

your body is the shoreline: interview

Your body is the shoreline

with Saskia Hölbling

by Gilles Amalvi for the Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis

Seeing your pieces, one gets the impression that each piece is rooted in the previous one, as if the prevailing questions have already been announced. Does that correspond to your way of working?

Yes, since “other feature” I have occupied myself with the same questioning of the physical. That means I examine the different forms of a “being in the body”. Before it was more an examination of individuality. In “other feature” the nakedness allowed a view of the body in its depth, a consolidating view. With “exposition corps” I wondered whether these physical states could be shifted to the level of the gestures and of the face. Can we still view the body as an intrinsic body? With “superposition corps” I wondered whether this was also possible in collaboration with other people without the emergence of a divided space. The shift was based more on the idea of a coexistence in space and on different physical constraints. That’s why the body was viewed less as a purely intrinsic body. After all this work on states and, above all, on solos, I felt like having encounters.

We began working with encounters that moved the intrinsic body into the foreground. Step by step we transferred the pas de deux into more emotional states, which, nonetheless, came from physically tangible encounters. Consequently the piece “Your body is your shoreline” should be positioned between the other two. The intrinsic body is still present, but there is a way out of this state. In fact, there was a danger of becoming too formal, of approaching the fine arts. The task was to remain in this tension, to leave the intrinsic, without wandering into the theatrical or into psychological conditions or interpretations of the shifting, the approaching.

What led to the idea of the encounter?

One of the most important words is “intimacy”. I believe we tried to find a form of intimacy that differs from the one we immediately expect. In plain words, there are certain body parts that are not a part of our spaces for encounters. They are body parts that – when they come into contact – give rise to interesting states. Then we must be able to maintain these states without them leading to images of social relationships. For the time being we must remove these images from the body and let emotions arise coming from the physical information. Images arise naturally in this process. It is, however, important – as I believe – that it is a new image, not just any that suggests itself, which for example evokes a head between the legs. It is a deconstructed image that is reconstructed by work on sensations and on the intrinsic body.

Are there moments of retreat, of solitude?

The starting point was the work on encounters for two. The improvisations led to a series of pas de deux. We rehearsed and learned them. That means there is a moment of improvisation that is not necessarily planned, but we work with video, with recordings of the forms. What we found while improvising we learn again with the help of the video, without resorting to rigid forms. It’s a different form of encounter. There is a notation for the whole piece, but it is written in a way that remains open for the experience: it has to be re-experienced, otherwise it doesn’t work. In all of my pieces there is a notation that demands the relationship to a present time.

Starting from these pas de deux we had to achieve a piece and not a mere series of juxtaposed pas de deux,

a catalogue of pas de deux, otherwise the encounter cannot take place. Our question is consequently: what presence is there outside of the encounters? It was clear that they couldn't be solo dances, but another presence, that emphasises that each of us is alone with him or herself; we live with ourselves in intimacy without being occupied by something. That leads to a back and forth, to moments of alienation, moments of coming closer without a story arising. There are moments of solitude, moments of encounter, but the path between these conditions doesn't allow psychological projections to arise. There is no story to the path. When we think of encounters, we inevitably think of a consequence, of that thing that could happen afterwards. This is about showing the presence of encounter. Intimacy is not necessarily something warm, something that implies tenderness ... it can be very raw, very dense.

Does the piece have a development, a progression?

The structure of the piece was designed in relationship to the music, the sound. When creating, I always work in silence and a trace of this silence remains. Since the theme is about intimacy, we wondered what kind of voice intimacy has. We occupied ourselves with the problem of language. The voice must open an intimate space. There are recordings of our voices – but the content shouldn't take up too much space. What really counts is the voice's intimate body. Heinz manipulated this recording very discreetly.

The sound produced a dramaturgy. There are encounters between voices, dialogues between intimate voices and towards the end a composition, which includes the four dancers and functions along the roundabout way of the four voices. They are points of contact, although they don't necessarily lead to "re-encounters".

The space produces a dramaturgy too. There is a long, grey carpet, which spreads out from the middle across the large black stage. At the beginning the encounters take place on the carpet and the moments of retreat take place more or less off the carpet, but gradually this order disappears; the borders between the two spaces open up.

The development in the piece therefore concerns the intimate voices and the space and the quality of the physical encounters.

"Your body is the shoreline" – it sounds as if bodies were landscapes.

The title relates to all dramaturgical levels: the physical self, the division of space, also to the music. For me a "shoreline" is something very precise. It's about a line, but it can be the one where the land meets the water or the one where colours change. There's something indefinite about this line. You don't know exactly where this encounter takes place. It assumes an addressee, who can be my partner in the pas de deux, but can also be the spectator.

Shifting the intimate borders of the self – with your own body and your own sensations in the body of the other?

That is exactly why I start from the assumption of an intrinsic body, from which point I can touch the emotional and I can hinder the appearance of psychological states. Of course these states are present. What is important is that another kind of intimacy can manifest itself, a deeper kind.

Wavering borders: at the beginning a wall of sounds that slowly disappears until silence emerges. The main part of the piece is performed in silence. The audience is seized by the silence that isn't there from the beginning. It is a movement towards silence.

Tectonic plates, images of the earth. Are they images you had in mind? Or does it all start from the body?

There are images that emerged while working, images that resulted from the encounter, or images that remind us of landscapes.

Is it about memory, the sharing of different memories?

Yes, we all draw from collective memory. This is not individual memory, but a general one. At the beginning of an encounter we never know how we will react to the impulse of the other. The way I bring out physical constraints can be derived from this memory.

An image: when I sit in front of a man's body, a cliché image can appear. A woman, who subordinates herself to a man ...

In our work we have to allow our thinking to change, allow a transformation of this image so as not to continue it, but to bring about its adopting another direction leading somewhere else.

The idea of the intrinsic body is different and leads to a different way of thinking. It's neither about obeying the logic of the material, nor is it about the logic of social relationships, it's about finding an area in between.

In life we move between two poles, although the representative and social pole wins the upper hand. Is this about helping the in-between area to be recognised again?

How should we enhance the status of and depict this encounter when we know there are various ways of interpreting it? Knowing social images would appear, we have tried to introduce a different dimension in body work.

In the context of here and now, encounters not carried by necessity are rare. When do we take the time to meet someone without having some kind of perspective?