

rrr...: interview

Interview with Saskia Hölbling

by Susanne Granzer

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The stage floor, a large, milky white shimmering area, regularly divided into black-edged rectangles. In the middle of them, a black cube, behind it a swivel chair.

Alongside the cube – later it will prove to be a metal suitcase – stands a dark figure with one hand resting on the “black box”, face and upper body concealed in the darkness. The figure stamps on the floor with one foot, hard and rhythmically. An appeal for attention which one cannot and should not escape. After a while the dark figure sits on the swivel chair; its head and face are still hidden from view in the darkness. You see a blonde over whose head a small red circle floats, a point that inevitably attracts the concentration to itself like the face that the light suddenly reveals. A first word: full stop.

A “lecture performance” a dance which begins with the geometry of words in the switch between languages and in the switch the dominance in the usual relationship between the spoken word and the physical word-body.

In "rrr..." could one speak of a “physical closed reading”? Reading the body? Directly?

Yes, one hundred per cent. On the one hand there is the textual level, the spoken world, on the other hand there is the physical level, the body as text. Both oscillate into each other, which does not mean, however, that the physicality follows the content of the text. At the beginning, the spoken text seems to be very mathematical, almost linear, but it becomes ever more multi-layered in its procedure.

Less and less Cartesian, you could say. And so in the course of its development it becomes ever more complex in its “clarity” and “conception”. At the level of physicality it behaves in a similar way. At the start it is clearly gestural, only, in parallel to the development of the spoken word in the course of the work, to become ever more complex, multiple, sensory. Yes, in this sense “rrr...” is a real “physical close reading”.

“Language-body”: In your performances you speak philosophical-scientific texts yourself and express them physically. As a dancer, how do you experience the relationship between the spoken word and body language?

What is interesting about “rrr...” is that first there was a choreography of gestures. The text that I wrote for it followed these gestures. That is, it was not the basis. But first, through improvisations, also through verbal improvisations, the basic structure developed in the gestures whose physicality was quite clear, and only after this style was quite clear did I write the text for it. And the text then influenced the physical style again. This process was exciting.

My first source was to look at the material of “Body Portraits” by Laurent Goldring, which are at the start of “rrr...”. Benoît (Lachambre) challenged me to improvise about the whole raw material of “Body Portraits”, which I had taken a look at, that is, to give my impressions of it. These impressions were not descriptive, but rather the images “spoke” to me and I then gave this “spoken text” an expression in the improvisations. The more I attempted to dip into them, the more complex was what the images triggered, the more complex did the ways of seeing them become. A point of reference that collected the respective past was always very important here. The gestural language of “rrr...” developed on the basis of such improvisations, and, as I said at the beginning, the very specific, scientific-philosophical text that I speak eventually developed out of the gestural language afterwards.

"Type-face": Watching it, I repeatedly saw and read your body as a kind of "sign", "pointer", "typeface", "letter", "signifier", "alphabet". To what extent is the body itself a "sign", something that points from here to there and so constantly refers beyond itself? Out into the environment, which opens the body up to others.

Usually, gestures are always acts that confirm, support, strengthen a certain content. That is, I have the statement and I have the sign. You could say that these are two things, so I speak and thereby [makes a gesture] I affirm it. But in "rrr..." this affirmative act of the gesture does not exist. It is not first the word and then I back it up with the gesture as an affirmation, but I put the word into the room through the gesture, or better the content of my thought into the room. To this extent, from the beginning these are always "whole-body gestures" that are filled with a certain sensuous content.

"Signifier/signified": In the course of your "lecture performance" (would you accept the word?) for me the classical relationship of signifier – of physical sign character – and signified – the non-material content of the sign – reverses. At the beginning, the non-material meaning of the spoken text seems to dominate the body. In the course of the performance the language no longer controls the body, but rather the body itself becomes wilful. It gets more of a will of its own.

Yes, that's right. At the beginning you can talk more of a gestural reading, out of which as we know an ever more physical reading gradually develops. The dramaturgy of the work also follows this development. The body manifests itself more and more. It becomes ever more determining and the word loses its dominance. We understand wilfulness first as unmanageable. But if you take the content of the word wilful [Eigensinning/self-willed] literally, then it is completely right.

"Switching languages": You switch back and forth between three languages, English, French and German. Does this change the relationship between language and body for you? Do the individual languages feel physically different for you? Do they stimulate other zones of the body?

Definitely. English, French and German are each situated differently in the body. You could put it like that. That's exciting, because these three languages actually feel physically different. The tones change, but also the wit. German, for example, is a very objective language. French is – it's difficult to express it in words – you could say French is more voluptuous [laughs] . . . but that sounds so clichéd. Nevertheless, I notice that I move differently if I am in France and am speaking French or if I am in Austria and am speaking German. With English it's more difficult for me to locate the language physically. English for me is rather a crutch for communication.