

The City as Stage in Rimini Protokoll: A Conversation with Helgard Haug

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Abstract

On the morning of her presentation at the Symposium “Theatre and City” in Barcelona, the director and author Helgard Haug, founder of Rimini Protokoll, welcomed the Observatori d'espais escènics UPC-ETSAB to the Institut del Teatre for a discussion about the role of the performance space, the urban realm and stage design in Rimini's theatre and sound plays.

Keywords: space, stage, city, theatre, Rimini Protokoll, Helgard Haug, interview

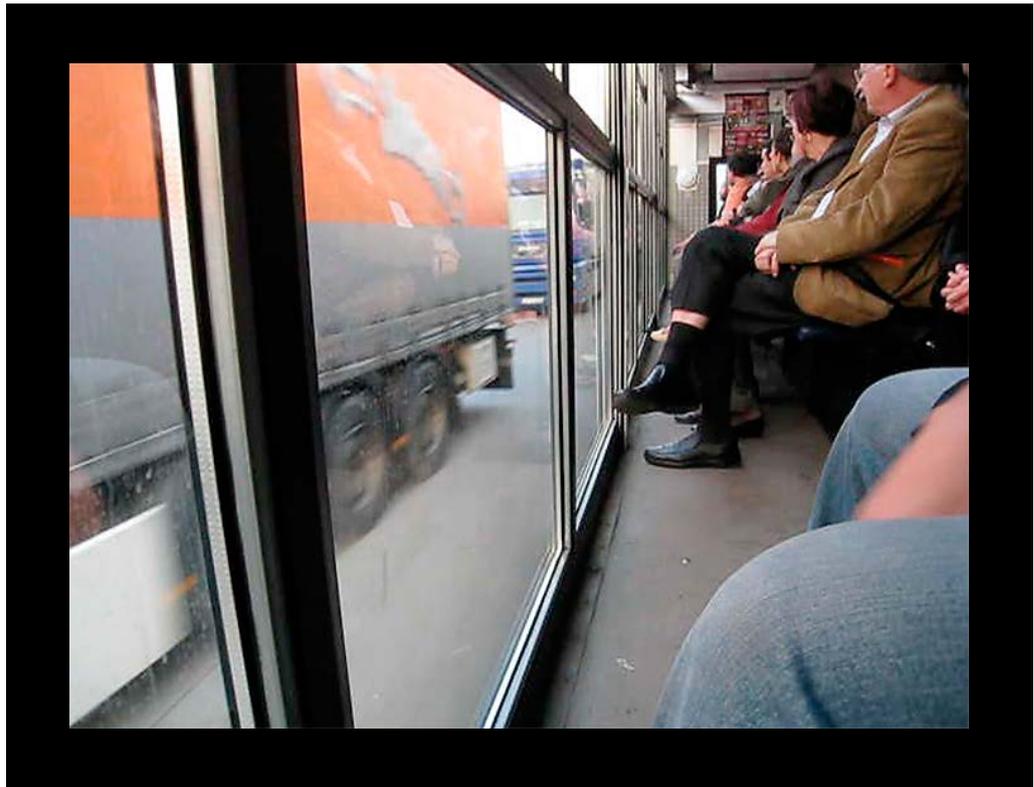
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Helgard Haug is a director and author who, with Daniel Wetzel and Stefan Kaegi, has been writing collectively under the label Rimini Protokoll. “The truck could be our own venue, our own answer on how to use space in theatre,” says the Berlin-based author. The director trio’s artistic statement focuses their work on the “continuous development of tools of the theatre to allow unusual perspectives on our reality,” a meaningful statement when it is translated into performance space and stage design. A feat made all the more impressive by their choice of subject matter and spaces: consumerism, politics, death, labour and society performed on a stage, in exhibition halls, living rooms, shop windows, the urban realm and in a conditioned truck.



Helgard Haug © TTFotografie/Schauspielhaus Zürich.



Video MVI_1947. *Cargo Sofia-Barcelona*. Recorded by Observatori d'espais escènics in Barcelona in 2007.

Internationally acclaimed by critics, in 2007 Rimini Protokoll received the prestigious German theatre award DER FAUST. The following year, they were awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in Thessaloniki, and in 2011 Rimini Protokoll's complete works were awarded the Silver Lion at the 41st Theatre Biennale in Venice, among others. For this interview, Haug took a break from the Symposium "Theatre and City" held at the Institut del Teatre of Barcelona to invite the Observatori d'espais escènics UPC-ETSAB¹ to discuss her trailblazing work on theatre and how it relates to space, stage design and the built environment, and how she continues to open up new perspectives on our reality.

Guillem Aloy: I would like to explore the sense of urban and architectural space in your work as Rimini Protokoll. Have you always consciously thought about the performance space in your theatre?

