



ARTIST IN FOCUS

PHIA MÉNARD
& COMPAGNIE
NON NOVA

GUEST EDITORS

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**LOOKING
THROUGH
DARKNESS,
IN SEARCH
OF EMPATHY**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH
PHIA MÉNARD**

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Over the past two decades, Phia Ménard has developed a unique personal artistic language with her company *Cie Non Nova*, becoming a reference artist of the French theatre scene. Initially trained in the art of circus as a juggler, in more recent years her work has evolved into a performative practice which is characterised by the constant hybridisation of circus, dance, performance, and theatre. This artistic project takes the name of I.C.E. (*Injonglabilité Complémentaire des Éléments*) (*Complementary Unjugglability of the Elements*). Here the artist evokes a perpetual battle of the performer's body with the elements of nature evoked in her pieces. The series of water (steam), the series of wind, and the series of ice encompass her entire repertoire to the present. Furthermore, transformation and transfiguration are essential notions associated with Ménard's research. In her vision, all the elements acquire a plasticity which blurs the frontiers between the performer's body and the elements evoked. *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (Pour Europe)* (*The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (for Europe)*) is the most recent work of the artist, presented at the 2021 Festival D'Avignon. It represents a further transformation of Ménard's creative process and output whilst maintaining her permanent dialogue with the spectator and their imaginaries.

The following interview documents a dialogue that progressed between Phia Ménard and myself, Stefania Lodi Rizzini, beginning in Vilnius at the EASTAP conference 2021 and culminating in a meeting in Porto during February 2022. This dialogue attempts to understand what *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (For Europe)* means within the broader scale of Ménard's career and her artistic journey, whilst reflecting upon all the elements which nourish her creation of performance and her deep reflection on what it means to be a human being and our coexistence in society.

In Vilnius, during our meeting for the EASTAP conference, you said that the Covid-19 pandemic had made you aware that, on a personal level, you are addicted to having an unstable life. You also expressed the need to change your relation with the profession. In the last six months, you have returned fully to stage and performance. Have your reflections during the pandemic impacted your work within your multiple roles as director and performer at the head of an important growing company?

I am a performer, so I will continue to perform on stage. We could list so many artists in the history of art and contemporary times who have continued confronting themselves with the audience while ageing. Moreover, I think that the older you get, the more interesting it becomes to perform on stage. It exposes the fact that exposing yourself and being on stage is not simply an act of veneration of youth, something that we can see often.

I am currently preparing the opera *Les enfants terribles* and one of the singers is in his early seventies. He plays the role of someone who falls in love. When I look at him, I say to myself that you can actually fall in love at seventy years old. This concerns as well how we relate to the essential facts of life. The only certainty we have is death, and very few others. This is something which often annoys us, but we have as well an absolute scientific and absolute real conviction drawn by our perception,

by the body. Therefore, showing an old body, that can still breathe, facing gravitation, being constantly in the feeling and in the necessity of life, convinces me to continue, because I'm not ready to leave the stage.

Afterwards, another question is the need to realise if as an artist you have nothing more to do on stage and what you propose in a dialogue with the spectator is no longer of interest. In that case being on stage is just showing off, and reminds me of the old stars who go on stage just to say 'I am still here'. Here, there is nothing interesting happening. Ultimately, in my opinion, to continue to share a point of view, a certain perspective and insight, I think there is no age limit to doing that.

In the last twenty-five years you have created a personal artistic language based on hybridisation of different genres and aesthetic forms such as circus, dance, and performance. Every time you are asked for a definition of your work, it seems that you are able to escape any kind of definite label.

