Review of *SMOKEY POKERSHIP: Perform the Exhibition Space*

By Simon Donger

Despite the institutional ironing out of a performative paradigm in art, to draw from performance and theatre continues to offer productive challenges to predominant modes of practice and understanding such as those signalled by early performance art. This is the critical premise of Sybille Omlin’s *Smokey Pokership* as it provides an important account of this restless legacy beyond the veil of normative absorption.

Primarily concerned with issues resulting from the translation of performative and theatrical phenomena in artistic and curatorial practices, the texts in the book challenge dominant conceptions of key topics such as performativity, participation, relationality and discursivity. As the book progresses, theoretical knowledge is increasingly complemented by and substituted with practical knowledge, concluding with the visual documentation of an exhibition that ended with a symposium from which the texts are issued. The book’s structural emphasis on practice as a series of processual and experimental actions underlines a radical proposal for ‘a rhythmic No […] acting without mandate […] dis/engagement […] conflictual participation […] irritation as a creative force’ (Katya Garcia-Anton, p.30,32). Thus, rather than attempting at formulating another conception of performativity in art, the book seeks to constructively expose and play out the problems at the heart of any interrogative approach. It does so by disentangling one by one key current discourses and trends. Against the ideological settlement of so called participatory art, relational art, interactive art, immersive art, etc…. *Smokey Pokership* examines the unresolved problems posed by early performative art as part of contemporary practices (artistic and curatorial) which pursue addressing these problems. Indeed, the overlapping of performance and art is the collision of two related yet differing structures of artists, curators and audiences’ agency, thereby teasing out problems that strongly resonate with broader and continuing socio-political issues of agency. To this comprehensive and dissident end, the book constitutes a series of dynamic contentions in order to posit a disordering and ever-mutating praxis at its core.

Wherein the normative reduction of performance art ‘the anarchic element of the life act is subdued through this transformation, the encounter of an event, where possibilities can never be completely controlled, is lost’ (Dorothee Richter, p.59), a performative praxis here would require its actors (artists, curators and audiences) to constantly revisit the structures of their agency and related processes ‘within an ongoing, non-linear discourse that is bound to negotiate its format again the day after’ (Federica Martini, p.42). And although drawn from performance, this understanding of the event is not easily found in theatre practice. Theatre too has come to loudly embrace other disciplines and foster some kind of interdisciplinarity at the heart of any respectable contemporary practice. Yet, the ‘anarchic element of life’ lingering in interdisciplinarity (to be in-between disciplines surely is for the least an opportunity to elude both ideological orders) has been settled under an institutional umbrella which seeks to capture other disciplines within the most conservative theatrical ideology (thereby re-actualizing traditional orders through the disguise of contemporaneity). Thus, just like art can draw from performance to openly introduce and subtly fail to allow the disruption and transformation of the viewer’s agency, theatre can draw from digital media/interaction to introduce forms of audience immersion that are highly prescribed and didactic in terms of interactive potential. To some greater extent, these deceptive disavowals are issued from their allegiance to larger forces at play. Theatre’s connivance in production processes in par with the mass production model (fast-paced/short-lived, outcome-oriented, wasteful, etc….) is increasingly covered up by concerns with sustainability (material, creative, financial, cultural). Effective economy/ecology would require radical revisions of the production process in line with Omlin’s proposal for practice to be a transformative ‘concatenation [, a] relay of events and spaces [, a] research’ (Sibylle Omlin, p. 84).

*Smokey Pokership* tenders a dialogic concatenation wherein the art world’s assumptions about performance, installation, participation, relation and discourse are suspended, going as far as rejecting the positioning of art institutions as socio-cultural illuminators to proffer ‘a more conversational institutional voice’ (Barnaby Drabble, p.47). By deflecting institutionalization from any claim to knowledge and power (as markers of a more than dubious form of democracy), performative art can nurture discursive uncertainty to accommodate the reconfiguration of its conversational agents. In return, and from the perspective of theatre practitioners (makers and producers), the book exerts argumentative pressure over key aspects of theatre practice that are now more than ever due to address thanks to, and as another kind of responsive companionship to *Smokey Pokership.*