



'The Ghosts Insurance': Participatory research in haunted schools by the Theatre of Research

Sibylle Peters

abstract

Since 2002 *Theatre of Research* brings kids, artists and researchers together in explorative projects based on performance art and wish production.¹ Most of our projects are initially based on wishes made by children like 'I want to be an astronaut!', 'I want to be rich!', 'I want to speak to a real pirate' or 'I want to meet a ghost!'. We then try to relate those wishes to current discourses and questions in cultural studies, as well as to live art practices which intervene into the everyday, to create experimental setups for collective transgenerational research. The wish 'I want to meet a ghost!' resonated with quite a few discourses and performance practices we were interested in and finally resulted in the founding of *The Ghosts Insurance*. Public schools were invited to sign up for a *Ghosts Insurance* to be on the safe side in case they did find themselves being haunted. At the time of writing, more than a dozen schools have taken part in the project which is still ongoing. In this essay I will describe the starting points, methodology and findings of the *Ghosts Insurance*.²

Introduction

One. When I visited Mexico a few years ago I heard the story of the 'virgen del metro'. This is how it goes: In Mexico City thousands of people live in the streets. One day one of them saw a piece of mould in the floor of the metro station of Hidalgo and watched it for a while. Suddenly, in the midst of the mould, the face

¹ <http://www.fundus-theater.de/forschungstheater/theatre-of-research/>

² The *Ghosts Insurance* has been developed and is performed by a team consisting of Christina Witz, Hanno Krieg, Gyde Borth, Monika Els, Dorothee de Place, Tobias Quack, Christopher Weymann, Tine Krieg, Sylvia Deinert, Tanja Gwiasda, Frank Helmrich and Sibylle Peters.

of Mother Mary appeared to him. The mould itself turned into her face. Others saw her, too, and they instantly agreed on a reading. A revelation: By appearing in the form of mould Mother Mary wanted to show her solidarity with the people living in the streets, in the mould. During the next few days thousands of the poorest people of Mexico City came to the metro station of Hidalgo to witness the revelation. The traffic system of the city broke down. The church made announcements and put up signs saying 'This is no miracle'. But people didn't care, they just wanted to see the holy mould, that made them feel meant by their very own miracle. More and more of them came - an estimated 70 000 in total. Finally, the city council had to send experts, who carefully excavated the holy mould out of the floor of the station and put it into a shrine next to a church at Hidalgo station. You can still see it there today: the trace of a miracle, that happened when one man one day looked at the mould in the floor from a slightly different angle.

Two. In the little town Hydesville in the State of New York nothing much ever happened. Until the first telegraphic line of the United States was installed there in 1843. Shortly after, a strange phenomenon was witnessed in the house of the Sisters Fox: knockings of an undetectable source. Soon, these knockings were discovered to be a telegraphic code from another world, the world of the dead. Many people came to witness this and after the house got too small for all of them, it turned out that the knockings followed the Sisters Fox wherever they went. They started to tour through the country to open that channel to bigger and bigger audiences. Only decades later, after one of the sisters had died, the other sister revealed how the knockings were produced by an invisible virtuosic tap dance which was disguised under the long skirts of the era.

While this famous initial of spiritualism may have been discussed at length, it is less common knowledge, that the Sisters Fox actually initiated a feminist movement: the movement of women towards the public lecterns (Braude, 1989). In the US of the 1840ies, like all over Europe and the Western world, women were still meant to keep quiet in public, and there were simply no occasions for women to address mixed audiences with their thoughts or opinions. The Sisters Fox changed this. Following their example, women all over the US started to claim publicly, that they spoke for the dead, they became so-called trance lecturers. Moving on from the somewhat complicated system of pseudo telegraphic tap dance, women first started to teach and preach about all kinds of philosophical and political topics by claiming to be in contact with spirits and lending their voices to them. One of them was Achsa White Sprague, a young woman, who ended a seven-year long sickness, that she had spent in bed reading, by becoming a trance lecturer. Apparently her charisma as a public speaker was so overwhelming, nobody ever doubted that she was actually possessed by spirits: How could this

young self-educated woman possibly talk about philosophy the way she did, without a dead man speaking through her?

