artists.

VELMA—CHRISTOPHE JAGUET AND STÉPHANE VECCHIONE

Daniel Blanga Gubbay

Poisoning the Gaze:

Performance, Anthropophagy and Representation

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni

1. In 1989 Suely Rolnik published her PhD dissertation, in which her concept of *anthropophagic subjectivity* appears for the first time. She started working on the concept two years earlier, inspired by Oswald de Andrade's 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago* and the idea of cannibalism at the core of the anthropophagic practice of the Tupinambá people—one of the various Tupi ethnic groups that have inhabited Brazil since before colonization—as a practice of subjectification. Years later, in her text *The Politics of Hybridization*, she wrote that the "Tupinambá were not attached to elements of their own culture and were able to shed them easily and absorb aspects of other cultures before dismissing them in turn"¹. Culture is based on a history of absorption and dismissal, a form of hybridization. Take language, for example, and the term arsenic for instance, which comes from the Greek *arsenikon*, derived from the Arabic term, *خيزر زلا*, *al-Zarnikh*, from Farsi *زرز*, *zarad*, yellow. The word preserves a history of absorption. Rolnik highlights how, in anthropophagy and the practice of 'devouring the enemy', the other is etched into one's flesh and metaphorically transported within one's body, in a form of subjectivity that contrasts with the Western idea of a fixed territory and identity.

DANIEL BLANGA GUBBAY

2. In her writing in 1989 Rolnik already sees the danger in future uses of the concept of hybridization. That date is crucial, and she refers to it in her text as the year of the first democratic election in Brazil after the military dictatorship as well as the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The year 1989 is often considered a portal to a post-ideological world and a pivotal moment of acceleration in the globalization process. Though

in History the concepts of globalization and Westernization do not coincide, the last decade of the twentieth century is often read as a superposition of the two terms, where globalization becomes synonym with the export of Western cultural and political models. In parallel, it corresponds to the accelerated import of non-Western cultural expressions, reduced to products to be consumed on the Western market. Several scholars remember the 90s as the decade of the popularization of feng shui, yoga, and sushi in the West, and of the invention of the *world music* category. A potential understanding of hybridization—and its original idea of cross-contamination—was reduced by the West to the simple consumption of the other. That is why, returning to the concept at the end of the decade, in 1998, for the catalogue of the São Paulo Biennale, Suely Rolnik points to how hybridization ‘began to be instrumentalized by transnational financial capitalism’².

3. 1989 is the year of the founding of Arsenic in Lausanne. The name of the poison was hybridized with its French homophone for the scenic arts (*arts scéniques*) to form the name of a theatre of contemporary practice, born as a home for the local community and strongly focused on two emerging elements: the cross-contamination of disciplines and international programming. Even in the performing arts world, the fall of the Berlin wall corresponded to an acceleration in globalization, with the increased circulation of international artists on the European scene. Quoting Rolnik again, one might say that the contemporary art scene became ‘a privileged arena for the struggle of forces that outline the cartographies of the transnational present’³. The forces at play here are, on the one hand, the circulation and affirmation of non-Western identities through performance, and on the other, the gaze projected upon them, the way of looking at these performances. Hence, in this dynamic between bodies, spaces and gazes, the theatre is a privileged arena not only to see shows but to analyse how we look at them. This short

text acts as a recent history of the gaze in the performing arts space, and in referring to non-Western scholars—contemporary to the birth of Arsenic—it becomes a way of looking at the Western way of looking.

4. A large part of the history of performance in the last century took place in a black box. It is often said that the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia came up, in 1921, with the notion of creating an unadorned and flexible space that, in its emptiness, would highlight the body. Regarding this contrast, the black box was initially conceived as being at the service of the white body, whose appearance would be captured by the gaze in its movements, constructed feelings or identity. In contrast with this idea of identity, the last thirty years of European performing arts have often witnessed a desire to withdraw from this identification of the body as subject. On the one hand, the discipline of theatre has seen a proliferation of post-dramatic writing, where, inside the black box, bodies no longer carry a fixed relation to identities. On the other, dance in the last decade can be viewed in its desire to further emancipate itself from the idea of being an expression of the dancer. Artists such as Mårten Spångberg, in opposition to the word *performance* (whose tradition is linked with the affirmation of an identity), reclaim the idea of *dance* as liberation from the subject and as an affirmation of the identity of movement itself. It is crucial to mention this recent history to understand what happens when non-European projects start being invited into European black boxes: Is this liberation from the subject, or from being the ambassador of an identity, still allowed?

