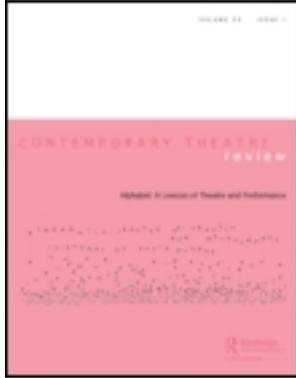


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# Rimini Protokoll's Reality Theatre and Intercultural Encounter: Towards an Ethical Art of Partial Proximity<sup>1</sup>

Meg Mumford

Since their establishment as a directorial cluster at the beginning of the millennium, Berlin-based Rimini Protokoll have garnered world-wide recognition for their Theatre of Experts. This documentary practice is an innovative form of Reality Theatre, a *mode* of theatre performance that has been prevalent since the early 1990s and which exists across diverse historical and emergent genres, including: autobiographical, community, documentary and verbatim theatre.<sup>2</sup> The mode is characterized by: an interest in extending public

understanding of *contemporary* individuals and society; a focus on representing and/or putting *living* people on stage; and an aesthetics of 'authenticity effects', artistic strategies designed to generate (and then, in some cases, destabilize) an impression of close contact with social reality and 'real' people.<sup>3</sup> A distinguishing feature of Rimini Protokoll's theatre is the way it both generates a sense of immediate contact with living people and truthful representations of their lives – especially through centralizing the narratives, bodies, and places of non-actors or so-called 'everyday expert' performers – while simultaneously destabilizing that impression through overt fictionality and theatricality.

Rimini Protokoll's integration of experts of the everyday can be related to the marked interest of all three directors – Germany's Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, and Stefan Kaegi from Switzerland – in engaging with people and phenomena from the contemporary world that do not often feature within the realm of professional theatre and/or are insufficiently known within the public realm. To date, a significant portion of that interest has been devoted to: firstly, strangers to the stage, people who do not usually perform their everyday activities and labour within a theatre context; and secondly,

1. I would like to thank Rimini Protokoll, in particular Helgard Haug and Sebastian Brünner for their dialogue with me about *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash*. I would also like to thank the experts and all other participants present at the *Mr. Dağaçar* rehearsal at the Podewil, 6 October 2010, for allowing me to observe their creative work. Thanks also to Heidrun Schlegel for her assistance with DVD materials and image copyright.
2. The term 'Reality Theatre' has been applied in both reviews and academic discourse to a recent strand of German avant-garde work. See, for example, Tara Forrest, 'Mobilizing the Public Sphere: Schlingensiefel's Reality Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.1 (February 2008), 90–98; Peter M. Bockenich, 'Other People Live: Rimini Protokoll and Their Theatre of Experts', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.1 (February 2008), 107–13. The term has also been used to designate ethnographic drama and performance. See Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman Altamira, 2005). In our current joint research project on the subject, Ulrike Garde and I use 'Reality Theatre' as an umbrella term to denote a mode of performance that exists across multiple genres, including the aforementioned avant-garde and ethnographic forms.

3. Susanne Knaller and Harro Müller, 'Authentisch/ Authentizität', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der ästhetischen Grundbegriffe*, ed. by Karlheinz Barck and others (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), pp. 40–65.

people who are perceived by the participants in the theatre event as cultural strangers – as different, foreign or insufficiently known, due to their occupational, class and ethnic background. With regard to this second type of stranger, the company has particularly foregrounded migratory subjects who have moved, or continue to move their places of work and living within and across countries. Rimini Protokoll's nomads have included: long-distance truck drivers, immigrant workers, diplomats, call-centre employees, cross-cultural adoptees, third culture children or airport kids, and members of forcibly re-settled communities.<sup>4</sup> As a result of their interest in these subjects, Rimini Protokoll productions often generate intercultural encounters – particularly between people from different occupational and ethnic cultures, and between people who are themselves polycultural: that is, complex fluid identities who travel between, or combine components from, multiple cultures in their everyday life. The desire to work with these subjects in turn contributes to the company's own status as a privileged form of global nomad, one that moves within and across national borders in search of thinking bodies, stories, images and performance places.

Both of the productions addressed in this article, *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash* (2010–) directed by Haug and Wetzlar, and Kaegi's *Cargo Sofia-X: A Bulgarian Truck-Ride through European Cities* (2006–08), demonstrate some of the key ways Rimini Protokoll negotiate encounters with subjects who manifest the intercultural condition of our globalized world. The selected case studies are also well-documented works by different directorial teams that utilize divergent staging strategies – *Mr. Dağaçar* was created for an end-on theatre configuration and *Cargo Sofia-X* is a mobile site-specific work. Consequently they lend themselves to a study of Rimini Protokoll's varied artistic approaches to intercultural encounter. In addition, both productions foreground subjects who have experienced social exclusion, and illuminate how Rimini Protokoll address the way encounters with these subjects are informed by histories of determination and

accompanying regimes of difference.<sup>5</sup> The case studies therefore provide rich sources of information for my investigations into: firstly, the way the company creates and destabilizes a sense of proximity to cultural strangers; and secondly, the way their approach to proximity encourages theatre participants to unfix oppressive – and experience fresh – ways of engaging with such strangers.

These investigations are informed by aspects of the feminist cultural studies framework offered by Sara Ahmed in her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (2000). My observation of intercultural encounters in both case studies has been influenced by Ahmed's proposition that:

An ethical communication is about a certain way of holding proximity and distance together: one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across. In such an encounter, 'one' does not stay in place, or one does not stay safely at a distance. [...] It is through getting closer, rather than remaining at a distance, that the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work, or made to work.<sup>6</sup>

Ahmed's consideration of how contemporary western subjects encounter others they configure as strangers has also contributed to my development of the following lines of inquiry: how do Rimini Protokoll's theatre-making teams enter relations of proximity with culturally unfamiliar subjects, and do these relations problematically assert the agency and empowered nature of the company? What sort of spectatorial encounters with marginalized cultural strangers does the company facilitate? How and to what end does Rimini Protokoll negotiate difference and distance between culturally diverse people?

