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Wanna Play?

## Dries Verhoeven and the Limits of Non-Professional Performance

In October 2014, Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer (HAU)—one of Germany's most influential performance venues, programming and often co-producing work by artists such as Rimini Protokoll, Jérôme Bel, Meg Stuart and Gob Squad—opened its new season with a festival called *Treffpunkte* (meeting points).<sup>1</sup> Conceptually, the month-long festival was located at the intersection of some of the major trends in contemporary Western theatre and performance, particularly the interest 'in curating intimacy in public' (Walsh 2014: 57; Read 2008), the renegotiation of theatre's place in the public sphere (Balme 2014; Haedicke 2013) and the relation of socially engaged performance, in the broadest sense, to late global capitalism (Jackson 2011; Harvie 2013). Its explicit aim was to explore, through the means of performance, 'the status of the private in the public sphere' (den Status des Privaten in der öffentlichen Sphäre) and to find out whether 'intimacy' (Intimität)—equated with an authentic 'communication between people' (Kommunikation zwischen Menschen)—was still possible 'in an age where the public space has been entirely pervaded by market conformity' (im Zeitalter der totalen Durchdringung des öffentlichen Raumes durch das Marktförmige) (Vanackere 2014: 2).<sup>2</sup>

However, shortly after the beginning of the festival, the theatre made headlines not for the discovery of intimacy despite the forces of late global capitalism, but precisely for the opposite: the alleged violation of intimate spheres, related to a staging of real people who—at least in some cases—did not know that they were being staged. Specifically, the headlines referred to one of the performances commissioned by the theatre. In *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)*, Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven installed himself in a glass container on Heinrichplatz in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. In this confined and transparent space, understood by Verhoeven as a temporary home and 'a materialized chat box' (2014b), the artist wanted to live for a total of fourteen days, his 'only contact with the outside world' being the internet (Verhoeven 2014b). The whole front of the rectangular elevated container, wider than it was deep, was made out of glass, while the back wall was covered completely by a large LED screen in widescreen format.<sup>3</sup> On this screen, spectators and passers-by were able to follow, in real time, Verhoeven's online conversations, made mostly through the popular Grindr dating app, which was launched in 2009 and is used—according to the company's website—by 'more than 5 million guys in 192 countries' in order to '[f]ind local gay, bi and curious guys' (grindr.com). Based on a smart phone's geolocation, the app lets users find other users who are nearby, giving them a list of profile pictures arranged by proximity, and allowing them to make contact, e.g., to send pictures or to chat.

In a published concept paper for his project, Verhoeven contrasts the pornographic imagination allegedly incited by Grindr—where the face of the other would become a projection screen for ‘sexual fantasies’—with the ‘intimacy and affection’ of ‘more vulnerable longings’ (2014b). Providing, through its container stage, what the artist conceives of as a ‘research laboratory’ and a ‘social experiment’ (Verhoeven 2014b), *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)* sets out to enact this criticism of digital culture by moving from the ‘virtual’ to the ‘actual’. The performance had Verhoeven contact men throughout Berlin and especially in Kreuzberg, a culturally and ethnically very diverse area of the city that is well known both for its affiliations with pop cultural movements from punk to hip-hop as well as for being home to a well-established LGBT community.<sup>4</sup> Verhoeven’s online chats, including the contributions of his contacts and their—slightly distorted—profile pictures, were visible for everyone at Heinrichplatz and were simultaneously streamed on a now defunct website ([wannaplayberlin.de](http://wannaplayberlin.de)). Usually, the artist would not tell his chat partners at the beginning of their online conversation that they were part of a theatre performance located in public. In a sense, he thus turned them into unwitting non-professional theatre performers, albeit at this stage still mediated through the internet. During the course of their conversation, however, the artist would invite his chat partners to visit him ‘in order to mutually fulfil non-sexual longings’ (Verhoeven 2014b). Verhoeven’s rhetoric of vulnerability and intimacy surrounding these visits, as opposed to the sexual ‘templates’ at work in Grindr (Verhoeven 2014b), present them as a meaningful encounter. In a statement given after the end of the production, Verhoeven claims that at this point he informed each of his contacts about what to expect on Heinrichplatz, i.e., that they would continue to be—now in flesh and blood—more or less exposed as participants in a theatre performance, although with the option to draw a semi-transparent curtain around the elevated container stage (2014c).

