

## Atmospheres of dividual performance

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Fig. 1 Macarena Ortuzar dancing *Stuck with the Bones*, with cellist Bruno Guastalla [right] at *Really Actually Windy/ R.A.W. Vol 1.*, I'Klectik Art-Lab, Old Paradise Yard, London. May 7, 2016.

The view is blocked. Imagine not necessarily seeing or having seen the goings-on. Thus the following essay should not be considered a review of performances, or a theory of the difficulty of hearing/understanding, but mostly a series of echoes, rumors in my ear's labyrinth, more of a reflection on the difficulty, say, of seeing the wind. As I write this down, I hear an inner wind, a rustling inside, and of course I shall balance this out for you to create some continuum for these evocations, and how its temperaments can be inhabited.

Imagine the space cramped, a small chapel-like venue constructed out of white wooden planks. We sit huddled together. The ceilings are high, giving us breathing room; a Victorian

arm chair mysteriously rests up there on one of the cross timbers, a seat for angels to look down upon the crowd of fifty or sixty that have gathered for this evening of improvised dance and music. The venue, I’Klectik Art-Lab, lies hidden under trees to one side of Archbishop’s Park, on the south bank of the Thames across from Westminster Parliament. In the courtyard, we notice that artists-in-residence at this Art-Lab also tend to vegetables and flowers that grow in the garden. When the dance and music begin, we have been beckoned inside and for the next three hours become enveloped in this green social ecology – an environment of very diverse practitioners, and visitors from near and afar, drawn to experimental contemporary art ranging across all genres and taking place in a working enclave, where members can rent space to develop projects. During intermissions, we are asked to go outside and linger in the garden.

What is a genre today? And how does renting connect to growing vegetables? Could we think of *techné* in a different way altogether again, as a crafting and hearkening, a being *in tune* with a ground? Attunement, then, would be one of our themes. Are we not listening to other forces of things now – climates, atmospheres and heterotopias (safe spaces)? Do we hear too much about terror and violence, causing dizziness, vestibular disorders, tinnitus and hyperacusis? Does the accelerated political “sensationism” (not quite anticipated in this way by the poet Fernando Pessoa) make us sick? And what is it about listening (the aural) that has preoccupied me lately, becoming concerned with different somatic places of investment in acoustic embodiment, other site-contingencies, away from that recent paradigm of immersive theatre and participatory social-works?

The combination of herbs, planting and performing is a hint at new hybrid materialities and interrelations. The title of this evening of eclectic work, “Really Actually Windy,” points outside the common parameters of theatre to other assemblages or “confederations” as Jane Bennett calls them in her book on *Vibrant Matter*? For example, at one point Bennett mentions the strange concatenation of stuff she discovers in a storm drain – a glove, a bottle cap, a dead rat, a smooth stick of wood...<sup>1</sup> I want to tune into such confederations here.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.



The works I hear at I'Klectik are introduced by (two of the ten) performers themselves, Anita Konarska and Mirei Yazawa. Performers are curators – a familiar trend in many alternative venues. When Macarena Ortuzar enters to the finest, almost inaudible sounds of Bruno Guastalla's cello bow and strings, we are instantly mesmerized by a quality of strength and fragility that she conveys through her slow moving, contorted postures. We inhale them as sensations, and Pessoa was surely right in imagining movement as a sensation, and as poetry. The tones of fragility also come from the strings – the sinewy mezzo, low frequency overtones, unleashed by bowing at the bridge. Ortuzar is encumbered, two wooden sticks help her to stand upright, they are her natural crutches and yet they become so many other things – branches of the wind, bones, walking sticks, lightning rods, spines, arrows. They are thin and smooth, one of them later seems attached to her chin, her face resting on it. A Chilean dancer who had worked on Min Tanaka's farm during her butoh and body weather training, Ortuzar here wears black blouse and leggings, a white apron wrapped around her hips (is she a maid?), her dark hair framing a face that is intensely focused, serious, and sorrowful. We see her movement reflected in every inch of her strongly muscled body, the way she can bend, twist her balance and shift her center of gravity, lean without falling, falling without breaking, hovering in horizontal floating a few inches off the floor, as if weightless. Ortuzar's dance, performed to the highly sensitive improvised music of Guastallo, who touches the wooden body of the cello with hands more than he plays the strings, falls into place with the later solo by Anita Konarska, begun in the garden leaning and weighing against a pine tree with her head and chest, slowly slowly sliding down against the trunk of the tree, then sinking her arms into a flower bed, then performing in the chapel invisible to us. We are blindfolded upon entering; and so I listen to what I cannot see imagining the inaudible, the silent now, growing what I collected from the outside, the nearly dark, unlit permutations of modes of contingency which are also relations to the surrounding architecture, that night, in that urban context.