### Rimini Protokoll's Passion for Encountering the Unfamiliar

In his 2007 analysis of Rimini Protokoll's approach to dramaturgy, Florian Malzacher includes a comment by Haug that clarifies the centrality of the group's interest in *das Fremde* (relevant translations

4. Relevant projects include: *Soil Sample Kazakhstan* (2011), *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash* (2010), *Cargo Asia: A Truck Ride through Japan, Singapore, Shanghai* (2009), *Vùng biển gió'i* (2009), *Black Tie* (2008), *Airport Kids* (2008), *Call Cutta in a Box: An Intercontinental Phone Play* (2008), *Cargo Sofia-X: A Bulgarian Truck Ride through European Cities* (2006), *Call Cutta: Mobile Phone Theatre* (2005), and *Schwarzenbergplatz* (2004).

5. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 13.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 157. Henceforth page references to Ahmed's text will be incorporated in parentheses in the body of the article.

include: ‘the foreign’, ‘the unknown’, ‘the different’, ‘the strange’) and in the maintenance of their protagonists’ *Fremdheit* (‘foreignness’, ‘strangeness’). The first published English-language translation of Haug’s comment reads as follows (I have inserted some of the original German terms in brackets):

The work really starts from detachment, from an interest in strangers [*am Fremden*]: doing something with a Conservative politician or a policeman. During the production comes a moment of complicity, which is very important. This complicity is possible because you can clearly tell people that the reason they are here is their otherness [*das Fremde*]. They simultaneously search to legitimise themselves on stage, and [the legitimation] lies within the fact that they can maintain this otherness [*Fremdheit*] and not make everything right.<sup>7</sup>

This translation communicates Haug’s understanding that the company’s approach to encounters is characterized by a focus on preserving an element of the experts’ *difference*, their difference both from actors and from the directorial team. What neither the translation nor the original fully convey is the way Haug often uses the term *das Fremde* to refer to unfamiliar and unknown phenomena, to fluid entities that can be transformed into something *more* familiar.

Before elaborating further on Haug’s non-fetishistic usage it is necessary to compare it with what Ahmed terms ‘stranger fetishism’. Ahmed describes such fetishism as involving the creation of a figure of the other that does not belong to a given space (such as the nation, community, body, etc.) and hence must be either welcomed in or expelled (pp. 21–22). Drawing on Marxist discourse, she explains that this figure, which appears to have linguistic and corporeal integrity, conceals the material relations and social differentiations that brought it into being. Stranger fetishism also involves the consequent perception that such figures have a nature, are something that simply *is* (pp.

4–5). An example she uses to exemplify her point is the stranger within Neighbourhood Watch discourse, positioned as a loitering individual whose seeming lack of purpose, and existence outside legitimate exchanges of capital, conceals the purpose of crime. This loiterer is a fetishistic figure because, for example, it conceals and is cut off from its histories of determination. In one reading these histories include the social differentiation between the dominant (white, middle-class) man, marked out as the good citizen who protects vulnerable neighbours, and the marginalized (black, working-class) men (p. 31). Why I contend that Rimini Protokoll are interested in a non-fetishistic approach is because they both present the stranger-experts in their work as transformable and porous entities capable of becoming better known, and because they address some of these strangers’ histories of determination.

Haug makes more apparent the group’s interest in a non-fetishistic approach to *das Fremde* when elaborating on her use of the term in an interview with Ulrike Garde. There she explains that *das Fremde*

also refers to neighbours or institutions from your own country that you want to learn about. I wouldn’t at all say that it [*das Fremde*] always has to be something that lies outside my own reach, but rather something I haven’t previously opened up.<sup>8</sup>

In the same interview she also stresses that *Entdeckerfreude* (‘passion for discovery’) is a key starting point for the company, and that:

One of the things that drives me, or also my colleagues in our theatre work, [...] is to open up something new – that is, to gain access to a country, a society, to a way of thinking, to a way of living.<sup>9</sup>

Critics such as Katrin Bettina Müller have asked whether Rimini Protokoll’s invitation to explore an unfamiliar life simply provides compensation for a lack of personal experience, especially for the educated elite.<sup>10</sup> When Mueller’s perspective was raised with Haug by Garde, who also asked what

7. Helgard Haug in Florian Malzacher, ‘Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity: The Story of Rimini Protokoll’, in *Experts of the Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, ed. by Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher, trans. by Daniel Belasco Rogers and others (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), pp. 14–45 (p. 33). See also Florian Malzacher, ‘Dramaturgien der Fürsorge und der Verunsicherung: Die Geschichte von Rimini Protokoll’, in *Experten des Alltags: Das Theater von Rimini Protokoll*, ed. by Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2007), pp. 14–45 (p. 33).

8. Helgard Haug, unpublished interview with Ulrike Garde, Berlin, Hebbel am Ufer Theater, 18 September 2010. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

9. Ibid.

10. Katrin Bettina Müller, ‘Durch ein fremdes Leben’, *Die Tageszeitung*, 2 January 2008, <<http://www.taz.de/!10326/>> [accessed 5 February 2012].

Rimini Protokoll hoped to achieve through giving themselves and their audiences access to the unfamiliar, Haug referred to two potential impacts of the work: firstly, the experience of getting to know something for oneself, and doing so through personally looking, rather than say, via a medium such as the internet; and secondly, the achievement of new perspectives through the input of outsiders who have a certain *distance* from the people and situation being explored.

