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**Ego ecology**

***So Far Away*. Introduction to ego-logy by Betontanc Ltd.**

The Betontanc group, founded by its thought leader and director Matjaž Pograjc, has been on the scene for the last couple of decades, constantly managing to keep up a recognizable dynamic stage style, created by all of its (more or less regular) members. Their individual contributions have resulted in a mature and fine dance theatre group that has had an important influence in Slovenia and has also won recognition abroad. Betontanc has become a real trademark on the dance theatre scene. In the last ten years the group has been co-created by three very successful performers, i.e. Primož Bezjak, Katarina Stegnar and Branko Jordan. Besides having participated in numerous projects on institutional as well as on non-institutional scene, the three have decided to do a joint project, which is largely based on their previous cooperation with Betontanc, mainly in its distinctive emphasis on dance theatre. At the same time, *So Far Way*, introduction to ego-logy, is a self-reflection on their work with Betontanc, the work of three peers who have become artistically mature (while working with Betontanc). Interestingly, the three authors and performers have signed the piece as Betontanc Ltd., which shows their strong identification with the group, as well as the autonomous role that each member has played in the performance creation of previous projects, and so the authors' (and moral) rights do not belong to the director only.

Nevertheless, the team Stegnar-Bezjak-Jordan adds the Ltd. (''limited'') label to the name of the group and thus problematizes complex relations within an art group that is constituted of many components. With the elimination of some individuals, the name of the group becomes legally questionable, as it was coined consensually and has become a ''trademark'' over the years. By adding the label, which stands for ''a private company with limited responsibility'' in business language, to the name of the group, the creators consciously step on the field of economy. The naming of the group is already a crucial part of the performance's concept. With this act, the creators clearly place the performance inside the economic structure, the integral part of which is (theatre) art as well. The performance criticizes contemporary late-capitalist consumer world without excluding itself from it. The creators realize that subverting and revolutionizing capitalism is much more paradoxical as it may appear at first sight, because the command to constantly subvert and revolutionize is an integral part of capitalism's foundations. That is why their starting point is self-reflection which becomes, through parody and without moralising or searching for the subversion or revolution point, a tragicomical theatre structure.

Consisting of two parts, the performance has a clear and explicit concept in the first part. While the performers parade around the stage in an exaggerated and flirtatious manner, the voice-over makes an exhaustive list: ' There are a billion hungry people in the world, a billion are homosexual, a billion are lonely, a billion depressed, a billion intellectuals,…' Each search of authenticity already has its own billion market. As Brian Massumi says: 'Produce variety and you produce a niche market.' The search of authenticity is possible only within categories, which are always unions of billions where each member needs the same products to fulfil a wish or to solve a problem. Synonyms for all these products are packages, which the performers persistently bring on to the stage so that slowly a (dynamically movable) set is formed, over-saturating the stage gradually. The banality of the boxes' contents is shown by the fact that the contents of the boxes are replaced by their packages carrying labels of famous brands. These boxes are used as real products by the performers (they stare at the box of an LCD television, they open a big box as if it was a fridge, a cardboard folding screen represents a shower cabin, etc.), which implies how cheap and consumable real products are. The process of creating set is not dull, on the contrary, it is an extremely well-choreographed physical action, which shows constant preoccupation with the material and has a purely functional role of constructing and moving the scene at the same time.

In a general frenzy of identity searching, the authenticity paradoxically becomes almost uniform. All three performers are overly self-confident in their respective stage presence, arrogant even, as is dictated by the ideal of chic appearance that a modern individual, for whom the world is a runway, must stick to. Betontanc want to bring, with a pinch of caricature, this urban individual on the stage. Simple costume design, which dresses all three in turquoise jeans and accessorizes them with trendy big frame glasses, places them in an everyday environment, which manages to stay glamorous nevertheless. During a rhythmical and dynamic choreography of hurrying and doing everyday chores, which takes over the complete first part of the performance, the performers change their outfits several times. However, this is not a chameleon change but only a variation of one and the same theme: a typical contemporary trendy individual, *a priori* changing his image. Following the same trends, however, these ''different'' individuals are almost identical. Pompousness and commercial media exaggeration are integrated into choreography of everyday activities, which consist of taking a shower, doing physical exercise, watching TV, doing the laundry. All these most common elements of our lives, and supposedly most intimate as well, are infused with a mediatised ideal image of free-time activities, brought to our living rooms and bought by different products for a ''better and easier life''. While using the packages instead of products, the three performers are rhythmically doing domestic chores - taking a shower inside a box, washing the laundry in a big box with a washing machine label on it, doing the ironing by using a box - and surprise us with their playfulness and coordination that is reminiscent of retro situational comedy of silent movies. There is an important difference, however. In our case, the characters are modern fancy individuals, dancing to the rhythm of capitalism.

