

ON “CONTINUING CONTAINING”

and two whirling bodies of water

Over a year ago I was invited by dance artists Susanna Ylikoski and Raz Mantell to join, by means of writing, their movement research on un-naming through dance. Back then, they presented “continuing with what already started, without knowing it has”, a research based on the experience of taking walks and their exchanges, reflections and readings on the topic of the female body.

This year we continue our collaboration and in the following text I present my personal reflection of the premiere of their piece “Continuing Containing”. In this second iteration of their work they focus on dancing through and with water. Their approach to dance is inspired by Zen philosophy and more specifically the “Tao Te Ching” as translated by Ursula K. Le Guin, along with another story by the same author “She Unnames Them”. Their dance is inspired by the yielding and flexible nature of water, and by the desire to un-say and un-name with their bodies.

“The stone, it doesn’t say if it’s big or small: it’s right there in the middle – unsaying with its being. The stone doesn’t say anything.”¹

Inspired by their work, I attune my writing to the fluidity and adaptability of water and its relationships to human bodies.

1 *Quote from the notes of the research, from my correspondence with artist Susanna Ylikoski.*

Flowing inside the theatre along with a calm stream of audience members, I drop my weight on one of the chairs, placed in a half circle around the centre stage. We look like rocks submerged in a large puddle. I vacillate of exhaustion and find rest in the first glance of the tangled bodies of the two performers. Susanna Ylikoski and Raz Mantell coiled together on the white floor, are containing each other's limbs. Softly swaying from side to side, they give time to the stream to settle and take the shape of their temporary container.

To contain comes from Latin *continere*, meaning „to hold together“, and so it seems: we are held together by the space that contains us; the situation holds our attention together, focused on the performers. They hold each other tight as their presence holds our gazes and we hold the performative space for them. It is all about holding and being held.



Photo by Lena Klink

In the photo the two dancers are in close proximity and moving together close to the floor. One is reclined with one arm outstretched in the air, we see her profile and her legs are wide apart. The other dancer is seated between her outstretched legs and holds one of them from below with one arm, the other arm is bended above her head. Her head is bended over forward.

The movement of their bodies increases in intensity, becoming larger and higher like waves growing white crests, swelling up from the floor and down on to the floor. I witness a surging watery energy filling the space and my body.

I continue to be tired and continue to find rest in my contemplative state, like at the seaside I soften my eyes on the rising and falling of these two whirling bodies of water.

The quality of their movements is gentle and calm, energetic and stirring simultaneously. They never lose touch, always a limb or a body part in physical contact with one another. They move as one, floating, giving weight and gaining trust. It feels like the trust one gains when learning to play dead on the surface of the sea, rocked by the waves, attuned to the breath contained in the lungs, like a life jacket.

The vast surface of the dancers skin informs their dance, they communicate in the unspoken language of touch, directing each other's weight in places of support, embracing one's momentum, indulging in the other's pause. It is mesmerizing to watch their bodies in this intimate dialogue, and I recognize their familiarity.

It is after all a continuation of a shared practice, they are continuing what already started, at least a year ago, if not longer.

To continue comes from Latin *continuare* meaning "join together in uninterrupted succession" and literally "to hang together", and so it seems: they hang onto each other and sway, swell, swirl, swish, splash and so on.



Screenshot from the video documentation filmed by
omer keinan.

In this photo the two dancers are standing close to each other, one in the foreground the other behind her. Their arms are in movements either above or in front of their upperbodies. Their faces are not showing as they are both bended forward. One of them wears only pants, the other only a shirt.

In a moment I notice a black, perhaps volcanic stone on the white floor, I had not seen it until it was hit by the accelerating dancing of the two bodies. Their clothing is now wet, and I wonder whether by sweat or water.

As the dancers start to undress, I ponder on the feeling of wetness on the bare skin and I am reminded of a scientific study on the physical phenomenon of perceiving wetness. According to this study sensing skin wetness (i.e. hygrosensation) is a sensorial capacity crucial to survival as much as thermoregulation, but little is known on the neurophysiological mechanisms underpinning this ability.

As humans we are not provided with skin humidity receptors (i.e., hygroreceptors), but through peripheral and central neural mechanisms, we have developed a hygrosensation strategy, underpinned by perceptual learning via sensory experience.

The two dancers are now fully naked and covered in sweat, gliding and wagging on the surface of each other's skin. What started as a gentle play has now become rough and bubbly, like water heated on the fire, water coming to a boil, water at the threshold of transforming into a different state. A gaseous hectic state. For a moment they lose touch with one another, surprising me with the sight of their unfused bodies. As they splash back together and differently than before, I start hearing their movements, a clap of a back hitting against a stomach. This sound shifts my attention to the underlying sound score that has been playing since the beginning of the piece. It is made of recorded environmental sounds of a cycle ride, encountering bodies walking on different surfaces. The sound is familiar and foreign at the same time, but it says nothing remaining abstract. Its rhythmical beats of clicks and steps create a contrast with the fluid state the dance evoked in me.

As the piece comes to an end the warm lights fade out, as they imitate the atmosphere of a sunset that eventually turns to the night. The lights first flicker, like the blinking of the gaze slowly shutting on the coiled bodies of the dancers. For a moment we are all held in darkness together, soon to dive back into our lives outside of this theater.



Photo by Erika Kooki Filia

In the photo one of the two dancers is leaning forward with her full body, one of her feet is lifted in the air. She falls over the body of the other dancer, who is in a reclining position, supporting her upperbody with her bended arm. Both dancers are fully naked and their faces is covered by their loose hair.