

The missing link: Gertrude Stein and postdramatic theatre

I too am very pleased to have this symposium here today, with two of Europe's most distinguished Stein readers as our key note speakers. Heiner Goebbels has staged Stein's texts to music by the Beach Boys in his opera *Hashirigaki*, while professor Andrzej Wirth actually coined the term *postdramatic* in relation to Gertrude Stein's plays. I'm not sure that prof. Wirth finds the term postdramatic appropriate any longer in connection with contemporary theatre, but in relation to Gertrude Stein I still find the term most precise. Today I am going to talk about the postdramatic aspects of Gertrude Stein's plays, and I shall try to suggest how her deconstruction of dramatic conventions informs contemporary theatre today. Especially I want to focus on her deconstruction of the mimetic relationship between text and performance, and also on her deconstruction of the unity of the dramatic character, which prof. Wirth pointed out in some small articles from the beginning of the 1980'es, which are still some of the most informative articles written on Stein and the theatre.

Because, even though Stein has been a most influential artist in theatre and especially on performance art, she has not been much recognized in academic theatre research, and her plays are rarely read in departments of theatre and performance studies.

While Stein herself was inspired by early European avant-garde theater – even as she claimed that she wasn't – her own impact on the theater really began after 1960, when artists like Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and others were inspired by her non-naturalistic approach to the play. These New York-based artists often worked more frequently in Europe than in the U.S.,

and especially in contemporary German theatre today, we once again feel Stein's influence on an artist like Heiner Goebbels and, perhaps more indirectly, on an artist like René Pollesch, an influence passed on through their interaction with American artists in Europe, and also through prof. Wirth's work at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the university in Giessen.

What has always fascinated me about Gertrude Stein's texts, and particularly her plays, is the way her language always invites new readings and never authorizes one single reading over another, because she always plays with words, not with their meanings. The key to reading her really lies in understanding how you as a reader are responsible for the text as much as she is as its author. As the poet Juliana Spahr has said about her, Stein's texts invite readers to connect with them.

This idea of the reader doing much of the work is at the core of Stein's poetics, and in the theatre it means that she does not in her play-texts point out how they are to be performed. She leaves this to the director, writing plays that are open-ended and suggestive of as many possible realizations as there are readers.

Ever since Antonin Artaud expelled the "author-God" from the theatre, in a revolt against the reduction of performance to a three-dimensional illustration of the authoritative literary work, we have seen in Western theatre an opposition between a text-based dramatic theatre on the one hand, and an experimental and very often non-spoken performance stage on the other. Stein's concept of theatre points beyond this contradiction.

Like Artaud, Stein criticized the interference between the fictional dramatic action on the stage and the physical presence of actors and audience in the theatre. In her lecture on *Plays* (1934), she describes, how trying to follow the action on stage always makes her "nervous" because it is almost always out of sync with the real-time sensation of the audience of being present in the theater. But Stein realized that these different layers of the theatrical event, the action on stage and the physical presence of the audience, should be seen as *a combination and not a contradiction*, to quote her own expression.

Gertrude Stein thus understood the crisis of the drama not as a conflict between text-based and non-spoken theatre, but as part of a general crisis of representation. If the relation between art and reality was not simply that of a stable mimetic representation, then the transformation from text to performance must also be considered in different terms – as based on a fundamental difference and not on similarity.

Like Artaud, Stein undermines the idea of performance as an illustration of the text, but she does so without giving up the notion of the play-text as a literary work of art in its own right. Stein's plays suggest a spacious notion of what a play may be, a notion that incorporates both the written text and the performance, but does not reduce them to a mimetic reflection of each other, governed by one unifying dramaturgical logic.

There are two main aspects of Gertrude Stein's conception of the play: First, her understanding of the play as a *literary* genre, which implies a notion of *play* as the performative aspect of all writing and language. Stein's focus on the performative aspects of writing is highlighted in a small text

called *Play* (1911). The text *Play* is not really a play, rather it is a portrait of the word 'play' and it shows how the notion of play as a general performative aspect of writing was important to Stein even before she wrote her first real plays two years later in 1913.

Play, play every day, play and play and play away, and then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it. Play it and remember it and ask to play it. Play it, and play it and play away. Certainly every one wants you to play, every one wants you to play away, to play every day, to play and play, to play the play you play every day, to play and remember it and ask to play it and play it and to play away and to play every day and to-day and all day. That's the way to play, to play every day....
(1911).

