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Listening in “The Infinite Body #3”

A conversation between Anne Sèdes and Kitsou Dubois

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Translation : Tresl Murphy

A.S.: As our collaboration on “The Infinite Body”¹ project progressed, I came to believe that listening formed the core creative dynamic of the project, be it individual, corporeal, intermedial, collective or immersive.

K.D.: I understand what you mean, listening is at the heart of my work, and it is at the heart of the project that we built together and its underlying dynamic. Listening is central to the beginning of every working day, in general, when I always invite the team to take part in a systematic body warm-up. It is a key moment, when we get in touch with our bodies, and with others. It helps to establish a listening process of one’s own, internally and externally, one that is alert, that sharpens our collective attention. It represents an embodied commitment, a shared moment, and is a way of opening up a creative space for working together. The Académie Fratellini houses the experimental circus set, and put two Académie Fratellini apprentices, ground acrobat Valentino Martinetti and acrobat and machinist, Pierre-Maël Gourvennec, at our disposal for this, the last year of the project.

The stage construction has a minimal, black and white aesthetic, and integrates material and technological constraints and virtual environments. It is made up of a stage with the Chinese pole forming a black, vertical line; a frame for screening images using the Pepper’s Ghost technique,² under the direction of Pascal Martin and ENS Louis-Lumière; a front screening space for the digital images produced by Chu-Yin Chen and Ponnara Ly from the INREV; an immersive sound system that includes the audience, for the sound composition by Anne Sèdes with help from David Fierro. The experimental stages were located between Studio 2 at the Académie Fratellini, the big studio at ENS Louis-Lumière, and the sound test studio was at MSH Paris Nord. In the interests of not forgetting anyone and to underline the collective nature of this process, I would like to mention:

Acrobat Valentino Martinetti, acrobat and stagehand Pierre-Maël Gourvennec, apprentices at the Académie Fratellini; Film students Benjamin Philippot, and Julien Charpier, with Alexis Allemand from ENS Louis-Lumière; PhD student at CICM

Musidanse Université Paris 8, David Fierro; Ponnara Ly and Swann Martinez, INREV Université Paris 8; Choreographer Kitsou Dubois, director of Ki Productions; Optics professor at ENS Louis-Lumière, Pascal Martin; Fine art professor at ENS Louis-Lumière, Claire Bras; Composition and research professor at CICM Musidanse Paris 8, Anne Sèdes; Art and IT professor at INREV Paris 8, Chu-Yin Chen; video technician at ENS Louis-Lumière, Stéphane Lavoix; Acrobatics teacher at Académie Fratellini Agnès Brun; the technical teams at ENS Louis-Lumière and the Académie Fratellini; PhD student at INREV Paris 8, Tsovinar Banuchyan.

Fig. 1

The stage set-up is visible in these photographs; the Chinese pole (and a pair of shoes, as the dancers are barefoot elsewhere), and the Pepper's Ghost frame, the wall-screen and white floor.

Fig. 2

Valentino and his Pepper's Ghost image. He is wearing an armband on the forearm with a MYO sensor, a gesture-control armband.

A.S.: I would above all like to highlight the way you worked with the circus performers, Pierre-Maël and Valentino, and how they appropriated the idea of listening. It is not easy to take on board, especially for a generation that tends to connect to sound and music through the idea of dancing to music and listening on a mobile phone.

K.D.: A fundamental point in my work with the apprentices was my experience of zero-gravity. It reveals what you feel inside your body, something that you have never felt before, as the terrestrial gravitational force dominates our bodily sensations, including our space-time sensations, in our interactions with the close environment. This is a fundamental issue for me, and I try to make all of the internal feelings I discovered when dancing in zero-gravity emerge through my writing on 'earth'. This is an exercise that demands that I listen to my body for sensations that open up new paths to knowledge, that open up new avenues. I try to share this knowledge, that I built with the language of dance, this knowledge-feeling, listening, with the circus apprentices of the Académie Fratellini, to reboot their approach and open them up to other emotional horizons, that I then try to share with the audience in the performance. This listening process is infinite, it is constantly being renewed, hence the title "The Infinite Body". It is quite new for the apprentices who are trained professionally to systematically concentrate on performing figures, finished forms, like double somersaults. I want to work on the pre-movement, on anticipation.

