

(Interview) Beton Ltd.: We got hooked on limited liability

Interview with the artistic collective Beton Ltd. – with Branko Jordan, Katarina Stegnar and Primož Bezjak – marking the tenth anniversary of the group

Let's start – not with Beton [Slovenian for “concrete”] (the origin of this part of the name is a concrete fact, so to speak, your first common home, apart from the academy, was Betontanc dance group), but with Ltd. “Limited liability company” seems like a great starting point for discussing art, society, and relations between the two. Was this label initially just a clever catchword, or was it “the root of the matter” from the very beginning?

“The label Ltd. as in “limited” essentially referred to our first performance *So Far Away: introduction to ego-logy*, which dealt with the responsibility of an individual for a burning issue such as climate justice or environmental issues. At the same time, Ltd. formally articulated our specific position on the established and expected model of the pyramidal hierarchy in the creation of performances. As actors, we often worked as co-creators of theatrical performances before, but we nevertheless had a limited liability in these creative processes. That's when we turned the glove inside out. And despite the fact that we took responsibility into our own hands, we claimed to have limited liability. It is a real paradox that becomes apparent when working in a collective: even though it seems at first glance that the responsibility for making artistic and organizational decisions is diffused, it is actually bigger, because it requires us, as actors, to take entirely new positions of acting and of absolute responsibility towards the performance. Consequently, we got hooked on limited liability. We were happy with the process, and at the same time, we were surprised at how well we could work together, but we didn't want to commit to any manifesto. Our modus operandi has evolved during the work itself, and we have no problem with limited liability, with shared, non-delegated responsibility. Due to our work regime, the performances are specific, we mainly place ourselves in them as the main actors, though not always. “

In your performances, the main ego-logy (the questions of place, conscience, awareness of the responsibility of every individual in the world) is always intertwined with questioning the possibilities of art. What can I do as an artist, how responsible is my art, and what is its scope. Have the answers changed in the last ten years?

“Above all, we can't and don't want to find an answer to the question of the role of art. Each of our performances is probably different in this respect, because we try to enact the multitude of contexts around us. We are certainly interested in the self-referential context of art, but it is not our top priority. At the same time, we approach all performances or projects with a sufficient degree of honesty, if honesty as a category in art exists at all. Every artists certainly wants their art to have a certain impact, a certain reach.

Perhaps we are old enough to have stopped looking for the answer in theatre performances and in our ideas of the scope of art. But we see the scope, value and progress mainly in our internal structure, our continuous work. Perhaps the biggest recognition is the fact that many young theatre artists want to also try out this modus operandi.”

Of course, I don't see your performances as autobiographical, but as performers, you are in a way committed to performing yourself. I find it interesting that outside of Beton Ltd., you have different “answers” to questions about the engagement of art and artists, that

one part is more directly socially engaged than the other, for example. How productive is this for your joint projects?

“Beton Ltd. is a temporary autonomous zone, a field of freedom that does not restrict any of us three (or other members of the team) with a Beton Ltd. party card, manifesto, or any ideology. Accordingly, there is also no ultimatum that could “unmember” someone from the collective. Outside the field of art, everyone is their own agent-human. This does not mean, however, that one is not subject to deep friendly inspection, teasing, or probing questioning of one’s political orientation or actions. Above all, it is about extremely open conversations and accepting diversity.”

It seems that your collectivity is pioneering. There are author projects with known directors, and there are anonymous performances where the roles of each participant are unknown. You are a collective with full names. You are all authors of the performance, you are all directors ... Can you still say something about the work process?

“A methodology exist, but not in writing, sometimes it is even deliberately not made conscious. But first comes probing of the social climate, next, searching for an exciting topic, and finally, finding the right performative form. However, not necessarily in that order.

In our work, laying the groundwork is essential. Searching for, extracting and articulating contents, so binding and intriguing that they trigger a conceptual world in each of us with enough potential for these contents to begin to materialize on stage. This often takes up most of the time in the process. To tune in. In doing so, we relentlessly eliminate everything that is purely individual, that does not provoke everyone, or more precisely: until it provokes everyone. When this terrain is solidly built, the transition to the practice on stage is actually easy. From here on, each of us autonomously intervenes in the material, switching between the positions of actor – spectator – director – dramaturge – choreographer and so on, according to the current requirements of the emerging performance. One of the key qualities that are essential for such group dynamics and that have been with us from the very beginning, is trust. Both personal and professional, theatrical trust, which began to build long before we started working as a collective and is really invaluable.”

“It was a privilege and a conscious decision to speak from our inner need and urgency rather than under the dictates of contracts, the market, hyperproduction. In short, to not say only what we are told to say, to paraphrase one of the titles of our performances.” This is a quote from one of your anniversary interviews. How successful are you in maintaining that freedom? Can this urgency, need persist for so long?