Only once, according to the artist, did the flow of the conversation carry him away, when he merely told his chat partner that ‘his living arrangements were “out of the ordinary”’, asking “shall I tell you, or shall I keep it as a surprise?”” (2014c). The man, who could not have known what this ‘surprise’ would entail, opted for the latter. When he arrived at Heinrichplatz and found that the—in his understanding private—conversation with Verhoeven had been put on display, he ‘stormed’ the container stage, punched the artist and threatened to sue the theatre. The man also released a statement on Facebook, claiming that ‘the autonomy and power over my sexual expression was taken and abused without my consent for Mr. Verhoeven’s own personal gain’ (qtd. in Cascone 2014), thus raising the question of agency in non-professional performance. This incident occurred on the second day of *Wanna Play?*, and ultimately led to the production’s cancellation three days later, on 5 October 2014. Throughout the heated debates during and after the performance’s run—on Twitter, Facebook, and a series of mostly LGBT weblogs as well as in the pages of Berlin-based national newspapers and two roundtable discussions organised by the theatre—the HAU, while admitting to some mistakes, most notably the insufficient distortion of profile pictures, maintained that ‘there was no violation of private rights’ (artistic director Annemie Vanackere, qtd. in Schnorrenberg 2014).<sup>5</sup> No legal action was taken, and despite the considerable uproar caused in Berlin, the project was repeated, with some changes to its privacy protocol, at the SPRING performance festival in Utrecht at the end of May 2015. While Verhoeven still did not tell his chat partners at the beginning of their conversation that they were part of a theatre performance, their initial contributions to the chat were blurred in this iteration of *Wanna Play?* In contrast to the artist’s approach during the Berlin production, at the SPRING festival he would explicitly ask for consent before making his contacts’ chat contributions readable. In contrast to its premiere, this version of Verhoeven’s performance ran for its planned total of ten days and did not gather much media attention.

In the following, I will focus on *Wanna Play?*'s first iteration during the *Treffpunkte* festival in Berlin and explore it as a site for the performance and dissemination of a still popular discourse of avant-garde theatre as non-commodified—and thus inherently subversive—practice. While critics such as Claire Bishop (2012), Jen Harvie (2013) and Nicholas Ridout (2013) have complicated all-too-easy notions of the relationship between socially engaged art and late global capitalism, their interest—encompassing different degrees of scepticism—lies, as Harvie puts it, in investigating 'how participatory art and performance practices might productively resist but also, damagingly, contribute to neoliberal governmentality' (2013: 16). My reading of *Wanna Play?* takes a different perspective. Rather than examining the use of non-professional performers as 'evidence of precarious labour' within an economy that 'artists are more likely to sustain [...] than to challenge' (Bishop 2012: 231), I ask how *Wanna Play?* performs the very distinction between a commodified public sphere and the paradoxically 'intimate' site of theatre allegedly resisting the economic.

This distinction is 'performed' not only in the sense of being staged, i.e., that the setup of Verhoeven's project *represents* such a differentiation, but also in the sense that *Wanna Play?* can be read as contributing to the *production* of the larger discourse it reiterates. Thus, my focus is not on the—albeit still important—question of how theatre navigates resistance and complicity with the socio-economic order but rather of how theatre's attempt to escape this order can in itself become damaging. This has to do with the fact that a project such as *Wanna Play?* performs the distinction between theatre and its alleged other as hierarchical: Here, the equation of intimacy and theatre is ascribed a higher value than the equation of the public sphere and the market. Ultimately, as I will argue, this hierarchical distinction allows Verhoeven and the HAU to insist, against evidence to the contrary, that 'there was no violation of private rights' (Schnorrenberg 2014). Because this distinction enables the conceptualisation of a staging of real people that problematically claims to liberate them from a life controlled by market forces – epitomised, in Verhoeven's performance, by Social Networking Sites – it thus, in a sense, makes them real only in the moment of appearing on stage. According to this dubious logic, if they were not real before, they could not be hurt.