Three. In his book *Haunted media* Jeffrey Sconce (2000) argues that throughout history ghostly matters frequently, if not always, occurred alongside the development of new media such as, for example, photography or radio. New media creates new relations between the present and the absent, and as this repositioning takes place at the level of technology and signification processes, it does also have an impact on collective consciousness in terms of questioning the boundaries between the normal and the paranormal. From this perspective phenomena like spirit photography or the practice of listening to otherworldly voices within the noise that occurs in random radio waves, can be read as instances of the cultural shift that occurs through every new entanglement between the present and the absent. An analysis, that while being phantasmatic, still points towards a cultural layer of technical development, that is often overlooked. It can be read as a practical investigation into how the matter of media is changing signification as such beyond the frame of what can be said within it.

Four. In her essay *Reclaiming animism*, Isabelle Stengers criticises the way western science and scholarship dealt with animistic beliefs and practices by way of first separating them from their original 'milieu' and then proving them wrong within the milieu of science. She argues:

A distinct operation was attempted by the surrealist poet André Breton, who claimed that the magnetism should be taken out of the hands of scientists and physicians, who mutilate them through polemical verifications dominated by the suspicion of quackery, self-delusion, or deliberate cheating. For Breton, the point was not to verify what magnetized clairvoyants see, or to understand enigmatic healings, but to cultivate lucid trances (automatism) in the milieu of art, with the ultimate aim of escaping the shackles of normal, representational perception. The milieu of art would explore the means to "recuperate our psychical force." Breton's proposition is interesting, as the milieu of art could indeed have supported and sustained the unsettling effects associated with magnetism. Such a milieu would perhaps have been able to produce its own practical knowledge of trances – a knowledge concerned only with effects of trances, indifferent to whether the causes were "natural" or "supernatural" (Stengers, 2002: n.p.).

To use the milieu of art for the creation of such kinds of knowledge, is what the *Ghosts Insurance* as a project of collective research is all about. In other words, this small collection of stories and theoretical references may roughly mark the 'milieu' of the *Ghosts Insurance* itself, as an experiment to reclaim ghostly matters in our everyday. The *Ghosts Insurance* tries to stay true to a tradition, in which spiritual contact is performed as an emancipatory practice. A practice, that is given to subject positions as the potential that comes with positioned at the margins of a predominant reality regime. The *Ghosts Insurance* tries to make this potential

available primarily to children, who are subjected to forces often fairly unspeakable for them in a school context. At the same time, the *Ghosts Insurance* clings to this tradition from a place outside of given practices, quoting them, re-enacting them, hybridising them. From a place of being spiritually challenged. And maybe it is only from these grounds that we can start again to use the milieu of art for something like a spiritually informed production of public discourse.

Methodologies and procedures

When it is announced to the children of a school, that their school has signed up for a *Ghosts Insurance*, it does not take long until suspicious activities are observed and reported. A written report submitted to the insurance triggers a procedure consisting of the following steps:

- a) search for spirits on school premises
- b) transport of the collected spirits to the *Theatre of Research* for performative analysis
- c) public séance at the *Theatre of Research* (including collective decision making regarding the future of the spirits)
- d) return of selected spirits to the school premises. Possibly including installations of places and invention of practices related to them

In the following I will describe these steps in practical terms. When we, as a team of the *Ghosts Insurance*, show up at a school,³ we introduce ourselves to the children and ask them about their general feelings towards their school and about their experiences and thoughts regarding ghosts and spirits, possibly related to cultural and religious backgrounds. During this conversation, we make the following essential points: As employees of the insurance, we know *how* to search for spirits and ghosts, but we can't actually do it ourselves. Only the children, the students of the school, will be able to find them. If we want to search for spirits and ghosts, they have to become our media. Whether ghosts and spirits really exist is a question that is raised again and again, because it cannot be answered one way or another, as, basically, ghosts and spirits are just that what we are not sure about. Therefore the *Ghosts Insurance* is based on the conviction, that this question cannot ever be answered. However, our search for spirits and ghosts is based on a very real concept of local spirits, the idea of the genius loci, which inhabit places

³ Often a meeting with teachers, headmasters or parents will have happened before in which we present the project in much the same way it is done in this essay.

creating and embodying a certain atmosphere. The *Ghosts Insurance* argues, that if many people feel the same at a certain place, this can either create or be caused by a genius loci.

