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THE CHOREOGRAPHER WITH A CAMERA

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I am the machine that shows you the world as a machine alone can see it. From now on, I will be liberated from human immobility. / I am in perpetual movement. / I approach things, I move away. I slip myself under them, I get into them. / [...] We clean our cinema from everything that has crept in, literature and theatre, we look for its specific rhythm, a rhythm that hasn't been pinched somewhere else and that we find in the movement of things. / [The new man] follows the movement of shooting stars, of celestial events, and of the work of the projectors that dazzle our eyes (Dziga Vertov, *Manifeste du Ciné-Œil*, 1923).

Olga Mesa presents herself as a choreographer and visual artist. If the body is at the core of her research and at the origin of her artistic creations, a camera is never really far. A familiar partner, the camera follows the choreographer as if it was an extension of her body and thought.

It fully belongs to the logic of the project, namely because the dance has incorporated its presence and the choreography is constructed with it. If I talk about a camera rather than about films, image projections or screens, it is definitely because the object itself constitutes a determinant prerequisite that will be staged and shown to the audience.

EYE. The camera would be an eye on the plateau

EYE of the choreographer, who orients the point of view on stage and displaces strict frontality by suggesting the integration of another point of view. Close or distant, lateral or plunging, detail, counterpoint...

EYE of the spectator, suddenly invited, in a way, to enter the *plateau*. EYE as the concrete presence of the audience inside the representation. The *mise en abîme* of its necessity.

EYE at last for the performer, who has to consider her movement in relation to this second gaze that comes to rest on her. In other words, for the dancer, the space tightens between different, more or less intensified poles: the audience, the camera, and maybe the recorded image reflected on the screen. Present on the *plateau*, the camera stages a point of view on the dance. What is filmed is not necessarily represented. In *On cherche une danse* (2004) and most of all in *La Danse et son double* (2006), the camera operates as a performer of the action, to whom a gesture is addressed. The film that has been shot belongs to the camera: it will not be projected.

The camera is a sort of fetish object in my work. Since my first solo *Lugares intermedios*, created in 1992, the camera is there. At the beginning of my par-cours I wished to construct a piece for the stage and in parallel, in an autonomous way but inspired of the choreographic creation, create a visual piece. I don't know where that idea came from. I went by the way to a natural landscape, in the Mohave Desert in Arizona, to film myself, even before I got into the studio. I probably already felt the need to orient my gaze to a practice of filmic capture and recording, which situates my body inside spaces related to memory and its construction. I remember that in the desert I was willing to be confronted with empty, abandoned spaces, without references, spaces of waiting and listening, spaces of unexpected emergence.

It was the end of my three-year stay in New York. I presented this filmic document in the theatre hall, before the audience went in to watch the solo.

A year later, I had the opportunity to shoot my first video creation project in natural environments around Salamanca, a project also inspired by the piece *Lugares Intermedios* (8 minutes).

After my second theatrical creation *Des/aparições* (Lisbon 1994), I invited La Ribot (Spain) and Francisco Camacho (Portugal), two choreographers and artists whose presence inspires me enormously, to participate in my second video work *Europas* (1995, 15 minutes), shot in the streets of Lisbon and inspired of Pessoa, the poet. To my big surprise, this project, co-produced by a video-dance festival from Barcelona, didn't quite fit their programming, and in the end it was a curator that selected *Europas* for the itinerant exhibition *Señales de vídeo: Aspectos de la videocreación española de los últimos años* (Video signs: Aspects of Spanish video creation of recent years). That exhibition took place at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, in the frame of a programming of Spanish visual artists, with no particular connection to dance... But it soon became too hard and ambitious for me, to continue working on theatrical and filmic projects side by side. I then decided to concentrate on the theatrical work. But I have never abandoned the camera. The camera is for me a space of open gaze, a waiting, listening gaze. It's very physical. Sometimes I have the feeling I was born with a camera that looks at me, so familiar and close it feels to me.

