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The Anthropocene and Performing Science

Examples from University Bielefeld

Abstract

This study inquires how theatricality and performativity (drama pedagogy) played an important role in certain research and teaching programs of the Center of Interdisciplinary Research in Bielefeld (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung / ZIF) and its associated Bielefeld University. It focuses especially on heuristic examples engaging with the challenges of the Anthropocene. By using inside and outside perspectives to the topic, the study investigates the structure of a university seminar on performing science, as well as the intersection, where art and science meet productively in a universitarian framework.

Keywords: theatricality, performativity, drama pedagogy, Anthropocene aesthetics, disaster, showing and/vs. lecturing

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Introduction

Though we do not think about sciences as primarily performing media, the aesthetics of how they are displayed, communicated and received have always played an important role. Just as arts, sciences also have an immediate contact to reality, in which they want to induce positive changes. They want to enlarge our horizon not only mentally but also emotionally. While arts communicate their subjects in an aesthetically holistic way, science relies on understanding and structuring them. However, the arts are also interested in conceptual and abstract forms, while science is also interested in maximizing its aesthetic manifestation. Ted Talks, Tedx events of the last decades, the FameLab forum running since 2005, or the Science slam competitions organized around the world are just a few global examples of science becoming more and more performative. The gradual opening of the sciences to the sensory-physical dimension of knowledge representation demonstrates that highly complex systems can rarely be understood otherwise. The popularization of sciences also resulted in developing the special presentation medium of 'Performative Science', which 'to a large extent means working on concepts within sciences that are open towards methods from arts and humanities and vice versa' (Diebner and Hinterwaldner 2006, 34).

This study uses inside and outside perspectives of the topic, giving insights both in a university seminar on performing science run by a finishing PhD student colleague (Frank Oberzaucher) and the author of this study (Dr. habil. Johanna Domokos), as well as in its context, where art and science meet in a universitarian framework. Reflecting on the Anthropocene with students in a seminar that ends with a series of performances gave the opportunity not only to communicate information on resource scarcity and ecological challenges of our planet, but to synthesize all these knowledges through artistic forms by students. Thus, the analytic power of science was paired with the performative power of arts offering the performing students and their audience not only analytic understanding but emotional internalization of this urgent topic. Combining performance in public space (the large hall of the main building of Bielefeld University) and academic presentation 'open[s] up intersubjective spaces for thought and action in which the research result appears as a form of event' (Haas 2017).

Theater, Performance and the Anthropocene at Bielefeld University

Founded toward end of the 1960s, and being a 'reform' research, teaching and experimenting institution, University Bielefeld gave place to the first interdisciplinary research center (ZIF) on the European continent, as well as, in the German context, a pioneering alternative pre-universitarian education with its *Labor Schule* and *Oberstufen Kolleg*. Bielefeld University has a four-decade long collaboration history with *Theaterlabor* (initiated in 1983 by Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and the founder Siegmund Schröder). In 2003 the Center for Aesthetics at Bielefeld University was founded to facilitate further artistic and cultural activities. As its website states: 'it is a service center for the management of individual tasks and projects, and on the other hand, it is a place where the aesthetic commitment and the cultural identity of the university are conceptually considered and further developed.'¹ The Center for Aesthetics presently hosts a series of theater groups for students and faculty, such as the *Compagnie Charivari*, the *English Drama Group*, *Theater Cocuyo*, the group *THTR* and *Live-Hörspiele und Theater*, the clown theater *FemBäm*, or the improvisation theaters *5..4..3..2..1 und los!*, *Knall auf Fall* and *Skuub*. The Center for Aesthetics supports projects belonging to individual university people, besides regularly organizing concerts, exhibitions, readings and festivals like *Nacht fer Klänge* (Night of Sounds), the *Lesenacht* (Reading Night) and the recent initiation *Wissenschat trifft Kunst* (Science meets Art) festival.

Since this study investigates the dramapedagogical elements of teaching and research events related to reflections on the Anthropocene (ecological challenges that our planet faces) at Bielefeld University, it is worth considering teaching and research topics, too. Reflection on history, culture, environment, art, and knowledge in the Anthropocene has been not only a topic of various courses² but also several research teams organized inside the university as well

1 Translated by Johanna Domokos. <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/uni/kultur-veranstaltungen/kultur/ueberuns/> Viewed on 07 January 2023.

