

**TkH platform – research and education in performing arts through writing, self-education and theoretical performance**

by Ana Vujanovic and Bojan Djordjev

**Introduction**

TkH (the *Walking Theory*) began its work on October 3, 2000 in Belgrade, a few days before the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, in an enthusiastic atmosphere of political, social and cultural upheaval. TkH came into being as an attempt to overcome and open up, in a supposedly emancipatory manner, all those theoretical, artistic and indeed existential borders faced by its founders at this time. TkH ‘appeared on the stage’ in the ‘theoryphobic’ atmosphere of the chaotic Belgrade at the beginning of 2000’s, in the joint effort to set and perform a *hard* theoretical platform for critical work and action in the realms of performing arts, culture, theory and education.

The principal failing of local art education, apart from being traditional in every aspect – from the art practices it favoured to the educational methodologies – is a general theoryphobic and mildly anti-intellectual attitude. In this context – which is still the predominant context of the Academia in Serbia – theory is viewed as something practiced *in camera*, in research institutes, as well as something that castrates art practice. With our name, TkH – Walking Theory/Teorija koja Hoda, we emphasize that theory is always (social) practice, that it is a relevant, potent and socially intervening agency, which can not be distinguished from art practice, let alone be its adversary. In order to stress its performative function we took the performing arts as our main field of interest. In this framework we explore the potentialities of performance as a new scientific/theoretical paradigm (in Jon McKenzie’s sense) but also promote the idea of performing arts not as a classificatory but as a critical concept that characterizes the spectacle-based society in which we live.

On the other hand, TkH is also interested in collective work, above all in independent cultural scenes. It supports local and cross-border collaboration and exchange, and collaborates effectively with many independent organizations, platforms, groups, theorists, and artists from abroad, especially from the Region of South-Eastern Europe, or more precisely the former Yugoslavia, as well as from Belgrade and Novi Sad. That is why there are many authors from Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bulgaria (as well as other places), who collaborate with TkH. Besides, TkH is actively engaged in cultural policy issues, and collaborates effectively with the self-organizing platforms



Druga scena / Other Scene (in Belgrade), Clubture's regional initiatives (ex-Yugoslavia), The FaMa (Belgrade – Zagreb – Ljubljana), and PAF (France), on improving the infrastructures and discourses of independent cultural-artistic scenes.

### **Organizational structures, or attempts of hybrid organizational models**

TkH was founded by the student of teatrology and cultural studies, Ana Vujanovic, by the student of theatre/radio directing, Bojan Djordjev, by the student of painting, Sinisa Ilic, by the students of musicology Jelena Novak, Ksenija Stevanovic, and Bojana Cvejic, by the student of composition Jasna Velickovic and the professor of aesthetics and art theory Misko Suvakovic, with support of teatrologist and director of the Centre for New Theatre and Dance (CENPI), Jovan Cirilov as well as some other professors and cultural actors.

The initial step of TkH was a series of self-organizing workshops within CENPI. They were carried out as a post-pedagogical model of work based on research in those theoretical and artistic fields (performance art, performing arts, experimental music, post-dramatic theatre, opera, dance...) which at the time were not integrated into the official curricula either of the state universities or private artistic schools. The focus was also on the changes in the status of 'the student' who ceases to be merely a passive listener and receiver of knowledge, and becomes an active agent in a concrete actual art world.

Further on, TkH acted for a couple of months as an art group, namely, for the preparations for the first theoretical performance *Walking Theory* for the Fifth Floor stage of the National Theatre in Belgrade in April 2001, to performing it again at the festival *Akcija Frakcija* in Zagreb, in November 2001. The group aimed to be a cooperation of a number of contributors to realization of collective artistic-theoretical projects. Later on, after the group recognized its inner incoherency, TkH functioned as a "cartel". The idea of the cartel was to run the TkH as a kind of a turnover company where the actions of the cartel were seen as ones of production, exchange and consumption of artistic and theoretical concepts. The term 'cartel' was borrowed from the vocabulary of Marx's *Capital*, as well as from the history of Lacanian theoretical psychoanalysis. At the same time, TkH organized PATS – Performing Arts Theoretical School within CENPI. It was a small-scale interdisciplinary school aiming at involving other graduate and postgraduate students from artistic schools in contemporary artistic and theoretical currents through creative, critical and post-disciplinary work. Afterwards, some of them became collaborators in several TkH's programs and activities. Ultimately, TkH was legally