The camera gives rise to a space that comes from my presence, an extension of my own gaze, a memory about to disappear, a trace. This gaze of the camera is first of all, for me, connected to the physical space, before it connects to narration. Having real space as departure point, which other space can we integrate with the camera? Olga Mesa.¹

So Olga Mesa drops the creation of autonomous videos in order to introduce the camera in the *plateau*. The camera allows her to question the presence of the performer on stage, to unfold, reframe, disturb it, put it at a distance to paradoxically get closer to it. Piece after piece, the choreographer explores indeed different ways of using the camera and the image it produces, in a permanent concern of sharpening the dialogue established with the audience. The camera becomes the tool for a sensitive and troubling exchange where the spectator is confronted with him or herself, with his/her own gaze, with his/her situation of onlooker, facing the performers (often the choreographer herself in a solo).

I discovered the film *Super 8* with Daniel Miracle, the visual artist who has worked in close collaboration with me in the trilogy *Res, non verba* (1996-99). For *Esto no es mi cuerpo* (1996), a film was projected in which we could see me sleeping. It was the result of a video capture of 8 hours sleep in real time, concentrated there in three minutes: we see the unconscious behaviour of the body during the sleep, a sort of involuntary dance, and the daylight that rises and invades the bed where I lie. In *DesOrdenes para un cuarteto* (1998), in a *Super 8* film projection we could see the quartet of dancers rehearsing

in the studio or else filmed in wild spaces outdoors looking up to the sky, to empty spaces or to the infinite. On the *plateau*, we could hear their voice telling their dreams in an off record, while the performers on stage would put their presence in brackets. It is with 1999 *L-imitaciones, mon amour* that the camera appears live, in real time. It's a matter of constructing another space inside the theatrical space. A visible (or not) off-frame inside the frame. At that time, the camera starts to become the witness-eye of the staged body, it opens the performer a space of dialogue indirectly linked with the spectator's gaze, it creates a frame inside the theatrical frame – a frame that we can see projected on a screen or not –. We can see someone filming and becoming the spectator of his or her own dance. The camera becomes a possibility for the performer to integrate his/her gaze in the theatrical space, and become the witness of his/her own temporal construction.

For *Daisy planet* in 1999, I set up a situation of unfolding of the body, using a camera hidden on the background of the stage, which films the *plateau* in *contre-jour*. I address that camera while the audience sees my back from a distance, and discovers my face in close-up on a TV monitor on the forestage.

Facing that invisible camera, I was telling my views on love in two differentiated discourses: one inspired by a scientific theory, and the other questioning the truth of intimate and personal confessions. Here, with the camera live, arises my interest in the construction of different narration layers that play between reality and fiction. We also filmed the general

rehearsal in each theatre with the camera on the background, and during the representation we would mingle the live image with the same image in pre-record, taken during the general rehearsal. That almost invisible interference created a subtle time-lag that at some moments altered the temporality of the piece. I thus experiment with the camera in an intuitive way to question the existence of visible things. *Daisy planet* is the first piece within my work where the apparatus of the camera in *contre-jour* and live allows the insertion of another frame in the theatrical space, sometimes creating a distance, or an irony, or even a strange and ambiguous proximity. With the camera apparatus I started to construct, not a character – this is not the right word – but the possibility to question again the presence of the text and of the body. I give the possibility to read the performer on stage otherwise. O. M.

Intimacy. The camera would be at the service of the construction of a theatrical intimacy

Irony? Distance? Humour? Olga Mesa looks for the words to define the nature of the theatrical presence that is constructed year by year. I would rather suggest the possibility that the use of the camera in the pieces of Olga Mesa does not produce a distancing.

How to make clear that the image takes part in a bigger complicity with the spectator and allows the maintaining of a more intimate relation with him/her? There is neither image aesthetization nor fascination for the result. The live projected image is by the way sometimes distorted, black and white, sometimes blurred or unsound. It is the process itself that obsesses: that of filming, looking, reframing. That of being filmed, of presenting to

the other. The exposure of oneself to the gaze is the hindsight needed for a reflection shared with the audience. It is not a matter of imposing oneself as an assertion, but a matter of presenting oneself as a suspension point. The presence of the performer becomes as such an interrogation handed on to the audience.

