The Rimini Protokoll art collective, consisting of Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, identified the decision to put ordinary people, not professional actors, on stage as one of the cornerstones of a theatrical development linked to the twentieth-century tradition of documentary theatre. At the turn of the century documentary theatre still showed unflagging vitality, in continuously renewed forms. Their performances belong to the group of theatrical experiences in which Hans-Thies Lehmann recognizes post-dramatic theatre’s essential features.

The protagonists of the performances presented by Rimini Protokoll, described as “experts of everyday life” and called on to recount fragments of their personal history, are living documents and at the same time active collaborators in the dramatic invention. They are not stage professionals and not even theatrical amateurs, and they are engaged with full responsibility in Rimini Protokoll’s projects.

The powerful charge of reality unleashed by the presence of the “experts” (term coined by Rimini Protokoll) on the stage modifies the structure of the theatrical experience and its performative value. Reality invades the theatre, which, in the Western tradition, has long been the place of the possible. Non-professionals take the place of the actors on stage, yet present themselves to paying theatre-goers in the usual circuits of theatrical production. The narrative structured as monologues takes precedence over dialogue. The usual mechanisms of representation and interpretation give way to the performative dynamics of presence. The languages of space steer clear of any claims to realism and metaphorically suggest places and geographies. Continuous visual inserts (photographs, video recordings, live filming of details of the stage projected against the...
backdrop) enliven the plain bareness of the stage space, while providing documentary
evidence of what is narrated and help insert further narrative lines. The physical action
is simple, proportioned to the elementary and common skills of the experts. The audience
is personally involved, being questioned, interviewed, called on to recompose the
narrative fragments, and sometimes becoming the object of observation by the experts.
The overall interlacing of the performance proceeds compactly but at the same time em-
braces the possibility of micro-changes embedded in the predefined grid of the action,
and the balance between predictability and instability is continually redefined. Reality
is presented through a prospective approach that does not claim to define a single truth,
but seeks to offer a composite or even contradictory picture capable of expressing the
complexity of the investigation into the meaning of history. The performance suggests
an interpretative path but leaves to each member of the audience the responsibility for
reading the signs gathered and assembled by the dramatic process. Crucial issues of our
time are the focus of Rimini Protokoll’s theatrical work: war, death, aging, unemploy-
ment, migration, the anthropological implications of economic globalization, the great
powers and stories of peoples. A form of theatre reportage which asks to be understood
in terms of its aesthetic function and civil significance.

1. MIGRATION OF MEN, MONEY, MATERIALS:
THE MOVEMENTS OF THE FORMS ON THE STAGE

Bodenprobe Kasachstan by Stefan Kaegi opened in Berlin. The markedly narrative
quality of the performative event was stemmed from the type of action performed main-
ly by the experts on stage, as they recounted fragments of their own biographies and
their respective professional stories. The five main strands of the plot are entrusted
to the narration of the personal and family memories of the five experts. They are the
distant and varied vicissitudes of Gerd, an engineer from East Germany, who special-
ised in drilling underground to exploit oil fields, a nomadic technician by professional
vocation; Heinrich, a retired truck driver from a German family, born in Ukraine and
raised amid the travels of his family, forced by the events of history to migrate from the
Ukraine to Germany and then return to Russia, near the Arctic Circle, finally ending up
in an orphanage and then in Kazakhstan, where he lived before moving to Lichtenberg
in Germany; Helene, also born into a German family from Ukraine, who lived near the
Soviet Cosmodrome at Baikonur in Kasachstan and then emigrated to Hannover, where

4 The definition is from R. Canziani, “I maestri peccatori di Venezia”, Hystrio, January 2012: 5. A.
Audino (ibid.: 25) aptly observes: “The director Stefan Kaegi does not ‘stage’ but brings on the stage people
really associated with events today in Kazakhstan”.

5 Bodenprobe Kasachstan by Stefan Kaegi (Rimini Protokoll), with Elena Panibratowa, Gerd Baumann,
Heinrich Wiebe, Helene Simkin, Nurlan Dussali; Concept & Direction: Stefan Kaegi; Video Design: Chris
Kondek; Music: Christian Garcia; Set Design: Aljoscha Begrich; Dramaturgy: Aljoscha Begrich, Juliane
Maennel; Lighting Design: Sven Nichterlein; debut in Berlin, Hebbel am Ufer, 27 April 2011. I refer to the
performance I attended in Venice at the Biennale Theatre on October 15, 2011. I have also made use of the
video recording made by Rimini Protokoll, whom I thank for the courtesy with which it supplied the video
and photographic materials, press releases and the unpublished script of the play translated into English. I also
wish to thank Dr. Emanuela Mercanti of the press office of the Biennale Teatro for providing me with the press
survey and the unpublished script of the play translated into Italian. The English translation of the title is Soil
Sample Kazakhstan, as indicated in the press release.

