

# PRESS

Review by Lieze Roels in Etcetera (29.04.2018)

## An ambivalent process

With participative performances such as *Some Use for Your Broken Clay Pots* (2014) and *Verein Zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen* (2015) Christophe Meierhans has shown that he is not averse to collective experimentation. In his most recent creation, *Trials of Money*, the Swiss artist calls on the audience's sense of responsibility. In this ambivalent performance, the object that we call 'money' is no longer exchanged over the counter, but is presented in the dock. What follows is a four-hour speculative trial in which both the audience and the actors try to decide just how responsible money is (or is not) for the current state of our world.

If you look up the definition of 'money' in a dictionary or on the web, you will find the same soulless description: 'money is the generally accepted medium of exchange with which we pay for goods, services and debts'. It may sound obvious - money as a so-called neutral entity that simplifies and consolidates the economic exchange between people. But is money in its contemporary context really so simple or innocent? The comprehensive case files that are distributed to each member of the audience at the start of *Trials of Money*, lead us to think otherwise. Before we really get the chance to go through this case file in depth Meierhans appears on the stage to explain the rules of this fictitious trial. In an unbiased tone and barefoot, he explains that *Trials of Money* will not illustrate a normal court of justice. Where in real trials only people (natural people) or organisations (legal entities) can be judged, in this theatre, a 'semi-human' person is brought to trial - a phenomenon that we humans have invented, but that today threatens slip out of our grasp. In our globalised world there is no longer one single central authority that retains control of money or that can call the shots. And yet this does not mean that this semi-human person is able to move from one part of the world totally free of any bonds. In actual fact, the existence of money remains dependent on our own existence; as soon as we humans stop using it, it will disappear. In other words: money may well be used at our behest, but we are at its behest.

Given that money only exists in relation to those who use it, in *Trials of Money* (remarkably enough) it is never represented as an independent character. Instead of this, nine witnesses appear who, alternatively played by four performers, inform us about their experiences and definitions of money. With the help of two microphones, the audience can ask additional questions. Based on these interviews and the additional information in the case file, the public can decide if they want to accuse money or take its defence.

## Personal accounts and structural systems

The characters who are called up as witnesses in Trials of Money were selected from interviews that Meierhans held in recent years and they form a rough cross-section of our global society and the wide-ranging attitudes towards money that can be found within this society. We thus hear the harrowing story of Patrick Blancheaud, a homeless man who has been wandering the streets of Brussels for several years. From his story it is clear how frighteningly quickly we can find ourselves outside the fringes of society due to a sudden loss of capital. A divorce, a drink problem and ensuing dismissal – this is all it took to cut through Blancheaud’s link with society and to remove his negotiating position.

In addition to personal testimonies like that of Blancheaud that illustrates the individual implications of money, Trials of Money also offers us a number of statements that educate the audience about the structural systems in which money operates. The solemn testimony of the deputy secretary general of the Swiss National Bank – comically depicted by Meierhans – teaches us for instance how money works at an institutional level. When the interview between the audience and Meierhans threatens to drift, one of the other performers jumps in and fires critical questions at the professional witness. This is a strategy to show us how much the dominant monetary system relies on a dubious and abstract debt economy that in reality will never be able to eliminate its structural debt. The sudden intervention in the dialogue between the audience and performer immediately becomes an example of the serious direction in which Meierhans is steering his tribunal. We are clearly not present here in order to hold an informal discussion, but to think seriously about the current status of money – and in order to do that, we need to have the correct facts at our disposal.



## **Between educational dialogue and dramatic imagination**

The thorough research that preceded this performance and the great amount of information contained in *Trials of Money* is impressive and enriching to say the least. But the precise process of unravelling the guilt or innocence of money also makes *Trials of Money* an unpredictable performance that constantly fluctuates between educational dialogue and dramatic imagination. The friction is created above all by the differing dramatic approaches used by Meierhans. A clear distinction is made for instance between the scenes in which a performer introduces his or her witness and when they are actually representing the character: the performers always introduce their characters as themselves and barefoot. As soon as the pertinent footwear has been donned (socks with holes for instance and worn down sneakers in the case of Blancheaud) and when the witness enters the fictitious courtroom, the performer changes to a dramatic acting style.

By making this shift, Meierhans capitalises on the illustrative power of theatre, but he also places the audience in an ambivalent position. On the one hand we are asked to step into the imaginative world of this trial and the characters involved, and on the other hand we have to relate, as critical interlocutors, to the actual information that we are provided with in the here and now.

In this sense, Meierhans' performance evolves not only as a comprehensive trial about the guilt or innocence of money, but also as an indeterminate search for the appropriate way in which to place this semi-human defendant centre-stage. As *Trials of Money* progresses, it becomes increasingly clear how difficult it is to put money into the judicial spotlight. Although every testimony, illustration, or reality teaches us something about what money represents today or what it could represent, they also bury the accused in various social and economic references. Consequently, the audience has difficulty directing its accusations at the semi-human person - 'money' - and not at the personal testimonies or institutions depicted by the performers. Time and again our critical questions veer to the shady umbrella structures in which money operates: the banking system, capitalism, the free market economy.

This is the strange paradox of *Trials of Money*: in its ambitious attempt to find out how guilty or innocent money is in the present-day, the performance itself threatens to fall victim to the monetary ambiguity it is trying to denounce. Oddly enough, the relevance of this speculative experiment lies precisely in this contradiction. *Trials of Money* illustrates (unintentionally) how impossible it is to disconnect money from the obscure and hegemonic power systems in which it moves and thus makes us aware that dealing with money more intelligently could be a first step towards an alternative reality. The fact that the performance ends before a final verdict is made, is a clear appeal therefore to the real responsibility of the public. Meierhans' fictitious court plunges us into the ambiguous forms of money over a period of four hours. Now it is up to the audience to spread the word outside the walls of the theatre.