

## To be looked at

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### **To be looked at**

In this following text I will write about the performance "To be looked at", which had been shown at the conference "Slavery in Contemporary arts" in Trier in 2006. To give an overview about the structure, I will start with the program text of the performance. Then I will describe the performance with words. That is a quiet different experience than seeing a dance performance on stage. After that I will reveal the process of the creation of the performance. I will end with a short discussion about the implications of the body for that subject. Here I will draw onto the value of bodywork and performance art in order to provoke change.

#### **1. Program Description**

In this performance I am looking at and underneath the skin. I am looking at the skin as our outside layer, which presents us in and to the world and with which we protect ourselves. But what lies underneath the layers of the skin? What is shown? What is stored or hidden? And why? Before whom? Where can that lead to? I use dance as medium to let the body reveal and talk about its personal and/or collective inscribed history - to look at the traumatic impacts of oppression, discrimination and injustice. Skin matters! Unfortunately.

There are different inscriptions and ascriptions depending on the colour of the skin. With this dance, as a white skinned dancer, I am not denying

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these differences. The White European privilege is based on oppression, discrimination and injustice. I am looking at the pain, which is often denied in order to remain privileged. Looking at this pain is necessary in order to realise the traumatic impacts of oppression, discrimination and injustice and make a change.

During this performance I want to ask you to also observe/look at the feelings in your body. What body sensations, images, thought do you have?

After the performance there will be time to share impressions, images and feelings and to discuss this.

## **2. Text of the Performance**

When the light turns on, you see a woman sitting on a chair in front of the audience. She stands up and walks forward. Something is in front of her. Two boxes, she tries to lift them. They seem to be heavy, one after the other she carries them to the middle of the stage and takes a seat in front of them. Now you can see the boxes are normally used to transport bananas. Music starts: Michael Franti: Every little soul is a poem. The woman raises her arms, she is looking upwards, seeing into the world with happy eyes, feeling and dancing the beauty of herself and her body, but suddenly a shiver goes through her body, she closes herself in, but just shortly and almost immediately, her feet start to dance like two people schmoozing around each other. Then it seems they are walking until feet and hand are thrust out, fist appears, her face changes, anger appears in

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her face. As she comes forward, her open hands are asking the audience for something. Disappointment vanishes into the wings. No possibility of running away. A defiant look shows the discomfort of the situation. Slowly she begins to sink to the floor, her arms are still raised up to the sky. The music stops, her arms fall down. She is lying on the floor. Suddenly, she curls into herself and raises her buttocks up into the air, but falls back to the floor, this movement repeats till she begins to crawl through the two banana boxes. A look back, a sequence of dance moves up and down. At the end of the stage she discovers a blue shirt. She is not sure, what to do with it. Finally, she puts it on. She walks forcefully towards the audience, but between the boxes there is a stop, something detains her. She tries again, the same thing happens again and again, she falls down, once more lying on the floor laying on the floor again.

A new scene starting: A person kneeling, her head hanging down, memories of prisoners coming up, sudden movements like invisible kicks are moving her, different views, different velocities, from the abstract to the highly emotional. Then you see someone who is controlling, giving the instructions for something and somebody falling down, standing up again. Another picture, a person upside down, you see the buttocks – still - suddenly inclining, but holding it back, inclining again and falling, the same position, the same reaction. She gets up, gets in front of the banana boxes into the same position like in the beginning. This time her legs rise up and fall down to the front, her pelvis moves/ rolls up and down while she is moving backwards. She gets up and walks normally to the front. She stands there and looks at the audience. She looks and looks. All of a

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sudden she sees somebody, becomes frightened and falls down. She is shaking and shaking, trying to get up, trying to move to the back. Finally she gets there and hides behind a wooden boards. You hear a strong breath. The wooden board is falling down, being caught at last minute and is slowly put vertical again. She is moving towards the audience, hidden behind the board. In front of the audience she shows her hands, a conversation of the hands, caring and very soft. The scene stops, she takes the board and puts it over the banana boxes. She sits on the board, we hear a reprise of the music from the start of the piece, similar movements, but different, something had changed. The music stops earlier, she curls up on her side and then kneels, different music... another scene starts. Nina Simone is singing. The person gets up, raises her arms and embraces herself, gets down again and turns rolls over her head, down from the board. She gets up, walks over the board. In the middle she takes off her shirt. A look back and then she puts it down and walks away. She comes to the end of the board, takes a step forward, over the edge and falls down...