A.S.: I often watched you working with the apprentices on the idea of bearing. Can you tell us a little more about that?

K.D.: Indeed, I use this idea among others, such as direction, inertia, fluidity, balance point....

The notion of bearing is a common part of the dancer and circus performer's

vocabulary, even though practices can be very diverse behind the traditional working vocabulary. In the circus, in acrobatics, and with the apparatus, bearings are dictated by powerful, hard muscular effectiveness, by the spot on the apparatus that takes our weight as part of the movement. I have been working on this notion of bearing since the start of *The Infinite Body*, and have managed to foster something that allows the circus dancers to understand, to build within themselves and to appropriate a different way of listening. This requires an inner-listening process, where one is attentive to one's bearing before producing a movement. It is listening to touch. It is a way of 'penetrating' the bearing even deeper before planning the movement. When embodied, this bodily sensation will allow the performer to learn how to resolve the movement, the action while producing the minimum effort for maximum effectiveness. Working on the consciousness of the bearing, means working on the pre-movement, the anticipation of the action.

So, we then go back to the figure pre-learned at the circus, to discover free spaces in the body, as we concentrate on our bearing, that allow the action to be organized in another way, using other paths, in slow motion, for example. The objective is to distribute muscular strength differently, not just concentrate it on the load-bearing body part, but to call on the body as a whole to support the effort and allow for more availability, more ease in creating the movement. The development of this inner listening process creates more availability to open up to the space around us and touch that of the audience. It is exactly at that place where we were able to connect with the potential of the interactive sound environment.

A.S.: Indeed, as the dancers wear MYO armbands that measure the nervous system's activity, in real time and as such the bodily strength used for load-bearing throughout the entire body; the slightest micromovement by the dancer generates perceptible, musically-composed feedback. The circus performer is then forced to concentrate on both their inner listening process and on listening to the sound environment, through their movements and their variations in speed. This situation is not always easy for the young apprentices, as in general, we dance to music rather than creating it ourselves as we move. This is what Varela refers to as *enaction*, which is to say, a looped cognitive activity, in permanent interaction between an environment, a milieu, and what we're feeling.

K.D.: At the beginning, the apprentice thinks they are listening, but they cannot hear anything. They try to rely on what they already know in terms of movement, professional experience, their own technique on the apparatus. Then something happens on a human level, there is a sense of letting go, a moment of trust, an immersion. In order to free up listening, you have to dare to do it, dare to lose something in order to open up to something else; dare to listen to the sound, and to treat it like a material. It is unsettling and at the same time it makes space denser, so that it helps to slow down, which is the opposite of circus culture where you are more likely to be required to perform fast numbers with virtuosity and effectiveness. The space here is densified by the sound and the wealth of its variations. It is like a container, a milieu, that creates a feeling reminiscent of that of dancing in zero gravity, a bodily state detached from falling.

Fig. 3

Exchanges between David, Pierre-Maël, Valentino and the audience, between the two performances.

A.S.: Obviously, this process comes with a potential for transforming sensible listening habits. We act on what we hear, and the slightest movement has an equally slight effect on the sound. One of the main challenges of artistic creation comes from transforming situations through bodies moving on the apparatus, presenting the transformations as so many possibilities visually and aurally and then sharing it with a wide audience whose attention and imagination we want to grasp through empathy.

K.D.: With regard to sharing with the audience, we split the presentation into two parts in an attempt at mediation. The audience starts off on front-facing tiered benches (with about 40 places) and settle in to watch a poetic, almost dreamlike performance, with no explanation. We play the first part to the audience for about twenty minutes, then we follow up with an oral presentation by the team that explains the piece from an artistic and experimental angle. We then have a second performance, with a conversation between the audience and the performers. This leads to an exchange, the verbalization of a community expressing its feelings and imagination about the two performances by speaking up individually.

Fig. 4

View of the audience during a performance; we can see that the members of the audience are looking in different directions, they are not all focused on the same thing.

A.S.: There is so much to say about the feedback from the audience as they expressed how the performance touched them in a rich and diverse way, and how the two parts of the performance, the mediation and the dialogue, led to a level of trust, attention and listening for an experimental art that is both container and content, for the construction and sharing of knowledge; knowledge of the body, the collective body, the shared body, the infinite body.