What we see - and hear - is a literal wordplay. We follow the word 'play' literally being put to play and set in motion down the pages. Stein is playing with the word 'play'.

The second main aspect of Gertrude Stein's rethinking of the play concerns the theatrical event. In her approach to the theatrical event Stein adopts a similar kind of concretism as in her play with words on the page. In her lecture on *Plays*, she points out how the space and light in the theatre is more important to a child than the action on stage.

Generally speaking all the early recollections all a child's feeling of the theater is two things. One which is in a way like a circus that is the general movement and light and air which any theatre has, and a great deal of glitter in the light and a great deal of height in the air, and then there are moments, a very very few moments but still moments. One must be pretty far advance in adolescence before one realizes a whole play. (*Plays*, 1934).

To Stein, this whole circus quality of the theatrical event is an integral part of the play and the performance. In this regard she anticipated one of the most essential traits of performance theatre: its non-fictional character and focus on what German theatre professor Hans-Thies Lehmann has called the *shared space* of theatre or *das TheatReale*: in performance art the performer does not play a fictional character, but is simply present with her body in the concrete space and moment of performance. But significantly, Stein's insistence on the physical presence in the theatre does not mean that she gives up the textual or representational layers of the play. Instead she conceives of the play as a performative interplay between stage and audience, and between meaning and matter.

This continuity between the representational and the real is also articulated in her concept of the play as landscape which she coined around 1922. By defining the play as a landscape, Stein implies that she does not want to write dramatical plays with a fictional, linear plot. Instead she tries to create a kind of text that is able to produce visual relationships between characters and objects in a spatial presence and simultaneity.

These landscape plays do not create a fictive universe in any conventional sense. Rather, they generate visual compositions in a scenic space. In this way, they anticipate certain forms of performance theater like for example Robert Wilson's early productions.

In Stein's landscape plays, the psychological character is no longer at the center of the plot or in control of the dialogue. Rather, the characters seem to materialize out of language itself, when a collage of voices performatively evoke a universe of shifting visual and emotional patterns.

Stein's characters may be busy moving around in their landscape of words, but the plot is seemingly static. As Stein explains in her lecture on *Plays* from 1934: "A landscape if it ever did go away would have to go away to stay." Her characters perform actions that are not involved in any sort of narrative progression, and without any dramatic culmination.

One of the techniques Stein employs in order to avoid a psychological drama is to multiply her characters. In *Four Saints In Three Acts* from 1927, each character seems to appear in numerous different incarnations like in these lines of Saint Therese's:

Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.
Saint Therese. There are very many many saints in it.
Saint Therese. There are as many saints as there are in it.
Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.
Saint Therese. There are there are there are saints saints in it.
(*Four Saints in Three Acts*: 456-57.)

Here you see, how Saint Therese is mentioned again for every new line of hers, implying either that she appears in as many versions at one and the same time, or that she changes from moment to moment and is somehow a different character for each line she speaks. Even more significant is the fact that Stein does *not* make clear exactly how many saints there are in the play. This will depend on the production and the director's choices, not the author's.

In *Everybody's Autobiography* from 1936, she explicitly states that:

When I see a thing it is not a play for me, because the minute I see it it ceases to be a play for me, but when I write something that somebody else can see then it is a play for me. (*Everybody's Autobiography*: 199).

Here Stein clearly breaks with the author's authority and the privilege of the text over performance. And she does so without abandoning the text itself, but by employing an already performative mode of writing. By writing plays which are themselves verbal performances.

Now I would like to show you some stills from Robert Wilson's German production of Gertrude Stein's play *Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights* from 1938 – the play we are going to see a workshop production of later this afternoon. This play, which is actually one of Stein's most narrative plays, has a female protagonist with a double double name: She is called Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. So of course we have a problem of identity: is she one or is she really several personalities. But in the play, this trouble with identity is articulated as a spatial problem, as a wordplay between being here or being there.

I'll just read you some lines of the text where Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is lost in the wild woods:

Once I am in I will never be through the woods are there and I am here and am I here or am I there, oh where oh where is here oh where oh where is there and animals wild animals are everywhere. (603)

Throughout the whole piece, this word-play on being here or there continues, all the time posing the problem of identity as a question of place.

