Die Ermittler – A Dialogue about Displacement, Refuge, and Home

Figure 1 a-c: Projection onto the Goethe-Schiller statue in Weimar and the start of a dialogue between German citizens and the refugee newcomers to Weimar.

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Abstract

The Goethe-Schiller monument at the centre of Weimar's Theatre Square is a tourist attraction that embodies German national cultural heritage. In summer 2016, an interactive participatory live projection mapping lent refugees in Weimar a voice by projecting them onto the statues of German poets Goethe and Schiller and to engage Weimar citizens in a dialogue.

Author Keywords

media architecture; participatory art; video.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The Goethe-Schiller monument at the centre of Weimar's Theatre Square is a tourist attraction that embodies German national cultural heritage. The sign on the statue reads: «To the poets Goethe and Schiller, the Homeland». But what do «home» and «national identity» mean to the citizens of Weimar today? And what do refugees have to say about belonging? Krzysztof Wodiczko, pioneer of projection art in public spaces, and Bauhaus-Universität Weimar created an interactive projection mapping for the Kunstfest Weimar that enabled the audience to lend the statue their voice

Figure 2. Close-up of projection.

'There were supposed to be just 15 person, and they put 60 person. Some loose their papers cause they had to throw the baggage outside to make more space for people.'

'It was impossible to think about swimming 12 hours. I just want to reach the island. I know when I reach ground, I can do it, I can walk 1-2 years to reach my dream.'

'We are normal persons, like you. (…) because we come from another country or have another religion – that's not a reason.'

'I didn't choose to be Syrian or my friend here don't choose to be Iraqian, or no-one ever choose his nationality'

'Mother, I thank you, it was your idea. I didn't forget, I will miss you. I told you I will not change, you can trust me always. I will study and go with my future.'

'I hope to wake up one day and see everything, it was just a dream.'

Quotes from the newcomers.

and face, shown on two nights in August 2016. The objective of this participatory project was to establish a dialogue between people „from here" and people „from there", taking a stand against fear and othering, in light of the political landscape in Germany.

Figure 3. The statue in context (during tests, at dawn).

We transformed the public square into an interactive 'Speakers' Corner', to serve those otherwise invisible, un-heard and dis-respected. In Wodiczko's stance those traumatized and silent people need democratic re-animation just as do monuments [4,5]. Video of people's faces and arms is projected onto the statue of Goethe and Schiller. The projection makes the statues appear alive, and lends authority to the speaker, a compelling effect given it gives refugees a platform to talk about their experience. The event used a mix of live and pre-recorded video. Pre-recorded video created a topical framing, and enabled us to continue projecting when there was no live material. Audience members were invited into a recording studio to talk to a refugee and 'be one of the statues'. Moreover, audience members could ascend a staircase installation on the square

to ask questions to the current people embodying Schiller and Goethe. In this way the square becomes a platform for dialogue between people who do not usually come into contact in daily life.

A thematic origin was the work of author Peter Weiss, whose experiences of emigration, alienation, and war trauma, as well as his method of documentary matter inspired theatrical-collage. Wodiczko uses similar themes in his work and engages current political events, usually staged as a video projection in public space [4, 3]. The idea was inspired by Wodiczko's prior work, such as the projection of war veterans onto the Union Square monument of Abraham Lincoln in New York, giving them a platform to share their trauma with the public. 'Die Ermittler' extends this approach by shifting the autoactive narrative to a public dialogue. It also goes beyond participatory art installations that rely on audience engagement [2] as it turns audience members into public performers who determine and 'author' the content. Instead of embodying a statement into an artefact, the creators' work lies in creating the conditions for a dialogue.

Background
Germany has been the top destination for asylum-seekers. In the first three months of 2016, nearly a third of all people seeking asylum headed here. Since March 2012, because of the situation in Syria, the Federal Office granted at least subsidiary protection to all Syrian nationals, unless they could be granted full refugee status or asylum. Germany's decision to take in refugees has resulted in a severe split in public opinion. Many inhabitants, especially in areas not used to immigrants, fear loosing out (economically or in terms of not feeling at home anymore), and ultra-right parties ex-

ploit the situation to their advantage. Many Germans have never spoken to a refugee, and have prejudices and tacit fears. The 'newcomers' to Germany also feel as strangers in a strange land, unsure if they are welcome, how to adapt, while often traumatized from their experience. This alienates them, so they feel uncomfortable to speak up. Besides of encouraging a direct dialogue, our performance was intended to be a conversation piece that gives people something to discuss, regardless of whether they become participants or not.
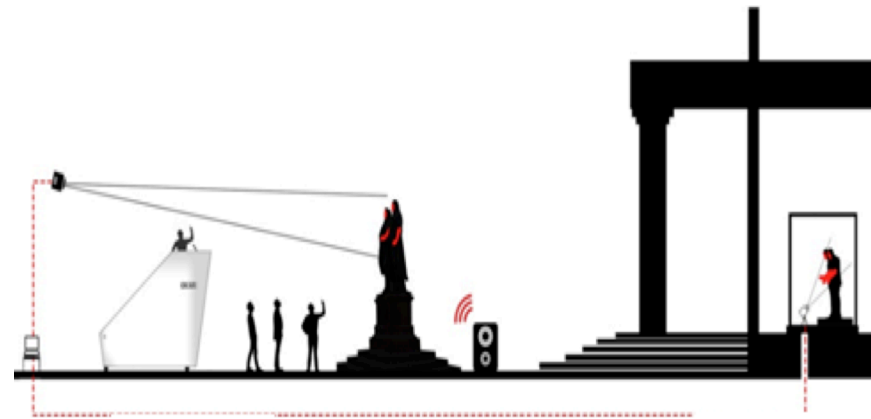