2 E.g. courses as *Einführung in die Ökokritik/Introduction to Ecocriticism*, 2013 SS, by Johanna Domokos, Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies; *The End of History – and What Came After*, 2017 SS, by Dr. Zoltán B. Simon, History Department) and several individual studies such as Markus Pahmeier's PhD Thesis on Adalbert Stifter, Marcus Kracht's book on how to handle Anthropocene (Kracht 2012)), as well as Sebastian Schönbeck's studies on ecocriticism and Zoopoetics.

as internationally at ZIF (e.g. *Communicating Disaster*, Research Group 2010–2011, or the present research cooperation group *Volcanoes, Climate and History* 2021–2024). Among invited speakers, let us recall the 2015 lecture of Norbert Rost (Rost 2015), or of the founder of the global *Transition Town* movement Rob Hopkins in 2017.

Narrowing down our focus to events involving teaching, dramapedagogy and the Anthropocene at the same time, the courses of Susanne Horstman (DAF/DAZ) since 2011 onwards, or performative lectures of Frank Oberzaucher and Eva Maria Gauss (around 2008–2012) provide excellent examples. Among the research and artistic publications of students and faculty, let us mention the multilingual poetry book by Tzveta Sofronieva: *Anthroposzene* (published by the student team *hochroth Bielefeld*, 2017) and the science-poetical experimentation volume of professor Johanna Domokos: *KataStrophe* (Domokos 2016).

Naturally, many more projects have been circling but several remained only as plans. One of them was planning the course on *The Aesthetics of the Anthropocene* by the physicist and Chamisso prize winning poet Tzveta Sofronieva³, planned to be hosted by Johanna Domokos at the University Bielefeld. However, her workshop has been successfully realized in other university settings in Europe and America (e.g., University of Dijon and MIT in US). Sofronieva produced one of the most complex descriptions of the cross section of Performing Arts, Anthropocene Time and Science, by birthing the word Anthroposcene. She defined her concept first in her German (+multilingual) publication *Anthropo-*

3 Tzveta Sofronieva formulated the following formidable syllabus: 'In the suggested workshop *The Aesthetic of Anthropocene* students will reflect on the term Anthropocene and its implications as well as produce literary installations (images and objects using literary texts written by the students themselves or given them by the author out of her literary works) related to the human slow violence, hyper-performance, to social conflicts that arise from desperation as life-sustaining conditions erode, to consolation.

Narrative, imagination, artistic skills and analytical insight have to be combined in constructive criticism and convert into images the danger, which is exponential, anonymous and of indifferent interest to our media spectacular oriented image-driven world. And at the same time do not serve false pseudo-religious terminology. The over-presented visible violence and the politics of the visible and the invisible will interest us. What does the Anthropocene offer as a framework in order to unveil through art and literature?

We shall discuss different topics in order to concentrate on the one. Dark matter, radioactivity, the sky, the water ... The sky as a topic, for example, brings riches of narratives and images: weather phenomena, birds and bees, planets and stars, astronauts and aliens, god and dark matter, light and Icarus myth, drones and bombs, airplanes and internet, GPS and more. We shall use different material, we shall discuss a lot.

In correspondence with Max Born, Erwin Schrödinger points out the necessity to make proper decisions for terminology of new concepts. He also writes that when he feels attacked, as a physicist, for being at once very revolutionary and very reactionary, he would rather call himself simply "vernünftig", the word meaning both "sensible" and "reasonable". We will practice being sensible and reasonable in regard to the Anthropocene.'

szenes. This has been reworked by Sofronieva for her recent English edition, published in her collection of poems entitled *Multiverse* (2021). Below we cite her definition from the latter publication:

Anthropocene [æn'θrɒpə,si:n], noun. a proposed term for the present epoch (from the time of the first discussion on the Anthropocene and onwards), during which humanity has begun to be aware of its own self-performance.

Definitions:

1. a hyper-performative, quantitative, technology- and multiverse-oriented, image-driven period of a highly self-reflective and fully interconnected semi-educated humanity;
2. a time of increased self-staging of humanity during the later Holocene;
3. a striking process that takes place between humanity and Earth. Accidents, scandals, noisy wrestling between people and planet, emerging from despair when life-sustaining conditions erode;
4. special venues in the solar system where a theatrical performance of living beings – who are capable to think, speak and have social life – is played;
5. episodes in the divine universal art work with plot actions that unmask the politics of the invisible;
6. fierce self-reproaches;
7. expressions of price, of human value, dependent on losses, profits and the interference with nature;
8. a psychological state in which humans are obsessed with fears and in order to escape from them again believe themselves to be the center of the universe and the purpose of the world's creation; this does not prevent them from destroying more than creating. Provoked by anthropocentrism, an unscientific, religion and idealism related doctrine.

