

Storytelling and translating

On the work »9 Scripts from a Nation at War« by David Thorne, Katya Sander, Ashley Hunt, Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer

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»Script: Source: I couldn't write about it. I just couldn't«. So reads one of the titles within the multi-channel video installation »9 Scripts from a Nation at War« by David Thorne, Katya Sander, Ashley Hunt, Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer, exhibited at documenta XII in Kassel. But the source does go on to »write about it«, about joining the U.S. National Guard as a girl a day shy of seventeen years old. »Everybody else goes out to war, and you stay here and guard the nation«, she was told, but she was, inevitably, deployed to Iraq. This video, and the whole of »9 Scripts« (which actually comprises ten videos) draws our attention to a series of such stories, revealing the costs of war on individual and on nation, and, specifically, to the construction of subjects embodying various roles in the current wartime environment.

»Script: Source« takes the form of an unfurling text, typed letter by letter, compositing and editing interviews by the artists with three former soldiers, each of whom describe the choking circumstances of service. In eight additional »Scripts«, texts — including excerpts from blogs by active-duty soldiers, the transcripts of military hearings, and other material — are read by actors who perform in spare but carefully designed sets, classrooms and auditoriums, and sometimes before assembled audiences. For example, »Script: Detainee: Please tell me when it's my turn to speak because I don't know what's going on here« involved nine actors reading from transcripts of hearings on the status of those held at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. Periodically, the actors exchanged the roles of so-called »enemy combatant«, legal counsel, and interrogator, displacements that may facilitate readings of these texts as tales of complicity. This script was also performed live in New York in March as »Combatant Status Review Tribunals, pages 002954–003064, a public reading«, and in German at documenta in August. At nearly five hours in length, the performance was a fascinating exercise in endurance, embodying the labyrinth of dehumanizing U.S. military procedure. Whereas other widely published texts of recent American political procedurals, such as »The 9/11 Commission Report« (2004) or »The Starr Report« (1998) made best-seller lists, the voluminous transcripts, released online, have largely evaded the public imagination. If those other texts took the form of espionage thriller, or courtroom melodrama, then they contained the satisfying narrative elements of beginning, middle, and end. In contrast, the CSRT transcripts are works-in-progress, unfiltered data. The appropriation of a fragment of these transcripts in »9 Scripts« makes them available for digesting, not in soundbite-summary form but rather within a framed quantity of chilling details.

The installation consisted of three stations placed at intervals in a multipurpose zone of the documenta Halle, which also included lecture salons and information centers. Thus »9 Scripts« was one of just a handful of pieces accessible to non-paying visitors to the exhibition. Some of the other freely-viewed documenta projects, such as »Mohnfeld: Poppy Field« by Sanja Ivekovi_ or Ai Weiwei's »Fairytale«, took the form of ephemeral installations or performances, each of which were more evocative than declarative, resource-hungry but potentially invisible. In contrast, »9 Scripts« was fully imbedded within the documenta's playground-colored, central interior space. The »9 Scripts« stations comprised uniquely handsome umber desks with recessed screens, each sporting headphones and chairs for viewers. A tenth video, »Script: Citizen: 248 predictions about what I will do when democracy comes«, appeared on a screen imbedded in a wall nearby. In the video, a chalkboard fills the frame, and hands reach in from either side of the frame to write on the board, erase what has been written, and write anew, in silence, save for the tap of the chalk and the shushing eraser. The script charts the imbedding of the individual within a perilous, rather than liberatory, environment: » I will experience a massive build-up; I will respond to an order to deploy ...« While each of these videos could easily bear exhibition on a much grander scale, this particular installation, rattlingly intimate, amplified the accessibility of a structurally complex, language-intensive, multi-vocal piece to individual visitors (and based on anecdotal observations by this writer, the viewing stations were frequently in use), if sacrificing the communal aspect of an installation accommodating larger audiences.

»9 Scripts« was distinguished within the exhibition by its use of an unusually direct — one might even say parrhesiastic — form of address. According to Michel Foucault, in »Fearless Speech«, a volume of collected lectures, in the form of »free speech« known by the ancient Greeks as »parrhesia«, the speaker gives » a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks.« If the first charge of the »parrhesiastes« is clarity, » » parrhesia«, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says.« But what of the relationship between speakers and their audiences? The »parrhesiastes« speaks, by definition, from a subjugated position relative to his or her audience — that is, one practices free speech at some risk — but what response, or range of responses, might answer the »parrhesiastes'« call? It may be that response is nil, and it is all too apparent that the leader who disregards public opinion is a tyrant. As for other possible audiences, Jacques Rancière, in his 2004 lecture »The Emancipated Spectator«, recently published in »Artforum«, offers another means of considering what constitutes a response. He argues that we must jettison the idea that »spectatorship is a bad thing« because »looking is deemed the opposite of knowing ... [and] the opposite of acting.« Instead, we must recognize, as others have also argued, that looking (and listening) are active and intrinsic components completing communicative acts. Does it follow that if spectatorship is a productive act, which may make a difference in one's consciousness, it can also change the material conditions of daily — that is to say, political — life? Of course, this is not a given. According to Rancière, »an emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.« The responsibility of free speech charges both speaker and audience with telling, regarding, and retelling truths about matters of importance to the polis. These are acts that »9 Scripts from a Nation at War« accomplishes with formidable elegance of structure and precision of expression. Accordingly, this work is not solely attributable to Geyer, Hayes, Hunt, Sander, and Thorne. They have become translators and storytellers of speech acts of others, soldiers, bloggers, counsel, detainees; some known, some anonymous, other as yet unknowable.