In an interview in September 2010, Haug and Wetzel both presented encounter as central to their work, which they described as a form of getting to know people and making observations.<sup>11</sup> This form, akin to much documentary performance, shares aims and methods in common with a socially engaged ethnography, one willing to encounter phenomena frequently excluded from the public realm. In *Mr. Dağaçar* the social engagement is evident in the presentation of trash collectors working in Istanbul, all of whom experience marginalization by state and municipal authorities. In an interview in 2006, at a time when Kaegi was working with Bulgarian truck drivers on *Cargo Sofia-X*, a show about the economic and personal realities of goods transportation, he presented curiosity and wonder rather than engagement as the motor of his art. Nevertheless, he expressed an interest in redressing the middle-European treatment of Eastern European truckers as an acoustic and ecological burden, through initiating what he felt had been a neglected process of dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

Across their body of work thus far Rimini Protokoll have opened up encounters with the unfamiliar authorities of their own nation – a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician and police officers from Munich, for example – as well as with what Ahmed terms ‘stranger strangers’ – those others differentiated as unassimilable by the self, community, and/or the nation (p. 97). In the case studies analysed in this article, many types of experts make an appearance. However, in keeping with the aforementioned lines of inquiry, this article focuses on the issues raised by the presentation of people

who have experienced being treated as the figure to be fully or partially expelled.

## Encounters with Stranger Strangers

In *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash* the stage is populated by six experts, the majority of whom inform spectators about their experiences of geological and economic instability within Turkey and its largest city. The protagonists include three Kurdish men from an East Anatolian village – the eponymous Abdullah Dağaçar (referred to on-stage as Apo), as well as his friends, relatives and colleagues Aziz İdikurt, and Mithat İçten – and one man from southern Turkey of Greek Gypsy heritage, Bayram Renklihava. All of these men moved to Istanbul for financial and family reasons, establishing themselves as unofficial trash collectors (see Image 1). Their experiences are set alongside those of Turkish Hasan Hüseyin Karabağ, a Karagöz-Puppeteer who provides his own work and earthquake stories as well as using his puppets to help illuminate the trash collectors’ narratives. A sixth performer is Pınar Başoğlu, a multilingual Turkish directorial assistant who comes out from the audience onto the stage to help translate improvised dialogue. During the show spectators learn that the collectors – or as Bayram insists, ‘recyclers’ – have been regarded by government authorities as visual pollution.<sup>13</sup> In addition the Kurdish men belong to an ethnic group that has experienced a long history of conflict with the Turkish state that at different points in living memory instituted measures such as the banning of Kurdish language and the enforcement of re-settlement.

In keeping with its attention to the representation of marginalized strangers, this article foregrounds encounters involving the recyclers. However, its discussion attends more to my own and the directorial team’s experiences of encounter with these experts, rather than to theirs with Rimini Protokoll. This is because, while the rehearsal in Berlin and performance in Essen that I attended<sup>14</sup> did offer insights into the recyclers’ experiences of such encounter, due to linguistic boundaries and temporal constraints, as well as the production’s focus on the experts’ work and family life, my access to these experiences was

11. Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel in interview with Ralf-Carl Langhals, ‘Inszenierung von Wirklichkeit’, *morgenweb*, 11 September 2010, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/web-site/de/article\\_4797.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/web-site/de/article_4797.html)> [accessed 16 November 2010].

12. Stefan Kaegi, interview with Nina Peters, ‘Keine Heilanstalt, sondern Museum: Stefan Kaegi über das Theater als Kommunikationsraum, seine Arbeit mit Spezialisten und das Gefühl der Scham’, *Theater der Zeit*, 1 October 2006, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/web-site/de/article\\_2077.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/web-site/de/article_2077.html)> [accessed 23 November 2010].

13. English-language version of *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash* script, December 2010, p. 15.

14. Rimini Protokoll, *Mr. Dağaçar*, rehearsal, Podewil, Berlin, 6 October, 2010; and *Mr. Dağaçar*, performance, PACT Zollverein, Essen, 27 November 2010.



Image 1 Trash recycling experts: Bayram Renklihava, Mithat İçten, Abdullah Dağaçar, Aziz İdikurt (seated at the front of the cart-cum-bus). Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

comparatively limited. By contrast, through an interview with Helgard Haug and an informal conversation with dramaturg Sebastian Brünger I gained better access to the intercultural encounter experiences of the directorial team.<sup>15</sup>

The ‘stranger strangers’ in *Cargo Sofia-X* are also the main protagonists, two Bulgarian truck drivers whose performance task is to take approximately forty-five spectators – seated in the cargo section of an adapted lorry – on a guided tour through their work lives as well as the cargo handling sites within the host city. The three truckers who participated as performers in this project were Ventzislav Borissov (Vento), Svetoslav Michev and Nedyalko Nedyalkov. As the drivers’ narratives make clear, their long work hours (much of which is spent queuing at borders) and shockingly low pay, make

it impossible for them to interact with many aspects of the countries and cultures they pass through. They tell us that shopping in many Western European countries is beyond their means, as is eating at McDonald’s or staying in hotels. Instead they live in and around the cabin where they both store food and sleep.<sup>16</sup> In each city that *Cargo Sofia-X* was presented, these experts were joined by a new and small group of people who gave cameo appearances that illuminated their work roles in fields such as haulage and highway patrol. Just like the drivers, the piece crossed many borders during its two-year season, touring to something in the vicinity of twenty-five European cities.<sup>17</sup> After

15. Helgard Haug, unpublished Skype interview with author, 30 November 2010; Sebastian Brünger, informal conversation with author, 6 October 2010.