How to make clear as well that the projection of the performer on a screen does not contribute, in this case, to derealize her presence but on the contrary doubles, amplifies and thickens it? It is not a matter of splitting and spreading in order to impose or invade the *plateau* either, but rather a matter of undoing the unity of the subject in order to make more subtlety and more layers appear. Such an image leads to the (hi)story and memory of the subject. To the complexity of construction which is both past and to come. The subject appears therefore in her changing sides, in a flickering presence because sensitive to the instant, but just as confident because aware of the instant. How to make clear, in short, that the eye of the camera does not amount to some narcissism of the dancer fascinated with herself but is constructed for and with the spectator? The camera for that matter captures the audience and integrates it on the stage: the spectators appear on the dancer's background (*Suite au dernier mot: au fond tout est en surface* (2003) / Following the last word: deep down everything is on the surface) or suddenly in close-up. Their image joins the performer's, recalling their necessary participation in the dialogue underway. It is a matter of defining a common territory where the exchange would be mutual. This address work of the camera is combined with other modes of exchange that pay particular attention to their addressees: direct questions to the audience, the use of the familiar "you", a focused gaze that

personalizes. The use of the camera, then, engages the spectators as much in a mode of exchange as in a singular perceptive activity. It encourages to an activity of reframing and of mobility of the gaze – following the indications suggested on the *plateau*, but perhaps more widely, following their own wish to redefine the frame and the off-frame according to their mind and liking –. And it invites an intimacy relationship into play.

For the camera allows drawing closer to the audience. The projected image can propose a personal or intimate distance where the performer, in compressed framing, addresses the spectators.

Olga Mesa thus works on a close distance on stage, the one of the confidential storytelling of the childhood, confided in the hollow of one's ear. She can, thanks to the camera, show the audience objects whose scale is completely inappropriate to the theatrical distance: short texts, drawings, photos...

It is the spectators' intimacy that is requested then. The choreographer, while unveiling bits of her onstage intimacy, reciprocally invites them to enter the work, leaving them the space to unfurl their own imaginary. She orchestrates the silences and the gaps in the fabric of her choreographic writing, so that they engulf themselves in. A call to remembering, and to the construction of fictions.

It's in *Suite au dernier mot: au fond tout est en surface*, in 2003, that I started to detach from the visible space to go towards the acoustic one.

In a moment of the piece, I leave the stage and construct the best off-screen I have ever created, thanks to the sound: the real time narration of my pathway naked in the street around the theatre, and of my encounter with the persons passing-by. How to explore the invisible

thanks to sound and no longer exclusively with images? How to make autonomous temporalities arise? From that moment on, my work with the camera becomes more radical: I introduce what I call the blind camera. We film something we don't see and we record sounds we are not going to listen to. It's in that three-fold relation between image, sound, and body that I go on questioning myself and digging.

So in *On cherche une danse*, in 2004, we see someone who films (Daniel Miracle) and someone who records (Nilo Galego) on stage: the body of the video director and the body of the musician. Later, in *La Danse et son double*, in 2006, there is only one camera in the hands, and the bodies of the dancers viewing, on the small screen of the camera, the hidden images they are realizing live. In parallel but in an autonomous way, we hear the narrative of a dream, or else the impressions and comments about the film that has just been realized on the *plateau*. O. M.

Writing. The camera would indicate the invention of a writing [une écriture]

Similarly to Dziga Vertov in *The man with a camera* as he sets up a cinematographic language capable of awakening the spectator's awareness concerning the nature of images, Olga Mesa questions the theatrical situation and the invention of a choreographic writing by means of the camera and the images it produces.

The choreographer stresses the spectacular apparatus: one or more performer(s) facing some spectators, sound, light, a boxed-in space of representation. She invites the spectators to identify with the camera, to

virtually move onto the *plateau* in order to modify their point of view on the performer, to ultimately become the witnesses of the creation of a choreographic language that can actually only be constructed in dialogue with the audience. It is a question of showing the construction of an artistic universe that seems to always uncover its threads, yet never really leaving the realm of representation: a subtle play between reality and fiction, autobiographic accounts and imaginary narratives, remote evocations from a different space or a past time mingled with descriptions of the present situation. Olga Mesa shows a research in act: that of constructing a theatrical being which is not a character but whose addressing mode and actions' nature gradually mould a singular theatrical identity, a style. A sequence of the piece *Suite au dernier mot: au fond tout est en surface* (2003) resumes the research of Olga Mesa in a parable of creation. The soloist sitting on the floor draws on the black floor with a white chalk. She is telling:

Then I go into that house and I see a woman who is writing on a big white surface. A bit farther there is a man watching her, probably through the eye of a camera. And even farther but also close there is a group of very concentrated people who look interested in that story, for they are watching it. In any case they look like they are reflecting. And at this very moment I ask myself: "what are they thinking about?" (Tableau 5 entitled "in construction")

Indeed, Daniel Miracle films Olga Mesa, while the audience watches her, along with her enlarged image projected on the background, on a large-screen. That "big white surface" on which a woman is writing is the *plateau*, but it is also the cinema screen where her reframed enlarged body inscribes, where a gaze and a point of view on the presented action are asserted.