The parody, produced by Betontanc in the first part of the performance, does not actually consist of making fun from a solid position. The creators of the performance are auto-ironic as well. Filling up the stage excessively with the boxes of well-known brands is happening with a simultaneous awareness that as ''Betontanc'' they are actually a brand as well, a brand that the audience came to consume. The performance does not succumb to the illusion that art is emancipatory just by holding up a mirror to society. It holds up a mirror to itself as well. The benefit of the performance *So far away* is that it accepts its reflection in the mirror and even takes advantage of it. It aims for the impossible - as Mara would try to convince us by citing Fredric Jameson - 'to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment.' Despite the absurdity and emptiness that the performance represents, it evolves before our eyes with awareness that the explication of the state of the things in society brings along the explication of the same system that enables art dynamics. Art in itself is never independent from social structures. This would give it an independent position from which a critique of society would be possible. In theatre as well, it is about producing pleasure, which is delegated into capitalist structure. As Massumi says, 'capitalism hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential'. Passion is woven into profit making, that is why 'the nature of a social bond is perverse', as Peter Klepec would say.

With their performance, Betontanc are introducing ''ego-logy'': an explicit structure of the first part offers a crash course on the contemporary culture of narcissism in a playful, dynamic and humorous way. As Lacan writes somewhere, 'psyche is no more than theology of contemporary entrepreneurship,' the consumer American way of life which is buying authenticity that is supposed to liberate us and enable us to perversely get rid of the name of the Father. In its own narcissistic hunt this blown-up embellished ego is blindly bumping into material goods and is overly concerned with its body image, interpassively delegating human relations to various trendy communication tools. Most simple everyday chores are in fact the most infected ones, as it is very well shown by the performers, our free time is always consuming (and consumable). Interference of the capital is most effective where (and when) the concentration of possibility to enjoy is the greatest.

The passage from the first to the second part of the performance is marked by a radical and clean dramaturgical cut, which functions as censorship and leaves us in expectation until the end of the performance. The stage from the first scene, littered with packages, disappears behind a curtain onto which the images of the three protagonists in the intimacy of their homes are projected. After a telephone conversation, each of them opens a huge parcel very slowly. The parcels have been brought to them by DHL, the global market leader in the logistics industry. What is hiding inside the box is a mystery produced by a media trick - censorship – ''more after the break'', which intensifies the audience's attention and increases the tension, and thus (in terms of television) increases ratings on account of artificial rise in sensation level and its delay, and also builds up the audience's expectations and impatience. In theatrical means, Betontanc use cheap tricks from the media industry as well. If critique is possible, it can be given only if it does not negate its position, which at the same time affirmates the system which makes the criticism possible. The technique that Betontanc predominantly use in the performance consists of caricature and parody. For certain details however (such as the above mentioned strategy to increase attention), the affirmation is not even exaggerated in parodic sense, where the critique is obvious, but it becomes subversive in its concealed judgement.

The second part, following the censorship with curtains and videos, is a total surprise for the audience, as it assumes the form of a documentary about polar bears. With its slow pace and apparent hermetics, this part is in total contrast to the explicit and dynamic first part. With a focused television accuracy, clearness and slowness, a soothing documentary voice-over tells us about the habitat and biological and behavioural features of the polar bear. This is spiced up by adding a popular documentary anthropomorphic note on love between the male and the female and their care for their offspring, which should enhance the audience's identification and personal affective involvement, which is again in the function of increasing the ratings, and thus increasing the consumption and consequently the profit. During the narrative, the stage is initially populated by a performer dressed in a white plush costume, moving around the stage with a fairly well-studied bear motoric. He is then joined by a female bear, overly feminine with a flower in her white fur. The story takes on a typical narrative structure, into which (in the interest of the media consumer) the producer fits the animals' lives. The performers' effort to appear as authentic as possible in plush costumes, displaying carefully planned human behaviour at times, is comical. Comical peak is reached when the polar bear family shares a hug while drinking Coca-Cola, literally citing a commercial campaign by this multinational, the face of which the polar bears once were. This stage image exposes a thin line between educational contents, humanitarian advertising and profitable advertising industry. The slowness and the length of the scene, which extends over approximately half of the performance, manage to grasp the audience's attention at all times. This is largely due to comicality of transfer from TV documentary media on to the theatre stage and of course, to unexpected ideas such as the one with Coca-Cola.