6 Narrative has emerged in the theatre in many forms in recent decades; for the English-speaking world
see M. Wilson, Storytelling and Theatre. Contemporary Storytellers and their Art, New York: Palgrave Mac-
millan, 2006.
she worked as a member of the ground staff of an airline; Nurlan, a young Kazakh who emigrated to Germany where he studied and worked online buying and selling raw materials before turning to the alternative energy market; Elena, a young woman from Tajikistan, who emigrated to Germany where she first worked in a bank, then became a dancer and bartender in nightclubs. The experts present themselves on stage by name, without special makeup and in their own clothes. Their identities do not seem altered, but are projected from the stage with the force of authenticity. Their very different biographies, ages, social and cultural backgrounds have a common denominator which constitutes the theme of the performance: the migrations of peoples and in particular the shared fate of ethnic Germans resident in the former Soviet republics and the populations of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, determined by the political scenarios and marked by economic necessity. A number of languages mingle in the time of the performance: German, Russian, Kazakh and Tajik. The sounds, rhythms and intonations correspond to the mosaic of the geography of the stories told. In this way the migrations of individuals, families and peoples do not remain on paper and in the words of the greater European history. In the fragments of biography that the experts relate in the form of testimony, migration acquires precision, concreteness and definite outlines. It is translated into images, smells, flavours, distances, sounds and languages. It causes upheavals in the affections and lacerations in family ties, boosts earnings and brings about existential improvements. It helps people find work but also to lose it. The narrative rhythm takes on an epic breadth. The experts literally on stage bear witness to their experiences.

The words are accompanied by the projection of videos, maps, old black and white family photographs and home movies of the protagonists’ childhoods. Visual documents projected onto the big screen behind the experts are used with a veridictive function. Places on the maps and individuals in the photographs are indicated with a laser pointer or by deictics that blend the image with the word in verbal discourse. At certain points videos create spatial settings, illustrating the relevant geography. The only expert who presents visual documents not relating strictly to his or her childhood is Elena: the civil war in Tajikistan did not leave her any objects of memory. Here story is first articulated by the amplified noise of the shutter of a camera. This does not, however, correspond to any image projected onto the backdrop, which simulates the closing and reopening of the camera shutter. Then the narrative continues accompanied by the

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7 The press release for the play reads: “In the 20th century people were shipped between the continents like barrels of oil”. In more detail, the dramaturg Juliane Maennel (interview granted to me on 15 March 2013, unpublished): “One of Stefan’s (Kaegi ed.) main ideas in the beginning of this production was the double meaning of the term ‘migration’. On the one hand it has a meaning in geographical structures of oil migration (during the developing process oil moves from the rocks where it was built to the place where it lasts for millions of years). On the other hand ‘migration’ has this more sociological meaning of shifting populations, moving people and immigration vs emigration”.

8 Helene, for instance, seeing the video of the copper mine near which she grew up, says: “I grew up with the taste of copper on my tongue”. And again, the sense of smell has a function in Gerd’s memory, when he tells of the time when the drilling struck oil: “You can smell oil. [...] It is porous rock, saturated with oil. This crude oil usually has a temperature of about 100 degrees. So it smells, and not just like it does in your basement. It smells like an accident. It smells like money”.

9 It is relevant to consider that, beside the theatre that retrieves fragments of memory, converting elements of private memory into theatrical forms, lies the large group of expressive practices that intertwine memorial processes, with the forms of documentation related to them, and cultural phenomena of the visual type. On this issue see the recent, dense volume by A. Cati, Immagini della memoria. Teorie e pratiche del ricordo tra testimonianza, genealogia, documentari, Milan: Mimesis, 2013.

10 At the beginning of her narrative Elena says: “I have no photos from my years of civil war, they are all in my head”, and introduces the video with this line: “There are no pictures of the civil war, but my aunt sent me a video ten years ago of my cousin’s wedding”.
home video of her cousin’s wedding party, sent her by her aunt when she had already emigrated. In this amateur video the hand holding the camera is uncertain, imprecise, like the home video in black and white of Helene’s childhood. These are traces brought to light from layers of personal and family memory, creased by fragility and technical weakness. All the signs indicate the testimonial quality of the presence of the experts on stage. The audience accept it through the theatrical setting that contrasts with but also enhances the degree of reality.