Eventually Konarska is revealed – someone invites us to unfold the folds – standing en pointe balancing a huge tree branch on her head that stretches almost across the entire width of the space. Tree woman, agent of near-silent sounds that we imagine hearing while blind, her performing conducts sensory power, a strangely shamanic vibe – I'm not sure what to call it.



Figs. 2 & 3 Anita Konarska [left], *Raw Pieces*, and Macarena Ortuzar, *Stuck with the Bones*, at *Really Actually Windy/ R.A.W. Vol 1.*, I'Klectik Art-Lab, Old Paradise Yard, London. May 7, 2016. Photos courtesy Anita Konarska.

Later I remembered a peculiar announcement released by composer Richard Povall out West in Cornwall in early 2016 –

Are you an artist, writer or performer looking to take your practice in a new direction? ... We will explore the shift in perception that comes from tying yourself to a tree ... the discombobulation of acoustically penetrating a tree's internal workings (Tree Listening), and the mind-opening excitement of embodying tree-being (Other Spaces), among other innovative tree-led strategies designed to remake your sense of human-tree relations. *Branching Out* fosters a radical reconception of the ways we inhabit the world in relation to other organisms.<sup>2</sup>

This relationality guides my thoughts here: why not shift attention to art and performance that makes visible what is, by nature or by design, often unseen or undervalued when working in a range of performance media, physical theatre processes, animated materialities such as the ones, for instance, that Min Tanaka's students learn when they train in body-weather techniques (in the landscape) and work on the farm planting rice? Tanaka's farm flows into

<sup>2</sup> Richard Povall, "Branching Out: Creative Collaborations With Trees," SCUDD listserv (email posting, 25 January 2016).

us: bending your body when planting is also a form of attunement to material surroundings. Why not branch out into shamanism and pataphysics, into discombobulated soundings and what Konarska calls the “raw pieces” that can be felt, heard, touched, but not necessarily seen? How do these other organisms enter us? The notion of the atmosphere, in performance, no longer engages with the distinction between subject/object. It exceeds. In a shamanic sense, Ortuzar and Konarska connect us to spirits. I feel the rods, the bones, the spines, the air. Both use their body weight and somatic sensations to develop, as sustained improvisations, a certain technology of movement-design. I can interpret such design in an immanent, material sense, looking at the architectures of spatial labor, the social spatiality created (the way they uses space), but also in a psychogeographical sense, through the imaginary narrative they intimate and make me listen to.

This is an interest of mine, partly embedded in my own choreographic practice, that you find me exploring here across a range of other manifestations: the “technologies” in question are not necessarily technical/digital but methodical and owed to techniques able to conjoin human and non-human, organic and non-organic matter. The choreographic is a vibrational and tactile occurrence – reminding us historically of significant endeavors to connect movement and architecture as practiced, for example, in Anna and Lawrence Halprin’s “Experiments in Environment” (the workshops they directed in California, 1966-1971). There is a rekindled interest in the 1960s, and the kind of *PASTForward* reworkings that Ramsay Burt traces in *Judson Dance Theatre*<sup>3</sup>, yet I sense that today’s postdramatic and immersive performances want to reconceptualize kinetic environments and happenings. They delve into atmospherics – the elemental movements in the weather world.<sup>4</sup>

The Halprins had examined such atmospheres to heighten perceptual experience through the intersection of component media. The exhibitions “Experiments in Environment” (Graham Foundation, Chicago, 2014) and “Mapping Dance: The Scores of Anna Halprin” (Museum of Performance + Design, San Francisco, 2016) revealed that Anna was aware of Kaprow’s Happenings but sought a more rigorous, interdisciplinary engagement with media and materials (lights, slide projections, transparencies, found objects, driftwood) incorporated into

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 186-201.

