

NTGent

**STEFAN BLÄSKE, LUANDA CASELLA,
MILO RAU, LARA STAAL (ED.)**

THE ART OF RESISTANCE

**ON THEATRE, ACTIVISM
AND SOLIDARITY**



The Art of Resistance – Golden Book IV
Published by NTGent

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AND SOLIDARITY

NTGent, Golden Book IV

EDITED BY STEFAN BLÄSKE,
LUANDA CASELLA, MILO RAU, LARA STAAL

The Golden Books are a joint project by NTGent and the Berlin publisher Verbrecher Verlag. It is a series comprising programme articles on theatre, aesthetics and politics as well as background pieces on projects by NTGent. A series on both the theory and the practice of an engaged theatre of the future.

The Art of Resistance is the fourth volume in this series. It gathers speeches, essays, interviews and manifestos, written and performed by artists, activists, journalists and lawyers. How can we practice solidarity? Fight an unjust system of imperialism and neoliberal capitalism? Give a voice to the unheard?

With contributions from Colette Braeckman, Luanda Casella, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, Aminata Demba, Douglas Estevam da Silva, Heleen Debeuckelaere, Béatrice Delvaux, Ulrike Guérot, Dalilla Hermans, Prince Kihangi, Daniel Lima, Robert Menasse, Ogutu Muraya, Yoonis Osman Nuur, Brunilda Pali, Milo Rau, Hendrik Schoukens, Yvan Sagnet, Lara Staal, Terreyro Coreográfico / Daniel Fagus Kairoz, Marc-Antoine Vumilia, Harald Welzer, Veridiana Zurita.

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STEFAN BLÄSKE, LUANDA CASELLA, MILO RAU, LARA STAAL
EDITORIAL. THE ART OF RESISTANCE

How can we practise resistance, responsibility and solidarity? How can we, as artists and theatre makers, make our globalised world a better one? This book gathers speeches and essays, performance texts and manifestos, written and performed by artists, activists, journalists and lawyers within the last years. The contributions are diverse: statements and reflections, analyses of our racist and neo-colonial world order, accusations and examples of ‘best practices’ as well as calls to action.

Theatre is often understood as mere fiction, as “words, words, words” and acting ‘as if’. But spaces of art can be places where we pre-enact, where we can search for and rehearse alternatives. We should not underestimate the power of performativity: speaking is a social action and language never only describes the world, but also creates one. So, let us use words as swords, as weapons in our battle against injustice caused by imperialism and neoliberal capitalism. We must ask ourselves: how can we get into action and offer platforms to voices we should listen too much more, how can we give power to the powerless? How can we collaborate better?

This book gathers texts that are related to theatre events and artworks: be it manifestos or speeches held to open theatres and festivals, be it accusations presented in staged trials and tribunals. Geographically, *The Art of Resistance* focusses on regions related to projects that were initiated by NTGent or editors of the book: in Brazil, in Central Africa (Congo, Kenya, Rwanda) and in the Mediterranean on the border, where inhumanity and exclusion of the European Union and the so-called civilised West become overtly visible.

CHAPTER I is a collection of speeches and manifestos held in 2018 and 2019, most of them in Ghent, Belgium. At the opening

weekend, when Milo Rau became the new artistic director of NTGent, writer Dalilla Hermans insisted on the fact that the arts, literature and theatre do not just reflect society or zeitgeist – but make society. They implement new thoughts and shape the hearts and minds, and therefore should be used to decolonise, to deconstruct and to derail. Together we should “march ahead into a new daybreak”.

Journalist Béatrice Delvaux, at the opening weekend of NTGent as well, quoted Hannah Arendt: “In your fight against the world, give the world a helping hand. For, to educate the world, you must love it.” Describing Belgium’s division between the Flemish and French-speaking people, she exemplifies how important it is to collaborate, to unite. The ambition to change the world is not megalomaniac, it is our responsibility. In that ambition, she feels that, as a journalist, she is not alone, because “you, stage directors, writers, and artists, are there alongside me, close by, and you are not giving up”.

