

SMATCH (1)

Roodthoof, Dominique

2009

Roodthoof, Dominique

Smatch (1)

Text of the conference "Smatch(1)" held on 28 November 2009 on the occasion of the 12th edition of the Verbindingen / Jonctions festival.

Translation: Emiliano Battista

Smatch was born from the carte blanche I received from Cristophe Slagmuylder, KFDA's director. I could do whatever I wanted: a show, a performance, an exhibition ... quite an open offer. After thinking about it for a couple of days (I had nothing going on at the time), I proposed a form which I would call *Smatch*.

Smatch is a contraction of two conflicting verbs: to smash (break, wreck) and to match (correspond, go together).

Smatch sounds like good English, and it also sounds like bad English; in that way, it is a knowing wink at our poor knowledge of languages in Wallonia.

I had been dreaming for a while of finding a space, a place where one could stop and think joyously with the audience and with the actors.

The theme of the *Smatch (1)* – there will be others – bears the following title: *Drive a monkey crazy and you bring a crazy monkey into being*.

It's a reaction to the sense [sensation might work better] that over the past several years we have been plunged deeper and deeper and faster and faster into a catastrophism (I've been fighting that against for years) that ultimately smashes us under the weight of impotence.

The title, *Drive a monkey crazy and you'll bring a crazy monkey into being*, is inspired by an experiment conducted by Harry Harlow, a famous American psychologist who wanted to show his peers the psychological damage that might afflict a child deprived of a bond to his or her mother. To do that, he bust up hundreds of baby rhesus monkeys (he separated from their mothers at birth to put them in cages) solely for the purposes of giving statistic proof for something that everyone had known already for quite some time ... The study was conducted right after WWII, and people had already started to notice that children in many orphanages were suffering enormous trauma. I had also been wanting to work with animals for a while. The title, taken from a sentence in a book by Vinciane Despret (*Bêtes et Hommes*), sent me back to my 'pre-Conservatory' days – I started at the Conservatory when I was thirty; before that, I had worked for eight years as a social assistant in a psycho-medical-social centre.

That period of my life – I am telling you about this because that period and my stage work intersect in places – allowed me to meet early on people who prompted me to think about the foundations that would continue to guide my life. The phenomenon of expectation, for example. During a university summer course (these exist in France), I got to work with Odette and Henri Bassis, the founders of the Groupe Français d'Éducation Nouvelle, a militant pedagogical movement very much engaged with the problem of how to guarantee that all children pass while maintaining a very high standard. A day of the conference was devoted to discussing the question of expectation in the learning process.

And there came the shock ... Suddenly, I felt I understood deep down to which extent when one expects something from a person or situation (something that is not there at the outset), one arranges everything (more often than not unconsciously) to ensure the realization of the expectation.

Secondly, it didn't take long for my first job to give me the impression that things had already been decided and settled, and this before they had happened and regardless of the desires of individuals. My role was in fact determined by the institution: contact the parents of children who were having problems at school, study the source of the problem with them, and help the family find solutions. My role was predetermined. What the institution wanted – that is what I want to get to – was one thing, and what I wanted was another. Invariably, there was conflict between what I wanted to do, and what the institution asked me to do. Teachers wanted to distance themselves from the failures of one or another child, and my mission was to meet the families of the kids in question and basically tell them that they had to find a different way to take care of their kids; and psychologists from the PMS, on their side, clung to their functions as examiners/councilors, and they rarely did anything other than what the teacher wanted them to do, viz.: say that the student had psychological or family problems and thus had to be directed towards schools for special learning, unless the family shaped up. The responsibility for solving school problems was always extrinsic to the school itself.

I actually spent a great deal of time turning down the requests of teachers after having analyzed them. To make them assume their responsibilities, to make them committed to working in the classroom (inventing new organizations) to make sure that all the children in the class – especially the ones for whom studying at home was impossible – passed. I also quickly abandoned the idea of meeting families whose failing track record at school could sometimes stretch across three generations and who were beset by social problems to tell them that they had to change their attitude at home for their kid to be able to thrive at school.

The second enduring lesson I learned while working in the fields of institutional analysis and institutional psychology is that the institution, and hence the organization that underwrites it, makes the person, so that by changing institutions, the person is – almost naturally – transformed. These reflections prompted two institutional changes in the PMS centre I used to work at. One is that psychologists stopped giving teachers the results of the IQ tests administered to the students; the second is that a bad record did not follow the student from one school to another.

I continued to cope with those contradictions until the incident with Simon, another story of humans and animals. A teacher wanted Simon, who was five, to do the third year of kindergarten over again. According to her, Simon was already having enormous problems at school, even though he hadn't even learn to read and write yet.

She read the story of the little prince to the class and asked all the children – all of them – to draw a flock of sheep. And Simon drew only one goat.