<sup>4</sup> See Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 96.

what she and her architectural partner called “collective creativity.” The psychogeographical and political resonances are significant, and “Really Actually Windy” also points to meteorological and atmospheric occurrences, to concatenations of moving, haptic, aromatic, acoustic aspects. These concatenations also have architectural resonances. They can be observed, for example, in the stunning environmental installations by Olafur Eliasson or Tomás Saraceno’s *Biospheres*, whilst architectural theories of atmosphere have been advanced by Gernot Böhme and Peter Zumthor.<sup>5</sup> Böhme speaks of architectural experiences as active, emotionally felt spaces that affect peoples’ breathing through processes of entrainment. In this bodily-affective sense, persons in an atmosphere are also not individual selves contained by their skin – the affective transmissions (as in the case of sound waves and smell) are sensorial phenomena that traverse space relationally, promiscuously, socially.

Halprin’s choreographic scores are visual and instructional mappings of the temporal, spatial and participatory dimensions of the performances she imagined and created, e.g. the “sensory tours” across the city. From her records of the workshop activities we learn of the contact-experience exercises with the environment, blindfolded walks, or “departure rituals” instructing participants to isolate and then reassemble different parts of their bodies – an exercise I enacted at the “E/motion frequency deceleration Choreolab” in Krems (Austria) a few years ago (2011). At the lab I experienced *deceleration* during a blindfolded walk across a hillside helped by a partner on whose shoulder my outstretched arm rested. The partner led me, or I led him trusting him blindly. This was a departure ritual, stipulated by choreographer Gill Clarke, which brought greater attunement to breath, hearing, smelling, the careful touch of my feet on the ground – proprioceptions of being-together with the other person, of being *dividual*.<sup>6</sup> Now I turn to performances I want to visualize for you, even though you may not have heard of them. What shoulder can I offer your hand?

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<sup>5</sup> Gernot Boehme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, 7th edition, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013; Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2012. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk devised a philosophy of *spheres* and envelopes in *Sphären III – Schäume* [partial translation: *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton & Steve Corcoran, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009], contributing to the current interest in atmospheres. See also Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*, London: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> I first heard of the notion of the “dividual” at a workshop with Yoko Ando, where she tested her *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior*, an interactive dance created at Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Japan, in 2011. My own current work with DAP-Lab explores multisensorial environments that enable dividual proprioception. We recently invited an audience of blind persons to touch, listen to, and play with our dancers and their costumes in *metakimosphere no. 3* (London 2016); each of the visitors was traveled through the environment by a performer.

Consider Catherine D'Ignazio and Andi Sutton's *Coastline: Future Past* project in Boston Harbor: 30 participants in June 2015 walked through the core of Boston tracing a route from the Climate Change prediction of the city's future coastline to its history, as a way of physically understanding the future and past of urban change at scales that are difficult to see and comprehend (<https://vimeo.com/160370905#at=0>). Sutton encouraged the activists and performers – calling them “poetic protesters” – to walk holding on to a rope and carrying stencilled messages, engaging in conversation with passers-by, and at key points climbing a ladder marked with the depth of the flooding scenarios projected for the year 2100. This left listeners, according to the story Sutton and D'Ignazio relate on the videos documenting the work, *under the water* at most locations.

This is an image to be savored – an audience under water, embodying calamitous climate change having traced the future (of a past) of their urban environment. When I referred to *PASTForward*, the White Oak Dance Company's re-performance in 2000 of original Judson Church pieces, I was less concerned with recreation, or Baryshnikov's homage to minimalist conceptual dance, than with a current interest in interrogating the theatre's ill-equipped negative potential to resist an enduring reality, and a disastrous climate of performance within the automatism of the marketplace. In these weeks, as I write, the terror repeatedly comes to cities and villages in European countries – vividly imaged in the news, reframed in speculative social media, as if it were new and radical – while wars continue to generate multitudes of refugees and migrants. The latter move across the waters, they crowd forward having risked their lives, they get processed through hotspots (on Greek islands), while the locals further north ponder and suspect the (suddenly dangerous?) participatoriness of public space, the relationalities of the emancipated communities. “Wie sicher ist der öffentliche Raum?” asks a feature on the “epidemic of suspicion.”<sup>7</sup> The paranoia in question is a defensive reference to Islamic fundamentalist militant terrorism (symbolized in the ISIS). More than that, it is a pernicious use of language that invokes biopolitics and shame about the West's (and the theatre's) immunisatory logic.<sup>8</sup> Migration now is suspicious too, and the refugees have become a “flood”, in biblical, near-apocalyptic terms. How then do performance artists examine their techné of sharing, the mimetic desire, sacrificial rites and

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Assheuer, “Epidemie des Argwohns: Der Terrorismus ist keine mediale Erfindung. Er zeigt Wirkung. Der Verdacht dominiert neuerdings unsere Wahrnehmung des Alltags,” *Die ZEIT*, 30 July, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> See Alan Read's provocative writings on community and immunity in *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance*, London: Bloomsbury, esp. pp. 192-99.



the scapegoating that suffuse the social-political climates in the still largely secularized former West? How would the scape-goating manifest itself in religious societies or occupied territories (in the Middle East, in Palestine)?