### Love and the Market

Neither the HAU nor Verhoeven could have foreseen the extent of public debate surrounding their production. However, the *Treffpunkte* festival—in line with the theatre's broader claim for its relevance within Berlin and society at large—definitely aimed at multiplying its potential audiences, and at using aesthetics to generate a form of what Jacques Rancière terms 'dissensus' (Rancière 2010). In this sense, *Wanna Play?*'s reach across different media platforms and actual sites beyond Heinrichplatz is paradigmatic of Western theatre's increasingly 'distributed aesthetics' between the 'situated' and the 'dispersed' (Balme 2014: 174–78), while Verhoeven's claim to facilitate meaningful encounters through art as a 'social experiment' (2014b) seems to be informed by Nicolas Bourriaud's influential description of contemporary 'relational' art as 'a state of encounter' (2002: 18).<sup>6</sup>

In *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (2014), Christopher Balme analyses Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (*Please Love Austria!*) as a critical model for the use of 'distributed aesthetics' in theatre. For his performance, staged in June 2000 as a reaction against the newly formed Austrian government—a coalition between the conservative ÖVP and the right-wing FPÖ—Schlingensiefel placed containers on a square in front of the Vienna State Opera, insisting that they were inhabited by real asylum seekers. Emulating the format of the then-popular reality TV show *Big Brother*, people across the country were asked to 'vote out' their least favourite 'candidate' who would then be deported from Austria.<sup>7</sup> Balme argues that Schlingensiefel's performance was successful on

account of two strategic moves. First, due to ‘a substitution of the normal metaphorical mode of theatrical representation by metonymy’ (2014: 180), i.e., the claim—regardless of its truth value—that asylum seekers in general were represented by a select number of ‘real’ asylum seekers rather than by actors playing their roles. Second, by drawing on the *Big Brother* format, the performance operated with a dispersion of spectatorship across the public sphere. Balme distinguishes ‘interested and disinterested live bystanders, media viewers who watch the performance on the Internet and possibly vote; the wider media audience who followed the five days from the relative comfort of their living rooms by newspaper, radio and television’ (Balme 2014: 182). While all of these spectators ‘participated’ in the performance, ‘their functions [were] quite different’ (Balme 2014: 182).

Verhoeven’s performance had the potential to generate a similar spectrum of spectator participation, e.g., passers-by on Heinrichplatz, people watching the live stream, others discussing the performance on Facebook and Twitter, and, last but not least, those entering the container, thus becoming participants in a more narrow sense—metonymically standing in for the larger group of Grindr users. However, even though both Verhoeven’s and Schlingensiefel’s performances installed their containers as paradoxically ‘private’ spaces within the public sphere, participation across the blurred boundaries of public and private was regulated quite differently in both cases. In *Bitte liebt Österreich!*, the container—albeit under video surveillance—was closed except for peep holes and only opened once a day to allegedly deport one of its inhabitants. In contrast, Verhoeven’s container was open, both in the sense of having glass walls and of being a site of encounter between the artist and his contacts. Paradoxically, whereas Schlingensiefel’s closed yet monitored container disrupts the idea of ‘home’ as being a private, safe and homely space, the very openness of Verhoeven’s container ‘tightens the space of relations’ (Bourriaud 2002: 15; original emphasis) by imagining it as a site for seemingly banal practices of everyday life to be mutually fulfilled by Verhoeven and his encounters.

Both in Utrecht and Berlin, *Wanna Play?* had an intentionally episodic and repetitive structure: Verhoeven would set a task for himself, clearly written out on top of the container screen, starting with the words ‘find someone to...’ followed by, for instance, ‘make pancakes with’ or ‘mutually shave’. The actual encounters—usually behind drawn curtains—that alternated with the chat sequences were thus framed as the fulfilment of these rather banal and exchangeable tasks. However, it is precisely due to their banality, exchangeability and repetitiveness that these tasks and their intended actions could epitomise what the *Treffpunkte* festival strove for, as quoted above: ‘intimacy’ as an authentic ‘communication between people’ (Vanackere 2014: 2). In this sense, Verhoeven’s tasks and their position within his performance and the Berlin festival at large can be conceptualised with regard to Niklas Luhmann’s sociological explanation of intimate love as ‘a symbolic code which shows how to communicate effectively in situations where this would otherwise appear improbable’ (1986: 8–9). In this type of communication, ‘people lower their relevance thresholds with the result that what one regards as relevant almost always is also held relevant by the other’ (Luhmann 1986: 158). Within the framework of *Wanna Play?*, practices such as mutual shaving and the shared making of pancakes can structurally—i.e., without asking whether they actually *produce* intimacy—be understood as casting the artist and the non-professional performer he encounters as the ‘one’ and the ‘other’ of Luhmann’s ‘intimate’ communication. The practices of everyday life mutually performed by Verhoeven and his partners are, in this sense, used to stage the intimacy of theatre, as opposed to seemingly more ‘relevant’ issues in the market sphere. Surrounding the glass container, Heinrichplatz becomes the metonymic embodiment of the economic system, with people going about their daily lives.

