

Mette Ingvarsten on Estranged Understandings of Bodies and Objects

Interview by Tom Engels

We agreed to meet at L'Espérance on Rue du Finistère; this infamous hotel with its luscious art deco style is reminiscent of Brussels' mundane days of times gone by. Espérance in French means both hope and expectation, and gently hints at the days when desires and passions spilled out of its upper-floor bedrooms when the tavern functioned as a brothel. While waiting for the Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarsten there is but one element that gives away the era we find ourselves in: on a digital flat screen television CNN reports on the terrors of the world that confront us daily. In this setting, where walls witnessed the melding and colliding of so many, we talk about notions of the nude, sexuality and the sensuous, which are explored in Mette's choreographic works. Discussing her interest in the corporeal body and its very presentation on stage at this nostalgic place seems to bring us even further into an oblivion of time. As the interior of L'Espérance is a reminder of the entanglement of desire, wealth and exploitation, Mette demands for redefining boundaries.

In your last piece 7 Pleasures, we see a group of people traverse seven 'pleasurable' states in which they explore each other as well as objects, in different 'bodily' landscapes. This radiates a certain sensuousness that is not obvious or directly perceived from the outside. What is your interest in this exploration of sensibility nowadays?

I'm interested in exploring the relationship between bodies, objects, sensation and the estrangement of desire. In a way, we have become entirely accustomed to objects being over-sexualized, as if it would be the most normal thing in the world. [...] My question is: 'What happens when we really seriously consider that an object has a sexual potential in itself?' In the middle of *7 Pleasures*, there is a crucial scene called 'the object orgy', in which the performers interact with each other through an object. The object becomes something with an erotic potential, something that might have feelings in itself. What if you no longer simply use an object to 'give' pleasure but try to stimulate the pleasure of the object itself? If it could feel, what would it actually want? This is of course a speculation; it gives rise to what you call difficult to identify. Whose pleasure is it? What is its direction?

This is an interesting and intriguing aspect as you are referring to both the social and the political in it.

You are right, it's indeed social as well as political. It is a question of how bodies are controlled through pleasure and desire to act in a specific way, to customize and individualize themselves, etc. In many different capitalist strategies there is a strong incitement to consume, because it would give your body pleasure and satisfaction. Pornography, of course, is a prime example, which constantly has to be bought again and again because of its orgasmic nature. Yet, the relationship between desire and consumption reaches far beyond the territory of sex itself. *7 Pleasures* refers to these questions and does so in a certain extreme and experimental way. It does not present possible solutions on stage, rather it shows estranged understandings of bodies, objects and their relations.

Are these explorations through choreography and body practices a form of subversion against the mainstream connection between sexuality, pleasure, desire and the commercial way in which it is presented?

The notion of critique is crucial, and I always question the form in which a critique can be presented. Consumerism precisely thrives on different forms of exploration, experimentation and novelties. To understand the manipulation of our affects and sensations I think we have to experiment with them to the point that our understanding breaks open. My latest group work

– *7 Pleasures* – gave the dancers and myself a very strong experience of altering our physical relations. As such, as a social project it was very strong. By taking off our clothes and by experimenting with these sensual materials, certain codes of behavior were taken away. There are many things that have to be cleared in order to set up a frame to enable people to work together in this manner. We discussed the relation between performing and sex-work, and how they diverge and intertwine. We also touched upon the politics of the work and the position of being a performer within it.

In what way do you problematize the display of pleasure in relation to the audience coming to ‘enjoy’ a show?

