

A NEW SENSUALISM

In Berlin's Schinkel Pavillon, sitting in the centre of the circular exhibition space is a humanoid robot, his face looking half-human, the cables, the metal limbs and the computer that keeps him going, are visible. He is giving a speech about the world and humanity, he opens and closes his mouth to say the words, he moves his head, his eyes, his facial expressions are convincingly human-like, he gestures with his hands to underline his statements. His audience – us – is sitting in a semi-circle around him. We listen to him. Impossible to say if this is a performance or a sculpture, the most intriguing thing about this work by Goshka Macuga – *Now this, is this the end... the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end?* – is the affective and sensual impression it makes. It is not some flashy showcase of technology and what it can do, there is no emphasis on the machineness and no critique of us being or becoming mere robots. It is the softness, the openness, the kindness, the calm and peaceful way this cabled man sits, speaks and moves that draws you in and that creates an intense presence. There is something new and unknown going on between you and the other, who is becoming more and more like you, or perhaps you

are becoming more and more like him, and this open and mutual sameness and otherness is certainly weird and uncanny, but not in an eerie or frightening way. Instead of being spectacular, it feels quite intimate and somehow even normal, it is a present tense glimpse into a world inhabited by hybrid identities. This world of alterity can not only be looked at, but felt, sensed, lived in this performance. It is present. Its presence changes the way you watch, it affects your being a visitor. You are not outside and separate from what is going on, this undefined being – the performing sculpture, the humanoid machine, the blurred difference – is looking back at you. It is addressing you, it is speaking to you. In this encounter, a space is created in which what you look at and who you are changes. This change happens in a subtle and radical way, you feel it before you realise it. Your looking at a thing turns into your own exposure. The performance affects you and that means you enter a state in which watching and being present become the same.

Two big screens next to each other on a slightly inclined line in an empty gallery space (Carlier Gebauer Berlin), two videos projected on them, each of them showing the same place and the same people, but not exactly the same perspective and progress in time: two policemen on an empty street at night, a man and a woman in heavy uniforms, armed with machine guns. Aernout Mik's *A Swarm of Two* shows the precise, slow movements of these people, their bodies, their being on this street. There is no one else, no one they would chase, there is no story and no plot. They are simply there, on this empty street that leads to nowhere and could be anywhere. There are strong signs and codes – the police uniform, weapons, trash on the street – and there is a narrative atmosphere in the images. But the work is neither about (de)signification nor about (de)narrating, nor any other kind of (de)constructing signs and codes. It is the softness, the fragility of the bodies and their movements that is touching; it is there for itself, not simply contrasting and confronting physical vulnerability with the aggressive protection of uniforms and guns. That is why this work primarily changes your affective state: it is a visual, dynamic meditation, a calm trip through this street. And while the moving images and bodies pull you in, you remain outside. This effect is intensified due to the double screens and double scenes you are watching. The strong sensuality of the images, the just-being-there of the bodies,

the street, this world, unfolds a presence that is surprisingly even stronger as it is doubled and the images spatialized. This double presence in the images as well as of the images presents itself as an overabundance that you feel in the immediacy of a sudden just-being-there. This presence is striking in a piece full of signs that would usually call for interpretation and meaning. In this work they are there, they are needed. It would not work without them, but the balance shifts, and the signs are affective forces, elements of what is touching you. The work is not about the significance of signs, but creates a way of watching as being moved by bodies and images.

In Nacera Belaza's piece *Sur le fil* at Tanzquartier Wien, it feels like there is no time passing. Three dancers, one after the other, in solos, are dancing in a rectangle of light on the stage, while the rest of the theatre is in almost total darkness. Repetitive music and the dancers' moving like spinning tops create an extremely dense moment, a very strong sensation, an intensity that becomes physically nearly unbearable, and how this happens is difficult to grasp. There is nothing that forces you into it, there is not the slightest persuasion. There is not even anything interesting, in the sense that you would like explore it or find out more about it; you do not look at a specific movement, you do not actively listen to the music. Nothing here is there to be watched or listened to, you do not see a "something" – instead you are offered a space. Through dancing, music, light, a space opens up and this space is infinite. It is an infinity that is real and concrete, paradoxically thus finite, happening in time, here and now. It is timelessness crystallizing in time, it is pure presence, inside of you as well as outside in the space. The stage, the dancing and the music are the passage to a state, a physical trip to an outer space inside of you that opens up when you truly feel you are being exposed, that is: existing. In the moments this space is opening itself you can hardly breathe, its intensity explodes in your chest. It is a strong feeling of freedom; it is precisely the state the dancers are in, which they offer and transmit to you. To be able to do so, the dancers are no doubt very present. Yet it is not sufficient to say that they are present, because it is not "their" presence. The piece itself is an open presence, in which dancing and watching merge without being or becoming the same. This open presence is able to emerge because the dancers and the piece overall are not showing anything, but serving. *Sur le fil* serves

