
REVIEW ESSAY

Really Actually Windy: On Environments, Technologies, and Dividual Performances

Johannes Birringer

REALLY ACTUALLY WINDY / R.A.W. VOL. 1. Curated by Mirei Yazawa and Anita Konarska. Performed and designed by Sayaka Akitsu et al. I'Klectik Art-Lab, London. May 7, 2016.

MISS REVOLUTIONARY IDOL BERSERKER. Directed by Toco Nikaido. LIFT Festival, The Barbican, London. June 22–July 2, 2016.

NAŠE NASILJE I VAŠE NASILJE. Directed by Oliver Frlić. Text adaptation from *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Peter Weiss) by Oliver Frlić and Marin Blažević. Wiener Festwochen, Schauspielhaus Wien, Vienna. May 29–June 1, 2016.

VORONIA. Choreographed by Marcos Morau. Sadler's Wells, London. October 19–20, 2015.

UNTIL THE LIONS. Choreographed by Akram Khan. The Roundhouse, London. January 9–24, 2016.

The space is cramped, a small chapel-like venue constructed out of white wooden planks. We sit huddled together. Yet the ceilings are high, giving us breathing room, and a Victorian armchair mysteriously rests up there on one of the cross timbers, a seat for angels to look down upon the crowd of fifty or sixty that have gathered for this evening of improvised dance and music. Our venue, I'Klectik Art-Lab, lies hidden under trees to one side of Archbishop's Park, on the south bank of the Thames across from Westminster Parliament. In the courtyard we notice that artists-in-residence at this Art-Lab also tend to vegetables and flowers that grow in the yard. When the dance and music begin we are beckoned inside and for the next three hours become enveloped in this green social ecology—an environment of very diverse practitioners and international visitors drawn to experimental contemporary art that ranges across all genres and takes place in a working enclave, where members can rent space to develop projects. During intermissions between performances we are asked to go outside and linger in the garden. (See figure 1.)

Johannes Birringer is a choreographer/media artist and co-director of DAP-Lab at Brunel University in London, where he is a professor of performance technologies in the School of Arts. His books include Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism (1989), Media and Performance (1998), Performance on the Edge (2000), Dance and Cognition (2005), Performance, Technology and Science (2009), and Dance and Choreomania (2011).



Figure 1. Performance poster for *Really Actually Windy* / *R.A.W. Vol. 1*. (Photo: Anita Konarska.)

Could we rethink of *technologies* in a different way altogether? Do we hear too much about terror and violence, causing dizziness, vestibular disorders, tinnitus, and hyperacusis? Does this accelerated political “sensationism” (not quite foreseen by Fernando Pessoa’s claim that “ideas are sensations”) make us sick?¹ And what is it about listening (the aural) that has obsessed me lately, turning me toward different somatic places of investment in acoustic embodiment, other contingent sites, and away from the recent paradigm of immersive theatre and participatory social works? Are we not listening to other forces of things now—climates, atmospheres, heterotopias? And how does renting space connect to growing vegetables?

The combination of herbs, planting, and performing hints at new hybrid materialities and interrelations. Perhaps the title of this evening of eclectic work, *Really Actually Windy*, points outside the common parameters of theatre and performance to other assemblages or “confederations,” as Jane Bennett calls them in her book *Vibrant Matter*. At one point Bennett mentions the strange concatenation of stuff she discovers in a storm drain—a glove, a bottle cap, a dead rat, a smooth stick of wood. . . .² In this review essay I want to talk about such confederations.

The works I hear at I’Klectik are introduced by (two of the ten) performers themselves, Anita Konarska and Mirei Yazawa. The performers are also curators—a familiar trend in many alternative venues. When Macarena Ortuzar enters to the fine, almost inaudible sounds of Bruno Guastalla’s cello, we are instantly mesmerized by a quality of strength and fragility that she conveys through her slow-moving, contorted postures. We inhale

¹Fernando Pessoa, “Sensationism” (1916), available at <http://arquivo Pessoa.net/textos/4103>.

²Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

them as sensations. The tones of fragility also come from Guastalla's strings—the sinewy mezzo, low-frequency overtones unleashed by bowing at the bridge. Two wooden sticks help Ortuzar to stand upright; they are her crutches and yet they become so many other things: branches of the wind, bones, walking sticks, lightning rods, spines, arrows. They are thin and smooth; one of them later seems attached to her chin, her face resting on it. A Chilean dancer who had worked on Min Tanaka's Body Weather Farm while training in *butoh*, Ortuzar here wears black blouse and leggings, a white apron wrapped around her hips (is she a maid?), her dark hair framing a face that is intensely focused, serious, and sorrowful. We see her movement reflected in every inch of her strongly muscled body: the way she can bend, twist her balance and shift her center of gravity, lean without falling, fall without breaking, hovering in horizontal a few inches off the floor, as if weightless. Ortuzar's dance, performed to the highly sensitive, improvised music of Guastalla, who touches the wooden body of the cello with hands more than he plays the strings, falls into place with the later solo by Konarska. Beginning in the garden, leaning her weight against a pine tree, Konarska slowly, slowly slides down against the trunk of the tree, then sinks her arms into a flower bed. Later, she performs in the chapel, but we are blindfolded as we enter to witness her actions. So I can only listen to what I cannot see, imagining what is nearly inaudible, growing what I collected from the outside, the nearly dark, unlit permutations of contingency that are also relations to the surrounding architecture, relations to that night, that urban context. Eventually someone invites me to remove the folds and Konarska is revealed: she stands en pointe, balancing a huge tree branch on her head that stretches almost across the entire width of the space. Tree woman, agent of near-silent sounds that we imagine hearing while blind, her performing conducts sensory power and a strangely shamanic vibe—I am not sure what to call it. (See figures 2–3.)