To start the search, we ask the children to draw a map of their school, including all the places which are important to them, and then to fill in the spaces with colours, indicating the atmosphere of the different places: feels good = green, feels indifferent = yellow, feels bad = red. By comparing the maps, we find special places in the school, for example, places that everyone feels bad or good about, though nobody really knows why, or places, which seem to have a very contradictory feeling to them. In the next step we visit these places in groups of up to eight children using our ghost machine. The ghost machine is a soundmachine that has eight headphones build into shower heads. Holding the shower heads to their ears, children hear a constant noise like from a radio in between stations. This noise never really changes. However, we let the children know, that the ghostmachine will keep moving until all the kids feel that the noise from the showerheads has changed in character. If that happens, the ghost machine stops and now has to be calibrated more precisely. Through a few simple exercises in perception, children are supported to describe the local atmosphere in more detail: What colour does it have, when you keep your eyes closed? Does it feel heavy or uplifting? Dense or loose? Is it dynamic or slow? When the kids finally agree on certain parameters the machine enters capture mode. The children take a polaroid of the place and are told that while ghosts and spirits usually are not depictable in photographs, they might leave a trace during the developmental process as such. After observing and interpreting the development process the kids point a stethoscope-like device that is attached to the machine towards the place in which they believe the spirit or ghost is hiding. If all goes well, the ghost is then sucked into the machine and finally filled into a glass that is closed immediately. Together with the information given by the maps and the qualities ascribed in the process of capture, the ghost is now materialised as the content of the glass, and thus becomes an object for further speculation: What's the name of the spirit? Why did it develop right in this place? What does he or she want? Of course, all the information and speculation given by the children is filed in the forms of the *Ghosts Insurance*. The team of the *Ghosts Insurance* says goodbye and takes all the glasses and documents to the *Theatre of Research* for further analysis. It usually takes at least two weeks until the children and teachers of the school, and occasionally parents, are invited to the *Theatre of Research* to take part in a public séance, in which they encounter their spirits and ghosts in a different context. To prepare for the séance, the team at the theatre closely examines all the given information. This is done from a range of different theatrical angles. To stay within the frame of our endeavour, these angles are addressed as 'theatrical spirits' inhabiting the theatre: the Animat, which is related to the intrinsic activity in all objects, matter and stuff, is mediated through



king with the Dead







a puppeteer animating objects. The angle of the Shifter or Twister, a spirit related to acting and being possessed, is represented by an actress. Furthermore, there is the Spark, a spirit related to inspiration, and the Small Mind, a ghost who is destructive towards imagination and entirely in disbelief regarding the existence of ghosts. In addition, a scholarly perspective is taken that reflects on historical parallels and resemblances and may give reference to related ghosts and spirits from cultural history. Next to the puppeteer, the actress and the scholar, who also functions as a receptionist to the insurance, handling the actual files and documents, the technician of the theatre, who runs the séance in terms of a theatre show including lights, sounds and special effects, takes part in the preparation. He finally is connected to spirits, which create potentially meaningful disturbances and errors by interfering with technical equipment. Together, this team prepares a performative setup for each of the captured ghosts and spirits by associating certain materials, actions, motives from cultural history, lights and sounds with them, without ever trying to fully embody them or identifying them with a fixed figuration. The setups are not completely elaborated and finished scenes ready to be repeated, but merely plans how to initiate activity, when a certain spirit is going to be summoned.

The glasses will not be opened, the spirits will not be released, before the children of the respective school have arrived at the theatre and sit on stage in a large circle. Nobody knows beforehand, what exactly is going to happen, when performers, theatrical spirits, children and ghosts will come together. The process aims to create an open-ended interaction between performers, children and spirits. The release of the spirits out of their glasses, one after the other, often ends with everybody actively participating: lying on the floor pressing ears to the ground, jumping up and down, laughing, hugging, telling stories or falling completely silent and sad.

