

Breaking the Spell.

Feminist artistic practices of being-with

"Breaking the Spell" is a pilot step of an artistic research project that reflects practices of thinking-and being-with in performing arts. It is a temporary space of common learning and mutual support for artists, curators and thinkers who redefine the arts by deeply transforming the ways of co-creating, producing and sharing it. It focuses on artistic practices which are deeply political and poetic at the same time and which refuse to follow the dominating, exhausting modes of working and producing. Observing how they are situated in the local environments, it searches for ways to build and maintain transnational alliances." Breaking the Spell" emerges from the desire to understand how to make art in the moment of losing the world as we knew it.

Its idea took shape during the rather bleak weeks of autumn 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, when the limits of social distance in Poland were broken by mass protests (the largest since 1989) against the almost total ban on abortion. Despite all the efforts, the new law on abortion was introduced, and turned out to be yet another element in the series of humiliations against female, feminised and queer bodies that we had been experiencing here recently. We have lost this particular fight, but we leave from it stronger, empowered by recognition of being many.

And even if, obviously, the current backlash is not specific to any particular country, the Breaking the Spell initial concept is indeed deeply situated in the Eastern European context, in its geopolitical position of semi-peripheral country which spent last thirty years in ceaseless run after the West, and which had to endlessly prove it was good enough to be considered European. The project idea stems from the moment of exhaustion and asks: how to keep going when the local ground actively repulses you? How to sustain your practice in the locality which becomes hostile? How not to let yourself burnout before you even noticed? Arising from the local context, the Breaking the Spell idea emerges from a genuine need of strengthening each other and looking for translocal and transnational alliances.

Borrowing its title from the book by Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, the project questions the sorcery without sorcerers¹, a capitalist, patriarchal realism, so overwhelmingly dominant and so deeply intertwined with our subjectivities that often any alternative seems unthinkable. The artists and thinkers invited to join the BTS trajectory challenge this domination profoundly: through the artistic research they undertake and through the modes of production they choose. They re-enchant the performing arts world by opening conditions for long-term, intimate encounters with their human and non-human interlocutors. They take a feminist perspective as a very logic of work and

¹ Philippe Pignarre, Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery. Breaking the Spell*, trans. Andrew Goffey, Palgrave Macmillian 2011, p. 135

acknowledge their interdependence with the ecosystem in which they operate on a daily basis. They withdraw from the flow of hypermobility and refuse the invitation to hop from one festival to another. Instead of seducing large audience for one evening and disappear, they propose an ongoing encounter and stay in a given local context for longer, trying to attune to its sounds and urgencies.

The artistic proposals gathered, practiced and researched within the Breaking the Spell pay a special attention to the embodied experiences and to the lived knowledge; they are deeply political in their rhythm; they focus on setting the frame of gathering with collaborators and audiences as much as they focus on its topic; they practice thinking-with and being-with (as Donna Haraway has it) and offer space for their non-human companions; they question the notions of progress and growth as the basis of development; they acknowledge the labour of care and maintenance as crucial elements of artistic practice and refuse to take part in the competition for new and loudly shouted ideas.

While challenging the working modes in the performing arts field, the artists and thinkers co-shaping Breaking the Spell often decide to withdraw from the so-called mainstream, sometimes, in consequence, struggling for sustaining and developing their practices. Some of their practices are being labelled as driven by a leftist ideology or censored, some are recognised as not socially or artistically relevant enough, some simply do not fit any existing frames. In a sense, they practice an “active withdrawal”, when the given conditions require too much of a compromise - and take the risk to pave new paths.

Breaking the Spell desires to follow them and learn on the way. During the gatherings we attempt at observing and sharing situated artistic practices and embodied knowledges - and we are asking: what happens if that very body is being endangered and becomes, sometimes explicitly, a territory of political fight? We would like to understand how the methods of being-with in the contemporary performing arts, that are situated in a local context, can be useful on a transnational level. Can we support each other while our perspectives are shaped by different landscapes? What can we see while our feet stand firmly on our local ground and thoughts are being formed with colleagues and interlocutors situated elsewhere? How might this constellation influence the way we think, work and gather?

In a sense, this first, pilot programme of Breaking the Spell attempts to respond to the exhaustion of critical theatre. Deconstruction of dominating narratives, revealing interdependencies, exposure of political compromises and entanglements is not enough anymore. We know the current structures do not work well: sometimes we know it even too well, experiencing it directly on our bodies, confronted with power abuse, bullying, gender based violence, transgressive behaviour. And if pointing out mistakes and preaching for change is needed, it does not work if it is not tightly entangled with a thorough reimagination of the structures we operate in. The artistic practices of being- and

thinking-with practice solidarity instead of competition, question the figure of an individual genius, experiment with various ways of (re)building relations with collaborators and with the publics, focus more on a practice than a singular presentation, take a risk of inviting the unknown to take space. In consequence, they offer and reflect new political languages and perspectives for performing arts (and beyond), that we need more than ever before. As Verónica Gago, an Argentinian political philosopher and one of the leaders of the movement #NiUnaMenos, pointed out: “we don’t know what we’re capable of until we experience the displacement of the limits that we’ve been made to believe and obey.”²

Container

In each project location the venue will become a „container” - a fluid space for sharing, manifesting and reflecting artistic practices, that welcomes new unexpected relations, contexts and encounters emerging between them. A container is understood here as a metaphor and a way of work: a space to hold on to, to gain strength from, to contain and carry our situated practices and struggles. Its shape is not fixed though: in every location it takes a form that resonates with the local landscape it becomes part of; it slightly transforms every day, responding to the gathered practices, to the rhythm of the conversation and to the surroundings. Gathering artists, thinkers and audiences, it invites them for a journey, where individual and common paths mingle and unexpected trajectories emerge.

Programme

The “Breaking the Spell” journey takes place from March 2022 to March 2023 and is hosted by four European performing arts institutions: Residenz Schauspiel Leipzig (23.03-1.04.2022), Müncher Kammerspiele in Munich (13-17.07.2022), Performing Arts Institute in Warsaw (14-20.11.2022) and Viernulvier in Ghent (3-11.03.2023). In each of the locations, closed working sessions will be followed by public programme, prepared in close cooperation with the hosting organisation. Throughout the whole journey Breaking the Spell will be accompanied by NOTES, a project by Ivana Müller, which will manifest in each of the four cities. One of the project traces will take a form of a book gathering artistic practices, working methods and spells.

With

Bodies of Knowledge (BOK): Flore Herman, Joana (B.) Polge, Damla Ekin Tokel, Sarah Vanhee), Aleksandra Borys, Silvia Bottiroli, Alicja Czyczcel, Mike Dittrich Frydetzki, Charlotte Eifler, Begüm Erciyas, Martina Hefter, Samara Hersch, Marta Jalowska, Caroline Kapp, Lina Majdalanie, Agata

² Verónica Gago, *Feminist international. How to change everything*, Verso, 2020, p. 2

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Marta Keil in cooperation with Residenz Schauspiel Leipzig, Münchner Kammerspiele in Munich, Performing Arts Institute in Warsaw, Viernulvier in Ghent and Grzegorz Reske.

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