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ALI KAZMA

Temporality a pivotal position of the work

Interview by Mo Gourmelon

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Mo Gourmelon : *Dancer*, 2009, produced by the Espace Croisé focuses on three pieces choreographed by the Icelandic dancer Erna Omarsdottir. You say the starting point of the dancer is death instead of life. What do you mean ?

Ali Kazma : Of course I am not claiming that death is the only starting point for her work. For one thing I have not seen all her work, but I believe it is an important element. As I was reading the book *Art and Revolution* by John Berger, a passage struck me as being very relevant for the work of Erna. The passage is below:

“We have seen how his starting point is death; how, given this starting point, he is especially aware of the obstinacy of life; how this obstinacy is created and maintained by the constant need to adapt to and contain contradictions; how he metaphorically visualizes these contradictions as forces and events internally modifying the structure and the workings of the human body. All this leads to his figures becoming models (in the scientific, not the moral sense) of endurance. »

Here, Berger is talking about the work of the Russian sculptor Neizvestny. But I felt it also applies to the work of Erna in many aspects. In Erna's work we see time and again the theme of an end – apocalypse, alien attack, killings, break-ups. But for her work, I feel these sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical deaths become the starting point for other possibilities. These possibilities are expressed through sudden and violent transformations/contradictions in the body, the extreme use of the voice and the testing of the physical and emotional endurance of the dancers as well as the audience. So in a way, death as a starting point becomes the bedrock of many possibilities. At their best, these possibilities are never frivolous acts of compliancy and boredom, but a chance to rise up to the challenge of being alive.

MG: How did you film Erna Omarsdottir? Is a dancer a worker like another? Why did you decide to film the choreography *Transaquania (Out of the blue)* in Iceland, then *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* and *Skyr Lee Bob* at Drodesea festival in Italy ?

AK : I filmed Erna as I film all other people in my videos. By trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible and by trying not to interfere in the work that I am shooting.

Having said this, I do not think that a dancer is a worker like any other. In the work of the dancer, the subject-object relationship that we see clearly in most other forms of work (brain surgeon – patient, clock master – clock) becomes problematic. The dancer is also the tool of the dancer. The contradictory position of the body as that which moves and is moved forms the core of my interest in the performing arts. The sudden and violent transformations of the dancer from being the tool of the master to being the master of the tool and then back again reveals something fascinating about our relationship to our bodies and to our work. I think it complicates the ‘obstructions’ series as a whole.

As to your second question, I wanted to shoot a part of this video in Iceland, with Erna in her own element. *Transaquania* became the opportunity for that. But without *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* and *Skyr Lee Bob*, I think the video would lack essential parts of Erna’s work and would not work as well. It didn’t feel right to limit this video to one work only.

MG: You’ve said that if one refers to life, notions of fragility and loss inevitably come to the fore, whereas the evocation of death totally transforms our perception. All the possibilities of life, even a tiny movement becomes significant. Is it the reason why you are also interested to film the painter Jacques Coulais, who is severely handicapped ?

AK: Well, I would say if we start from a position that takes life for granted or rather from a position that takes for granted all possible ways of being in the world, then it becomes very difficult to isolate specific moments and gestures. In the middle of all these possibilities, both imagined or real, things get concealed, veiled or, worse, taken for granted and not worthy of further analysis or attention. Nuances get lost. Gestures become signs for pre-conceived ideas. It becomes difficult to differentiate between the acts. All acts, whether intentional or accidental, become part of one big lump.

But if we start from a position that does not take life for granted, then we open up the possibility of isolating gestures. We can slow down the tempo and give each and every act the chance to come to light and show itself. Each action, free from the noise of other gestures, becomes clear, and carries the deliberate intention of the artist. And if we take the defining characteristic of a person as “A performer of intentional acts which are bound by the unity of a meaning.” (Heidegger “Being and Time”), then this is the point where things get interesting. Every gesture becomes measured, necessary, precious. These are some of the reasons why I am interested in both Jacques Coulais’s and Erna’s work.

MG: The best way of showing your films turns out to be in an exhibition situation. At each screening you pay close attention to the way the videos are arranged. *Dancer* is situated, at the Espace Croisé, between *Casa di Moda* and *Slaughterhouse* and opposite *Brain Surgeon*. Can you explain this? What do you expect from an exhibition?

AK: When I show the *Jean Factory* with *Slaughterhouse* and *Brain Surgeon*, it is a very different proposition than *Jean Factory* with *Dancer* and *Slaughterhouse*. The different combinations and juxtapositions of videos start to create their own dynamics. On top of this, since all the videos have different durations, you never see the same combination of images or hear the same audio twice. When you add a fourth or a fifth video to the space, of course the complexity increases exponentially.

