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“From the history of nudity to the the performer’s nudity”

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Communication In Body and freedom Festival Naked Performance in Urban Space Awam ·
Dihoskan oleh Beatrice Schumacher

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My intent is to show how the skin can exert a fascination in today's artistic practices, how it can suggest by its breaches, for example, the hollowness of the body. Its image as a boundary, its expressive value or identity can mobilize extreme focus. A narcissistic envelope protecting from the world, it is often given as its primary object, an immediately available tool, a place for inscription and major outbursts. It is this object that seems to be at the heart of many stage programmes because it is at the heart of the visible and the identity. It is then revealed, at the origin of a true effervescence.

My first part:
an experience of nudity in creative research

1/The situation

It is when thinking about the skin and about a survey conducted among actors that I participated in an performance action experiment. This took place at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and was framed by the Acquaalta arrangement created by the visual artist Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. He imagined a lake-side landscape that leads the visitor into a visual, tactile and acoustic experience by modifying their perception of the place. This peculiar experience immersed me into a situation where nudity was dominant. The action was filmed and photographed by artist Enna Chaton who regularly collaborates with him.

2/ Protocol and questions

There were 25 participants. During the performance Enna Chaton was pushing simple actions like walking, walking in the water, getting into the boats, rowing, lying on the ground, walking again. A kind of exhaustion and fatigue of the bodies gradually set in. There were my own impressions at the end of the experience which were based on images, sensations felt and the impression that I had made a journey, the one crossing the River Styx that makes us brush against ghosts and wandering souls. It is from this experience that I asked again some questions about the skin: tangible situations, felt relationships, movements, looks.

- how does the nude foster a particular relationship to the integument?
- Did the time of experience change my perception?
- Can the other person's gaze sharpen sensitivity to integumentary appearance?

- Did the experience have a lasting effect on my own feelings?

I tried to give a more objective side by asking the participants, in writing, about these same themes.

3/Research and first results

I analysed the answers to the questions sent by e-mail to the participants. It is the situation of nudity that has attracted the most attention as if it should capture any investment. With a prevailing feeling: a feeling of freedom; most saying that this exposure "did not pose a problem", others, more literally saying "that with friction with water there was an umbilical return to a poetic matrix"; some others insisting on "complete oblivion of being naked"; and others still saying that "the body carries us". The nude thus appears as a kind of "victory", leading to the study of sensations starting from it: emphasis on a feeling more marked, a more striking way of perceiving space and its objects; a "singular sensation", says one of the participants, of "cold, hot, weightlessness, fluidity, sliding of the body in slowness, instability in water".

With one nuance, however, when a few say they having been embarrassed by the group's presence, to the point of describing it as "perilous".

Finally the real work of the skin, in its most specific meaning, is little questioned. Few participants answer precisely on this point, a little as if alerting on the integument required to cross some obviousness, to make an effort, to make what is silent exist, because it is too blatant. Some say, however, that having been oriented on such a subject makes it more real to them, fostering an awareness they did not reflect upon.

The tangible situation has brought us closer to a presence, that of our sensitive envelope. Even so, it has shown how difficult it is to confront the clear perception of its content.

My second part: the skin interface

1/ The surface and the « within » game

Other artistic proposals exist: those that try to show the "within" game. They play with an "above" supposed to reveal a hidden. This is for example what Yann Marussich submits in Bleu Remix created in 2007. His performance suggests the moods that come from "within", which arise directly on the skin. The event takes place in a room, without separation between the stage and the audience. There stands a plexiglas box with, at its center, the performer already present, as if in waiting. Yann Marussich is sitting in a half-lying position in a plexiglas chair. Key

challenge: the performer has previously absorbed a mixture containing basically a drop of methylene blue, under medical supervision. Through his skin, blue-tinted liquids appear, revealing the inner swirls of his body. Once the audience is there, the lights in the room go out. The lighting entirely arranged to the ceiling of the plexiglas box stages the performer-dancer in his reduced space. His skin is striped with bluish strands, increasingly varied.