Figure 5. Set-up, from left: projector, Monument Questioning Platform (stairs), statue and speakers, theatre building, inside, recording studio (MAS) and control room.

Several reasons made Theaterplatz ideal for this piece. Here is the Deutsches Nationaltheater, where the first German "Weimar Republic" was declared in 1919. One of the core pillars of a democracy is dialogue between inhabitants. The square as a symbol of democracy was ideal for a dialogue on newcomers entering into a society. The newcomers speak through the statues of Goethe and Schiller, two German icons and embodiment of its classical period. The statues act as messengers from the past to talk to people of today about current events. Another twist is that Schiller himself was a refugee, as he had to run from political persecution.

The physical installation and setup

"Die Ermittler" has four key parts as an installation. The two most visible for the public were the Monument Questioning Platform (stairs) and the statue that video was projected onto. The remaining parts were located inside the German National Theater foyer. The stage direction team in the theatre controlled the content for the projection (figure 8 top row). This alternated every

Figure 4. The recording studio (also termed: Monument Animation Studio - MAS) set up in the theatre entrance, with participants being made ready for live recording and mapping.

20 minutes between pre-recorded and live video. Prerecorded video was filmed in prior months using the same positioning rig on which the live participants were captured in the recording studio (figure 4).

The overall setup (figure 5) consisted of: 1) a *recording studio* inside the theatre (figure 4), where live content was captured, with two people conversing while standing on a positioning rig, which fixed them in the statue's posture (figures 6, 7). The 2) *control center* was located adjacent, so the stage direction team could see what was going on. The people on the positioning rig were 3) projected onto the *statue of Goethe and Schiller*. After some experimentation, we decided to project heads and lower arms, which gave aesthetically best results. The arms were important to map, adding expression and revealing emotional state, as well as emphasizing the dialogue situation (Goethe has his hand on Schiller's shoulder and they jointly hold a laurel wreath). Finally, the audience had the opportunity to directly converse with the statues,
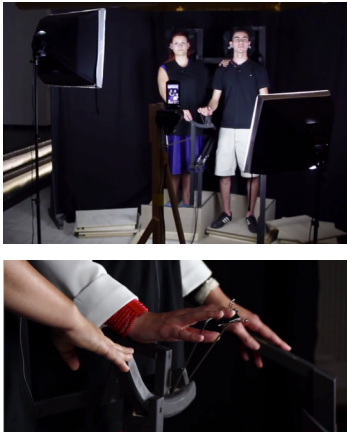
Figure 6. Volunteers on rig and detail of armrest ensuring positioning in alignment with statue.
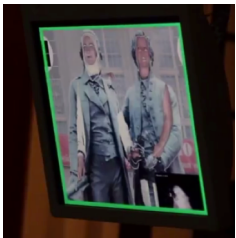

Figure 7. Preview for performers. Unpainted rig version.

Figure 8. top row: The recording studio seen from the control center area. The control center, with crew monitoring the performance and controlling the software that maps video sections onto the statue (the windows on the screen show heads and arms). Lower row: View on the plaza, with the Monument Questioning Platform facing the statue and a woman talking to the people in the studio. (stills from video documentation)

respectively the current inhabitants of the recording studio (on the rig), by 4) ascending a large stand-alone *staircase* facing the statue, the *Monument Questioning Platform* (figures 9-12).

The positioning rig in the recording studio
The performers had to take a pose similar to the statue for the "illusion" of a living statue to work, and their limbs to remain visible. This was the main purpose of the rig (figure 6, 7). Its height can be adjusted for different body heights. Arm rests ensure placement of arms and hands. To restrict head movement, we provided a cushioned head support. Participants on the rig could see a preview image of themselves mapped onto the statue on small screens directly in their view (figure 7), so they could gesture and then had visual
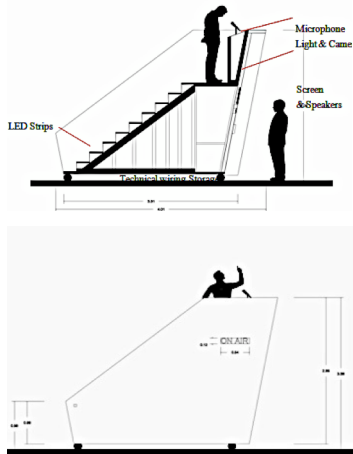
Figure 9. Architectural sketches for the MQP staircase structure.