To her eyes, this was proof that the kid had all manner of problems: 'Look at that. I asked all the kids to draw a flock of sheep, and Simon drew a single goat instead!' He didn't know how to count — that was the first problem. 'And when I asked him where the other sheep were, Simon answered: "They are hiding behind the goat"'. And there was the second problem: he was lazy and rebellious.

This child embodied all the qualities I hold dear: he managed to evade a normative response and, what is more, he did so with a poetic gesture that I found marvelous.

And so I told myself that it was time to go, to change scenes in order to be able to invent new ones, where I would try to be more in sync with my own ideas. I chose the stage, a neutral place, a black box where everything must be reinvented with each new project.

Besides the phenomenon of expectation, institutional analysis, and the organization of power (whether liberating or not), my professional engagement is guided by the question of resistance. I come from Liège, a city where the culture of change is channeled through the idea that, to get what one wants, one must seek out the enemy, face him, penetrate the institutions of power, unseat the existing power and replace it.

On that front, I have always been partisan to the idea that *things happen on the periphery and not in the centre*, as Heiner Müller says. And we know nowadays what happened to revolutions when revolutionaries took power.

The major split in the history of resistance is rather recent. It dates from the movement of the Indians in Chiapas who, with Subcommander Marcos, led a revolution whose goal was not to take power, but to reclaim their land, to be able to work it and to live on it as they wished. He is the first revolutionary not interested in power. Miguel Benasayag analyzes this phenomenon very well: one becomes powerless when one seizes power. Currently, a number of resistance movements –

and I think Constant is one as well – are working to create networks and situations in which people can reinvent worlds without taking power and without imposing their view on everyone else.

So, coming back to my second job: I enrolled in Liège's Conservatory of Dramatic Arts when I was thirty, to learn the craft of acting. I wanted to be able to start working on my own collective projects – rather than acting for others – as soon as possible. The bulk of my work tells stories about social development, but always on the poetic more than on a militant realistic register. With *Smatch*, I want to continue showing that the poetic register and that working against the grain does not prevent politics in the least.

When I received the invitation to the Junctions Festival, I reviewed my previous projects and noticed that, in each of them, I went against the grain of common sense in one way or another. The dramaturgic idea for my first piece, *les pas perdus*, was to talk about fear, without being overly fastidious about how. Fear is everywhere: it blocks us, it is paralyzing. But it is also the first survival mechanism. An enlarged creativity and a boundless imagination are, most probably, a product of fear. A person in fear imagines to him or herself the most beautiful scenarios in the world.

It was an ambulatory performance in Liège's abandoned train station. There, the audience met a number of characters who had lost their jobs. They had stayed at the train station after it was closed, and developed certain problems linked to solitude ...

In the second piece, *le paradis des chiens*, there were seventeen old actors on the stage; eight of them were over eighty years-old. Six were professionals, the others were amateurs.

While in New York for a six-month stay, I met an old homeless man, and I asked myself the question: what keeps him alive in spite of all the hardship? That led me to ask myself about how we might be able to speak about old age, not nostalgically, but in the present.

I asked several old people if they would be willing to talk to me about their condition today and about how they could say that they were still alive, still able to do projects, to resist, fight, create ... in sum, still engaged with life.

We had a very small budget for a group of twenty-five people. Of the seventeen actors, most had never set foot on a stage. My expectation at the start of this adventure was the following: to create the possibility for people who have nothing in common to be able – at a particular moment and for a specific reason – to organize and create something as a group, in common (be it a theatrical piece or something else). The group consisted of academics, trash collectors, Walloons, Flemings, and people with different cultural and social backgrounds.

We approached the subject through the metaphor, substituting a poetic discourse for the language of the militant. The cast had built their circus and each number represented, metaphorically, a social reality. (For example: the *reveil des fauves* sequence was a choreography in which old bodies wrapped in sheets swayed to the infernal cadences generated by collective organizations).

Another commission, another project: a carte blanche for a street theatre festival. Invent a new *entresort*, an extremely brief form: you walk in, see something, you walk out [1]. Like the headless woman, Spiderman, the beard man or the trunk man. I wanted to question the audience's voyeurism. I went against the grain of the form. That is to say: I created an *entresort* (*le dernier chant d'Ophélie*) that contained all the codes of Walt Disney – the beautiful little mermaid, with perfect red hair ... but, in the dry shade of a barge, what the audience was a mermaid drowning in its own tears (a mermaid can only drown in tears).

The public listened to the sailors awestruck. We had cut out a window on a large vat, and when the sailors opened the lid the audience could see the beautiful mermaid and admire a scene worthy of Walt Disney.

She sang, cried, and called out to her prince (there were references to Shakespeare's Ophelia and to Lewis Carroll). Meanwhile, the water rose slowly until it finally drowned her. The last image of this beautiful scene was the corpse of the mermaid floating in the vat. The sailors closed the lid, and the play ended. The adult members of the audience were left alone with their problems of conscience. And the kids flooded their parents with questions about death and love.

