

To Give a Voice **An Interview with** **Stefan Kaegi of** **Rimini Protokoll**

Giuliana Ciano
& Pascal Gielen



‘...we believe more in seduction,
than in provocation.’



Rimini Protokoll are a theatre collective based in Berlin. The three founders, Helgard Kim Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Daniel Wetzl, extensively work on installations, site-specific projects, large-scale immersive performances, and public art. Active under the label Rimini Protokoll since 2002, they are pushing the boundaries of western theatre placing political issues and people's stories centre stage throughout their practices.

From the involvement of hundreds of citizens for a *qualitative* representation of a city to a simulation game for twenty people, they 'outsource', as mentioned by Stefan Kaegi, their ideological positions from their artistic point of view to the people. A venue can be a public square, a theatre, an art gallery or a Parliament and, according to their practices, these are not just places of representation, but become arenas in which people are allowed to perform themselves, to meet and to be engaged.

Rimini Protokoll redefine the theatrical event by reintroducing art in the public sphere. They have conferred a civil dimension to the contemporary art creation suggesting a shift from the notion of cultural consumption to a participative democratic engagement.

In December 2016 we held a Skype meeting with Stefan Kaegi while he was working in Chile on the project *App Recuerdos*. He told us more about Rimini Protokoll's practices and tools, the challenges and the values that move their work.

Giuliana Ciano — Can you tell more about how you create your projects and how you develop them? What is the starting point? When do you feel the need to organize a project around a subject matter?

Stefan Kaegi — One main gesture that goes for many of our projects is that we try to give a voice to the people that are not the most prominent or canonical voices to be heard. It is not the mainstream voices that we try to bring to life in our projects. At the moment I am in Santiago del Chile where we are creating a new project called *App Recuerdos*. *App* stands for Application and *Recuerdos* refers to a very specific concept. *Recuerdo* doesn't mean 'memory' because that would be *la memoria*, which is a very ideological term used to describe what happened in the past. For example, here in Santiago there is the Museo de

la Memoria, which is the museum where the dictatorship is being looked at from the victims' point of view and where it is presented as an official statement referring to what happened after all those years when in school students wouldn't hear about people disappearing because of the dictatorship. *Recuerdo* is a term that is much more subjective. *Recuerdo* can be just something that happened yesterday and that I think of. It can be something that is not about the sufferance. It can also be much more simple. That is why we have chosen this term.

The project works like this: we have about 120 contact points all over the *micro-centro* of Santiago del Chile. This area used to be the important downtown area when Santiago grew at the beginning of the twentieth century, where the central market was and where the people from the Andes came to sell their products. During the Pinochet era, the city grew very much in this direction. I can see it out of my window now. Actually, *Las Condes* is a whole new neighbourhood that is for all the banking centres, the shopping malls, the modern infrastructures and where the more wealthy people live now. On the other side of downtown you can still find the palace where Allende was bombed out by the fighter planes at the time. In this area, there are hundreds of such very subjective memories that are brought together.

Here, we are collaborating with artists and scientists from Chile who have been gathering, over the course of one year, subjective recordings about what happened on this very corner. Some recordings can sound like, for example: 'I lived up there in that house. I was looking down at the street when the Pope visited the city. It was a very important visit in the 1980s when the Pope came here and justified and tried to a little bit to criticize Pinochet'; or 'this is a bank where I work now, and at the time, I was working for the Ministry of Pinochet, and I believed in the neo-liberalism that the Chicago Boys installed in this country'; or 'I was here on the street when suddenly I was taking part in the demonstration when the police stopped, and they arrested me.'

GC — How do you expect that people will see the project? How does it work?

SK – The people will be standing in the middle of a public space, but they will be there with something that is private, the headphones. They will hear something that is a mixture of the private memory of one person and the history of the country. All of these narrations are from the 1970s and 1980s. We present precisely curated situations. We have selected and edited all these memories. We have worked with these people on how to represent their memories of that time. It will be accessible for free and available forever (until the software changes). People can just download the app on their smartphone. For the people who don't have a smartphone, we have places where they can go and borrow one for one day for free. The entire project is totally for free. It is an invisible museum, in a way. You stand on that corner, and now maybe the place of torture is not there anymore. Maybe in the same place there is a hotel now, or you stand in front of the Palacio de la Moneda, and you don't see the tanks anymore that attacked, but you see just the tourists standing in front of it. You hear this story or some of the original recordings that we made, a speech again from that time, and somebody tells you why that speech was very important to him.