16. Sara Brady, ‘Cargo Sofia: A Bulgarian Truck Ride through Dublin’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 51.4 (Winter 2007), 162–67 (p. 166).

17. Stefan Kaegi, interview with Deepa Punjani, *Mumbai Theatre Guide.com* <[http://www.mumbaiatheatreguide.com/dramas/interviews/13\\_interview\\_stefan\\_kaegi.asp](http://www.mumbaiatheatreguide.com/dramas/interviews/13_interview_stefan_kaegi.asp)> [accessed 5 February 2012].



Image 2 Truck driver experts: Ventsislav Borissov and Nedyalko Nedyalkov in *Cargo Sofia-Berlin*, March 2007. Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

two years of touring in Europe, *Cargo Sofia-X* was adapted for an Asian context, resulting in a new series of pieces titled *Cargo Asia: A Truck Ride through Japan, Singapore, Shanghai*. My access to the various theatre participants' experiences of intercultural encounter in the European version has been made possible predominantly through reviews and commentary, as well as documentary and television footage of the Basel and Essen performances which feature Vento and Svetoslav (2006).

The following analysis of Rimini Protokoll's artistic approach to intercultural encounter across two productions deals sequentially with three aspects that illuminate some of their most distinctive strategies. These are the treatment of: authority and authorship in the case of text production; of observer and observed roles and relations; and of social antagonism and cultural difference.

## Questioning the Politics of Ethnographic Text Production

In the case of *Mr. Dağaçar*, the directors' approach to ethnographic textual activities, such as translation and turning life stories into relatively fixed texts, was marked by a desire to acknowledge how these texts can dispossess the unfamiliar subjects they are connected with. Ahmed points out that translation entails a 're-termining of the foreign such that the foreign becomes the familiar' and produces a 'knowledge which creates the stranger in the familiar in order then to destroy it' (p. 58). What

distinguishes the ethnographer, Vincent Crapanzano notes, is his or her task of *producing* rather than simply *translating* texts, as well as the paradoxical goal of rendering the foreign familiar while preserving its foreignness.<sup>18</sup> For Ahmed, such textual procedures demonstrate how knowledge creates and destroys the stranger (p. 59).

In their productions Rimini Protokoll incorporate many forms of text, including: translations; statistical and factual information; autobiographical statements; stories co-produced with the experts; and what the company referred to in the *Mr. Dağaçar* script by the capitalized term 'META', written and spoken commentary on the making of the work, especially the relation between Rimini Protokoll and the experts. Text in the form of spoken, recorded, projected and sung words is a dominant dramaturgical and audio-visual feature of their productions. One discussion of text during the rehearsal in Berlin that particularly caused me to ponder the politics of ethnographic translation concerned a sentence that was ultimately delivered by the eponymous Kurdish protagonist in the final episode. The German translation of Apo's comment in Turkish, which was projected on a surtitle screen in the rehearsal space, read as follows: 'Wenn jemand kommt und dein Leben aufschreibt, ist es als hättest du vergessen was du gelebt hast'<sup>19</sup> ('When someone comes and writes your life down, it's as if you had forgotten what you have lived'). At the rehearsal Apo seemed to express uncertainty, at least according to the translation of his comments provided for Rimini Protokoll, about whether the text accurately represented what he once actually said, and whether he even wanted to continue to say it.

In her review of an Istanbul performance, Sara Heppkeausen singled out this sentence for attention, connecting it with a feeling of discomfort that remained with her after the show. By the time she saw the production, the line read differently and as follows: 'Wenn jemand dein Leben in einen Text umwandelt, fühlt es sich nicht mehr wie deins an'<sup>20</sup> ('When somebody transforms your life into a script, it feels like it is not yours any more').<sup>21</sup> Both

18. Vincent Crapanzano, 'Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley & Los Angeles: California University Press, 1986), pp. 51–76, (pp. 51–2).

19. *Mr. Dağaçar*, Rehearsal Notes, Podewil, Berlin, 6 October 2010.

20. Sara Heppkeausen, '900 Kilo Plastik als Monatsmiete', *nachtkritik*, 16 October 2010, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article\\_4837.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article_4837.html)> [accessed 2 December 2010].

21. *Mr. Dağaçar*, English-language script, p. 23.

versions of the line present (auto)biographical text as, on the one hand, creative – it can preserve a trace of the past or reconfigure a life – and on the other hand, as a way of dispossessing and potentially misrepresenting the one who utters it. That Rimini Protokoll decided to maintain a line of this sort suggests an interest not only in foregrounding Apo's thoughtfulness, but also in acknowledging their ambivalence about the politics of turning lives into documents. In a recent email exchange that considered, amongst other issues, this ambivalent line, Haug pointed out to me that after a successful tour of the show in France, Apo made the comment, 'I prefer performing my life more than living it', a statement that demonstrates a strong awareness of the pleasure creative reconfiguration of a life can bring.<sup>22</sup>

### Dispersing and Revealing the Artist-Ethnographer's Authority

Through their approach to the authorship of text Rimini Protokoll display a desire to disperse their authority as the knowing artist-ethnographer, and to make knowing a shared enterprise. However, through strategies such as the incorporation of a meta-text that reflects on the way Rimini Protokoll's *Entdeckerfreude* affects the trash collectors' lives, they also acknowledge that this dispersal does not overcome the power relations that maintain the ethnographer's privilege. The company's scripts contain many texts they have co-authored with the experts, sometimes in a manner close to ghost writing.<sup>23</sup> These texts have much in common with recent ethnographic writing which, according to Sally McBeth, seeks to 'legitimise the expertise of the members of the culture being investigated' and to move from the pursuit of ethnographic objectivity to an 'informed intersubjectivity' predicated on listening and collaboration.<sup>24</sup> Ahmed contends that when reflexive ethnography presents the native informant as an equal co-author, it conceals 'the

relations of force and authorisation embedded in the desire to know (more) about strangers' (p. 63).