I recall a peculiar announcement released by composer Richard Povall in Cornwall in early 2016:

Are you an artist, writer or performer looking to take your practice in a new direction? . . . We will explore the shift in perception that comes from tying yourself to a tree . . . the discombobulation of acoustically penetrating a tree's internal workings (Tree Listening), and the mind-opening excitement of embodying tree-being (Other Spaces), among other innovative tree-led strategies designed to remake your sense of human–tree relations. *Branching Out* fosters a radical reconception of the ways we inhabit the world in relation to other organisms.³

Why not shift our attention to art and performance that makes visible what is, by nature or by design, often unseen or undervalued when working in a range of performance media, physical theatre processes, and animated materialities, such as those, for example, that Min Tanaka's students learn when they train in body weather techniques or work on the farm planting rice? Why not branch out into shamanism and pataphysics, into discombobulated soundings and what Konarska calls the "raw pieces" that can be felt, heard, and touched but not necessarily seen?

Shamanic rituals are quite common in the South Korean *kut* tradition, where dance and music blend but where the voice of the (usually female) shaman, or *mudang*, performs a high-wire act between earth and the air. She intones repeated words, special phrases, and movements to mediate between the everyday world and another realm (of spirits and demons) with the aim of healing, protecting the community from evil, controlling the spirits,

³Richard Povall, "Branching Out: Creative Collaborations with Trees," SCUDD listserv (email posting, January 25, 2016).



Figure 2. Anita Konarska in *Raw Pieces* at *Really Actually Windy* / *R.A.W. Vol. 1*.
(Photo: Anita Konarska.)



Figure 3. Macarena Ortuzar dances and Bruno Guastalla plays the cello in *Stuck with the Bones* at *Really Actually Windy / R.A.W. Vol. 1*. (Photo: Anita Konarska.)

comforting the troubled. When I watch the *kut* dances and listen to contemporary musicians, such as the group Jeong Ga Ak Hoe that plays classical instruments to accompany the dance, I am reminded how Ortuzar's performance alongside Guastalla's strings was an atmospheric occurrence. She walked the earth, with her wooden bones, and sounded out a vibrational sensation that connected us to energy landscapes, forces of molecular configurations.⁴ In a shamanic sense she connected us to spirits, and I felt the rods, the bones, the spines. She used her body weight and somatic sensations to develop, as a sustained improvisation, a certain "technology" of movement design. I can interpret such design in an immanent, material sense, looking at the architectures of her labor and the social spatiality she created through her use of space, but also in a psycho-geographical sense through the imaginary narrative she intimated and made me listen to.

In this review I am interested in how space is occupied, how atmospheres become elemental and induce specific affective responses, how atmospheres are engineered (performed) to direct or trick our hearing, seeing, and sensing. Thus I will move through four transborder productions I witnessed, two of which struck me as employing an aggressive loudness that descended upon me, squatting on me, whereas the other two seemed to hover more elusively, working through an almost sacred calm and an air that expands to another plane. I wondered what coastlines one might see in this pairing, and where the lines withdraw, so that site-contingent projects like *Really Actually Windy* come to remind us of the precarious, much less accommodated side of contemporary performance.

⁴For a more scientific exploration of visualizing/sonifying the atomic dynamics of energy fields in intra-active audio-visual dance installations, see Thomas Mitchell, Joseph Hyde, Philip Tew, and David R. Glowacki, "danceroom Spectroscopy: At the Frontiers of Physics, Performance, Interactive Art and Technology," *Leonardo* 49, no. 2 (2016): 138–47.