Another project that went against the grain: a bus ride *sur les traces de Oskar Serti*. This was a guided visit in which a bus followed the traces of the imaginary hero of plastic artist Patrick

Corillon. The most pertinent place was Paris, as part of the festival Paris quartier d'été. The public, in the company of a driver and conductor, both from Eastern Europe (the actor had learned to drive the bus for the occasion), were taken by bus to places that 'cannot be visited' – ugly, sordid, desolate places, a no man's land where everything was demolished, or where everything still had to be constructed. Places, in sum, where a new world could be constructed simply by dint of the stories narrated by the two guides. It was amusing to go against the grain of the expectations conjured up by a guided visit to Paris: expecting to visit the City of Lights, you suddenly find yourself going to all sort of 'uninteresting' places, like Aubervilliers, Saint-Denis, ...

The overarching question is always the same: how to put the audience on its guard, how to nudge it into a joyful questioning?

I had also once been asked to conceive a show for teenagers, and the question at the centre of *Smatch* crystallized for me then. What I proposed was a conference with three panels, as it were. For that performance, we staged Jonathan Swift's *A modest proposal for preventing the children of the poor in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public*. The essay was written in 1729, and in it Swift suggests the following, radical solution to the problem of poverty: the poor could sell their one year-old babies to the rich, who could use them for food. This would reduce poverty, and stimulate the economy.

I added a second panel to that: the biography of Nicoletta, a young Hungarian woman who had come to Liège and who narrated the story of her life. It bore the title *A modest testimony to prevent children from being in charge of all the World's sadness and to make them in spite of everything aware of life's many possibilities*.

The third panel was an initiative for the auto-social construction (a practice of the GFEN [2]) of a common knowledge around a place where it was still possible to resist.

There was also *L'opéra bègue (The stuttering opera)*, where one work of the title goes against the grain of the other. Indeed, the two words cancel each other out.

It's a musical piece made in collaboration with the philosopher Pieter de Buysser and with composer Dick Van der Harst, from LOD. We used Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' as our starting point, but we changed the ideas.

The text of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' is extremely powerful as well as absolutely sordid. And so we tilted the piece towards delirium, to allow it rouse the family (itself adrift in petit-bourgeois values), and to allow delirium (a young bride wakes up the day before her wedding with a tree growing from her mouth) to spark a joyful and poetic chaos. I asked Pieter to keep the following image in mind as he was writing the play: the members of the audience, as soon as they had been seated on their comfortable seats, had to be immediately destabilized and pushed towards a new discomfort, a new questioning.

The set was made of mattresses, and the characters, caught in their comfort and their mediocre petit-bourgeois mentality, moved awkwardly across the soft stage.

And then came *Smatch*.

Smatch: a soirée composée/performance presented as a laboratory for ideas. We tried to find a form in which different points of view could intersect, clash. Something like a stroll inside philosophy, art, poetry, politics, life, a stroll that would give the spectator the freedom to choose the path he or she wanted tread. Starting from an anecdote or current event, we tried to find an approach that would allow people (ludically, if possible) to construct an idea or thought together by using the strategy of going against the grain. The formula we used for the performance was one that could subsequently be varied with new guests and new themes.

The prophecy with the most traction today is that the world will come to end. In the shadow of that prophecy human finitude becomes the only possible truth. But this at the price of overlooking or forgetting the thousands of examples that attest to the human capacity for thinking, imagining, cooperating. It is no surprise that our societies should find themselves plunged into a sense of impotence and retreat that favors stasis and the ethos of 'every man for himself'. We want to continue living with the idea that it is not over for human being and thus give humanity a chance to continue its construction. The starting point for this first *Smatch* was a strange map of Belgium

I found in a guide to cultural institutions in Flanders. The northern side of the map, the Flemish side, shows Flanders' various provinces, each of them illustrated with warm colors, and the names of various places. The southern half, Wallonia, conversely, is depicted in a uniform pale blue, and is deserted. There are only three place names: Hornu, Charleroi, and Eupen. Liège, Mons, Namur, and so on have all disappeared! This strange cartography attests to the peculiar gaze through which one region of the country sees the other. It is a perfect illustration of how the process of expectations ends up creating a new reality. As an answer to this rather reductive representation, I thought: why not populate this deserted Wallonia with intelligent animals and make the desert dunes sing? Given that the desert ...

It was a nice, amusing starting point to talk about our concerns.

How can we talk about the problem of expectations without incurring conflict, without wading into an extremely complex and long situation, as Belgian history certainly is, without falling into the trap of stating the obvious and taking recourse in clichés? We wanted to give an answer that allowed us to be elsewhere, an answer that would come at the question indirectly. We wanted to think, not against, but with difference – using the strategy of going against the grain.