On the 10th of November 2018, hundred years after the end of WWI, political analyst Ulrike Guérot, writer Robert Menasse and director Milo Rau presented a manifesto: “The Proclamation of the European Republic”. It is founded upon the principle of universal political equality – irrespective of nationality and social or ethnic background. “The sovereignty of states is hereby replaced by the sovereignty of citizens.” The manifesto was proclaimed simultaneously on balconies all over Europe. “Of course, it is symbolic politics”, Milo Rau writes, “but is it inevitably powerless?” Institutions must be conquered, first symbolically and then in real terms. “Reality comes from utopia, and that is why everything can change today.” Rau gave his speech in Ghent at the alternative summit “The Art of Organising Hope” with activists and grassroots organisations from all over Europe. Focusing on Europe alone is of course not enough in our colonial world-order. That’s why the manifesto states: “We recognise that Europe’s wealth is based on the exploitation of other continents

and the suppression of other cultures over centuries.” We must think in terms of global responsibility (and restitution). The authors of the manifest state that the European Republic should only be a “first step on the path to a global democracy.”

In her opening speech for “Same Same But Different. International festival about decolonisation and identity”, activist Heleen Debeuckelaere questions the concepts of objectivity and uniformity. In every collaboration, it is about accepting different points of view, different ways of being in this world. “The concept of knowledge is a colonised one.” We must learn not to listen to the loudest voice in a room. To embrace vulnerability. “Representation without any true power is dangerous”, and safety is impossible. “We are dancing on the edge of the volcano, looking into the abyss of what is ahead and wondering how we got here. We are not safe but we are holding on tight to each other, we are vulnerable, we are listening and last, but not least, we are dancing.”

Also theatre maker Luanda Casella presents a sharp analysis of our time: “The shipwreck of politics, the arrogance of the powerful, the kingdom of the false, the vulgarity of wealth, the cataclysms of industry, the rampant misery, the naked exploitation, the ecological apocalypse – we are not spared from anything, not even from being informed about it.” What, she asks, can we do? In her opening speech at “Het Theaterfestival” in Ghent, she presents twelve principles. Her “Morning Manifesto” invites us to be truthful and humble and curious. It asks us to produce and share knowledge. To behave, to stay in character, to “be a killjoy feminist and spoil the enjoyment of others every time violence is manifested”. We are challenged to use active verbs, because they provoke movement: “I order, I demand, I plead, I yield, I challenge, I provoke, I dare, I claim, I name, I condemn, I disrupt, I evoke, I initiate, I resist...” Casella closes: “Through art we can widen the scripts for what counts as ‘a good life’.”

The last speech in chapter I was held by Italian-Cameroonian activist Yvan Sagnet in Matera, Cultural Capital of Europe in 2019. He is speaking in the name of ten thousands of refugees that arrived in Europe and are stuck in the very south, due to European refugee politics and the Dublin Treaty. There, they are working in slave-like conditions, producing the fruits and vegetables for European supermarkets. As a spokesman for the local plantation workers, he declares that “freedom of movement is a human right”, that “no one is illegal” and “all people must have access to adequate housing. Unused infrastructure and abandoned land are public property. We call for the occupation of this space!”

Yvan Sagnet calls for these actions as himself, but also in the role of Jesus, prophet of the Bible – and activist against the Roman Empire. His speech is part of Milo Rau’s theatre and film production *Il Nuovo Vangelo*. Therefore, it also suits as a transition to Chapter II, where we present poetry and theatre texts. *The Old Testament* teaches us the power of language. “In the beginning was the Word.” How can we make constructive use of it? Yvan Sagnet – as Jesus – sets up a revolt: “The Revolt for Dignity is the struggle of our time. If we do not fight now, all united, then all other struggles will be useless. *Hasta la victoria siempre!*”

CHAPTER II is dealing with the questions of representation and power from a black perspective and questions the ways in which, for example, white women pretend to be feminists and white theatre makers portray Africa. The chapter starts with two poetic texts: in “Don't cry when I call you racist”, writer Dalilla Hermans addresses white paternalism and feminism – “Just because you say so, our struggle is not the same” – and criticises a solidarity that only pretends to be one. “Don't twerk with me if you won't work with me. / I don't want you near me, until you hear me.” Her text also questions white institutions and their way of using black people for their own benefit: “Don't put me on your

cover to show diversity / Don't use me on a poster for your white university.”

Actress and author Aminata Demba describes her feeling as a black woman of not being seen, of not being listened to. “I am tired of trying to convince you that my experience is real, that it sometimes hurts, that it matters, and I want to make things better for those who come after me. I am tired of screaming it out loud until you get it. They say, don’t lose courage. But how?” She wonders how to deal with all the ignorance. “The fight against the minds is real. You get mad because we want to fight you with the same weapons you use to fight us. We should find kinder ways? We should stay calm?”

