

THE ART OF DECISION MAKING

The title of this essay was taken from the text by Joshua Rothman, which was published in "The New Yorker" in January 14, 2019¹. This text deals with the complex topic of decision making. In my essay I will relate to this and some other articles and books² which I found interesting in this context.

I will discuss one of my performances in terms of decision making. This performance, called Performance C*, was realized in June 2017 at the Museumsquartier in Vienna. The choreography's intention was to show the interconnection and relations between people and places: yarn was attached to the clothes of the actors to make the movements visible for the spectators.

"Man lives in a constant change. Time and place, relationships and connections, chaos and (new) orders arise. Performers show their influence on existing frames through active movements or in silent pause. The yarn on the actors will hardly leave a linear pattern ..."³



- 1 -

When I started my performance series with the title Performance C* (C stands for connection, correlation) at the Kunstraum Niederösterreich⁴ in May 2017, I had to make a lot of conscious as well as spontaneous decisions, besides the organization of enabled performers, communication of my ideas, finding photographers, cameramen etc. My work is based on the influence of Chaos and System Theory⁵. These theories are interesting for me, because they question systems and their dynamics. How do we interact in systems? Are we aware of different systems? How are we related to systems? Regarding the Chaos Theory, my interest is to see how someone interacts with *the system* in a conscious or unconscious way - in

¹Rothman, Joshua. The Art of decision making. Your life choices aren't just about what you want to do; they're about who you want to be. In: The New Yorker, January 14, 2019

²In the seminar "Theory and History of Design I" with Dr Björn Frank we read texts by various authors about decision (making). I refer to them directly (with quotes) or indirectly in the essay. At the end of the text I list the literature.

³Mang, Sarah Iris. Performance C*, 2017: <https://www.sarahmang.at/art/performance-c-im-museumsquartier-wien/>

⁴ Documentation about the project: <https://www.sarahmang.at/art/performance-c/> (German and English version)

⁵"Systems theory has evolved to another level called chaos theory. In this context, chaos does not mean total confusion. Chaos refers to the dynamics of a system that apparently has no, or little, order, but in which there really is an underlying order. In these systems, small changes can cause complex changes in the overall system. (In technical terms, chaos theory applies to complex non-linear dynamics systems.) Chaos theory has introduced new perspectives and tools to study complex systems, such as biological, human, groups, weather, population growth and the solar system." : <https://managementhelp.org/systems/index.htm>, cf: Tosi, Federica. Chaostheorie - Niklas Luhmanns Systemtheorie und Soziale Arbeit, München, GRIN Verlag, 2010 or: <https://www.grin.com/document/207136>

PerformanceC* - it is a specific place, time frame and the selected performers – and how someone can change or transform it through moving. The yarn on the performers can be seen as these – normally – invisible connections. The space between the people changes during the performance, through their movements. Everyone is part of *the system*: the family, the social and political system as well as the global and outer space systems. We are interacting with these systems constantly. It is important for me to show that everyone is a creator of this system and can shape it or can change it, or act in a more passive way. James Bridle wrote in his book “New Dark Age”: “Our great failing in thinking the network up to now was to presume that its actions were inherent and inevitable.”⁶ His statement underlines my point of view that systems and networks are flexible if you interact with them consciously.

As to contents I want to indicate the Butterfly Effect, which is related to the Chaos theory. A butterfly flapping its wings at just the right point in space and time can cause a hurricane at another place far away. Small changes in the initial conditions can lead to drastic changes in the results.

One thing is to develop an idea, another is to finally realize what I had in mind. At the Kunstraum Niederösterreich I found out that I wanted to change the conception of Performance C* for the Museumsquartier, which took place one month later. Why was that? Based on the experience of the first one I had come to the conclusion, that the place itself has a deep impact on the performance and that I wanted to change the choreography as well: give my performers more responsibility on their own and more ways to express themselves. Originally, I fixed the yarn on their bodies, when they were lying on the ground. At the Museumsquartier I attached it to their clothes, so that they were able to move differently.

In Pierre Hadot’s text “Philosophy as a Way of Life” philosophy (philo-sophia stands for the love of wisdom) was a way of life in Ancient times, before it became later institutionalized and somehow “just” a scientific discipline. Philosophy was originally practiced in groups. My performance is not a philosophical act, but it is related in terms of using the skills and wisdom of a single person related to a group.



Two performers were performing together, and in the middle part all moved together. At the end of the performance the actors went back to the starting point (different art institutions).

When I develop performances, I follow ideas which I can imagine as moving pictures in my mind. From experience I know that I cannot control and calculate everything, and that is actually “the point” of my work: to establish a specific frame (choreography) and allow myself and the actors be surprised by the outcome. My performers are not entitled to speak – so they

⁶ James, Bridle. New Dark Age. Technology and the End of the Future, p:12

use other communicative skills: mimic, body language and so on. How they inter/act, with the limits I communicated first, is their own responsibility. One of the performers sent me this wordrap after the event:

<p>Gut vernetzt</p> <p>Es geht um die Fäden, die uns connecten. Um die dünnen und dicken, die kurzen und langen. Es geht um die Spannung, um fester zurren und locker lassen - ja nicht verlieren. Uff, zu fest! Es geht um die Luft, die zum Atmen bleibt. Lass los die Leinen, beweg dich fort. Mist! Wo bist du? Ziehen, zerrren, einwickeln, aufwickeln, um die Distanz zu verkürzen. I want to be near You! Endlich vernetzt, eingesponnen in deinen Kokon. Uff, zu eng! Es geht um Entflechtung, den nächsten Versuch im ewigen hin und weg ohne den Faden je ganz zu verlieren.</p>	<p>Well connected</p> <p>It's about the threads that connect us. To the thin and thick, the short and long ones. It's about the tension to get tighter and let go - yes, not lose. Uff, too tight! It's about the air that remains to breathe. Let go of the lines, move away. Damn! Where are you? Pulling, tugging, wrapping, winding up, to shorten the distance. I want to be near you! Finally networked spun into your cocoon. Uff, too tight! It's about unbundling, the next try blown away in the eternal without ever losing the thread.</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