We knew from the start that this choreography could be seen as one of these sensorial projects that generate pleasure, excitement and frustration. My goal has been precisely to problematize this relationship. As a spectator you might feel pleasure and excitement, next to alienation, non-understanding or disagreement. *7 Pleasures* entails a presentation of seven different possibilities of how to understand pleasure. The audience is put into a negotiation and reflection about how they want to define ‘pleasure’ and the kind of spectatorship coming with it. Some people question if we intend it ‘as a spectacle for the audience’. In a way this happens quite often: the audience enjoys the performance and consumes it, and at the same time the question arises as to what ‘giving pleasure’ really means. Some people are asking in what way *7 Pleasures* differs from images that can be found on the internet. Of course, what we do is completely different. It is not a flat image, we are not showing usual sexual practices. We undo certain images of sexuality and standardized ideas of the body, reversing understandings of pleasure and how it operates.

It feels like there is a strong tension between the public and the private, or at least what remains of this distinction. On stage you propose situations with very strong references to actions and practices that would normally only happen enclosed in a bedroom, in private life. In the solo performance 69 positions there’s a strong reference to the sexual liberation movement in the sixties and its rethinking of how nudity and pleasure need to be claimed publicly. Why do you opt for the theatre and its public capacity to tackle these questions?

Since the sixties, the breakdown between the public and the private is ongoing. It’s not new that the differentiation between our public and private lives no longer exists and as we are experiencing this in such an extreme way, it should in my opinion be reconsidered. The exposure of who you are on Facebook, and the expression of the self, has become part of people’s lives and also produces a lot of tension. What do you decide to show or not? How is your profile abused or not? These mechanisms are extremely complex to think about and strongly influence the formation of subjects today. Did you, for instance, know that the average age of boys encountering pornography is eleven or twelve? This is very early and it of course strongly influences the understanding of sexuality and relations. One of the performers of *7 Pleasures* also told me that there’s a new pornographic trend called ‘shaming’, an extreme form of disrespecting your sexual partner. Something I never heard about before. So, in my view, the theatre is a very important place to treat these topics because we still have the luxurious possibility of showing bodies in the flesh rather than as emptied out images.

Approaching this topic and dissociating it from the personal is remarkable. The topic of sexuality is embedded in a rich historical context where in artists like Carolee Schneemann or Annie Sprinkle used their naked bodies as the battlefield of their aesthetic, even political work. There’s always been an implication of a ‘personal life’ in those works that deal with sexuality, sensuality, etc. How do you deal with that dimension in your work?

My performances have never been about the personal or the autobiographical. Instead, they are far more on anonymity, or challenging the understanding of one’s own body by erasing personal identity. This does not mean that the personal is not important to me, but it refers to the history of performance where the link to the authentic, the self-expressive and the autobiographic has been very strong. Nowadays, this exposure of the private has become such a machine that it seems to be just the right moment to question these notions in my work. The constant exposure of ourselves has actually nothing to

do with our 'selves'; instead the machinery merely enables these expressions. My questions on the private and public have always been about getting away from self-expression and from the demand of making oneself visible and available today. There is a necessity to define what is really private and to imagine spaces where this privacy is respected. It's clear, that when we go to our bedrooms and shut off the lights that all these mechanisms remain within our bodies. It is a very delicate work to be aware of how society's mechanisms are operating on and within our behavior, and how they are ingrained in our physical bodies through hundreds of years of repetition.

You told me about your interest in Paul Preciado's work, for example Testo Junkie and the Counter-Sexual Manifesto. In Testo Junkie, we can see the separation between a genealogical and theoretical analysis of – what he calls – the pharmacopornographic regime and his diary. This diary – which might be a fictional one – tells about strongly personal, sexual explorations. I'm wondering how you relate to that procedure. Instead of referring to your own life, you very much engage with theoretical elaboration.

