

Photo: Roland Kaiser



## SEEING DOUBLE

Rachel Rogers

Cologne based artist Angie Hiesl has been creating site-specific performances since the early 1980s. Her collaboration with Roland Kaiser began in 1997 and since then they have worked on many major international projects together. In July last year The Bluecoat brought their performance installation and first major UK commission *TWINS - how do I know I am me...*, to the A Foundation in Liverpool.

*The doors to the warehouse open and we are faced with a curtain of water raining down from the roof into a shallow trough. The sound echoes through the building as we stand separated from the rest of the space. After a few moments we become aware of another sound, just distinguishable from the splashing water – joining the end of the water curtain a row of loud hailer strung from the roof by red and white plastic tape spit and crackle with recorded voices whispering, 'how do I know I am me... how do I know I am me...', reinforcing the barrier between us and the empty space. Two women, twins, appear behind the falling water. Silently, effortlessly they peel a jumper from one body, over a head and onto the other body. The action is repeated over and over and momentarily they are one body, one movement. The late evening sun glistens on the falling water, the splashing, crackling and sensual movement is hypnotic and we stand mesmerised...*

*Gradually the choreography becomes less fluid. Staccato movements punctuate the flow until the action becomes more frantic, shifting from dialogue to confrontation, from soft, subtle and contained to loud, fast and explosive. The rain is switched off. The falling water subsides revealing the rest of the sparse industrial space. The noise of water dripping is slowly replaced by the women's breath as their movements intensify. Our eyes investigate the space. We see twins sat on opposite halves of sofa, mounted on the corner of a wall around ten feet high, allowing us to see both women but they are invisible to each other. They sit, dressed identically, legs crossed, texting, eating crisps, drinking tea...*

*TWINS - how do I know I am me...* comprises an ongoing series of surrealist images animated by sets of twin performers dressed identically. The audience moves freely around the space, able to watch each set of twins as they prepare for and perform their actions. These actions range from the everyday (eating an apple, a meal, speaking on the phone), to the surreal (twins playing snap, twins facing each other repeating 'Du bist Anna' ('You are Anna'), twins plaiting their hair together to again become one body), to the disturbing (images of twins subjected to the horrific experiments of Dr Mengele in Auschwitz are projected onto naked live performers). Angie explains '[in this way] the dead twins [regain] an aspect of their lives and the disgrace of the past is projected into the present, keeping this memory alive,'

The images unfold one by one, animating the warehouse; strange double images as if we are inside a real life 'spot the difference'. The twins mirror each other in identical surroundings. As the audience move to view the set pieces they are presented not only with changing views of the twins but also of each other – watching, walking, watching. As one action draws to a close another springs to life shifting the focus within the space. Though we are free to walk anywhere, to leave and to re-enter, we are also guided gently from point to point and encouraged to view scenes from a particular angle, framed in a particular way as in a conventional art gallery. The choreography of the whole piece includes the audience in the flow of the action and our pathway through the space is mapped next to those of the performers.

So why twins? Angie grew up with identical twin sisters. She told me, '[they] were always a unique phenomenon for me and made me question a lot about identity, boundaries between two people, feeling and thinking together or alone. So many mysteries to be discovered.' A perspective perhaps only available to those living in close contact with twins, someone on the outside looking into a mysterious world of two. She continued, '[Twins are also interesting] to look at from an aesthetic point of view, parallels, similarities, differences, it is so inspiring... is there perfection in the similarity of two human beings?'

*TWINS - how do I know I am me...* was first created in 2001 in Cologne, this new adaptation was created specifically for Liverpool and the A Foundation space in 2009. I asked Angie how they went about re-creating a performance for a new space. 'In many ways it is like starting anew and working in the same way we would the first time round. We are inspired by the space, we analyse it then look at how we can arrange the performance to correspond and/or contradict its new surroundings. This time we worked with five new sets of twins, two from Liverpool. Almost a third of the project was created totally new and the other parts were reworked and rearranged according to the new twins and the location.'

Bryan Biggs, Artistic Director at the Bluecoat, initially invited Angie and Roland to the UK and explains why he was keen to present their work: 'Liverpool is twinned with Cologne and the Bluecoat has been at the centre of a cultural exchange for many years. Cologne has a long history supporting performance work and artists who cross territories between visual art, theatre, dance [etc.]. Angie is one such artist with a distinguished track record of presenting memorable, ambitious and highly challenging work.'

