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INTERVIEW FROM/VON

**GISELA HOCHULI**

WITH/MIT

**ANDREA PAGNES / VESTANDPAGE  
CO-CURATOR OF KONTEKSTY 2018**

OCCASION OF THE TRIP/ANLASS DER REISE

**KONTEKSTY | 8TH EDITION  
INTERNATIONAL SOKOLOVSKO FESTIVAL  
OF EPHEMERAL ART**

**Interview by Gisela Hochuli**

**with Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage)**

**29th of July 2018, 12:30 to 13:30hs, Sokolovsko, Poland**

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**Andrea Pagnes** [00:00:00] My name is Andrea Pagnes. I was born in Venice. Since 2006 I have been working together with my wife and art partner German artist Verena Stenke under the acronym of VestAndPage. I started to operate in art and culture during the late eighties while still at the university: cultural journalism, as a translator, creative writings and published my first books, an art essay and two collections of proses. Nominated by the Cini Foundation of Venice, in 1990 I received the Robert Schuman silver medal (also consisting of a grant) by the European Community, which allows me to further my professional training abroad. So I went to Munich and then Cologne (at that time the contemporary art capital of Europe) where I did a curatorial internship with German artist, photographer and curator late Martin Mlecko, who became my best friend and mentor. I learnt in depth conceptual art and how to conceive art projects independently, outside institutional settings. I assisted Mlecko in the organisation of international art exhibitions in non-conventional places (castles, coal mines, industrial abandoned construction sites) and met with eminent artists like Rosemarie Trockel, Walter Dahn, Johannes Stüttgen and several others among the most influential of that decade. In 1991, Mlecko invited me to exhibit a series of drawings at two international group shows that he organised in Duisburg and Cologne. At that time, I had never considered displaying my artworks publicly, but this unexpected opportunity gave me the courage to undertake a production of visuals professionally (paintings, sculptures, outdoor installations) aside from the activity of curation and writing. In 1994, when my daughter Aisha was born, I had to come to terms with the fact that operating as an artist and independent curator was not enough to guarantee sufficient economic support to my family despite the professional achievements for exhibiting and curating in venues and art galleries internationally. Hence, being Venice a city that offers several possibilities to work in the field of contemporary art, I began to assist renowned artists and cultural institutions involved in the Venice Biennale (until 2008), also participating as

an artist and coordinator in three main exhibitions under the aegis of the Biennale itself in 1997. For a young Venetian artist, as I was, these were excellent working opportunities, because of a consistent financial remuneration and for the possibility to encounter worldwide renowned art protagonists. For instance, I assisted and spent qualitative time together with Joseph Kosuth, Rudi Fuchs, Samuel Keller, among many others, acknowledging invaluable lessons, both in terms of art and life.

Yet, I have never been really enthusiastic of navigating the mainstream of the art system, particularly that one of the Biennale, despite its grandiosity, nor of the way I was operating from inside of it. The sensation I always had was that one of being boxed behind a colossal shop window with products on display, notwithstanding the absolute artistic quality of many of those products. I felt the risk to reduce my drive to make art to another regular job: something that didn't actually correspond to my idea of art and that was corrupting my poetic spirit.

So, to nurture my creativity, I decided to undertake long sojourns abroad. In Berlin as an artist in residence at the Starke Foundation. In London to my friend Emma Hill, founder of the Eagle Gallery, where I had a solo exhibition in 1998. In Sao Paulo, thanks to art gallery owner Nara Roesler and artist Fábio Cardoso who offered me a studio to work. In Florida, as a resident artist at the Atlantic Centre for the Arts under the tutoring of sculptor Giò Pomodoro. These years of bohemian life were genuinely refreshing, despite the pros and cons.

A most decisive encounter I had was precisely in 1996 in Berlin when I met with Jon Hendricks, author of the seminal Fluxus Code, Fluxus and Yoko Ono's exhibition curator and consulting curator at MOMA. Yoko Ono and Jon Hendricks have been those who for first brought me inside the world of performance art. In 2003 they hired me as installation assistant for the setting of «Imagine Peace», Yoko's participatory performance and installation for Utopia Station, the exhibition curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija for the 50th Venice Biennale. Yoko has been really an art-godmother for me. After the opening of «Imagine Peace», she asked me to maintain her performance for the whole period of the Biennale every day for six months. At first, I didn't understand what I had to do precisely, but Yoko gave me a few instructions. She told me: «When the visitors approach the space, you break gently some dishes on the floor. Then you ask them to sit on a table together with you and repair the broken dishes with glue and rope strings and set them on

display on those shelves. You have to engage with the visitors, talking emphatically to them, finally inviting them to write their hopes and dreams on these small paper labels that they will attach on these two olive trees. The visitors will be attracted by the noise produced by the dishes when they break. They will willingly spend time discussing with you. Once other visitors understand the process, they will take the initiative themselves.» For six months, I enjoyed this immersive experience. Interacting with so many people, I began to understand the real power of art and performance: gathering together in unconventional ways.