A sort of *basso continuo* runs through the narrative intersection between the five stories. This is the technical explanation by Gerd, an engineer. In the course of the performance he illustrates drilling methods, the geological features of Kazakhstan, the risks bound up with the work of excavation, the phases of hydrocarbon migration through the different geological strata and the functioning of pipelines. Accurate data, geographic information and technical observations. The material is dense, seemingly coarse from the dramatic point of view, but functional, with its impersonal enunciation and obscure terminology, as a counterpoint to the autobiographical narratives, variously pervaded by nostalgia, desire, hope, pride in their achievements or blunt awareness of the present. Gerd’s technical explanation is accompanied by frequent screenings of video footage shot in Kazakhstan, with the workers busy around the drilling rigs or pipelines. It comes to an almost at the end of the production, with the story of the excitement aroused in the teams workers and technicians when they strike oil. In this way, the migrations of raw materials and money intersect the migrations of people recount by the experts.

Their stories are entwined with other autobiographical accounts or simple testimonies presented by video inserts, projected onto a large screen behind them and introduced by the five experts in the course of their lines. Each of the experts on stage interweaves his or her story with an account or action presented by other experts in videos. In this way the performative event includes additional characters, present as images in the video interviews. They are: Helene’s silent brother, shown visiting the cemetery in Kazakhstan where there are the tombs of his family, which he is reluctant to leave behind; Nurlan’s Kazakh grandparents, who speak to their nephew from the sofa in their home, one recalling the war fought against the Germans, the other singing a song for Nurlan and urging him to return home and get married there; a colleague of Geard’s, Peter Krieger, tells of the working conditions and lives of foreign migrants in Kazakhstan, attracted by the chance to earn good money; the manufacturer of bratwurst working in Kazakhstan and there ensuring the availability of this German national food; the director of the museum in the Palace of Pioneers where Helene grew up with the myth of the exploration of space; the colleague with whom Nurlan discovered how easy it is to make money by trading raw materials on line. The video testimonials are spliced with the narratives of the experts on stage. The biography of each protagonist illuminates by fragments and in the multiple perspectives of their individual paths the great political

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11 I quote, for example, the narrative segment of Gerd which opens the play from the unpublished script translated for the performance into English and used in the surtitles: “We are at Karakhaganak, near Aksai, in north-western Kazakhstan, in the steppe. We are 200 km away the Russian border, behind the border is the Ural, in the south the Caspian Sea. When I began my career as a drilling engineer there in 1990, I wore this jacket and a warming vest. We are on the platform, 10 m above the steppe. The derrick is 65 m tall. There are already 2,000 m of rods in it, each 30m long, made by Valoreque, delivered by Libya. The noise comes from the power house with three 800 bar pumps. Made by Halliburton. We start with 25” drill bits. Later we make them smaller. The first layers are quite recent, only a few thousand years old… they’re loose. In a few days we’ll reach levels that are 2-3 million years old. We are aiming for a layer 5000 m deep, the 130 million year old Zechstein. There is the oil. I will now start drilling”.
upheavals and transformations of economic systems that have marked the history of Eu-
rope since World War II. Post-war reconstruction, the Cold War, the division of Europe
into two blocs, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, economic globalization and the rush
to get hold of raw materials all remain in the background, unmentioned, but they form
the horizon against which individual events unfold.

The dramatic form combines the videos with verbal narrative, structured as a mon-
tage of the monologues of the five experts on the stage, at times enlivened by pseudo
dialogues with the protagonists of the video recordings. The screening of the video is
interrupted and the expert on stage pretends to reply and resumes the dialogue with the
protagonist in the video; then the video starts up again; the filmed subject speaks, and
the production continues in this way. The fiction is Brechtianly explicit and audience is
fully aware of it. The dramatic montage segments the monologues of the five experts
on stage, inserting interruptions where possible points of convergence emerge between
individual stories. For example, the family histories of Gerd and Heinrich intersect in
1943, when Heinrich’s family was forced to leave the Russian village where they lived
for over a hundred years, following the withdrawal of the Wehrmacht, and moved in
Silesia, at the same time as Gerd’s great-grandfather was decorated for having fought
on the Russian front. The narratives of the two men continue, alternating at the points
of intersection between the different phases of history, until the end of Heinrich’s story,
which closes in the long years spent working as a truck driver in the harsh and inhospi-
table environment of the Kazakh steppe. At this point speech gives way to singing. It is a
frail and uncertain song, sung a cappella, without instrumental support, with Heinrich’s
old voice faltering and short of breath. The song arises from the depths of memory,
telling of the gruelling work, the need to sing so as to withstand the urge to sleep and
keep driving, the hostility of the places, the sadness and uncertainty of human destiny,
epitomised in the image of the journey along dusty roads through fog, cold and mud:

Oh, you roads /
Fog and dust /
Cold weather and worry /
and the grassy steppe /
you cannot know /
what fate can hold /
just live on you go /
On the steppe so cold /
mud and dust of the steppe

The song is the third form in which the verbal component of the performative text is
expressed. Heinrich’s long, sad song is the first of a series. It is followed by “Pioneers’s

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12 For example, introducing the video with Peter Krieger, Gerd says: “He’s Peter Krieger, a colleague.
Last time I saw him was in Kazakhstan in 1992. He made this video for me. Now I’ll act as if I was talking
to him”.

13 Heinrich: “I walked to Germany with the retreating Wehrmacht. Maybe I passed through Austria on
my way. Now I’m going to Germany”. Gerd: “This happened in 1943, when my great-grandfather Hermann
Hoth was awarded oak leaves to his medal for holding the strategically important Dnieper line with his Panzer
Division, shoulder to shoulder with the Austrian ‘Bergmann’ division. But in the autumn the Red Army broke
through the front line in the Ukraine, and Heinrich had to go faster”. Heinrich: “So we came to Germany. To
the village of Amelsdorf, in Silesia. We wanted to start again. This is my family. That’s me in front in the mid-
dle and behind me is my big brother Peter. He was arrested by the Americans because he had a tattoo like the
SS used to have and he had to go to Paraguay. I never saw him again. Although they promised us the restitution
of home before, the Russians shut us into railcars and sent us to north Russia”.

14 Quoted from the unpublished script in English.
song”, sung by Helene when she recalls her stays in the summer camp to training of children to fight\textsuperscript{15}. A third song, performed by Gerd, Heinrich and Helene, recounts the forced displacement of ethnic Germans from Russia to Kazakhstan in 1941 and marks the caesura in Gerd’s narrative technique that precedes the entrance of Nurlan on the stage. In the video, Nurlan’s grandmother sings a traditional song of love of her land, specially for her nephew who is far away. Nurlan sings an original song in which he reflects on his story as an emigrant, driven by the desire to build a future as a “citizen of the world” and to escape from the power of oil and the clans that control the cities and the rich Kazakh markets. Elena sings a traditional song in Tajik praising her homeland and filled with nostalgia. Finally Helene sings after expressing her desire to see her brother back in Kazakhstan again.

Nurlan’s song seems to coalesce a few fundamental questions that pervade the performance:

\begin{verbatim}
I wanted to learn oil in English -
'cause oil has us in its hand
How much does a man burn?
How much does a man learn?
[...]
Do I want to come back here? cash and power uncurbed?
The answer is plain and clear
I am a citizen of the world
\end{verbatim}

These are questions about the power economics wields over human destinies; the ability to redeem oneself through knowledge; the choice between a life devoted to accumulating wealth and power and a life spent in the search for freedom. The confrontation between the generations is obvious: in the play the old have submitted to and suffered the effects of the major political and economic movements of history, like Heinrich and Nurlan’s grandparents, while young people try to build their own destiny by seeking to avoid submitting passively to the ruthless rules of the global economy. Moreover, the distance between the great powers and individual lives is concretely embodied, for example, in the nuclear tests conducted by the Russians near the town where Heinrich and Helene and their families lived, a probable cause of life-threatening diseases for the people who lived there and indirectly confirmed by the specially devised early retirement laws which Heinrich has benefited from. The contradictions and distortions inherent in the country’s impetuous economic development are also revealed in the references to the almost absolute power of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with the elements of the personality cult that Nurlan and Helene testify to\textsuperscript{16}, added to the stories of corruption that Gerd and Krieger cite very circumspectly in hypothetical form.

