

## THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



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### COMMENTARIES

## Ulla von Brandenburg

30 & 31 January 2016



## Ulla von Brandenburg 'Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley'

When theatre is usually mentioned in the context of visual art practices, it is typically associated with 'performance', a way of staging that highlights the presence of the artist and stresses the supposed politics of disappearance and transience – the sense in which in this live medium, there is no stable object to consume, transport or circulate. One thinks here of a tradition that perhaps started with Futurist *serates* in 1910 and whose contemporary lineage in the work, say, of Marina Abramovic (the most visible of performance artists) can be traced to Allan Kaprow's Happenings of the 1950s, the experiments of Fluxus artists in the 1960s and the body art practices of Chris Burden, Vito Acconci and Franko B from the 1970s through to the present day. Ulla von Brandenburg's *Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley*, however, attempts to do something different. In common with the recent trend for theatrical performance seen in the work of artists such as Paul Chan (*Waiting for Godot*) and Jesse Darling (*Antigone*), von Brandenburg has written a play, staging the rituals of the utopian Saint-Simonian community that came to prominence in Paris in the early-to-mid nineteenth century.

The piece, originally commissioned in conjunction with the *Nouveau Commanditaires*<sup>1</sup> for the Saint Simonien's residence in Ménilmontant in eastern Paris, was restaged in Glasgow in conjunction with The Common Guild in January 2016. Differently from its first iteration at the Kaaiteater Brussels, when it was staged in a conventional front-on *mise-en-scène*, the performance in Glasgow was site-based, and took place in the extraordinary rooms of Langside Hall, in Queen's Park. The performance started with a greeting on the stairs by one of the performers, dressed in the distinctive red, white and blue uniforms worn by the Saint-Simonians, after which the audience was invited to follow the action as it unfolded, promenade-like, through the spaces of the building. Throughout the performance, the five actors were accompanied by a series of songs or choral chants sung by the all-female Eurydice choir. In the upper room of Langside Hall, the audience witnessed the daily 'dressing ritual' performed by the Saint-Simonians, in which the 'Father' of the movement (Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin) is helped into his costume by his fellow adepts. For the Saint-

Simonians, such an action was crucial in that it illustrated, in the most concrete form possible, the necessity of mutuality and co-dependence. The costumes of the Saint-Simonians were specially designed to prevent individual dressing. The design of the costume meant that one was always dependent on the other, implicated in a relationship of mutual trust and help.

The second act of the play (if we can call it that) took place in the civic function room on the ground floor of the Langside Hall, and here we saw an additional ritual, the apparent initiation of a woman member of the Saint-Simonians on a stage full of strange, crafted objects and with an equally affective and disquieting atonal song, performed by the actors and the choir, who were located on a balcony overlooking the main performance area. Once the ritual ended, the singing continued and the performers, still in costume and sometimes in character, served soup to the audience in an act of theatrical communion.

*Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley* is a beautiful and haunting piece of theatre. Instead of investing in dramatic theatre's habitual concern with action, in staging conflict (what in technical terms is known as the *agon*), the work prefers to introduce spectators to the Saint-Simonians by, gently and patiently, reflecting on their rituals and reproducing their songs and beliefs. The effect is complex and affective: for what we are provided with is not an historical play as such, or some painstaking documentary re-enactment. Rather, it is more accurate to say that von Brandenburg has brought to life what we might call, after Raymond Williams, 'a structure of historical feeling'. As in the Symbolist plays of nineteenth-century playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, her concern is with the production of atmospheres and moods, which she manages to evoke, quite beautifully and simplistically, through a series of moving tableaux, in which bodies, voices and costumes unfold, languidly, through actual time and space. Here von Brandenburg, along with her collaborators, exploits theatre's specific mode of signifying, rooted, as it is, in materiality and liveness, to create a series of complex interactions between past and present, here and there, and performers and spectators. As a number of performance theorists have pointed out, theatrical representation is always, to an extent, ambiguous and contradictory. The presence of the live body on stage does not, as classic mimesis would have it, produce immersion and identification, in the same way that the crystalline surface of cinema does. On the contrary, the facticity of

the performers, their sheer 'thereness', produces, for the theatre spectator, an uncanny feeling of distance in proximity, and difference in identity.

Theatre's perpetual oscillation, its double movement, works to place the spectator in an impossible space, in which one is simultaneously aware of two incompatible realities. This has important consequences for someone like von Brandenburg who is concerned with how best to represent history, for it means that we are transported to the past while always remaining aware that the past is being constructed in the present, in the here and now, so to speak. In the extent to which von Brandenburg has been able to exploit the immanent 'doubleness' of the medium, she succeeds, brilliantly, in disclosing what is perhaps the very essence of theatre: the sense in which it is the earliest (and best) virtual reality machine, an apparatus that allows the world to come into being as appearance, as, that is, something utopian, a word whose etymology in Greek translates as a nowhere, a *u-topos*. In *Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley*, then, form and content meet, and what is ultimately created is a utopian stage for a utopian movement, neither of which is ever able to come to any definitive end.

Carl Lavery is Professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Glasgow.

1. Originally commissioned as part of Fondation de France's Nouveaux Commanditaires initiative for the Saint-Simoniens residence in Ménilmontant. Work produced with the support of the Fondation de France and the Fonds de dotation Famille Moulin, Paris, and Fondation d'entreprise Galeries Lafayette, Paris.

'Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley' was first performed at the Kaaitheater, Brussels as part of Performatik festival 2015. A site-specific filmed performance was produced by kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, and presented at Pilar Corrias Gallery, London and Performa Festival, New York.

The work was performed by Pierre Casadei, Lucienne Deschamps, Duncan Evvenou, Giuseppe Molino and Benoît Résillot. Costume design and production by London College of Fashion, MA Costume Design for Performance: Bronya Arciszewska, Maria Bruder, Viola Cesa de Marchi, Maria Costa, Oliver Cronk, Daphne Karstens, Pallavi Patel, Yufan Xiao. Costume coordination by Alexander Ruth, Agnes Treplin. Production coordinator Sabine Tarry.



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