

JASON E. BOWMAN

Ein Bißchen, Questioning Trust and *The Berlin Inquiry*

Q. “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

A. “Ein Bißchen”¹

This writing oscillates between known facts and assumptions. Assumptions are relative to uncertainty and the necessity to consider the mediation of uncertainty is a key factor in how trust may come into being and be thought about by the parties involved. Whilst inconclusive, as trust itself may also be, my text seeks to reveal how even a micro detail from *The Berlin Inquiry* created by Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz in 1998 may open out to the expansiveness of this work, its historical significance, its questioning of conscientiousness regarding the chronicling of the Holocaust and the interrogation of responsibility that the work raises, not only in terms of governance and legality and collective citizenship and popular media, but primarily in terms of individuals and our trust in them to be decision-makers.

The micro detail that generated this writing was an experience of twice viewing one specific video clip that I encountered in both retrospectives of Esther Shalev-Gerz’s works. Even though at the Jeu de Paume I had found myself entirely distanced from my co-spectators, as I had unconsciously walked across the gallery and found myself in a deeply unfamiliar place within my experience of spectatorship of video art, seeking to lay a hand on the survivors represented in *Between Listening and Telling: Last Witnesses, Auschwitz 1945-2005*. Even though I have built significant familiarity with her methods through recurring viewership of Shalev-Gerz’s works and have gained unique access to her practice by having previously commissioned and curated her

¹ Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz, *The Berlin Inquiry*, 1998

work. Even though her two retrospectives provided me with an opportunity, for the first time, to surround myself by multiple works in once place, as well as the opportunity to see works again – some reworked and reconstituted for the context of a retrospective – and indeed newly commissioned works that I had not yet seen, by an artist with whom I have consistently worked with over a decade. Even though I have spent three years reading about trust within moral philosophy and examining frames of dialogue in relation to “participation” in art and actively seeking out related experiences such as joining a Bohmian Dialogue group. Despite that armor, I had not anticipated where *The Berlin Inquiry* or its documentation might lead me, nor how what I confidently thought I knew may be challenged and disturbed not only by it, but also by my reaction to it. I encountered an indecisive moment and left the Jeu de Paume, to be haunted in memory by a microcosmic moment of hesitancy, a fragment of uncertainty, an admission of part-knowingness, which I believe I still fail to make rational sense of.

In Lausanne, at her second retrospective, I forced myself to firstly ignore the clip and view everything else first, as in the time between my two potential acts of viewership, I had fantasized about the possibility to see this fragment again. It had produced a desire in me to self-monitor and a demand to evidence for myself whether what I thought I had seen had existed and was at all meaningful. It put into question whether I could trust my judgment of what might matter in my investment in Shalev-Gerz’s work.

It is from this – a shaken position of confusion, a subliminal resistance to measurability and quantifiability, a desire for expectation to be sidelined by an unpredictability that may open up and call upon an alternative viewpoint to be trusted and a demand to recognize that that also matters – that this writing comes. But in a way, Shalev-Gerz and her work have taught me to value this too. This is now my third inconclusive and speculative reading of a singular video clip excised from an oeuvre that is imbued with thirty years of thought, action, and presence of trust. An oeuvre through which, as long as our working relationship continues, I will constantly search to have my expectations destabilized – and from this experience I trust that that may well be possible.

The quote that opened this writing is but a fragment, excised from a video documenting the creative process of artist Esther Shalev-Gerz and her erstwhile collaborator Jochen Gerz making

The Berlin Inquiry in 1998. It depicts three people, two men and a woman, of whom two speak and one remains silent, but all of who participated, in this small moment.

In a recording studio a woman of southern Asian heritage has read, and then repeated several times, a short section of text. In English, a Caucasian male asks her whether she has “understood” what she has just read, and has been recorded as having read, by two means: a microphone on the desk in front of her, but also the camera attending to video documentation. The latter has captured not only her reading but also this question and her response. She answers that she *has* understood, “ein Bißchen” – i.e. she has understood “a bit”, and hence, as we are to understand, not the whole. The question was asked not before to but *after* her having already given voice to the text and having been recorded doing so. Beside the woman sits another man, also of southern Asian descent, who smiles silently at her response. What she has read is an excerpt from Peter Weiss’ 1965 verbatim theatre script, *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*).