During the Wiener Festwochen, Oliver Frljić's *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* [Our violence is your violence]<sup>9</sup> offers a spectacular work of performance art, mixing dance, visual choreography and electronic sound into drastic physical theatre collage scenes that are meant to shock our sensibilities. The references are overtly political (including religious symbols and references to rape, torture, terror, fascism and Islamophobia), in an almost old-fashioned sense of a bygone political theatre aesthetic. Frljić, born in Bosnia and now working as artistic director of the Croatian National Theatre of Rijeka, was commissioned by the Berlin HAU Hebbel Theatre/Wiener Festwochen to devise the performance as a critical homage to Peter Weiss's novel on radical resistance, *Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975-81). Previously he had provoked attention with his performances of *Aleksandra Zec* and *Balkan macht frei* [The Balkans set you free] (both 2015) – the former dramatizing Croatian war crimes against a young Serbian girl and her family, the latter a more personal and intentionally self-stereotyping depiction of discriminatory policies present in every society. The main character in *Balkan macht frei* is Frljić's alter-ego, performing his struggle to meet/overcome the expectations of him as a director coming from the Balkans.

Watching the relentless stereotypical violence of *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje*, one cannot but sense Frljić's overcompensating furor, trying to "explain" Islamic terror in the wake of a long history of Western colonial and religious terror, fascism and capitalist exploitation. He delights in attacking the hand that also feeds him now. The production floods the stage (in front of a back wall of dozens of oil barrels) with refugees and prisoners, who at one point perform a hallucinatory trance dance in orange Guantánamo detainee uniforms, in the next moment appear naked, with calligraphic Arabic inscriptions on the skin as if they had walked out of a Shirin Neshat video. Jesus descends from the cross to rape hijab-wearing Muslim women; the dancing Guantánamo prisoners now sit in a circle and torture the new "Syrian" refugee just arrived, while voice over announcements request us to observe a minute of

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<sup>9</sup> Text adaptation from *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Peter Weiss) by Oliver Frljić and Marin Blažević; directed by Oliver Frljić; May-June 2016, Festwochen, Vienna.



Fig. 4 *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* [Our violence is your violence], 2016. Photo: Wiener Festwochen/Alexi Pelekanos

silence for the victims of terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. Then there is the attack against the audience (of our bourgeois theatre) itself: “Am meisten schäme ich mich für Sie, das Theaterpublikum. Denn für Sie ist der Tod ein ästhetisches Ereignis” [I am most ashamed for you, the theatre audience. For you death is an aesthetic event].

The religious and political symbols function as a kind of ritualized semiotic – the iconography of signs of terror are meant to provoke shock on both right and left ideological spectrums, attack the violence of terror and show the radical illusions of consensus or complacency, along with the feel-good humanitarianism.<sup>10</sup> The West has no moral superiority at all, and a young director from the former East plays havoc with the left liberal mindset in the former West that can be easily debunked now in the light of the necropolitical violence of state politics sustaining contemporary racism as a primal ideology of global capitalism. Frljić’s heavy metal theatre using blatant, fetishized violence on stage can be called *plakativ* (in German), i.e. trotting out shrill political signs, shoving them into our faces, and casually intermixing them with the archive of performance gestures that once resonated (e.g.

<sup>10</sup> In December 2015 Latvian theatre director Alvis Hermanis cancelled his production *Russia.Endgames*, projected to open at Thalia Theatre Hamburg in the spring, as he felt uncomfortable with the theatre’s political engagement for refugees, dismissively calling it a “Refugees-Welcome-Center.”

mimicking Carolee Schneemann's iconic *Interior Scroll*, a hijab wearing actress in *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* pulls an Austrian flag from her vagina).

An aesthetics of resistance, if one were to follow Weiss's study of historical fascism and the workers' movement, would have to grapple with material phenomena of resistance (e.g. strike, protest, activist organization) and with the current politics of austerity, not with terror as aesthetic choreography. The propulsive in-her-face theatre tends to privilege the political content through spectacular gestures that heighten the theatrical affect. It is the loudness of the affecting that turns me off. I wonder whether current dance theatre productions pursuing a more abstract spiritual technique of ritual, more subtle tonalities, are able to dig deeper, make us listen differently.