Coming back to your first question, this is a concrete example. We don't have a general strategy. For each project the strategy is different, but what we generally do is to try to give a voice to the people that are normally not heard and to foster the subjective narration going beyond what the people post on Facebook every day. We aim to create something that has a political meaning because it's brought together from carefully chosen points. For instance, here we had to fight quite hard to convince our collaborating artists to also include many voices of people who idealize Pinochet. These people are still present in this society. Our point is that it is interesting to present contradicting memories, as they exist in this society. The project is a curated kind of symposium of the city talking about its past.

Pascal Gielen – When you refer to a specific project, you point at a specific concern, emotion or something that you experienced. I was wondering, when you started with

Rimini Protokoll, did you have a kind of general concern or a specific value you decided to point at?

SK – At our beginning, first of all, there was a very big distrust of craft. We didn't understand why theatre should be something made by people that are geniuses in imitation or by geniuses with good techniques. We were saying: *no techniques*.

We were saying that *form* could not be the only interesting key of access. If we zoom back into late 1980s and 1990s, a lot of people in the avant-garde scene were taking very erratic formal decisions about the body (for example look at Grotowski), about the light (Bob Wilson), or about the space (Anna Viebrock). These were very formal approaches.

I came from journalism. That was my first job. And when we started, we didn't want to speak about reality through techniques or only through *form*. We wanted to find new ways. Nowadays, we clearly see ourselves as communication designers. I wouldn't have said that at that time. Theatre has had some phases where it was seen only as a place of representation and of one-way communication. We started saying that communication is good if it has multiple directions.

PG – Can you say a little bit more about that? Because, for example, communication design sounds very technical, but you also have an ideological intention about how this communication should be organized. I was wondering, were there also other concerns? One concern you point out is about the function of theatre at that specific moment in time. Am I right?

SK – Obviously you can say that the *form* shouldn't be the starting point, but still, you will need a form at some point. Often we tried to identify a form that existed and use it as a copy-frame. For example, if we look at the *World Climate Conference* project, it was a very clear and simple thing. We said, 'Let's try to make a World Climate Conference happen as if it is being organized by the UN.' We will shorten it. We won't have two weeks, but three

hours, and we'll do it with our audience. 500 people, 600 people came together, and we distributed roles. The form, on the one hand, came from the climate conference format and, on the other hand, from these simulations where students step into the role of a politician for a day. These were the two main decisions. Obviously you have hundreds of details to consider, you have to collaborate with scientists to solve those, and so the whole production came about. I won't go too much into details, but this is to say that we didn't invent a completely new form.

We dis-trusted the gesture of invention by the artist; we rather said let's try to copycat and rearrange existing forms. Another example would be the form of the telephone conversations that take place every day between call centres in India and European businesses or individuals. We have used that format with a different purpose, and from there the whole *Call Cutta Project* came about. Or we decided to use the form of the shareholders' meeting, the annual meeting of the board of Daimler, who own Mercedes and many other car companies. This meeting is held every year at the headquarter of the Congress Centre in Berlin. 5,000 shareholders come together and re-elect the board. This event is so interesting theatrically that we just said. 'We don't need to adapt this form and transfer it into theatre, we just bring people there and call it a piece of theatre.' We wanted immediacy.

Theatre always tries to speak about reality. Even Shakespeare, probably, would have said that, but there were a lot of techniques and interpretations installed in between. If Peter Brook would have made that play about the 'World Climate Conference', he would have rewritten a text that actors then would have studied. He would have given an interpretation of it which then would transfer his ideological understanding of this place.

You might blame me for using a neo-liberal term, but we 'outsourced' the ideological positions from our artistic point of view to the people. We want this ideology to be heard and reframed in a different context.

PG—How do you choose your subjects? What is your drive and what are the main concerns that guide your

work aesthetically and politically? Was there a conscious decision when you started with your company?

SK—I don't think I can wrap this up in a general talk. When you are 26-year-old and just coming out of university, you don't have a clear vision of where you are going. We never thought of such a long-term working relationship together. Generally, when you are young, you don't start after school thinking, how can I organize the rest of my life in a very reasonable way. You rather think, how can I do the most non-reasonable things.

The very first project was with people living in a home for the elderly next to the theatre we were working in. There were all these young, fancy artists doing exciting avant-garde creations, and, next door there was this home for the elderly. We thought that these old people were much more interesting than the hipster's interpretation of art with some crossover with electronic music. We went to talk with these old people. Our question was how to bring them on stage to talk about their problems. They were 80 years old and had to deal with things such as breaking a leg when you stand up very fast, or, the in-ear amplification system that doesn't work well because you hear better what is happening behind you than what happens in front of you. We thought that these were interesting concerns to be heard, especially in a crowd that is young and fancy and thinking of art.