Such concealment in the context of a theatre production could include a failure to signpost what aspects of the forms of text and staging are produced by the theatre practitioners rather than authorized by the ones who are known. As I discuss in more depth below, rather than failing to signpost authorship, Rimini Protokoll often generate uncertainty about who has created what, a strategy that draws attention to (if not resolving) the power relations involved in theatre production. Concealment in the theatre could also take the form of failure to divulge the social and material privilege that allows the performance makers to have proximity to the experts. In *Mr. Dağaçar*, however, some of the relations of force and inequity are indeed foregrounded through, for example, statements outlining the show's impact on the recyclers and the Kurds' depot (i.e. the collective of workers who are housed together *and* their lodgings). Both the destructive and creative nature of that impact is acknowledged. For example, the meta-text used in the Essen performance informs the spectator that through the theatre job, Bayram, head of his own unauthorized waste business, has earned enough money for his wife to do an English class and become a hotel receptionist instead of a cleaner. However, as Rimini Protokoll feared, the removal of the Kurdish recyclers from their work place did lead to the dissolution of their collective, with most of their colleagues moving to another depot.<sup>25</sup> Through their management of text Rimini Protokoll display their interest in replacing centralized authority, and what Wetzell has referred to as *Hilfsimperialismus*<sup>26</sup> ('imperialistic help'), with a democratic and mutually empowering social exchange. Simultaneously they acknowledge how that attempt is jeopardized through the privileged *Entdeckerfreude* that first set it in motion.

### Challenging the Dominant Subjects' Observer Position

Another method Rimini Protokoll use in their bid for egalitarian encounter is a play with the positions

22. Helgard Haug, email correspondence with the author, 8 and 10 February 2012.

23. Tan Wälchli, 'Jäger und Sammler: Theatertreffen Berlin, Festival Avignon: Stefan Kaegi und "Rimini Protokoll" spielen dieses Jahr in der Champions League des Theaters', *Wochenzeitung*, 24 August 2006, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article\\_1168.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article_1168.html)> [accessed 22 November 2010].

24. Sally McBeth, 'Myths of Objectivity and the Collaborative Process in Life History Research', in *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by C. B. Brettell (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), pp. 145–46.

25. *Mr. Dağaçar* English-language script, p. 23.

26. Christine Wahl, 'Stochern im schwarzen Loch: Hau 3 Miriam Yung Min Stein wagt in *Black Tie* einen mikroskopischen Blick aufs eigene Leben', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 27 November 2008, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article\\_3889.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/article_3889.html)> [accessed 23 November 2010].

of observer and observed. Through this play they questioningly highlight, displace or re-place the researcher-artist and spectators' positions as the ones who look and know. Situations are created where spectators are made aware of their voyeurism, where they and the theatre practitioners become the ones observed, and experts become expert observers.

In *Cargo Sofia-X* Kaegi's arrangement of spatial relations helps him to establish myriad performance spaces and viewing relations. Inside the container section of the converted freight truck there is raked seating for the spectators, who face an expansive window. In the early stages the audience experience a black box space: the window is covered on the inside by projector screens, and the two miked drivers stand in front of the screens and before the spectators, introducing themselves and the journey. Later there are moments when the screens are lifted and something like a proscenium arch emerges. The audience in their darkened space are able to look voyeuristically through the framing window<sup>27</sup> at: highway and haulage sites, the workers who make cameo appearances, and the truck drivers when they get out of the cabin to make an outdoor presentation to their paying spectators, or to chat to unsuspecting fellow drivers. At the same time, uninitiated outsiders in the 'real' world stare quizzically back at the strange framing window. According to audience member Amanda Rogers, who experienced a performance of *Cargo Asian* in Singapore that began in daylight and ended in the night, the outsiders' ability to view the contents and inhabitants of the adapted truck varied depending on the quality of light involved.<sup>28</sup> When the screen is rolled down and documentary footage is screened about the Bulgarian freight company Somat, the wheeling-dealing of its German owner Willi Betz, the drivers' lives on the road, and our 'journey' from Sofia through Europe to the host city, the theatre turns into the cinema. When live footage of the drivers in the cabin is screened, the cinema becomes the television. And all the while there is a digital peephole,

a camera through which the drivers are able to look back at the spectators.

Through Kaegi's deployment of communication technology, space and lighting it appears that the spectators were moved through various viewing and encounter positions. Reviewers' comments demonstrate that some spectators experienced a sense of the following positions: that of voyeur and consumer, and that of the exotic others and cargo that are to be consumed. One of the effects it seems Kaegi's deployments achieve, is to create an association between, on the one hand, the spectators' desire to know unfamiliar others and their (goods and image) consumption practices, and on the other hand, the exploitation of the labouring bodies of strangers.

In *Mr. Dağaçar* the dominant subject's exclusive rights to the knowing observer position is challenged through a re-placement of this position elsewhere. The re-placement occurs when the trash collectors are presented as capable observers of the directorial team's viewing activities. This happens when it is *they* who utter those parts of the META text that articulate the thoughts and attitudes of the theatre practitioners. In her interview with me, Haug explained that while it would have been appropriate for one member of the directorial team to appear on stage and deliver these segments, this option was logistically impossible.<sup>29</sup> During the rehearsal I attended, this text was spoken by Pinar, the directorial assistant. After the Essen performances Haug explained that as Pinar did not feel comfortable in this stage role, Rimini Protokoll had then suggested the collectors themselves could present the directors' thoughts, using the third person plural to refer to the theatre makers.<sup>30</sup> Haug also expressed her satisfaction with this creation of a 'Blick von Außen' ('view from outside').<sup>31</sup> A distance and difference between Rimini Protokoll and the men was also presented at content level. For example, the meta-text referred to 'their' uncertainty about the impact on the men of journeying to Berlin for a week's rehearsal, about whether the men would get passports and visas, and to 'their' fear that someone would vanish in Germany.