But first, let me return to the larger implications of this kind of listening to the atmospheric and how it tunes me into different architectures of performance, like the wind that moves and becomes trees and grass and as it spreads itself. This is an interest of mine (partly embedded in my own choreographic practice) that I explore here across a range of other manifestations: the “technologies” in question are not necessarily technical, digital, or software-based, but methodical techniques able to conjoin human and nonhuman, organic and nonorganic matter. The choreographic is a vibrational and tactile occurrence, reminding us historically of significant endeavors to connect movement and architecture as practiced, for example, in Anna and Lawrence Halprin’s “Experiments in Environment” (workshops they directed in California during 1966–71). Speaking of traces and source code, then, and the kind of *PASTForward* reworkings of original Judson Church pieces that White Oak performed in 2000,⁵ I sense that contemporary postdramatic and immersive performances tend to reconceptualize the kinetic environments and happenings staged by the Halprins. As became apparent in the exhibitions “Experiments in Environment” (Graham Foundation, Chicago, September 19–December 13, 2014) and “Mapping Dance: The Scores of Anna Halprin” (Museum of Performance + Design, San Francisco, March 17–June 4, 2016), Anna was aware of Kaprow’s Happenings, but sought a much more rigorous, interdisciplinary engagement with the media and materials incorporated (lights, slide projections, transparencies, found objects) into what she and her architectural partner called “collective creativity.” Half a century after the Woodstock generation and Situationism’s critique of capitalism, the psycho-geographical and political resonances of work that answers the Halprins’ call for collective creativity may have fresh significance.

Anna Halprin’s choreographic scores are visual and instructional mappings of the temporal, spatial, and participatory dimensions of the performances she imagined and created. It may not be easy to recognize her quasi-Situationist counternarrative to the politics of the era or her critique of Warholesque psychedelic environments at the time (for example, *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* at the Factory), but from her records of the workshop activities we learn of contact-based exercises with the environment, blindfolded walks, and “departure rituals” instructing participants to isolate and then reassemble different parts of their bodies—an exercise I enacted a little while ago at the “E/motion frequency deceleration Choreolab” in Krems, Austria. The deceleration workshop links up to pertinent concerns debated today in the Netbehavior and Rhizome online communities.⁶ I see such practice/research-driven debates as a very fruitful corollary to the performances, exhibitions, and workshops I encounter; they provide a more dynamic narrative context than reviews or scholarly studies in print media. Deceleration and data mapping stand in an intriguing relationship with verbatim theatre or documentary practices used by Rimini Protokoll, Walid Raad’s Atlas Group, Rabih Mroué, and others (in the wake of earlier performance artists like Anna Deavere Smith), which seek to “channel” words, testimonies, interviews, confessions, remembered speech patterns and movements, and so on. By slowing down the constant overproduction of data within the technological, political, and socioeconomic infrastructures that bind us, we shift our attention to time and touch, listening more carefully to such words and testimonies, and to their necessary translations among different

⁵See Ramsay Burt on such reworkings and what he calls “political disappointment” in his *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 186–201.

⁶See Furtherfield’s forum on accelerationist performance (April 2016) and also the empyre list investigation (July 2016) into feminist data visualization, available at <http://www.furtherfield.org/features/articles/accelerationist-art> and <http://lists.artdesign.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2016-July/thread.html>.

media, bodies, voices, and contexts. Given much of the transborder work we see today, could not translation also necessarily slow down intensities and saturations and the curious frenzied rush to participatory performance? To what extent can a ritualized slowing down protect us from the fetish of speed and compression of time?

I experienced such *motion frequency deceleration* in Austria during a blindfolded walk across a hillside, trusting a partner upon whose shoulder my outstretched arm rested. Instructed to do so by choreographer Gill Clarke during this Choreolab, the walk was a departure ritual of sorts that brought greater attunement to breath, hearing, smelling, the careful touch of my feet on the ground—proprioceptions of being together with the other person, of being “dividual.” Gilles Deleuze distinguished between a disciplinary system that sees the individual maintaining a distinct position within the mass, where the dividual is interrelated, always formulated anew in relation to a network.⁷ This jives well with Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s image of the “rhizomatic” (in *A Thousand Plateaus*)—the spreading out of horizontal, heterogeneous growth. What I seek to evoke here are examples of contemporary performances that grapple furiously with the sonic’s transfusion of environment, the complexities of transcultural tones, volumes, cadences, and textures (instrumental and bodily gestural). These works expose the *atmospheric* as a relational saturation (or subtraction) that “individual” elements in fact always traverse. There are no individual elements; they are, rather, “dividual.”⁸ And here we are, imagining a few performances that I need to visualize for you, even though you may not have heard of them or will not encounter them, physically and behaviorally. And what shoulder can I offer your hand?

Staying for a moment with artistic projects that perform data visualization, consider Catherine D’Ignazio and Andi Sutton’s *Coastline: Future Past* project in Boston Harbor in June 2015, where thirty participants walked through the core of Boston tracing a route from the predicted coastline of the city after climate change to its historical mark as a way of physically understanding the future and past at scales that are difficult to see and comprehend.⁹ Sutton encouraged the activists and performers—she calls them “poetic protesters”—to walk holding onto a rope and carrying stenciled messages, engaging in conversation with passers-by, and at key points to climb a ladder marked with the depth of the flooding scenarios projected for the year 2100. This left listeners, according to the story that Sutton and D’Ignazio tell on the videos documenting the work, *under the water* at most locations.