Writer and theatre maker Ogutu Muraya makes the effort of presenting three different perspectives on the same event: invited by curator Lara Staal to reflect on *The State of Beauty*, he links the aesthetic with the political and choses a theatre production called *Africa* (produced at NTGent in 2013) as his starting point. The production was based on the experiences of white Belgian actor Oscar Van Rompay in Migori, Kenya, where he owns a farm. It was performed successfully for many years in Western Europe, but now is questioned radically: “The feelings of being wronged came with the certainty that a crime had been committed and there was no trial and therefore no verdict and no sentencing, and I wanted a trial and I wanted a conviction, but of whom?” Based on talks and interviews, Ogutu Muraya wrote three multi-layered and self-reflexive texts about *Africa*, from the perspectives of Oscar Van Rompay, curator Lara Staal and himself. Using the style of forensic reports, Muraya investigates different positions and arguments and asks: “What really is the crime – black facing, stereotyping Africa and Africans, the generalisations and clichés, the catastrophising of Africa, the hypersexualisation of black bodies, white innocence and its unresolvable desires?” Although trying to avoid thinking in right and wrong, there is no excuse in the end: “What is the

point of dehumanising someone while claiming it as a strategy to humanise them? Why do we feel free to use the pain of others and repeat this again and again, only so that we can gain insights about ourselves?”

CHAPTER III addresses the problem just mentioned: that, too often, there is “no trial and therefore no verdict and no sentencing”. Artists and activists have often felt injustice and powerlessness facing a political and juridical system that is only partially functioning: often corrupt, often restricted to national borders, often bound to inhuman or insufficient laws – bound to constitutions that basically assign rights to humans, but not to nature.

Having famous examples in mind such as the *International War Crimes Tribunal* initiated 1966 by Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre and others, today, more than ever, artists and activists are staging trials and tribunals: to investigate and educate, to create symbolic power and draw media attention for what they consider to be a crime. To stage justice that in the world of real power politics cannot be brought to court (yet). We are presenting three examples of trials and tribunals staged in the last years.

In 2015, director Milo Rau and dramaturg Eva-Maria Bertschy organised *The Congo Tribunal* in Bukavu and Berlin. They assembled victims, perpetrators, witnesses and analysts of the Congolese war in a civilian tribunal in eastern Congo. Representatives of the government, the opposition and the military took part as well as rebels, international mining groups, local miners, farmers, victims, perpetrators/culprits, human rights activists and experts on globalisation. They testified in the publicly held tribunal. Here, we document four closing speeches.

Prince Kihangi, a lawyer for land law and an expert in the mining industry in the Great Lakes region, argues that local people should not expect too much from the international community and multinational enterprises. “We, ourselves, are the solution to our problems. The international community's actions are guided

by certain interests.” They are “standing behind the strong and powerful states and they want to keep the weak states weak”. Kihangi ends his analysis of Darwinism in international law and politics with the wish of self-empowerment: “Let us be solidary and united, let us combine our efforts and take responsibility.”

In her closing speech in Bukavu, journalist Colette Braeckman describes how violence, wars and aggression, how colonial and dictatorial oppression and “the disregard for all values have left their mark: the 'medalists' and 'collaborators' are still there”, people think of their own interests first, not their responsibilities. And the “future dangers are perhaps even more serious than the past ones: globalised capital is even crushing European countries such as Greece” and examples in DR Congo show “how the population is deprived of their rights, under the guise of a legality that comes from outside and is contrary to legitimacy.” For Braeckman, the big questions are: “Will the mineral resources help the country or further damage it? Isn't DR Congo with its riches perhaps the last hurdle in the race for globalisation? When in 30 years the mining concessions run out and the deposits are exhausted, where will you be?”

Harald Welzer attacks the problem of a “structural inequality of power”. Seeing the roots of evil only in those who actually kill, would be too simple, in his opinion: the conditions and reasons for these acts are much broader and to be found in “a situation of complete diffusion of responsibility” between the international and national politics, NGOs, militias, warlords and companies. “These societies are functionally differentiated and nobody is able to actually take responsibility unless they do something where they are caught with the pistol or the machete in their hand and had no legal basis for it.” The depressing thing, Welzer states, is that the mechanism behind “this diffusion of responsibility always leans in one direction, namely in the direction of injustice and not in the direction of justice.”