5. The Western gaze upon non-Western bodies is inscribed in a narrative that is not neutral. It carries the colonial desire to exotify, the practice of orientalism⁴, the attempt to reduce the other to a category. The act of looking is filtered through the lens of Western knowledge, and the body being looked

at is asked to correspond to the image that the gaze has of it. The circulation of non-Western artists in Western black boxes cannot be analysed without the possible violence—implicit or explicit—involved in reducing the artist in their singularity and complexity to being the ambassador of a specific culture, as if being liberated from carrying an identity is a privilege only assigned to white artists.

Already in 1990 Martinique-born poet and theorist Edouard Glissant analysed this risk, defining the Western form of *understanding* as a desire for transparency with the aim of reducing the complexity of the other to fit a pre-existing category. It is a form of domestication that for Glissant opens the door to the consumption of this complexity: the gaze eats away at the complexity of the other, who is reduced in order to be appropriated and digested, in a description that echoes the Western distortion of anthropophagy prophesied by Rolnik. In response, Glissant calls for the right not to be understood. What he calls the *right to opacity* is the right to affirm one's singularity beyond the gaze's ability to read nuances, the right to be neither fully read nor consumed. Within this landscape, the central question for Western theatres might therefore be not how to guarantee the right to visibility, but how to guarantee the right to opacity, or how to empower a form of international circulation outside the patterns of exotification and consumption of the other. And here is where the distant and more recent history of Arsenic might become, in support of artists reclaiming a different way of being looked at, a tool to delve into the question.

6. In her performance *Oriental Demo*, presented at Les Urbaines in Lausanne in 2018⁵, artist Ceylan Öztrük references her Turkish origins and the usual projections associated therewith by performing on stage her inability to belly dance. In front of the audience she is taught by a local Swiss professional belly dancer, in an inversion of roles that responds with opacity to the violence of identity

expectations. Her body affirmatively refuses to confirm the preconceived notions that the audience might have of her. The element of *confirmation* is of central importance here. In the essay *Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts* published at the beginning of the 90s, Cuban-American theorist José Esteban Muñoz writes about how 'often performance functions as an *alternative* to the presentation of evidence'⁶. The image of the body on stage has to count as proof, as evidence to confirm pre-existing ideas. In contrast to the idea of *evidence*, and the violence implicit in its belonging to legal jargon, Muñoz proposes the idea of the *ephemeral*. While evidence is certain and monolithic, the idea of the ephemeral suggests a constant escape of the body from being imprisoned by the gaze in a pre-assigned identity. While evidence, as part of the performativity of the law, implies being judged from the outside, Muñoz proposes a counter-performativity in which the body defines itself from the inside. For this reason, Muñoz speaks about performativity as 'strategies of self-enactment for the minoritarian subject'⁷. One can think of the work of Ligia Lewis, *minor matter*, presented at the Arsenic in 2018. Therein, travelling through present and historical references and creating a poetics of dissonance between the complexity of black identity and the space in which it is represented—between blackness and the black box—Lewis affirms from the inside an identity that refuses to adhere to its projected image, or in her words, an 'antagonism towards white supremacist logics—the logic of empire—and their hold on the body'⁸. The body refuses to be digested by the gaze. It is the affirmation of an indigestible identity that acts like a poison, entering the gaze and corrupting its certainties and projections.

7. As it becomes clear, this act of representation is intrinsically political. It results from a history of being represented from the outside and from the subsequent act of

regaining agency. In this sense, the body on stage is not only performing a *representation*, it is a political *representative* of its story. Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak showed the importance of distinguishing between the two components of the English—and French—word “representation”. In 1988, with *Can the Subaltern Speak?*⁹, she criticizes the Western practice of speaking in the name of the other, or appropriating their position. To clarify the difference between the two forms of representation she resorts to the German language and its use of *darstellen* (to represent something or someone, such as in theatre) vs. *vertreten* (to represent someone politically). Spivak reaffirms the connection between the two expressions: one must be able to call oneself representative of an identity (*vertreten*) to be able to represent it (*darstellen*), a gesture of self-representation fighting a history of representation from the outside. In so doing, Spivak also reminds us that all forms of cultural appropriation are extremely problematic, as they break the connection between the two meanings of the word *representation* and renders those who are represented invisible. Being represented from the outside, she adds, always reduces the other to a category, damaging both the other’s complexity and singularity, since ‘the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogenous’¹⁰. Kicking off one year after the publication of Spivak’s text, the history of Arsenic necessarily tracks these questions. While the end of the 80s marked an increase in international circulation in general, with a concomitant reproduction of the exotifying gaze in the performing arts, the Arsenic’s path over the last thirty years has challenged the existing paradigm by supporting artists increasingly addressing, from the inside, the relation between the body and the gaze. This story shows how it is possible for an institution to provide a space not simply to look at a performance but to look at how we look at a performance.

