

The *Body:Language Talks*. The Art of listening.

To develop my work as a production dramaturg in dance, working with amongst others such high profile artists as Akram Khan or Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, my own interest shifted from the production side of the creative process to the receptive side: so as to continue to train one's perception or one's listening skills in a dialogical practice. And although writing is still my own creative medium and output, I started to experiment with other forms of writing that were either more embodied and performative as in the *Rewriting Distance* performance practice, that I developed with the Canadian choreographer Lin Snelling (see also www.rewritingdistance.com) or which translated the dialogical or sometimes even polyphonic nature of oral practices onto paper. The *Body:Language Talks* which have been held at Sadler's Wells since 2008 and the resulting publications are an example of the latter.

The Rebirth of Dialogue.

If we were apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species. (Fiumara 1990, p. 57).

My own shift in interest from the active/production side of the creative process to the receptive/perceptive side seems to coincide with an ethical turn in the arts. (1) This ethical turn revalorizes the act of listening in a dialogical practice that uses the sentient body to reconnect with its environment.

Since Bakhtin, there has been a re-evaluation and re-orientation of the importance of dialogue within the classical, rhetorical tradition dating from Socrates and Plato. In *The Rebirth of Dialogue* (2004), James P. Zappen gives an overview of how "*the emergence of dialogue as a response to cultural values embedded within printed texts, beginning as early as Bakhtin and extending to recent discussion of the new digital media*" (Zappen 2004, p. 3) mirrors the way in which Socratic dialogue had been a response to an older, oral tradition. In order for dialogue – as an exchange of utterances – not to become cacophony, each participant in the dialogue also has to practice 'an active viewing of each utterance from the perspective of the other' (id, p. 43). The dialogue is in opposition to monologic rhetoric. It proposes "*openness and incompleteness, becoming rather than being, the created rather than the given, the unfinished rather than the finished.*" (id, p. 42) This form of dialogue also clearly differentiates itself from the dialectic. Its purpose is not to persuade the other but to let new ideas emerge out of a creative interaction between many voices.

Gemma Corradi Fiumara is a contemporary philosopher who looks at the same Socratic tradition but through the lenses of such 20th century philosophers as Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Gadamer. In *The Other Side of Language, A Philosophy of Listening* (1990), she pleads for a reappraisal of the receptive act of listening within a dialogical practice. Fiumara opens her book with the observation that in the history of Western thought, 'logos' is mainly aimed at 'saying', which is often the equivalent of 'defining' (Corradi Fiumara 1990, p. 8) and has no 'recognisable references to the notion and capacity of listening' (id, p.1). This lack of a practice of listening,

according to Fiumara, is also responsible for the growing subdivision and fragmentation of our knowledge. As we institutionalize we tend to listen to and support only our own areas of interest and lose the ability to listen to the larger frames of life. For her, the lack of listening has severe ecological consequences (cf. the quote above) and she continues to argue that listening is the precondition of good research (id, p. 151) and of creative thinking itself.

The art of listening and a dialogical practice are fundamental to my work as a dance dramaturg. Out of the ongoing conversations I had with artists arose the desire to make some of these dialogues public and to offer them a stage to be 'performed' upon.

The Body: Language Talks

The idea for the *Body: Language Talks* came out of a number of conversations with Emma Gladstone, one of the producers and dance curators at Sadler's Wells London (2). The idea was to have an in-depth conversation with an artist/choreographer that was not linked to a particular performance, like conventional pre- or post-performance talks, but that would stand on its own and would raise a public interest for an audience willing to buy a ticket for it. We decided on an hour and a half format, always on a Monday evening at 7pm. The talk would be illustrated with video fragments from the 'body of work' of the artist, or from sources that inspired him/her, and I would also pre-select a number of quotes that I would bring in at random, depending on which direction the talk would go, to illustrate or further nurture it and to bring the oral conversation into a dialogue with a corpus of written texts.

