

by Lindy Annis

I like to laugh. I laugh often. I am often seen laughing.

Antonia Baehr was sitting at the window of her small but stylish apartment in Berlin having an existential conversation with herself, or to put it more exactly, one of her many selves. Running a hand through her sharply cropped hair, she asked herself; if I were to see me amongst a group of other dapper characters, how would I describe myself? The one with the brown hair? The one who dresses well? The one with a moustache smoking a pipe? No, she said to herself, letting some smoke glide from her lips towards the ceiling, no. I would describe myself as the one who laughs. The one who likes to laugh, the one who is often seen laughing.

“Laugh” is a piece about laughing as laughing. For the length of the piece she explores this expression as a sovereign entity, in separation from causal baggage; jokes, tickles, narrative, humor, joy, looking at the thing itself: the sound and shape, the music, choreography and drama, the rhythm and the gesture of laughter. Comedy is not her goal, but contamination is an unavoidable by-product that sometimes contagiously trades sides of the ‘fourth wall’.

In April of 2007 Antonia Baehr began work on this monumental work by asking a handful of friends and acquaintances to honour her birthday by giving her “laugh partituren”. The partituren were to be compositions for Antonia Baehr alone on stage, between 5 and 15 minutes long and concentrating on the act of laughing, not the desire to be funny. Musicians, visual artists, dancers and performers as well as members of Baehr’s family responded with about 20 partituren of great variety. Where some defined her every movement and expression, others offered her stimulation for improvisation and the freedom to develop a composition from the generated material. The strictest partituren originated from her parents; her father assigning an extensive research project into the family tree of laughter, and her mother testing her daughter’s ability to laugh on command while challenging the integrity of artificial laughter, there by putting the fundamental premises of the project into question.

Three times during the work process Antonia Baehr invited the partituren authors and others to watch the growing collection of laughing compositions in a series of “Salons” in Berlin. The first two happened in “The Aula”, an abandoned auditorium of a former school building. The third was in “Ausland”, a basement venue in a former squatted apartment building. Baehr invited her guests to an ‘aperitif’, some ‘hors d’oeuvres’ or ‘amuse-gueules’; the Salons serving as appetisers to the coming main course, the performance of which will happen on Baehr’s 80th birthday. The atmosphere was cordial. The guests were greeted with a cocktail and a small delicacy to eat, and the performance began only after all the visitors had arrived and received their refreshments. Much of the group already knew each other, many being members of the performance and new music scene of today’s Berlin which has become a sporadic home for many international artist - a place to drop their bags between tours and residencies in other parts of the world. The group was defined by who was not on tour. The date was defined by when Baehr was in town.

A typical Salon consisted of 10-14 partituren, including some by Antonia Baehr. Sometimes there was a break to eat some oysters; sometimes the session was kept short to allow for nervous exits to the airport or a current dance festival. An informal discussion would follow the showing. Topics included: The relationship and responsibility of performer to the partituren author; The role of laughter as audience –

performer communication; Laughter and pathos; Laughter and comedy; and Laughter as endurance sport, or more specifically, How long can Antonia Baehr laugh? And, How long can an audience watch Antonia Baehr laugh?

A co-producer of "Laugh" is Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, an arts centre which focuses on the development and production of new works in Aubervilliers, a city hugging the northern border of Paris. Baehr chose to use a residency in June of 2007 for some research of a rather academic kind. Although Antonia could laugh very well, she decided to organise some extended learning courses for herself, and because it is more amusing to laugh in a group than alone, she decided to invite some residents of the town of Aubervilliers to join her. An announcement looking for "good laughers" attracted a group of 25 laugh aficionados who participated in this "Atelier". Three experts were engaged to give one-day seminars in their specific field. There was one day of Laughing Yoga ("Ho ho hahaha"), one day with a clown who had converted to Feldenkrais ("Ho ho-ah-ya-ya-yah"), and one day with an Italian artist who taught them how to laugh pianissimo ("ho ho ho"). There was also Dr. Rire, (a.k.a the video artist Pauline Curnier-Jardin), who opened her office in a neighbouring dressing room and filmed each participant/patient in the act of laughing during the course of the Atelier. Following the 3 days of seminars the group wrote laughing recipes for each other and practiced the art of laugh-notation.

Two more residencies followed the June stay at Aubervilliers. These were devoted to development of the laugh "Wurst" as Baehr began calling it. The goal was to create a stage composition drawing on the experience and material collected since she began working in April of 2007. Baehr worked extensively with her personal laugh coach Valérie Castan, consecutively bringing in the collaboration of the sound designer Manuel Coursin, the lighting designer Sylvie Garot and the dramaturge Lindy Annis (coincidentally the author of the text you are presently reading). The premier took place on April 10th 2008, which at the time of writing this text, this date lies in the future and so is impossible to describe the event in this publication.

Lindy Annis March 3, 2008 Berlin

Bakary and Chantal Diakhité (laughing yoga teachers) Claude Bokhobza (director and actor) Barbara Manzetti (dancer and choreographer friend of Les Laboratoires)