being there, coming into existence. The mode of watching this piece is part of this service. You are not looking at a service, but your watching serves the piece being nothing else than its own existence.

In Ismail Bahri's videos in the exhibition *Instruments* at Jeu de Paume in Paris, you see a drop of water quivering on the bare skin of an underarm and its movement, almost like breathing, is immediately strangely beautiful; rather than being an alienation or abstraction of everyday life, it is very concrete, a living intensity. In another room on another screen, two hands are folding, unfolding and folding again a colour printed magazine page until all the letters and pictures disappear and it turns blank; when one page is finished so is one video and another one begins again showing the same procedure with another page. After about the second or the third one, something inside of you decides to stay and to continue watching. What you see is putting you into the state of watching, while it is no longer about it. What you see is there so that you can get into a watching mode. You are watching means: your whole body, your whole being is this watching. The videos allow you to not hold anything back in your desire to watch; in becoming a spectator who enjoys the movement of watching itself instead of the fixation and possession of an object.

Many of Laurent Chétouane's dance pieces offer this kind of non-possessive watching. The most intriguing and impressing being *Considering Accumulations* at Tanzquartier Wien and *Invisible Piece #1* at HAU. The dancers and the musicians, who are adept at being in a special mode of letting their movements go, rather than planning and controlling, create a landscape. You are watching and listening as you would on a meadow, being inside and outside at the same time. You do not watch a meadow as you would look at an object; you are in it, but without interacting. You are there, watching and listening to what surrounds you. Most of Chétouane's pieces offer you this way of perception and ask you to be prepared and open for this. The shift from what you see (an object seen by a subject) to just being there watching and listening is something you have to allow yourself to happen. And only if this is effective, only if it is a performance in which the dancers and musicians reach a

certain level of letting go and you in the audience let yourself watch freely and openly: the meadow appears.

There are more works in the last couple of years emphasising sensuality and presence. Some of them do this purely and directly, some of them are full of signs and codes. For example, the video installation *What the Heart Wants* by Cecil B. Evans, which deals with the topic of future, technology and mankind and all its meanings, but creates a landscape and an immediacy of affection and perception; there are the dance pieces by Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir in which the performers let appear an extremely pure state of intimately being there. And there is our own choral work that gradually intensifies the essence of sensual presence, my work with Moritz Majce, from *Festung / Europa* to *Narkosis* and *Chora*. It is from there, from the desires, longings and questions in my own artistic experience that I see the pieces I just described. I feel close to these works and that they have something in common. They all create a presence in watching, no matter if they are performances, sculptures, videos. They allow a watching that is not triggered by anything interesting on the side of what is being shown and that is not an understanding on the side of the spectator. It is rather an appearing than a showing and rather a contemplation than a rationalising. A watching as a state surpassing what you see and who you are as a spectator. Neither the artists and the performers nor the visitors can control it, but all of them are involved in exploring a state in which watching becomes being sensually present.

The works I described all express a belief in presence, in sensuality, in openness. They are not critical, not ironic, not detached, not cool; neither are they personal or emotional. They are at the same time humble and radical, because they follow a drive. After postmodernism and many subsequent posts and turns, after conceptual art and its application to all the arts, after deconstructing narratives, genres, bodies and identities, and beyond today's political imperative, there is something else going on in the arts. It is subtle and it is strong, it is a new way of relating to being in the world.