Wilson has three different actresses play the composite character of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, and all three are on stage at the same time. He also has three actors play Faustus, and he has two actors play Mephisto.

What I hope to show you in these stills, is how Wilson in his choreography reflects the doublings and displacements of identity in Stein's words.

Wilson's choreographic patterns realise Stein's unstable and permutable characters in an immediate and concrete way, where the characters are dispersed in the scenic space like figures in a landscape.

(The Wooster Group in their production of the same piece used a somehow opposite strategy and had each actor play several characters in two different stories at one and the same time, while doubling and redoubling them through monitors and other technologies of transmission).

The possibility in this play of having the same character doing several different things and moving in different directions at one and the same time, gives a complexity to the plot. The characters can so to speak follow several lines of action at the same time, in the course of the same performance.

Like a cubist painting, the play may realize several different aspects of a character at one and the same time. [Stein's composite characters can be said to represent the many potential possibilities that are present at every moment in each and every person.]

In trying to describe Stein's deconstruction of the dramatic character, Andrzej Wirth wrote in 1982, and I've translated from the German text, as best I could:

Gertrude Stein's special position in the dramatic literature of the thirties depends on her emphasis on the meta-language of drama and theatre and her consequent use of a system of secondary language codes as the primary level of language. This was probably the most radical step, to make drama abstract through the dissolution of the figure (...) (Wirth, 1982).

One of the first students in Giessen to be exposed to Wirth's experiments with theatrical form, was German director and playwright René Pollesch. And the main characteristic of Pollesch's plays may, directly or indirectly, be traced back to what Wirth here defines as the most radical step in Stein's deconstruction of the drama: the dissolution or dissolving of the character into the discourse.

Pollesch's characters have no consistent, fictional identity. They are reduced to fields of fluid, merging and combatting discourses, and this all-pervasive flow of discourse undermines every attempt at establishing a distinct identity. In Pollesch, the characters are no longer the agents of a dramatic dialogue, but rather their momentary identities are themselves only effects of the flow of discourses that they are exposed to and in which they grapple for some firm ground under their feet:

C There is this hotel, and people do not only sleep there; they all work there.

N In this hotel – and it looks like a multistory office building – and there you can sell your subjectivity via notebook. And write some e-mails to your staff or to your punters, if you ARE A WHORE! Or to STAFF OR OTHER SUBORDINATES, IF YOU ARE A WHORE!

T And it offers all these services which allow you to work in this hotel.

C And the furnishings look frigging ugly, but all the other offers are attractive. All the stuff you don't see. This factory which produces an idea of home.

T All services here are somehow attractive. And real. They are all so REAL, THE FEELINGS WHICH ARE SHOWN FOR ME AND THE PERSONAL SYMPATHY! FUCK!

N I am in this hotel, and there are these fluent transitions between living and working!

C And everybody works here, in this hotel. And they plug their notebooks in, in these ISDN-hotels!

T Although the hotel offers home or produces it, everybody works here.

N Insourcing of labor and home in hotels!

(René Pollesch: *Insourcing des Zuhause: Menschen in Scheiss-Hotels*, transl. Bettina Brandl-Risi).

Here we see, how discourses from different spheres of work and privacy melt together, how feelings become service offers in a complete confusion of what we used to think of as different spheres.

Now the point is of course, that what in Stein is a liberating force – the possibility of acting out different social identities and roles – in Pollesch becomes a crisis because the demand for change has itself become a normative, capitalist imperative.

The *dramaturgical* point, however is, that in order to articulate this changed perception of reality and identity, the theatre has had to deconstruct some of its most fundamental and normative dramatic conventions. It has had to become postdramatic. Gertrude Stein's deconstruction of the unity of dramatic character has been one of the major contributions to this change of the fundamental assumptions of theatre. And the first step in Stein's deconstruction of the drama was to reconceive the relationship between text and performance not as based in a mimetic similarity but in an irreducible difference: by writing her plays in such a way that the performance on the stage could never be reduced to a threedimensional illustration of the words on the page, but would have to develop its own compositional expression with theatrical means.

Just like her characters change with their shifting spatial contexts, their identity dependent on their social, spatial and compositional relations with other characters and objects in space, so too her plays are meant to change with every new reading and performance.

Thank you.