Marc-Antoine Vumilia says he would have preferred to formulate wishes, to continue dreaming. But reality is stronger with “the multinational corporations and their tactics of imposing gag contracts on the weak states, the lethargy of the UN and the corrupt Congolese elite”. Vumilia elaborates a fable of a burning house, put on fire by people who promise to put the fire out and meanwhile force the owners to sign a contract that makes it theirs. Therefore, Vumilia hopes that “this tribunal, which has given a voice to the speechless, acts like a sharp stone in the boots of the hunters and the warlords. To raise one's voice means to gain power. The power to live and pursue your own goals.”

In 2018, human rights activist Yoonis Osman Nuur and curator and maker Lara Staal put together *Europe on Trial*. The project was realised in Amsterdam within the Forum on European Culture programme and set up to discuss whether the European Union is guilty of violating human rights in light of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. Goal was to use the art of theatre to design a court case, where European citizens could be informed about their border policy in order to take a stand. Every spectator was, as a European citizen, both the defendant and a member of jury.

In his own speech, Yoonis Osman Nuur first reminds of facts and figures about this continent, Europe, that only covers 2% of the Earth's surface. Its total population is about 11% of the world population, but for centuries, European powers controlled, at various times, big parts of the world. Now, that people from former colonies are trying to get to Europe, they are kept from entering with all means, or sent back. “I accuse the European Union of sending people back to places they’ve so desperately tried to flee. For all the people who died during their attempt to cross the sea. For putting fishermen on trial for saving people’s lives. For seeing people as numbers. For being obsessed by statistics instead of ethics.” Yoonis Osman Nuur reminds us that “the anthem of the EU sings of how our unity in diversity will contribute to world peace. But instead of celebrating diversity, we

are making differences between ‘native’ citizens and migrants.” Europe has become a fortress with an ugly face. He concludes: “You are guilty. We are guilty ... But being found guilty might also be a chance, an opportunity. It creates the possibility to take responsibility. I propose to start today.”

Lara Staal, in her closing statement of the *Trial on Europe*, reflects on what it means to stage such a trial. What do verdict, judgement and sentence mean, if they are not ‘real’? “In court, the judgement is the moment the judge explains the reasons for the verdict.” But how should that be organised in a “peoples’ tribunal, where everybody has spoken? You alone know the reasons that have been informing your judgement. Essentially you have been judging yourself.” In a later reflection on the event, Lara Staal summarises her reasons for using art to create a court. “I believe art can be a space in which we exercise ourselves in alternative realities. Art can remind us of the fact that the reality we live in is only one of many possibilities.”

In 2019, artist Maria Lucia Cruz Correia realised *Voice of Nature: The Trial*. A project staged as “A Restorative Court Unit” in the Old Court in Ghent, with the goal to investigate ecocide and the possibility of making a new proposal for the justice system. It aimed to experiment with how law and justice can serve the ecosystem by proposing a “new type of courtroom” and create a new form of trial in which the voice of nature can be heard. The utopia was that humans and non-humans come together to find a collective language, focused on inter-being, intersectionality and restoration.

In her own statement, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia presents her research and asks what use a court case can have if rivers, mountains, oceans “don’t want to be in court. If nature does not want to be in court, we are the ones who should take the stand and take up the responsibility to become guardians of nature.” How would, how could such a ‘guardian of nature’ speak? Maria Lucia

Cruz Correia presents her vision: “I’m here today to speak as a legal representative of other-than-humans. As guardian, I stand for kinship – a reciprocal relation with nature. I question the ontological kinship between nature, culture, governments and corporations. And I ask this court to make perpetrators accountable. To start compelling governments to apply legislations which are working with and for a society that is not composed only by humans, but also rivers, forests, oceans, mountains, animals.”

It’s obvious that constitutions protect people and human beings (by far not all of them), but do not protect nature and the planet. Since the so-called Enlightenment, Western constitutions are focussing on the rights of the individual against the state. Scholar and environmental lawyer Hendrik Schoukens, who worked as an advisor for *Voice of Nature*, suggests to go “from ‘egocentric’ to ‘ecocentric’”. He presents a list of what should be changed in the (international) law system and of principles that should be introduced, such as: the integration principle, the prevention principle (avoid or compensate damage), the precautionary principle and the ‘polluter pays’ principle. It would be about installing an International Environmental Court. About listing ecocide as a crime. Loosening up on property rights. Giving wide access to court for environmental NGOs and, finally, “giving non-humans a place in courthouses: instead of Greenpeace vs. Exxon Mobil, a river (represented by a lawyer) vs. Exxon Mobil.”