This is one of the defining characters of the work for me since:

This presentation keeps the work fluid, dynamic, difficult to pin down and possess completely; therefore open ended. Alive instead of dead. The presentation becomes a dynamic exchange between the videos as they confirm and contradict one another continuously.

This presentation, in all its complexity, multiple centers and tensions, is in a constant state of becoming; open to infinite possibilities and yet able to present one possibility at a time, which I believe mirrors the world as it is. Or rather, relates to a world where this is possible.

It links production to presentation in a positive way and makes it possible for me to stay engaged with the works. With this, I mean it enables me to experience an older work or works under a new light. Having said all this, as you know, I work very hard on the editing of each video and I am not satisfied until I know that each video can stand on its own as a unique piece. I do not make an extra effort so that the videos work better together.

MG: What are your impressions on seeing for the first time nine of your films screened in the same space? Often for artists exhibiting at Espace Croisé, it's an occasion to make a kind of assessment of their work so far. What about you?

AK: This was precisely the case for me. When I first saw the space last year as we were discussing the possibility of an exhibition, I immediately felt that the space would be perfect for my work. It would allow me to show as many of my videos as I would like without having to make compromising decisions about their placements. The architecture of the space demanded that I treat each one equally and it was both large enough for each video to stand on its own and open enough for them to keep a dynamic dialogue going. I was very happy to see them together in Espace Croisé. It gave me a chance to see if what in theory I thought would work, would actually work in reality. And to a large extent, I think they do.

MG: How do you choose the people you film, and what are the filming conditions ?

AK: I do not necessarily choose the people first. Each project is a different story. But in general, I can say that there are certain human capacities and activities I am interested in and would like to work on. I try to do some research on these topics and locate some people whose practice I am more attracted to for some reason or another. Then I try to approach them and try to get them to collaborate with me. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. The working conditions are pretty specific for this series. With these videos, I always do my own shooting and my own editing. I do not have a crew, lights or assistants when I am on location.

This is very important for my work. Entering these spaces puts me in a very receptive and festive mood. I feel I am at the edge continuously; the threshold of change, the moment of decision. This mood is not very compatible when you have to communicate with others. And this way of working is also necessary since I do want to change what I am shooting due to a big presence on location. I would rather stay like a fixture or, better still, a ghost - as much as possible.

MG: *Obstructions*, the title of the series, seems strange. It appears for the first time in the film *Today*, 2005. Why do you refer to the Second Law of Thermodynamics?

AK : Temporality occupies a pivotal position in my work. I am very interested in the passing of things. Maybe by talking about *Clock Master*, I can be more clear. In *Clock Master* I enjoy the multiple ways the issue of temporality is approached - time as change, as decay versus the constant struggle of man to possess and control it; by intellectualizing, systemizing, form-giving, caring, etc. Ultimately of course, it is a lost cause. In the case of the video *Clock Master*, we see a man working to fix a representation of time, a clock, on and through which time has passed.

At other times, fixing a brain, creating shelters for the body, killing animals, making objects that negotiate our relationship to the world... And while so doing, showing all the beautiful and terrible things we possess, in passing.

So I refer to this law as it summarizes without fuss or sentimentality this tragic position. Human Will as Local and Temporal Obstructions and/or Temporality as the Ultimate Obstruction against Human Will/Desire. Obstructions for me is a code word for the complicated co-existence of both.

MG: Through your work you directly refer to the human condition. You make reference to Hannah Arendt and in particular *The Human Condition*...

AK: I think this series gives me a unique opportunity to simultaneously develop both my practical and theoretical skills. Some of the texts I read and the work I do enhance and inspire each other. I think the texts open up possibilities for new works and the works ground the readings and relate them to the world. Practice without contemplation can remain dull and lose itself in pure energy or form. Reading texts around the work I do feels very natural to me.

MG: How does this human condition appear in your films ?

AK : I think the answer to this would have to be as long as the films... But if I had to answer in words, I might say that all the films are about the different possibilities for a human being to exist in the world. And how these possibilities of being in the world in return shape the environment one finds himself in and how in return the environment shapes the human being which is simultaneously changing the world as it changes him...

And ultimately, maybe that these possibilities are not all the same, and that there are differences between them. And quite possibly, that this still matters.

MG : What are your following projects?

AK : My next project is with a German taxidermist, Thomas Bauer. I am also planning to work with a chef, a painter, a film director, and oil refinery, a car factory, weapons producer, a circus, an oil tanker, a theater group, a philosopher, an athlete ...