In fact, it is funny, the word for label in French (*étiquette*), if we speak about the label, its meaning is very much linked to the idea of the product. Everything produced is labelled and immediately linked to its market value. I envisage that my multidisciplinary practice makes it difficult to associate or define what I do into any one performing arts genre. In the performing arts, genres are defined based on things such as their precise use of gesture, or use of a text, or acrobatic practices, or singing. So how we define a performance depends upon how its production is linked to different forms of putting the body in action. Theatre has a text and written choreography, and music has a score, for example. Performance encompasses all forms which expose a kind of relationship to the given moment, to the unknown of that given moment. When I look at theatre today, at least text-based theatre, I ask: when does it stop being interesting? I think it stops being interesting when it loses its relationship with the instant, with a given moment. I think about this

new movement of young artists we have in France who work with video, such as Julien Gosselin. How can video ever bring a kind of unexpected immediacy, a possibility of approaching something primal of the theatre representation? Performing live means maintaining a living character. Without live performance, we are left with something without this living character. Live performance also shows a will to keep a relationship to the given moment. We know that in performance everything is played out in that given moment, which is the only real value of performance. Moreover, performance allows you that day, at that moment, to become witness and bear witness to an action while the artist who carries out this action is also in this same relationship of immediacy which can fail, mess up, or become uncertain.

Getting back to the notion of the label, I think that the fact that my work is not easily identifiable with a label is something that I have to continue to defend. I would say that I propose a relationship to living at that given moment of a performance which is also a relationship of empathy. A real relationship of empathy. I am currently defining the dossier for my next creation *Article 13*, and I have come to understand that there is only one subject that I am interested in, and this is violence. Violence interests me because I'm trying to understand why we don't have empathy. What makes us lose empathy so easily? And if I have to be labelled, I will take the label of any genre in search of empathy.

In addition, I am questioning this primal relationship and connection that I feel to a more primitive notion of performance, not drawn from the Greek or European theatre, but from the cave paintings, which brings me back to the notion of living and witnessing. When I look at the Chauvet cave paintings, the lions and fawns scenes, I feel the emotion of the person who drew it, captured in a feeling of fascination and fear. Within these emotions, I feel empathy for humanity. These beautiful animals are stronger than us. We are so weak. Reconsidering the

notion of the label, a label is a market notion and is connected to the art market as a business. This raises the question: can a society exist without a market, without money? Is it possible to imagine a society without submission and therefore a society where empathy is not neglected, and empathy is not a commodity either?

In Vilnius you said that Covid-19 forced you to question your motivation to continue doing theatre. What are your motivations now? What is nourishing your will to continue doing theatre beyond the research of empathy?

Maybe Covid made me think about all of the violence that occurred during 2021, with the death of Marion (the performer from *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*)) and the loss of other young people's lives. The evidence of death, especially young people, to me it is intellectually intolerable, I have a real problem with it. I think these reflections also allowed me to clarify a very strong desire and understanding of what I was doing. During the Covid pandemic I worked on the *Trilogy* (*The Trilogy of Immoral Tales – For Europe*). Perhaps the greatest power of the *Trilogy* is that it makes empathy anything but anecdotal. The work provokes empathy and bring us to constantly question: where is our empathy? What makes us lose empathy? Moreover, this means that in this definition, and in this awareness about the object of my research, nowadays I understand more and more that my work is a revolt against violence and that violence cannot be accepted.

If I look at it retrospectively, everything becomes clear. Now I can say that all my pieces call violence into question. By interrogating violence, what does it express? Violence is itself a way of expression that I use on stage, since the scenes and images I show are violent. I think about *P.P.P.*, *Vortex*, *Belle D'Hier* (*Yesterday's Beauty*), *Saison Sèche* — they are all violent. Each time there is an enormous use of violence, but all this violence is there to constantly create and provoke this empathy. In its intent, it's almost re-educational. We have to re-educate ourselves to exist in the

sensitive world. We must embody a sort of counter-message as well to the solicitation we are permanently exposed to be strong, that our society exists only because we are strong, and that strength allowed us to survive and dominate the animal world. But in fact, I ask another question: strong for what and in what? Here strength is a terrible incapacity to consider the other, to consider him or her as an equal. I recently saw Raoul Peck's documentary *Exterminate All the Brutes* which was incredibly interesting and helped me to understand the notion of dominance.

How do you meet your performers? Do they actively take part in the creative process or are they purely somas? When creating any new work, do you look for specific skills or is the encounter with performers dictated more by chance?

