

## secret sight: interview

with Saskia Hölbling

by Gilles Amalvi

**One of the inspirations that essentially influenced the development process of this work was the sight of Japanese Zen gardens. How did you get from this visual experience to the choreographic composition, to work with bodies in movement?**

It actually all began with the discovery of the temple garden of Ryoan-ji, one of the purest forms of Zen garden. When I saw it for the first time I was above all fascinated by the fact that it did not provoke any hierarchy in the ordering of the gaze. From Western gardens, such as those at Versailles, we are used to the construction of a perspective, a vanishing point, that guides the gaze – a design element that does not exist in Zen gardens. These gardens consist simply of five rock islands of varying sizes laid out on gravel. None of these rocks is more important than another. Attention is not focused, it drifts there. That means that what is perceived is not the objects and their relationships to each other but the space between the objects. This space in between begins to vibrate, to assume a different consistency. A strange relationship between the objects and the space develops – the relationships construe themselves differently. This was the actual starting point. Now, bodies are not rocks. When I look at a Japanese calligraphic sign, I can perceive it without touching the content that it conveys: it is an abstract sign. But as it is simultaneously a drawing, it evokes something, provokes a different form of reading, which I can just not quite define. I am attempting to observe the bodies in space somewhat in the light of this paradox. The tension that develops from this paradox makes a new approach to the material of movement possible for me. If one observes this material it is difficult to read a story from it – even if the signs clearly inscribe themselves in the space. If I compare this process with other works by DANS.KIAS – for example, with *Other Feature* or *Exposition Corps* – which show an organic body, an essential body, then I would say that I may still be analysing the essential body, but that this experience of the perception of this space in between led me to deal with it differently.

**One could say that in *Exposition Corps*, the essential body reveals itself as an external manifestation of an internal process and that this search is continued with "secret sight", but with you now taking abstract signs from this organic material.**

Yes, another question that I posed myself in the context of this work concerns certain codified gestures – leaps, leg postures – that belong to the history of dance: how can one use these elements and divest them of their spectacular character, how can one ultimately integrate them in this catalogue of signs and confront them with the essential body?

**Was this paradox – this tension between the neutral observation of the space and the inscription of the signs that make it move – the motor of the creative process?**

It was one motor, yet, although I approached this paradox from several sides: in order to get a space to vibrate one has to find the other spaces that constitute it. To get there we worked with several constellations: the bodies could show themselves at the centre, but also be outside, on the periphery, and draw lines of tension from there. And then again the question poses itself of how they move – and in which relation they stand to each other. A final important point: the costumes, which are actually more than costumes, because they likewise behave like signs. In this work one can watch the solo of a jacket in the space or also the relation of a jacket to a body or of two jackets to two dancers. This allows a wide range of combinations and lines of tension to develop, which create vibrations.

**So are we back to the paradox we started from: like the rocks in the garden, the jackets would be points placed in a tension with the moving bodies, which for their part are the embodiment of the relations between the unmoving elements and which set the space in between in motion?**

Yes, although the jackets themselves are subject to this field of tension. They can function as simple points, but are also manipulated. You have to find the correct way of unfolding them, folding them up and moving them. As soon as they are unfolded, they are no longer just an abstract point, they also refer to a human presence.

**Each element has several facets, can be read in different ways . . .**

Yes, besides, there is one facet that I haven't mentioned yet: the fact that the bodies present on the stage catch people's eyes differently according to the way they are dressed. Here it is not about whether one is "clothed" or "unclothed", but about creating contrasts to be able to understand the individual body parts from different perspectives. Thus the upper body can be clothed in black, whereas the lower body is naked. Or the arms are naked and the rest of the body is dressed in black. This has a completely different effect to a body that always appears in black clothing on a white stage. The signs inscribe themselves differently through these combinations.

**Another important question in this work relates to the encounters. At the beginning there was the desire to take up the idea of physical encounter, which was a theme in "Your body is the shoreline", in a different way. How does the relationship of the signs in space and of the encounters – which could form a nodal point or a visual focus – articulate itself according to this?**

The duets developed in a way that we were not guided by an intention or an idea but rather by an abstract curiosity. One person's body part touches that of another and the whole develops out of this first contact. Then associations meet, integrate in this making of contact, in this initial surprise. However, in our work we attempted to base ourselves as little as possible on associations of a psychological kind – but to permit the bodies to find themselves, portray themselves, develop on the image that is developing. On the other hand, these movements actually produce a culmination, a nodal point – but this does not close the space. Inside these nodes, new islands can arise that for their part decentralise the gaze. For example a hand that crops up, a little finger that moves. If the gaze sinks into something it becomes sensitive to details – as if the frame has become narrower, but at the same time remains open to each new event that takes place.

**In this work there are also two female and one male body to be seen – a triangle of love. Were the interpretations that this arrangement suggested made a theme, neutralised, or led in a totally different direction.**

This triangle inscribes itself like a sign – it can be the triangle of the genitals or that describing the sex and breasts, or also that of the male sex. That balance between these three bodies, everything that arises between them, encounters, distancings, tensions, relations, which are sometimes gentle, sometimes tense, all this circulates.