In his questioning of her, did the man suggest that she may be at fault in providing the answer that she did? If so, how is that fault to be recognized when we have no access to the agreement previously made or indeed to any renegotiations of it? Instead we are forced to return to the image, even in the knowingness that these other questions have also now been posed but will inevitably remain unanswered. In terms of the woman, perhaps we were confronted by an *honest* answer, one that appeased the specific question being asked, and potentially it may be irrelevant whether she was considered to be at fault for her partiality. Why would one lie by giving an answer that could be perceived as an embarrassingly inadequate response to the question being asked, especially as the question may be read as having significant gravitas, given the controversies and sensitivities involved in the making of this work?

The Berlin Inquiry responded to a multiplicity of related societal and legal controversies, complexities regarding the Holocaust and the procrastination and obstruction of bringing the trial of its perpetrators to the public, as well as the sensitivities involved in making public the testimony of its survivors as witnesses. It deconstructed and reformulated Peter Weiss’s controversial verbatim play *The Investigation*, which had emanated from his own attendance at the Frankfurt-Auschwitz Trials in 1965. Staged in both East and West Germany in the same year and with

fifteen simultaneous premieres of full-scale productions and readings at theatres in West Berlin, Cologne, Essen, Munich, Rostock, East Berlin, Cottbus, Dresden, Gera, Leuna, Meiningen, Neustrelitz, Potsdam and Weimar, it became the most performed work in German theatre between 1965 and 1967.

The man, who did not speak and sat beside the woman, the one whose comfortable smile filled what otherwise may have been only a nervous and thoughtful temporal gap between the question and her answer, may help us in thinking through what else may have been at play in the situation. It was a knowing smile, suggestive of an awareness of what may have been occupying the suspended time between the other man's inquiry and the woman's reaction. A smile that acknowledged that silence is neither neutral, nor to be accounted for as ill-informed or naive.

There were three Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials (1963-65, 1965- 66, and 1966-67), which are also known as the "Second Auschwitz Trials", which were initiated by the German government itself after the submission of new evidence and allowed for the trial of perpetrators who had not been tried during the initial Auschwitz trials held in Poland in 1947. The jurisdictional processes in bringing forth legal justice and penal sentencing of initiators and perpetrators of the Holocaust at the Auschwitz and Buna/Monowitz concentration camps had been a complex and slow process. In January 1959, Thomas Gnielka, a reporter at the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, submitted documents that he had received from the survivor Emil Wulkan, to Hessen Attorney General Fritz Bauer. Gnielka identified these documents as Auschwitz execution files and listed prisoners who had been shot as punishment for the alleged crime of having tried to escape and named thirty-seven members of the SS responsible for their execution.

The woman had agreed to participate and was perhaps operating from a different perspective and under a different premise from that presumed by the questioner. Not all trust is motivated by situations where all the underlying agreement that affect decision-making are to be totally verbalized or articulated. Some people are sufficiently trusting in responding to the invitation of

another to assume that a tacit agreement exists. Perhaps it was implicit to any assumption made by this woman that she would be treated fairly, respectfully and as an equal, and maybe that's simply how she had approached her decision to read this text.

In April 1959, the Bundesgerichtshof (the Federal Court of Justice) granted jurisdiction to the regional court at Frankfurt am Main to conduct a trial of these and other crimes committed at Auschwitz, and thus allowed two public prosecutors, Georg Friedrich Vogel and Joachim Kügler, to begin an investigation in summer of 1959. Supported by Hermann Langbein (the General Secretary of the International Auschwitz Committee until 1960), the Frankfurt law enforcement agency succeeded in identifying members of the SS who had been active at Auschwitz and also heard the testimony of Auschwitz survivors as witnesses to their crimes. In April 1963, the public prosecutor's office presented a bill of indictment. During the trials, over 360 witnesses were called, including 211 survivors, to try 22 defendants under German penal law.

She had hesitated. It is the uncertainty, which occupies the temporality of the "and" – that conjoins question "and" answer – that has been invoked. In that doubtful moment she had been visibly interrupted and indecision had accompanied her thought. She took her time and used it to measure her awkwardness in reaching towards a reply that, despite its apparent honesty, had (if we accept that honesty may be inferred through the possible inadequacy of the answer when measured against the gravitas of the question) allowed other questions to stick themselves onto her disclosure.