In rehearsal this meta-text, spoken by Pinar, seemed an act of self-reflexion created by Rimini Protokoll. One of the sentences in the German-language translation of Pinar's text, which was projected on a screen during the rehearsal, was clearly

27. Jörg Järmann, 'Ein gerüttelt Mass LKW-Theater: Stefan Kaegi hat ein neues Doku-Fiktions-Theater geschaffen: *Cargo Sofia-BaseF*, *Basellandschaftliche Zeitung*, 2 June 2006, <[http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/project\\_108.html#article\\_1484.html/de/article\\_1484.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/project_108.html#article_1484.html/de/article_1484.html)> [accessed 5 February 2012].

28. This comment was made by Amanda Rogers when she attended a guest lecture on Rimini Protokoll that I gave: 'Rimini Protokoll's Fascination with the Unfamiliar: Staging Real People as a Mode of Intercultural Encounter', Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London, 6 December 2010.

29. Haug, Skype interview with author.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Mr. Dağaçar* Rehearsal Notes.

marked by the directors' German cultural heritage: *Das letzte Rädchen der türkischer Gesellschaft auf die Bühne rollen – was ist das für eine Geste?*<sup>32</sup> ('To roll the last small wheel of Turkish society onto the stage – what sort of gesture is that?') All parties discussed whether or not this phrase was descriptive of a socio-economic structure or potentially pejorative. Ultimately the line was removed, a decision Haug attributed to the difficulty of translating the cog-mechanism imagery.<sup>33</sup> The disappearance both of Pinar and of this clear mark of the directors' voices contributed to my initial erroneous belief that much of the directorial commentary had been removed. It also heightened the uncertainty I experienced during the Essen performance about exactly who had devised the text segments being uttered. That uncertainty was first set in motion by what I experienced as a tension between, on the one hand, the analytical tone and content – which many spectators such as myself would prejudicially have thought the collectors did not have the knowledge or educational background to create, and on the other hand, the men's delivery of the texts as if it was indeed *they* who had authored them. Thanks to this destabilizing tension I found myself neither to be a knowing observer nor one free from potentially oppressive perceptions.

### Highlighting Social Antagonism and Complicity in Exclusive Practices

Rimini Protokoll's play with viewing positions in both case studies demonstrates their awareness of and desire to unlock the concealment of social antagonism. The company seem aware that, as Ahmed puts it, encounters are not simply meetings in the present, but meetings which '*reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference*'. They involve both 'the domain of the particular – the face to face of this encounter – and the general – the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism' (p. 8; emphasis in original). During the *Mr. Dağaçar* rehearsal I attended, when confronting aspects of the meta-text were discussed, such as the sections dealing with the doubts and suspicions Rimini Protokoll and associates of the experts initially had about one another – a market seller had warned Aziz that Germany is the mafia

and you will have your kidneys sold during surgery there – Daniel Wetzel defended these sections.<sup>34</sup> He expressed the belief it was important not to bow down to political correctness and instead to explore how great the distance initially was between the collectors and Rimini Protokoll. In the interview I conducted, Haug also mentioned the importance of presenting material that revealed Rimini Protokoll's moments of arrogant scepticism towards the men. For her such a demonstration not only acknowledged a social division, but also the fact that Rimini Protokoll were no better than those spectators who have similar arrogant thoughts. Here it seems Haug views the meta-text strategy as a way of highlighting, and therefore as a step towards changing, those shared and ongoing practices that fix unfamiliares in place as the excluded and unassimilable.

In *Cargo Sofia-X* it is the simultaneous layering of contrasting journey experiences and the division of space and labour that contribute to the foregrounding of social antagonism and to the revelation of the audience's complicity in exclusive practices. During the production the audience experienced at least three journeys: their approximately two-hour city tour with the drivers; a fictional long-haul journey from Sofia to the host city that the drivers create with the help of video footage and commentary; and the drivers' personal narratives of their own 'real life' journey experiences. The fictional and personal narratives describe journeys that are long, filled with interminable hours spent waiting in border control queues, and undertaken as part of labour that is poorly paid. As a consequence the drivers experience a high degree of confinement, social isolation and exclusion. On the road they live for long hours in a confined space owned by a multinational corporation. In contrast the spectators experience a short and social 'pleasure' ride. The drivers' maintenance of service industry roles throughout the performance and their moments of sustained physical separation from the auditorium area, underline the *difference* between their economic situation and that of the predominantly middle class cargo-consumers. As in *Mr. Dağaçar*, the approach to intercultural encounter with marginalized unfamiliares is characterized both by the pursuit of democratic and fair exchange *and* an acknowledgement of the social antagonism that makes that same pursuit both necessary and challenging.

32. Ibid.

33. Haug, Skype interview with author.

34. *Mr. Dağaçar* English-language script, p. 20.

## Highlighting the Ethical Role of Distance and Doubting the Possibility of Pure Proximity

Rimini Protokoll's mode of proximity is also characterized by an interest in the contribution distance can make to an ethical encounter, and by a doubt that pure proximity is possible. In her discussion of ethnographic modes of proximity, Ahmed asks: 'If we cannot overcome the relations of force and authorisation implicated in "knowing" itself, then is the answer *to come to know how not to know?*' (p. 72; emphasis in original). Such knowing would involve, for example: admitting the impossibility of being or being with the unfamiliar; ascertaining and acknowledging *what* we can and cannot know; and/or recognizing the unfamiliar as the knowing. In other words, it would involve recognizing distance.

