

Speaking Bodies, Plural Voices

ARNOLFINI • 17TH - 20TH JANUARY 2013

On spectatorship.

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Arnolfini's *4 Days* was imagined by curator Jamie Eastman as a platform for the exchange of ideas through performance, with a rough theme of "coming together" – a place where questions of artist and audience interactivity could be explored. Many of the performances by artists including Sharon Gal, Emma Smith, Boondock Collective and Georgia Sagri were directly interactive, involving volunteers who had collaborated before the *4 days* event, as well as members of the public on the day of the performances. As a festival aimed at exploring notions of exchange and communication, these performances were an obvious fit. However, some of the work – such as Mette Edvarsen, Phillip Gehmacher and Sarah Vanhee – took place in a more traditional framework of audience as watchers/listeners, with a stage created around the performer. These examples dealt with exchange in a less direct and apparent way, and were a necessary and thought-provoking addition to the festival. Their use of space, text, gesture and action challenged

relationships between body and language, most notably by blurring the separation between the two and in doing so, displacing the possibility of separating encounters between performer and audience, maker or listener.

Mette Edvardsen converted a black box space into an imagined world of objects by naming and placing them through speech and actions. Her manner was precise, her body and actions compact. The objects she imagined morphed throughout the piece, and in turn, also changed her. “Things things things things things things things things don’t don’t change change change change change change change change’, yet ‘I change”, she announces. This phrase rings throughout the performance. She does change, but so does the world around her. It is hard to separate who or what holds the agency in this encounter. Similarly, it is hard to decipher what she makes by naming, and what she makes by placing; her body and speech seem inextricable. For a piece that one might expect to be about two polar opposite states of being, the world created is far less black and white; it exists on a line between thought and experience, tangibility and conceptuality. The result is a tension at times uncomfortable, at times a communication familiar and natural.

Through the minimal, controlled emotion of the piece, I found myself searching for a narrative. I came away not knowing to what extent I'd made one, and to what extent it was given to me. In short, I came away a little baffled as to what just happened. It would have taken one audience member to walk across the space and the whole world would have shattered. We knew this, of course; the room was after all empty, the objects invisible. Objects came into being only through the audience's compliance

and investment in the creation of an imaginary space. Yet we didn't practice this potential power for destruction. Without an ethical impulse to jump up and join in, or a directly interactive set-up, believing what was made in front of us didn't feel like an active choice. Our implicit agency in the performance revealed a subtle dynamic of movement between performer and audience, reflected only in the actions and words of Edvardsen herself.

The

convergence of Edvardsen's words and actions carried more weight than physical presence. This was not a world of absences; things were defined by their changeability, not their stasis. Leaving, the audience passed a table of objects painted black, their shapes becoming black holes on a surface, negative spaces to be filled. The artist's erosion of the line between absence and presence allowed for a space in which the relationship between body, action and words – in other words different modes of communication – was the event we were really watching.

Phillip Gehmacher's *walk&talk*¹³ also highlighted this relationship between gesture and speech, as he presented his ideas through words and movement. The performance felt intellectual and personal at the same time. Gehmacher's bodily movements emerged from a sensitive, intuitive body, whilst his words described concepts and theories underpinning the

body's communication. The meeting of body and language sometimes caused tension; unlike gestures that enhance speech and meaning, often there was a discrepancy between Gehmacher's words and actions. This tension was dynamic, as it called into question the body's ability to exist on a line of plurality, as opposed to speech which, through the act of naming, immediately exists in dualisms. Whilst the body was harder to read with the linear narrative of 'making sense' in an intellectual way, it felt much more familiar to understand Gehmacher's movements when listening as bodies to bodies. It challenged the audience's response, and in a wider sense, caused me to reflect upon the parts of our own understanding that exist when participating in a work of art. It challenged the notion of 'looking' and 'listening', rather converging in a place of 'experiencing', where no priority was given to the intellectual understanding of the lecture or the bodily reciprocity of the dance.

