

SHARED WORDS (GEDEELDE WOORDEN)

Review of *Letters from Attica* by Rudi Laermans in Etcetera, 15.09.2020

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In her eponymous performance that premiered at Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Begüm Erciyas works with small excerpts from *Letters from Attica*, which the American revolutionary Sam Melville wrote at the end of the 60s from the infamous Attica State prison. They are presented as independent letters, with a date, opening words and closing greeting.

1

A revolutionary ends up in a high-security prison in 1969; he writes and receives letters, manages to unite the rival ethnic groups from the prison, and in 1971, together with 32 fellow prisoners, dies during a four-day uprising. The revolutionary was called Sam Melville (born Samuel Joseph Grossman), prisoner of the notorious Attica State prison. Together with several like-minded people, Melville committed a series of bombings in New York in 1969 in protest against the war in Vietnam. Jane Alpert, one of his accomplices, portrays her lover at the time in *Growing Up Underground* (1981) as a sexually dominant and mentally unstable person. Melville placed one of the bombs on his own, against all agreements and without notifying the building's security department, resulting in 19 wounded. "Could this revolutionary I loved actually be a mere drifter, incapable of commitment - to a job, a person, or even to his precious revolution," asks Alpert. Melville's sustained organisational commitment in Attica, which regularly led him to the isolation cell, suggests that he could indeed commit himself to the revolution. Prison as a school of revolutionary discipline?

Letters from Attica, published one year after Melville's death, does not contain letters to Alpert (she was on the run from justice, but through her lawyer she did provide a profile of her ex-lover included in the book). The correspondence contains long letters to and from his former wife Ruth, their son Jocko, his lawyer William Cram, and several friends. In her eponymous performance that premiered at Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Begüm Erciyas works with small excerpts from *Letters from Attica*. They are presented as independent letters, with a date, opening words and closing greetings. Melville asks for the lyrics of a song by Dylan, for example, or a message about a food package he received. The mini-letter at the end of the performance, on the other hand, is an outspoken political creed: we must commit ourselves to the construction of a society in which the needs of the people are fulfilled (I am paraphrasing as the sentence in question is considerably longer).

The fact that Erciyas fragmented Melville's published correspondence has to do with the participatory style of her performance. In Brussels, it takes place in the steeply sloping park tucked between Rue de la Po-

st and Rue de la Vert in the run-down Brabant neighbourhood behind the North Station. The hidden part of the park creates a somewhat *huit clos* situation, although of course not that of a total institution like prison. Together with some 20 others, you are rather in an urban oasis. In accordance with the applicable Covid-19 measures, the masked participants are placed about one and a half meters apart from each other. The queue snakes around the corner of a building, so that you can never oversee it entirely. That is important for what is to come. From behind or from the front, a few words, a phrase or – after repeating a few words and phrases – a complete sentence is passed verbally from participant to participant. The miniature letters do not cover more than a few short lines or a longer sentence. The combination of succinctness with an anecdotal content turns some of the letters into notelets. At the same time, it was clearly a dramaturgical choice to alternate prosaic messages with messages in which Melville describes the barren prison situation and his organisational commitment, ending with the above-mentioned political statement that defines the core of a revolutionary morality by the ‘we must’.

2

Before the start of *Letters from Attica* you will receive a note that explains the communicative commitment of the performance in a few lines. It does indeed stage a situation that calls for mutual trust between the unknowns who function as oral intermediaries. Nobody is allowed to distort the words passed on, while that can easily happen. This interdependency can also be read as the assumption of a shared responsibility: “Even if the members of the chain do not know each other, or the receiver of the message, the care for the message is what all members share”. *Letters from Attica* essentially stages a collective complicity within a situation in which the messages passed on must remain secret. The form of the performance alludes to Melville’s activity as an agitator in Attica. After all, you can only prepare an uprising within the prison thanks to a chain of secretly transmitted messages. Because the mediated words originate from personal letters, a certain tension does arise. The performative chain is in the register of oral communication and alludes to an underground conspiracy within the walls of a total institution; letters, on the other hand, are written, come from inside and go out, and often have an intimate character. In both cases, communication is dominated by secrecy, but the reason is different. Here, the confidential and voluntary sharing of a personal experience, emotion or thought, there, the obligatory discretion of a collective clandestinity.