'I met Angie in Dusseldorf in 2006 at a showcase at the tanzhaus nrw theater, though her work was far removed from dance. Angie and Roland then made several research trips to Liverpool. [Their] work is always as much about place, memory and history as it is about the performers, and in the A Foundation's Greenland Street space we found the perfect location, a former industrial building that provided just the right evocations and reso-

nances against which the five sets of identical twins could create a series of tableaux.'

The industrial edge and changing face of Liverpool appealed to Angie. 'We loved it from the first moment onwards. We love the unfinished atmosphere, a city in process. The shrinking aspect of the city's development was shocking [for example] the many, many deserted and blocked up houses. At the same time we hope it will create new locations for art or special community activities. We also loved the ultimate weekend madness; the dressed up and unique looking ladies, a touch of theatricality symbolising a constant reinvention of oneself in a time of loss of work and social instability. Not forgetting the lovely people with whom we worked and other very open and friendly people that we met in the city. We would love to go on working in Liverpool'

For Angie and Roland location is crucial and gives a piece context or acts as a contrast to the action. 'The space is like another performer', Angie explained. 'We choose the locations because we like them, we find them in some way attractive or see them as disliked locations and we want to challenge this. Sometimes locations are especially suitable for the themes we work with. We work a lot in public spaces and we like to intervene in daily life, to confront people with something unforeseen, we like to give them another perspective on their environment. We like to surprise and to irritate.'

It was this surprising and quirky element that struck me when I first came across Angie's work. I saw images of the performance *x-times people chair* (first performed in Cologne in 1995) showing 'ordinary' people sitting on chairs mounted high up on the outside of buildings performing simple everyday actions as people passed beneath them on the street – polishing shoes, scaling a fish, reading a book. The performers had a movement score which was repeated. The actions were not 'performed' with any particular intention, simply placing them in the public domain created the performance.

Making the private public and putting pedestrian actions on display is a recurring theme in Angie's work. She exposes what is often concealed and in doing so the personal can be seen to be political. In the Amsterdam version of *x-times people chair*



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(1999) performers aged between 60 and 70 carry out their actions overlooking empty sites where buildings were flattened during World War II. I asked Angie if the age of the performers and the

location chosen have an intended meaning. She said that though her work 'often had a social context any political aspect to it would depend on how one reads the work.'



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With a more recent piece *...and HAIR...and HAIR...and HAIR and...* (2006), another collaboration with Roland Kaiser, it seems there could be a political stance being taken with text in the publicity stating that: 'Hair is an expression of one's personality... The heads of prisoners are shaved to rob them symbolically of their individuality...The Material for real hair wigs mainly originates in poorer countries in Asia. Hair is both the object and product of a global industry...' Is this a dig at the machine that is global economy?

I asked Angie if there was a message in her work. 'Maybe not a specific message', she says, 'but the wish is to open the perception of the spectator and to make them perceive themselves and their surrounding in a different way. We like to give the people an unbiased view in order to let them find their own approach and associations to the work.' Whatever the intended meaning may be the appeal of the work is, I believe, universal – people, looking at people. Though the majority of the work is conceived and premiered in Germany, Angie feels that, 'as we've been floating around a lot in between different cultures and countries, and as I was brought up partly in South America, I think we have found a form of work that is not only seen as purely German.' I would agree – it is the location, the context and the framing that give the work its edge – the performers keep it accessible to any audience.

To me, the themes of public vs. private, familiarity vs. detachment, performing the everyday and animating public spaces run through the work of Angie Hiesl and Roland Kaiser. Together they are able to transform the quotidian into the extraordinary, open up public spaces to new possibilities and to really encourage an audience to connect with their surroundings and question what they see. Their projects are a perfect combination of visual and performing arts, social engagement and popular appeal, and I hope we will see their work in the UK again in the near future.

Angie and Roland are currently working on a book and film (in English, German and Chinese) based on the 'china-hair-connection Beijing-Cologne' a performance in 2008 that is a development of the hair theme. They are also working on a new project called URBAN-CITY-URBAN that will have its first performance in spring 2010 in Cologne and will focus on specific issues of work in public space. [www.angiehiesl.de](http://www.angiehiesl.de)

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