organized as NGO *TkH – Centre for performing arts theory and practice*. It is established as an organization for production, presentation, interpretation and advocating new, non-typical, problematic, anarchistic or deconstructive productions in contemporary theory and practice of performing arts. The organization is seen as a *body* entering into the system of social struggle for influence, power, hegemony, centering or displacing, in other words, for a transfiguration of the system of performing arts through theoretical statements, conflict and the unexpected potentiality of materialist-oriented post-structuralism, cultural studies, techno-theory and critical bio-politics. The TkH – Centre based its research on the idea of dynamically entangled projects carried out by different teams of artists, researchers and theoreticians. Therefore, the identity of the TkH – Centre is not a *Gestalt*-identity of a group of several authors: it is a *moving map* crossing and indexing the problems of contemporary performing arts and its theories through concrete projects and work. Therefore, since 2007, the official full name of TkH is *TkH Platform*, while TkH – Centre is only used in legal and administrative matters.

What also affected our organizational structure, as well as the level and density of activities, is that in 2007 we entered the space of a new cultural center Magazine in Kraljevića Marka Street, dedicated to independent cultural organizations but given to the Youth Center Belgrade to administrate. TkH was one of six organizations that got the space (office and space for public events) in Magazine from the city council of culture for a limited period of time, starting with the date of finalization of the renovation of the space – which has to date never happened. Work in this “liminal zone” pushes us toward more public and sometimes non-budget programs, such as *illegal\_cinema* and *Knowledge Smuggling!*, with which we try to open the space for a broader independent scene and its self-organizing platform *Druga scena / Other Scene*, and on the other hand we have become more engaged in cultural policy issues that address the independent scene and its relations to the authorities, policy makers and experts.

Most of the TkH associates went a long the institutional path, from being students of arts and theory/science to acquiring their MA and MSc degrees or indeed PhDs. In that sense, TkH was set up as an open performance of mapping and restructuring of alternative, official and hegemonic spaces for arts, theory and culture. Numerous participants in the TkH projects – apart from its founders – gave their contributions in the period from 2000 to 2009: psychologist Tanja Markovic, musicologist Ivana Stamatovic, costume designer Maja Mirkovic, painter Katarina Zdjelar, student of theatre directing Vlatko Ilic, student of painting Mirko Lazovic, dramaturge Marija Karaklajic, theatre director Ljubisa Matic, student of dramaturgy Maja Pelevic, student of film directing



Marta Popivoda...; as well as huge number of contributors to the *TkH journal for performing arts*, from Belgrade, our region and the world.

Today, the permanent collaborators of TkH are: PhD Ana Vujanovic (program coordinator and editor of *TkH journal*), MA Bojan Djordjev (program coordinator), Marta Popivoda (program coordinator and editor of web platform tkh-generator.net), MA Sinisa Ilic (program coordinator), Jelena Knezevic (producer), Dragana Jovovic (production assistant), PhD Misko Suvakovic, MA Bojana Cvejic, MA Jelena Novak (active as editors of the journal and in some projects as well), as well as few young artists and theorists as volunteers.

TkH conducted and presented their research in these almost nine years through different theoretical-artistic practices, from the *TkH, Journal for Performing Arts Theory* (16 issues, no. 17 forthcoming), educational projects to theoretical performances (ca. 20 productions) and other public art/theory actions including symposia and conferences, web platform tkh-generator.net, illegal\_cinema project, collaborations on the independent scene and engagement in the cultural policy issues. The following sections of this text discuss three main means of conduction and presentation of TkH research: its journal, theoretical performances and (self-)education programs, although most of the time these fields of research overlap.

### **TkH, Journal for Performing Arts Theory**

The journal was founded through collective research work of TkH's collaborators. It is published twice a year in the Serbian or English languages, each issue features a special topic such as: new dramaturgy, digital performance, contemporary dance, readymade theatre, self-organisation, self-education, right to theory etc. Contributors are authors from TkH platform and their young collaborators (art, theory and humanities students) from Belgrade, prominent authors from the local scene and the Region, Europe and USA, and from time to time some of the most important international theorists and writers. Advisory board members are: Milena Dragicevic Sesic Ph.D., Jesa Denegri Ph.D., Jovan Cirilov, and Aldo Milohnic MA. Active editors of the journal are: A. Vujanovic (editor in chief), M. Suvakovic (responsible editor), S. Ilic (artistic), B. Cvejic, B. Djordjev, J. Novak, Marta Popivoda.