\textsuperscript{15} An upbeat, combative song, with a marching rhythm, which it probably accompanied.
\textsuperscript{16} Consider the passage in which Nurlan descends among the stalls and shows the audience the fantastic model of the city of Astana, the new capital founded by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the steppe, with a huge project designed by famous architects. One of the most prominent buildings preserves a cast of the hand of President Nazarbayev cast in gold. The custom has grown up of the Kazakhs making a journey to Astana to put their hand in the cast of the presidential hand and expressing a wish. Helene on stage shows a golden triangle with the imprint of a hand and, as she rests her hand on the cast, she makes a wish that more and more oil will be found, so that will be restored to the job she lost as a result of the rise in the price of oil, and will be able to return to Kazakhstan to find her brother. It is certainly no coincidence that the English script ends after Heinrich’s last sentence, with a note that specifies “Intervention in loyalty to the
Monologues, pseudo dialogues and songs articulate the massive presence of verbal action, which is configured as witness, partly through the experts’ non-professional theatrical status; but the drive towards narrative also guides the visual and auditory languages of the performative text.

The stage is covered with layers of soft gray material which the protagonists can move, stack or lift, while the backdrop is a video screen as big as the proscenium. Few props are introduced in the course of the action and some of them support the simple physical actions of the experts: a treadmill Gerd walks on; an exercise bike used by Heinrich; a hula-hoop used by Helene; a pair of rubber boots Helene put on to take a few steps; a stringed musical instrument used by Nurlan and Elena; the notebooks Nurlan uses to simulate part of his work as a solar panel salesman, while interviewing a member of the audience in the front row; the small petrol tank exhibited by Nurlan; the bottle Elena throws and spins to show her virtuous skills as a bartender; and the stump with an axe and the logs Heinrich splits at the play’s end. Only one object brought onstage deviates from the humdrum images of everyday life: a huge double wheel made out of steel which Helene uses to demonstrate her ability to rotate upside down, showing she is ready for spaceflight because she can endure zero gravity conditions. Other objects are simply suggested by gestures: this is the case of the Kalashnikov rifle Helene pretends to be stripping down while recalling she held a speed record in carrying out this action as a child. The actions of the actors on stage are simple and taken from everyday experience. For instance the use of the exercise bike refers to Heinrich’s habit of cycling now he lives in Germany. Elena dances to show her skills as a dancer-entertainer; Helene uses rubber boots to simulate walking in mud as she recalls in the Kazakh steppe in the village where she was born.

The neutral, artificial set lends itself to suggesting the multiple geographic locations in which the stories of migration are set, without representing them. Its lack of definition enables it to stand for different places, by turns muddy, icy or covered with dust. Within a few seconds, a few steps suffice Heinrich to reach different parts of the stage to simulate his migrations between Russia, Kazakhstan and Germany. He simply suggests in words to the audience where he is and where he is going17. A grey panel raised by Elena reveals a surface that can serve as a bar table, on which the young woman dances, showing what she can do to keep the customers drinking. Another panel, raised by Nurlan, allows the young man to take from a trapdoor in the stage a fanciful model of the city of Astana, which he presents to the audience as the Kazakh president’s great, almost immeasurable, urban project. Naturally the reference to everyday experiences does not exclude the possibility of the physical actions performed acquiring metaphorical meanings and having intentional expressive overtones. Gerd walks steadily on the treadmill, perhaps alluding to his nomadic existence wandering from one mine to another; Heinrich’s exercise bike creates a contrast with the images of the trucks on the road, a memory of his past profession projected on the screen.

Actions representing movement in space seem to prevail, evoking the incessant fate of migration which unites the five experts. While recounting her childhood, Helene pretends at one point to be walking in mud and then on icy ground, moving from one official opinion of the Kazakh government”, stemming from an objection to the play by a Kazakh audience member at the end of a performance in Berlin (clarification of this detail was provided by Juliane Maennel in the unpublished interview granted me).

17 Heinrich: “Now I’m going to Germany[...]. Now I’m going to Russia[...] I’m going now to Kazakhstan”. 
point of the stage to another where different materials are brought to light by moving some panels of the grey covering. As she walks on these materials, her movements allows the viewers to hear the amplified sound of footsteps in the mud and on splintering ice. The strong impression of reality prompted by these amplified noises links sound, image and story. On the other hand, the actions can also be detached from any close connection with the verbal part. As they narrate, the experts turn to the public frontally, standing upright. They indicate details on visual documents; they speak simply, with a casual rhythm coordinated with their breathing, and in calm tones. No technical actorial expertise shapes their vocal delivery, which matches the immediate authenticity of their bodies and gestures. The bodies of some of them are already eloquent, marked by their labours in the rough places where they have lived. Nevertheless, the narrative is made for the audience: the protagonists are aware they are onstage and the stage diaphragm is clearly present, despite the naturalness with which they fulfil what has been set down for and by them. Small errors can occur in the set scoring agreed on with the director. Slight variations are possible, and at some moments they may even dry up. The experts on the stage help one another in the absence of a prompter, and when one of them forgets the lines or hesitates to intervene, another will intervene to prompt their workmate’s memory.