This is an image to be savored: an audience underwater, embodying calamitous climate change, having traced the future (of a past) of their urban environment. When I earlier mentioned *PASTForward*, I was not concerned with re-creation or Baryshnikov’s homage to minimalist conceptual and instrumental work, but with a contemporary interest in interrogating the theatre’s ill-equipped negative potential to resist an enduring reality, and a disastrous climate of performance within the automatism of the marketplace. In these weeks, as I write, the Terror repeatedly comes to cities and villages in European countries—

⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (winter 1992): 3–7.

⁸ I first learned of the notion of the *dividual* while attending a workshop with Yoko Ando, where she tested her *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior*, an interactive dance created at YCAM (Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media in Japan) in 2011. I reflected on this experience of multiple fluidities in “Gesture and Politics” (see *VLAK: Contemporary Poetics & the Arts* [2012]: 380–88). My own current work with DAP-Lab explores multisensorial environments that enable dividual proprioception; for example, we recently invited an audience of blind persons to touch, listen to, and play with our dancers and their costumes in *metakimosphere no. 3* (London, April 2016); each of the visitors was led through the environment by a performer.

⁹ See *Boston Coastline Future Past*, available at <https://vimeo.com/160370905#at=0>.

vividly imaged in the media and reframed in speculative social media as if it were new and radical—while wars continue to generate multitudes of refugees and migrants. The latter move across waters, they crowd forward having risked their lives while the locals ponder and suspect the (suddenly dangerous?) participatory nature of public space, their relations with the emancipated communities. “Wie sicher ist der öffentliche Raum?” asks a feature article on the “epidemic of suspicion.”¹⁰ The paranoia in question is a defensive reference to Islamic fundamentalist militant terrorism (symbolized in the ISIS); more than that, it is a pernicious use of language that invokes biopolitics and shame about what Alan Read has called the “immunisatory” logic of the West (and the theatre).¹¹ Migration now is suspicious too. The notion of immunity, of being immune to an Other (or an Outside), of course, conflicts with the phenomenon of the atmospheric, the swirl of movement, the excess of passage. In the following I evoke transborder performances—within the context of the international theatre festival—that inevitably deal with cross-cultural translation and, at the same time, with confederations of the incommunicable.

The ethereal beauty of the late Kazuo Ohno’s hovering presence and the consanguinity of Eiko and Koma’s performances with watery or scorched landscapes are still alive in my memory. Their slowed-down metaphysical extrusions amaze when contrasted with the frenetic contemporaneity of Toco Nikaido’s drastic pop culture send up *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*—a crazy mash-up of television-celebrity reality shows and high school musicals that wants to immerse its audience while facetiously protecting them from an onslaught of noise, lights, water, foodstuff, and glitter. We are not quite underwater, but are given waterproof ponchos and earplugs, our seats covered with cling film. A cacophonous tribute to fan culture—*otagei* are geeky dance routines performed by superfans for their Japanese pop idols—this company of twenty-five performers practically envelops us in a projectile theatricality. Akimi Miyamoto’s video designs wash over the stage backdrops in a discombobulating, deliberately shapeless mass of incoherent graphics as the dancers prance around in an absurdist hyper-*kawaii* (cute) style. (See figure 4.)

The concept of the cute or small, however, is here turned anarchic and pummels us blind with these wilder flashes of troubled youth. For a moment in the beginning they recall tradition, sporting Kabuki masks, lanterns, and parasols of Japan’s old theatre, but soon they turn hyperactive and silly, a riot of noise, color, and nightmarish animation. As twenty-first-century Japanese disco drills the atmosphere, the performance makes a kind of pataphysical sense, perhaps inadvertently riffing on *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* and our own Euro-American idol-celebrity culture. Yet, even more interestingly, the environment self-consciously comments on trends in promenade and immersive theatre, surrounding us from all sides, with dancers shooting water pistols at our necks as we squirm in our ponchos, sarcastically celebrating a frantically choreographed study into relationships forged between performers and audiences. Apparently, the performance uses around 2,000 props: cardboard signs, samurai swords, paper masks, Matryoshka dolls, buckets of seaweed and water, leeks, ticker-tape, and so on. Creator and director Nikaido embodies the *Idol Berserker* intensely, on the edge of a darker chaos and excess that may not translate as easily as the banners proclaim when held up by the *otagei*: “NOMAL [sic] THEATRE SUCKS.”

¹⁰ Thomas Assheuer, “Epidemie des Argwohns: Der Terrorismus ist keine mediale Erfindung. Er zeigt Wirkung. Der Verdacht dominiert neuerdings unsere Wahrnehmung des Alltags,” *Die ZEIT*, July 30, 2016.

¹¹ See Alan Read’s provocative writings on community and immunity in *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 192–99.



Figure 4. The company in *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*. (Photo: Cyclone A.)