Word Origin: from *anthropo-* and *-scene*; from Old Greek (anthrōpos) = human, prefix, keyword in compositions meaning human; Latin *scena*, *scena* = locale, ancient Greek *σκηνή* (skēnē) = tent, hut

First known Use: Tzveta Sofronieva, Hochroth, March 2017

Deutsch: *Anthroposzene*, *die*, Wortart: Substantiv, feminin, Worttrennung: An|thro|po|sze|ne

Aussprache: [antropo'stse:nə]

Synonym: Anthropozähne

български: антропоцена, антропосцена (цената и сцената на човека).

Sofronieva's witty, sometimes ironic or sceptic, but poetically optimistic definition of *Anthroposcene* demonstrates the multidisciplinary and multiartistic approaches of our socio-politico-geological era (see the first eight definitions). This dictionary-like entry includes another word coined by Sofronieva, that of *Anthropozähne*. This homonym to the compound word *Anthroposzene* contains the same first unit but ends with the word meaning 'teeth' (in German: sg. *Zahn*, pl. *Zähne*), evoking the animalistic aggression in humans that this era brings along with itself. Sofronieva has regularly held innovative and ecocritical guest lectures, book launches and installations on cross sections of science and (multilingual) art at Bielefeld University ever since 2009 when she was a guest lecturer in a course on multilingual literature⁴. During these open discussions with students and faculty, questions of Anthropocene and Arts were often discussed.

All the above examples – pointing to a very preliminary exploration of our topic – will be followed by a short description of a four-hour long performance thematizing the Anthropocene in the major hall of Bielefeld University. This performance was prepared by the students of the performing science course *Disaster*, WS 2011–2012, under the supervision of Frank Oberzaucher and Johanna Domokos⁵.

The structure of the course

As its course description in outlines, this course set out to investigate literature (science) and sociology from the perspective of performance. The international research group at ZIF 'Communicating disaster', where one of the instructors (Frank Oberzaucher) was also a research team member, was running in

4 For other events with Sofronieva, have a look to the following blog entries from 2015 and 2017: https://blogs.uni-bielefeld.de/blog/fsz/entry/tzveta_sofronia_lesung, https://blogs.uni-bielefeld.de/blog/fsz/entry/lyrik_polyglott_5_6_18 Viewed on 03 April 2023.

5 German title and course number: 239624 "Disaster": Literatur- und Sozialwissenschaft unter der Perspektive von Performance (S) (WiSe 2011/2012)

parallel to the course. The collaboration between Domokos and Oberzaucher started a few years earlier, when Domokos was an artist member of another ZIF research group working on the epistemic practices of professional actions (Case / Der Fall, led by Jörg Bergmann and Ulrich Dausendschön-Guy). In the performance at the final conference event of this research group, taking place in September 2009, Domokos invited Oberzaucher to contribute. Besides working on his PhD in sociology, Frank Oberzaucher was active at that time in different theater companies (e.g. *Theaterlabor* in Bielefeld).

The present course offered an interdisciplinary insight into communication of the Anthropocene (the term was just marginally mentioned at that time), by looking closely at new orientations in literary studies and sociology, including (1) literary and academic texts and plurimedial performance, (2) staging and theatricality of disasters, (3) affinity with rituals, ceremonies and other schemes of action, (4) from telling to showing or showing off, (5) mixing up the active-passive relations between 'performer' and 'audience'. The twelve enrolled students were invited to experiment with literary and journalistic texts on various aspects of the Anthropocene, theatrical play and staging methods of disasters, and thus explore the intersection of art, science and the Anthropocene. The course participants were also offered the opportunity to meet performers and researchers of the topic. Core elements of the course were text analysis, body work, improvisations with objects and spatial settings. Previous creative experiments (e.g. writing, theater education, film, music) were welcomed, but not mandatory, and indeed more than half of the students were already engaged in different theater performances. Regular participation in the classes, as well as participation with *Pecha-Kucha* or *Ignite* presentations in the final performance were also requirements.

