

Dorothea Rust

Pressing the shutter at moments of Maria Hassabi's «in progress»

Dorothea Rust writes after the performance «in progress» by Maria Hassabi on Saturday 13.08.2022 at BANG BANG - translocal hi:stories of performance art, an exhibition project by Revolving Histories/Performance Chronik Basel and Museum Tinguely, from 8 June to 21 August 2022

Before Maria enters the large exhibition hall from the outside, already traffic noises and human-voices fade into an electronic hissing and sometimes become a sombre sound, which haze the room. Most of the audience is seated on chairs, some at the front on cushions on the floor. Maria passes the audience to the right, slowly walks into the middle of the large, empty hall then coming to a halt in front of us. Her clothes: between everyday and glamour with sneakers, fancy ripped gang jeans, and a white shirt with large jewelled glass stones attached, shimmering and creeping over the left side of her chest and over her shoulder like a strange growth. The moment she stands before us, the glamour dissolves into a highly tense, concentrated state of mind, that ripples through the hall.

Even then, when I have been present in the hall of the Tinguely Museum, and now later, when I am writing and remembering at home, I cannot see her movements. I am occupied with noticing moments. When I'm writing, moments like "her posture has dropped to one hip, the right hip, and then her head is tilted all the way back so I can see her angular chin in the first place", moments like that just want to slip away, yet I seem to capture some, they trigger something in me. An image flares up in me: The posture of a woman, her head all the way tilted back like Maria's head. It's from a 19th century painting showing a session with Jean-Martin Charcot demonstrating hysteria patient Blanche Wittman in the lecture theatre of the Salpêtrière.¹ The demonstration object Blanche Wittman is less upright than Maria and is supported from behind by a man's hand. The room in the Salpêtrière is filled with men's gazes. Maria's presence here in the Museum Tinguely is spunky, gutsy and determined, in full control of the choreography of her movements, surrendering herself entirely to the time and gazes of a mixed audience. We are as exposed to her fashionable, styled, vulnerable, sensitive and refined presence as she is to us. Does she embody a message about the endangered female species? She hits a nerve, it makes me thinking of all the femicides that are happening in the world. Femicides are an underestimated phenomenon in most countries. Does Maria suggest a kind of self-empowerment over every moment through her temporally stretched movements? An impossible wish that (many) women and female beings cannot fulfil

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Clinical_Lesson_at_the_Salp%C3%AAtre

in their daily lives because they are subject to all kinds of social and time constraints. But could it go as a wish and a speculative life plan?

Is this performance space situation in the Museum Tinguely a pressure-less-time? How does Maria go about this context in this performance-situation? She may have brought a prepared, carefully crafted movement sequence that choreographs time as moments. This can help her focus with herself and keep the kinetic awareness of the tiny changes in her movements.

By all means Maria illuminates each moment equally, no moment is more important than the other. Imperceptibly, she shifts her weight from moment to moment into moments of waiting, holding, hanging, turning, pushing, lifting, folding, raising ... There is no momentum in the movement, everything is pulled evenly in time, a difficult task when she is in an intermediate position. She has to keep her balance in every single moment. There must be a subtle connection to the breath, which I can't see, but I can feel on my own breathing. No freezing, no movement in slow motion, but moments of passing movement divided into many moments. And yet the moments in their totality do not make a congruent whole, these individual moments standing for themselves. Each one on its own an out-of-place experience? In the German language the term 'Augenblick' literally means something between an eye gaze and a snapshot, indeed the eye gaze is more than a looking with the eyes, it is a looking with the whole body. Where did I read that «the moment is that ambiguous moment where time and eternity touch»? And Plato would have said that «the moment is placeless, nowhere, out of place».

Maria creates a temporary vacuum in the performance situation at the Museum Tinguely: On a lonely steamer, we move through an endless sea, see nothing in particular and yet are captivated by the sight of the sea and its waves and unresolved details. The whole time during the performance I stand in the same place, almost not moving - hypnotised? And because we see nothing spectacularly concrete, we are thrown back on ourselves, our (own) phantom images emerging. There are neither good nor bad moments here, there are only moments that get caught in a larger web. Another collective image flashes me when Maria creates a momentary (photographic) pose with one of her arms stretched in the air: the iconographic image of Robert Capa's «Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936»². It is a sensational war photograph in the collective pictorial memory. It is the moment when a fighter is hit in the head by a bullet and Robert Capa presses the shutter. «There have been significant doubts about its authenticity ...»². Nevertheless I feel this image pop up from my (hidden) memory-set and it tells me that Maria creates photo effects and we, the audience, press the shutters.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Falling_Soldier

Unperturbed and steady, she seems to glide through the movements. I think I can read something powerful, binding, unyielding and deeply emotional in her body timbre. Is there a volcano simmering inside her?

There is no information content here, no communication, only the power of the moments, because each moment passes into the next, uninterrupted ceasing and becoming. She is abandoned, I am abandoned, we all are abandoned, no bonds, except the time? And our transient associations, images and phantomal memories? Is this experiencing an unknown way of being, which makes each moment precious? Which might evoke awareness for action in also the active sense of the word as Hanna Arendt sees it: «Action as the only activity through which humans can become what they are in the true sense of the word. Action not only as a necessary condition (Conditio sine qua non'), but as a sufficient condition (Conditio per quam) of human existence.» Here she follows the Aristotelian understanding of humans as the living beings in the political community ('zoon politikon')»³. When I look away from Maria the performer for a moment and then back to her and around me and see all these people silently focusing on Maria and the situation here, it seems that 'she Maria the performer' is not alone, that I am not alone, that we are not alone, that we are in temporary company with others, sharing the same time and space whatever the others may experience. And whatever actions this performance time of about 40 minutes may indirectly evoke later.

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³ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditio_humana