Figure 10. Daytime view

Figure 11. Top of stairs, with microphone and webcam.

support to return to the default posture. Before going live, new performers had to throw on a large black t-shirt with a microphone. They were measured and we then tested if their stature would match the statue they chose to speak for. We further engaged them in dialogue to prepare for the live situation and think about what to say.

Monument Questioning Platform (staircase)
As an object, the staircase attracted attention and raised curiosity during setup already (figure 10). The structure is composed of stairs leading up to a speaking platform (at 2m height) with a microphone, lights, and a camera, for the audience to go up and speak directly to the statue in the live situation (figure 11), while the performers in the recording studio would be able to hear and see the interlocutor and answer. During the show, the steps are highlighted with LED light strips. A signal (ON AIR) on the side and top of the structure lights up to indicate the beginning of a live transmission (figures 8, 12).

Control center
The live video was processed in TouchDesigner. The control crew (figure 8, bottom row) could adjust the audio and live video feed (e.g. remapping when participants departed from the initial posture), using a Photoshop masking input file to manually select the body parts projected and the Kantan Mapper tool [1], to activate the MQP microphone, or to switch over to prerecorded footage. A hardware MIDI controller was used to control the system, as this was faster and easier than on-screen buttons. The crew in the control center further could see what was going on on the plaza and on the staircase via video feeds from surveillance cameras.

Figure 12. The stairs set in front of the statue on the plaza. From up here, one is almost at eye level with the statue.

Development process
Over several months, the physical design for the installation was ideated and developed, the concept for the performance iteratively refined, software for projection mapping developed and tested, and the overall process for the event trialled and prepared. Moreover, contact with local refugee organizations was established. We invited these for a social event and explained the project, asking to visit us for the interviews. This not only provided us with video to select segments from for 'pre-recorded video', but also to gain experience on how to facilitate and interview the volunteers on the day, given interviews could touch on challenging subjects. This pre-phase was important for establishing contact with the refugee community, on whose participation the event crucially depended. Various social gatherings were organized whenever the artistic director was in Weimar, to ensure the refugees felt involved in the project and could provide us with feedback. A number of refugees came to work with us repeatedly

"I came from Afghanistan this year, I passed 10 countries, and every time police was after us. (…) police shot gun, sometimes police arrest some people."

"Didn't your family want to come here or couldn't they?"

"2 months before, my father, in a bomb explosion in Afghanistan, dead. And after that my mother said you must go from this country. (…) I saw your father dead and I don't want to see my son dead."

"Did you plan to come to Germany?"

"I was working as a coordinator in the media and (...) the Taliban say to all people who work in media, that will kill those people."
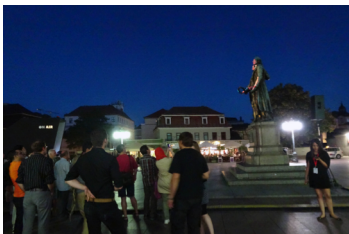
Dialogue from the pre-recordings

Figure 13. The public observing.

and took part in the live event, embodying the statues and answering live questions from audience members. One of our main concerns was gaining participants' trust to share their emotions and personal experiences. We were rather surprised, how comfortable some were in expressing their emotions in a foreign language, and it was interesting how they often helped each other translate or tell a story during the recording sessions.

Figure 14. Onlookers watching a conversation.

Reflection and Experiences

General feedback from the audience was good. Many people we spoke to said they never before talked or listened to refugees about their journeys, lives or feelings, even if they follow the news, so this was the first time these experiences became 'real' to them. Many stayed and watched for a long time (figures 13, 14).

Language was a serious barrier, as many audience members did not understand English and only few refugees spoke sufficient German. As many local people also wanted to be Goethe and Schiller, we paired some with a refugee, which created a dialogue situation with locals and newcomers on equal footing. Over the two

performance days, we constantly learned how to better prepare participants both for the Goethe-Schiller part (thinking of what to say and possibly rehearse) and for the questioning role (asking them what they would want to ask, suggesting questions if they lacked ideas and engaging them in conversation until it was their turn, so they would not get nervous). Many were interested in talking to the refugees but hesitated to do so in public. Still, a lot of interesting conversations took place, starting with questions of what food is missed most, what activities they engage with to pass the time, why they came to Germany, whether they still refer to themselves as 'refugees and asylum seekers' after a full year's stay, what surprised them about Germany, to the question, what we Germans could learn from *their* culture. Many conversations dealt with language courses and certificates that refugees have to do, which constitute a large part of their daily routine, and are evidently proud of when successfully completed. The most memorable situation might be one person asking why it was the Germans who were asking questions to refugees – why do they have to explain themselves all the time and to justify why they are here?

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