During the 2016 edition of the Wiener Festwochen Festival, Oliver Frljić's *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* (Our violence is your violence) offers a similarly spectacular work of performance art, mixing dance, visual choreography, and electronic sound collaged into drastic physical theatre scenes that are meant to shock. Yet, the images here, including religious symbols and references to rape, torture, terror, fascism, and Islamophobia, evoke an almost old-fashioned sense of a bygone political theatre aesthetic. Frljić, who was born in Bosnia and now works as artistic director of the Croatian National Theatre of Rijeka, was commissioned by the Berlin HAU Hebbel Theatre/Wiener Festwochen to devise the performance as a critical homage to Peter Weiss's novel on radical resistance, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975–81). He had previously provoked attention with his performances of *Aleksandra Zec* and *Balkan macht frei* (The Balkans set you free) (both 2015): the former dramatizing Croatian war crimes against a young Serbian girl and her family, the latter a more personal and intentionally stereotypical depiction of discriminatory policies present in every society. The main character in *Balkan macht frei* is Frljić's alter ego, performing his struggle to meet/overcome the expectations placed on him as a director coming from the Balkans.

Watching the relentless stereotypical violence of *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje*, one cannot help but sense Frljić's overcompensating furor, trying to "explain" Islamic terror in the wake of a long history of Western colonial and religious terror, fascism, and capitalist exploitation. He delights in attacking the hand that also feeds him now. The production floods the stage (in front of a back wall comprised of dozens of oil barrels) with refugees and prisoners, who at one point perform a hallucinatory trance dance in orange Guantánamo detainee uniforms, and in the next moment appear naked, with calligraphic Arabic inscriptions on the skin as if they had walked out of a Shirin Neshat video. Jesus descends from the cross to rape *hijab*-wearing Muslim women; the dancing Guantánamo prisoners now sit in a

circle and torture the new “Syrian” refugee just arrived while voiceover announcements request us to observe a minute of silence for the victims of terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. Then there is the attack against the audience (of “NOMAL” THEATRE) itself: “Am meisten schäme ich mich für Sie, das Theaterpublikum. Denn für Sie ist der Tod ein ästhetisches Ereignis” (I am most ashamed for you, the theatre audience. For you death is an aesthetic event).

The religious and political symbols function as a kind of ritualized semiotic: the iconography of signs of terror are meant to provoke shock on both Right and Left ideological spectrums, attack the violence of terror, and show the radical illusions of consensus, complacency, or “feel-good humanitarianism.”¹² The West has no moral superiority at all in the current political context. A young director from the former East plays havoc with the Left-liberal mindset in the former West—a mindset that can be easily debunked now in light of the state’s necro-political violence that sustains contemporary racism as a primal ideology of global capitalism. With its blatant, fetishized violence, Frljić’s heavy-metal theatre can be called *plakativ* (in German)—trotting out shrill political signs, shoving them into our faces, and casually intermixing them with the archive of performance gestures that once resonated (for example, mimicking Carolee Schneemann’s iconic *Interior Scroll*, a *hijab*-wearing actress in *Naše nasilje I vaše nasilje* pulls an Austrian flag from her vagina).

An aesthetics of resistance, if one were to follow Weiss’s study of historical fascism and the workers’ movement, would have to grapple with the material phenomena of resistance (for example, strike, protest, activist organization), not with terror as aesthetic choreography. The propulsive in-yer-face theatre tends to privilege its political content through spectacular gestures that heighten theatrical affect. It is the loudness of the affect that turns me off. I wonder whether current dance theatre productions pursuing a more abstract spiritual technique of ritual, more subtle tonalities, and are able to dig deeper make us listen differently. And I wonder whether their withdrawal from political sensationalism can shape other awarenesses or mobilize other creative collectivities that are not whole or united and do not share the same cynical despair or political disappointment.

Formed by Marcos Morau in 2005 with artists from dance, film, photography, and literature, the Barcelona-based company La Veronal performs a fascinating example of such an abstract ritual with *Voronia*, named after a geographical location (a deep cave in Georgia, Caucasus), which must have inspired the dark vacuum of the stage space. The group conducted its research there, descending into a kind of bottomless pit that Morau compares to an empty center of gravity and to Dante’s *Inferno*. “¿Qué o bien dondó está el Mal?” (What or where is Evil?), he asks in the program notes. As we enter the theatre a young boy is seen standing alone in a vast gray horizontal stretch; then we note the cleaners that hover on the edges, slowly scrubbing the floor. Figures in black and white emerge in front of the long gray curtain: they twitch and contort in slow and fast cycles of mutated body-popping. Short volleys of clapping hands or slapped hips evoke chittering insects, sounds that recur often during the performance, and we hear them moving back and forth across the stage as words are projected onto the wall. Those words come from nowhere and disappear; only later did I realize that the sinister biblical refrains of gnostic sentences belong to the prophet Ezekiel and Saint Augustine. Their origin and destination are unclear, but

¹²In December 2015 Latvian theatre director Alvis Hermanis cancelled his production *Russia.Endgames*, projected to open at Thalia Theatre Hamburg, because he felt uncomfortable with the theatre’s political engagement for refugees, dismissively calling it a “Refugees-Welcome-Center.”

they evoke an atmosphere, as the rear curtains part to reveal various scenes set behind glass: a dream surgery in an operating theatre in which surgeons bend over a human body, a boy trapped like a fly in a glass box, his hands bloodied. Dark-clad monks pass across the stage in a slow procession. Animal puppets and real animals appear now and then in a hallucinatory landscape that draws on Christian iconography and prophetic allusions to the Valley of Dry Bones from the Book of Ezekiel.

