

Curator's Key

A curator talks about an artwork they keep coming back to

Christine Standfest on Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg's *Coming Society* (2019) Volksbühne Berlin

A lot has been coming back this year, but it's theatre I keep turning to most: the visual radicality of Einar Schlee's *Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti* (Berliner Ensemble, 1995), Christoph Schlingensiefel's whole body of work, and the Volksbühne Berlin, from 1992 up to Frank Castorf's *Faust* in 2017. Boldness, die-hard generosity, and a clear understanding of what it means to struggle – this is how I recall the past decades of theatre. Just when I think it's all behind us now – the unshakeable belief in a place for art and theatre that will interfere in our lives and ways of worlding – the theatre shows me something new,

unexpected, with different ways of seeing that alter the normal habits of aesthetic experience.

It was in January 2019 that I was looking down from an apartment on the twenty-third floor of a *Plattenbau* next to Hackescher Markt in Berlin at the huge banner announcing the evening's show at the Volksbühne. "Coming Society", it read, a title that could just as well have referred to the city as a whole as the evening's production. Was it a promise, of something to "come"? Or a warning? I was curious but deeply sceptical. I didn't like the title. This assertion, "Coming

Society" smacked of Nietzsche, an inkling of the *Übermensch*, and I can't escape it: the German history that so violently performed *Über*. And yet, I'm drawn to the "coming" attraction nonetheless.

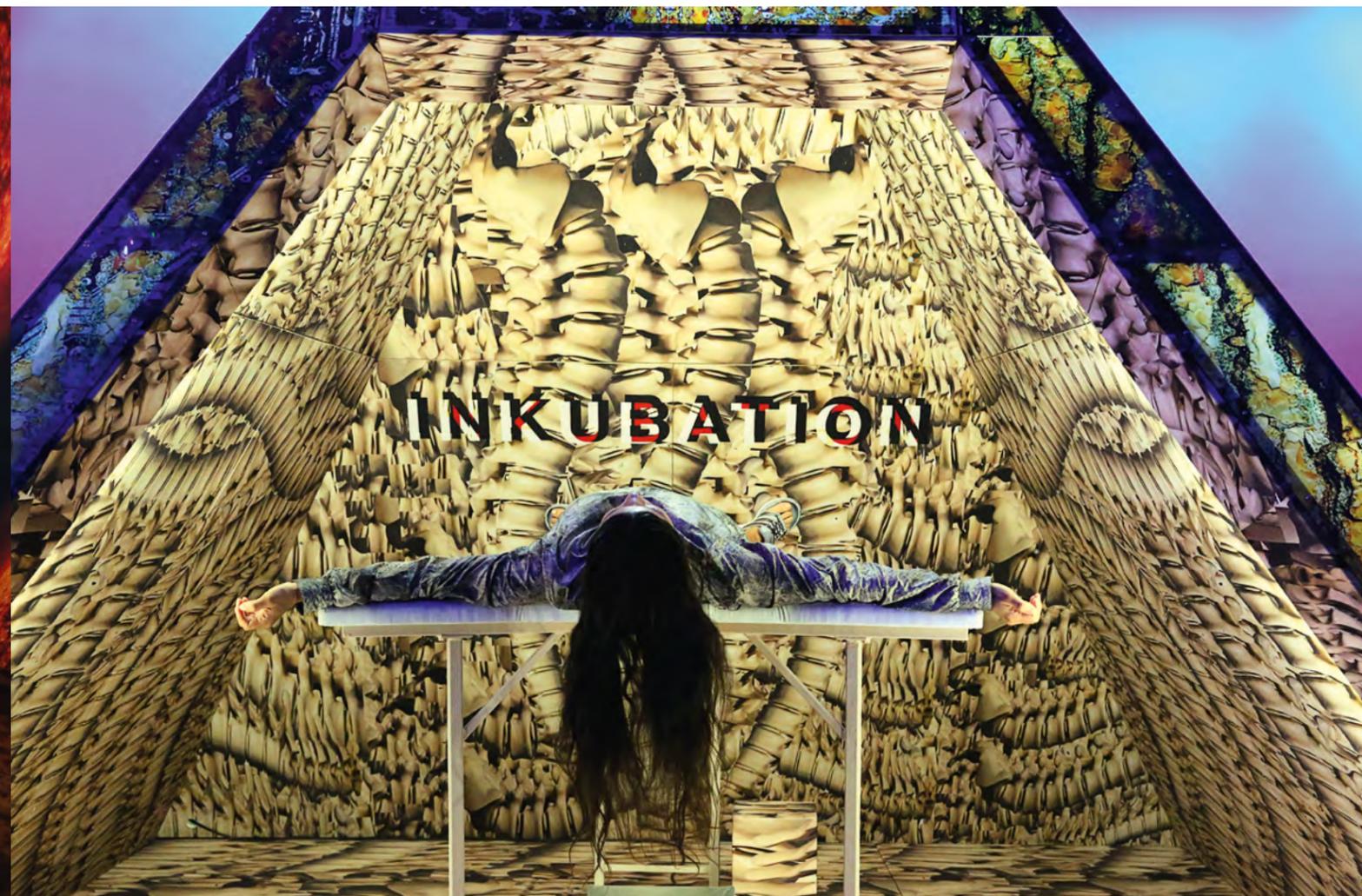
In the end, I went not once but twice to the installation/performance, *Coming Society*. Everything is there – the conceit, its promise, a menace – and yet everything turns out differently than I expected in this "landscape with a group of performers", according to the programme text. "Healers, hosts, stalkers, and shamans", created by German theatre director Susanne Kennedy (*1977) and artist Markus Selg (*1974) with music by Richard Janssen and costumes by the fashion designer Andra Dumitrascu. Together they "imagine a sphere in which nature, mathematics, and spirituality combine."

