

MEIERHANS: BROKEN CLAYPOTS

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It is something you can identify in any upcoming election: political apathy is peaking. And perhaps not undeservedly. Today a politician with no extreme or sleek profile has a hard time getting into the spotlight. Those who do win the ballot, often do so based on empty promises. Once in office one's term is soon put in service of the next campaign, leaving little room for a sustainable policy. After the last presidential elections in the U.S. Christophe Meierhans started working with this stalemate as a starting point. A good year later, on the eve of the Flemish, federal and European electoral struggle, Meierhans steps into the limelight with a challenging proposal that radically rethinks our approach to the distribution of power.

Its point of departure is as simple as it is radical: what if instead of choosing who attains power, we would chose who we disqualify? At any moment of the year citizens can cast one critical vote against the policy of any political leader. When this governor has collected a certain percentage of no-votes, he or she is deprived of his or her office. Carefully navigating between the roles of politician, salesman and artist – in a setting that is somewhere between white cube, broadcasting studio and conference room – Meierhans unveils his idea. What initially comes across as a joke develops into the core of a system that starts making more and more sense, slide after slide, argument after argument. It augments the permanent involvement of the voter and increases his impact; it produces an enormous freedom for politicians, because – as long as they are in power – they do not have to answer to a parliament for every action taken. Moreover, the abolishment of election campaigns offers oceans of time for a politics of merit instead of a policy of promises and hollow criticism.

During the first part of the lecture-performance the list of advantages is summed up with determination. And however seriously and convincingly Meierhans does so, several ideas – such as an account for each citizen in an overarching Statebook, or fanciful scenarios for changes of office – much resemble parody. Precisely because of this meticulous balance of seriousness, consistence and playfulness Meierhans succeeds in starting off a provoking brain exercise. What began rather slowly as a somewhat technical argumentation soon starts firing imagination. The strength of the show really becomes clear when the spectators start to ask questions and to articulate objections. Of which there are plenty. For doesn't this new system cultivate a politics of complaints? Doesn't it swear in inexperienced beginners time and again? Doesn't it leave too much freedom to politicians? And are we actually capable of competently evaluating our politicians?

It much resembles a sparring match: ideas are put forward and tested in the debate. As a seasoned rhetorician Meierhans has an answer to nearly every question. He skilfully makes a case for his self-declared post-ideological, post-majoritarian, post-statal system in every detail: from the diverse domains of competence and appointment procedures to his own inaugural rituals and a new model for civic service. His capability of entering into a conversation with a live audience makes the show flow into a stirring and animated brain exercise, which is being carried by a constantly increasing part of the audience. Even if Meierhans' proposal can never fully shake off the allegation of some kind of rebellious incompleteness, it is mature enough to reanimate our critical involvement. For if Meierhans' exercise of imagination reveals something, it is how extensively the rules of any system determine reality. How achievable it is. And isn't that awareness at odds with the feeling of powerlessness traceable in the average elector?

This is the paradox of *Some use for your broken clay pots*: as much as the show focuses on Meierhans' new constitution, its relevance lies elsewhere. Rather than the conditions for a new culture of state, Meierhans examines the conditions for a new culture of debate. He wakes up the audience; shows them something they can no longer be in their daily lives: an involved individual that participates fully in the process that fixes and redefines the rules of our political deeds. Here, something is brought to life, which has been essential to democracy since time immemorial (the Greeks), but which we have meanwhile unlearned, namely the art of public debate. Not public debate as a dialogue that leaves the prevailing consensus intact. But as a space for committed criticism, retort and friction.