K.D.: We are currently working on the "listen-expansion"³ project, so in future performances we will go back to this two-part formula with the audience. We will also attempt to introduce synthesising images and light in real time, like we did with sound, in close interaction with the circus performers' movements. This composed, scenographed, material and virtual set-up will be updated by each performance before an audience.

- 1 About the film shown here.
- 2 N.B.: The edit of "Corps infini #3" that we are showing here is a trace, an evocation, barely an archive that presents the style and general aesthetic of the performance. For example, the sound mix is in stereo while the actual performance was immersive, in 3D ambisound with the audience immersed inside a cube of speakers. The shot framing is very wide and does not really render the experience from the spectator's point of view, as they get to circulate from different points of variation of the circus performers' micro movements with corresponding sound and visuals. This circulation of attention, visuals and hearing means that the temporality and morphology of the piece is unique to each spectator, and cannot be captured by a fixed camera. The audiovisual archive protocol will have to be designed so as to film the images and mix the sound as close to the project as possible. This point will be refined during future projects. We did not want to present the archive of all of the performance and chose instead just an evocation as the film is not faithful to the actual experience of the performance.

NOTES

1. In 2016, ENS Louis-Lumière, the Académie Fratellini, the CICM and INREV Université Paris 8 and ENSAD research laboratories began the three-year adventure of "The Infinite Body" based on the work of choreographer Kitsou Dubois. The objective was to create a convergence of theoretical thinking and artistic practices around the same object; the perception of the weightless body. The paths taken by each medium (circus, images, sound, virtual reality and textile design), engaged on all of the human body's interfaces were intended to bring together a team committed to the same creative process, focused on one theme. <http://www.labex-arts-h2h.fr/le-corps-infini-1066.html> [Consulted October 5 2019]
 2. Pepper's Ghost technique is often erroneously confused with holograms. In fact, it is a technique that makes absent objects or people appear. Pascal Martin, Optics professor at ENS Louis Lumière, explores these techniques with his students. They are already being used in museums, show-business and politics (by Madonna and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, to name but two). In "The Infinite Body #3", the circus performers interact with their own ghosts.
 3. With the support of the Circus Research Programme at the French Ministry of Culture.
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AUTHORS

KITSOU DUBOIS

She revisited the fundamental gestures of dance movements, starting with the experience of the absence of gravity. After a stay at NASA thanks to the Villa Medici grant "Hors les murs" in 1990, she collaborated on scientific experiments at the laboratoire de Neurophysiologie Sensorielle CNRS (run by Alain Berthoz) in Paris, with dancer subjects. She is a doctor in "Aesthetics, Science and Art Technologies" at Paris 8, and her research subject is "The Application of Dance Techniques to Weightless Flying, A Dancer in Weightlessness." These experiences, allowed her to be able to converge artistic and scientific concerns. Kitsou Dubois was the guest of the International Chair of the Labex Arts-H2H in 2016 and directed the project "Corps Infini" with the ENS Louis Lumière until 2018, in partnership with the Académie Fratellini, the INREV and the CICM / Musidanse of Paris 8.

ANNE SÈDES

She is a professor in the music department of Université Paris 8. Undisciplined, her research focuses on computer science and music creation, mixed composition, virtual environments and creation, spatialization of sound, music and cognition, the creation of research activity, be it musical, organological or software, and finally the epistemology of the sciences of art. She has been involved in many projects such as "Creating sound spaces" (Young researchers project 2003-2006), "HD3D" (Cap Digital, 2007-2010), "Virage" (ANR 2009-2010), "HOA Library (Labex-Arts-H2H, 2012-2015), "Musicoll" (ANR, 2016-2018), "Infinite Body" (Labex Arts-H2H, 2016-2018).

Composer, she develops all of her artistic productions in

an experimental setting related to research-creation at the university and on the territory.
Anne Sèdes belonged to the management team of LABEX Arts-H2H before joining EUR ArTeC.
She directs the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris-Nord since Fall 2019.
Since 2006 she has co-directed the Association Francophone d'Informatique Musicale.