Sometimes Gehmacher seemed to go inward, to reach outward, to contract, to be grasping at something. Through his movement I felt I was watching a body working itself out in relation to other bodies in its presence. The encounter between self and other seemed much more ambiguous and blurred through the embodied movement rather than through language and narrative. It highlighted the body's boundary as a false edge dividing an essential ambiguity. The extension of the body through the energetic resonances of it, or as Gehmacher used the term, the kinesphere, eroded this false line. The implication extended to the body of the audience also. It was a relief to experience the relationship of audience and artist as an energetic one, rather than a conceptual one.

The active decision to present his ideas about the exchange of energy in a lecture, a space within which the audience is traditionally called upon as listeners, not other bodies, contrasted to artists such as Emma Smith who worked with more direct forms of participation and bodily energies throughout the weekend. By keeping the audience in this realm, Gehmacher was requiring us to remain balanced on a line between observing, listening and experiencing in a sensory, kinetic way more akin to his own movements. There was no way we could step with relief into one or the other; this felt like a hugely important challenge to the way in which we experience ourselves, the world and the art within it.

Sarah Vanhee's performance involved speaking continuously in an attempt to voice her subconscious and conscious mind-wanderings; any thought that seemed to enter her head she voiced. The result was a powerful and moving performance, not to mention an onslaught and fast-paced confrontation of an ever-speaking, multi-vocal mind. Vanhee was endearing, funny, angry, feisty insecure, timid, unapologetic: a kaleidoscope of many selves, opening an internal process to the audience. Vanhee occasionally addressed the audience when they entered her periphery 'yes yes please come in and sit down it's better if you don't linger...her gloves dropped on the floor why isn't she picking them up?...I wish you wouldn't write in the performance it really puts me off'. These snippets that assured us the performance was entirely spontaneous, simultaneously cause a tension amongst the audience. What will she say next, will it make us uncomfortable, will we be brought into the limelight? The combination of empathising with an internal process, realising our affect on the performer and vice versa, and existing on a knife-edge of tension

with regards to how we might be implicated, charged the interaction with a liveness that is for me, the crux of what performance should be about.

The exposure and vulnerability involved in Vanhee's voicing of the usually silenced, uncontrollable mind, involved the audience as an empathetic force relating to an acutely shared experience. An experience that is rarely voiced, and completely at odds with language that attempts to be coherent, linear and perhaps as a result, dualistic. Unlike Edvardsen's precise, repeated, rhythmic naming, Vanhee's sentences were rarely complete, often tailing off into completely unrelated subjects, or finding association through the sounds of words themselves. But just as Edvardsen's world existed on a line between thought and experience, absence and presence, so Vanhee's language highlighted the inadequacy of singular, linear speech to express the plurality of the sensing, experiencing, and ultimately timeless body. In doing so, the worlds both artists created were more akin to experience than the illusion of linear languages and singular selves in the world.

The performance of the plurality and simultaneity of meanings within each singular mind, challenged a reading of the show itself. Like Edvardsen and Gehmacher, Vanhee revealed something about the artist audience interaction by turning the spotlight on the viewer's multiple ways of experiencing. Contemporary debates often centre around audience duality of passive/active; these performances seemed to be devious that that. Rather than covering this old ground, they focused on the nature of the audience's active position. They denied a viewer's desire to revert to a dualistic position within their own active meaning-making by calling on not one faculty of being (conceptual) or another (sensory), but by