The *Über* in *Coming Society* at first signals overwhelmingly friendly (*überfreundlich*). At the outset of the piece, we are seated in the all-too-familiar auditorium, looking down upon a recklessly beautiful stage. *Über*-colourful (psychedelic!), digitally-generated patterns everywhere, on carpets, walls, screens, a shamelessly hybrid mixture of mythologies, from pyramids to caves to "incubators". As if dreamed up in Tantric delirium, or plucked from a tacky set design quoting 18th century freemasonry (Mozart! *The Magic Flute!*), there

are also the uncanniest of performers: Suzan Boogaardt, Ixchel Mendoza Hernández, Jone San Martín, Kate Strong, Bianca van der Schoot, Ingmar Thilo, Frank Willens, Thomas Wodianka. We are invited to cross the threshold onto the stage and join them, at which point, paradoxically, I find myself alone; or, more precisely, isolated. In this "landscape" built on a permanently rotating stage, in which the eternal return of the same is simulated by always different, and yet ever the same vistas – on screens and scenes filled with sounds and voices whose physical sources remain hidden. What to look at, and how to decide? And why? What happens to our much-beloved "free will"? After all, I can always reach out for solid ground if I choose. I can take a seat on the edge, lean my head against the cool wall of this dear building, and look through the perpetually revolving mummery before me, into the empty belly (auditorium) of the Volksbühne; an outside inside an inside, and so on. "Berlin" might still be out there, I say to myself.

Texts are there too. Nietzsche, yes, as well as self-optimisation claptrap from neoliberal coaching literature, interviews, scenes from US TV series, gasping, moaning, breathing. After my first experience of the show, I was furious. Much ado about nothing, apolitical, esoteric, *Quark* (baloney). Thinking

All images: Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, *Coming Society*, 2019, Volksbühne Berlin



Photos: © Ursula Kaufmann



Bold assemblage of simple Jesuit-like theatre tricks, digital technology, and beauty.

of a quote by Rosa Luxemburg, on whose *Platz* the Volksbühne sits: "Revolution is great, everything else is *Quark*." I find myself hijacked, locked into a perfectly stylised, wonderful, and inescapable world of regression.

At night, though, I dreamt of a different image. This one is monumental, a baroque altarpiece of Saint Margaret, my very first encounter with art in the church in my childhood village. Framed by sinuous columns and a multitude of angels and putti, Margaret sits there, surrounded by henchmen, stretching her soft neck towards the executioner's sword that has just been drawn. Her eyes are aimed heavenward. The ecstasy of the martyr becomes the child's blueprint for rebellion and sexual pleasure, forever connected to death. A Catholic *mise-en-scène* that turns the church into a theatre; an eternal re-enactment that I study week after week, year after year, before I am even able to really speak.

This image has now been thoroughly painted over by the imagery of *Coming Society*, the former's patriarchal

(eroticism of) violence radically dissolved. *Coming Society* is like an explosion of counter-Enlightenment gusto. At my second visit, I get lost. I start to enjoy the ambivalence, indulging in the overflow and repetition of images and actions. Since the second viewing, all anger has evaporated, and now I often return to the enigmatic attraction of this installation, to its visceral and weird spirituality, challenging non-violence, intrusive nervousness, bold assemblage of simple Jesuit-like theatre tricks, digitalia, and beauty. It's an artistic encounter that transcends all individual notions of "touch" and recalls a desire that Heiner Müller once formulated: "Communism is solitude, that is, a happiness whose mercilessness one must also fear."

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