In its criticism of the larger public sphere through the means of performance, Verhoeven's project seems characteristic of Annemie Vanackere's larger conceptualisation of the role of theatre. When she took over the artistic directorship of the HAU in 2012, Vanackere imagined the latter to be 'a free space where compulsory, fixed, and solidified ideas can be suspended to a certain extent and held in abeyance. Only those who listen to aesthetic processes, who can value them as an open question, can unfold their true political explosiveness' (2012). Vanackere also stated that she wanted her 'not-immediately-being-in-agreement with what people are trying to sell me as truth' (2012) to be injected back into the city as a means to open up discussion and critical engagement. At least conceptually, the *Treffpunkte* festival closely followed this approach in which a singular artistic vision ('me') is used to question, within the public sphere of 'the city', an alleged general consensus ('compulsory, fixed and solidified ideas') against which theatre is then positioned as the 'free space' of potential resistance. Located 'at public and semi-public sites throughout Berlin' (an öffentlichen und halböffentlichen Orten im Stadtraum Berlins), the *Treffpunkte* productions were supposed to take their starting point 'from a position of radical subjectivity' (aus einer Position radikaler Subjektivität) in order to scrutinise 'not only the situation of our contemporary society at this precise moment in time, but also our private, personal existence' (nicht nur die Situation, in der sich unsere Gesellschaft in genau diesem Moment befindet, sondern gleichermaßen unsere private, persönliche Existenz) (Vanackere 2014: 2).

Vanackere's quote conflates the 'radical subjectivity' of the artist, the personal situation of an unspecified 'us' and the problems of society at large. *Wanna Play?* operates with a similar conflation, as it aims at generating a 'meaningful' encounter between individuals, namely the artist and the non-professional performers who serve as chat partners, and uses the 'us' thus created to criticise the larger socio-economic frame of digital culture. Read in this light, Vanackere's belief that 'there was no violation of private rights' (Schnorrenberg 2014) is something else than merely a legal precaution. It is made possible because non-professional performers, even though a necessary prerequisite for *Wanna Play?* in their contribution to the chats as well as in their potential encounter with the artist on stage, become a blind spot in Verhoeven's performance. As I will argue, this is mostly due to sometimes unacknowledged assumptions about the autonomy of theatre, the role of the artist in socially engaged practice and the performance protocols of digital media. While I will be careful not to generalise too easily from what seems to be an unusual example of 'staging real people', I hope to explore through this case study some potential limits of non-professional performance. Especially, I am interested in how 'the digital' complicates notions of staging real people and how a normative discourse of the avant-garde might come into tension with the liberatory potential of theatre by non-professional performers. Within this context, I define the rather broad category of 'liberation' as encompassing practices as varied as theatre therapy (Warstat 2011), the alleged empowerment of spectators through participation (Kattwinkel 2003) or the promise to escape the constraints of everyday life through 'play' as referenced in the title of Verhoeven's project.

### **The 'Radical Subjectivity' of the Artist**

One of the reasons why *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)* is somewhat unusual with regard to the staging of real people is Vanackere's claim that the performance proceeds from a 'position of radical subjectivity' (2014: 2). Her view is echoed by the artist, who has repeatedly stressed, both before the actual production as well as after its cancellation, that *Wanna Play?* draws on his 'own situation' as 'a more or less carefree practicing homosexual [...] to ask questions' about larger cultural and social developments (Verhoeven 2014b), thus framing the performance 'as a "self-portrait"' (Verhoeven 2014c). In contrast to many contemporary theatre practices involving non-professional performers, e.g., the work of Berlin-based Rimini Protokoll,

Verhoeven's project did not aim at 'centralizing the narratives, bodies, and places of non-actors' by putting them on stage (Mumford 2013: 153). Nor did it strive for audience participation in the narrow sense of including 'the audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance' (White 2013: 4). While it was potentially possible for a chat partner of Verhoeven's to be physically present on Heinrichplatz or to have seen part of the performance before 'making contact', and thus to move from the position of spectator to participant, the project neither intended nor encouraged such a trajectory.