A new sensualism is emerging in our time of globalisation, when the globe is recreating itself. It is hard to imagine anything more elementary. It is not only that something is changing while the rest

stays the same, rather it is a transformation of everything, including the nature of change itself. Technology is clearly no longer an instrument but a condition, it is becoming our nature. We live in a technonature on a radically changing planet. It is characterised by a climate change we experience as natural catastrophe and a technological environment in which social bonds dissolve, while at the same time everything is connected. Apparently we cannot control and plan what is going on and that in itself is integral to what is going on. We can feel and sense this new becoming. We live it. We are not detached from the extreme planetary transformation, but we are in it and we are part of it. The planet is not changing without us. The transformation that happens cannot be looked at and studied like an object. What is changing is changing us: what we see and how we see, what we hear and how we listen, what we feel and how we feel – how the senses make sense – is transforming itself and that is why sensing as such is becoming so surprisingly new, intense, exciting, disturbing. We are listening, watching, moving, speaking, crying and loving in this emerging technonature. We are being born into the environment of a transforming planet; we are exposed to experience it, to live in it. The works I gave as examples expose this exposure, and you can feel it. These artworks are affected by the elementary change we are in. They work with presence and sensuality to let you feel, hear, see this self-transforming time and space. To do so, some of them address technology and nature explicitly, others do not. It is not important. When technology becomes natural and nature is technologically transformed, it affects our existence and our senses – always. Not only when we use devices or talk about it. The transformation goes deeper and beyond technology's instrumental function. If a piece is about presence then it is about the elementary nature of this change.

All the pieces I mention here share – after a long period of works and humans feeling like the last ones, burdened by a certain melancholia and the heaviness of closure, of history being over – an atmosphere of something else coming into existence. Indefinite beings, ones who start living and feeling in this new world, who start being (in) technonature. That is why “mere presence” becomes so important in these pieces. What matters in them is the drive to open the senses, to approach our transforming existence as sincerely as

possible, even innocently. On this planet which is giving birth to itself and so to us, we are vulnerable and fragile. We are not dominant. We are not the strongest. We are able to kill some or even many of us and a lot of life on earth, and we do so every day. But we are not life as such. There are forces pushing on without us and we can clearly feel this today in the change and transformation that is happening around us, between us, within us, exceeding and surpassing us. The works of a new sensualism open themselves to these drives and offer a space for getting in touch with them. This changes the relation to those who come to experience the work.

None of the pieces I refer to are "interactive" but all of them engage with the audience and establish new relations, offer a different kind of participation. The being present, the pure being there, happens in and as an environment. It is an environment that includes the audience, and that appears in-between, consisting of relations – bodies, feelings, sensations, perceptions. An environment of affects and forces in which you are exposed and connected, open to what comes into presence right here and now. In this milieu a new way of being an audience is emerging. It is not about what you see – neither what nor you – but about the state a piece offers. As an audience you still have to enter that state, be open for it; being a spectator or visitor here does not mean staying outside observing. From the outside you will not see any of these works. It is only after dropping our reflex for understanding, decoding and explaining, our opinions on whether it was well or badly done, our will to categorize, our looking for the concept etc., it is only when we are not busy with any of that that something will happen. The works I take here as examples do not manipulate you. They do not force you into something, they give you space and time for being. It is an offer, not a product and not a task, and it is not always easy to let go the everyday mode of feeling and perceiving trained to consume and to perform.

The pieces outlined here ask for a certain way of watching and being in them. Yet they do not form a movement. It is not a group of artists agreeing on a shared perspective, form or method; they do not even know each other and all of the works are singular, the artistic intentions different. What links these works is a strong and intense feeling of being alive, a sensual affirmation. It is out of this

affirmation that I am writing this text. In current dominant critical discourse about art, centred on the political relevance of art, I am missing the resonance of this serene 'yes'. This yes is strong and it sounds new. It sounds new if you are used to a more melancholic tune, or to a maybe-yes, or a yes because there is no other choice. It is a yes that sounds not only new, but even shocking if you are tuned in to a no, a political no to all that is unjust and unbearable in this world, of which no doubt there is a lot. This yes is not ignorant of violence, of injustice, of exploitation; it is not an escape from the suffering. It is charged by and opening up for what is stronger than any destruction. It echoes that there is something rather than nothing. This yes sounds like it is coming from somewhere else. It is the call of an adventure.