The writing is therefore defined within that relation between a present body and a gaze watching it that is reflected for the audience. The writing emerges from the overlapping of disconnected spaces – “that house” from the narrative, the *plateau* on which Olga Mesa sets up an improbable sketch as she brings in unsound chalks and eventually a screen that focuses the attention on the performer, while excluding the onlooker from the field, who is yet very present on the *plateau* –. The writing entangles fiction, illusion, and the concrete situation of the *plateau*. The screen can remain white, thus inviting the spectators to project their own images and to construct, complete, recompose a work which doesn’t exist without them.

But the camera also indicates the invention of what we can call an “image-body”, an expression forged by Véronique Fabbri in reference to the “movement-image” that Deleuze talks about in relation to the cinema (Fabbri, 2005: 8-10). In other words, the performer constitutes an image [*fait image*] in that she produces a force field. The camera, then, comes in to enhance the parallel between the cinematographic image and the invention of a mode of being on stage. The performers appear on the screen just like actors whom the cinema intensifies the aura, namely as it emphasizes details like the slightest movement of the face or an imperceptible transformation of the expression. Olga Mesa transfers to the whole body what the cinematographic art was able to intensify on “the cinema’s face” (Aumont, 1992). The choreographer is the one who draws signs on the ground, says the parable, but also the one who rhythms the space by her displacements, by the successive imprints she leaves behind: her dance is made of pressures, of accentuated back-

ups, of reiterated trajectories that seem to imprint right on the stage the story of a sensitive adventure whose memory is carried by the body, and whose places are likely to keep the trace. The performer is not in a body of representation but in a body of movement that captures and returns the light, concentrates dynamics, stresses the space of movement. In this way, the dance of Olga Mesa tries to intensify sensitivity, to distend time, to suspend the event in order to let the vibratory gap through which her presence makes sense come to light.

Cinema and discontinuities. The camera would come in to reinforce a language which is already cinematographic.

It is not insignificant that in 2005 the choreographer has named her company: “Hors champ / Fuera de campo” (Off-screen). Olga Mesa talks about her camera as an intermediary between the spectator and the performer. But, more widely, that camera takes part in the invention of a choreographic language which is close to a cinematographic logic. It is not enough to recall the direct quotations from films or the story-boards of the piece designed by Daniel Miracle and commented by Olga Mesa, which constitute the occasion for a new story within the story. It is rather a matter of considering that the dancer’s “image-body” weaves a narrative logic that is characteristic of a certain cinema. The writing procedures refer to cinematographic aesthetics. Olga Mesa recognizes herself in the aesthetics of certain directors, some of them discovered very recently: Jonas Mekas, the temporality of Andreï Tarkovski’s or Federico Fellini’s films, the poetics of the space in Pier Paolo Pasolini, also Chris Marker, discovered in 2006 and who, like her, appropriates images in order to construct his na-

ratives (*La Jetée*, 1962). The disconnected spaces, the narrative discontinuities, the associations of images in the choreographies of Olga Mesa give rise to a language and to a narrative that are specific to the post-war cinema, when it represents destroyed or closed down places. It is a cinema that makes what Gilles Deleuze names “action-image” go through a crisis: a cinema that compromises the sequences situation-action, action-reaction, excitement-response, and that produces dissipation logics, that integrates the unexpected and the event as it unfolds, that undoes the linking between portions of space (Deleuze, 1983: 277).

So a “stroll-form [that] liberates from spatiotemporal coordinates” (*ibid.*, p. 287) appears and makes place for ordinary, disconnected or empty spaces.

The characters found themselves (...) in a state of promenade, of stroll or wandering which defined *purely optical and acoustic situations*. The action-image tended then to explode, while determined places faded away, letting ordinary spaces emerge where modern affects like fear, detachment, but also freshness, extreme speed, and endless waiting developed. (*Ibidem*: 169).