Generally, the summoning aims towards learning more about the character, the wishes and wants of the spirits and ghosts, not least to provide insights for a final procedure of collective decision-making: When a ghost or spirit is finally sucked back into its glass, the school community which is present in the theatre has to decide whether to take the spirit back to school and acknowledge it as an official member of the community, or to leave it with the *Ghosts Insurance* to be kept in storage.

The theatre team prepares and supports this process of decision-making in several ways: The ghosts and spirits captured, named and described by the children differ widely in character. There are always those who are merely jokes, light echoes of pop cultural entertainment, or pranks, which use the concept of the spirit to make a bold or discriminating statement about something or someone at school. During

the séance these jokes and pranks are often dissolved by the Smallmind, who – much to the amusement of the children – literally eats them out of their glasses commenting on their ingredients. Other ghosts will be of an utterly positive nature, good local spirits standing in for support, community and pleasure. For this kind of ghosts, the insurance issues certificates, congratulates the children for having them and recommends to put them back to where they were found, possibly accompanied by a festive event in their name. In the spectrum between these two positions, there are many ambivalent and sometimes quite dark spirits, which point to feelings and conflicts, that should be addressed in some way. Regarding these ghosts and spirits, the team of the *Ghosts Insurance* generally argues for an inclusive approach - this time to the amusement of teachers and educators for whom 'inclusion' is a paradigmatic term central to recent school reforms. The team asks the school community to acknowledge the existence of these ghosts and spirits and to aim towards a peaceful coexistence, instead of leaving them behind in the insurance's storage. Not least because this comes with the risk of spirits growing back stronger than before. To point towards how to deal with them, the team provides precedence of similar cases and mentions procedures like, for example, relocation in a spirits' house next to the school building, sacrificial gifts, the instalment of a messaging system, like a mailbox, combined with the reading of anonymous messages in a ritualized setting. Generally, these procedures are open formats or protocols to acknowledge and address the situation related to the ghosts. Sometimes, when it becomes obvious, that a spirit actually symbolises the total neglect of an issue, suggestions might be more specific, going as far as demanding that measures will be taken to renovate children's sanitary facilities or something similar.

Finally, after the séance is finished, children, teachers and spirits in glasses return to their school. At this point the job of the insurance is done and the school community itself is in charge to follow up on the process in their own way. Sometimes this is initially done in the form of a procession of spirits relocating them in the school and putting up the certificates issued by the insurance on the walls.

Findings

Before I provide a brief overview of our findings, I would like to point out that, whereas the framework of the *Ghosts Insurance* as a piece of performance art and a detailed interactive protocol, is entirely on the account of the *Theatre of Research*, the ghosts and spirits found at the schools are not. On the contrary, the team of the *Ghosts Insurance* takes great precautions not to push children into any direction, when it comes to finding and describing their spirits and ghosts.

Therefore, the number of ghosts and spirits, more than 200 in total, which in the course of these last years have been found in more than a dozen schools can actually be interpreted as results of research in an ethnographical perspective.

Certain types of spirits and ghosts can be identified which have been found in many schools alike. One of the most surprising findings, in this sense, might be that in more than 60 percent of elementary schools, children found ghosts which are trapped in the toilets due to the fact that they cannot clearly identify their gender. Another common type is the ghost of conflict that often is found in overly attractive parts of playgrounds, in staircases, which tend to be overcrowded, or in areas of queuing for meals etc. A more complex form of ghosts often occurs in areas, which are related to conflicts between teachers and students. These ghosts are sometimes described as nurturing themselves from the 'acid' of those conflicts, creating self-escalating dynamics by becoming bigger and hungrier exponentially. Also, frequently there are ghosts related to the gaze, either connected to constantly being watched in a way, that makes one feel guilty or small or ignorant, or, to the feeling of being overlooked and invisible in some way. In many classrooms ghosts have been found, which interfere with concentration in some way, either supporting children to focus, or creating disturbance on the level, it appears, of the nervous system, for example by tickling or by some kind of frantic frequency that allegedly emanates from them.

