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# An Island of Togetherness

Stephanie Thiersch and Brigitta Muntendorf ask: how can we move away from an anthropocentric worldview?

Interview: Beatrix Joyce

Stephanie Thiersch | Brigitta Muntendorf

*In “ARCHIPELAGO – A spectacle of blending”, dancers, musicians and singers interact with a porous multi-layered sculpture, designed by Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto. From this heterogeneous group of performers, a new kind of organic emerges that propels us towards a future shaped by other forms of collectivity.*

**Beatrix Joyce:** What inspired you to make “ARCHIPELAGO – A spectacle of blending”?

**Stephanie Thiersch:** We have been working together for many years on interdisciplinary collaborations between music and dance, where the two disciplines intersect and feed into one another. Now, with “ARCHIPELAGO”, we wanted to go one step further. The piece asks: how can we move away from an anthropocentric worldview?

**Brigitta Muntendorf:** We are interested in the idea of creating a society, a microcosm that has its own rules and that doesn't use language as its prime tool for communication. Our creative process includes rethinking how we communicate, for example through rituals and gestures, imitation and echo.

**BJ:** The performers are an intergenerational group of dancers and musicians, spanning the ages of 12 to 50. They come from different backgrounds. How do you approach your work with such a diverse group of performers?

**BM:** We schedule special joint musical and choreographic rehearsals where the performers learn from each other, meaning they meet at the respective edges of their individual disciplines. Each formation – the dancers, the musicians, the choir – is characterised by a high level of interaction with each other and play with the sculpture as a sound object or a living environment.

**ST:** Biologist and cultural critic Donna Haraway speaks about ‘making kin’, a way of seeing the world which emphasizes the connectedness between species. In “ARCHIPELAGO” all the elements exist in a flat hierarchy: there is no dominating movement, rather, it is about creating a kind of collective coexistence. During the rehearsals we imagined new technologies and having multiple limbs or antennas – this way we sought to extend our senses and create a certain kind of alertness that is tangible in the piece. We are interested in reaching the limits of our capacities and finding new ways of being there.

**BJ:** How did your collaboration with Sou Fujimoto come about?

**ST:** We were drawn to his way of conceiving architecture: he seeks to integrate his buildings into their environment, connecting nature with society. For example, he designs balconies like trees, from which communication is made easy. His designs are a home and a meeting place at the same time, which resonates



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with the motifs in our choreography and composition. We explore shifting between states of intimacy, safety and comfort, and change and insecurity.

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**BJ:** You will be staging the piece at MaHalla in Oberschöneweide, a former power plant turned arts venue. Officially opening its doors again to the wider public in 2022, it's a site where people and artists have often envisioned a new future – dystopian or otherwise. How will the narrative of "ARCHIPELAGO" overlap with the narrative of the site? Do you consider it a process of overwriting, of rewriting?

**ST:** There might be an interesting friction between the real – the site as a former

power plant – and the possible. For us, utopia is less representative of the extra-terrestrial, the extra-planetary, and more a place between the real and the possible. "ARCHIPELAGO" then becomes an utopian site of future possibilities.

**BM:** The transformation of this space has already happened, from a historic location into an arts venue. Transience and renewal are the constants in history. I think it's natural and essential that we keep rewriting places and that we maintain our trust in transformation.

**BJ:** Before the pandemic hit, "ARCHIPELAGO" was conceived for the Ruhrtriennale, in 2020. Have you had to make any sacrifices when finally being able to stage the piece live this year, after its previous cancellation?

**ST:** Initially, we had the idea to have the audience move around the sculpture, so they could gain a 360° view of it and choose their own perspective. This would have had the effect that there was al-

ways a side you couldn't see and that you remained curious about. However, due to the current restrictions of the pandemic, the audience must be seated and the choir is only present via audio and video.

**BM:** So, in order to still have this sensation of movement, we will be using a 3D audio system that allows the voices of the singers to come from different sources, proposing different angles and allowing the sound to travel within the space.

**ST:** In the future, when we no longer have the restrictions of the pandemic, we would imagine allowing the audience to interact with the sculpture. But for now it is through distance and the power of imagination that we find togetherness. 📡

**Stephanie Thiersch |  
Brigitta Muntendorf**  
**ARCHIPEL – Ein Spektakel  
der Vermischungen**  
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