This is mainly thanks to our producers at Bunker, who have an extraordinary understanding of the above-mentioned issues. It is also a matter of unshakeable trust, which is a privilege in itself. On the other hand, it was our conscious decision not to become slaves to the dictate of constant production, the dictate that artists often set for themselves. We have successfully avoided this dictate twice already. We mainly relied on our intuition in this respect, and we quite simply admitted to ourselves what we can and cannot do. Especially in terms of production conditions, where you make a long-term commitment to produce a product every year, a product with which you will not only fulfil your obligations, but with which you will also be satisfied.

How do you maintain a high level of motivation and freshness with the constant unsolvability? The first sentences of the first performance, *So far away* – “So, here you

are, homo sapiens, in the year 2010, in all you pomp, in all your madness ...” – basically predict perpetuation ...

Someone once said that you are always working on the same performance. But as long as there are facts around us that make us angry, unexplored topics that need to be discussed, and topical issues, we will not run out of material for performances. And due to our way of working and the results of this work – in which we are not committed to any aesthetics in terms of content or genre, and where we prefer to give up acquired knowledge or a successful formula, rather than insist on established pattern – we are simply throwing ourselves into the unknown. It keeps us alive and present. And as long as the regime works, we will probably be able to produce.

We are aware, however, that due to various reasons, creative relationships often fade away, and this is also why everyone is working on many other projects in different fields and in different relationships. It was never our goal for Beton Ltd. to be our only artistic statement. Outside Beton, we are Branko, Primož and Katarina – it is true, though, that we are burdened, in a positive sense, with theatrical knowledge acquired through our common experience, as well as with our unlimited liability.

Your most recent project, *Mahlzeit*, a concert event, is probably really just a light in-between snack? Snack in the German Cycle, so to speak ...

For us, *Mahlzeit* was primarily an experiment, a shift in focus and an attempt to bring the ‘support’ elements to the forefront. To give music and visual elements the place they deserve. To use the excellent materials for which we had not found the right context until then. And at the same time, to examine the relationships in the wider collective. And these were just the initial concepts for *Mahlzeit*. And even though we wanted a snack and a break, this performance was just as demanding as any other. It is interesting, however, how lightly one refers to a light in-between snack – as if probing, reflection and creative work can only be manifested as something complex, spectacular, not to say beautiful. If *Mahlzeit* project is not regarded through a multitude of contexts in which we live, it can be seen as “only” a concert with a released record (which in itself is not exactly a piece of cake). But ultimately, our intuition proved right once again, as it became clear over the last year that musicians have become one of the most affected social groups. Not to mention the scenography of the auditorium and how it can be read in the present circumstances.

And, of course, there's the question of the future. Where to, to which cycle, which context, which world, performative mode?

Indeed. The question is a kind of the Sword of Damocles hanging above us. Of course, to complete the German Cycle, as we named it, which has been revealing the impotence of intellectualization, verbalization, the acoustic mix of the pressing social issues and circumstances from the perspective of privileged social position, which unveiled the obscured view of the threat of infantilization and trivialization that is systematically unfolding right before our eyes. But how? In the completely changed working conditions, in a somewhat unimaginable future, which will certainly no longer be exactly the same. We are waking up to a quite different world, it is uncertain whether we will be able to name the real problems that are relentlessly being swept under the rug of everyday life. The stage is set for us to begin getting rid of the excess.

Who and what is Beton Ltd.

Beton Ltd. is a Slovenian theatre collective founded in 2010 by three actors, performers and theatre artists, Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bežjak and Branko Jordan. Their common artistic biographies date back to their student years at the Academy of Theater, Radio, Film and Television (AGRFT), and especially to the Betontanc theatre group led by director Matjaž Pograjc. In 2010, they created their first performance as Beton Ltd. collective, *SO FAR AWAY: Introduction to ego-logy*. Since the beginning, they have been co-creating the performance with set and light designers Toni Soprano and Sonda (Miha Horvat), as well as with musicians Janez Weiss and Jure Vlahovič.

Since then, they have created various performances: *I Say What I Am Told To Say* (2012), *Everything We've Lost While We've Gone on Living* (2013), *Revoltin' Man* (2015), *Ich kann nicht anders* (2016) and *Große Erwartungen | Big Expectations* (2018) in which they deal with modern-day problems, always with a great deal of self-reflection and humour and using innovative performing practices and methods. At the end of 2019, they created a music-performance event *Mahlzeit* and released their first LP album, *Beton Ltd. Mahlzeit*.

Beton Ltd. performances are produced by the Bunker Institute, and two were also (co-)produced by Anton Podbevšek Theatre, Novo Mesto. (*presentation on the Bunker Institute website*)