### **3. Creative approach to the performance**

When I started to think how I could create a solo performance on the theme of slavery, it was very difficult. How could I put this theme into dance? I knew that I did not want to perform what we can see in films or the violence what we can see in the daily newspaper. I knew that I did not want to perform pretty, lyrical movements to make a `cruel` theme look

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beautiful. Then I thought I would combine movement with text. At this time I was reading a novel "The time of our singing" by Richard Powers. I was deeply touched by the impossibilities of communication within a family and so I selected particular passages and improvised with movement to the text. One big issue for me was this ...How could I, a white European, do a performance on the theme of slavery? So I started to read more about Whiteness studies. A text from Bell Hooks was a kind of a key for me to go on, to see the importance of working on this theme, especially as a white European. I remembered that the theme of colonialism and slavery was rarely taught. Germans lost all their colonies after the First World War and compared to countries like France or England they had just a few - so why teach it in school? The Nazi dictatorship and the holocaust offered a 'much bigger theme' to be digested, but even that cannot be the reason why we spoke so little about colonialism and slavery. Maybe the only thing we were taught in school about colonialism and slavery was the reading of the novel "Tom Sawyer". My personal opinion is that the theme is not taught in school<sup>1</sup>, because society is trying to keep and create a certain kind of image of Germany. It is an image of a particular type of German that exists stereotypically blond and blue-eyed. By cutting out the former colonies and their history, the dark side of Germany can be reduced to the two world wars. Nowadays economic exploitation based on historical colonialism can be more easily hidden. Because, unlike France or England, the German people are not so

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<sup>1</sup> I am not informed, how the subject is taught in school today, but I tried to find it in the curriculum of Berlin schools and it is hard to find.

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closely confronted by the people from their former colonies. Germany choose instead to deport them, claiming that they are here for economic reasons and forgetting about the historical facts which created the economic misery in the first place. When racist incidents happen the media - does not mention the word "racism" choosing instead to discuss (foreigner un friendliness) "Ausländerfeindlichkeit". Always avoiding the underlying problems which is only ever confronted by special school education programmes. I am not able to go into more detail here although it is a big theme to be discussed.

I found a reason within myself to create a dance around the bigger theme of oppression and violence. Although I am not personally affected by general oppression, discrimination or violence, I see and read the news and I walk down the streets with open eyes. Discriminatory, violent and/or Oppressive images, stories and situations affect me; touch me deeply in my body. To work with the impact/effect the theme has on me specifically from the viewpoint of my Whiteness and Germanness. It was still difficult, however to deal with the different levels which are involved in that theme (personal socialisation, social and political structures) and to bring them into dance.

Through the arts it is possible to bring a personal and emotional level into that subject. I believe it is easier to become distant looking at something cruel with the rational mind than when we lively sense and feel it. Here I believe our acceptable limit would be much lower.

I decided to use bodywork techniques in order to come to a deeper level where the personal and the collective involvement might be stored. In

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doing so I wanted to see, what kind of movements, what kind of images and themes were stored in my body and let them reveal themselves in improvisations. The bodywork techniques I used are BMC and Authentic Movement. BMC is a method, which works with the different body systems e.g. bones, muscles, organs, fluids and the developmental patterns. Therefore it is a useful approach to use when digging out the hidden information. Combining this method with Authentic Movement gives the possibility to express these unconscious inscriptions via movement and dance. I always filmed the improvisations. As in Authentic Movement I tried not to judge, but to let my body speak. I did not watch the tapes, until I thought I had enough material. I watched all of them. I was impressed that although I did not want to use certain kind of images, they were there. Where did they come from? Did they come from images I had seen, I had heard or read? Or was that stored in my own memory, maybe as a part of collective memory? I do not know, but as they were part of the improvisational process, I decided it was important that they were there. I started to select the movement sequences, which were the most touching to me and put them together. There was no story, but different images and feelings. I changed the order and created transitions. How could I end? That was difficult. I knew that an ending gives the audience an important message about what I wanted to say. Instead I just wanted to show the different images, but I had no end, for me it was just a starting point to working with this theme. After the conference I had the desire to work on the theme even more. Since then I worked again on the performance and changed parts of it

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and I mostly changed the end. Instead of walking over the board I start to use the banana boxes. I get myself entangled with them and then trying to throw them away without success to then become part of them. In the end the audience can see my feet looking out of one of the banana boxes.