The *TkH* journal has been formed as an instrument and a demonstrative screen of theoretical and art research in the scope of hard critical theory, hybrid discourses and



polygenre writing. The concept of hard theory means the establishment of a consequent critical and analytical theory of performing arts and contemporary culture. The hybrid discourses signify an inclusion of different conceptional but also existential explanations and interpretations of theory and art. The hybrid discourses start simultaneously from different theories (poststructuralism, culture studies, biopolitics, philosophy of new media) and art practices (theatre, opera, music, painting, comic strip, film/video, performance art, new media), which confront each other within the performance of a hybrid theorist or a theorist-as-a-symptom. Polygenre writing in *TkH* owes a lot to materialistic theory of text as well as to working experiences with potentialities of hypertext or data bases mixed with cultural pluralism. Polygenre writing in *TkH* is led by the critical confrontation of theory and art texts in search of major problem points or intervals of art as theory, theory as art. And that means – immediate *penetrations* of signifiers into safe areas of meaning identifications<sup>1</sup>.

The principal aims of the *TkH journal* are to: provide an insight into the relevant current practices of theory and performing arts today; to organize debate by problematizing topics of actual interest; to introduce emerging fields in performing arts, which haven't penetrated the local scene yet; to serve as a tool for educating theoreticians and artists with the referential frames of contemporary artistic and theoretical practices and to stimulate theoreticians and artists to develop in articulating the problematics they tackle in their work.

In 2007 *TkH journal* was one of the participants in the Documenta 12 *Magazines Project*. From 2007 it has been put online, and now almost all issues are available for free downloading at the web site: <http://www.tkh-generator.net/en/casopis> (English version).

### **Theoretical performance<sup>2</sup>**

Positioning of the performers' work of the TkH was grounded on and developed through a set of critical-theoretical premises:

- art and theory are interactively connected, materially performed, hybrid and interventional practices in quite specific socio-cultural contexts;
- performance art is not set as a new discipline or a new extended medium for artistically disinterested creations, but a conflictual, problematic practice of

<sup>1</sup> Based on Miško Šuvaković, "MADNESS + ORGANIZATION = MASTERPIECE", *Artluk* nr 3/2007, Warsaw.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



- performing in pluralistic, unstable relationships between artistic and theoretical practices;
- art and theory are not rationalistic, positivistic or instrumental displays of possibilities for acting, but a dramatic slippage whereby the author physically faces the obstacles and potentialities, consistencies and fictionalities of the artistic and theoretical action;
  - theoretical performance is set up as a playground for questioning the display of events of the development of theory through physical intersubjective and intermedia performance on stage, or potential displays of events of artistic practice as a material practice in its necessary relationship with theory.

Instead of the assumed ‘irrationality of the artist’, ‘obscenity of the artistic act’ or ‘power of theatre follies’ certain tactics were proposed as emblematic for art at the turn of the XXI century.

The theoretical performances of TkH are, in phenomenological terms, set as verbal, behavioral, fragmental and poly-genre media events. Verbal performing is aimed at presenting consistent or inconsistent and fragmentary narratives which have a problematic theoretical plot. Behavioral performances are aimed at theoretization of behaviour or transfiguration of stage-sensual or non/stage-perceptual situations in the process of conceptualization of the theoretical figure inscribed in the place of the expected artistic figure. Fragmentariness is a distinctive feature of all TkH performances, because it is performed as a political instrument for the display of defying or *queer* relations between signifiers’ practices of theory and art. It leads towards understanding that meaning does not derive from the story of the theoretical narrative, but from the manner in which it is performed, with all due resistances from the context of the performance. The poly-genre character of the TkH performance derives from the set up of the performance as an “instrumental signifiers’ field” or “performer’s map” through which traditional performing genres and desposits can be passed through, filtered, deconstructed or regulated, e.g. opera (*DreamOpera*, Piran, 2001), digital theatre (*Psychosis and Death of the Author: Algorithm – YU03/04.13*, Belgrade, 2004), TV (*s-m-s guerilla*, 2005), or even sport (*Boxing match – readymade theatre*, 2007). TkH works were performed in different media, from physically-verbal or physically-behavioral performing on stage, through inter-media links between different arts to the use of technology in different media: radio, TV and digital film, CD-Rom, LAN, Internet. Thus, what is demonstrated is the media nomadism of TkH, but also an important statement:



that the medium is an instrument of ideology. By choosing different forms and dispositives of media presentations a thesis was postulated: every medium presents complex problems of ideological identifications and transfigurations in the synchrony and diachrony of an artistic, cultural and social space.