The plurality of places is matched by the multiplicity of times that inhabit the performance. The present that the experts evidently share with the audience, the many layers of the past evoked in their narratives and the accompanying images of the stories of men and women that unfold through the centuries, from the age of Catherine II of Russia to the twentieth century; remote geological eras of the ages of the formation of the Earth’s crust and the migrations of hydrocarbons traversed by Gerd’s technical explanation; the accelerated and fragmented time of Nurlan’s experience of online economic trading, measured in seconds and minutes; the time of the future from which emerge the experts’ many hopes and desires. The humble individual stories of men and women, recounted by the experts on the stage, are like cores drilled in history on the grand scale, as the play’s title suggests. Under the compact reconstruction of the political upheavals that have transformed Europe in particular in the last fifty years by historians and consigned to Western culture, Kaegi’s theatre goes in search of individual lives, the remarkable stories of individuals and groups, with the lacerations and alterations in their lives caused by every shift in history. On the stage a few of the many normally doomed to silence find a voice.

The surface crust of history is pierced to discover, through the viewpoints of the experts, subjective and precise, how history actually took place in real life. The scenic image that seems to epitomise this process is imposed in the final sequence, in which Heinrich sums up the segments of his wandering existence. As he lists all the great generals and politicians, German, Russian and Kazakh (Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, Nazarbayev, Kohl), who were the cause of his wanderings and those of his family through the states of Europe, he is splitting wood. At each name Heinrich strikes a blow and splits open a log. Chopping wood is an everyday action for Heinrich, but set this moment in the play it evokes further meanings. A sharp splitting gesture,

18 This can be shown by comparing the script translated into Italian and the registered version on the Dvd, in which the experts utter lines not in the script.

19 Maennel explained: “For this scene Stefan asked Heinrich to chop wood. Heinrich told us before that he did it while living in Kazakhstan. And then again it was a combination of a movement that is personally associated with Heinrich and embedded in his biography but could also be read in a metaphorical way” (from the unpublished interview on 25/03/2013).
mimicking the way his family was split into pieces over the decades. The decisions of the powerful fall from above and strike like an axe:

In -40° C degrees I chopped wood for heating.
Today, I chop wood again and think of the politicians.
Although they are not all the same, they have all changed my life.
Let’s see what becomes of them today.
Adolf Hitler brought me to Silesia
and separated me from my brother.
Josef Stalin brought us back to Russia,
put my father in jail and me into an orphanage.
Nikita Khrushchev forced us to go to Kazakhstan.
Mikhail Gorbachev promised us ethnic Germans
an autonomous region but did not keep his word.
Nursultan Nazarbayev let the ethnic Germans go.
Helmut Kohl brought us to Germany.
Soon I installed new heating in my house.
I was able to heat with diesel.
I didn’t have to pay for diesel.

Just as Gerd reconstructs the process of drilling in the ground down to the earliest geological strata concealing the black treasure, the theatre becomes the place where the protagonists dig into the depths of their memories to bring to light and transmit the treasures of the history they have lived.

2. “LIFE IN THE THEATRE IS MORE VISIBLE”:
A RAFT OF ISSUES BETWEEN REALITY AND THE THEATRE

In La subdola strategia della noia, a text transcribed from a seminar held in 1991 in Paris, Peter Brook observes that “life in the theatre is more visible, more vivid than outside it. Life in the theatre is more readable and intense because it is more concentrated”²⁰. Brook was referring to the great European written drama, and quoted Beckett and Chekhov to back up his claim. But the observation also helps illuminate a part of the functioning of Rimini Protokoll’s creative processes which make their work original. While, as has been noted by De Marinis²¹, a feature of twentieth-century theatre was “une tension constant vers le dépassement de la représentation”, and in particular many artists sought to get away from the system of représentation by importing reality directly