I think there's more or less all of that. They are somas, that's for sure. What provokes the encounter and how do we meet? The encounter takes place by provoking it. The encounter is provoked, sought out, and, at the end, it always takes place. I don't believe in chance, and I think the meeting with Inga (the leading character of *Temple Père* (*Father Temple*)) is the best example. I knew that the role of dominatrix of *Father Temple*, was made for me, but at the same time I was conscious of the limit I had personally to develop this role, so I had to find a person for this feminine role. That's when I finally met Inga by chance, one evening whilst she was talking with an artist I knew.

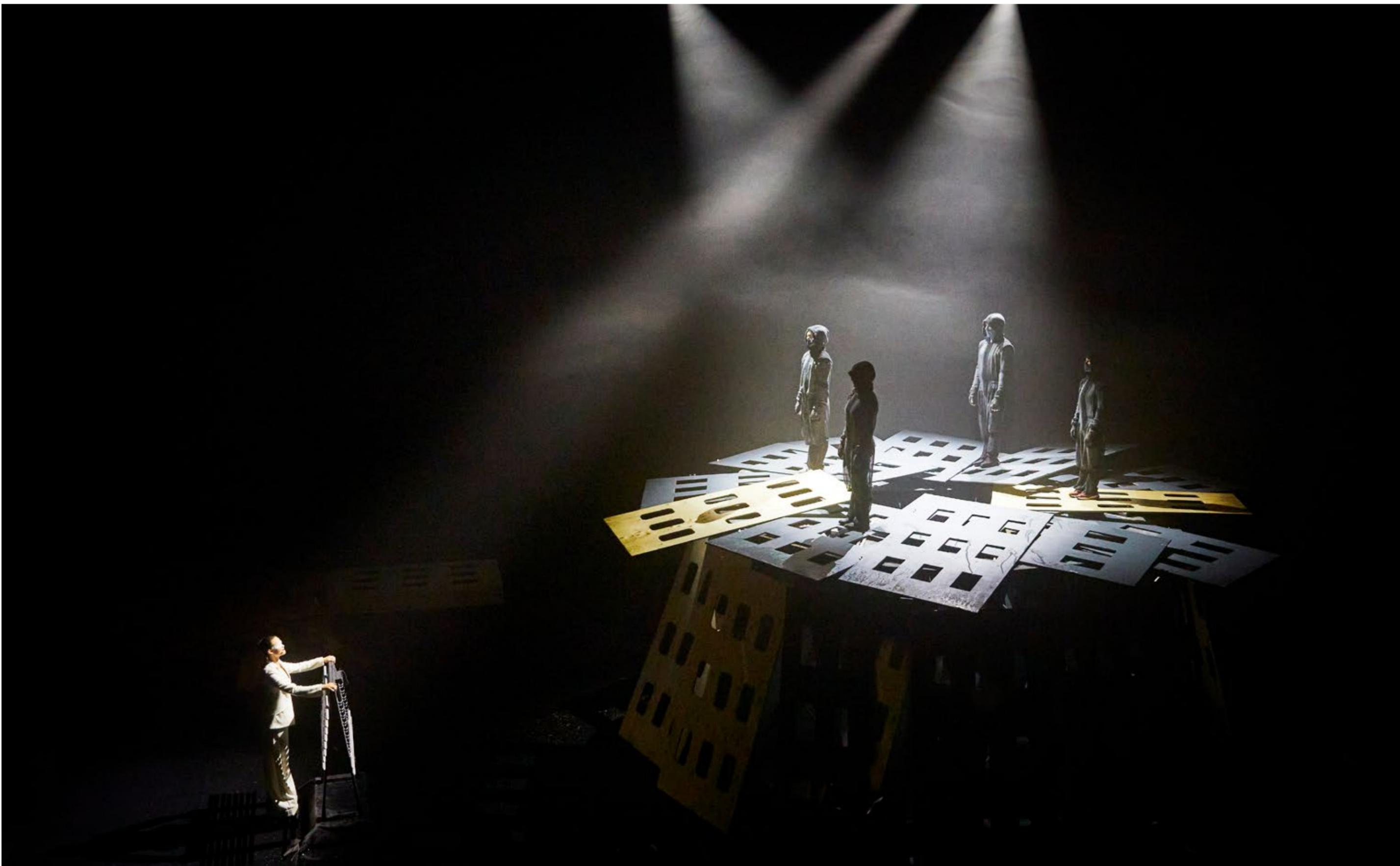
I believe enormously in the encounter and, if I look back, all the people who work in the company come from chains of acquaintances. These encounters are produced by a sort of correspondence and common exploration of artistic research. To me it is a kind of speleology, in the sense that I believe that, in the moment you cross the light of the other speleologist, you may realise that there is the possibility of continuing the path of exploration together. I really believe in that. This desire for encounter finally produces a range of possibilities which will make the