The Barcelona-based company La Veronal, formed by Marcos Morau in 2005 with artists from dance, film, photography, and literature, perform a fascinating example of such an abstract ritual with *Voronia*<sup>11</sup>, named after a geographical location (a deep cave in Georgia, Caucasus) which must have inspired the dark vacuum of the stage space. The group conducted their research there, going down into a kind of bottomless pit that Morau compares to an empty center of gravity, and Dante's *Inferno*. "¿Qué o bien dond   est   el Mal?" [What or where is Evil], he asks in the program notes. As we enter the theatre, a young boy is seen standing alone in a vast gray horizontal stretch; then we note the cleaners that hover on the edges, slowly scrubbing the floor. Figures in black and white emerge in front of the long grey curtain: they twitch and contort in slow and fast cycles of mutated body-popping. Short volleys of clapping hands or slapped hips evoke chittering insects, sounds which recur often during the performance, and we hear them moving back and forth across the stage as words are projected onto the wall. These come from nowhere and disappear, a sinister biblical refrain of gnostic sentences from the prophet Ezekiel and St Augustine. Their origin and destination are unclear, but then the rear curtains part to reveal various scenes behind glass, like the dream surgery in an operating theatre, where surgeons bend over a human body, or a boy trapped like a fly in a glass box, his hands bloodied. Dark clad monks pass across in a slow procession. The Christian iconographies and prophetic allusions to the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel) are like hallucinations, just as the animal puppets and real animals that appear now and then.

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<sup>11</sup> Sadlers's Wells, London, October 2015.



Fig. 5 *Voronia*, La Veronal, Sadler's Wells London, 2015. Photo courtesy of Sadlers Wells/Foteini Christofilopoulou

Half-way through, the glass has transformed into metallic elevator doors through which a table emerges, set for a supper at which the dancers gather. We are taken through repeated changes of “location” in a dance that is highly cinematic, allusive and allegorical yet without a guiding narrative (thus following the tanztheater collage technique but avoiding all literalizing or epic tendencies that once marked the theatre of Pina Bausch). The choreographic work is extraordinary, fast-paced and often disaligned, distorted and fragmented. The twisting, cavorting bodies now move or sit rigid around the table at the absurdist supper, and we hear the sound of electronic and human babble, interwoven with fractions of classical music, sacred chorals and the percussive sound of the performers clapping hands. A woman (Sau-Ching Wong) shouts what appears to be a long tirade of abuse (in Mandarin) while pushing people away from the table. She tries to escape, but finds increasingly strange things lurking in the elevator every time she calls it: a military figure in riot gear, naked people flailing in a dynamic Rodin frieze; the young messiah boy being measured for a suit, and old man, etc. One dinner guest has quietly turned into a polar bear. Near the end, the boy pulls out a casket, as if he were in a morgue, discovering the corpse of the polar bear.

Choreographer Morau and his group tend to trust the associative visual imagery even if it risks being oblique. I find it gripping and also hypnotically strange because it is offered in such a detached, ritualistic calmness, allowing me to think about the underground and religious (apocalyptic) violence, revelation and rapture in many new ways, complicating the weird surrealism with claustrophobic references and the blatant poetic beauty in biblical phrases that I had not expected (or long forgotten). The dancers are mesmerizing, pushing, pulling, and stretching themselves into exquisitely grotesque positions, and El Greco and Goya come to mind when imagining the allusive structure of this performance that still resonates in my ears through the quick, tiny clapping sounds made by the dancers. Then again, recalling the last years of Goya (when he painted the Black Paintings hiding locked up in his house), the painter of dark phantasms was deaf, he could not hear.

Akram Khan Company's *Until the Lions*<sup>12</sup> is staged as a prophecy as well, not in a biblical sense but in the narrative mythological contexture this strong dance work evokes and without which its physical language and the dramaturgical principles of *abhinaya* (in South Asian dance) could not be fully understood. Khan's stature as a choreographer has grown consistently over the past decade. His deconstructions and transformations of the codified languages of *kathak* are much talked about as he now clearly inspires a younger generation of artists who do not so much politicize their ethnic or racial bodies but push the creative potentials of their multi-corporeally trained instruments, blurring all boundaries between codes and abstractions, and classical, modern and contemporary performance idioms. As in the case of Morau's work (the development of specific improvisation technologies for his company, called *Kova*<sup>13</sup>), Khan has refined his aesthetic of collaboration paying much attention to formal experimentation with multiple movement vocabularies that allows shiftings between gender roles and masculine and feminine energies, and *Until the Lions* offers a beautiful, haunting example of how a performed gender identity can become self-divided or divisible.