While something similar to the third approach is manifest in the presentation of the experts as knowing observers, aspects of the other strategies emerge in, for example, Rimini Protokoll's approach to linguistic competency. The latter is characterized by an openness to working in environments with people who do not share their languages, and where consequently it is impossible to achieve verbal or textual exactitude. In the *Mr. Dağaçar* rehearsals the directorial team used English or German to communicate with the assistants, who then communicated with the East Anatolian men in Turkish, who in turn spoke amongst themselves in Kurdish. Haug has explained to me that when the Kurdish-German translator responsible for the surtitles presented his script in Istanbul, this text varied significantly from what the team had been working with during rehearsals, which may explain the aforementioned differences in Apo's line about transforming his life into a script. She also acknowledged that the translation process during rehearsal both provided the directors with much valued time to reflect, *and* led to losses and misunderstandings on both sides.<sup>35</sup> The company often re-invoke the rehearsal environment of linguistic polyphony and partial communication during performances through the use of languages other than the performer or spectators' mother tongue. For example, Kaegi's Bulgarian truck drivers speak to their (predominantly) European spectators in English and German, and directorial assistant Pinar often provides German-language spectators with her English-language

paraphrases of the dialogue improvised live in Turkish. While working without linguistic exactitude is hardly new in the performing arts, especially in fields such as dance and physical theatre, it is noteworthy in a theatre that gives text centrality.

Rimini Protokoll's willingness to work with approximate verbal communications can be related to their interest in creating a form of dialogue involving different and excluded voices. This interest and the obstacles that sometimes stand in its way are exemplified in Rimini Protokoll's attempt to have the Kurdish recyclers speak in their first language. Initially a Kurdish-German translator attended rehearsals, partly as a recognition and counter to a long history of banishment of Kurdish from the Turkish stage. However, the difficulties that arose when combining four different languages in the rehearsal space proved too overwhelming. In the end the recyclers spoke predominantly in Turkish, though their Kurdish voice asserted its presence during an early scene where they recall and literally count the steps in their lives thus far, during moments of improvised dialogue, and in an important scene where Apo tells of the nightmare he experienced one evening after a return from Istanbul to his village.<sup>36</sup>

Like their acknowledgement of social difference and the distance it brings between people, Rimini Protokoll's accommodation of linguistic difference reminds me of a point Ahmed makes when she is analysing philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' version of the ethical encounter. According to Ahmed,

his ethics is about finding a better way of encountering the other which allows the other to live, as that which is beyond 'my' grasp, and as that which cannot be assimilated or digested into the ego or into the body of a community. (p. 139)

In his work 'the other' refers to the weak, poor and marginal. Ahmed questions his protection of the otherness of the other, arguing, amongst other things, that it fixes the other as an alien being that exists prior to encounter. However, she welcomes the acknowledgement of 'a sense of that which can't be grasped in the present' (p. 148). Other aspects of the company's work that to my mind generate precisely that sense include their approach to authorship, especially those moments when they withdraw some of the signposting of their inputs,

35. Haug, Skype interview with author.

36. Ibid.

which can create uncertainty for the spectator about the nature of the performing subject in front of her. For example, when the recyclers utter the meta-text sections about Rimini Protokoll's initial attitude towards them, as a spectator I am not quite sure how the self-reflexive words are connected to the bodies uttering them. As a result I jump from one possibility to another, thinking: 'These words communicate the men's thoughts. No, they communicate the company's thoughts. Wait on, no, they communicate the company's thoughts as observed by the collectors.' And so on. My uncertainty not only illuminates my prejudices about what perspectives and wording both parties are capable of producing, but it makes me aware I cannot fully grasp the person I am together with in this face-to-face encounter.

The sense of ungraspability is also created in Rimini Protokoll's works through an insistence on showing the partial nature of their and the audience's proximity. By partial I mean both incomplete and biased. In *Cargo Sofia-X*, for one reviewer of a performance in Basel it was the insertion of moments of fiction that drew his attention to the incomplete nature of his access to the drivers' lives.<sup>37</sup> In particular he referred to the appearances of the mysterious woman who intermittently appeared outside the truck, singing Balkan songs at a microphone in the middle of a traffic roundabout, cycling past on a bike with parcels in her carrier, singing next to a Swiss flag-bearer who has fallen asleep. For the reviewer, these theatrical interludes, which spoke to him of desire and yearning, and also mirrored the world of the truckers, made him aware that one can only get a small insight into, and not a full knowledge, of what it is like to live in this foreign world. They also prompted his recognition that Kaegi's mode of operation was to refuse closure, make offers, show excerpts, stimulate.<sup>38</sup> In other words, that Kaegi is an artist of the partial.

In *Mr. Dağaçar* similarly overt moments of artifice reminded me that I was looking through Rimini Protokoll's glasses at the collectors' world. One vivid moment of artifice occurred during the rehearsal and staging of a group folk dance, where the three Kurds dance with closely joined bodies that create a moving mass. It was the use of contemporary music technology and gestic prop selection during the dance that made me very aware of that mediation. During the rehearsal Wetzel

explained that the music he wanted to try out was a traditional Kurdish piece that had been reworked so that there was a focus on the bass part. The men struggled to move in time to this music and claimed better results could be achieved if they could use their own traditional music, which they produced after carrying out a search on a mobile phone. Volume problems made it difficult to use this piece at that moment. At the end of the dance rehearsal Aziz asked Wetzel not to change 'our dance', and referred to the fact that Rimini Protokoll had already changed many of the things the Kurds regarded as theirs. With a smile, Aziz added that he could change the show with this dance.