### **(Self-)educational projects<sup>3</sup>**

The independent critical education and collective self-education of artists and theorists was from the very beginning the central practice of TkH. However, in the beginning, it was done at a primary level, intuitively and based on the need of overcoming the lack of an institutional art and art theory education in our local context. Later on, these problematics and the methods applied (more or less unconsciously) were reflected upon more systematically. Since 2006 and the initiation of the *s-o-s project* (acronym of the title *Self-managed educational system in arts* in Serbian), TkH is fully engaged in the issue, through several projects and programmes, both local and international, producing a discourse of self-education, together with methodologies, tools, broader contextualization, etc.

At this point it is important to explain the terms self-education, self-management and the specific practice that we researched and conducted. First of all, in the Serbian language *self-* from those coined phrases has nothing to do with the philosophical notion of the *self*, and it is rather more equivalent to *auto-* or *do-it-yourself*. On the other hand, the emphasis here is on collective self-education. Collective self-education is viewed as an intervening political practice in the social field as opposed to private practice of auto-didacticism. These aspects will appear more precise in the following explanation of workers' self-management by Ana Vujanovic.<sup>4</sup>

*Workers' self-management* is a specific organizational model of economics where workers have decision-making power. It cancels division between those who make decisions and those who execute them, those who produce and those who decide upon the product(ion). *Autogestion* was conceptualized first by P.J. Proudhon in 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was developed in Spain (*fábrica recuperada* movement) and SFRYugoslavia (as official model of cooperative socialist economy), and partly also in some other contexts (in France, Algeria, USA, etc.) *Self-management* is sometimes analyzed philosophically through its provocative etymological combination of "self" and

<sup>3</sup> Based on *TkH Selfinterview* for everybodystoolbox.net and paper presented by Bojan Djordjev and Marta Popivoda at *Forum for Creative Europe*, Prague, March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> This explanation is part of the text (*Workers' Self-management / Radničko samoupravljanje*), written for the Lost Highway Expedition 2007, unpublished as yet.





“management”. But I would insist that its auto-gestion etymology is less about philosophical *self*, *soi-même* or *sopstvo* and more about organizational *do-it-yourself-efficacy*, Perform or Else! or even *just do it*. Workers’ self-management may be rethought and re-appropriated today as an alternative organizational model by collective self-organized cultural and artistic initiatives that emerge from below (but not: bottom-up).

The first step towards some kind of reflection on the methodologies of education that we practice was taken up immediately by the way of formalizing the initial TkH workshops into **PATS, Performing arts theory school** (2001/02). Within the informal workshops that we had in CENPI, the collaborators of TkH have organized researching series of lectures and workshops mostly lead by M. Suvakovic, which served for our own investigation and education within the field of contemporary theories and arts. Within the PATS, TkH has organized and lectured one more official four-course educational program for and with fifteen young theorists, artists, and students, as well as TkH collaborators themselves. The curriculum and the topics were suggested by the TkH collaborators who had already gone through the workshops; lectures and discussions were prepared by both the initiators and the students, who constantly shifted the roles.

In 2006, TkH launched an independent educational project conducted as research *s-o-s project* (*Self-managed educational system in arts*) and later its practical extensions **Knowledge Smuggling!** (2008) and large-scale regional project **Deschooling Classroom** (2009). All the projects explore the procedures of non-institutional, non-hierarchical, collective self-education as an alternative to the overwhelming commodification of knowledge by the institutions of higher education.

**s-o-s project** (2006-07) was conceived as an open system of theoretical-research, *public lessons* and textual production that implemented the practices of post-pedagogy in the fields of art theory, cultural activism, and educational methods. Its goal was to shape critical alternatives to the official educational institutions in the direction of *self-education* as a collective practice. Key concepts were: artistic education, knowledge production, self-education, (workers) self-management, *open source* procedures in education, and commodification of knowledge. This project was presented – and what is more important, developed through the presentations – on the occasions of Documenta 12, Kassel; Summit of Non-aligned Initiatives in Educational Culture, Berlin, PAF, St. Erme-France; Tanzquartier and Die Theater Spielplatz, Vienna; EDA Week, Zagreb... The s-o-s team was composed of TkH collaborators M. Popivoda, B. Djordjev, S. Ilic and A. Vujanovic, curators from Kontekst gallery Ivana Marjanovic and Vida Knezevic, and independent theoreticians and artists Ana Vilenica and Iva Nenic. It was a