Soon after, for a series of unfortunate events that occurred in my private life, I decided to leave Venice and went to Florence, where I met with Social theatre. This was the turning point of my artistic path. I got the diploma of Social theatre actor and operator and started writing and acting together with actors «non-actors» whose provenance was from the so-called social disadvantaged categories: psychic patients, Down's syndrome people, inmates, prostitutes, refugees, former drug addicts and so on.

With these actors non-actors, to do their best, you can't put them to play classic theatre but a performative theatre by transforming artistically their profoundly extraordinary life stories. Social theatre makes you understand that to make theatre and art, in general, is also a matter of social responsibility, and this was also «that which» I wanted to inject into my work.

In 2006, I was still working with my theatre company in Florence. I co-wrote a theatre piece «Corpo 1 Prologue», which raised the interest of several theatre festivals across Europe, such as «No Limits» in Berlin. We performed at the Ballhaus Ost Theatre, an «off» but «cool» theatre. Verena actually was in the organisation of the festival. She was like the care-keeper of our company. I fell in love with her, and a few months later, I invited her to join me in Florence.

Verena's background is in theatre, contemporary dance, martial arts, Sufi Theatre, and art installations. Also, she is a very skillful makeup artist.

One day I proposed her to try and make something together, just she and I. So we conceived a piece, at first without having well clear if it was a body art installation or a durational performance also consisting of a video sound installation. In summer 2007, we premiered this piece under the title «Speak That I Can See You» at

Art Kontakt festival and won the first prize. From then on, VestAndPage was born.

How did we build our performance art network?

Having already built a network in the art world, I asked some of my friend artists if they knew about opportunities and venues interested in presenting performance art. We researched ourselves events that maybe were the most appealing for us as a newly born performance art duo. We started to write letters and emails and made telephone calls to get directly in touch with performance art organisers and curators. In the beginning, we had to invest a little on our own. In Italy, there is not an institutional funding policy that supports performance art. It is a country that has a very foaming political situation still today. Since the last 30 years, even major cultural institutions have been suffering a consistent lack of funding that has been cut to the minimum by governments. However, I was still selling quite well my visuals. Also, both of us were doing other temporary jobs in the meanwhile. So we decided to invest part of the income we made in travelling abroad to learn what was happening in the field of performance art, from Asia to Latin America. To learn about performance is not just by reading books (which are however necessary, as one can acknowledge methodologies of pioneers and masters of the past and the present) but by getting in touch with different cultures, witnessing and acquaint directly the performative languages and styles of artists who come from different cultural backgrounds. We spent months travelling from country to country, presenting our works, knowing artists, art operators and professionals that started to appreciate us and invited us to perform again at their events but with more beneficial conditions. We built our network this way.

The idea of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK was born in 2012 when the Global Art Affairs Foundation took its seat in Venice and started to renovate five beautiful decaying Venetian Palazzos. As the system of the Venice Biennale collateral exhibitions has considerably changed in the last decades, and the demand of the artists who want to exhibit their works in Venice aside the Biennale is always increasing, the original primary purpose of the foundation was to renovate those buildings to rent them to institution and artists desirous of exhibiting.

Put it shortly, Venice today is a wheel of «money-spending – money-making» to which the whole city art system is not immune. However,

during wintertime, most of these buildings are empty, there is no cultural activity. When the directors of the GAAF foundation, now European Cultural Centre, contacted me through a friend and asked me if I were interested in conceiving an art project of a different kind that could move the city and create a new audience, I proposed them to realise a project specifically focused on performance art. Their offer was very tempting, not only because it allowed me to conceive something new and never done before in my hometown, but because they granted me the use of their historic premises without asking me for any economic compensation, as long as I could make an international artistic event capable of attracting a lot of people. I accepted. I contacted some old friends in Venice of my generation to help me in solving the many organisation aspects that a wide-ranging international cultural event requires. Venice is a small town. Venetians of the same age know each other quite well since they were teens. I have friends that today are owners of best hotels and restaurants, managers of enterprises. It was because of their magnanimous intervention and support that I have been able to initiate an art event without cash flow but sustained by in-kind support of various nature. I said to myself that if I cannot pay to the artists that I wish to invite a decent artist fee, at least what I can offer them is a beautiful setting and provide historical buildings where to perform and where performance art never happened before. Then top-quality logistics, skilful technicians to set their work at the best, four and three stars hotels attendance in Venice city centre for eight days to provide them with a wonderful staying, two meals per day in excellent restaurants.