The talks were presented on the stage of the Lilian Baylis Studio in a simple, yet staged scenography. We also expressly decided not to hold a Q&A session with the audience afterwards, but instead to always offer the opportunity of joining us on stage at the end and addressing the artist in a more personal and intimate way. We decided that the overall theme of the talks would be the place of the body in the work of the artist, and relating this to a wider debate on the body in philosophy, science, medicine, anthropology, the arts, ... Depending on the affinities of the artist, a more specific theme would be defined for each individual talk. Finally I found it very important to know the artists personally very well, either because I had collaborated with them as a dance dramaturg or curator or because I had a strong personal friendship with them.

Richard Sennett develops a similar argument to Fiumara In *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012) and discusses how the lack of dialogical practice and the failure to exercise one's listening skills is one of the main reasons for the diminishing social cohesion in the work place. As a sociologist, Sennett has been conducting extensive research on both the working conditions of back-office workers on Wall Street and those of computer programmers in Silicon Valley. His research provides both quantitative and qualitative data on how a short-time perspective has taken over on all levels of work, and how 'stability in the work has become a stigma' with 'project labour acting as an acid solvent, eating away at authority, trust and cooperation' (Sennett 2012, pp. 162-163). Sennett describes several new pathologies such as anxiety and withdrawal, either into narcissism or complacency, that arise as a result of this process. He not only criticizes, but also tries to offer a vision and strategies for reversing or transforming the current state of affairs. One of the main

strategies he proposes, besides revaluing rituals, is to practice dialogic skills such as ‘listening well’, ‘managing disagreement’ or ‘behaving tactfully’. He also underlines the importance of recognizing the listener’s share in a discussion, realizing that receptivity means paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal concrete details in order to understand not only what is said but the underlying assumptions as well. Cooperation requires listening and only by doing so, are we able to ‘weave’ the complexities, whether of society, of life in the city, of a group gathering or a choreography.

The first series of talks took place in November-December 2008, when as part of the six-month sabbatical, I was on a month-long residency at the October Gallery in London. There were four talks on four consecutive Mondays and I spent the weeks leading up to each talk preparing for it: revisiting the ‘body of work’ of the artist; rereading everything that had been written about it; meeting up with the artist. For the first two talks, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan were the obvious choices. They were the artists I had collaborated with most intensely as a production dramaturg and they were both associate artists of Sadler’s Wells. Since Sidi Larbi’s work is very much a contemporary form of storytelling with the body, I decided the overall theme for his talk would be *The Mythic Body (body:language #1)*. We had worked very closely on a large group piece, *Myth*, in which we tried to (re)create mythical images. During that creation I had been highly inspired by the book *Myth and the Body. A colloquy with Joseph Campbell* by Stanley Keleman (1999), whose main theme is that all myths are about the body: its birth, its death and all the rites of transformation in between. With Akram, the obvious theme was the way he negotiates his position as an artist between different cultures, and how this negotiation takes place as much in between different time frames and traditions as it does between places – hence *The Bi-temporal Body (body:language #2)*. For the next two talks I wanted to focus on more formal aspects of dance and choreography and chose as a theme the fundamental relationship with space on the one hand and music/time on the other. The two exemplary British choreographers to research this with are Rosemary Butcher and Jonathan Burrows, the latter in close collaboration with the composer Matteo Fargion. I had worked intensely with all of them when I was still curating the dance program at the Arts Centre Vooruit in Ghent in the 1990s and had developed strong friendships out of this. Rosemary’s talk, which was called *The Spatial Body (body:language #3)*, was introduced by a quote by Gaston Bachelard, whose *The Poetics of Space* (1994) is still the main philosophical reflection on space. In the talk Rosemary reflected on questions such as how the 2-dimensionality of the film screen dialogues with the 3-dimensionality of a performance space; or how you push the parameters of any experience, not emotionally but spatially, literary to its edges. And for *The Musical Body (body:language #4)*, the talk with Jonathan and Matteo, I was inspired by amongst others Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (2008). In their talk Jonathan and Matteo also addressed the relationship between the act of writing and a movement based practice and how they translated the concept of musical scores to dance.