The question remains difficult: “Who can speak on behalf of future or past generations and of other-than-human (animals, plants, rivers, land, places)?”, and answers have to be found case by case. But Brunilda Pali, criminologist and specialist of restorative justice, also reminds us that “indigenous communities listen to their ancestors and have the awareness of the duty of care and guardianship towards the environment, a role that in non-indigenous communities, scientists, lawyers and activists have been playing for decades.” In the eyes of Brunilda Pali, *Voice of*

Nature: The Trial made clear how “each of our actions lead to consequences and that we are all entangled in ecocide. There is no outside.”

CHAPTER IV is gathering texts that are a small fragment of a much greater movement of resistance happening in Brazil today. The authors and artists selected, all have a long trajectory of activist undertakings that try to expose the most violent as well as the most subtle ways in which colonialism, coloniality and colonisation are present in the current situation of the country.

Daniel Lima writes about Haiti: the only nation to carry out a slave uprising that has seized power, the first independent nation in Latin America, the first nation to abolish slavery in America. He retells us this history from the perspective of the oppressed exposing Brazil’s involvement in the occupation of the country. His text reveals how Haiti became the laboratory for the current, extremely violent practice of military occupation of favelas in Rio de Janeiro – what today becomes the systematic extermination of the black, poor population. What we need, is “unifying the fractional struggle of all the minoritised – which are constantly and systematically excluded from the hegemonic white and colonising world.” He ends with calling to action: “Unite. We will not obey!”

Veridiana Zurita addresses the concept of *coloniality*, which transcends the historical end of colonialism through the maintenance of the colonial logic, which Brazil has always been a blatant example of in the material, symbolic and intersubjective spheres. Her text is a strong provocation to this logic, proposing an anti-capitalist poetic conspiracy of decolonisation of subjectivity through artistic strategies and practices of dialogue. Using the art project “(Don't) Eat the Microphone” between Ghent and Rio de Janeiro as an example, she reflects on the continuation of 'madness' in the Global North and South within capitalism.

For years Daniel Fagus Kairoz and his collective Terreyro Coreográfico have been addressing the violent real-estate colonisation of public space, the gentrification of São Paulo's city centre, the marginalisation of the indigenous, African, and homeless communities. The group pleads for an inclusive architecture that respects the public spaces of the city in its symbolic, cultural and aesthetic values and the setting up of apparatuses for exchange and solidarity. "YES to a space where consumption is not the super-objective but the pleasure of building and cultivating the city and enjoying the results collectively. In public rejoice!"

As a last contribution, we print an interview with Douglas Estevam Da Silva, member of the Brazilian Landless Movement MST, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra. It is held by Milo Rau in preparation of his upcoming project, *Antigone in the Amazon* (NTGent 2021). Da Silva explains the structure and history of the landless movement, officially founded in 1984 as a result of a series of land occupations and agrarian conflicts in the late seventies. They talk about the church's principle "See, judge and act" and the tension between liberation theology and a Marxist perspective, but also between peasants and indigenous people. It is about the challenge to bring all different groups together. "You have to respect each one, with their specificities, their particularities. So, there is dialogue, exchange. And the main strategy is to do actions together. It is collective action that will help to overcome differences." The main action, of course, is occupying land. "This is not an outlaw action, it's not about private property, it's about public property", Da Silva explains. In occupying land, he says, the slogan of the church changes and becomes: "occupy, resist, produce."

It is obvious: We need to move from 'I' to 'We', to overcome differences and divisions. Our struggles have become isolated and fragmented over time. But climate crises, nationalism,

imperialism and the growing gap between the rich and the poor are connected. In order to change something, we need to combine our protests and voices – into a multitude of narratives that embrace complexity and diversity, fighting against global capitalism and its effects and damages. Artists need to build alliances with environmentalists, human rights activists, the anti-racism movement, feminists and labour-activists. This book is meant to give examples and insights in some of the actions that were organised within the last years. It is meant as an inspiration for further projects, art works and activism. There is one planet only, one world, one humankind. We need to engage now – in solidarity.