Another fundamental aspect to consider is that Verena and I didn't conceive the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK like a performance art festival, but as a «live art exhibition project». We intended it as a gathering reunion of artists and friends coming to Venice not just to produce and present their work, moreover to spend qualitative time together to conceive other future projects. It is a project whose main aim is to set forth «continuity». The most poignant feedback that we received was by beloved late Lee Wen when he came to Venice to perform at the first edition. He wrote: «There was no beginning... Since there was no end... This is not a circus, this is not a show, this is not a biennale, this is a meeting of artists and people who looked for the pearls in the rivers of human civilisations and came to share what they found.» Lee Wen's words portray precisely the spirit that we kept to realise the first three editions of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK. In fact,

Verena and I are not precisely curators. We are an artist duo that, among our multiple art activities, also realise art projects of such kind. At the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK we have exhibited pioneers and invited masters and artists among those who have most inspired our work, have met during our art travels and with whom we have consolidated genuine working relationship and friendship. Of course, the selection that we did has been forcibly partial. But later we had the opportunity to be invited as organisers of other events abroad. For example, although we still miss you in Venice, we have been able to bring you to perform in Prague and here in Sokolovsko.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:14:49] Of course, no problem.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:14:50] I wish to get back to the question of «continuity» from our perspective. Allow me an example. In 2017, we decided to change the format of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK. We initiated a brand new project that we entitled CO-CREATION LIVE ART FACTORY for two main reasons. On the one hand, we didn't want the project to become a hypertrophied platform of contemporary art as many others; on the other hand, we want to empower the younger generations of emerging performance artists who often have fewer occasions to present their work officially in the frame of a consolidated international art project. Hence, together with Marilyn Arsem, Andriago&Aliprandi and curator Francesca Carol Rolla (who is part of the organisation team since 2014), we tutored 75 emerging international performance artists subdivided into three classes. We invited artists Robin Deacon, Preach R Sun, Marcel Sparmann and creative and executive producer Elisabetta Di Mambro to hold lectures and artist talks. Finally, as also our practice, as VestAndPage, is often site-specific, we set forth a co-creative situation aimed to offer the opportunity to the emerging artists to produce their work on site, then presenting it officially in the frame of an established and recognised live art project as it is today the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK. When it is possible, Verena and I don't like to present a work as if it were already made. For us, the essence of performance art springs when the performance artist arrives in a place with his/her/their body as his/her/their only tool and inhabits that space (where he/she/they are going to perform) not just for an hour or two, but for days. Experiencing a space for quite some time is part of a more extensive process where something new and unexpected may arise. We

are interested in the process because to make art is a process. Also, when we present a work of ours, we consider it as one stage of a long process and not its culmination. To perform is a process of continuous learning and continuous change. On that, it is a continuum of variation and transformation. We operate in performance cycles precisely for this reason because the performance that we will do tomorrow in this or that venue is an anticipation of what we are going to perform in a forest next. Our way of envisioning what does mean to perform keeps our spirits alive and not stagnating on fixed expectations.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:17:38] Verena and you built your network on your own and over the years. It's an ongoing process. You meet other people, and the network gets bigger.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:17:57] For Verena and myself to work on performance art has become our life project. I quit the night job I had in 2010. Now it's eight years that I dedicated myself to performance art almost 24 hours a day. It is not just practising performance art, training, facilitate workshops, lecturing, and curating, it's also to continue to study, writing a lot and publishing. I had the chance to publish with different publishing houses, but we found also ours: VestAndPage press. We publish not just our writings, but also those texts by performance artists and curators friends that we believe are important and that don't have necessarily to undergo the selection process of academic systems, which sometimes I see... too incestuous so to speak. I like academic writers, but I believe that the true testimony of performance artists is also very important as well, and their writings are somehow more creative and free than the academic ones. We want to give space to those texts for what we can. We wish to publish and design books and catalogues the way we like. We have an excellent graphic typographer in Venice that supports us, but the decision on the content, layout and the distribution is in our hands. Having also worked for major publishing houses in the past, too often I saw how many unsold copies of a book are shredded. It may happen that if a publishing house publishes 1'000 copies of a catalogue, it can sell maybe 300 copies... the rest sooner or later will be burnt and gone forever with a considerable waste of time, money and energy.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:20:02] Let's stay a bit with the writing. You have your own publishing house.