Jonathan Burrows

It reminded me why I like working with scores, and it has to do with quieting the sensory experience of the body, which can often draw you back into a place that is familiar. Body patterning is so powerful that it will draw you back to what you always do. The graphic experience – something to do with the act of writing or drawing – seems to release an imagination different to the imagination released by moving or researching movement.

Matteo Fargion

The composer Morton Feldman often talked about notating music in order to slow him down, because of course you go to a piano and your fingers will play the chord you are familiar with playing, and it is very hard to break those patterns. I have even tried things like playing the piano backwards. Feldman worked very much at the piano, but notating as he went along, in order to avoid those habits. So even for musicians I think the act of notating, and thinking about how to notate something clearly, gives you ideas of how to go on.

(From *Body:Language* #4, pp.26-27).

The spaces in between utterances.

In *On Dialogue* (1996), the physicist David Bohm follows a similar line of thinking to Sennett. Social coherence in contemporary society is poor because there is a lack of ‘shared meaning’ (Bohm 1996, p. 32). This lack of shared meaning is the result of meaning being fixed in individually held positions. What we need to do, according to him, is to restore ‘the flow of meaning’ by allowing different voices to co-exist. For this we have to practice dialogue. Bohm underlines the importance of listening skills for successful dialogue and acknowledges that new meaning can also arise out of misperception, as well as inevitable gaps in the flow. The latter is very much related to Derrida’s notion of the interval.

The success of this first season, both in terms of quality of content and audience attendance, prompted Sadler’s Wells to decide to continue the series. A second season took place in the autumn of 2010. (3) I decided to stick to the principle of only inviting artists I had a close relationship with, but I allowed myself to look beyond the disciplinary borders of dance. My first guest was Tim Etchells, the artistic director of the performance collective Forced Entertainment, whom I had befriended during their first visits to Belgium in the mid-eighties. In order to prepare the talk, I revisited Tim in Sheffield, his home base, and out of that visit the theme of *The Imaginative Body* (*body:language* #5) was born, or ‘how language has the power to invoke other bodies’. The second guest that season was Dana Caspersen, William Forsythe’s artistic and life partner, with whom I had also collaborated during my years in Vooruit. She is very articulate in her thinking and writing on the body and the collaborative processes within a contemporary dance company. *The Transformative Body* (*body:language* #6) explored amongst others the “ability to imagine multiple versions of the self, a proliferating, projective equation that moves out from where the body is to where the body might be” (Caspersen 2011, pp. 96-97). The last guest of the second season had to be Alain Platel, under the wings of whose company, Les Ballets C de la B, I had

formed my own identity as a dance dramaturg. With Alain, the obvious choice was to talk about *The Political Body (body:language #7)* or how “*the political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimensions*” (Marcuse 1978, pp. XII-XIII).

Tim Etchells

But the possibility that language gives you to invoke another body is an abiding interest, partly because it does this weird performative manoeuvre on the spectator. Those pieces – *Starfucker* and *Dirty Work* – have a habit of getting you to picture relatively benign things, but as time goes on they will ask you to picture things that perhaps you might not want to picture, and then it gets into a very interesting territory: because you’ve read it, or heard it, you have already pictured it, but you kind of wish you hadn’t. It tests the relationship between the viewer and the work.

“The body organizes sensation that arise out of tissue metabolism, and this is what we call consciousness. This somatic process is the matrix for the stories and images of myth.” (Keleman 1999, p. 5)

Guy Cools

You say that language has the capacity to make non-existing realities present. Does it also work the other way round – is the physicality of the body also a source for stories and imagination? I am thinking particularly about some of the autobiographical elements in your earlier work.

Tim

Yes, even though the work with Forced Entertainment has its conceptual basis, it is essentially made by a bunch of people being in a room together for very long periods of time – five month’s worth of rehearsals. So the focus becomes less about your idea, but more about concrete things like how many chairs, how many people, all of those things. What interests me is the actuality of things – learning to pay attention to what is really there in front of you, people, bodies, juxtapositions, space.