In the first two-hour long introductory meeting, the structure of the preparatory phase and the basic concept of the performance were outlined. Then the dedicated students and the instructors met for six hours on three consecutive Fridays. The first block unit gave a general introduction to lecture-performance methods and basic body work techniques. One of the students gave a theoretical and practical introduction to August Boal's street theater, and Jan Hagens, a visiting scholar from Harvard University, gave an intro into speech-act and performativity theories. Students outlined their Pecha Kucha presentations planned for incorporation later to Station 0 (focus: general questions) and Station 1 (focus: past events leading to present challenges) in the perfor-

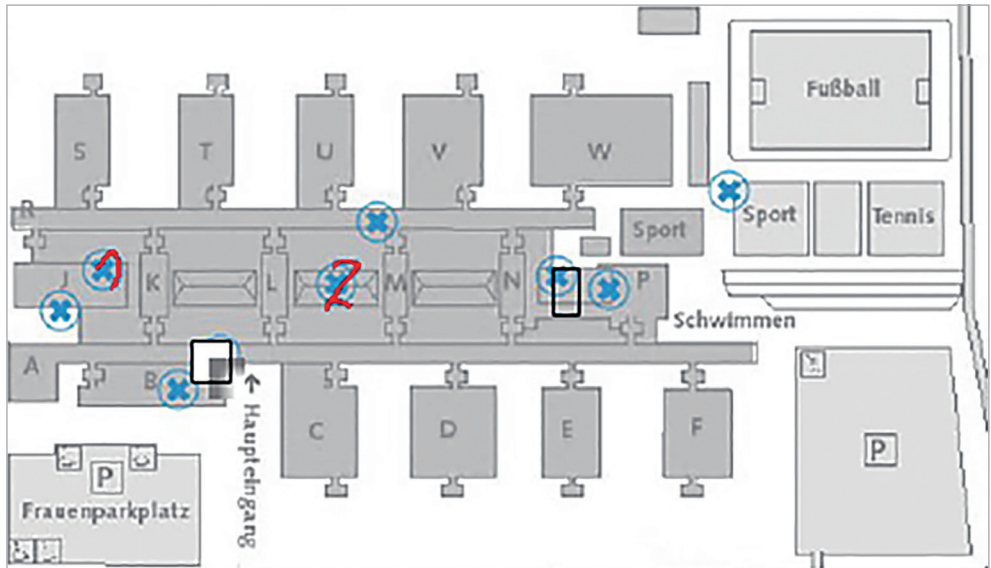
mance. The second block concentrated on the interpretation of Kleist's *Erdbeben in Chili* (Earthquake in Chile). In the close reading of the novel the social manifestation of the earthquake and its temporal dimension were underlined. Certain motives were placed in walk-acts and invisible theater performative actions lead by Frank Oberzaucher (e.g., the procession). Brainstorming for actions at Station 2 (focus: present events of the Anthropocene) and stations linking movement actions were outlined (among Station 0, 1, 2 and 3, as well as back to Station 0). The final block unit hosted a lecture by Prof. Marcus Kracht followed by a brainstorming of its theatrical transformation into a lecture performance at the final station of the performance (Station 3, focus: future actions). Time loop, time-lapse techniques as well as face-to-face exercises for future communication with the audience were incorporated in the theatrical exercises. During the seminar units all the four performing subjects, areas, props and actions were outlined together in a script, which was used as screenplay for the event. While describing succinctly the performing process below, instructions to some specific moments will be quoted in footnotes. The whole process was documented both as video and photo material, which played an important role in the personal and collective evaluation during the follow-up meeting.

Locations, actions, bridging acts of the performance

Bielefeld University was conceived around a several hundred-meter long and about 20 m high common area, a corridor with side shops (banks, post, bookstore, bio store etc.) and cafes. It is the major place that students, faculty of all institutions and all other employees of the university need to cross in order to reach their seminar rooms, offices, libraries or dining hall ('Mensa'). Our performance of twelve people dressed in white (half of them in white disposable overalls) was located at four major performing areas in this covered space. The event was advertised on 60 posters around the numerous corridors of the university, and the construction of individual scenes were done the morning before the performance.

In the following lines the place, time and contents of these scenes will be outlined briefly. Each of these scenes had three students who were responsible for

preparing the place beforehand, for taking care of the necessary requisites, and also to clean up the space afterwards.



The starting SCENE O (at UNIQ) of the map above was the starting place, using a white and black oval fabric partition with the big capital words of *Performing Science*. This partition was the fourth wall for the five *Pecha Kucha* presentations of the students, which were followed by video materials⁶ running during the hours following the performance (with locations at other parts of the university corridor). This space served to raise the interest in Anthropocene topics of the university people passing by and invite them to follow our journey into the past, present and future of this topic.

SCENE 1's thematic focus was the first signals of any kind of disaster (scene's title: 'Before the disaster'). Departing from Scene 0 in slow panic motions resembling the effort to escape a fast-rising tide, the performing group arrived in front of the office of the bank at that time, namely the office of *Sparkasse*.

