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CHRISTOPHE MEIERHANS VEREIN ZUR AUFHEBUNG DES NOTWENDIGEN

A HUNDRED WARS TO WORLD PEACE

VEREIN ZUR AUFHEBUNG DES NOTWENDIGEN is a dinner and it is about democracy. Not democracy as institutional engineering for mass organisation, but democracy as something we internalize, as individuals, at the level of our day to day existence. It is about democracy as the realisation of our individual and collective desires.

A meal brings people together, it is warm and convivial. Yet, food is also home to our most intimate convictions: existential, ethical, aesthetic, economic, social, ritual or religious. In other words, dinner is the perfect set for a political showdown. The kitchen will be our theatre of operations.

For the duration of the performance, and in many ways, all those present in a theatre hall form a community. In our case, this temporary community is given the untranslatable name Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen, the club, or association for the abolishment, or lifting, or conservation, but also transcendence of the necessary, of the indispensable.

Each individual member will hold the destiny of the whole community in his hands. It is a shared responsibility. But spectators often disagree, they like different things and are ready to defend them. This performance is not about consensus.

It is sometimes said that we are what we eat. In this theatre piece, we will eat what we are and nobody really knows what that will taste like.

CREDITS

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Inspired by an original idea by: Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen e.V, with thanks to R. Komarnicki

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Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/150764002>

Full captation: <https://vimeo.com/155943584> (Password: pleaseletmewatch)

ON TOUR

25 > 26.09.2015	Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Gent (BE) - PREMIERE -
21 > 22.10.2015	BIT Teatergarasjen, Bergen (NO)
26.11.2015	Kunstencentrum De Werf, Brugge (BE)
27 > 29.01.2016	Kaaitheater, Brussel (BE)
03 > 13.02.2016	Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil, Paris (FR)
16 > 17.04.2016	Vaba Lava , Tallinn (EE)
30.04.2016	Kunstencentrum BUDA, Kortrijk (BE)
11 > 12.05.2016	Auawirleben, Bern (CH)
03.07.2016	Inteatro Festival 2016, Ploverigi (IT)
29 > 30.10.2016	Teatro Municipal Maria Matos, Lisboa (PT)
07 > 08.02.2017	Théâtre d'Arles, Arles (FR)
03.03.2017	La Faïencerie, Creil (FR)
17.05.2017	Théâtre de Châtillon, Châtillon (FR)
23 > 24.05.2017	Comédie de Béthune, Béthune (FR)

BIOGRAPHY

CHRISTOPHE MEIERHANS

°1977, Geneva, Switzerland, lives and works in Brussels.

Christophe Meierhans works with and within performances, public spaces, theater, installations, sound, music and video. His work consists mainly in developing strategies for interventions in our daily life protocols through manipulating conventional agreements, social habits or simple usages. Fragments of reality such as an existing speech, a café, a theater performance or our daily audiophily become frameworks for artistic operations which attempt to redirect banality so as to only let it reappear under peculiar angles. His work raises questions of norms and conventions by confusing casual contexts with another and confronting the spectator with some kind of otherness, the strangeness of being in the “wrong” place, or of the place itself being the “wrong” one.

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CUT FOUR ONIONS INTO LITTLE PIECES, THEN TOSS THEM INTO THE AUDIENCE

Evelyne Coussens

Some couples don't need to be told: more arguing takes place in the kitchen than anywhere else. In his 'theatre dinner' *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen/One hundred wars to world peace*, Christophe Meierhans takes on the organization and preparation of a collective meal to put our penchant for consensus to the test - not in the form of a theoretical thought exercise, but by forcing us to get to work. Let's cook!

Swiss artist Christophe Meierhans (b. 1977) is a composer, video director and performer. Until 2012 he was part of the Brussels collective C&H, with which, among other things, he carried out the striking urban intervention *Postcards from the Future*. In 2014 he broke, well, pots with the 'lecture performance' *Some use for your broken clay pots*, in which he proposed a new constitution based on the 'voting-out-of-office' of politicians. Meierhans's intensive argumentation and scrupulously thought-out plan drew the audience into a passionate debate - a *practice of speech* which, rather than the act of persuading the spectators, was the actual goal of the performance. With *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen*, Meierhans wants to make the leap from a politics of speech to a politics of action: 'I'd like for people to lose themselves in the action.'

Christophe Meierhans: In essence *Clay Pots* remained a theoretical thought exercise, a science fiction in which you speculate together over something that could exist. In doing so you engage in politics, but only at the level of commentary. With *Verein* the question was: how can we set up a *concrete* exercise in politics in which something is really at stake? In which a group is confronted with an actual problem - it's hungry - and a real longing - it wants to eat. That should lead people to reverse the order of thought and action: first they act, before they go and reflect on what they've done and what the consequences are.

