

Landscape Plays | A solo exhibition by Heiner Goebbels

IN CONVERSATION:

Heiner Goebbels and Amruta Nemivant

Heiner Goebbels is one of the foremost exponents of contemporary music and theatre. The Frankfurt based composer, director and artist's work cannot be confined to conventional artistic categories – it ranges from composing and staging music theatre, large orchestra- and ensemble pieces, radio plays, to creating and presenting several installations that are presented within the wider scope of contemporary art. In a career spanning more than forty years, Heiner Goebbels has engaged with the works of some of the most erudite minds in the field of theatre, literature and philosophy. His works - for example, his piece *Surrogate Cities* - have been presented and performed at major venues across the world. He has presented his work twice at Documenta Kassel, and produced sound installations for the *Centre Pompidou*, Paris. Goebbels has been nominated twice for the Grammy Award and was awarded with the International Ibsen Award, the world's most prestigious award for innovation in theatre practices. He was also the Artistic Director of the Ruhrtriennale arts festival from 2012 until 2014.

In his first presentation in India, Goebbels presents his work – *Landscape Plays* - the title refers to a term by the experimental American author Gertrude Stein. In the following interview, he speaks about his reasons behind choosing this particular piece, his working methodology wherein he combines multiple points of views but never imposes just a single point agenda on the viewer - ultimately giving the audience a free hand to interpret his presentations.

What is the idea behind Landscape Plays?

*Usually I have no ideas ... I am sceptical about people, who have too many ideas ... and **Landscape Plays** is a term coined by Gertrude Stein, in which I recognize my own scepticism towards theatre, opera, and other conventional performative art forms. As a spectator, I don't want to be lectured, nor directed, nor do I want to identify with anyone. Instead, I am looking for the freedom to watch performative or visual art forms as if I am watching a landscape or a landscape painting. With the same freedom to decide for myself what interests me: foreground or background, discovering a small detail at the edge or the frame itself and how much attention I want to give, or the time I want to spend....*

That's why I like to use the term "Landscape Plays" for some of my works without a centre — whether concerts, performances or exhibitions. I wish the same freedom for the spectators, too.

Why did you decide to present this work in your first show in India?

It is an attempt to raise individual interpretation by not presenting meanings and messages, nor showing spectacular images, but rather constellations and processes you can attend. 'Meaning' is solely a matter for the individual viewer.

You are known to contextualise and adapt your works based on the prevailing circumstances, can you briefly tell us how you adapted the work presented at Dr Bhau Daji Lad museum? What were the key influences? What were the main challenges, if any?

It is very inspiring for me to be confronted with the rich history of the former Victoria and Albert Museum because I like a conversation across times. And it's beautiful to discover how those diverse precious objects become the protagonists here. I am also intrigued to focus on the issue of the institution itself. So two of the works, which I present here, - "Seven columns" and "The Last Painting"- are directly dealing with it - as living, contemporary answers to the questions posed to the institution of the museum.

What was the process that you followed to finalise the installation?

At first it was a first visit last September. Later, in the Berlin studio - together with my technical director and collaborator René Liebert - there were countless try outs and simulations according to the documentation of the size, character and quality of the spaces. And frankly speaking, while I answer your question, I am still changing plans – and this will go on ,in situ' until March 14th, when the exhibition will open...

You have had a long term engagement with the works of Gertrude Stein (amongst other notable thinkers), can you please elaborate how her theories have influenced the making of Landscape Plays? Heiner Müller as another example – how do you imbibe these theoretical frameworks into your own work?

Heiner Müller's influence was very direct, we had a personal and long affiliation and collaboration for more than fifteen years until his death in 1995. He even read (performed) as an author in some of my productions. We also shared the scepticism towards expressivity and interpretation in theatre.

Only later I discovered the radicality of Gertrude Stein's literary strategies. And then some of my performances, radio plays and staged concerts were based on her texts. I was specially inspired - not by her poems - but by her prose. My piece „Hashirigaki“ is based on chapters of her almost unreadable thousand-page book „The Making of Americans“. My staged concert „Songs of Wars I have seen“ is based on her reflections about the time she spent in France during World War II.

It is rather the rhythm, the musicality of her words, and the structure of her sentences, which inspire me, besides the topics around which her writing is constantly circling. She was also an important and early voice in developing contemporary

aesthetics for plays: „What is the use of telling a story since there are so many and everybody knows so many and tells so many [...] so why tell another one.“

Both, Gertrude Stein and Heiner Müller, were early protagonists of a post dramatic theatre.

You have a very diverse practice, you are a Composer, Director, Artist, Curator / Festival Director - What led you to start doing site specific installations?

My practise is not so diverse as it seems, because my general approach is at first always Maelstroma musical one; I try working without hierarchical presumptions: not one medium – text for example – is the most important medium for me. My works follow the logic of polyphone relations between the media.

*The first site specific installation I created together with Heiner Müller and set designer Erich Wonder was Maelstromsouthpole for **documenta VIII** in Kassel 1987. Later we showed it at ars electronica in Linz and in Berlin in 1988. It is the free mode of perception which I appreciate in this format. Only technically it is more challenging to do that in a museum, because those spaces are often not prepared for sound separation. I, therefore, appreciate the options to work in four different rooms here at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad museum.*

Each discipline / art form comes with its set of structures. How do each of these forms feed into the other in your interdisciplinary work? How do they influence one another, how do you develop different structures of presentation?

Indeed, the gravity of the several disciplines and the hierarchical use of them is the biggest challenge for our perception. One chance to overcome it is the collaborative approach I am looking for, from the creative team, as well as with the creative performers (as I try to show in the first room). Another option is an intermedial approach in the arts, when the relation is inverted: when words have a musical function, when musical instruments or fog or light or water becomes the protagonists (like in the second room) and when there is no centre (like in room 3).

You have also held numerous professorships, in theatre studies, composition, interdisciplinary research - has teaching played an important role in your artistic practice?

Probably I learned the most from teaching myself! But I separated my work from teaching, I didn't want to create followers but rather give the students the space and chance to develop their own aesthetics.

Have you ever collaborated with your students? What was that like?

I taught for over 20 years, and sometimes it was difficult to work with my students as assistants. It contradicted their expectation of getting an explanation from me as to

why I was doing what... But I couldn't. As I said: I have no idea... I'm waiting for my subconscious to tell me. But nowadays I often collaborate with former students.

And finally, what next? If it's possible, we would like to know a bit about what is the next project you are developing?

Already for the end of May I am preparing a performance in Athens on Heinrich Schliemann - the German businessman and hobby archaeologist in the 19th century, who tried to find the ruins of Troy. Maybe there is also something spontaneously developing in Latin-America. For next year I will work again on a new work based on a text by Heiner Müller - as well as an installation project in Paris and Oslo.

Apart from this I have some staged concerts coming up this fall in Berlin, London, Strasbourg, Dublin among others.