Ostensibly a trio, with Khan partnering Ching-Ying Chien and Christine Joy Ritter, the work actually features seven performers, as the choral presence of four instrumental and vocal

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<sup>12</sup> The Roundhouse, London, 9-24 January 2016.

<sup>13</sup> In a video where company members present aspects of the technique, Kova is referred to as "geographic tools": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA3ACE927qs>; see also: <http://www.laveronal.com/work/kova-%C2%AC-geographic-tools/>



musicians, who are placed in four corners of the circular stage (inside the massive circular Roundhouse, a famed rock arena in Camden Town) and move around the circle as well, is substantial for the overall choreographic, kinetic and aural atmospheres of the work. For me, the sensual atmospherics started to be very noticeable even before the dance, upon entering a space that seemed misty, as if a fine sawmill dust hung in an air suffused with a strange scent. In front of us, the round stage designed by Tim Yip (known for his art direction in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) resembles the stub of a 30-foot-wide tree-trunk, sawn through just above the ground. There are cracks, which later open upward to create uneven *mesa*, and through them smoke trickles up insistently, filling our eyes, while Michael Hulls's lighting meticulously culls out luminous enclosures and clearings.



Fig. 6 Ching-Ying Chien, Christine Joy Ritter and Akram Khan (center) in *Until The Lions* at The Roundhouse, 2016. Photo: Jean Louis Fernandez.

The clearing, I take it, is for the gods that populate this dance drama, for the ancestors on the other side of the ritual curtain. As Morau reaches back to the Hebrew and Christian mythographies, this production is an adaptation of *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*, a retelling in verse of the *Mahabharata* by Karthika Naïr, which is here danced in an elliptical manner practically impossible to follow if one were not apprised of the tale. Khan had returned to the Hindu epic before (e.g. in his 2009 *Gnosis*) after having

performed the role of the Boy in Peter Brook's controversial *Mahabharata* in the mid-1980s. But now he chooses to focus on the story of Amba, a princess abducted from her wedding ceremony by the powerful and obdurately celibate Prince Bheeshma, who then takes revenge on him by killing herself and assuming the form of a male warrior. Taiwanese dancer Chien portrays the fierce Amba, Khan takes on the role of Bheeshma while Ritter (who trained at the Palucca School in Dresden) is a kind of animal presence, skittering and slithering around the clearing with intensity, a possessed figure of destiny who becomes the spirit driving Amba's revenge.

Throughout the performance, bathed in a shimmering, sand-colored light on the giant slice of tree trunk, I envision the world as a living organism and a continuum, my eyes travel with an inner and outer wind, as if rustlings and movements of plants, trees, things, landscapes, living beings, kangaroos galloping on all fours and supernatural actors combined into a collective whole. The trunk, with rings and bark, becomes a platform for a strangely erotic mating ritual during which Chien and Khan embody Amba's attempt to persuade Bheeshma to marry her; she reaches to touch him and grasp him, yet he alternates between pushing her off and reciprocating, increasingly confused by transactions that we can also imagine as internal transformations. Later, the trunk becomes the battleground on which Amba, Bheeshma and their invisible armies rage against each other. They are watched over by the blackened, severed head of an old warrior that is mounted on a stick, and in the final scene the musicians join to throw innumerable long wooden arrows onto the scene as if preparing a funerary pyre.

In conclusion, it is the sounding that lingers prominently, after this bracingly physical, multisensorial dance. A score by Vincenzo Lamagna underlines the action, a low electronic drone with whirlwind percussion from Yaron Engler and impressive vocals from Sohini Alam and David Azurza who prowl the perimeter of the stage environment, joining the action from time to time. Most stunningly, they use the (amplified) tree trunk itself as percussion instrument, making it as ritually threatening and earthly as the pounding rhythms in Stravinsky's *Sacre de Printemps*, or shifting into lyrical, melancholy registers with Gaelic love songs (accompanied by guitarist Lamagna). Azurza surprises us near the end with his remarkable countertenor voice, enriching the piece's gender fluidity.