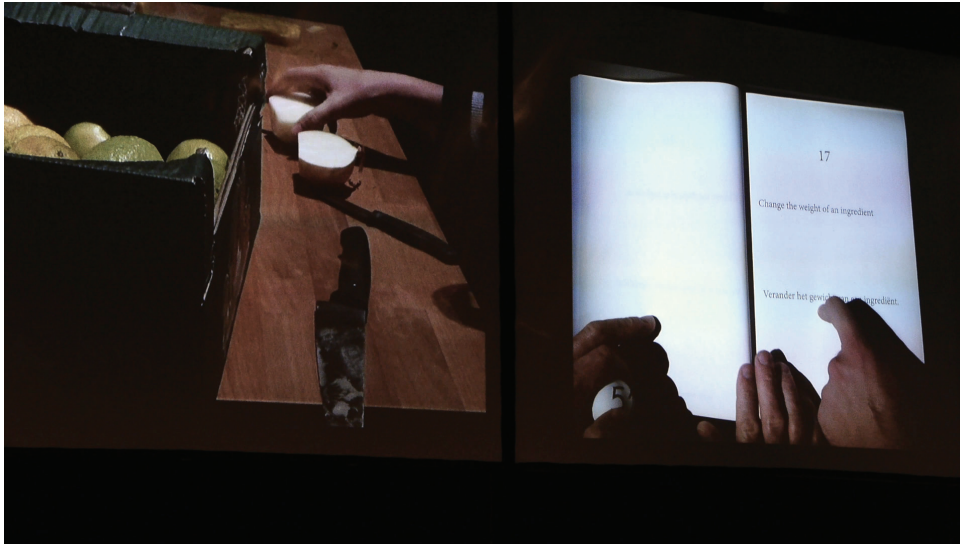
In *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen* you thought up an ingenious system whereby hundreds of spectators will ultimately prepare a meal together - or not. Where does the political potential of this action lie?

Meierhans: In the tension that emerges between what the individual does and what the group expects. Each spectator receives an instruction with which he or she can do something in the large kitchen on stage. It's not a task they can follow blindly; it requires an interpretation. The choices that person makes are determining for the entire group. If someone decides to prepare meat, they'll be excluding the vegetarian part of the audience from the meal. If someone lets the potatoes burn, that's a problem because there'll be no rice to use as a backup. Each individual decision or action has consequences for the community. From the try-outs for *Verein* it appeared that we are thoroughly conditioned to do what is socially acceptable, to seek a consensus - precisely the behaviour that I want to challenge. During a specific try-out a spectator came onto the stage who had been asked to do 'something' with the onions. He spontaneously began to juggle with them, but a bit later he decided in the end to cut up the onions neatly into little bits. We easily assume that our individuality - the longing to juggle with those onions or if necessary to toss them into the audience - is something that must be curtailed for the benefit of the community. But why would the community not grant that individual the space to express him- or herself freely? For me it's a question of always being able to reconsider a particular 'self-evident' assumption. In this case it's about the assumption that a 'good' community is by definition a consensus-based community. Well, in that case I'll just prepare a nice meal for everyone - we'll eat well, but we'll have missed the point.

Why did you explicitly choose for a theatre to carry out this political experiment?

Meierhans: The context of the theatre allows you to create a situation with 'strange' parameters. A bit like when you step into a lift that then gets stuck: at a stroke you find yourself in a special situation with a special set of relations to the other people in the lift - you've never spoken before, but you become a part of their 'community' from sheer necessity. At that moment reality receives a little push, and perhaps you'll remember that day for the rest of your life. Theatre also offers the opportunity to tweak the parameters of normality - and the audience accepts that. When a politician starts spouting fascistic crap in a speech, you get up and leave, but in the theatre you remain seated, until you understand why the performer is saying those things and what it means.

That's a question of trust: you give yourself up to what can happen, in the belief or the hope that it has meaning. That contract between performer and spectator is sacred, but it can be worked out in different ways. The mental opening that emerges when the expectations are not met is a moment of grace: you get the opportunity to make a leap outside your own frame of meaning.



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To what extent can you as an artist influence or determine that 'strange situation'? If you guide it too much, don't you run the risk of replacing the expected 'stage play' by an event, a meal on stage?

Meierhans: That's the whole question of balance: you can't just replace one frame by another - you have to make sure that a certain tension emerges between the different frames, that a situation arises with which you can play. There are three layers in *Verein*: the cooking, the political level, and a certain show factor, because the fact is you're in a theatre with a watching audience. The trick is to tune those three to one another so that neither predominates. There was a try-out in which we tried to boost the performativity and to entertain the people a bit more, but the result was a party on stage - fun, but not a disruptive situation. You've got to break the rules of the theatre, but at the same time you've got to keep meeting a minimum of fictional expectations - otherwise you might as well move the event to a club or a restaurant. The spectators must keep relating to the 'unusual' context and to the community that is watching what they're doing.