6 Film1: Johanna Domokos: *Katastrophe Bacchus* (10")

Film 2: *The Sunken City: Rebuilding Post-Katrina New Orleans*, von Marline Otte und Laszlo Fulop (30")

Film 3: Lecture Performance: Johanna Domokos–Pedro Tivadar: *In (k)einem Fall: eine Performance*, ZIF, (10")

Film 4: Lecture Performance 1: Eva-Maria Gauss: *Sprachkomplex*, Theaterlabor Bielefeld (20")

Film 5: Lecture Performance 2: Eva-Maria Gauss: *Körper haben*. Performance Wettbewerb Gießen 2008 (20")

Two *Pecha Kucha* Performances located in the white and black oval partitions were followed in the corridor by the act *Plant a Planet*, leaving an installation behind for the following hours. This scene took up 30 minutes.

Departing in the form of a procession, using the white oval partition as ceiling and the black partition as the corpse the group was chanting, repeating the short definitions of the disaster pre-sung by Frank Oberzaucher as a liturgy⁷.

SCENE 2's theme was 'In the Disaster' and it was located in front of the bookstore of that time. The event here started with a 20-minute lunch performance, when the participants were using all kinds of technical instruments to consume their lunch⁸.

The three performances of the students at this stage concentrated on the stories of objects partaking in disaster. Again, in this half-hour performing time not only did the hundreds of passing students 'participate' but also several of them stopped to watch or contribute to the performance. At the end of this unit the performing group was moving with real and imagined transportation vehicles from Scene 2 to Scene 3. Around bicycles lying on the floor and the white chalk outlines of human shapes, children (bobby)cars were circling.

SCENE 3's topic was: 'Rebirth after a disaster'. It took place with two formations of 4 students each⁹ in the area before the Westend Café, on a podium Professor Marcus Kracht (Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies) was giving a 20-minute long lecture performance while throwing white pebbles into a bowl of water. The audience was standing around the lecture podium.

7 "Procession to Scene 2: white canvas forms a roof (similar to Catholic Corpus Christi processions). Jan, Kai, Stefanie, Philip hold the white material up, Hannah, Lena, Tabea form a queue. The black oval serves as a corpse and is carried by Johanna and Janina (if she has already arrived at this point), Frank leads the procession group and reads short definitions of disasters, which are repeated by the group as a chorus."

8 In the outline for this performance the following indications were given: '20 min LUNCH with eye masks, protective suits, white gloves and possibly technical tools (instead of cutlery). Important: be in the foreground: take a short break, but still create a nice picture – by waiting as a group until everyone has prepared their food and starting and finishing as a group at the same time as a group (note the group impulse). We use the tool as if we were always eating with this (strange) tool. If you want, you can remain silent and dissect this wonderful food with great fascination. Props: 2 tables, 12 chairs, 1 bicycle, 1 bench and your own lunch.'

9 Indications in the performance outline: 'Group 1 forms a queue, Lena shows the movements: turn the head – to the right, to the left, up and down, then add the hands, cradle the head in the left hand. Important: Lena decides what to do, the others' job is to follow her. Group 2 sits down next to the right side of the stage and slowly walks to the back of the stage, varying the movements from: making the cross, looking at the clock, yawning, riding the train, silence – then running back and sitting down. Important: Stefanie decides what to do, the others' job is to follow her.'

After the lecture, the performing group formed a dancing queue. Holding hands and repetitive steps (two ahead one back), the Gregorian song of *Dies Irae* was played back from a cassette recorder. This is how the group and joining students reached back to Scene 0, where the whole story began.

Summary

By actively shaping the performing event on major topics of the Anthropocene, university studies and research as well as its communication was seen as more than merely an intersubjective, life-world activity of knowledge dissemination. In the preparation phase of the seminar we planned together how the artistic performance can be used to make us aware of the challenges of the physical and mental-psychic world we are living in. In the next phase, namely the *performing process*, the performing students as well as the ones passing by experience a completely different intersubjective horizon than of their regular seminars. In the *follow-up meeting* a joint linguistic reflection was done through a didactically guided conversation. Our case also demonstrated what the above-quoted Haas 2017 formulates in the following way: ‘Knowledge should no longer be understood as a representative, static construct, but rather as an event form of an intersubjective experience’¹⁰ (Haas 2007). Moreover, artistic representations of scientific data evaluating the Anthropocenic period allow us to communicate not only dry data but living ones which touch upon the mind and heart of humans.

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¹⁰ Translated by Johanna Domokos.

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