**Andrea Pagnes** [00:20:12] For example, when we curated the international exhibition «SiO2 - The Reason of Fragility» at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana (AL) three years ago, we made an agreement with the director of the gallery to publish the catalogue in collaboration with them. The National Gallery of Arts sustained the printing costs of the catalogue, but we did the graphic design of the cover, the layout, and we decided which texts and photographs to publish. We insert the logo of the National Gallery of Arts together with the logo of VestAndPage Press. 500 copies were printed: 300 have been taken by the National Gallery and 200 by us as compensation for the work that we did. Why did we choose so? For two main reasons: to maintain our style of publication and to be responsible for the distribution of our 200 copies. Of course, we could have delegated these tasks to other professionals, but we couldn't expect that they would have operated as we wish. Therefore we always prefer to work more and take on the responsibility of every publication in which we are directly involved.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:21:44] In these publications, do you also publish texts from other artists? Regarding the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK, do you make a publication for each edition?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:22:09] Regarding the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK, we make a publication also with texts of other artists that we invite to write on specific topics related to the central theme of that year edition. Some of them because they have participated with a live performance or in the exhibition, some others we contact them through our artist network. Building a network is also...

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:22:16] ...to share knowledge?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:22:17] ...to share knowledge... The human comes first. Then comes the artist. The artist is «tightened» to the human, but the human is what counts the most. To share knowledge and culture, to produce new experience, it is to put the human and the artist in an alchemic relationship. We, people, create new awareness by sharing our different cultural backgrounds, finding convergences and discrepancies that offer us a common ground to work on. This becomes possible once the relationship with the artist that you meet is not just about shaking hands, cherish each other superficially and then going away. I am fond of relationships that evolve, become fruitful

and continue to grow. All the human qualities, which enforce human relationships among individuals and people over time, they pertain to the domain of ethics. The artistic spirit is capable of giving to those same qualities an aesthetic foundation for its very nature.

To come back to the question about our publications. For example, the great friendship that we have consolidated in the last years with Marilyn Arsem or with Guillermo Gómez-Peña among other artists, made sure that when we asked them for a text of theirs to be published, they welcomed our request at open heart. It is a blessing for us to count on the open collaboration and support of artists that we also consider as our masters. But this also gives us a high responsibility to make qualitative books. It takes about one year to work on a book to publish it the way we envision it. It requires patience and dedication. Also, it is a horizontal project because many contribute to its realisation until it is printed.

If I look back into the 12 years of VestAndPage artistic activity, it seems like we have done what is typically supposed to be done in 20 years, or more. At least many colleagues have said to us so. This is because of love. We love what we do to the point that we have made of it our life project. We feel close to people like-minded that do the same and are so much into this way of living life and art as we do. I like to imagine art as an entity, a vast field to be explored. It is art itself that causes the artist to make something, to try and make this world alive while offering different readings of our reality. Paradoxically, artists don't make art. It is art that manifests itself in some way through the works of the artists. Same, I cannot say that this is my world. What I can tell, if anything, is that I belong to the world. I can say that I belong to the Earth, but the Earth is not mine.

Encountering like-minded people gives the possibility to implement one's network. Friends bring friends. If I look at our artistic network, I see it as a large community even if all its members live in different countries.

Technology – if it is used with common sense – helps to keep ongoing communication. Relationships can also be built by using technology wisely. When relationships are proactive, sincere and respectful, they can inspire projects of a different kind. Many things we did were born this way: because of healthy and non-competitive relationships between peers and colleagues. Of course, you cannot be a close friend with everyone, but to have the capacity to found