encounter happen at some point. I don't believe at all in the audition thrown in the air, neither in the call for tenders. I don't believe in this market notion... What is an audition? It is an offering to the most dedicated person to come and join a project and perceive him/her in her/his market form. It is a dilemma for me, and I can't consider it. I can only take into account humanity. In meeting each human being there is a part of uncertainty, because I don't know what to expect, but I always hope that the encounter produces something. I really believe in that; I believe much more in meeting someone who will have to work to progress sometimes more or sometimes less than having someone who already has a certain level but who will not advance anything else. A meeting with the latter example would be purely execution.

You define the performance Temple Père as a sadomasochistic play. Why did you choose a woman as a leading role of this work? In your previous pieces, you dealt with the liberation of women, I am thinking about in the ritual piece Saison Sèche or Belle D'Hier, while in your last creation the seductive and cruel role is given to a woman.

Recently I've been reading some very interesting discussions and critical papers focusing on this female figure, who is someone who collaborates with power. To me, as a feminist, I can't understand how a woman doesn't recognise herself as a feminist. We have to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be feminist? Why don't women identify themselves as feminists?

If we move on to a sort of malignant opposition: could men call themselves masculinist? Who are those who call themselves masculinists? Those who want to assert their masculinity as a kind of power. Within the feminist issue we should raise the question: what makes us so submissive despite being so numerous? Why even individually are we unable to change society? The answer is patriarchy and ultra-liberalism, the most powerful cocktail, a system that we are not able to change even



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (pour Europe): Temple Père*, 2021
Performers: Fanny Alvarez, Rémy Balagué, Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, Élise Legros
© Christophe Raynaud de Lage

though we are aware of it. The role of women in *Temple Père* speaks to this collaboration in a much broader sense. *Temple Père* is about building a cock/phallus. She builds herself an armory and she keeps speaking about this building as an incredible machine. She takes part in the construction of this machine; therefore, she is part of it.

Ultimately, the problem in society, regarding women and their social representation, is that women are a cog of power, a gear in this society. Women have the power to give birth, an absolute power which is constantly controlled because men do not have it. As I started my dialogue with the performers from *Saison Sèche* and *Belle D'Hier*, I once again raised the question about a subject which is not approached by feminism. Women who have a hetero life practice, who love to make love with men, they live a dilemma because in a relationship with the man, they are looking for their equal but at the same time they want to please and have the pleasure from this relationship. I think this is one of the most crucial questions which is never addressed, which faces us with a real subject of the impossibility of federating women. We are facing a real issue of the impossibility of uniting women. This concerns the role of Inga Huld Hákonardóttir. It allows me to look at the women, those who are collaborating in the patriarchy, those who are really guilty. At the beginning when I was thinking about the role of the dominatrix, I was thinking about the role of Auschwitz camp's guardians, and a book about the notion of witness. I recall a book about the testimony of the women concerning the rape of German women by Russian soldiers entering Berlin at the end of the Second World War. This subject is absolutely taboo, so I was questioning the notion of collaboration. Did they collaborate? How could they? How did they live through this? These are fundamental questions which are never raised.

That is to say, yes, we could change society, but the very subject of feminism would have to be addressed in a much broader way that would

include all the questions that cannot be asked, that is to say, sex and desire, the desire to have children etc. At the end, what is *Temple Père*? It is a session of sadomasochism. It is a contract based on the agreement as defined by Gilles Deleuze. Our social existence is based on a contract where the relationship of submission and domination is accepted by contract, and we are all in this. That's exactly Inga's position, she embodies the role of dominatrix. She has a contract of dominatrix with her slaves, but at the same time, you may also say that she has a contract of submission. What I suggest in the play, this great power is ultraliberalism and patriarchy. By consequence, women stipulate a contract with the ultraliberalism and patriarchal society, and this is a problem for me, something that I am trying to understand.