8. Preceding this text is the Latin saying *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, a palindrome, hence reading the same forwards and backwards. Its meaning—*we go around at night and are consumed by fire*—probably originally referred to fireflies. In more recent times, the phrase became famous in 1981 when Guy Debord used it as the title for his film about a protagonist burnt by capitalist modernity and a society of spectacle that reduces everything to its image. The image of consumption evoked by the saying could be adapted to the practice of looking at the non-white body on stage, going around in the night of the Western scene, consumed by the fire of the gaze, in a cannibalistic act that reduces the singularity of the body to an image to be consumed. What Ligia Lewis or Ceylan Öztrük do is fight this paradigm of consumption, but they also go further. They question the gaze and its way of looking at them, and by doing so they turn this paradigm on its head. Suddenly we can see the possibility of reading it in the other direction, from right to left. The phrase does not change, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*—we go around at night, consumed by fire—but we can imagine that the positions are reversed, creating a new form of agency. It is not the bodies that go around in the darkness of a black box, but the gaze of the spectator. And the fire is not the gaze, but that of the performance. The performance is no longer the history of a non-white body consumed by the Western gaze, but that of the Western gaze and its ways of looking consumed by the performing body. For this reason, Muñoz wrote: ‘In the spirit of queer acts, I am less interested in telling readers what the performatively polyvalent writings that follow *say*, and more invested in gesturing to the work that these writings *do*’¹¹. It is not about what these performances *say*, but what they *do*. In this sense, Ligia Lewis or Ceylan Öztrük do not simply perform in the space of a black box, they perform within the viewer’s gaze, working it from the inside. They perform inside the gaze, poisoning

it and dismantling its constructions. While, a few lines further, Muñoz draws attention to ‘all those things that remain after a performance’¹², I might now imagine—or wish—that what remains after a performance is once again a poison that can work its effect on the gaze for years to come.

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- 1 Suely Rolnik, *The Politics of Hybridization. Avoiding False Problems*. In *The Time We Share*, Mercator Fonds, Brussels, 2015.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978
- 5 As part of Les Urbaines 2018
- 6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, online [www.tandfonline.com], 1996, p. 7.
- 7 Ibid., p. 8
- 8 Interview of Ligia Lewis by Catherine Damman, BOMB 147, Spring 2019
- 9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988, p. 66.
- 10 Ibid., p. 69.
- 11 José Esteban Muñoz, op. cit., p. 7
- 12 Ibid., p. 7

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GISELE VIENNE

The great strength of Arsenic’s artistic direction is indeed one of its specificities. Its artistic directions, just like the works presented, through its very programme, write a story. They are part of the hope that artistic experience, the creation of new forms, can allow us to question and shake up the pseudo-reality that is the fruit of the shared creation of the representation of reality and that creates the social norm.

Delphine Abrecht

Delphine Abrecht is a researcher and artistic collaborator. She has worked on a number of theatrical productions in French-speaking Switzerland over the past fifteen years. In parallel, she conducts research projects at the Manufacture – Haute école des arts de la scène: *Action* (2017–2018); *Spectator ludens* (2019–2020); *S'entretenir* (forthcoming). From 2012 to 2017, she worked as a graduate assistant at the University of Lausanne, where she embarked on her thesis on the relationship to the audience in contemporary theatre, under the supervision of Danielle Chaperon.

Daniel Blanga Gubbay

Daniel Blanga Gubbay is a Brussels-based curator and researcher. He is currently the artistic co-director of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts. He has worked as an educator and an independent curator for public programs, among which: *Can Nature Revolt?* for Manifesta, Palermo 2018; *Black Market*, Brussels 2016; *The School of Exceptions*, Santarcangelo, 2016. He has worked as co-curator for LiveWorks, and was head of the Department of Arts and Choreography (ISAC) of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Brussels. Recent articles appeared in *South as a State of Mind* (Athens), *Mada Masr* رصم ماسر (Cairo) and *Performance Journal* (New York). Recent presentations include: *Politics of Co-Imagination* (2019, Tangier); *Dance Under Cover of a Fictional Rhythm* (2018, Sharjah, UAE); *The Movement as Living Non-Body* (2018, New York); *Knowing the Unknown* (2017, Museum of Impossible Forms, Helsinki) and *Prophecies Without Content* (American University of Beirut).

Sally De Kunst likes to bring people together and create communities of practice around societal issues. She is interested in re-inventing art institutions from the inside by introducing a collaborative and inclusive approach to governance that is adapted to current artistic practices and paradigm shifts. After her studies in graphic design and art history, she worked as a journalist, a curator and an artistic director, of the Belluard Bollwerk Festival in Fribourg and Arc artist residency in Romainmôtier, amongst others. She is currently the director of the Museumsquartier in Bern. (www.sallydekunst.com)

Patrick de Rham

Patrick de Rham has directed Arsenic since 2017. Before that, he ran the interdisciplinary festival Les Urbaines, devoted to emerging artistic forms, for ten years. He also created and directed the professional symposium Post Digital Cultures, dedicated to the relationship between contemporary arts and digital media, for three years, under commission from the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. He regularly lends his expertise to art juries and commissions such as the Swiss Performance Prize, La Becque, Swiss Dance Days, Corodis, PREMIO, the Irène Raymond Foundation and Pro Helvetia (the Swiss Arts Council). Previously, he worked as a sound producer at Radio Suisse Romande (RTS) between 1995 and 2007.