relationships on reciprocal esteem and sincere respect, avoiding to fall in the trap of particular individual interests, it is what serves to we people to prepare the terrain for a better future. We say this many times to our young students since they are the ones that tomorrow will operate in the fields in which we work today, and hopefully better. As soon as a group of young people starts to create projects together, they have more chances to go on their own free will and act independently as they wish, especially against contrary advice or detrimental rules and stale norms. So it happens that some young artists that have participated in our workshop classes do their projects around the world now, surmounting obstacles and difficulties. This is the most beautiful reward we can receive. Verena and I believe very much in the teamwork because to work as a duo is to work in a team. The less you compete with your team members, the more you enforce the team. Having done a lot of sports, team sport... if you play rugby or if you play football and you want to be the star, keeping the ball just for yourself and don't care of the other teammates that are playing with you, you will never win. You will be an impediment for the team. If instead you play and work for the team, if all the members of the team play and work together, then the team becomes stronger and great achievements may happen.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:28:34] I have another question about your writing because you write a lot. What are you writing personally? What are the subjects that interest you the most?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:28:58] To write is a way of expressing myself, coming closely into touch with my intimacy, my Self, my thoughts. I write more in English than in Italian to reach more audience, and because I love the English language very much actually. English has become the lingua franca. I like all the idioms, their sounds, but English has the gift of synthesis in the exposition of concepts. The Italian language is much more flowery and rhetoric. To write of about a tree, I would start to write about the sky, which is very poetic of course, but writing about aesthetics and performance art issues, you have to be precise because they are already complex issues per se. English is a language that gives the possibility to go straight to the point, without being forcibly redundant. It being not my native language, I need English friends that edit my texts. In the construction of the English sentence, I am still strongly influenced by the Italian syntax and way of thinking, which inevitably leads me to make mistakes again. I write mostly about performance art issues

and my researches in this field, of what performance and live art make me think and feel. I write my considerations about the questions of the Self and of the identity, about the crisis, with a poetic-philosophical approach. Also, I write proses and poems that Verena and I use in our performances, mainly as spoken words and recordings. Maybe this is because of my creative writing and the actor's background. In this moment of my life, I have the urgency to go back to storytelling in our performances, even in an abstract way. It's not about telling stories «once upon a time» alike, but about the use of words as tools, as materials. I like words that have a semantic quality springing from their sound, words that have a meaning or a multiplicity of meanings or no meaning at all.

In our performance operas, often we work with ten or more performance artist collaborators. During the performance opera, we invite them to tell texts in their own mother tongue. With ten artists talking together or to each other in different languages, you can't focus any more on the meaning of the word, for you hardly understand or don't know at all the language they speak. Yet you can concentrate on the sound that each word has and appreciate its power. In a way, it becomes a concert; a chorus of multiple voices, each one of them speaking a different language.

Words are important. Through them, I can translate my thoughts into sentences that become images. When I face a blank paper or the screen of my laptop, I have the urge to write something always. Also, I like to read a lot. Notwithstanding, as Wittgenstein says, the language remains my limit.

Also, the use of blood and the self-cutting in VestAndPage's performances are directly related to writing. Here, I wish to remember Norbert Klassen because he was the one who inspired me the most to explore in-depth what the issue of blood means for me personally and intimately.

When I met Norbert at the 10th OPEN International Performance Art Festival in Beijing (2009), one day, we engaged in a conversation about extreme performance art. He asked me: «You say that blood shouldn't be used as a shock tactic, so why is it so important for you?» I answered him: «Because my blood is to write. I see my blood as my original ink produced by my body, my flesh as my canvas, and my skin as my sheet of paper.»

I see writing as a performative tool. In performance, my blood offers me the possibility to write without having tools other than that. My blood, this organic fluid, is a kind of supreme ink. And there's more

to which I refer to: at the university, I also studied the philosophy of the alchemists, which argues that the soul resides in the blood and that the colour of the soul is red. So when I perform and write with my blood on whatever support, I feel free to imagine that it's not me anymore who writes, but my very own soul that transforms blood drops into words, as it tries to convey something, a message, a meaning, a line, a trajectory in a purer way than my rational mind can say.

Also, I see it essential to write about art not only from an academic perspective or with an academic style. I am more delighted when I read a text written by an artist than by an academic professor. I respect academic writings very much: some are truly exceptional, like those written by Amelia Jones, probably one of the best writers about performance art issues that I've ever read. Yet, I find outstanding and fascinating those written by performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, for his ability to mix art theory, critics, poetry and politics together in a style which is so vitally magmatic.

To publish is very hard. There is a lot of competition, especially in niche disciplines like performing arts. The best publications are often academic journals. I had the chance to publish also in a few academic journals. It gives you credit, but it's a stressful process... application, submission, and peer review. There will always be someone that will say that your text is «not in line with their editorial policy» or that «the content is not sufficiently developed»... educated ways to say that your writing is a patented shit. But then to a second, or third submission with another journal, maybe you are luckier, and they publish it. The last essay I wrote, I asked a Canadian academic journal if they were interested in publishing it. They weren't. Then I submitted it to a Brazilian university, and they published it in a book. You know you don't have ever to discourage. With a little bit of adult age, I'm not frustrated anymore if I encounter a refusal. Systems function this way, and things sooner or later will fall into place if they have to.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:37:26] You try here and there. If they don't want, then you try another.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:37:29] In some way, it is better like this. I never consider a refusal or a «no» as a failure but as an opportunity that tells me: «You were in the wrong place, look for your place.»

