

## SYMPOSIUM: PLAYING UP - Live Art for kids and adults

TATE MODERN – 4.4.2016

By Hannah Biedermann

### 1. Children and adults are different. We all live in the same world.

People who haven't lived for a long time in our world, have had less experiences. And of course, they've had very different experiences, as all of our experiences are different. They are our own. Still: Children know less, they have a different perspective on our world. In my opinion, to take children seriously means to take this difference seriously, even if it's hard to define, hard to grasp. And to take children seriously means to take myself seriously, with my experiences in this world and my questions about it, as well as my artistic expression for these questions.

### 2. Theater is communication. A unique event between actors/performers and the audience.

If my audience is different from me in some way, I have to think harder about our dialogue, about how we communicate. I have to find the right language, so we can understand each other. The understanding goes both ways: The children have to understand me, but I have to understand them as well. I have to create a theatrical event that allows for the children's feedback. Children naturally react to what they see and respond loudly, in a way that you can hear it on stage and in the audience. Instead of trying to ignore this, I have to create a performance that is interested in the children's response, and moreso I have to include that response by making it part of the performance and create scenes that need this reaction. Hence, children inspire me to create interactive theater.

In "The Rest of the World", a piece about news on television, children from the audience are asked to represent the percentage bars of a statistic, or they play the part of an interviewee. They play a spontaneous role.

In "Waste. A Making-Of", they are interviewed about their own behavior in relationship to waste, and they are allowed to throw their own trash onto the stage as part of the performance. This interaction is created and framed by us, but it's always a gap, an opening, in which the children can act freely and uncontrolled.

The performers have to listen, they have to take every response seriously. They have to respond to that, instead of repeating written dialogue.

3. Power structures are inherent to the theatrical performance, especially in children-and youth theater.

Children and adults are different. Performers and audience are different, too. There is a difference in knowledge and experience. How fair can the dialogue be, then? How can the children's interaction happen on eye-level? I think one way is, instead of trying to be fair, to be transparent. By showing and pointing out one's own advance in knowledge, as an adult or as a creator of theater. And to play with it.

It can be ironic, like in Making Of, where we ask the children to throw their trash on the stage, and they are supposed to hit a trash can. Then the game is interrupted and a different performer confronts the children why they did this. Did they even think for one second, or do they always just do what seems fun.

We seduced the children to an action that we use as a reproach within the next moment. But they didn't have a real chance to decide against this action.

We are not being fair, we betray them, but we point it out. We do this in a way, that is so over the top that the children understand the irony. And our goal is to be

transparent about the power structure of theater as well.

Theater is a space of possibility that has the potential to question power structures between children and adults. The goal is not to pretend that we're all equal, but to recognize our differences.

Theater as a space of possibility is a space of experience, not a place of education. We play a game by inverting typical roles and authority, but the experience is real, and you take it home.

With "Conference of Essential Matters", i developed a game, that is guided mostly by technology instead of performers. There is no audience, only participants. A mixed group of 20, between the age of 8 and 99 gathers around a table. They play family. Using two buttons on a personal panel they can vote, change the light or the music, and buzz. A personal hand-held speaker sends individual messages. Children have to cut the cake with a sharp knife, or protect the adults from their own utensils. Adults are asked to tell the children about their relationship problems. Children are asked to tell adults what they can do better than them.

The whole group has to vote about rules for their gathering, and they are invited to suggest new rules. Things are allowed to be different here, but they don't have to be. The audience is invited to try things out.

More important than switching roles or to pretend that children and adults are equal, is to share time and an experience. To observe and to stand each others differences.