Nowadays it is hard to imagine a discussion about polar bears without an accompanying moralistic speech about global warming, pollution and ecological catastrophes. Betontanc take advantage of this and bury the frontal part of the stage with piles of plastic bottles, which function both as icy landscape ''so far away'' and non-biodegradable waste. Ecological catastrophes are used for raising the drama level of the death of the bears, reaching a caricature level already – the first bear dies of ice melting and undernourishment that follows, and the other one ends trapped in plastic. This not very likeable portrait of dying ionises the exploitation of consumer's affective potentials by humanitarian and various other organizations for preservation of wild animal species, which are extremely well-tied into profit industry. Media contents are delegating the feelings of individuals and even lead to the exchange of wild animal specimen with their own offspring – each endangered polar bear gets its adopter. It is probably needless to point out the difference (if it even exists) that the bear ''child'' mostly gets financial ''care'', which evidently does not come directly into its paws. By the end of the performance, a random finder of dead giants appears on the stage. Truly moved, he calls the association for the protection of polar bears. However, he only reaches an answering machine through which he can report the tattooed number of the dead polar animal. Apparently, random tripping over dead polar bear bodies is a fairly common practice (and caricatured as well). Now, a big humanitarian company can deliver mortal remains of the adoptees to their adopters. After a long censorship we finally discover the content of the heavy DHL parcels from the (anti)heroes' living rooms.

At this point, it is again extremely well shown how emotion is woven into the functioning of contemporary society and capitalism. A consumer's feelings of responsibility and compassion, which are harder and harder to express and please in this fast moving consumer world, are delegated ''so far away'', somewhere far in the North Pole where the polar bears live. With this, the search of an individual's authenticity (or undercover narcissism), woven into capitalist logics, is indirectly and smoothly completed. Nevertheless, we want to keep the others at safe distance, so that they cannot steal our pleasure, let them stay ''so far away''. In this safe structure of pleasure delegating and casting discomfort ''away'', the mortal remains of a polar bear in the living room of a modern consumer thus represent something foreign - facing the reality. And it is this foreign body that represents a point impossible, exaggeration and absurdity, which does not coincide with a laid-back attitude of modern western humanitarism. This last straw uncovers and exposes the absurd scheme of *perpetuum mobile* of contemporary capitalism. We would be wrong, however, if we thought that this exposure of the real is a point in critique of late capitalism where open wound of the system lies. As Massumi says: 'The oddest of affective tendencies are OK — as long as they pay.' In the end, real tears and real polar bear body stand for that passion for the real, a fundamental feature of 20th century according to Alain Badiou. This position of a fundamental feature, surviving in a peculiar way also in 21st century, is not subversive, though. Passion for the real is the point from which it is impossible to approach the point of authenticity that triggers consumerism. The features assigned to rebelliousness coincide with the perverse structure of social bond, as rebelliousness is nothing else than a hunt for authenticity, the nature of which is narcissistic.

Similarly, every image nowadays seems more convincing if it openly shows its own (real) illusion, which is why this process is often at work even in commercials. Metafiction has become the key to the real. This real, however, as we have already shown, is not a direct critique of the existing system. Even though it belongs to the system, it nevertheless offers a reflective position, which is exposed through self-reflection and self-critique which does not allow a neutral, distanced standing point. Betontanc do not run away from the real in terms of metafiction – on the contrary, they take advantage of it, so that together with self-critique they can deliver a critique of the system. Besides parody, caricature and foundations of subversive affirmation, this extremely lively and very entertaining interpretation (despite the complexity of the problem it is dealing with) is infused with cynicism that Marx, possibly without realising it, had requested. This is in fact the position between, which preserves both positive as well as negative features of capitalism. In the performance, the positive ones are those which form the performance strategy to stay metaphysical in terms of its ''real'', which is also woven into capitalist structure – and from that position only, it is possible to point out the negative aspects of capitalism. If we see the position of the Betontanc from that perspective, it does not appear very idealistic and it does not prepare for ''revolution'' even though it exposes (in a comical way) the decay of the system. This is perhaps the most sincere position as it exposes the real cynicism of the society. It is the position which enables a realistic (self)critique, which is ''far away'' from the idealistic revolutionary positions that exempt themselves from the criticized, even though they have been incorporated into the system since always. It is true that Betontanc realistic and non-utopian position also works towards the allayment of passion for the real and is thus perhaps not ''the best'', however, it is most certainly the most ''real'' critique.