That “stroll-form” is also specific to Nouvelle Vague cinema, Deleuze continues. A cinema that Olga Mesa admires and quotes. In *Suite au dernier mot: au fond tout est en surface*, the reference to Jean-Luc Godard is straightforward: an excerpt of *Vivre sa vie* (1962) is projected on stage and commented. The composition of the piece calls, like Godard, for the fragment, for discontinuity, for repetition, for the camera gaze, for the acoustic and visual off-camera, for quotation or for self-quotation, for uttered, written, projected text...

The cinematographic logic of Olga Mesa concerns therefore that construction of spa-

ces by gaping and splitting, those elliptical, complex narratives, half documentary half self-fiction, but also a way of presenting oneself to the other.

The onstage subject, both assumed performer and fictional construction, rubs shoulders with a reality embodied by the audience and the theatrical situation. She swings between laying bare her self such as Anna Karina, as if captured by a camera that unveils her in spite of herself, and the construction of a theatrical identity that gathers the projection of successive fictions and imaginaries.

Vestige. The camera would refer to the work of the memory, to the construction of remembrance

No wonder then that these aesthetic affinities lead to the visible arising, in Olga Mesa's pieces of recent years, of a declination of the vestige. In the pieces of the project *Más público, más privado* (More public, more private) started in 2001, the narrative is constructed out of snatches, incomplete stories that are often supported by memorial or tangible traces: a souvenir, a photograph, a drawing. A collage of lost and found scraps, a montage of scattered snatches of remembrance. This choreographic language close to the cinematographic art is haunted by memory. The observation of the space and of the souvenir that Olga Mesa stages usually leads to a suspension of the action in order to enjoy the present time and give oneself the leisure to memorize the instant that has just passed. “I am interested in the idea of capturing movement and its possible story just before it vanishes, in the idea of becoming the spectator of my own traces” (Interview with Olga Mesa, June 2004). The moments of movement interruption inside a

dance, or the silences between two words, are as many occasions of image freezing, of unseemly interruption where the performer leads to an intensification of the sensation of time. The movement then appears as a form of resurgence of the souvenir or as a form of manifestation of the vestige.

But the personal memory also meets history. And the re-membrance snatches lead from the intimate vestige (a childhood photograph) to the historical ruin. It is another way of taking up with post-war cinema, characterized by its narrative discontinuity. The choreographer's recent pieces therefore bring along images of war, of desolate or destroyed landscapes that Olga Mesa borrows from the daily news or documentary films, and makes reappear on stage. So *La Danse et son double* pays tribute to the ruins of a post-third-world-war apocalyptic world as it appears in *La jetée* by Chris Marker. And the quite new solo created by Olga Mesa reasserts this research.

In my last stage creation *Solo Aveugle (avec des larmes bleues)* (2008) I went back to my origins with the production of the second filmic object that I call *LaboFilm*. (The first one was realized at the Fond Régional d'Art Contemporain of Metz in 2007, as I was an artist in residence invited to curate an exhibition based on their collection and to intervene dialoguing with the chosen pieces). The stage apparatus of the piece is a film projected on a big screen out of the audience's sight, and each spectator has only access to a part of the image through its fragmented reflection on a mirror.

The film, built in loop, is presented throughout the whole piece – sometimes with light, sometimes in blackout –. It is made

of excerpts of films about the war: the destroyed landscapes of the Second World War or Hiroshima, excerpts from Pasolini's film *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (1966)... or also excerpts from a filmic journal containing personal memories, like a tree of my childhood filmed before my grandfather's big house and at last the image of a black-out as the main space of memory and of (hi)story.

We don't see everything. The visible escapes. It's connected with ephemeral spaces of the memory and its fragmentation. I situate myself both inside and outside the theatrical and narration space. At some moment, I am naked with a goat mask, I wear high-heels. I look at myself in a mirror and I feel the audience's gaze behind. Images of war are projected on this mirror where I observe my body. I try to identify my body beyond the image, inventing a space of presence that escapes my understanding. I don't think about the image I'm going to produce though, but rather about the space of memory I'm going to experience. The piece doesn't talk about images, but about vision as territory of disappearance. I try to detach images from imposed temporalities, from asserted meanings, in order to construct spaces that help them emerging and that cross them. The piece questions the detachment of images. I don't try to impose images, nor to assert or exploit them. It's something that has to go across. O.M

Translated by Paula Caspao.

Notes

All quotations by Olga Mesa are drawn from the interview between the author and Olga Mesa in April 2008.