Helgard Haug: In the early stages of our activity we already worked both outdoors and indoors. When working inside, the venues were more or less multifunctional black boxes. These were the places open to experiments — their audience is younger and more open-minded than in more traditional venues. Although I actually really like the old-fashioned, more traditional spaces.

1. Conversation held at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona on 28 September 2018. Transcribed by Laia Montserrat and supervised by Professor Antoni Ramon. More information about the Observatori d'espais escènics at: <http://espaciosescenicos.org/>.

GA: Such as in Italian theatre, where the audience sits in front of a play?

HH: Yes — and this is a confession — to be honest I am often very inspired there. It's a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, I am often very frustrated by what is presented in those spaces and how artificial it is and ignorant about the reality that is kept outside of it and, on the other, I really like to play around with those conventions and traditions. The rules are so strict in those spaces, the conventions so dominant... There is a central perspective, there are lights on, the audience in the dark...

GA: And a different way of thinking about theatre as a creator.

HH: Absolutely. But it's fun to take advantage of it and use it in a totally different way. For example, the revolving stage. Our project *100% City* was inspired by this technique. We imagined revolving the stage constantly and inviting ordinary people from the city to come on stage and just step into the limelight. To present themselves in a constant flow. A whole city! Day and night. Where every inhabitant will get their five minutes of fame!

GA: I was at the performance in Brussels of *100% Brussels*. I remember a hundred people on the stage. I remember the video screen, and the circle. They were moving all the time. It was quite impressive to see those one hundred real people representing the population of the city on a stage, performing the statistical reality on the stage instead of on spreadsheets.

HH: Yes. The concept transformed a bit and we invited one hundred people onto the stage in order to represent the whole city. The play is mainly based on questions that they can be answered in various ways. It is like a mirror held up to the whole city. And the basic intention is still the same: to open the doors of the theatre and let some fresh air into those dusty, dark spaces. Very rarely are there theatre venues that have a window or a door to the outside. And our first action is always to open to it! It was always very symbolic to me that most traditional theatre takes place behind those big walls, detached from real life instead of trying to interweave with it.

GA: And do you reflect on space, on the performance space? Is it something naturally related to the piece or do you consciously think about architecture and the urban realm in your theatre?

HH: I think many projects are inspired by the actual site. Observations in the city or visits to spaces can trigger a whole idea. For example, we once created a project in Bonn — the former capital of West Germany — just one year after the Parliament of the reunited Germany moved to Berlin. I guess each Parliament is a theatrical building but here it was exciting to be in this abandoned space that looked more or less like the one in use now. The same architecture, the same seating arrangement, even the chairs had the same colour.

GA: If I remember well, it was a performance with real citizens from Bonn, reproducing live a real Parliament meeting in Berlin.



100% City: 100% Tokyo. © Yohta Kataoka.



Deutschland2. © ThiloBeu foto@theater.bonn.de.

HH: It is called *Deutschland2* — a copy or duplication of what was happening simultaneously in Berlin. The people in Bonn were normal citizens that chose a parliamentarian who they would like to copy. They got the original voice on the headphones and repeated what they heard. In Germany, we say if you vote you give your voice. I give my voice to the politician to represent me. And the idea was to get this voice back...

GA: Was that your first experiment outside of the black box?

HH: Hmm... No. There have been other projects before but it's one example of how a building can inspire the whole work. During the same research, we visited many towers and high-risers because we were interested in the perspective of looking down onto a public area and finally created the play *Sonde Hannover* — the stage is the city and the audience is seated on the top level of an office building, equipped with headphones and binoculars. Whatever is happening out there in the square, you look at it with such different sort of attention, or from a different angle, that it all gets staged in a way. It's all performative. And you can never get this in the theatre...

GA: You like to work with actors who are not really actors, who are themselves. In terms of the space, we could talk about it in the same terms: you like to find spaces that are themselves.

HH: It's an illusion that you can just be yourself and fully authentic when you are on a stage. You're not just a natural person but a person who is looked at and being observed so this is melting authenticity. But working with non-actors is more exciting for me because I'm interested in their story and knowledge. So, it's about their lives. I think that there are very interesting stories and very interesting perspectives, and that's something I want to bring, that's something I want to refresh the theatre with. To say, it's not roles, it's not old texts that we perform, it's not fixed situations, but something that we can frame, part of our reality.

There are also plays where we construct the whole set and that is completely artificial. *Situation Rooms*, for example, where we created a complete film set and invited experts to shoot 20 films simultaneously. And



Sonde Hannover © Rimini Protokoll.