PG—Were there some projects you couldn't realize because of obstacles that you encountered? How did you develop strategies to overcome the problems and find your way? Or, did you realize all the projects you wanted?

SK—With *Deutschland 2* we were trying to copy what was going on in the German Bundestag in Berlin and to live-sync it to Bonn in 2001. It was just a few years after the Capital was moved from Bonn to Berlin. Our idea was to copy these discourses made by the politicians and re-enact them with common citizens. The place would be the former Parliament, the Bundestag, a building that still exists even today, and it looks like the one in Berlin. We rented

it for one day, which was quite expensive. But, before the event took place, the head of parliament—at that time Wolfgang Thierse who still had the possibility to decide what will happen and what not in that building in Bonn—decided to revoke our contract for the rent of the space. He forbade us to proceed, because, as he wrote in his letter, he was afraid we would harm the dignity of politicians.

It was strange because politicians always represent citizens. Why shouldn't citizens be allowed to represent the politicians for one day? Why would politicians be so afraid that citizens would harm their dignity? If you look at who wanted to participate in the project, you could see that they were people who had a positive image of the politicians because they had been in Bonn for so many years—during the period in which the city was the capital of West Germany—and they had seen the politicians from close-by. We didn't intend to harm the dignity of the place with our performance. Anyway, the project was cancelled for the former Bundestag and we could not realize it there.

In the end, we decided to realize the project in a large neutral space, which was rented by the theatre, at the time. We installed a simplified version of a German Bundestag. We put some blue chairs and a large eagle (which is the symbol of the Bundestag). Then, we did our performance there, which took 18 hours. It started early morning and it ended only after midnight. It was a live copy of the debate happening in Berlin. Our speakers had in-ear monitors of what the politicians were saying. 200 citizens of Bonn did this with us.

PG — And examples of specific tactics? In your work you generally deal with people who are not strictly connected to the art field: you have to convince a politician or a lawyer for example. Can you give us examples of how you convince people to make this step into your projects?

SK — Sometimes it is surprisingly easy, sometimes it is a very difficult process in which first you have to identify people, then talk to them and convince them to take part in the project. For instance, right after our interview, I will have a Skype meeting with an insect researcher

that I want to convince to take part in a project. The main topic is why Germany has so many big problems in making huge constructions happen, especially when they are publicly organized. For example, the new Berlin Airport BER or the Opera in Berlin, which both are never being finished, or the Stuttgart train station that will cost three times as much as foreseen. The insect researcher can give us interesting insights, because ants are the most successful builders of huge constructions, because of their particular non-democratic model of society. This is theoretically very interesting. So now I will have to convince him to come, bring in his knowhow, spend many days in Dusseldorf (where we are rehearsing) and to donate a lot of his time to our project. This will be the challenge: a very practical one.

On other occasions, you have to face content problems. The latest project we started in Munich: *Top Secret International*.¹ It is about secret services. You can imagine that the people working in this sector sometimes have great difficulty in speaking in public. So, in this case, we made an audio-based interactive system that we set up in a museum space where you can hear those voices. You can imagine that many people, especially in countries such as Egypt, China, Iran, or Russia did not want to speak in front of a microphone about what we were discussing behind the scenes with them.

Reality imposes obstacles. You have to deal with this. When you let real people speak, then they also will implement their censorship on you, on what to say and what not. It is their lives and they have to live with it afterwards as well. It is much more complicated than just giving an actor the text, and he or she will recite whatever you want them to. This friction is interesting to us because the friction often produces more reality than the total freedom in an empty artistic space.

PG — Do you sometimes use your position as an artist or the position of art as an 'excuse' to convince people or organizations to do things they maybe would not do otherwise? Do you sometimes use the argument like 'we just make art' or 'it is fiction, don't mind or don't care'?

SK—To use that argument in front of the people that are part of one of our projects would be cheating them. We never try to make only fiction. An exception may be ‘Remote X’ for the way in which it is performed. It is science-fiction, not a documentary.

In our view the artistic space, even while knowing that it has a documentary reality of itself, is still giving ordinary people a feeling of... ‘okay, here I can say things that I wouldn’t say in a political speech in front of Parliament’, or ‘... this is something I wouldn’t say in front of my boss. Here I can say it.’ Sometimes participants change their names so that they are a bit more protected. These are all techniques that we can then use to mediate, but as I said before, we are not so interested in techniques and mediation. We try to avoid those.