You often play in your work with the border between fiction and reality, between the passive and active participation of your audience. In both *Clay Pots* and now *Verein* the interaction with your audience is even determining. Why do you choose for these interactive forms of performance?

Meierhans: I think I don't like art for which you have to be 'initiated', in which, say, the theory of this or that philosopher is presented in images and the spectator simply has the task of decoding the work, while an author who has all the answers hides behind the artwork. I call that 'encryption': you wrap something up in a difficult manner, the performance consists in finding the key to it and in getting the message - a fine intellectual challenge, certainly if the 'secret' is rather complicated, but in essence it's nothing more than solving a Rubik's Cube. I prefer to develop forms that are open, easier to understand for everyone. Because it's not about explaining something or offering insight, but about putting something in motion. We can ask ourselves 'why are we all so consensus-oriented', but it's better to install dissensus, to try out dissensus. Hence also the decision to choose specifically for cooking. It's something real. It's not a metaphor, you don't need to understand it, it's something that happens in the here and now. The situation speaks for itself. If the food burns, that's the way it is; if people walk out, they walk out. There's no illusion. That's radical.

It's radical, but it also involves a risk for the maker. As in *Clay Pots* you give the audience a lot of power - they can make or break your performance.

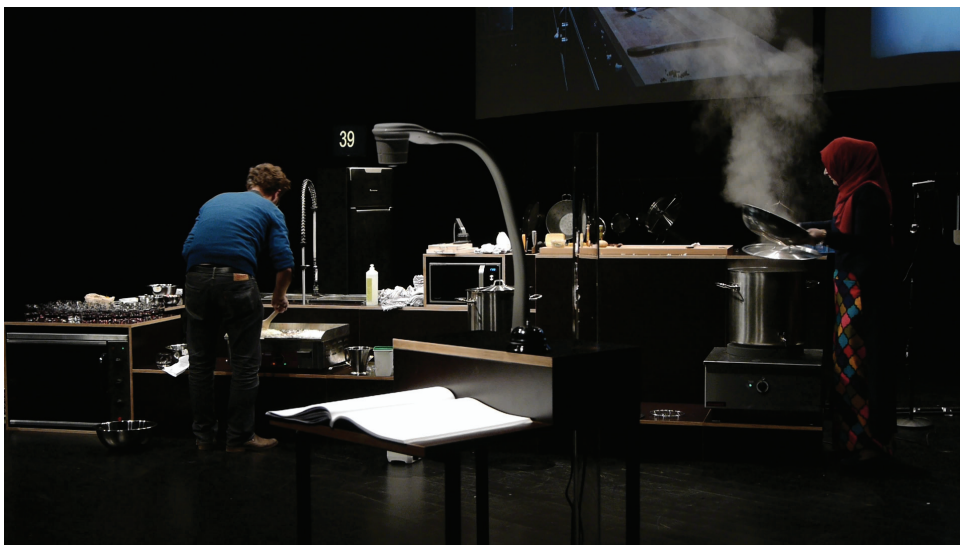
Meierhans: Funnily enough I rather feel the opposite: with *Clay Pots* I was very nervous about the part where I myself give the introductory statement, and therefore where I was in control. Once the audience started asking critical questions, however, I relaxed. I'm not a theatre-maker, I'm not an actor, I don't feel at home on stage. It's not that I'm afraid of speaking in front of an audience, but I have the feeling that I lack the mandate to begin a monologue without reason. In *Verein* no one will be on stage; there's only the kitchen which the spectators will gradually be invited into. Strangely enough few spectators seem to have trouble crossing that threshold between auditorium and stage - so far, in any case, virtually no one has refused to take part. But it could happen, yes, that people refuse to participate, or sabotage the performance one way or another. I wouldn't see that as a failure. The worst that can happen is that the shift between what people are used to doing and what they do in a special situation fails to happen - then the play won't have taken place. Hence also the title: it's about the *Aufhebung* - the lifting, the suspension - of what is necessary. The objective is not only to satisfy our direct urge for food. The tangible stake is the meal, but the process leading to it is more important. You go through something, and that transforms you - or not. That's why the instructions are not only instructions for a recipe, but also for an exercise in politics.

What, for you, is the ideal outcome of such an evening?

Meierhans: That by the end of the evening you're eating something you find bizarre, or something there's not enough of, or something you simply didn't want to eat - but that you realize that it wasn't about food, but about the question as to how it got that far, how you ended up in this situation. And so that you, in your thoughts, fill the gap between what you expected and what really happened. In the most radical case all the food will have been burned and the kitchen turned into a disaster area and together we have to acknowledge that this is it, that this is what we did together, and so that we ask ourselves how we reached that point. In that sense we are not what we eat, but we will eat what we are: if everything blows up, that has to do with that specific dynamic between the people who were present in the theatre that evening.