This woman's trustworthiness has therefore coalesced with that which she by her own admission had not *fully* understood. Hesitancy had shifted my perception of her away from the question that had been asked and a spoor leading to other inquiries had replaced the evidence already given, which left me thinking that she knew less than I may have expected of her. But now that we are on this path, what if we pull doubt towards ourselves and join her hesitancy – should we not then ask: What was actually asked of her? What is it that she had agreed to? Might her inconclusive understanding actually have informed her involvement? Was partiality in fact an entirely appropriate response, in that she believed in the principles at stake without necessarily

understanding all the details? Was she in fact demonstrating trust in her own ability to analyze and assess any vulnerability that may be at play?

Our protagonist can be understood to have agreed to participate in the reiteration of a text by Peter Weiss, taken from a work that had itself received significant press and has been the subject of criticism and critique since its inaugural performances in 1965. Her agreement to do so, however, was now under the auspices of *The Berlin Inquiry* and therefore she was participating in the work of Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz, which was to mirror certain aspects of Weiss', but as mirrors do, and as Shalev-Gerz does, certain expectations were to be reversed.

Weiss had published and released the script two months prior to the first performance, which had increased media attention towards the initial premieres and Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz developed their work in ways that acknowledged the temporal gap between initial media coverage of the trials, Weiss's work, and then their own, which in particular instigated further debate regarding the role of media and its trustworthiness to provide publicly responsible frameworks for the chronicling and recording of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

The act of mediating, via diverse media, was to become a significant device in the representational force of *The Berlin Inquiry*, as the artists worked across a series of platforms including printed press, television, radio, and live performance, constantly increasing participation whilst investigating the complexities of how the process of mediation, itself seen to be dependent on peaceful settlement or reaching compromise between disputants through the objective intervention of a neutral party, may be problematized. In *The Berlin Inquiry*, Shalev-Gerz and Gerz challenged the concept of neutrality whilst recognizing the sensitivities of these trials but also sought to carefully ignite debate regarding social responsibility, as they had twelve years previously with the *Monument Against Fascism*.

In January 1998, via the project's partners, seven thousand letters were issued to subscribers and "friends" of three Berlin theatres: the Hebbel Theatre Berlin, Berliner Ensemble, and the Volksbühne am Rosa Luxemburg Platz. The letter invited people to participate in a forthcoming work of art by agreeing to read out, as individuals and as chorus, Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*. Five hundred participants came forward to work on the reiteration of the text in a

series of public seminars organized by the artists. One hundred and fifty of them agreed to have their photographs printed in the daily Berlin newspaper, *Der Tagesspiegel*, with direct quotations from Weiss' work. Listeners of four radio stations spoke passages onto answering machines, which were then broadcast randomly during the radio programs. The national ZDF television station produced televisual info-films with public celebrities reading short passages from *The Investigation*. From May 25 to June 1, at five theatre performances, the general public read the play facilitated by the each theatre's ensembles of companies of actors. The artists had therefore reversed the usual theatrical convention of passive audienceship, suggesting that no-one in attendance was entirely objective or redundant to the situation and that everyone, not only those who had personal involvement – in their agreement to participate and not least via the transferal to their mouths of the word of law, the voices of witnessing, the analysis of evidence, and the processes of prosecution and defense – was implicated. In the foyers of the theatres a sound work was produced with the participation of fifteen schoolchildren and thirty migrants who were still learning to speak German – including a woman of southern Asian descent – whose voices were pre-recorded as they recited questions asked by the judges from *The Investigation*.

Perhaps the woman had paused before answering because the question was so unexpected, so far from her perception of what it was that she personally sensed herself to be engaged by and participating in, and for which the specific task she had been invited to perform was an important part of a greater sum – the implication of us all in the *polis* of the Holocaust and the obligation to publicly act on our beliefs, and to be seen to do so. Despite her having understood only “ein Bißchen” of what she had read perhaps she believed that her participation was important to the collective production of a communal mesh of risk-taking, punctuated by the persistence of courage in the face of personal vulnerability and to thus demonstrate the hope that the right thing can be done – if you trust just enough.