The piece opens with a projection of the map of Belgium and with a naïve conversation about this representation. We've put Wallonia into a sort of sea that is perhaps a desert, as it is not populated. And, since we were at it, we populated it with animals. While we discuss the issue, Mr. Delmotte, performer and artist, is drawing. He redraws Wallonia's outline, making it look a pig, and he populates our blue part, this desert, with pigs ...

The space is bifrontal (in echo of the two communities), but it also brings the audience into a lab (the public examines the issue with the actors). The actors are always visible and always very close to the audience: we are in a research space, and we are trying to construct meaning together throughout the length of the piece. Two screens are mounted on rails; they are mobile.

We imposed a very rigid constraint on our starting point: an alphabet composed of the letters that make up the word *smatch*. It is through this alphabet that the piece articulates its journey through thought. We wanted to end with the word possibilities, and we chose to project that last word of the evening in Dutch: *mogelijkheden*. The word only appears in Dutch.

Two paths intersect.

The path travelled by Vinciane Despret, a philosopher who has spent more than ten years studying not only animals but also, and above all, scientists, trainers, animal lovers, and others who have strong bonds with their animals. Her work is about all those who have transformed the way we look at animals, and who have been transformed in their turn by animals.

The example of the great British primatologist Thelma Rowell is eloquent: after studying monkeys for fifty years, she decided, after having retired, to study sheep. She wanted to ask more intelligent questions of them than how their meat can become a tasty morsel on our plates. She settled on a farm in England's wild countryside with a flock of sheep. She had decided to take the time necessary to observe them, to put them into a situation comprised of all the conditions that allowed the animal to be in another condition and to discover the capacities and the forms of intelligence of sheep.

We read Vinciane's books, we recorded her, we spoke to her at length before choosing the words we thought suitable to articulate the piece's journey through thought.

The first word we chose was *syntax*. Vinciane Despret discusses the notion of *agency*, by which we are to understand the faculty of acting, of investing other worlds and other modes of being than the human with intentional power. She is, incidentally, working on the notion of agency in the dead: how to attribute intention to the dead?

Another word, *contrary*, addressed the question of thinking with and not against. I recommend reading Vinciane Despret's *Être bête*, based on her research on breeders and on their answers to her questions about the difference between being human and being animal. All breeders had some sort of link to the animal, and all spoke of resemblances

The show could be read on two levels. The first level is that of learning to know the animal better. The second is that of a reflection on how we can import the manner in which ethnologists address and study all that is foreign to us ...

We combined and crisscrossed Vinciane's path with the path of someone who studies the song, the music of sand dunes (since there is desert on the map).

We knew from the start that we wanted to talk about those two things, but we had no idea how we would interweave them. We pondered this on the stage and we found the answer together. There is a moment, for example, when we play with sand. This is followed by a short performance with layers of superimposed colours (the colours are those of the Belgian flag), after which we blow the sand, giving the illusion of the Belgian flag (the three colours), which appears, disappears, blends.

We speak about animals, we speak about sand, and then we return to the human with the word *mogelijkheden*. Vinciane Despret and Isabelle Stengers talk and weave the whole thing together. In particular, they return to the metaphor of the desert. When a region becomes desert, what does one do to keep the sand from swallowing up a village? Building a wall is useless, certainly, as the sand will just go over it.

Conversely, if one becomes well acquainted with the desert and with the village's architecture, if one studies the wind and observes how the sand moves, then one can build paths that channel the sand in such a way that it bypasses the village without covering it over. A new position of resistance, a path towards new possibilities.

The play ends with an extract from a film in which researchers – like children, but with the seriousness of scholars – disperse sand dunes by making them sing. The very last image is of the living fish that performing artist Mr. Delmotte has been putting into vials all through the play. This final image stages the clash between thought and sentiment: the admiration of a beautiful image is there disturbed by a cruel, possibly dangerous, situation. We had to open all the vials immediately after the end of the performance to make sure the fish didn't suffocate and die. It was the occasion to continue the debate with a new contradiction ...

A question from a member of the audience:

I would like to know if you involve the spectator in the performance.

Dominique replies:

In this performance, the involvement is solely at the level of thought.

Everything has been constructed, even though it looks like a big mess – quite against the grain of what we usually find in the performing arts: a magnificently clean and sleek stage at the beginning, a huge chaotic mess at the end (we are rubbing shoulders with deconstruction).

Our last strategy for going against the grain: give the impression of an enormous mess only to arrive, little by little, as things fall into place and thought moves along its rails, at the construction of a new knowledge ... and, perhaps, at the beginning of a new story?

[1] An entresort is a fair or carnival attraction in which one pays to walk through and see a display. – Trans.

[2] A *démarche d'auto-socio-construction* is an approach practiced by the Groupe français d'éducation nouvelle.