- 3 -

The wordrap transports a very personal experience, affected by the process of executing the performance. It reflects the decisions and personal feelings of the performer. Are decisions emotional or can you calculate them somehow? Gerd Gigerenzer`s text "Getting to the Heart of Romance" deals with decisions in personal contexts: for example Charles Darwin and his list of pros and cons of marrying his cousin Emma Wedgwood (he finally married her and had ten children) or is it better to maximize rules of thumb? Maximization of subjective expected utility that is based on the idea of knowing and estimating the risks – but who can really calculate all this? Or shall we refer more to Benjamin Franklins bookkeeping method, which takes for granted that all the candidates are known. Every method has its pros and cons. All try to approach a good personal result. I know my performers, but through experience I have the knowledge that they are acting differently every time. This is something that I like very much about performing – that things turn out differently than I had pictured before.

When I develop performances or art works I like to collaborate with experts of different fields to reflect my own position. When I was developing Performance C* I contacted Jonathan Wolfe, Ph.D. He is the Founder and Creative Director of the Fractal Foundation, a New Mexico nonprofit that uses the beauty of fractals to inspire interest in science, math and art through mail.

“Chaos is the science of surprises, of the nonlinear and the unpredictable. It teaches us to expect the unexpected. While most traditional science deals with supposedly predictable phenomena like gravity, electricity, or chemical reactions, Chaos Theory deals with nonlinear things that are effectively impossible to predict or control, like turbulence, weather, the stock market, our brain states, and so on.[...] By understanding that our ecosystems, our social systems, and our economic systems are interconnected, we can hope to avoid actions which may end up being detrimental to our long-term well-being.”⁷

His work is related to the Chaos Theory. A fractal is a never-ending pattern. They are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales, and somehow this idea of fractals inspired my choreography. People create through their actions and decisions patterns – sometimes regular ones, sometimes they do not - somehow, they seem never-ending or in other words: repeating (somehow) constantly.

The hardest choices are also the most consequential. So why do we know so little about how to get them right? Steven Johnson asked these questions in his book “Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most” and he summarize that their success relies on having a future-oriented approach and the ability to consider all their options in a creative, productive way.⁸ This is an interesting point of view, especially in the context of how we consider the options, how we evaluate them.

- 4 -

Making performances also means having the audience in mind. Is it interested in performance or is it more – like in the Museumsquartier – a group of people with different interests? To communicate my idea, I also need to take the visual aspects of communication into consideration. My personal point is simple and reduced. Black clothes white yarn or vice versa. My performers preferred the first option. I like to integrate the ideas of others, if they go along with my idea. In the end I must take full responsibility for my artwork.



In Rothman`s essay different experts, like Steven Johnson quoted before, and their views are discussed. The philosopher Edna Ullmann-Margalit or L.A. Paul share their concepts and ideas of decision making. Somehow, at least for me it seems like that, there is **not the (only one and right/false) way of decision making**, there are plural ways at the same time.

There are many other facets to talk about regarding decisions. In “On the shortness of Life” by Lucius Annaeus Seneca, life is discussed through completely different lenses: the aspect of time and how we spend our lifetime. The quality of time is also related to our ability to make decisions. Close to end of this essay I conclude that if you think about your own decisions and reflect on them, you find certain personal behavioral pattern emerging. Sometimes I make

⁷Wolfe, Jonathan. Ph.D., <http://fractalfoundation.org>

⁸ Cf: Johnson, Steven. Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most. Riverhead Books 2018

decisions – like in the performance – based on experience, sometimes spontaneously, integrating my creative skills. Another time - it also depends on the context and topic of decision making- I simply do not know. And what do I do then? First: I allow myself (at least I try to) not to know. Sometimes I wait for some time or I take a long walk to clear my head. But this is not always possible – so in the end I must admit that I use and explore, depending on the topic, different ways of decision making. For me it is a creative act, therefore I loved the title of Rothman`s article and through the seminar and the discussions there I figured out that decisions are complex like an artwork itself.

Literature:

Alex Burrett, "Dating Death," in *My Goat Ate Its Own Legs: Tales for Adults* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), excerpt

B. J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003), excerpt.

Ferdinand von Schirach, "Fähnner," in *Verbrechen: Stories* (München; Piper Verlag, 2010).

Gerd Gigerenzer, *Risk Savvy: How To Make Good Decisions* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), excerpt.

Kieran Setiya, *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* (Princeton University Press, 2017), excerpt.

Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995; reprint, 1999)

Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (New York, Viking Press: 1989), excerpt.

Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, "Choice Architecture," in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)

Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, Penguin UK ed., 2004

Other literature/articles:

James, Bridle. *New Dark Age. Technology and the End of the Future* (Verso 2018)

Federica, Tosi, *Chaostheorie - Niklas Luhmanns Systemtheorie und Soziale Arbeit* (München, GRIN Verlag, 2010)
part of the book is also online :<https://www.grin.com/document/207136>

Joshua, Rothman, *The Art of decision making. Your life choices aren't just about what you want to do; they're about who you want to be.* (In: *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2019) also online:
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/21/the-art-of-decision-making>

Steven, Johnson, *Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most* (Riverhead Books 2018)

Websites:

Performance C*: www.sarahmang.at

Jonathan, Wolfe: <http://fractal.foundation.org>