

# Art in America

Althea Thauberger /The Power Plant

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By Milena Tomic



Toronto The full title of Althea Thauberger's video installation at the Power Plant takes on the quality of a mise en abyme as it sets and resets the historical scene: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade as Performed by the Prague-based Experimental Theatre Company Akanda for the Patients and Staff of the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital* (2012). The central conceit of Peter Weiss's 1963 play *Marat/Sade* is familiar: the Marquis de Sade, while interned at the Charenton asylum in 1808, stages a theatrical production about the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, the physician, scientist and journalist famously assassinated by Charlotte Corday in 1793. Thauberger restages the play in the decommissioned water and laundry facilities at Bohnice, a psychiatric hospital in Prague, and in so doing renews issues about the lines separating therapy from punishment, liberty from anarchy and social reform from political theater.

Well known in Canada, her home country, for facilitating collaborative situations that highlight the vulnerabilities of groups such as military families, amateur songwriters and adolescent girls, Thauberger freely courts controversy. Her own version of *Marat/Sade*, directed by Melanie Rada and here presented as a wall-projected, 90-minute video, allowed the Saskatoon-born artist to deepen the thematic contrasts already present in her source. Choosing two historical moments when a total restructuring of the social order seemed imminent, Thauberger finds a way to connect the Reign of Terror with the 1989 revolutions marking the largely nonviolent fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Microphones and other equipment freely enter the frame of her camera, which often fixes on the reactions of an audience composed of both patients and employees, some of whom appear in interview segments.

The interviews echo Thauberger's own uncertainty about the play's therapeutic usefulness. In one, the hospital's director explains his initial misgivings about the project, admitting that cultural therapy might merely sanitize "something terrible" rather than initiate a necessary system-wide reform. A young patient observes that, with so many people suffering from schizophrenia today, mental illness might serve as an indicator of societal health under capitalism. An older patient compares his experience of the postcommunist government with opening night at the theater, seeming to hint at his disappointment with the promised social change in the years following the Velvet Revolution.

As art historian and critic Claire Bishop has argued in a series of articles and in her book *Artificial Hells* (Verso,

2012), participatory projects work best where they undermine the comforting illusion that community bonds are strengthened through artistic collaboration. In much the same way, Thauberger brings together doctors, patients, theater professionals, the art world and the general public not to facilitate new understanding but to underscore the uncertainties they all face under neoliberalism. Against the backdrop of a real hospital undergoing deinstitutionalization, the work casts new light on the debate between collectivist fervor and libertine individualism present in *Marat/Sade*.

PHOTO: View of Althea Thauberger's *Marat Sade Bohnice*, 2012, single-channel video, approx. 45 minutes; at The Power Plant.