Elizabeth LeCompte, the director of the Wooster Group, said that she has to go to the rehearsal studio in order to see how it doesn’t work. She might have a great idea in her mind, but when she goes to the studio she finds out that it’s crap. That is truth. You spend an awful lot of time looking at stuff that doesn’t work.

(From *Body:Language #5*, pp.11-13).

Tim Ingold offers a valuable semantic alternative to the term ‘dialogue’ In *Making. Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), by introducing the notion of ‘correspondence’, which can take place not only between humans but also between humans and their animate or inanimate environment, as well as between the craftsman/artist and his materials. Ingold borrows the term ‘correspondence’ from the increasingly obsolete art of letter writing. He defines two fundamental qualities of it. Firstly, it is always ‘a movement in real time’, which takes time and which ‘may go back and forth, without a clear starting point or end point’. Secondly, this ‘movement is sentient’. The act of letter writing also implies a certain intimacy. Maybe we are

losing our listening skills because we are afraid of that intimacy.

All the talks had been recorded, originally only to archive them, but after the continuing success of the second series, the desire grew to also publish them. Both Sadler's Wells and the Jerwood Foundation, with the support of the Research Institute *Arts in Society* of the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts in the Netherlands, raised the money to make a beautiful, bibliophile edition (4).

In editing this contribution for *Nowiswere*, Veronika Hauer rightly pointed out that the desire to publish the talks also arose in order to extend the intimate relationship of the 'correspondence' of the partners in the dialogue/talk to a third party, the reader. With the reader becoming a listener/witness of two or more people sharing their thoughts on artistic practices.

Meanwhile, a third season had already been planned for the autumn of 2012, continuing to expand the range of artist and subjects. With Jonzi D, one of the founding fathers of hip-hop culture in the UK, and Soweto Kinch, we explored *The Poetic Body* – how, in hip-hop culture, dance, music, poetry and political engagement are intricately related. With the puppeteer Sue Buckmaster we explored *The Subversive Body* or how puppets and objects allow the body to be treated in an 'uncanny' way. The final talk of this third season was with the London-based Israeli choreographer/composer Hofesh Shechter. In *The Rhythmic Body* we continued to explore the essential nature of rhythm as the main formal principle of editing the work.

Guy Cools

When I first prepared this talk I gave it the title 'The Urban Body', but then it felt as though that was too limited. And when I saw the show, I changed it to 'The Poetic Body'. It reminded me of one of my favourite philosophical quotes ever, by Foucault, in which he makes a link between poetry, dance and drunkenness as being three related 'art forms' in the Dionysian style: "*Noisy ear, unstable repetitions, passionate violence and desires [...] of intoxication and dance, of organic gesticulation: the flash of poetry and of abolished time, repeated.*" (5)

Jonzi D

Well, let's see... "*Noisy ear*" – I think you have to turn up the music a bit more; "*Unstable repetitions*" – um-ch, um-ch-ch-um-ch... That's what makes me dance!; "*Passionate violence and desires*" – Hey, we all love that, don't we; "*Intoxication and dance*" – I don't know if intoxication is the right word, but I would definitely say that once you get into the cipher, you know that you've just got to keep going and you connect to something uncontrollable that happens there; "*Organic gesticulation*" – [giggling] Yeah... there's a few people that understand what I'm getting at now...; "*The flash of poetry and of abolished time repeated*" – Soweto, maybe you've got an angle on that?

Soweto Kinch

I think it neglects the kind of restraint and control that you need to pull off a lot of Hip Hop disciplines successfully – you're not abolishing time at all, actually, you are very

conscious of the metre and the constraints of time when you're dancing or emceeing, certainly when you're DJing. But I do like the allusion to being intoxicated – being possessed, if you like, by something else.
(From *Body:Language* # 8, unpublished)

In his book *Conversation. Community + Communication in Modern Art* (2004), the art historian and critic Grant H Kester introduces the term 'dialogical art practices' for contemporary art practices that 'share a concern with the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange', where 'the conversation is an integral part of the work' (Kester 2004, p. 8). As such, a dialogical art practice always 'unfolds through a process of performative interaction' (id, p. 10) and again shifts its focus from the productive to the receptive side of the creative cycle.