**A further idea that emerged in the development of this work is that of a missing element: on the stage there are three dancers and four jackets. How did this discrepancy arise? Is it precisely this absence, which makes a perfect balance impossible, that permits the circulation of the gaze?**

Sometimes coincidences give rise to very interesting things . . . at the start the work was conceived for four people. In the first rehearsals however, there were only three of us – but we were always thinking of this

fourth person who would join us later. However, then she was not able to take part in the work. What is interesting about it is that as a result of the fact that this person was constantly “with us” there was always a free space, an empty space, which influenced the structure of the composition. When it became clear to us that we would remain as three, something of this absence had already incorporated itself in the work and had proved to be very consistent in relation to the project. The inscribing of signs only works because the presence and absence, the fullness and the emptiness remain in balance. Finally, the absence of this person was made a theme through the jacket – which at some moments has a very powerful presence, a magnetism on the stage . . . here, too, a paradox was the motor for the creation of the whole dynamics.

### **How is the title to be understood? What "secret sight" is it about? Is it shown to us?**

To come back to the Japanese gardens, one can find oneself at every point in the garden and look in any direction one wants – there are no prescribed ways of observation; whatever one sees is new. For me “secret sight” is the discovery of the experience of the gaze that an observer can have if he or she recognises how relations renew themselves. Some see the raised little finger, others at the same moment see the relationship between two dancers, a third sees the space and the jacket, and yet another is fascinated by the space in between.

**In “secret sight” there are several “suspended” moments in which the space is so to speak unmoved. Could one say that one can not only observe this work from every perspective but also interpret it from each individual moment? And thus what relationship is there between these “suspended moments”? Do they make it possible to introduce a different temporality in which there is neither a beginning, a middle or an end?**

In order to achieve an understanding that goes beyond our habitual attitudes you have to temporarily switch off your consciousness, so that it doesn’t focus on the sequence of events. At the beginning the duet introduces a particular time perception – a duration that extends itself, that has the effect that one forgets the passing of time. If the piece started with the first solo, that is, if it were driven forward by a very powerful energy that encompasses the whole room, the interpretation would remain focused on the body. This beginning is very important; it has the function of introducing an orbital duration. But it is also necessary that this suspending appears again, so that the sight of this concept of the in-between space remains in the memory, so that it is not lost in the inscription of the sign. If the signs were to incessantly follow upon one another, the relationships in the space could no longer vibrate. So there are these long pauses for breath, at the start and in the middle of the work – but also other moments that work with the same suspending, which suspend the linear sequence of time.

**One could say that the stage works like the mystic writing pad, the “Wunderblock”, with which Freud compared the unconscious. The things draw themselves on the surface, are erased, but a trace remains behind, invisible, under the new lines that inscribe themselves . . .**

I am thinking of another image, a comparison from science, that is perhaps not so exact but which serves to create resonances between various moments in the work: in quantum physics it can be observed that two particles that were in contact with one another continue this relationship even when they are spatially separated. A memory remains. Space and time become relative. One also finds this idea of a profound inscription in bodies in certain dance techniques and we have used this image in order to produce resonances that charge the space with other relationships, jointly to move the space.

**This piece shakes the meaning, does not permit one interpretation to crystallise out. How did you introduce light and music without adding meaning?**

To come back to the garden of Ryoan-ji again, you have no direct access to this garden but get in through a detour that is almost like a hidden path. The garden itself is surrounded by a wall. Behind this wall one sees nature. You see not only the frame of the garden, but also the trees around it. And if a leaf falls from a tree it is part of the sight – without becoming the focus, an object that attracts attention to itself. The garden is exposed, integrated however in its surroundings. I would say that light and music have been integrated in a comparable way. Let's start with light and consider the example of nature. There is bright sunshine, but then clouds come over . . . I am thinking of those Irish landscapes where the weather can change very suddenly. The lighting in the work does not accentuate what is taking place, it allows the space to breathe. During one of the duets, for example, the light progressively moves from one side to the other, almost imperceptibly, it unconsciously distracts the attention without accompanying the action. As far as the music is concerned, this is based on the human voice. Heinz Ditsch used speech-synthesis software to alter our voices by sometimes just retaining a grain of the voice, the breathing or the rhythm. The sound adds a standpoint, is a presence that introduces tension. Sometimes a word or part of a word crops up in the composition, only to dissolve again. Often the music of the dance serves as a background. Here we worked on a composition that integrates silence or in which silence functions as a part of the whole: sounds appear, merge with the total perception, disappear . . .

**Why did you decide to start from the human voice?**

This was again about the idea of the sign. Words, too, are signs. We asked ourselves whether it would be possible to inscribe words in the same way as bodies. In poetry you can create a hierarchy-free space – even if only on paper . . . black signs on a white sheet of paper. We were aware that the words on the stage were too “powerful”, too dominating as bearers of meaning and that you have to get away from that. The signifier of a word that is allowed space influences the type of reading in a completely different way . . .

**The starting point of the project was the Zen garden, but also the consideration that Roland Barthes mentioned in his book dedicated to Japan “The Empire of Signs”. “Signs do not express anything, they bring to existence”, he wrote. To what extent did this idea influence the work?**

If I relate to Japan I am thinking not only of the Zen garden but also of quite simple observations that I made when I visited this country. Reading Barthes' book enabled me to consolidate some of these impressions, to deepen them. He expresses it very well that in his approach to these signs he conveys a certain interpretation, a personal perspective. Actually it is not about having a view that does not immediately offer an interpretation, but about a view that allows things to be and exist for themselves.