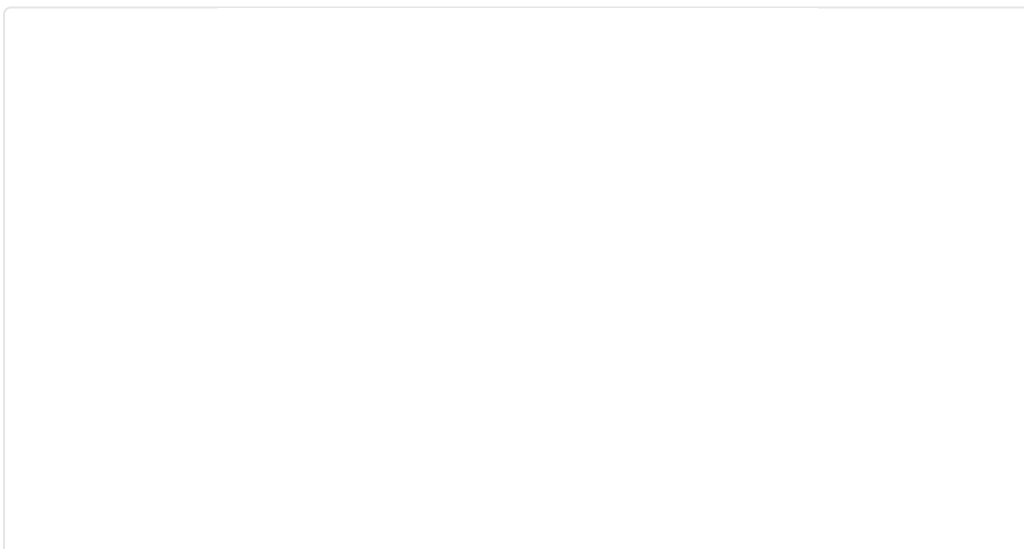
calling for a new language that could contemplate both and more, simultaneously. Perhaps part of that means letting go of searching for linear, explicable narratives, either for the artwork or the wider context and environment. As a result all three performances challenged the ways in which we encounter the artwork, and by implication, the world. Arnolfini's *4 days* rose to its own challenge and provided the dynamic platform for this questioning to take place.

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Speaking Bodies, Plural Voices Show Info

CAST INCLUDES Bodies in Flight, Edwin Burdis, Emma Smith, Heather Phillipson, Laure Prouvost, Mette Edvardsen, Mikhail Karikis, Nils Bech, Philipp Gehmacher, Sarah Vanhee, Sharon Gal, Project Boondock and Georgia Sagri

LINK <http://www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/live/details/1555>



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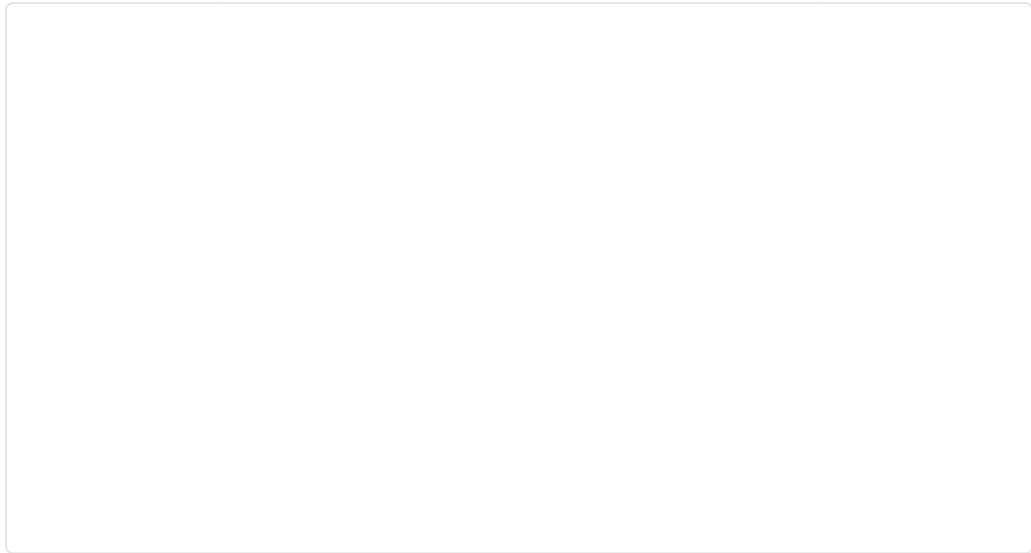
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