Some philosophers affirm that changes occur via the re-appropriation of knowledge? I am thinking about Rosi Braidotti and her notion of maps of intensity and affects. At the same time, knowledge is linked with interests. I am thinking about education systems and how they are disciplined and integrated into society to form the social subject. How can we transform society starting from the re-appropriation of knowledge?

We have to learn. School is a structure for the functioning of the society. We have to learn what the school doesn't teach us. This is a real issue, ultraliberal and patriarchal: the notion of interest or of stakes. Who owns these things? The stakeholders ('actionnaires') and their existence are exclusively bound to the stakes. In France, we are approaching the presidential elections. The only subject that will never be addressed is: what is the stakeholder for? The stakeholder will always be the one who will only maintain a value that is absolutely abstruse. Recalling Raoul Peck's documentary series, Peck shows very well how the predominance of white and European society constantly functions by dominating other societies by the use of violence, by the inability to extract oneself from this idea of exploitation. I think the big term is exploitation. The school is the

generator of the exploited, which allows exploitation. Maybe I take the position of the artist who constantly refers to the image of the exploited and the exploiters. An artist who takes a stand in all this, who really works and creates and is able to become estranged and at the same time to bear witness of all this. It is a particular position. Today I am aware that I do a bourgeois job, in the sense that I can criticise and at the same time I am given means to do it. The bourgeoisie gives me a space.

When I think back now to the question you asked me about the label, maybe subconsciously I have spent my time trying not to be identified under a label, telling myself I'm not a commodity, holding a real desire to distance myself from this.

I would like to talk about your relationship with corporeality and the materiality of the body. For years, bodies have been the centre of your exploration. At the beginning of your career, you explored your corporeality and your body on stage yourself, starting from yourself to get to yourself, in a very introspective way. Whereas in the last few years, you created collective pieces focusing mainly on women's bodies. How have your creative work and the associated dynamics changed?

As you said, my body's journey, my physicality has been built upon two parallel issues concerning identity and writing. I sought to write while seeking to be me; this is the male period, the period of my male transvestitism as I would define it. In all disguises there is a very strong shadow part, a part of impossibility. I was searching for a possible being, a possible living. From the moment I made this act of accepting to transition, to be in a place or site and to understand that this new position I was adopting, that of saying ok, "now I'm a woman", was also opening a huge new drawer. What does it mean? It's a discovery of another inequality in which I can recognise myself. This is at least something that I can experience in a very corporeal way as a woman in a male domi-

nated society. Since then, I can start another form of dialogue, which interests me for my future projects, which is that of sisterhood. We are aware that history is written by the winners. We have to rediscover the incredible hidden history of sisterhood, excavating in history as well. We have to engage in this archeology of sisterhood.

One of the most beautiful things I can say today about corporeality is that I identify with a part of society, whereas before I didn't. This allows me, today, to write pieces like *Saison Sèche*, or other pieces which deal mainly with female bodies, because I want to bear witness from this site, not that of the sufferance. The sufferance is visible, instead I want to bear witness to power and the submission which it implies. I want to bear witness to the fact that in this submission there is a strong state of consciousness which relates once again to this notion of contract. However, as in any contract, there is the possibility to breach the contract. Ultimately, it is necessary to know who has to break it.

Relating to this journey which you have undertaken to become a minority, I would like to hear your opinion on a very contemporary issue that is important to the theatre world, but also of broader significance. Who is entitled to narrate? Who owns the histories to be told?