Midway through the performance the glass transforms into metallic elevator doors through which a table emerges, set for a supper at which the dancers gather. We are taken through repeated changes of “location” in a dance that is highly cinematic, allusive, and allegorical, yet without a guiding narrative (thus following the tanztheatre collage technique, but avoiding all literalizing or epic tendencies that once marked the theatre of Pina Bausch). The choreographic work is extraordinary, fast-paced, and often dis-aligned, distorted, and fragmented. The twisting, cavorting bodies now move or sit rigid around the table at the absurdist supper, and we hear the sound of electronic and human babble interwoven with fragments of classical music, sacred chorals, and the percussive sound of the performers’ clapping hands. A woman (Sau-Ching Wong) shouts what appears to be a long tirade of abuse (in Mandarin) while pushing people away from the table. She tries to escape, but finds increasingly strange things lurking in the elevator every time she calls it: a military figure in riot gear, naked people flailing in a dynamic Rodin frieze; the young messiah boy being measured for a suit; an old man, and so on. One dinner guest has quietly turned into a polar bear. Near the end, the boy pulls out a casket as if he were in a morgue, discovering the corpse of the polar bear.

Choreographer Morau and his group tend to trust the associative visual imagery even if it risks being oblique. I find it gripping and also hypnotically strange because it is offered in such a detached, ritualistic calm, allowing me to think about the underground and religious (apocalyptic) violence, revelation, and rapture in many new ways, complicating the weird surrealism with claustrophobic references and the blatant poetic beauty in biblical phrases that I had not expected (or long forgotten). The dancers are mesmerizing—pushing, pulling, and stretching themselves into exquisitely grotesque positions; El Greco and Goya come to mind when imagining the allusive structure of this performance that still resonates in my ears through the quick, tiny clapping sounds made by the dancers. Then again, during his last years when he painted the Black Paintings hiding locked up in his house, Goya, the painter of dark phantasms, was deaf—he could not hear. There are moments when the choral passages, of dancers huddled together or piling on top of one another (as in the table scene), constitute quiet ruptures, brief instants of the eye of the storm when all is quiet; in Japanese *anime* one calls these moments *udokanai* animation (stilled animation).

Akram Khan Company’s *Until the Lions* is staged as a prophecy as well—not in a biblical sense, but in the narrative mythological contexture this strong dance work evokes. Khan’s stature as a choreographer has grown consistently over the past decade, and his deconstructions and transformations of the codified languages of *kathak* are much talked about, as he now clearly inspires a younger generation of artists who do not so much politicize their ethnic or racial bodies, but push the creative potentials of their diversely trained corporeal instruments, blurring all boundaries between codes and abstractions and classical, modern, and contemporary performance idioms. As in the case of Morau’s work, which relies upon specific improvisation technologies he calls *Kova*, Khan has refined his aesthetic of collaboration through formal experimentation with multiple movement vocabularies

that allow shifting (or queering) gender roles and masculine and feminine energies.¹³ *Until the Lions* offers a beautiful, haunting example of how a performed gender identity can become self-divided or dividual.

Ostensibly a trio, with Khan partnering Ching-Ying Chien and Christine Joy Ritter, the work actually features seven performers; the choral presence of four instrumental and vocal musicians, who are placed in four corners of the circular stage (inside the massive circular Roundhouse, a famed rock arena in Camden Town) and move around the circle as well, defines the overall choreographic, kinetic, and aural atmospheres of the work. The sensual atmospherics were very noticeable even before the dance began, for the space appeared misty, as if a fine sawmill dust hung in an air suffused with a strange scent. In front of us, the round stage, designed by Tim Yip (known for his art direction in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), resembled the stub of a thirty-foot-wide tree trunk, sawn through just above the ground. Cracks later opened upward to create an uneven *mesa* and through them smoke seeped up insistently, while Michael Hulls's lighting meticulously framed luminous enclosures and clearings. (See figure 5.)

The clearing, I take it, is for the gods that populate this dance drama, for the ancestors on the other side of the ritual curtain. Just as Morau reaches back to the Hebrew and Christian mythographies, this production is an adaptation of *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*, a retelling in verse of the *Mahabharata* by Karthika Nair. Danced in an elliptical manner, it would be practically impossible to follow if one were not apprised of the tale. Khan had turned to the Hindu epic before (for example, in his 2009 *Gnosis*), after having performed the role of Boy in Peter Brook's controversial *Mahabharata* in the mid-1980s. But now he chooses to focus on the story of Amba, a princess abducted from her wedding ceremony by the powerful and obdurately celibate Prince Bheeshma, who then takes revenge on him by killing herself and assuming the form of a male warrior.¹⁴ Taiwanese dancer Chien portrays the fierce Amba; Khan takes on the role of Bheeshma; Ritter (who trained at the Palucca School in Dresden) is a kind of animal presence, skittering and slithering around the clearing with intensity, a possessed figure of destiny who becomes the spirit driving Amba's revenge.