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:37:55] People choose you. They appreciate your work. If not, they will not accept you. This is a good feeling for me if I know, ah, yes. I don't want to force anybody to take me. So it's better to have another one.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:38:15] I have been always quite against the school system as it was (in Italy) when I was a student: rigid hierarchical structure often leading to the exercise of excessive authority and abuse of power. Today, as far as I can experience it, especially in art universities and academies of the rich Western countries, I see art students treated as clients and academic or university professors that look like more to «qualified» employees than art experts. To my eyes, also it is insane that students have to ask for a bank loan to pay twenty-five thousand euros or dollars per year to get an MA. Academic institutions treat them more as «clients» than students. And a customer, to make him happy, you have to pay him off, so he will bring other customers to you. Students then come out with high expectations, presuming that they will have something back from the system for what they have paid, but in reality, once finished their studies, many of them will struggle to find even the most ordinary job, stressed by the debts that they have to pay unless their families are wealthy. Of course to study offers possibilities, but here I'm speaking of the whole educational system, which seems quite toxic. Students that enter in an art academy usually have high hopes to become artists, but nobody tells them that by studying in an art academy it is written nowhere that they will become artists. As soon as they finish their studies, a vast majority of them finds themselves alone and realises that to become an artist and make a living out of it is deep shit. So some of them may try to become art teachers as soon as they can. But here a question lingers: How can you teach right after a degree? Which experiences have you made? You still have to study, make different experiences, work hard, go on your own and trace your artistic path. Then, one day, you can also teach something.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:39:34] It's like this.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:39:39] Artists have to safeguard their ideas, beliefs, even though all could collapse tomorrow. Our task is to try and keep alive the world we live for what we humbly can. Today I see a standard line of thinking in performance art: to look for

authenticity, which literally means to be the author of your own Self from within. Especially when I read and write about philosophical issues in art, I search for intellectual honesty, which is very important for me.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:40:25] And what is for you intellectual honesty?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:40:27] I don't write about a topic because it's the topic «du jour». I don't write on a theme having read just a few books on it. I can't write about a performance by Gisela Hochuli if I haven't seen at least one or two times Gisela Hochuli performing live. Indeed, several texts exist on performance art issues written by authors who hardly go to see performance art. That's for me a bit strange. Also, I cannot read texts by authors anymore that criticise this or that performance deliberately, just looking at the surface of the work and ascribe meaning of their own personal interpretation. These texts sound to me pretty much autobiographical of those who have written them. They do not actually dig inside the artist's spirit. To write about an artist, you have to spend time together with him/her/them. If I have to write about you, I would have to talk to you maybe for one day or more, ask you kindly to open your heart and unveil as much as possible what you feel inside, what moves you to make the art that you make. This means for me, intellectual honesty. It's work. It means to be fully dedicated to the subject that you want to write about. If I have to write about Joseph Beuys, I have to read books and document myself on his oeuvre and life, but maybe I can also interview someone that has met Joseph Beuys and was close to him. It's not that you have to write like an employee and make an essay in 15 days because of a deadline. It can take one year to write an excellent article on performance art issues. Moreover, intellectual honesty is all about being faithful to one's own idea. If I see a performance or an exhibition that I don't like, I have learned that I have not necessarily to criticise it. If I didn't like it, it is maybe because I didn't understand it. So first I'm driven to know why I didn't understand it. Only then I decide if to write about it or not. Also, I dislike any form of censorship and judgment. Sometimes I see artists performing too roughly or approximatively, or whose works are not in my line. But why should I have to write badly about them? It's so despicably narcissistic to harshly criticise someone or something. I'm not a judge but an art lover. Of course, I have my preferences. I'm personally fond of works that stimulate my inner sense of beauty, that bring me elsewhere from