I think this is one of the most difficult subjects. I think it's difficult now because we're back in the time of the sufferance. To me Covid-19 was just a kind of accelerator of something that was already in progress. I think the MeToo movement was a trigger of something that the pandemic came to exacerbate even more. I think we are in a time of pain and sufferance and therefore we need to take account of this and recognise it. That means recognising the pain caused to women, to people of colour, to anyone who is dominated by a white, patriarchal power. This is all clearly in front of us. It is obvious that we cannot escape this need to work on sufferance and the pain.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (pour Europe): Temple Père*, 2021
Performer: Inga Huld Hákonardóttir
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This reminds us of the tales of the people killed by the Nazis. At the beginning, nobody believed their testimony. To me, all the sufferings we see today can also be placed upon this spectrum. Today, we still have to talk about violence against women in order to convince society that it is happening and to bear witness to that. Furthermore, we have to recognise our postcolonial heritage because our society and our world is the result of these acts. For instance, climate change. So, there are a lot of issues. Therefore, I think that, for a while, it will be very difficult to speak out about certain subjects without being concerned. Those who are not directly concerned with the subject need to act with humility. It's going to be hard, and I think that we can do very little, because there is a sufferance. Coping with it, society has only one response, the one given by the justice system. However, the justice system does not respond to the uniqueness of the pain, it only responds in general, with a judgement made in relation to an established law. It means that society gives a legal response which is never an empathetic response. Furthermore, society, in its established structure, responds to the sufferance and pain in a distanced way. The distressed person can only find healing within a personal response which can only come from themselves, their capacity, their relationships with their dearest ones, to resolve themselves. If they work on this, they will always resist revenge, and they will work to make society fairer. Let's take, for instance, the example of those feminists who declare that trans people cannot be feminists because they don't have a vagina and they cannot bear children; a very male discourse which situates women once again in their role of giving birth.

I think we are going to live in a period where humility is needed. It may look like a loss of freedom, but perhaps it's the only way, in any case, that we can succeed in easing the pain and sufferance that we have made. If I think about it, it's terrible because I want to be able to deal with all these subjects at once. However, on the other hand, there is an answer to all that, and that is the artist's answer. The artist's answer lies

within their capacity to develop an imagination that will allow them to continue to deal with all these subjects of injury by means of constantly transfiguring, transforming, bringing in another point of view, which will escape the sufferance whilst recalling it.

Here we can see a point recurrent in your work: your dialogue with the spectator and your research to strike and create a connection with personal imaginaries. This appears to be a fundamental aspect of your creation.

I recall a sentence by Andrej Tarkovskij who states that not everyone can be an artist, but rather the artist is someone in a society, designated or self-designated, who is able to return their perspective about society to society, and therefore to bear witness to society. The artist is someone who is compelled to step out of the group, to look at it, and to take time to return a vision. It is an extremely important position, someone who bears witness to something which could have the possibility to change society. The artist can't testify from the front, neither can they hold up a mirror because they would only look at themselves. Here you don't look at society, you have to look at yourself in society. So, the only way an artist can look at society and not look at themselves is when the artist is able to deform, transform, anonymise, to enlist all the elements of a construction that only starts from them, as well as permanently reflect on this and ask themselves: how can I speak about this without hurting anyone? How can I talk about this in a way that will touch someone?

In considering these questions, we have to connect with another consciousness and use all the means which connect us all the time, which are in the end very simple: the light, the blur, the movement. These are things that will give a first idea of what a body can be on stage: an illuminated, perceived, isolated body. A body seen and heard walking on a theatre stage is also a body existing in a space which is a site of representation, of transfiguration, and a metaphorical space as well. Finally, there is a powerful

connection with the possibility of the unconscious. Recently speaking about dreams with a dear friend of mine, she made me laugh. She said to me, what is reassuring about the unconscious is the fact that the unconscious is not us, it must be someone else. I think there is something true about this. In fact, the artist is someone who searches the possibility to be someone else, to be all the others. That means that we have to be able to be what we don't want to be. Generally, on stage we are not who we are, otherwise we are there just to show ourselves for the sake of business. We live this strong relation to ourselves to say that we must also be all those who are in the audience that evening, and finally we are, we got to it. Being there we try, continuously, to interrogate the symbols, and that is why I think that theatre, or at least the theatre that I want to practice, is very much linked to the symbol, precisely because symbol constantly lends itself to interpretation and interpretation is a form of the imaginary.

Symbol is also a reconnection to our past. In Vilnius, you told me that Trilogy was created as a sort of memory of your father's life. So, is the imaginary symbol connected to the notion of memory even within personal memory?