### **4. Implications of the body for the theme of post-colonialism and performance art**

Through our body and its movement we have access to the world and through our body we perceive and act in the world. With and through movement we are and express ourselves in the world. Our body is movement – inside and outside of the body. The body is the medium of dance. It is the tongue of expression. The body - also the dancers body - is historically and socially constructed. As well as the body is embedded in structures of power he mirrors the social and historical circumstances. The society further on controls how the individual body is seen. Performances can be seen as a mirror of the society in which it has been created. In order to analyse a performance it further seems to be necessary to take into account the historical and social surroundings of the performances (Klein, 1990: 283).

Within the approach of analysis of a performance with the broad theme of colonialism/post-colonialism there are more complex things to consider. One main aspect to name is the power. Who has the power to name whom? According to Foucault power is a net of techniques and discursive practices that comprise the micropolitics of everyday life but not as a

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substantive entity or something what can be possessed. Power does not exist in historical forms or causal effects, but can be described as a mode of actions and relations in any society and in any direction. That means for example that the power of capitalism has to be rooted in pre-existing forms of behaviour, socialised bodies, and local relations of power, which could not be mere projections of the central power and still effectively maintain and legitimate that power. Foucault further argues that freedom is the precondition and condition for the exercise of power. This necessity of freedom to the exercise of power implies as well the resistance. Therefore the exercise of power can be seen as a strategic choice of ways from among ways of interacting and in depends upon a variety of practices chosen by the parties involved to maintain the relationship as one of power.

There are different perceptions of the body (White<sup>2</sup>, Coloured, Black, Female, Male and/or Transgender body), which influences the manner how the performance is seen and analysed. People of different Colour (eg. White – Black) have not only different attributes ascribed to them. Unfortunately these ascriptions have to do with a different access to power and therefore to opportunities in the world. For example White people benefit more from the distributions of wealth.

Different perceptions of the body also are depending on the cultural background of the audience seeing the performance. During the creation of the performance dancer and choreographer are influencing the way the

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<sup>2</sup> I write the terms of colour with a capital in order to point out the social construction of the terms.

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body is seen during the performance with their personal and social perception of the body and its language, which is stamped by their cultural background. The cultural perception of the body is stamped by the historical and actual structures of power. Munik Sodre, a Brazilian anthropologist, for example describes the Yoruba notion of the body as a collective representation of what is individual. "To be is to have a body (in Ramos, 1946)." Looking at the specific importance of the body within a society, it is necessary to take into account how and because of which reasons these have been developed. Slaves can be named as a very specific example; they could not even possess their own bodies. Their bodies were not owned by them but by their masters. Here it becomes visible that the body is the most basic and fundamental level of power relations and it is through the body that the sovereign power is constituted. Within the slave-master relationship the role of the body then became important on a different level and it became a physical place of fighting for power. The master fought for power, subduing, punishing the body of the slave. The slave fought with his body for survival.

Julio Tavares wrote that the physical body and its nonverbal language helped the slaves to survive. With the nonverbal languages such as dance and music on one hand they could keep alive their own traditions. On the other hand these nonverbal languages developed even further as forms of resistance. One example is Capoeira which can be seen as a form of disguised fighting practice (in Cunha, 2000: 179).

So, it is through the body, that structures of power can be obtained but also can be changed, but Levin argues - contrasting Foucault - that the full

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realisation of our humanity as bodily beings is not possible without the full support of a cultural, social and political context (in Parviainen, 1998: 14, 27). Therefore there first must be an acknowledgement of the very cultural very different body stories and within that acknowledgement the social and political steps must be taken in order to achieve equality.

Returning to the level of performance art and dance and its specificity.

Here the body of the dancer is the medium of expression; the audience body is there to perceive, to listen, opening the kinaesthetic sense.

Therefore one approach could be to listen to our bodies, as we perceive the world through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, Fraleigh, 1987, 2004). Another would be - as dancer or audience member - working with the body. Working with the body, makes us understand more about it and it can help us to realise how important attention and respect are for health. For example Hartley says that each body system express their own quality of movement, feeling, touch, etc. Within the body, we find that if one body system or organ, for example, is overused, abused, or denied in some way, the health of the whole person will be compromised (Hartley, 1989: 301). In our society we can also see, that discrimination, violence of a certain group of people, does not only affect that group, but the whole society in a very bad manner; producing collective traumas.<sup>3</sup>

The use of bodywork is opening a space and can help finding a way for healing. As the body is socially constructed the body is formed within the

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<sup>3</sup> In transferring examples from biology to society it is very necessary to be very careful and not to generalize that approach or the outcomes, because there was and is a misuse in transferring findings in biology onto society. Just some weeks ago Watson gave another example of this abuse of biology.