what I already know and make me long for that which is invisible but radiant. So about these works I write, for it's something that I really feel. Finally, to be intellectually honest is to write about things I really feel for.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:45:10] This is in the context of authenticity, to write what you really feel for?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:45:22] You can't oblige a painter to paint against his very nature. If for all his life, he is trying to understand the essence of an abstract line, and then you go there, and you say to him: «Paint a landscape!», you force him to step out of his track. You violate his research.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:45:53] It's not adequate.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:45:59] When I see young performance artists performing in a way clearly informed by their academic studies, they appear to be entirely lost because their vision has been compromised by a series of professorial «don't» that they have blindly assimilated. Young performers should be instead inspired to widen their practice, to shape and empower their visions thoroughly and stimulate to look at the configuration of the reality with different eyes continuously to not stagnate in illusory certitudes.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:47:00] How come that you are the co-curator of the 8. International Festival of Ephemeral Art *Konteksty* here in Sokolovsko?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:47:16] In 2016, «Fragile Body – Material Body» was the last chapter of the trilogy dedicated to the body of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK. We invited a selection of performance art masters that we admire, among them Janusz Bałdyga. We had seen him performing durational at the event *Là-bas*→where we also participated, curated by Irma Optimist at the Helsinki Kunsthalle. We much appreciated Janusz's conceptual rigour and charisma. We stayed in touch and invited him to perform in Venice in 2016. Małgorzata Sady, founder and curator of *Konteksty*, invited us to perform here in Sokolovsko at the 5. edition of the festival in 2015. We don't know who suggested us to her.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:48:49] Helsinki was before?



**Andrea Pagnes** [00:48:51] *Là-bas*→ in Helsinki was in 2013. We performed live at *Konteksty* in 2015. Also, Janusz performed, this time with the legendary Akademia Ruchu. I thought that maybe Janusz had talked to Małgorzata about Verena and me, as he also saw us performing durational in Helsinki, but I frankly can't say so, it is just my personal assumption. So, I asked Janusz to come to Venice to perform in December. A few weeks later, we invite also Małgorzata as visiting curator. She was very supportive of our work. She also organised a workshop that we held for young artists in the stunning natural environment of Sokolovsko. We esteem Małgorzata. She's a professional of high culture and experience. Once in Venice, I asked her to write a text for the catalogue book, and she did it. Then, last year she wrote us an e-mail expressing her desire to invite us to co-curate a section of international performance art for the 8. edition of the festival. We accepted willingly and forwarded her a list of performers whose work we considered in line with this year festival theme.

Then there was this turning point with the Ministry of Culture in Poland. *Konteksty* organisation was expecting an amount of funding similar to what they received for the past editions, but this time the funding has been cut to the minimum. We revisited the list and opted for the artists whose countries of origin have an art policy or council that support them abroad. So we called you because if we had applied in time to Pro Helvetia to sustain you, there would have been significant margin for you to come here to perform, also considering that among the Swiss performance artists (and not only) you are among the most established. Gim Gwang Cheol from South Korea was already on tour in Europe, Alperoa from Chile also. They called me. Andrea, we are in Europe. If you know of an opportunity where to perform, please tell us. I said to them that by coincidence I have been appointed as co-curator at *Konteksty* and that I would have liked them to come. Gim performed in Venice in 2016, Alperoa in 2012. Things fall into places. I'm glad to have had the chance to invite a selection of performance artists among those who I love the most.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:51:41] Yes. It's really a good program you selected.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:51:49] I'm very content. I trust all of you. I believe your heart, your art, your humanity, your strength, beauty, poetry, artistic quality and intensity.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:53:35] Now you talked a lot, you give me a lot, Andrea. If you want to tell more, please. If not, I would like to take a picture of you and me here on the bench, and then we can go to have lunch. Is there anything on your mind you would like to say?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:54:00] For all of us, artists and curators, institutions are essential for many factors. But it is when we are together that art springs its power. We can cooperate with institutions, but it shouldn't be our first thought. We are in two here, you and I. We can conceive a project for, let's say, ten artists. So when the project is defined, we have the content. Only then we should go to the institutions and ask for their involvement in some way. Because if we go first to the institution...

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:55:02] They want to choose by themselves...

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:55:17] Today, if an artist has money he can also rent institutional space to exhibit his works. By my side, I try to find resources inside the institution and outside the institutional frame. In 2014 the Museum of Modern Art of Venice offered us to organise a performance art evening in its premises during the II VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK. We did it, but to my eyes, it was disastrous. They hardly helped us to put a nail on the wall. If this is the kind of collaboration that an institution can offer, I frankly can do without it.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:56:14] You did this evening? What was the disaster?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:56:21] Yes, we did it. In the end, we realised that they didn't care at all of the art we were doing. They just wanted us to fill their spaces with a new audience and maybe also to test us. I don't like to be used. Or we cooperate at the same level, or you do your own shit, and I do mine somewhere else. I can survive well, even without institutional support. Of course, I would like to choose the institution with whom I want to work with, although I perfectly know how difficult it is and not always possible, primarily if you operate in the immaterial. Institutions that support ephemeral art do exist, but not so many. I had the chance to have worked with some excellent ones. What I don't like in the art world is when artists are used for ulterior motives that have nothing to benefit the artists.