Florian Gaité teaches Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art (ATER) at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and is a research associate in the Aesthetics and Critical Theories of Culture section of the ACTE Institute. A member of the International Association of Art Critics, winner of the AICA-France Prize 2019, Florian Gaité has worked in print media (e.g., Artpress, The Art Newspaper, paris-art.com) and radio (“La Dispute” on France Culture), particularly in the field of visual arts, performance and dance. In 2021, he published the collection *Tout à danser s'épuise* with the publisher Sombres torrents.

Jacques Gardel

After studying at the Ecole romande d'art dramatique (ERAD), Jacques Gardel was involved in the creation of the Atelier de recherche scénique (ARS) in 1961–1964. He has founded numerous structures: in 1969, the Théâtre Onze in Lausanne with Jacqueline Morlet and Michel Eggel; in 1981, the Atelier de travail théâtral (Att1) with Miguel Québatte; in 1984, the Festival international de théâtre contemporain; in 1989, Arsenic – Centre d'art scénique contemporain, which he ran until 1996. In 1989, he launched the Concours des jeunes compagnies, which became the Prix romand des compagnies indépendantes de Théâtre et de Danse. In 1997, he opened L'ATT2 – La Filature in La Sarraz and set up two editions of the festival Les chemins de la création, whose *Théâtre* inaugurated a new form of performance, as a “journey into the heart of the forest”. In 2016, he opened an art gallery, l'Impasse du Phoenix. He has directed nearly 40 shows and has developed a rich pedagogical practice.

Olivier Kaeser is an art historian, independent curator and director of Arta Sperto, an artistic structure without a fixed location that develops multi- and transdisciplinary projects, such as the exhibition-festival *Dance First Think Later: An encounter between dance and visual arts*, presented in Geneva in 2020, the publication and a second edition of which are in preparation for 2022, or the cycle *Un contexte, une œuvre*, which was launched with Anne et Jean RoCHAT's underwater performance *SpO2* in 2021. He curated the exhibition *A escala humana* by La Ribot at Sala Alcalá 31 in Madrid in 2022, co-founded and was editor-in-chief of the Grand Théâtre Magazine in Geneva from 2019 to 2021, and co-directed the Centre culturel suisse in Paris from the end of 2008 to the end of 2018, and Attitudes – espace d'art indépendant from 1994 to 2012. He has co-edited numerous art publications.

Sandrine Kuster

After training at the Serge Martin Theatre School in Geneva, Sandrine Kuster opened the Théâtre de l'Usine, devoted to emerging multidisciplinary creation, in 1989, and co-managed it until 1993. In parallel, she collaborated on a dozen shows for the Cie des Basors, directed by Eveline Murenbeeld. Between 1999 and 2003, she was the theatre and performance curator for la Bâtie-Festival de Genève. From 2003 to 2017, she was director of Arsenic in Lausanne. Since 2017, she has been at the head of the Théâtre Saint-Gervais in Geneva, a venue dedicated mainly to the performing arts. She is president of the Association de la Rencontre du Théâtre Suisse and of Reso – Dance Network Switzerland.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF THE AUTHORS

Thierry Spicher studied political philosophy and sociology at the University of Fribourg. From 1988 to 1996, he was the administrator of the Compagnie Pasquier-Rossier and a member of the executive committee of the Fri-Son club. From 1996 to 2003, he was director of Arsenic. He founded Box Productions with Elena Tatti in 2004. He was president of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture's fiction sub-commission from 2006 to 2010, and a member of the Commission fédérale du cinéma (CFC) from 2010 to 2016. Since 2012, he has served as an expert for Eurimages (the Cultural Support Fund of the Council of Europe). In 2011, he founded the distribution company Outside the Box with producer Pierre-Alain Meier.

Laurence Wagner

Laurence Wagner is a curator and art critic and the director of the Belluard Bollwerk, a festival of contemporary performing arts in Fribourg. She teaches about feminist anger, alternatives and literature at the Manufacture – Haute école des arts de la scène in Lausanne, produces plays for the radio station *DUUU and writes for the journal *Mouvement*. Over the past ten years, she has worked in numerous cultural institutions in Switzerland and abroad. In 2018 – 2019, she was a resident at the Swiss Institute in Rome.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF THE AUTHORS