reading/research group that also organised and took part in public actions. These were organised in order to present, re-think and comment on the content of books studied, using the methodology from the book itself to present its key concepts. The questioning of **education** - in which the etymology of the notion itself displays the ideology of the teacher-student relationship presented in *Le maître ignorant (Ignorant Schoolmaster)* by Jacques Rancière - was dealt with through public reading session, in accordance with the author's insistence in the books, rather than professors' interpretations as a source of knowledge. The concept of post-pedagogy and affective knowledge/learning by Gregory Ulmer in *Applied Grammatology*, was presented through multimedia theoretical performance that activated performance proper, video, audio, live action, ambiance... as means of learning in the age of media. Finally, Ivan Illich's concept of un-mediated, un-hierarchical peer-to-peer learning outside the institutions from his *Deschooling Society* was presented through a chat session, and later further elaborated in practical projects that followed *s-o-s*, namely *Knowledge Smuggling!* and *Deschooling Classroom* <sup>5</sup>.

***Knowledge smuggling!*** (2008/09) was designed as a long term self-educational project in the field of performing arts, critical theory, digital technology and free culture, that followed an intense self-organized winter school which took place in January 2008. Through it we attempted to open a temporary crack in the local knowledge market and intervene in the existing system of production and exchange of knowledge, smuggling it from official educational institutions into the sphere of individual needs and as-free-as-possible cultural spaces.

The programme is practically realised through open weekly working sessions of self-educational groups, currently: Free Software – Skill Exchange, KKH – Walking Critique, and Free Improvisation in Music. Apart of their regular self-educational work in the Magazine, bigger public events (workshops, lectures, books presentations, laboratories...) are organized from time to time, i.e. when the modest budget we have allows.

***Deschooling classroom*** (2009-11) is a large-scale regional project, which is organized by TkH and independent organization Kontrapunkt from Skopje. It promotes open, critical, collaborative and cross-disciplinary formats of cultural production through

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed dossier of the **s-o-s project** and contextual background of TkH platform self-education research see *TkH* issues no 13, 14, Belgrade 2007, and 15, Belgrade 2008, online:

<http://www.tkh-generator.net/en/casopis/tkh-13-0>

<http://www.tkh-generator.net/en/casopis/tkh-14-0>

<http://www.tkh-generator.net/en/casopis/tkh-15>



critical reflection on the educational systems in the region of SEE. Methodologically, it moves away from the concepts of hierarchical models of education, individual authorship and expertise, and advocates collective educational structures where self-organised communities (working groups) facilitate horizontal production, exchange and distribution of knowledge. The organization of activities is similar to *Knowledge smuggling!* but put on higher production level – so apart of the regular self-educational work of the groups in Belgrade and Skopje via video link, there will be several public events such as Open Weeks, Summer Schools, then collective cultural productions, self-educational Toolbox, etc. The curriculum of all the programs will be created by the participants themselves, and we hope through all of this we'll make possible a really self-educational collective programme highly visible in the region, and hopefully broadly applicable as a tool for critical and intervening practices in cultural field.

### **Self-organization – model of cultural politics in the independent scene**

One of the constant questions that is posed through TkH's working in the independent scene is which critique is more fruitful, relevant or even possible at all – from within or from outside the institution. Speaking practically, we tried both. On the one hand, TkH is all the time an independent organization, both at the concrete economic and legal level (we are neither founded by the state or the city nor at the annual budget of them), and at the level of its “manifesto” or ideology, which promotes independent critical practice in art and culture. On the other hand, many of the collaborators of TkH have their professional careers connected with the institutions (e.g. A. Vujanovic is lecturer at the University of Arts, B. Djordjev directs in different theatre houses, M. Popivoda and S. Ilic pursue visual arts careers, etc).

In last couple of years, with our recent projects and programs and engagement within the Other Scene (TkH is one of the initiators) we in a way have reached the point of problematizing the validity of this very dichotomy or dilemma. Through its activities the TkH platform suggests creation of new organizational models, that go beyond the binary model of oppositions, or competition, and that are appropriate to the new independent scene. They are not an alternative but offer something parallel, or multiple parallel fields of action, more or less temporary autonomous zones that develop simultaneously in an artistic or/and social field. In that sense s-o-s and other educational projects of TkH should not be viewed as an alternative solution to the existing official education. Rather, they just venture away from it, trying to find their own way, or using it



in the manner of a critical transplantation as in the case of Knowledge smuggling! which refers to un-authorized transfer, smuggling of knowledge and its shaping in the new, independent, non hierarchical contexts. Therefore, we are now interested in all the multitude of ways of resistance, actions, agencies and practices that share a space with cultural and educational institutions. And our efforts are focused on connecting or contributing to the connection of these agencies and practices in an incoherent and provisional, action front (but still front), that is able to critically transform the space.