The performance blurs the distinction between intimacy and clandestinity. Personal written communication is drawn into the bath of secret oral interaction, in which the mode of literally interpersonal communication – A writes or says something to B – works as a bridge. Because of its form, the performance naturally focuses on, say, oral clandestinity,

without, however, losing the dimension of intimacy. That does not seem to me to be a coincidence. If Erciyas had wanted to stage a conspiring secret society, she would not have chosen excerpts from Melville's correspondence, but another source and other words. By choosing the letter form as the origin of the words passed on, Erciyas confirms her earlier interest in the intertwining of intimacy, voice and communication. Because even though the input is a lot more political, Erciyas' adaptation of Melville's *Letters from Attica* is thematically an extension of her two previous productions, *Voicing Pieces* (2016) and *Pillow Talk* (2019).

In the installation *Voicing Pieces*, you hear yourself reading lines of text in a mushroom-shaped box: an intimate 'self-communication' that makes you face up to the simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar or intrinsically 'unheimliche' (Freud) nature of your own voice through the distortions of your voice (see her artist's contribution in *Etcetera* 151). *Pillow Talk* (see review) is also a participatory installation and invites you to enter into intimate communication with a machine. *Letters from Attica* in a way completes the circle: intimate communication (the content of the letters) is passed on out loud to others in a confidential way. It is like a trilogy, a three-step exploration of the relationship between intimacy and 'voice-ness' that goes from the individual over the machine to the other(s). Each time a different division comes into view: there is no overlap between speaking and listening, between people and the digital dispositions to which we have been structurally linked for some time now, and between 'I' and 'other(s)'. Or more accurately, there is always a changing unity-in-difference. Individual speaking and listening need each other, but do not coincide. We cannot do without digital data streams, but zeros and ones convey meaningful information that is different. And the other, without which my speaking becomes meaningless, must also continue to differ from me. Call it the paradox of the two-unity.

3

Letters from Attica is in all respects a co-performance. You take an active part and thus ensure that the performance takes place. Its happening is your doing. There are professional performers at both ends of the human chain and at the corner where that queue doglegs. They are initiators, rather than transmitters, and also possible examples of the theatricality with which the message is mediated: joyous or whispering in a conspiratorial tone, with much or little articulation of the words, with or without supporting gestures... Each participant ultimately plays that range of possibilities as they see fit. But no matter how you relay the message, you are inevitably in the role of a performer who always gives a short performance to the next in line. *Letters from Attica* is indeed a 'speech performance' in which speaking to someone else with more or less reflexivity represents itself. In corona times, however, this is done in a halved manner. After all, the obligatory face mask conceals the part of the body that is essential

for oral communication. As a result, the individualisation in passing on the words and phrases remains limited: there is no appealing face, only a face divided in two with a personal upper half and a generic/artificial lower half. This puts the voice even more in the foreground, which fits with the overall structure of the performance. Maybe in post-Covid 19-times, it will also require the putting on of a face mask.

Of the three performances that Begüm Erciyas has devoted so far to the interaction between voice, intimacy and communication, *Letters from Attica* is the simplest and, therefore, the most precarious. You can summarise the input and the operations required for the realisation on half a page. This conceptual framework, however, takes shape differently with each performance, depending on the physical context and the involvement of the participants. I participated in the Brussels park after closing time, while there were also performances in the afternoon. The later ones were probably very different due to the presence of children playing or curious passers-by to whom you relate as a co-performer. Or take the young Eastern woman to whom I passed on the words I received. She often found the situation funny, which often resulted in a short roars of laughter. It quickly created a specific bond, which would have looked completely different if I had communicated the words to a grumpy man. Perhaps this is where the ultimate goal of *Letters from Attica* lies: the staging of a simultaneously intimate and socially shared space of interpersonal collaboration, one in which the performative speaking that accompanies the relationship with the other makes for an element of unpredictability, despite the imposed language. It is not so much the reference to the character of Sam Melville that gives *Letters from Attica* a political charge, but the reflective nature of this contingency.

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