I did a project in Egypt, which was realized with the muezzins that are calling for prayer every day. Obviously they had a lot of constraints about what they could or could not do on the stage. Some of them told us that they cannot play Domino on the stage, others had other practical issues, for example they could not show their feet or the sole of their feet on stage. Things that you learn while doing. You respect, you ask, but still you want them to talk about particular things. It’s a long process of negotiation and, of course, of building trust.

GC—So, in this negotiation, what is the role of the theatre that invites you to realize a project? In the negotiation with the people you involve, are they supportive? Do they help you in the mediation? Do art institutions, theatres, who invite you in their programmes, backfire when you go into the field? And perhaps sometimes restrict you?

SK—The relationship with the institutions is maybe not so different from the one with all the others on the artistic team. They will all make their suggestions; it is not just all coming out of our mind. We work with the technicians, the sound designers and find our mediation with them. Obviously, when you choose with which producer you are going to work, you also take a common decision about whom you trust more to make this happen in a good

way. In some way, the producers will choose to work with you because they respect your work, and they will try to make things happen, but sometimes they are also good at pointing out problems that they will have. Sometimes they will see difficulties where there are none. So you have to convince them.

An example that I can use for this case is the project *Nachlass*. In the very beginning, I just wanted to place an announcement that said that the theatre was looking for people who were soon going to die and who would be willing to talk, very simple. Panic! It took me months and months to convince the theatre to find a way. I had a lot of difficulties to understand what the problem was, but it seemed that they, as a theatre, didn’t want to be associated with the notion of death, or they were scared of invading people’s privacy. After, we tried many other ways to find people and finally we convinced them to find a solution.

PG—For example, thinking of a city theatre, let’s take the Arts Centre deSingel in Antwerp, which is subsidized by the Flemish Government. Often, in a direct or indirect way, you also criticize the politics of such a government, or of what is happening in the society they are governing. Are art institutions sometimes afraid of what you will do there? Or do they just embrace you, and easily say, ‘Okay, let’s go for it’?

SK—From that point of view, I think they may be more afraid of artists who live on creating scandals. Perhaps they want these problems because they know that it may generate a lot of press attention. This is really not Rimini Protokoll’s attitude. I don’t think we have an intention of having this kind of process where you will have a law suit afterwards and make the headline of the main newspaper. These are not the kind of projects we go for.

When you look at China and Russia, you have a certain number of artists that do try to make something radical against their government. Then they run away. And sell this piece, the picture of it or the story around it, to a Western gallery, and they become the kind of radical artists that have had the guts to do it. That way maybe will

grant you a place in art history, and you will probably sell well in the West, and it may inspire people to have the courage that they don't have in their normal life. But it may also create a fronts with people who have no idea about art and who are perhaps shocked in a way that they will not trust. It will, for example, mobilize all the Catholics or the politicians against your show, and they will from then on never trust theatre again because they have been insulted in one particular aspect. Basically our idea is quite different, we believe more in seduction than in provocation.

GC – Observing your 100% city format and Home Visit Europe, you use a subjective lens for telling stories about the complexities of a city or for creating a discussion around Europe. In addition to this qualitative approach, with both projects you also register data and statistics. What do you do with all this information? Will you use these data or are they just an artistic output?

SK – It is a tricky question. We are living in an age of big data, just look at how Mr. Trump won his election through these algorithms. Simplifying the complex experience that you have in a theatre performance and shrinking it to the data output of it was never really interesting for us. We did one try, and I am half-satisfied with it, which is the website about the project *Home Visit Europe*. There you can see a lot of data. It gives you a picture of hundreds of households. You see how thousands of people have taken part in an interaction in very different rooms, from poor students' flats to high-class apartments or little hostels, Italian gardens to Norwegian farms to Czech hospitals. They all have played 'Home Visit Europe'. I like this part very much because of its diversity.

Then, on the website, you also have the numeric results which might produce a misunderstanding. For instance, it is mentioned there that 0% of Polish people are interested in political parties or that 40% of Norwegians are afraid of the future. This is a bit dangerous; we are obviously having very specific audiences that are not representative of an entire city. We hope that our website clearly comments our critical view on this.