During the performance Aziz was given room to express his frustration at the company's approach to his culture's traditions during the episode when he explains why the Kurds did not want Rimini Protokoll to dismantle their abandoned depot and put it on stage. He states that while his brother who ran the depot was not against the re-placement of the depot, the performers felt: 'We don't want to be confused with this kind of work. We want to stand in front of you as just human beings with our traditions and culture.'<sup>39</sup> In the Essen performance, Aziz performed the role of leader, waving a trash collectors' glove in his right hand (rather than the plastic bag used in rehearsal), to a soundtrack that fused old musical forms and new digital technologies. Both the music and the glove, which made me wonder if the leader of this dance form usually brandished a piece of material or scarf, spoke to me too of the hands of the directorial team. The incomplete authenticity of the dance both dispossessed the experts and acknowledged that dispossession at the same time.

However, the partiality of the dance was also constructive, contributing to the production's creation of something new and empowering: a portrayal of the trash collectors that challenged an abject image of downtrodden eyesores with a counter image of an energized and creative collective, one that earned large rounds of applause the night I attended, both after the dance and at the finale. Even if this dance did not change the entire show, it certainly changed the familiar showing of trash collectors! In many respects the dance was a hallmark of the way the production, as reviewer Sara Heppekausen put it, brings out the recycler's artistry rather than having them wallow in rubbish.<sup>40</sup>

37. Järnmann, 'Ein gerüttelt Mass LKW-Theater'.

38. Ibid.

39. *Mr. Dağaçar*, English-language script, p. 22.

40. Heppekausen, '900 Kilo Plastik als Monatsmietet'.



Image 3 Mr Dağaçar and his clean on-stage trash. Photo courtesy of Rimini Protokoll.

Throughout *Mr. Dağaçar* the audience witness skilled and beautiful work, including: the swift and expert sorting of recyclable materials, and an acrobatic dancerly interaction with the metal bin carts, involving acrobatic leaps into and out of the bins and choreographed wheeling in cart ballets. The audience are also presented with what I and others found to be an *unexpectedly* clean and attractive landscape, one that again forced me to consider my prejudices: the bodies, clothing, plastic bottles, aluminium cans, and cardboard are not soiled (see Image 3). In a conversation after the Berlin rehearsal, dramaturg Sebastien Brünger spoke of the charismatic nature of the men. He also mentioned Apo's talent as a folk singer, and the surprisingly welcoming nature of Apo and his friends towards members of the directorial team during a chance encounter at night on the streets in Istanbul. As Apo explains during the show, the other collectors the theatre makers had approached had run away, being too focused on their work and unused to

someone taking an interest.<sup>41</sup> Apo's description of the encounter, through drawing attention to some of Rimini Protokoll's casting methods, is another reminder to the audience that the performance offers a partial perspective.

The focus on artistry reminds us too of the impossibility of pure proximity given the performative nature of both stage and everyday life, given the way we construct, rehearse, and display our actions and interactions for specific audiences. Through features such as the display of rehearsed script upon surtitle screens, overt choreography and orchestration of props, and the open display of sound and lighting operators and design, the company and their experts repeatedly remind us they have carefully crafted representations of themselves and each other, in this case for mass display. While Rimini Protokoll employ modes of proximity that

41. *Mr. Dağaçar*, English-language script, p. 2.

do not involve such overt reminders of distance – including moments of performer improvisation, autobiographical statements, and documentary footage of the performers’ everyday contexts – they work very consciously with the frame of theatre. This frame, as Rimini Protokoll commentator Gerald Siegmund puts it, ‘affords an undeniable distancing. It turns the trusted into something foreign: as “real” as something seems, as “real” as it might sound, it is here closely related to the possibility of fiction’.<sup>42</sup> As both case studies testify, this company engages with both the distance that comes from fiction and the distance that comes from acknowledging cultural difference.

In conclusion both of the productions analysed here suggest that Rimini Protokoll practise a mode of proximity that *strives* to achieve a democratic and mutually empowering social exchange. To this end they engage in dispersing the dominant subject’s authority, and troubling the viewing and consumption practices that fix marginalized unfamiliar into a place of exclusion and total knowability. Ethnographic and artistic strategies that facilitate this engagement include: the exposure of text’s ambivalently creative and destructive potential; the insertion of a meta-text that exposes the relations of

force that inform intercultural encounter; a form of collective authorship that challenges centralized authority and preserves the ungraspability of the unfamiliar; a spatial and textual play with observer–observed relations; and the layering and juxtaposition of fictional and documentary narratives that reveal the audience’s complicity in exclusive practices. Rimini Protokoll’s mode of proximity also embraces certain forms of distance as useful for ethical encounter. These include the distances created through: admitting social antagonism and the impossibility of being or being with unfamiliar; and through acknowledging the partiality of any insight into foreign worlds. Rimini Protokoll creates such distances through, for instance, opening up inexact linguistic communication, withdrawing signposts of authorship, inserting overt fictions and artifices, creating hybrid expressive forms, and acknowledging casting and choreographic procedures. In her discussion of ethical communication, Ahmed calls for a getting closer that yet takes up ‘the impossibility of that very gesture, at one and the same time’ (p. 148). To my mind, Rimini Protokoll’s attempt to get closer, with its respect for distance, moves some way towards answering that call.

42. Gerald Siegmund, ‘The Art of Memory: Fiction as Seduction into Reality’, in *Experts of the Everyday*, ed. by Dreyse and Malzacher, pp. 188–211 (p. 190).