My explorations are not merely theoretical but foremost physical, material and experimental. In my private life, I am experimenting physically as well. Being a choreographer and working in theatres gives me the chance to set up frames that do not correspond to what is expected and accepted in daily life. The theatre provides the opportunity to speculate. In 'real life' this speculation is far more complicated to execute. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that our stage performance doesn't affect our lives! Instead of exposing our private lives, we reverse that procedure to see how our 'invented' practices create questions and reflect on our life and private sexual practice. There is indeed a porousness between these two realms. It's not the question whether what we do is applicable to 'real' social situations; it is more about how this work transforms the understanding of our own bodies in relation to other bodies and the way this allows us to change interaction. Ultimately, there is indeed an element of trying to change something. In the sixties, the element of potential change was located in the sexual revolution, but as we know it has failed blatantly. I'd rather not think a piece can change society, but it actually can produce a tension, an awareness and sensitivity to its mechanisms. Being able to know what is happening to one's body and having the tools to create possible modes of resistance would indeed be a 'freeing' practice. The non-verbal, the movement and the sensorial are the place where this work really happens. Of course, this can be approached by a theoretical investigation, but in my work it is extremely important that these modes of thought are embodied, precisely because these mechanisms are physical, bodily, material and almost pre-linguistic. It is something that happens beneath conscious verbalization.

Does this relate to the recurrent trope of the nude body in your work? It seems that the physical body, stripped down from all external signifiers, is there for constructing a body almost anew.

In a way, my work has always been about understanding the formation of subjectivity. I don't understand my subjectivity as having a center or a core, which can be traced back to some Freudian relationship to my father. I'm completely against this and try to develop subjectivities on stage, which are created in a relationship between the inside and the outside. When I was younger I made a lot of sculptures. That really led me to thinking about the body as material. When you're wearing clothes this 'material' is hidden. The idea of the body being moldable, that can merge and transform, which can become something other than you think it is, is recurrent and persistent throughout my investigations. I work a lot on how to dissolve the shape of the body into pure flesh. In each work the nude body appears as a different catalyst. For example, ten years ago I was very engaged with androgyny, which was quite personal – until the age of thirteen people thought I was a boy. It was very troubling to constantly hear that people thought of me being of the opposite sex than what I really was. There are occasions where this still happens to me. If you are taller than 1.75m you must be a man... when I was younger, I enjoyed playing with it, pretending to be a boy.

Has this experience marked or influenced your work in any form?

It is astonishing how little sensitivity people have to bodies. In my early work the question of gender was very important. *Manual Focus* (2003) was mainly about this: the undoing of personal identification through the use of opposite signifiers such as the male, the mask, age, which would allow our bodies to be unidentifiable. For the performance *50/50* from 2004, I worked on affect and deformation, treating the body as a material. The question is how to deal with nudity as something problematic and unproblematic at the same time. In *69 positions* you see me perform and speaking as if I was completely dressed, fully ignoring the fact that I'm not. A lot of people tell about how they forget that I am naked. Most people who see a naked body are so aware of this nudity and try to figure out what it does to them. There is a certain moment when people don't think about it anymore. In my view, this moment is very interesting.

Your idea of the body as material to morph and sculpt is recurring in your work not only as a transformation of one's own physics, but also in relation to objects. What a body can do to an object, and vice versa, and what the object can seemingly do to itself, seem to play an important role. In The Artificial Nature Project (2012) there are apocalyptic storms of confetti swirling around the stage. It might be less obvious, but even here I would speak about certain sensual and erotic moments.

For five years, I was completely immersed in research into the non-human and materiality. Both *The Artificial Nature Project* and *evaporated landscapes* are about the non-human. What can an object tell us, what can it do, what does it desire? The confetti we work with is a seductive, reflective material and has certain sensual qualities. In a way, the 'liquid movement' that you see in the confetti is not very far removed from the liquid state that emanates in *7 Pleasures*. There is also a question of how the object is a sensual one and what its sensoriality might be; there's definitely a continuity of thought. Actually it would be very interesting to consider what the sexuality of those pieces would be. My last pieces speak about sexuality in an explicit way. But I don't think they are 'about' sexuality; they are much more about questions of social mechanisms, a collective moment in the theatre and how we participate in an event. How representations of sexual bodies influence us in a public context thus becomes both a social and a political question.

First published in EXTRA EXTRA , Issue n° 4, 2016