I cannot describe the sound of this dance-work any closer; it touches me on levels of experience that exceed the semantic or syntactical dimensions of the epic narrative or the

movement enunciations (no longer solo *kathak* but dividualized and disjointed, diversified through the collaboration with dancers and musicians working from other, sharable vocabularies). What I tried to evoke are examples of contemporary performance that grapple furiously with sounding out, the transfusion of environment through the sonic, the complexities of transcultural tones, volumes, cadences and textures (instrumental and bodily-gestural), the atmospheric where one can discover within relational saturation (or subtraction) that “individual” elements in fact always traverse. There are no individual elements.

If we now take *Until the Lions* as a post-authentic work that messes up its (inter)cultural sounds to the point where listening to performance is precisely challenged (and East and West are interwoven and hybridized to a point where the mythic text is perceived as invented and the ritual force only a pataphysical prank), then the juxtaposition of the shrill, hyperkinetic *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* and the grave, overly sincere *Until the Lions* becomes stranger.

What happens to accepted ontologies when movement techniques are no longer recognizable, words and translations fail, voice and music no longer demarcate cultural histories and spaces, and acoustic and visual relations drift apart? Genres are bunk. What kind of synaesthetic listening do we perform in the face of the incommunicable? One could argue that amongst the collectives of audiences, connotations of sounds, of languages, of gestures and sensorial phenomena will always be discerned, mobilizing a potential expansion of multiplicity. We are quite capable of somatic identification; the calm and slowness of the shamanic, ritual performance dimensions which I addressed may qualitatively contribute to an enhanced perception of condIVIDUALITY. Theatre always communicates even if it cannot grant immunity, then, and what I evoked, in the beginning, as less accommodated, site-contingent performance, whose dividual dispersion in space is more difficult to fathom, may in fact challenge the very denomination of site and identity position itself. For example, how do you resolve the paradox of an occupied theatre, a theatre under occupation<sup>14</sup>, unable to move or unwilling to move, compared to the commonplace dispersed production and diasporic actors (and privileged migrants) within globalized economy?

Let us listen to the wind, one more time, in this case to a company called Iraqi Bodies – their

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. the Mavili Collective’s occupation of the Embros Theatre in central Athens in 2011.

incongruous, ironic name evoking a kind of national state company. They came to my attention when I was doing research on Middle Eastern performance (Noura Murad's Leish Troupe, one of the few independent and experimental theatre groups in Syria; the Khashabi Independent Theatre, a group that has just relocated to an old building in the historic Wadi Salib area of downtown Haifa from which the majority of Palestinian residents were forcibly expelled in 1948).<sup>15</sup> All three companies were afflicted by war and occupation, to the point where Leish Troupe had to cease their creative activities for a while; Kashabi were homeless for several years after they founded the group in the occupied territories in 2011. Iraqi Bodies, founded in 2005 in Baghdad, had to re-form in exile in 2009 (Gothenburg, Sweden) after director Anmar Taha was forced to flee the increasing violence of sectarian conflict in Iraq. They kept the name Iraqi Bodies even as the company now included Swedish, Greek, Dutch, and other international performers and musicians.

When I saw Iraqi Bodies' *Possessed*, I was struck by its dark intensity, which connects it to other works in the field of contemporary dance theatre (e.g. Hofesh Shechter, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Rachid Ouramdane). But it surprised me on an aural and kinetic level because of the ironic sensibilities that suffused the choral pattern of the work, giving it a ritual quality similar to the one observed in *Voronia*. In the beginning there is darkness. *Possessed* is a world of sparse lighting, silence and near immobility disrupted by seemingly erratic, repetitive movements. The opening sequences are nearly invisible (under a dim red and a blue light spot, one vaguely discerns two flailing bodies). When the light grows, we seem to be in a smoke filled landscape, as if after a fire, jutting white lines mark the space as if delineating an architecture to be built, or the contours of buildings that were once there. Then the chorus of nine dancers huddles together tightly (separated from a figure that lies motionless on a different spot in the empty environment), moves together, halts, moves, halts again, the only sound is that coming from the bodies themselves, their tiny steps, shuffles, molecular conjoined movements, later the whisperings and mutterings of incomprehensible words.

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<sup>15</sup> Exiled Syrian choreographer Mithkal Alzghair was featured in the Tanz im August Festival in Berlin, 2016, with his new piece *Displacement* which reflects on his experience of violence, fleeing his homeland, and the identity conflicts this produces.