²⁰ Peter Brook refers to the effect of the concentration that life undergoes in the theatre: “The act of reducing space and compressing time creates a concentrate. In life we speak in a chattering tumble of repetitive words, yet this natural way of expressing ourselves always takes a great deal of time in relation to the actual content of what one wants to say. [...] The compression consists of removing everything that is not strictly necessary and intensifying what is there, such as putting a strong adjective in the place of a bland one, whilst preserving the impression of spontaneity. If this impression is maintained, we reach the point where if in life it takes two people three hours to say something, on stage it should take three minutes. We can see this result clearly in the limpid styles of Beckett, Pinter or Chekhov” (cited in P. Brook, The Open Door, New York: Anchor, 2005, 11-12, ed. orig. 1993).

onto the scene and experimenting with work on the boundaries between the real and the theatrical, the immediate and the represented, it is also true that a theatrical approach has been retained in many events to ensure the aesthetic and also symbolic dimension of reality on the stage. The question is evident in Rimini Protokoll’s artistic process: the involvement of experts, their evident lack of theatrical skills, the frailty and uncertainty of their stage presence, are counterbalanced by a rigorous dramaturgical and spatial structure that holds all the strings of the performative event and captivates the audience.

To see Rimini Protokoll’s experts one has to enter a theatre building. The theatrical place is a threshold that predetermines the experience of the audience and the actors on the set. The stage is clearly separated from the space where the audience sit. It is an artificial, technically developed space, in which the visual and auditory languages appear in the use of advanced technology and skilful directing. The diaphragm of a refined theatricality fixes the boundaries within which the elements of everyday life are manifested on the stage: it surrounds them, highlights them, sustains them, making them theatrically effective. It does not annul the risks entailed by presenting experts who are not professional actors. But any slips are smoothed over with elementary techniques of compensation that the other experts use naturally. The dramatic form is robust and flexible, capable of incorporating micro variations stemming from the here and now of the theatre.

The relation between the artistic collective and the group of experts, chosen separately for each project, it is one of the cornerstones of Rimini Protokoll’s creative procedure. Juliane Maennel, dramaturg of Bodenprobe Kasachstan with Aljoscha Begrich, in turn also responsible for the invention of the stage space, has testified that how essential the long process of documentation on the subject and casting is to the definition of the concept and the dramaturgy. In an interview, Maennel made it clear that the starting point was the director Kaegi’s interest in the twofold meaning of the term “migration”, applied to both hydrocarbons and people. This is a crucial issue for our time, confronted with the urgency of continuous migratory flows. So the search for experts is configured as a progressive exploration of the theme:

From there on we started to look for people with interesting biographies and story lines. We started with our research in the Russian-German communities in Berlin and Germany but in the Kazakh oil industry as well. The castings are already a system of approaching the topic and the selection of the biographies is already one of the main decisions contentwise. The decisions taken during the castings are based on several principles: it’s about adding contrasting parts, like findings parts of a puzzle to complete an image or even more the imagination of the show. It’s about checking if single parts of the different biographies fit to each and about finding links between the story-lines and of course also about finding out whether the characters and the people fit to each other. It’s a trial and error principle.

Searching for and selecting the experts is an essential step and it takes a long time, because it is conducted empirically. The stories of the experts clarify the articulation of the theme, suggesting ways to develop the performative text. The experts are chosen

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22 All the more so because the public pay for admission in the usual form of professional theatre in the West.


24 Interview granted me on 15 March 2013.
primarily for their ability to tell their story\footnote{Malzacher, \textit{Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity}, 27: “In the end the real motivation to participate as an expert in a Rimini production is [...] not an interest in art, but rather in being able to tell your story.”}, the qualities of their stories, the possible intersections between their narratives, and finally the overall balance and the impulses that can emerge from the montage of their stories. Many decisions depend on the first performer chosen. After that, it is a matter of “grouping, comparing and arranging the final cast”. The dramaturgy seeks to intensify the stories by bringing out contrasts and in cutting and concentrating the texts\footnote{Juliane Maennel states: “The beginnings are interviews and recordings of interviews, it’s about getting to know each other and trusting each other. Afterwards the single stories are intensified by contrasting other stories of other performers and by transforming them in a final stage text. This work is done by Stefan [Kaegi ed.]. Only by this process are you enabled to edit the texts later on in an abstract way. Afterwards the normal dramaturgical process of shortening, concentrating and questioning the texts begins” (Interview granted me on 15 March 2013).}. The quality of Rimini Protokoll’s collective and collaborative creative process is evident. The experts have an active role, they are subjects and not the objects of the director’s intentions\footnote{See M. Mumford, “Fluid Collectives of Friendly Strangers: The Creative Politics of Difference in the Reality Theatre of Rimini Protokoll and Urban Theatre Projects”, in G. Fischer, F. Vasser (eds.), \textit{Collective Creativity. Collaborative Work in the Sciences, Literature and the Arts}, Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2011, 329-343.}. There is a continuous effort of negotiation between the artistic component of Kaegi’s team and the group of experts on stage\footnote{Malzacher, \textit{Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity}, 42.}. The experts are responsible for their actions; they have the last word on their lines and often the negotiations continue even during performances. Directorial intervention is then entrusted with the final choice on the dramaturgic composition and performative trend of the text. For these reasons, the notion of the author within these practices of performative theatre is complicated and open. In the case of \textit{Bodenprobe Kasachstan} the process of writing is shared between the performers and Kaegi, who then has final responsibility for the choice of stories and giving a formal finish to them. The \textit{dramaturg} Maennel writes:

Well, asking for the author is quite a huge issue... but very practically and in regard of our working constellation I think that both performers and Stefan [Kaegi n.d.r.] are part of the writing process, with a slight emphasis on Stefan’s part of choosing, comparing and editing the stories.

The paratactic tendency in the montage of the stories is finally one of the main reasons for the open-ended character of the performative text. While finding a conclusion of great theatrical impact, focused on the effort of the individual to bear the blows of history, \textit{Bodenprobe Kasachstan} does not indicate an unambiguous key to interpretation; it does not offer an interpretive synthesis. It asks the audience to make this transition. As Arfara notes, Rimini Protokoll’s theatre does not seek absolute truths but “models of a collective reality”\footnote{K. Arfara, “Aspects of a New Dramaturgy of the Spectator. Rimini Protokoll’s ‘Breaking News’”, \textit{Performance Research}, 14, 3: 112-118. The notion of the audience as co-author, currently the subject of the theatrical aesthetic debate, is discussed in C. Biet, “Towards a Dramaturgy of Appearance. An Aesthetic and Political Understanding of the Theatrical Event as Session”, \textit{Performance Research}, 14, 3: 102-109.}. The role of the viewer is indeed crucial. The viewer is asked to understand, observe and compare; the theatrical event is blunt, anti-illusionistic. It does not induce forms of identification. It proceeds according to dramaturgical forms of Brechtian ancestry. It contains an explanatory didactic component, for instance in the use of the map which shows in detail the geographic locations mentioned by the experts.
The intellectual and rational pressure does not exclude an emotional and affective involvement, aroused in the audience by the resonance of the individual stories.

In this way the audience is called on to supplement what they see and hear, and especially to grasp the meaning of the difficult balance between authenticity and representation, between the truth which the experts seem to embody and their need to perform calculated actions that are the outcome of rehearsals to sustain a role, which may coincide with the roles of their lives\(^\text{30}\).

Rimini Protokoll’s theatre puts reality into shape to understand it; reality gets into theatrical frame, it is worked, segmented and recomposed by experts, director and dramaturg, seeking a possible reconciliation between ethics and aesthetics.

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**SUMMARY**

The article analyses performance by Stefan Kaegi (Rimini Protokoll) *Bodenprobe Kasachstan*. By putting ordinary people on stage, not professional actors (so-called “experts”), the Rimini Protokoll art collective creates performances in which reality invades the theatre and narrative structured as monologues takes precedence over dialogue. Stefan Kaegi’s *Bodenprobe Kasachstan* (2011) explores the theme of the migrations of people (and the parallel migration of oil through the Kazakh steppe) during the twentieth century: five experts on stage recount fragments of their personal history, their narrative monologues being accompanied by projections of videos, photographs and other iconographic documents. Politics, the economy, and war have shaped the experts’ lives.

The creative process is collective and collaborative: the experts have an active role and discuss with the dramaturg and the director. So in this type of performance, the notion of the author is complicated and open. The customary mechanism of representation and interpretation give way to the performative dynamic of presence. The audience is personally involved in grasping the meaning of the difficult balance between authenticity and representation.

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\(^{30}\) Malzacher, *Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity*, 43. See also U. Garde, *Spotlight on the Audience: Collective Creativity in Recent Documentary and Reality Theatre from Australia and Germany*, in Fischer, Vassen (eds.), *Collective Creativity*, 313-328.