For its 'proper' functioning, *Wanna Play?* depended on the chat partners' initial ignorance of performing—through the real-time contribution of pictures and words—within a theatrical setting: 'at the start of the chat I purposely hid the intention of the project, I first spoke of my needs and then asked the other why they were online' (Verhoeven 2014c). This approach presupposes the exclusion of the unwitting, non-professional, theatre performers from the 'knowing' audience. In addition, the project had to rigidly follow a dramaturgy of the fourth wall—and thus to enact a clear separation between performers and spectators—based on its own conceptual premise. Paradoxically, Verhoeven's residence in a glass container on a public square was advertised as the artist 'shutting himself away from public life' with no 'contact' to 'the outside world' apart from the use of 'Grindr and other such apps' (Verhoeven 2014b). As a consequence, Verhoeven's own performance within the container never directly addressed the audience on Heinrichplatz, but staged a precarious illusion of privacy precisely through the exposure of daily routines such as sleeping, chatting, using the toilet, running on a treadmill, etc.

Architecturally, the separation between outside and inside was reinforced not only through the physical presence of the 'fourth wall' made of glass and the stage-like elevation of the container, but also by means of a security pit, further separating the audience on Heinrichplatz from the action on stage. Those who accepted Verhoeven's online invitation—in Berlin a total of 24 people, according to the artist (2014c)—entered through a steel door on the side of the container, and usually chose to have the curtains drawn. For the spectators and passers-by on Heinrichplatz, Verhoeven and his partners were thus reduced to shadowy figures until the end of their encounter. In this sense, the actual entrance of the non-professional performers as living bodies on the stage grants them more 'privacy' than before, when their slightly distorted profile pictures and online conversations were exposed on the LED screen. This decision to allow the use of curtains, I would argue, is not only due to pragmatic reasons, e.g., reducing the possibility of stage fright among potential performers and increasing the likelihood of people accepting Verhoeven's invitation. It also performs a specific relationship between digital media and live performance in which the internet becomes synonymous with neoliberal market values and the condition of constant surveillance ('the time of Grindr'), while theatre is positioned as the privileged site of intimacy and meaningful encounter ('love').<sup>8</sup>

### **The Entanglement of Life and Screen**

This division between theatre as love and digital media as economic structure entails larger implications for the staging of real people and indeed for the negotiation of what 'real' means within their social and theatrical performance. By placing the container stage with its large LED screen on a public square (i.e., in the middle of 'real life'), *Wanna Play?*—through its very setting—argues for the embeddedness of digital media in everyday social performance. It does so by constituting a 'digital performance' in the two senses outlined by Steve Dixon and Barry Smith. On the one hand, *Wanna Play?* is situated within a field of 'performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics or delivery forms' (2007: 3, original emphasis); on the other hand—and more importantly within the

context of this article—it presents ‘Internet communication [...] as a type of virtual performance of the self’ (2007: 3).

In *Wanna Play?*, the screen did not constitute a separate entity of Verhoeven’s theatrically exposed life. Rather, it showed the constant interaction between the daily routines that it quite literally framed through its sheer size, and the act of checking or using the apps that the large screen mirrored. In this regard, the performance made very clear that there is no easy distinction between life beyond and on the screen, but that ‘offline’ and ‘online’ are mutually dependent layers of the same reality. As sociologists Michael Liegl and Martin Stempfhuber argue, this interdependency becomes particularly evident when looking at social media apps based on geolocation. In the case of Grindr, ‘the constant *switching*, the simultaneity of face-to-face and interface-to-interface contacts is [the app’s] pragmatic logic of use. Instead of having the logic of “real” and the logic of “virtual” space compete with each other’, Grindr performs a ‘hybridisation’ of those spaces (2014: 31). When in public or semi-public places, users continually shift attention from their phone to their physical surroundings and vice versa, applying one layer of reality to the other. While Liegl and Stempfhuber, based on their empirical findings, describe this as an open process—moving back and forth from ‘face’ to ‘interface’ (2014: 32f.)—Verhoeven has a more sombre vision:

In gay bars I saw guys covertly checking their Grindr messages in a corner. The place was full of men, but approaching their digital counterparts entailed less risks than the analogue versions. [...] Had men suddenly lost their nerve? (2014b).