Bathed in a shimmering, sand-colored light on a giant slice of tree trunk, the performance envisions the world as a living organism and a continuum. My eyes travel with an inner and outer wind, as if rustlings and movements of plants, trees, things, landscapes, living beings—human, animal, and supernatural—combined into a collective whole. The trunk, with its rings and bark, becomes a platform for a strangely erotic mating ritual during which Chien and Khan embody Amba's attempt to persuade Bheeshma to marry her; she reaches to touch and grasp him, yet he alternates between pushing her off and reciprocating.

¹³ In a video where company members present aspects of the technique, Kova is referred to as a set of "geographic tools"; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA3ACE927qs> and <http://www.laveronal.com/work/kova-%C2%AC-geographic-tools/>.

¹⁴ The dramaturgy is more convoluted, as Nair's book wants to foreground the voices or viewpoints of the epic's hitherto silent female characters. Princess Amba is abducted by a warrior, Bheeshma, but released when he discovers that she has a lover, Shalva. Shalva rejects Amba because she now "belongs" to another man, yet Bheeshma refuses to right the situation by marrying her because he has taken a vow of celibacy. Amba vows to revenge herself on him, and after years of penance Lord Shiva prompts her self-immolation so that in her next life she is reborn as Shikhandi, a woman-turned-man who trains as a warrior and kills Bheeshma. Nair's poem takes its title from an African proverb: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." See Kathrika Nair, *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (Noida, India: HarperCollins India, 2015).



Figure 5. Ching-Ying Chien, Christine Joy Ritter, and Akram Khan in *Until the Lions*.
(Photo: Jean Louis Fernandez.)

ing, increasingly confused by transactions that we can also imagine as internal transformations. Later, the trunk becomes the battleground on which Amba, Bheeshma, and their invisible armies rage against each other. They are watched over by the blackened, severed head of an old warrior that is mounted on a stick, and in the final scene the musicians join to throw innumerable long, wooden arrows onto the scene as if preparing a funerary pyre.

In conclusion, after this bracingly physical, multi-sensorial dance, it is the sounding that lingers prominently. A score by Vincenzo Lamagna underlines the action: a low electronic drone with whirlwind percussion from Yaron Engler and impressive vocals from Sohini Alam and David Azurza, who prowl the perimeter of the stage environment, joining the action from time to time. Most stunningly, they use the (amplified) tree trunk itself as percussion instrument, making it as ritually threatening and earthly as the pounding rhythms in Stravinsky's *Le Sacre de Printemps* or shifting into lyrical, melancholy registers with Gaelic love songs (accompanied by guitarist Lamagna). Azurza surprises us near the end with his remarkable countertenor voice, enriching the piece's gender fluidity.

I cannot describe the sound of this dance work any closer, but it touches me on levels of experience that exceed the semantic or syntactical dimensions of the epic narrative or the movement enunciations. It is no longer solo *kathak*, but dividualized and disjointed, diversified through the collaboration with dancers and musicians working from other, sharable vocabularies. If we take *Until the Lions* as a post-authentic work that messes up its (inter)cultural sounds to the point where listening to performance is precisely challenged (and East and West are interwoven and hybridized to a point where the mythic text is perceived as invented and the ritual force only a pataphysical prank), then the juxtaposition of the ridiculous *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker* and the grave, overly sincere *Until the Lions* be-

comes stranger. The juxtapositions among abstract, expressive, political, and pop certainly dissolve slowly, as do the differences between the tree (with its roots) and the grass, cunningly captured in the photograph on the invitation to *Really Actually Windy*. The relation of the post-authentic to sound (an acoustic transculturalism?) suggests that any notion of an essential identity or individuality is at odds with the rhizomatics of atmospheric exchange.

What then happens to accepted ontologies when movement techniques are no longer recognizable, words and translations fail, voice and music no longer demarcate cultural histories and spaces, and acoustic and visual relations drift apart? What kind of synaesthetic listening do we perform in the face of the incommunicable? We are quite capable of somatic identification; the calm and slowness of the shamanic, ritual performance dimensions that I addressed may qualitatively contribute to an enhanced perception of con-dividuality. Theatre always communicates even if it cannot grant immunity, then. And what I called, in the beginning, the less accommodated, site-contingent performance, whose dividual dispersion in space is more difficult to fathom, may in fact challenge the very denomination of site and identity position itself. For example, how does one resolve the paradox of an occupied theatre, a theatre under occupation, unable to move or unwilling to move, compared to the commonplace dispersed production and diasporic actors (and privileged migrants) within the globalized economy of the festival?