Is playing with frames, the shaking of expectations a constant in your oeuvre?

Meierhans: *(pauses to reflect)* I think that for me it is indeed always about creating 'exceptional' circumstances - think of the lift. Yes, that longing is something you can trace all the way back to the start of my career. Challenging normality, independently of the specific subjects of actions or performances, because I'm not fixated on a certain topic. I see the way society functions and relations between people a bit like a computer's operating system which you can only rewrite from the outside - from inside the computer itself you can't change the configuration, for that you have to use an external disk. I want to take up that external position, I want to create that platform, so that we can question and tweak the operating systems of our society from a distance. Yes, let's try something different. *(laughs)*



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FOOD POLITICS

Danae Theodoridou in conversation with Christophe Meierhans
on *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen - A Hundred Wars to
World Peace* (Etcetera 143, December 2015)

DT: What was your starting point? And this also connects with another question: how does this piece relate to your previous work, *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots*, and to your work in general?

CM: I was thinking of continuing something that originated in *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots*. I wanted to approach the same questions – how do we live together, how do we decide, what kind of rules we create for ourselves – from another angle. *Clay Pots* is pure speculation, everything happens in the head, we are talking about something that does not exist and will never exist. In this sense the work is political theory more than anything else. Even if there is a debate going on, the politics we are talking about are fictional. So I wanted to try to create a situation in which something really is at stake, where people are actually debating about something that exists and that is much less negotiable. Because you are in it and you cannot reflect, you cannot take a distance. If something is burning on the fire and nobody does something about it, we will all have lost something. Food is a very concrete thing, it's like air, it is something we need to live. If people grow hungry their behaviour changes, and you can feel this. Questions of waste, ethics, religion, all of these are inherent to food, to the meal. It is one of the few things that are truly universal. All traditions, religions, all customs and habits find their meeting point there. So in terms of politics it can act as a good catalyst.

There is a strong theoretical basis behind this, which is anarchy. Rethinking the relationship of the individual to the group and re-centring the interests of a group around those of the individuals. That of course can also be understood as a very neo-liberal way of thinking, if you just conceive it from the perspective of the individual. But here the exercise is to see the collective as a component of the individual's desires rather than as their limitation. It's not about the group collectively setting rules and individuals then having to conform their longings accordingly. It is about each individual integrating the group into the genesis of his own desires. It is about desiring the collective. If you love something, you are more likely to care about it aren't you?

(...)



DT: How easily can we apply observations of a theatrical experiment on society? There are fundamental differences between the two. The social groups we are part of involve specific decisions, aims and something that is really at stake. When I cook with my friends, for example, I have chosen that community. I was also thinking of Claire Bishop who refers to artworks which in the USA are called 'social practices'. She criticizes them because they consider artistic choices and the alternatives they offer less significant but, most importantly, because she finds them dangerous to democracy. They imply distrust towards democracy itself suggesting that it is unable to do its job, therefore art should take its place. In your case, what is the role of the investment involved in social contexts in the semi-random community of *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen*?

CM: I see an artistic framework as a place where you put things between brackets. You can suspend something - that's where 'Aufhebung' comes in again -, in this case hunger, to be able to see beyond it. With *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots* it was about suspending your scepticism towards the possibility of changing our given constitutional basis, so that you actually look into it. You suspend reality to some extent, which means you don't apply anything to reality, but to a suspended framework, which is part of reality as such. The idea is to create conditions that are slightly different, where you might look at things differently. If you don't have this suspension anymore, then you do creative social work and you don't create the brackets or the conditions that create a different reality.

DT: In what way does the piece create brackets for you?

CM: In the sense that outside of the piece you would not forcefully approach your extremely intimate relations to food from a different angle. I think the relations of the individual to the community become extremely strong in the piece because of the theatre, because of the people looking at you with a specific gaze. My responsibility as an artist is to create those brackets. Then whatever happens in it is fair to me. I create brackets for one evening only. I think it is useful to limit things so that people can actually take risks. I want people to break through and try some stuff that might be wrong. I agree, the whole thing exists only within a very limited framework. But what does this mean in relationship to society? Politics start in the household, in the way you relate to dishwashing with the person you live with. It is very futile but if you are not able to deal with that, how can you pretend dealing with bigger issues? If you think about social justice but are not able to deal with the dishes at home, I think there is a problem.



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HIROS

Hiros is the joint venture of the management offices Margarita Production and Mokum. Together we continue to build a solid framework for individual artists and artistic projects.

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