The viewer's expectations mingle with an inevitable questioning. Everything contributes to reinforce this phenomenon of time suspension and to increase the dramatic effect: use of mixing, sounds of heartbeats from the performer, previously recorded. The waiting becomes more and more palpable in the room. Some spectators then get up to examine the performer and his flooded skin as closely as possible.

Paradoxically, it is the inside of the body that is revealed to us, with its moods, its secretions, its ambiguities. The most intimate is revealed. This artistic proposal leads us to feel the body as a resounding volume, the perception of the spectator seems caught up by this internal space. It is indeed this promotion of the "within" that is to be retained here, and which is at the centre of contemporary fascination, the challenge of many issues. The "internal" sensitivity seems to be sharpening here. The physiology is under scrutiny. This exploration of the "within" fascinates because it would be "a central or at least unavoidable place of identity" as G Vigarello points out. This sensitivity plays with the mysterious part attributed to him today, with the obstinate search for a revelation that seems to come from within, a promise of discovery and revelation of an inaccessible hidden.

2/ The game of the outside

Another body, another type of hollowness, when the surface highlights a game of the "outside". One can think of some recent scenes such as the "Night of the Long Knives" in *Les Damnés* (2016) directed by Ivo Van Hove, where Baron Konstantin Van Essenbeck, played by Denis Podalydès, after having seemed to tear off his partner's ear with his teeth in an embrace, has fun sliding, naked, on a tray covered in beer. The actor is being performed. The naked bodies rubbing against each other, splashed with a bucket of blood, stained and dirty as if the sexual and death drives suddenly coincided. The corruption of an authoritarian regime and its oppressive system seem to correspond to this dirtiness of the bodies, as a statement exposed by its traces.

The game of the "outside" has another aim: the political questioning. In this type of suggestions, through the body of the performer/actor, it is a whole protest against alienation that is offered

to see. The artist can impose pain on himself. Protesting also means choosing to show the endured abuse, symbolized here by suffering. The skin then bears the trace of it, up to the marks of wounds and blood, up to the tears in its surface. Is this a way of choosing destitution to better convince people of outrage? A way of choosing the image of the victim in a society where only compassion could have any effect? Hence the choice of some artists, to protest against any oppressive power, to show abused bodies in order to underline the constraints of society, that makes bodies docile. These bodies, objects of violence and terror, constitute then the "exhibited support of the (neverending) victim condition of the subjects", conveying what Roméo Castellucci calls the "victimism", conceived by him as the necessary foundation of contemporary theatrical creation. More generally, such a tendency to identify more to the victim in our society is the indication of a mutation. It is explained "partly by the feeling of being excluded from the political pact". The only possible alternative to exist would no longer be to act but to suffer.

Other types of bodies revealing their hollowess emerge and highlight a body that has entered into resistance, seeking to transgress the prohibitions and customs of an established society. This is the case with the performance *Pearls to pigs* (2015) by Filipe Espindola and Sara Panamby. We see the performer wearing her hair according to American Indian fashion, swallow a kind of whitish porridge that she spits out after having absorbed it, while her partner sews white pearl ornaments on her naked and shivering skin. A change occurs when Sara Panamby, head, back and chest fully adorned with sewn beads slowly rises. Making us cross the body surface - like Carolee Schneemann in *Interior Scroll* (1975) - the performer then unwinds from her vagina a long necklace of pearls that never seems to end. Thus, she draws attention to the inside of the body in a turmoil. Her body seems to empty itself symbolically, to exhaust itself. Symptom of unease and radical exposure. The anti-colonialist proclamation is not forgotten but becomes secondary before the strange and disturbing beauty of the show. The idea here would be that of a break out transforming pain into aesthetics.

These series of performances thus categorized show to what extent a strange work can be played out on the boundaries of the body: not only "hollowness", but also "exits", "transgressions", "effusions". Many cultural dynamics are then indicated, mixing protest or victimization, individual or collective affirmations, obscure ailments or aerial vitality, all of them messages playing with the surface as much as with the depth of the body. A number of particular body representations emerge, putting porosity and open-mindedness into perspective. Thus the skin

acts as a true revealer, exploring differences and marginality, violence and identity, disturbing perception. Excess is singular there, because it distances judgment and disturbs the physical interiority of the spectator.