If you look at *100% Show*, the experience you have is not to say 10% of our city are gay or 15% are unemployed. The experience you have is that you see one person who—I'm just making up an example—may have said in his monologue (at the beginning of the performance) that he works as a policeman; during the show he says that he has also smoked dope, and then later he says he is against foreigners. Through him and all the stories that are part of the performance, you can follow a very subjective trajectory and you can do that because you shared a physical space with these people for an hour and a half, which is the complexity that a theatre piece allows.

By contrast, the quick communication of simplified data is a reduction of what might be an interesting decision, knowing the background and the trajectory of a person is very important, it makes the difference. I believe that very soon we will see theatre performances that will have been informed by this age of big data, which we are just about to enter, and it will be interesting to see where it will lead us.

A Few Thoughts after the Interview...

Burzynska and Malzacher (2017), following Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), open their book arguing that '... the nineteenth century was a century of actors. The twentieth century was a century of directors. The twenty-first century is a century of spectators'. This is the century in which we are facing different forms of participation in the arts, of political activism and social engagement. 'Theatre has the potential to become a kind of "rehearsal space" for democracy, a place where one's encouraged not only to observe, but to be critical, active, and responsible for what is happening' (p. 9), as Burzynska and Malzacher suggest.

An important shift is taking place from representation towards a multilevel co-creation process that is engaging spectators, communities and citizens, opening up new political narratives. This approach is redefining the relationships between the audience and the artists, the cultural organizations and their way of producing. Rimini Protokoll are actively contributing to this debate. Through

their art practices they are offering new perspectives on how producing theatre and democratic engagement. Starting from the interview a few thoughts come to mind about theatre practices and the innovative aspects that Rimini Protokoll have introduced into the sector.

To begin with, we should underline the process of 'formatization' of a theatre performance. Rimini Protokoll intervene in transforming the classical structure of a theatre piece, bringing the idea of 'form' into the sector. For them 'form' is a format that exists and that is used as a copy-frame (as Stefan mentioned above), as the case of *World Climate Conference* project. Maintaining the uniqueness of the artistic experience, they create theatre projects that can be duplicated at the same time in different places across the world, travelling as luggage (as the case of *Home Visit Europe*). The formats created are reproducible and this reproducibility creates the exceptionality. Secondly, *Home Visit Europe* or *Remote X* or *100%*, are 'forms' that foster the idea of active participation of the audience in the show. The participation is not only consumed in the moment of the performance, but is the creative ingredient of the art project itself. The performances are realized without the presence of actors on the stage, they are built-up according to a participative dramaturgy where the experiences of the people (and the narration of those experiences) are the means for speaking about what is Europe or what are global cities nowadays.

Thirdly, in this process of engagement, the spectator becomes a *prosumer*. The notion of prosumer refers to the digital practices when the consumer and the producer are the same person. Popular books such as *We think* (Leadbeater 2009) and *Here Comes Everybody* (Shirky 2008) popularized the idea of a society that was moving towards a greater, bottom-up democracy made possible by digital media. For instance Facebook or social media experiences are 'places' that are filled with content by its own users. Rimini Protokoll brought this perspective into the live performing arts playing with the notion of an open and non-linear dramaturgy.

The venue changes its role, becoming a place of expression and experience. The main focus is the 'reality'

that is brought by the attendees. The critical perspective on the reality is provided by the collaboration with experts. They bring a more sophisticated and critical perspective to the creation process, enriching the observation of the pure reality. 'What they want to reveal, by using the experts, is not to capture reality but rather to constitute a typology of this reality that cannot be reduced to the banality perceived by the naked eye' as Katia Arfara (2009) suggests. A 'format' allows the artist to create a *meta-place* where the venue is a terrain of encounter between artists, citizens or experts or shareholders.

Rimini Protokoll create a process-oriented, documentary theatre, that has transformed the notion of 'venue' in a civil space and is able to foster the notion of democratic engagement. Their practices bring to light what is invisible. For example, *App Recuerdo* is an invisible museum that is realized in a public space, placed in the 'air', based on a long process of research and analysis across generations in Santiago de Chile, open to all citizens. They co-write their artistic works with citizens and their practices are transforming the way of producing theatre while enlarging the notion of civil sphere and bottom-up political debate.

Notes

- 1 Top Secret International is a teatrology that insists on the role of secret services, the growing number of whistle-blowers and the condition of post-democratic phenomena (as mentioned by them on their website). The visitors, thanks to the use of the headphones, can move through the museum playing the role of politicians or secret services, choosing and listening to the audio segments that are the result of interviews with real whistle-blowers or secret services.

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