As one of the consequences, the artist imagines ‘a new closet’: the ‘young, homosexual person of today can keep his inclinations secret for longer by using apps like Grindr’ (2014b). While many sociologists conceive of this possibility as potentially liberating, in so far as apps like ‘Grindr allow sexual minorities to seek one another out within a not always hospitable culture’ (Gudelunas 2012: 360), Verhoeven—conflating the individual and the communal—defines it as his task to work against the alleged emergence of a new queer ‘invisibility’ (2014b). Even after the project’s cancellation and protests that *Wanna Play?*’s public exposure of Grindr profiles entailed the danger of forced outings (e.g. Schnorrenberg 2014), Verhoeven insisted: ‘as an artist, I have to position myself between critical reflection and empathy. I want to respect the feelings of others who I involve in my work, but I also feel the need to break-through [sic] the common consensus. They don’t always sit well together’ (Verhoeven 2014c).

In accordance with the ‘radical subjectivity’ approach taken by Verhoeven’s performance, the accompanying concept paper’s arguments are put forward in an autobiographical manner. Describing his own use of the dating app, the artist claims:

Grindr brought me more sex than ever before, but the app was untouched by any form of intimacy, we maintained a silent agreement that we could enact our porn fantasies on one another (2014b).

These fantasies, Verhoeven implies, are to a large degree determined by digital media: ‘the internet becomes the operating system that regulates our identity and social existence’ (2014a: 20). *Wanna Play?* takes Grindr and its users as paradigmatic of this development, since the performance, according to Verhoeven, is ‘about a world in which gay men imitate, in real life, the profiles that they see on the computer screen’ (2014a: 20)—profiles that he assumes to be largely fictional templates. Implicitly drawing on a rather static and highly problematic opposition between authentic self and virtual mask, the artist claims that his Grindr pictures ‘did not show the man that I was’ (2014b). Instead, they were a conflation of his reality with a set of commodified

public personae that are as such assumed to be removed from the realm of real people: ‘Dries Verhoeven meets [singer] Justin Timberlake meets [porn star] Jeff Stryker’ (2014b).

Hence, the artist ascribes a performative power to Grindr, in so far as it would constitute a reality allegedly governed by the laws of late global capitalism. To make this point, Verhoeven’s concept paper operates with a series of binary oppositions. In addition to the distinction between ‘real people’ and ‘public commodities’, chief among them are two visions framed as the artist’s ‘dystopia’. First, that Grindr may cause ‘the gay world to change from a community into a supermarket’, and second, that the app might become ‘a darkroom in which men weren’t looking for sex, but were veiling their desire for love’ (Verhoeven 2014b). *Wanna Play?* is then presented as a ‘counterproposal’ to such a view, i.e., Verhoeven’s performance is claimed as the privileged site of resistance against the performative power of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> As a ‘research laboratory’, the container stage would provide the framework for a ‘social experiment’ to explore whether dating apps would allow—against their alleged neoliberal determinism—an encounter with the real, reminiscent of Bourriaud’s vision for relational aesthetics according to which it ‘seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows’ (2002: 45). Articulating a similarly ‘small’ utopia, Verhoeven proposes the following research question: ‘Can we free ourselves from the existing templates and come up with new strategies for meeting with a man who is nearby? Or will I simply be blocked by the men in my vicinity?’ (2014b).

Rhetorically, Verhoeven’s binaries are based on avant-garde tropes of artistic experience, subjectivity, vision and transgression that easily lend themselves, as Bill Blake has argued, to a rejection of technological and socio-cultural processes (2014: 4–6). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the artist’s ‘radical subjectivity’ takes up a series of well-rehearsed arguments in media theory and cultural studies. Grindr’s alleged performative power, from which real people using the app seem unable to escape, echoes the media determinism of Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Friedrich Kittler (1999). Depicting the app as generating the real life embodiment of ‘porn fantasies’ (sex vs. love) seems informed by the ‘fear [...] that through pornography’ – and thus through the allegedly porn-like sex facilitated by Grindr—‘capitalism subjects the body to serial modes of production and regulation, thereby conceptualizing the body itself as a machine, one that can be manipulated and controlled’ (Schaschek 2013: 67). In contrast, intimacy and love, as promised by Verhoeven’s search for a meaningful encounter in theatrical performance, would constitute a reality outside the grasp of economics. To position Grindr as the opposite of this romantically informed and historically contingent notion of love (Giddens 1992: 37–47) is to take up standard criticisms of internet dating sites. According to sociologist Eva Illouz, for instance, ‘the Internet structures the search for a partner as a market or, more exactly, formalizes the search for a partner in the form of an economic transaction’ (2007: 88), thus further promoting the transformation of ‘the *private psychological self*’ into ‘a public performance’ (2007: 78, italics in original). From such a point of view, ‘the internet emerges as the archenemy of romantic love’, as it allegedly turns ‘the private self’ into ‘a commodity in the well-regulated public market’ (Wagner and Stempfhuber 2013: 384).

