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FOR
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RESEARCH ON ECOLOGY AND PRESENCE

BY ROBERT STEIJN IN COLLABORATION
WITH MARIA HASSABI

*You dance inside my chest where no one sees you,
but sometimes I do, and this sight makes our dance.*

LUMINOSITY

Amy Cox

The room, where Robert & Maria show us the beginnings of their new work, is flooded by natural light emerging from the windows on two sides of the four surrounding walls of the Danslab Studio. Above, the fluorescent work lights have been turned on. It is late afternoon, so the brightness comes from an indirect reflection of the sun through shifting clouds; greys, blues and yellows.

Their piece in progress consists - for the present moment - of a simple system of looking at each other right in the eyes. They stand approximately two feet from each other and begin by locking their gazes. This simple act - I realize later - has some of the potential equivalent to John Cage's famous '4'33', where the act of uncovering piano keys transforms the expectation of hearing a piece for piano into perceiving the space and its surrounding sound as composition. During the first four minutes of the performance, the audience is suspended within the components of listening and the idea of sound itself - heightening their awareness of the intricacy and complexity of *listening consciously*.

Robert and Maria's gazes will remain locked for the duration of their piece, as we will gradually become aware of the potential of *seeing* itself.

In order to begin, Maria must tilt her head upwards to stare diagonally at Robert, placing her hands in her back pockets in order to settle into a posture that allows her to look directly *into* Robert's eyes whilst *staying with herself*. She relates this process to the Alexander Technique -staying present and free from strain- as she embarks on a physical challenge. Robert stands upright with his arms hanging loosely and relaxed by his side. His downward gaze into Maria's eyes has a less disturbing impact on his frame, as if

the act of looking -for the moment- is an act intended for the eyes alone, unrelated and unconnected to the body's frame.

The two stay in this active stillness for a period of five minutes or more, sufficiently long enough for us to settle down and drive away any expectations that we will be seeing more than just this: two people *actively* looking into each others eyes. It is not a game. You feel them searching for something in this act, a connection, a point of departure. They are free to laugh, be casual and light with themselves and with us. However, their task is not to impress us, but to invite us into their experience.

As part of the audience you notice various human details: the determination and commitment and also the casual ease. But at the same time you take them in from afar. You notice the negative shapes that arise from the borders of their bodies and the altering spaces between their strikingly different forms. They could be statues in a gallery for modern art, reflecting a unique moment of kinship between each other - sharing a task that is fulfilled with intense care.

What is the occasion for this kind of love? In the holding and *deepening* of their gaze, they begin to become *jewel-like*, reflecting something in this charged

stillness that is akin to awareness itself. This quality of resonating or brightening seems to extend beyond their joint capacities and also beyond the limitations of the room in which we sit. This bathing within awareness also results in us going deeper, becoming brighter - like entering into a kind of infinity.

In this context I would like to return to the importance of natural light. The piece particularly drew my attention as to how my eyes were being affected by the light. My vision became fuller, more panoramic - light itself making vision possible.

At a certain moment they begin to move, or make small adjustments to their posture. Like a film, my internal narrative jump-cuts between a landscape and personal exchange -a montage of growing plants cutting away to two people having a picnic in the park. My ability to shift my interpretation feels logical because they are reflections of a larger landscape, an ecology where all of life is connected.

In its entirety, the work reminded me of a phrase from the *Yoga Sutra of Patanyali* which describes the yogic practice in part as being: '*a stilling of the fluctuations of consciousnesses*'.



CAUGHT BY THE MYSTERY OF THE EYES

Robert Steijn

This research is about looking into each others eyes. Something I really like to do, also off the stage, although I know it is a tricky thing to engage in. Once I had a lover, who never wanted to look into my eyes. There was a kind of shyness between us; his eyes would always look away. We loved each other, we had great sex, but I always missed the silent dialogue of looking into each others eyes. It felt as if we still kept something to ourselves, something that we didn't want to share. My lover joked about my obsession for looking each other in the eyes, considering it a highly romantic fantasy.

On one occasion, a collaboration with a friend ended after she experienced that I didn't really look *into* her eyes on stage. I didn't give her the support she needed to be able to continue her part of the play. She said that it was evidence of my problems with women, of being raised by a dominant mother, who's controlling eyes I couldn't escape. I on the other hand, considered the act of looking into the eyes of my friend on stage as a symbolic action, without engaging in the possible psychology lying behind it.

The night before my mother died, we looked into each others eyes for hours. Of course we embraced each other a lot, but the eye-to-eye connection revealed the most about how we felt individually, about our being together. I saw her panic and fear of dying and she in turn saw my sadness at her leaving me behind.

Now I look Maria straight in the eyes during the whole performance. This eye-to-eye connection became the most objective base or common ground that we could find to be together on stage without judging each other. It provoked a heightened awareness of the shifting of the position of our bodies and the space we created between us and around us.

By looking into each others eyes we engaged each other in the process of moment to moment decision making. The here and now of being together on stage was split into a range of different moments, questioning each time who decided to take the initiative and who decided to follow. This constant change of positions led to a state of mind where the borders between

myself and the other became elastic and even for a brief moment erased in a communal moment, a conjunction, where you feel the body of the other as an expansion of your own body.

This heightened awareness provoked an embodied navigation system which allowed us to move together within time and space. Simultaneously the body took on poses, which were formed by spontaneous decisions which triggered memories and stimulated the imagination.