**Gisela Hochuli** Is it a question of culture? You are an artist, and you are a curator, and you are an organiser. You know the needs of an artist. You know them. You have this approach to process and continuity. The institutions they don't have this. They don't understand the needs of performance artists because these are not the same needs as visual artists have. The conditions are different if I do a performance in an institution.

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:58:11] I think it's probably my cultural background and my education. I don't live in my country. I don't like to work so much in my country since ever, I don't know why. I have a nomadic spirit. Five years here, five years there... I don't know where Verena and I will be in five years. I'm not even easily classifiable as Italian by now. I'm a citizen of the world if anything. Also, I must say that emerging Italian artists are somewhat penalised compared to those of other countries where there is an arts council that supports their artistic activities, like UK, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Singapore, Canada, Australia and so on.

**Gisela Hochuli** [00:59:09] Isn't there an art council in Italy?

**Andrea Pagnes** [00:59:13] It is possible to apply to some grants or competition notices that the Region or the Municipality issue from time to time. However, to be successful, one should have a political connection. Performance art has to be defined as a form of experimental theatre or squared in the category of entertainment. But for me, performance art is not entertainment. It is an art practice that produces a pure reflection. It's challenging to have an open dialogue with this kind of institutions that I have in my own country and make them understand what it is about. Once we received the meagre amount of 900 Euro from the Province when the event was already finished for two weeks. We had to give the money back. In Germany it is different. There it is Verena that copes with the cultural institutions, but more for our filmmaking activity.

**Gisela Hochuli** [01:00:06] So you'll get support for filmmaking in Germany?

**Andrea Pagnes** [01:00:11] For the last film, we received support from the Federal Government Commissioner For Culture And The Media, a branch of the Ministry of Culture. We received not so much as we

asked but enough to be able to realise the movie. It was prestigious support that most probably also concurred to make us win the award for a low budget film at the Berlin Independent Film Festival 2018. The prize did not include money, only an honour, but it will be maybe helpful to submit another funding request in the future.

**Gisela Hochuli** [01:00:57] And in Germany you get funding for your performance work as well?

**Andrea Pagnes** [01:01:01] Sometimes, the Goethe Institute supports our travel tickets abroad when the festival organisations submit a formal request in time. Then there exist other supporting systems. I wouldn't be able to get funding myself but Verena maybe could. I cannot tell you precisely the names of these institutions, but once you are successful with your application, you may be supported for three or four years. Institutions that operate like the British Arts Council, Pro Helvetia, the Canadian or the Australian Arts Councils are rare. Also, these countries are more prosperous than Italy. They can invest more money in contemporary art and culture. In Italy actually, there is not even a proper Ministry of Culture, only the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, to safeguard the vast Italian cultural heritage, and the Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment that hardly looks at contemporary art. Then there are governmental departments, the Regions and the Municipalities that give money directly to established cultural institutions so that they can make their own cultural programs, but the Italian system in a matter of cultural affair is still too much politicised and way behind other countries.

**Gisela Hochuli** [01:02:35] We stop now. What do you think? You talked a lot. Maybe you are exhausted?

**Andrea Pagnes** [01:02:38] I'm fine. Of course, one has to learn how to talk to institutions. Probably, I never discovered how to do it well. But when an institution offers me collaboration, I'm very caring to not compromise my integrity as an artist.

For example, as far as I have understood, here in Sokolovsko, the liaison between *Konteksty* and the Polish Ministry of Culture is functional thanks to Fundacja In Situ (and its founders Bożenna Biskupska and late Zygmunt Rytka), which is in charge of renovating the majestic Sanatorium where we have performed. It's a direct line. It gives prestige to the festival and its mission in the national

picture. In Trybunalski, Jan Świdziński, the great pioneer performance artist of Poland, founded Interakcje Performance Art Festival. There are different ways to undertake and realise a project, but when one or more artists conceive a project that later becomes an institution itself, it is always a beautiful thing. It's like a breath of fresh air. There are many ways, and things fall into places when they have to.

**Gisela Hochuli** [01:04:19] Like Interakcje maybe. (...)

This was an interview with Andrea Pagnes from VestAndPage and me, Gisela Hochuli, during the festival of ephemeral art *Konteksty* in Sokolovsko, Poland, on the 29th of July 2018.

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### PEOPLE/LEUTE

- Gisela Hochuli, Bern, Schweiz: [www.giselahochuli.com](http://www.giselahochuli.com)
- Małgorzata Sady, Polen: [www.contexts.com.pl/pl/artysci/2434](http://www.contexts.com.pl/pl/artysci/2434)
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### FESTIVALS/PROJECTS/PLACES

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