### **The Making of ‘Real People’**

During a roundtable discussion after *Wanna Play?*’s cancellation, Verhoeven claimed that the ‘biggest mistake’ he had made regarding the performance was to publish a concept paper in advance, because it ‘influenced people’s perception of the production’ (HAU 2014). Following this line of defence, my critical reading of Verhoeven’s text potentially obstructs a genuine engagement with his performance. Such a view seems to be supported by the fact that *Wanna*



*Play?* is framed as ‘social experiment’ and ‘research laboratory’ (Verhoeven 2014b), thus explicitly claiming an *open* discussion of socio-cultural issues through the means of aesthetics. However, the project’s relative lack of attention and care towards its non-professional performers is premised, I would argue, on assumptions that can be inferred from the concept paper and the actual staging of the project, and on their implications for the ‘real’ in social and theatrical performance. The logic of these assumptions can be summarised as follows.

First, *Wanna Play?* could allow itself to be careless about the projection of chat messages and user images precisely because it could claim to present Grindr profiles as largely fictional and commodified products in the sense outlined above. If being online is a ‘public performance’ governed by market conformity rather than by the performance of one’s ‘*private psychological self*’ (Illouz 2007: 78), then a careful or ‘ethical’ approach is not needed. Here, the underlying assumption is that the users have not only tacitly agreed to the market forces, but even modelled their online selves according to the logic of supply and demand. If one follows the dubious notion that the digital ‘public performance’ of real people means that they hide a ‘real’ self behind a product for the market sphere, then the projections are ‘masks’—rather than the ‘exposure’—of real people. In reality, the projections expose aspects of real people (e.g., their sexuality) without their consent.

Second, Verhoeven’s use of the Grindr app within *Wanna Play?* is necessarily predicated on a hierarchy of knowledge that it simultaneously performs. For the artist, the chat is part of a theatrical performance, while his contacts employ the app as part of their social performance without initially knowing that their contributions to the online conversation simultaneously enter the aesthetic frame. On the one hand, this reinforces an avant-garde discourse of the artist being entitled to transgress allegedly narrow-minded moralisms: ‘Starting the chat with an explanation of the project would have damaged its authenticity but would have been morally correct’ (Verhoeven 2014c). On the other hand, the information gap between the artist and his unwitting non-professional performers implicitly claims that behavioural changes are possible only through the power of theatrical performance. Everyone but the artist in his ‘radical subjectivity’ seems to be bound by ‘fixed and solidified ideas’ (Vanackere 2012).

This is related to the third point made by the performance: if the internet’s ‘fictions’ of public performance, produced by the pervasiveness of economic structures, allegedly determine how real people act instead of being part of their ‘act’, social performance ‘in the time of Grindr’ is restricted to a repetition of norms. As described above, *Wanna Play?* shows the entanglement of online and offline performance by theatrically exposing what is claimed to be Verhoeven’s life as a constant ‘switching’ between different layers of reality. While the highly problematical dichotomy of imaginary and authentic self, public performance and private being is thus destabilised, *Wanna Play?* reintroduces such a distinction by granting its non-professional performers the agency to draw the curtain precisely and only once they are about to enter the stage, thus establishing the latter as a more private space than digital media.