Let us listen to the wind, one more time, in this case to a company called Iraqi Bodies—an incongruous or ironic name evoking a kind of “national theatre.”¹⁵ Iraqi Bodies, founded in 2005 in Baghdad, had to re-form in exile in 2009 (in Gothenburg, Sweden) after director Anmar Taha was forced to flee the increasing violence of sectarian conflict in Iraq. The company has kept the name Iraqi Bodies even as it now includes Swedish, Greek, Dutch, and other international performers and musicians.

When I saw Iraqi Bodies’ *Possessed* I was struck by its dark intensity, which connects it to other works in the field of contemporary dance theatre (for example, Hofesh Shechter, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and Rachid Ouramdane). Yet, it surprised me on both the aural and kinetic levels because of the ironic sensibilities that suffused the choral pattern of the work, giving it a ritual quality similar to *Voronia*. *Possessed* is a world of sparse lighting, silence, and near immobility disrupted by seemingly erratic, repetitive movements. The opening sequences are nearly invisible: under a dim red glow and a spotlight of blue one can only discern two flailing bodies. When the light grows we seem to be in a smoke-filled landscape, as in the aftermath of a fire. Jutting white lines mark the space, perhaps delineating an ardor-architecture to be built or the contours where buildings once stood. Separated from a figure that lies motionless on a different spot in the empty environment, the chorus of nine dancers huddles together tightly, moves together, halts, moves, halts again. The only sounds come from the bodies themselves, their tiny steps, shuffles, molecularly conjoined movements, later the whisperings and mutterings of incomprehensible words. I imagine these interrelated shapes of bodies in motion, like the slow erosion of coastal lines, have been cast outside of the lawscape. Papers and applications processed, they are welcomed as refugees in detention centers or makeshift camps. Or in broken buildings they wait quietly and with ardor to escape a violent and proxy war, dreaming of a better life for their families. (See figure 6.)

¹⁵ Iraqi Bodies came to my attention when I was doing research on Middle Eastern performance. I also followed Noura Murad’s Leish Troupe, one of the few independent and experimental theatre groups in Syria; the Khashabi Independent Theatre, a group that has recently relocated to an old building in the historic Wadi Salib area of downtown Haifa from which the majority of Palestinian residents were forcibly expelled in 1948. All three companies were afflicted by war and occupation: Leish had to cease its creative activities for awhile, and Khashabi was homeless for several years after the group was founded in the occupied territories in 2011.

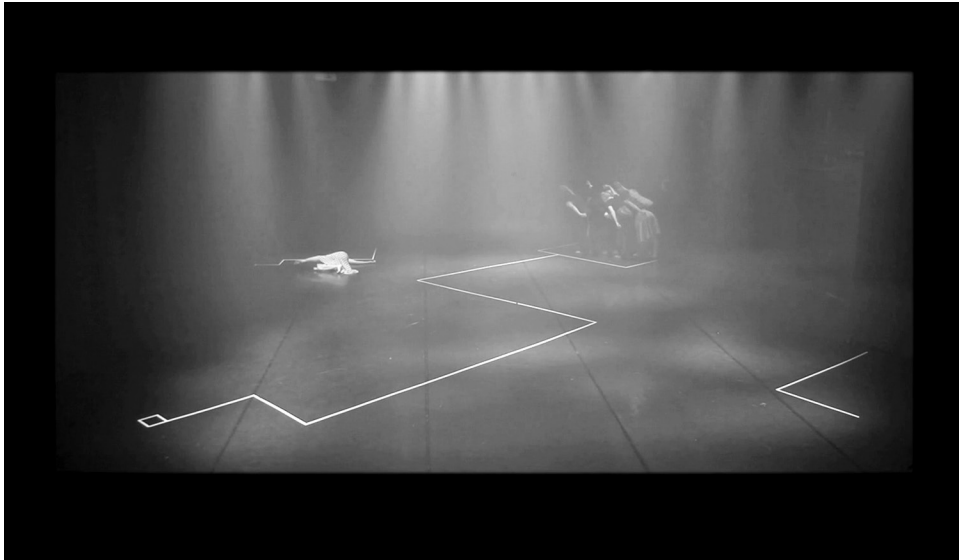


Figure 6. The company in *Possessed*. (Photo: Iraqi Bodies / Anmar Taha.)

I want to end on this note. Perhaps this is what it is going to be like: we are underwater, and everything we hear is strangely muffled; the movements we perceive slowed down, in a thicker medium than air that offers more resistance, yet the echo waves travel. We, on the other side of the ritual curtain,¹⁶ open our ears wider to listen to the ancestors behind the glass: "I, body spittle, laughter dribbling from a face/In wild denial or in anger, vermilions."¹⁷ The ancestors hope we understand, or everything will be lost.

¹⁶ See Gerald Raunig, *Dividuum: Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution*, trans. Aileen Derieg (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2016).

¹⁷ Text quoted from the website introduction to *Vowels*, available at <http://www.iraqibodies.com/body--identities-vowels>.