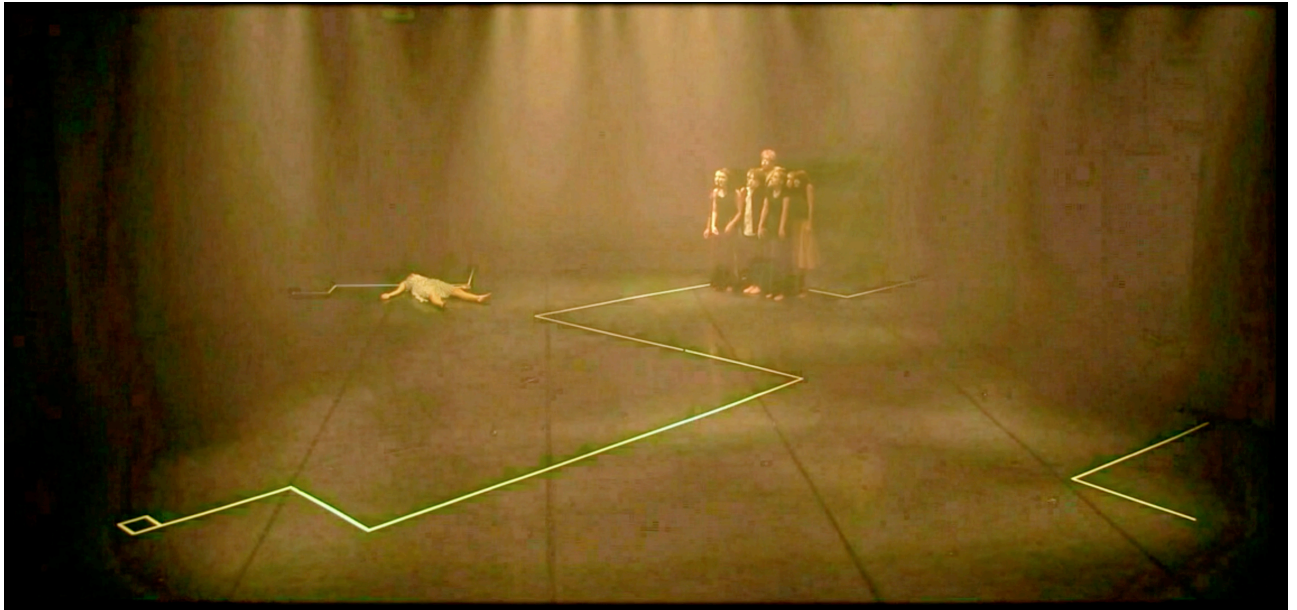


Fig. 7 *Possessed*, performed by Iraqi Bodies, 2015. © Photo courtesy of Iraqi Bodies/Anmar Taha.

In a similar piece, *Vowels*, Iraqi Bodies uses a grouping of four actors (two older, two younger, perhaps a family) in an infinitely long motionless opening scene. The two men and the younger woman are wearing traditional dress from the Middle East; the older woman (mother) stands still, untouchable, in the background, Western-styled and beautifully dressed. Working in butoh vocabulary, the actors' motions, when they occur, are minimal, reduced, the "vowels" remain unspoken. There are so many steps not addressed that the audience constantly have to fill in the gaps: we cover up the silence (in the relationship between the former West and the Middle East). I imagine the interrelated shapes of bodies in motion – like the slow erosion of coastal lines – cast outside of the lawscape, papers and applications processed, welcomed as refugees in detention centres or make-shift camps, broken buildings, waiting quietly with ardor to escape a violent and proxy war, dreaming of a better life for their families ("is this Europe?").





Fig. 8 *Vowels*, performed by Iraqi Bodies, 2015. © Photo courtesy of Iraqi Bodies/Anmar Taha.

I want to end on this note. Perhaps this is what it is going to be like: we are under water, and everything we hear is strangely muffled, the movements we perceive slowed down, in a thicker medium than air that offers more resistance, yet the echo waves travel. We, on the other side of the ritual curtain,<sup>16</sup> open our ears wider, to listen to the ancestors behind the glass: “I, body spittle, laughter dribbling from a face/In wild denial or in anger, vermilions” (Iraqi Bodies, *Vowels*).<sup>17</sup> The ancestors hope we understand, or everything will be lost.

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<sup>16</sup> See Gerald Raunig, *Dividuum: Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution*, trans. Aileen Derieg, South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Text quoted from the website introduction to *Vowels*: [www.iraqibodies.com/body--identities-vowels](http://www.iraqibodies.com/body--identities-vowels)