Through this act, the promise and possibility of privacy—and of potentially ‘authentic’ encounters—is delegated to theatrical performance. According to this dubious logic, the ‘real’ (of self-determined rather than market-regulated performance) only comes into existence when moving from the digitally informed realm of the everyday to the performance space. *Wanna Play?* is thus caught up at a precise historical moment in the history of Western theatre, at which the latter, as Christopher Balme argues, attempts to reclaim its relevance for the public sphere against the legacy of nineteenth century dramaturgies which have made ‘the darkened auditorium [...] to all intents and purposes a private space’ (2014: 3), an ‘intimate sphere for activities between

consenting adults' (2014: 17), due to which 'the normal performance fare, no matter how innovative, taboo-breaking or transgressive, has little engagement with the public sphere' (2014: 3). Substituting a glass container for the 'darkened auditorium', Verhoeven's performance paradoxically claims the 'privacy' of the latter—i.e., theatre as an autonomous sphere of artistic freedom—while breaking consent and transgressing its boundaries in search of political relevance. Claiming that social performance 'in the time of Grindr' is bound up with producing commodified fictions and, more importantly, being regulated by what is being produced, Verhoeven's 'play' ascribes to theatre the liberatory potential of not only staging, but of *making* real people. This, however, constitutes the very limit of liberation, insofar as the artist is—according to the concept laid out by the performance—the only one empowered to transgress its binaries, e.g., between public and private, love and the market, reality and fiction. By firmly positioning the artist at the centre of socially engaged art, theatre as 'research laboratory' and 'social experiment' (Verhoeven 2014b) runs in danger of forgetting that it is part of the world it criticises and that its social responsibility cannot be confined to the project of emancipation.

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## Notes

1. The HAU was founded in 2003 through the merging of three theatres in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. It thus has three performance spaces, most notably among them the old Hebbel theatre (opened in 1908) and the former venue of the Berlin Schaubühne (from 1962-1981). A good overview on the HAU productions from 2003 through 2012, when the theatre was under the artistic directorship of renowned dramaturge Matthias Lilienthal, can be found in Hehmeyer and Pees 2012.

2. The statement is by the HAU's current (2012-) artistic director Annemie Vanackere, quoted in the festival's program notes. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are mine.

3. Photographs and a short video clip of this performance and of Verhoeven's other works can be found on the artist's website ([driesverhoeven.com](http://driesverhoeven.com)). Additionally, a series of 10 short video clips, one for each day of *Wanna Play's* second run at the Utrecht SPRING performance festival (21-30 May 2015), is available on Verhoeven's Vimeo page ([vimeo.com/driesverhoeven](http://vimeo.com/driesverhoeven)). For a detailed analysis of some of Verhoeven's earlier works see Groot Nibbelink 2015, 36–59 and 85–110.

4. For instance, the Schwules Museum, the world's first LGBT museum, was established in Kreuzberg in 1985. On Kreuzberg as 'one of the predominant districts for Berlin's LGBT infrastructure' (Schuster 2010: 134) see Schuster 2010: 119-140.

5. The roundtable discussions took place on 5 and 15 October 2014 (the latter of which is available for streaming via HAU 2014). For a broader picture of the debate, see, for instance, Schnorrenberg 2014, Göbel et al. 2014, Behrens 2014, [nachtkritik.de](http://nachtkritik.de), [wolfauftausendplateaus](http://wolfauftausendplateaus.com) 2014 as well as the comments on Verhoeven's Facebook page ([nl-nl.facebook.com/driesverhoeven](http://nl-nl.facebook.com/driesverhoeven)). On the role of websites, blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter links for the discussion of theatre with regard to a wider public sphere, see Balme 2014: 68–73 and 168–73.

6. Balme's discussion of 'distributed theatrical aesthetics' is informed by the terminology of media scholars and artists Anna Munster and Geert Lovink (2005).

7. Extensive documentation and critical assessments of the performance can be found in Lilienthal and Philipp 2000.

8. This equation of theatre and love, as it is implied by Verhoeven's performance, can also be found in Annemie Vanackere's programmatic statements for the HAU. Quoting cultural journalist Frank Raddatz, she

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claims that “love”, like theatre, “is an exclusive form and waste of energy and occasionally also of life. Love is a risk factor [...] which fortunately cannot be outsourced to bad banks” (qtd. in Vanackere 2012: n.p.).

9. Noting a ‘paradigm shift in the theory and practice of organizational management’ to what he describes as ‘Performance Management’ (2001: 6), Jon McKenzie argues that ‘*performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge*’ (2001: 18, original emphasis). The neoliberal principle of ‘perform - or else’ thus illustrates the entanglement of economic, cultural and technological performance (McKenzie 2001). In contrast, Verhoeven’s position implies that theatrical performance is opposed to the performance of capitalism.

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