Rimini Protokoll's truck transformed into a theatre. Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

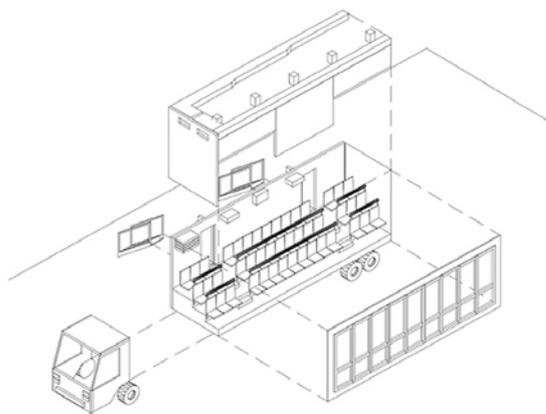
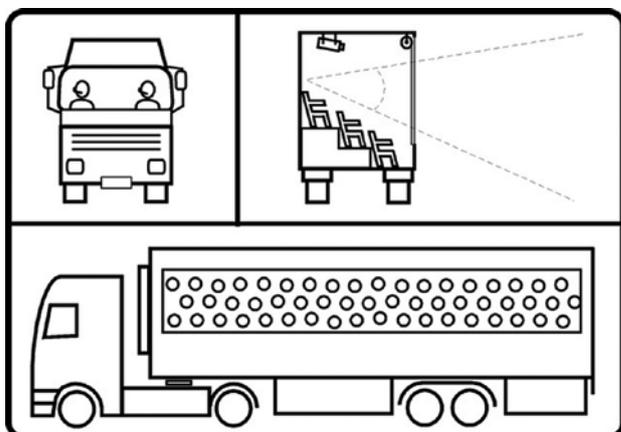
then the audience gets iPads and the films guide them into the set and make them follow their actions, while the real protagonists are gone.

And speaking about spaces — it's fascinating to create a situation where the audience is not really visible and is watching life outside. This can reveal very touching moments.

GA: That's also what the Rimini Protokoll's truck transformed into a theatre venue does.

HH: Yes, the truck is perfect. To me it's quite amazing how different I look at a situation when I am inside the truck and watch it through the big window. Somehow this frame makes you see everything very clearly. It's like a magnifying glass! You get very close to the people you watch and, in a way, to yourself. Because looking at your own city makes you reflect on your own life and lifestyle. What you experience is very emotional.

GA: I remember, here in Barcelona, there was this moment when the truck, at the *Cargo Sofia-Barcelona* show, went to the port, to the cargo port. And actually, the venue of the theatre-truck performed a kind of a panoramic view, like a tracking shot in the cinema. When you started to move in the



Rimini Protokoll's truck transformed into a theatre, the seating installed in the trailer takes 50 spectators. Plan courtesy of Rimini Protokoll [left]. Rimini Protokoll's truck transformed into a theatre. Axonometric view by Observatori d'espais escènics [right].

truck, you had all the port cranes in the background, and the police car was talking to you by a microphone and in motion. That created a kind of new perspective, of course, but also a sort of strange intimacy with the policeman who was guiding us.

HH: Yes, I think it's often touching when you slip into the perspective of a stranger, instead of just staying in your own little bubble. I think it's all about opening this and getting in this perspective of, for example, the police guy. To say, "oh, it's a police guy", but suddenly you also understand his role in our society.



Rimini Protokoll's truck transformed into a theatre. Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

GA: In that sense, the device, transforming a truck into a venue, was a design for a specific performance: *Cargo Sofia - X*. But then it became something that could be, as you said before at the symposium, your own venue, that the truck could be the Rimini Protokoll personal venue.

HH: This May we created a new play with it. It is called *Do's & Don'ts* and the protagonists are two children that question the way we create rules for everything. So, we used the same truck but play a completely different game and there are so many more possibilities for using it. For example, driving to the more rural areas, or just driving along one street, but very, very slowly – like a scanner...

GA: So, it's not only the urban realm, the reality is staged. Maybe there has to be a storyline behind, a script that guides your view.



Rimini Protokoll transformed a truck into a theatre. Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

HH: Sure, it's definitely a combination. With *Do's & Don'ts* we use the eyes of a child for example. Of course, you remember how you grew up in the city and what you were looking for, and which rules you understood, and when you enjoyed breaking them and how important it was to question and break them!

GA: You said that you will continue to use the transformed truck. Do you already have some ideas about how to use it next? What's your next project on that?

HH: The slow mode drive is definitely on my list. A quality of this mobile venue is to drive somewhere and really observe – I like to speak about insisting on an observation, on a gaze. You can actually put it almost everywhere and watch. To say that: I'm here to observe and I'm here to watch this, and this is a stage. I attach importance to this, and share a day just being there. What is the rhythm of a city like? Because most of the time in the city of course we pass by – you go from A to B and you pass by and don't stop to watch.

My colleague, Daniel, is planning to create a play that is actually connecting Berlin and Athens.

GA: Like a road trip?

HH: Yes, that's right – it will take a couple of days, though...