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society in which the body grew up. Therefore the body carries in both memories - personal and collective – and within that the in the society underlying structures of power. As we could see above in some example a Black body is differently inscribed and ascribed than a White body.

It becomes necessary not only to fight for social and political equality but also to reveal and acknowledge the different stories being held in the body. According to Hartley the body

“holds the seeds of healing and growth, and through exploring the body, its chronic, pains, and symptoms of disease [I would also add the traumatic collective and personal memories], we may access this healing source (...) The hope is that, as the body as shadow is acknowledged, owned, understood, and its processes integrated into consciousness, the body becomes a guide and teacher in our development (...) (Hartley, 2004: 26).

A personal process of healing the own body cannot be sufficient without social and political change. It could just be that social and political traumas would be repeated. Using only a social and political way to change the hierarchical racist and sexist structures of society would miss out the stored traumas, which is shouting loudly to be seen and heard. I believe that only through a combination of both processes it is possible to create healing and change.

Expression through the arts relates the body to life, society and the larger body of spirit (Fraleigh, 2004:30-31) and can therefore hardly be understood from the perspective of culturally created body ascriptions and body-mind dualism. Dance is mostly a non-verbal performance art. The perception and interpretation of these non-verbal parts occurs through the kinaesthetic sense. Dance is experienced through the kinaesthetic sense

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(Pavis, 1996: 319, Fraleigh, 1987, Seldon in Alter, 1996). At the same time we live in a society where the body is relegated to a place of shadow, where body and mind are separated from each other (Parviainen, 1998: 22). The separation of body and mind is also a separation from our kinaesthetic sense in the way that the kinaesthetic sense is not felt consciously. Unconsciousness further implies that there is no possibility of choice. According to Pavis (1996:319) an understanding of the kinaesthetic sense as perception mode and of consciously sensing is necessary for the aesthetic value of something. Halprin says that “[b]y using this language consciously, we are able somatically (through the physical body) emotionally and symbolically to re-access a re-arrange of life-responses and reactivate feelings and images associated with certain life experiences (Halprin in Levine, 1999:136).” Through a conscious process of acknowledging the different personal, social and cultural body stories in very different areas such as dance and/or political demonstrations, it could be possible to find a way of healing this big collective trauma.

Olsen underlines with her following statement the power of performances on stage:

The multiplicity of the human experience lives in each of us, and the stage provides an opportunity to embody our inner selves by moving as performer, or by empathizing or projecting as witness. This transference of awareness between the audience and the performer enables transformation for both. At first, the collective mind of the audience supports the surrender of the performer to unconscious energies, but soon the audience surrenders its awareness of self and goes with the performer towards transformation as well (1983: 49).

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Boal, the founder of the theatre of Oppressed (Brazil), has a slight different approach to speak about the power of the performance stage: "Theatre is born, when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself (Boal, 1995:13)." I would go on; by seeing itself, the human being starts to get respect of the miracle of being and will in consequence start to respect other human and living beings in the world.

Statements like those give a lot of power to the performance art. As people are mostly not as aware or theatre and dance are mostly seen for entertainment, it becomes more a desire for a greater awareness through which change can be realised. At least a desire can be like an utopia; a goal to reach; a way to walk. In this sense I want to conclude with an invitation to acknowledge and respect the body in a different way with the following statement from Levin:

We need a conception of "body" that enables us to "ground" resistance to oppressive power in the needs and concerns, reasons and motives that are constitutive of, and constituted by, the body-self lived experience (...) [Communication] requires, among other things, the capacity to be touched and moved by what one sees, and the capacity to listen carefully and with an open mind (Levin, 1989: 98-102).

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Heike Kuhlmann  
*Dancer, Choreographer, Bodywork & Movement Therapy*

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Heike Kuhlmann  
*Dancer, Choreographer, Bodywork & Movement Therapy*

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**Heike Kuhlmann** (heikekuhlmann@googlemail.com)

Dancer, Choreographer, Integrative Bodywork & Movement Therapy

Actually she lives in Berlin. She has lived and worked in Central America, Cuba and England, these experiences influences her interest in combining dance with politics, theory with practice. She understands dance not only as an art form but also to be a pedagogy - a pedagogy of the body and of life. Therefore she is also working teaching children and youth movement expression and dance.