

Empathy TV: it hurts cause it has to

Karolina Rospondek about „Empathy” by Dorota Ogrodzka and LTS collective

The performance „Empathy” by LTS collective constitutes a challenge of confronting the participant with platitudes that human mind likes to use. As a premise to create the performance, they used a quotation by Barack Obama, saying that the most serious problem in today's world is the lack of empathy. Keeping up with american eagerness and overexcitation, the creators built Obama's American Institute for Cultivating Empathy in Węgajty.

Red-and-blue garlands are decorating entrance to the barn and walls in the theatre hall. The spectators, however are kept in the porch, observing the live projection of what is happening inside the room, displayed on the wall. The screen shows three people (members of the collective at first, later replaced by the spectators). Aesthetics evoking „The Date Show” or TV Quiz, but this time in a serious manner. Camera does morbidly close zooms on focused, often confused faces of the people questioned. „Do you love someone now?”, „At what times do you feel that you are a Pole?”, „Is casual sex a bad thing?” „Do you tend to shorten or enhance distance between people?” - the performers ask. At first one could buy the illusion of sincere interview, especially when someone from the audience was questioned, but when the lie was detected, one could presume there is some hidden pattern of the answers. The pattern was revealed when couple of spectators and I were invited inside. Situated at the seat number 3, I saw papers

with hints placed on the floor [[Answer]] „As if you were from National Radical Camp”, „As if you were a mother of seven children”, „As if you were a refugee”. I was told to identify with a hairdresser from a little town. Memories of early childhood's theatre games come to my mind, with all the simple hints for seeking character realism. Although I don't appear very convincing (in my own eyes), it lasts only until I get another hint: my hairdresser has depression. „What pisses you off the most?” - question is asked. „ - that I can't change a thing in my reality”.

The interview is over, all of the audience are inside now. The LTS members are taking up the roles of integration coaches, conducting – sometimes very harshly – the audience to obedience. Games that they offered are calculated to provoke extreme reactions: one has to imagine oneself hurt by parents, facing a moral dilemma or trying to fight one's egoism. Emotions of participants are rated in scale from 1 to 10. It is not about the numbers, it is more about acknowledgement of nuance: the damage is felt similarly by the most of people, but the reactions to it are different. Two spectators shared their own examples of difficult situations, but faced clear incomprehension.

I felt it almost physically when interference of performers touched too deeply my personal experience. Still, it continued to be a part of the experiment. LTS screams: 'I call!' towards all the people stuck in complacency, who think that only claim on their openness or sensitivity is enough to be considered emphatic. By proposing the game in a circle where participants needed to confess to their shameful thoughts and acts, performers forced me to self-reflection. They went even further, saying: 'imagine a person with whom the most you wouldn't like to sit together behind Christmas table'. Next part of the performance was about finding among the present the one who would be the most alike that person and performing a gesture of reconciliation. In utopian assumption we would be perhaps supposed to reach out to that person also in real life. I don't know how any viewers would manage to do it, but the effect of this experiment was cathartic to higher extent.

The provocations of the LTS had impact on many levels: from the training of emotional imagination up to examination of conscience (literally!) and verification of own prejudices and opinions, putting oneself on a morally higher position. The participants sharing their experience were sometimes hit with a wrecking ball of stereotypes and exclusion.

Multitude of actions, their intensity and sometimes aggressive approach affected negatively some of the participants. Not everybody made it to the final dinner. There was a chance to notice among the companions not only guests of the Theatrical Village, but also the Other. The Other whom it's difficult to understand in everyday life, not the distant abstract enemy in kind of Trump or Putin, but the racist uncle, neighbor who takes the ball away from children, vegan with excessive sense of mission, a cousin focused only on making money, someone who does not approve our relationship or choices. And despite of all still be together.