Maybe more expectable are spirits related to nature, which, for example, live in trees or bushes and provide a hide away, a much desired chance to be alone or in private during breaks. Finally, spirits related to the known history of the school building are found, often in cellars or attics. It has to be noted, that the search for spirits, often, is the first time children were allowed to actually examine all the spaces of their school – including areas, which are usually out of bounce, like for example the teachers' room. Of course, ghosts are suspected frequently in these out-of-bounce-areas. One team once found a ghost called Moodshifter in the teachers' room. It was held responsible for a strange phenomenon: children had witnessed that teachers enter the teachers' room in a good and leave it in a bad mood. Interestingly, in many schools, children found spirits characterised as sad muses. They tend to live in places like assembly halls, that are seldom used, or unused closets next to the library. These spirits and ghosts like singing, spectacle or stories, but they suffer from loneliness. They point towards a forgotten potential of creation connected to these spaces.

Other findings of the project concern the question what might follow from reclaiming spirits within a school community. To review these, it should be kept in mind, that the *Ghosts Insurance*, being a theatre project, allows for a wide range of approaches, some serious, others playful or even nonsensical. In the milieu of

art, this is never is a dual opposition. However, along this spectrum a school community would find a few ghosts and spirits of minor importance, which soon were to be forgotten. Usually, only a small number of ghosts actually called for a sincerer treatment in the everyday. Regarding these more important ghosts and spirits, two highly positive outcomes of the project have repeatedly been reported to the *Theatre of Research* by teachers and parents: Undoubtedly, to manifest and reclaim local ghosts and spirits helped people to identify more with their school environment. Due to recent reforms, many of the schools explored by the *Ghosts Insurance* were in transition from part-time to full-time-schools. This implied the challenge of redefining school from a place of learning into a place of living, as children and teachers suddenly spend much more time at school than before. To enhance that process of transformation, schools need inspiration and a new perspective on their spaces and how they use them. The *Ghosts Insurance* draws attention to the way children experience atmospheres at school and helps to define, intensify or change them by associating them with a certain spirit.

Another important outcome of reclaiming spirits is a different option to deal with conflict. In any given conflict between children or between children and teachers, the ghost of that conflict now forms something like a third party. It suddenly seems evident to all participants that a conflict is not just between two people, but has an existence of its own. From this perspective, it becomes more obvious that to try and blame either side of a conflict is not a way to solve it. To describe the ghost of conflict in detail allows for a different approach.

In a third dimension of findings, the methodological framework of the *Ghosts Insurance* has been found suitable to create a collective process of analyses, creation and communication, that generally proved joy- and helpful to school communities. Though the methodological setup was mostly used working with groups of children between eight to thirteen, it is not necessarily limited to this group. Eight year old children do not 'believe in ghosts' any more than most adults do. On the contrary, they often distance themselves more fiercely from any kind of 'childish' belief. On the other hand, they might be capable of a somewhat smoother transition from play to serious business and back. On a few occasions, we used the methodological framework of the insurance to work with adults groups like teachers, university students or the employees of our theatre. These trials indicate that the methodological toolbox of the *Ghosts Insurance* might be used in many different ways, also by other institutional bodies or collectives, like, for example, neighbourhood communities, who want to search for local spirits as a way to analyse and change settings and uses of public space.

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the author

Prof. Dr. Sibylle Peters, researcher, performance artist, studied literature, cultural studies and philosophy, and worked at the universities of Hamburg, Munich, Berlin (FU), Bale, Wales and Gießen. As a freelancing performance artist she realized projects with major european partners (Wiener Festwochen, Berliner Festspiele, Tate Modern u.a.) focussing on participation and collective research. Peters is cofounder and director of FUNDUS THEATER/Theatre of Research, where children, artists and scientists meet as researchers. She is cofounder and speaker of the PhD program Performing Citizenship and currently visiting professor at the Heteropia Graduate Program at Folkwang University of the Arts. Email: sibyllepeters@gmx.de