The eyes are often referred to as the *gateway to the soul*, to the subconscious. Our own eyes, exposed to the bright light, began to shed tears. This involuntary physical reaction of the body occasionally created an enormous sorrow whilst performing the duet. The sorrow softened our presence, our being. By obeying this assignment for the eyes on the stage, I place myself upon a path, where I am engaged in discovering myself not only as a performer and a choreographer, but also as a human being with his own unique autobiographical background.

By zooming in on small shifts in the body - generated by a dialogue of reciprocal impulses and initiatives - we have discovered a reservoir of possibilities capable of generating meaningful theatrical connections with each other.

We also realized that the audience could project a great deal of their thoughts and feelings into some of our positions.

Our desire was to find internal similarities as opposed to the obvious external differences. I think that up until now we have discovered within the research that the basis for our similarities occurs by means of a negotiation between each other. A negotiation through the eyes. Through repetition, both in private and before an audience, I believe our dialogue will gain more emotional depth.

It will become a flow of emotional energies that move naturally through us, without the need for us to re-enact them.

REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH PRESENTATION

MARCH 13TH 2010

Diane Elshout

What I saw were two people, a man and a woman; Robert Steijn and Maria Hassabi in the Danslab studio, facing each other, looking at each other. Or perhaps more exactly: looking *into* each other, using their eyes as a medium to connect and not merely to observe. They would stay true to this commitment during the 20 minutes of their demonstration. It began by them standing on the spot with a distance of some 50 cm between them. Then gradually poses emerged, eventually leading to larger and more complicated movements. Their actions created space and also a certain calmness as I watched. Sometimes I felt far removed from their journey. Their focus on each other made me question my place and function as an audience member. I was fascinated by the first couple of minutes where *nothing happened*, just the act of standing still on one spot. I observed the most subtle movements of their bodies, like the swelling of the chest whilst inhaling, the slight changes of weight which moved them back and forth.

The following crossed my mind as I watched: *doubt, love, hunger, denial, glory, power, caring, sharing, damage, playing, stubbornness, mischief.*

As far as I understood, there was no deliberate movement and the body did not seem to be representing anything but itself;

it resonated, it was open and fully present. I would like to refer here to Deleuze's *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation*¹ in which he states that modern art and philosophy have converged on a similar problem: both renouncing the domain of representation, taking instead the *conditions* of representation as their object. What Deleuze seems to search for is how the *invisible* can manifest itself in the form of *sensation* - a logic (but not a procedure) of how the invisible forces are manifested in the figure (the body); deforming and transforming it. In those first minutes, that is what I saw happening in front of me. The body was not used in a figurative, narrative, nor illustrational way, no, it became an intensely energetic locus of presence itself.

I would like to focus on the word '*presence*' as presented by Lepecki in his book *Exhausting Dance*². He considers presence as '*not only a term referring to the dancer's negotiation between technical and artistic proficiency in the performance of choreography, [but] also a fundamental philosophical concept*' (Lepecki, 2006:6). Any dance that probes and complicates how it comes into presence and also questions its very grounds of being suggests a critical and renewed dialogue with contemporary philosophy, for it creates concepts that allow a political reframing of the body.

Dance in the Western tradition is often associated with a '*flow*

and a continuum of movement' (Lepecki, 2006:2). This was certainly not the case in the first minutes of this performance. Both standing bodies appeared like an enactment of stillness, challenging dance's own political ontology'. According to Nadia Seremetakis in her book *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*³, stillness, is the moment when the buried, the discarded, the forgotten, escape to the social surface of awareness. It is a moment of '*exit from historical dust*' (Seremetakis 1994:12).

Historical dust is not just a metaphor. When taken literally, it reveals how historical forces penetrate deeply into the inner layers of the body: dust creating a sediment upon the body, fixing the subject within overly prescribed pathways and steps, fixing movement within certain politics of time and place. The '*still-act*', in opposition to the brutality of historical dust literally falling onto the body, (Seremetakis 1994:12) reshapes the subject's stance regarding movement and the passing of time. The '*still act*' critically questions modernity's impulse towards movement and its constant display of mobility. It refers to what Sloterdijk calls '*kinetic excess*' (Sloterdijk 2000b:26)⁴. It was the insertion of stillness - the slowing down of movement and time- that struck me most in this presentation and which led this research to reconsider action, mobility and its place in dance.

¹In relation to this subject I would like to refer to Ferguson, who states that movement is 'modernity's *permanent emblem*' (Ferguson 2000:11). In his book *Exhausting Dance* Lepecki adds to Ferguson's statement suggesting that movement is indeed so, by virtue of its capacity to disrupt 'the alliance between dance and movement, by critiquing the possibility of sustaining a mode of moving in a *flow and continuum of movement*'. Some recent dance may be actually said to propose a political and a theoretical challenge to the old alliance between the simultaneous invention of choreography and modernity as a 'being-towards-movement' and the political ontology of movement within modernity. In this context to exhaust dance, is to exhaust modernity's '*permanent emblem*' (Lepecki 2006:8)

²Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, (London, Continuum Books, 2005)

³Lepecki, André, *Exhausting Dance*, (Routledge, NY, USA 2006).

⁴Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵Sloterdijk's philosophy outlines a critique of mobilization by addressing modernity's 'kinesthetic politics' as an exhausting and exhausted onto-political project 'being-towards-movement'.

Credits

Research: Robert Steijn in collaboration with Maria Hassabi

Danslab coordinator: Jette Schneider

Photographer: Noud Verhave

Editor: Michael A. Kroes (writer and journalist)

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