Finally, in the autumn of 2013 a fourth season was added with talks on *Body and Light*, with the choreographer Russell Maliphant and his long term collaborator, lighting designer Michael Hulls. "*Hulls has become a co-creator in a new form of dance-theatre, where light and movement are an inseparable duet. He and Maliphant invented this tentatively 20 years ago, and their unbroken collaboration ever since has led from obscure early solos to the international acclaim brought by their creation with Guillem and the Ballet Boyz.*" (Ismene Brown @theartsdesk Q&A, 21/01/2012)
In *Body Dramaturgy* with the dance dramaturg Ruth Little we talked about her interest in "dramaturgical dialogue that goes beyond beyond linear determinism – the orderly predictable world of classical physics and Aristotelian dramaturgical models - to an understanding of non-linear dynamics and living systems." (Ruth Little. Speech at Kenneth Tynan Award ceremony, 2012).

The Energetic Body with the British sculptor Anthony Gormley was the ideal conclusion of the series. In it we discussed his live long research on the relationships between body and space; movement and stillness and the energetic qualities of the body as explored amongst others in his collaborations with choreographers such as Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Hofesh Shechter. "In all these works the body has become a place in which mass has been released from its stable condensed form into a field of energy." (Noble 2007, p. 45)

The experience of the *Body:Language Talks* has reinforced my growing interest and often even preference for oral forms of transmission over written forms. In *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) David Abram argues that we have lost our connection to the larger ecological environment, and the use of our own body as the memory bank of that connection, due to the overdevelopment of a written culture. The alphabetisation and phonotisation of language and writing, which replaced older pictographic systems in the Judeo-Greek tradition, have distanced language further from the phenomenological reality it refers to. Abram gives a detailed overview and critique of this evolution, referring to the legend of the Egyptian King Thamus, as recorded in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Thamus is supposed to have refused the gift of writing offered to him by the god Thoth, arguing that writing also induces forgetfulness, since we no longer need to remember from within ourselves, but can do so 'by means of external

marks'. As a counter-strategy to this distancing, Abram pleads for a revalorisation of oral cultures and of reading aloud, which is basically a 'synaesthetic' experience in which 'the eye and the ear are brought together at the surface of the text' (Abram 1996, p. 124).

It is only when you are able 'to tell your story', as Ingold states, that you own it. It is how transmission of knowledge happens, and has long happened, in Eastern cultures and traditions such as the Buddhist or yogic one. What I also see in my work with a younger generation of artists, as well as the internet and its phenomena such as the TED-lectures, is a similar reevaluation of oral transmission without lacking the necessary rigour or depth. The dialogical nature of the *Body:Language Talks* would always vary in degrees, depending with whom I was 'corresponding' and how our interaction would develop, with me always practicing my listening skills. If successful, it would create openings for new insights to arise in-between the utterances.

Guy Cools,
Antwerp, London, Vienna, March 2014

The first seven *Body:Language Talks* can be ordered on line at the web shop of Sadler's Wells: www.sadlerswells.com/shop-online/

Notes:

(1)• Parallel to *the Body: Language Talks*, I curated an international conference, *Ethics in Aesthetics? For an Ecology of the Arts of both Environment and Body* and co-edited with Pascal Gielen a book, *The Ethics of Arts. Ecological turns in the performing arts* (2014) on this theme.

(2) Emma recently left Sadler's Wells to become the artistic director of the Dance Umbrella Festival. As a result Sadler's Wells decided to replace the *Body:Language Talks* by another format from autumn 2014 onwards.

(3)• In 2009 I wasn't available to do a series, because I was primarily based and working in Canada.

(4)• The graphic designers of the book publication, Valle Walkley, received a national print design award for them.

(5) Author's translation from French. Original in Michel Foucault (1986), *Sept Propos sur le septième Ange*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana. p. 52.

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