It's true, *Temple Père* is a kind of tribute. But I think that many of my pieces, such as *Belle D'Hier* also, have these kinds of features. These memory pieces are in fact about submission, conceived once again in a very contractual way, that of a submission accepted because it was better than a form of anarchy. There is also the element of the pride of the submitted, which is the core of my relationship with my father. Although he was a model worker, a blue-collar worker, he never admitted he was submitted. He just recalled that he had no choice. As I remember, when I was young, he brought me to see the boat he worked on, and he was proud. He sometimes complained, but in the end, he always started all over again. In addition, it is funny because, from a very intimate point of view concerning my father, he spent his time writing memoirs, but not personal or intimate memoirs, but rather the memoirs of a labourer,

detailing what he did, what he made, what he learned, and how to do things. It's the memory of submission. The Industrial Revolution created the worker role: the person who gains their place in society through their submission. The submitted worker gives their life to work and therefore accepts that their body is impacted by this submission. Handing down work from father to son was based on a fake idea of protection. What was the pride of the miner, or the metalworker, or the manual labourer, who passes this trade on to their male child? The knowledge of the father that their son will continue their work. This knowledge was never defined as submission. I think this is a theme that I have developed enormously and *Temple Père* talks about this. That is to say, if you read the reviews of the *Trilogy* today, you will never see the names of the four artists who build the tower, you will never see the names of the four artists.

Temple Père talks about the disappearance of bodies. The bodies of the four performers disappear in fact, embedded in the construction, an effect that is also achieved by the use of lighting.

Yes. The light here is a form of biography. It's bringing light to something. Finally, there are only these four acrobats who are able to build the tower, so you show that an oppressed population of workers has a specific knowledge, and submission can only exist on people who have such a knowledge. From a psychiatric point of view, if we think about the first studies on wild children — for example, that of Lucien Malson — what knowledge does the French wild child Victor de l'Aveyron¹ possess? He is absolutely incapable of establishing priorities, whereas the submissive worker establishes priorities. This raises the question of freedom.

¹. Victor de l'Aveyron was a foundling who lived until the age of twelve in a forest in the central massif area of France. He was born around the end of eighteenth century and his case attracted public attention and the study of anthropologists and was taken as an example by experts to study the nature of humankind. He did not have contact with living beings for all his childhood, he was unable to speak. François Truffaut made a movie based on his story in 1970, called *L'Enfant sauvage*, which renewed his fame.

Victor de l'Aveyron was free, he was totally free. Another question: what is a savage? To be submissive is a state of human consciousness. This suggests that every human being at the moment they accept to be submissive is already in a state of reflection, which is terrible.

So Trilogy is a memory piece, a sort of architecture of memory?

Yes, it is a memory. These pieces are also pieces of a memory about the meaning of submission. However, at the same time, it is the memory of a knowledge, and as well my own memory, which is that of having been a boy to whom a knowledge was transmitted, a knowledge of architecture, of construction, and order to build. I would say it is a memory and a transmission, because memory is a transmission. I asked at the beginning what we needed to protect ourselves? At first, it started with a roof, to protect oneself from the sun and the rain. Then you needed walls to protect you from the wind and then you had to find a way to warm up a cold space. And finally, it is perhaps the transmission of a memory of the human being who thinks and reflects on how to adapt, to transform. So, it's a memory of transformation. More specifically, architecture is a relationship to the body. An architecture without a human being does not exist. Architecture is a way of framing a human being and making society exist. Architecture is born with the society. As soon as we no longer live in the cave but decide to set up a place to cultivate and take advantage of what nature gives us to protect the family, that is the birth of architecture. For me, architecture symbolises all this, but to me it is also the space of scenography, the space of the imagination. Architecture is ultimately about questioning the space of the imaginary and, in my work, the pieces are always constructed at the moment that the scenography is drawn for me. At the moment that I begin to draw the scenography, the piece will exist, that means that I have defined the architecture of the piece. My creative process always starts with the stage design, which is an architecture. The process always starts with where the action takes place.

What is the role of the nude, exposed body in your theatre? With the exception of Saison Sèche and Belle D'Hier, you never used nudity on stage until La Rencontre Interdite (The Forbidden Encounter). Why now?

It was not a choice! It was an obligation. Something I would say about architectural theatre is that it is necessary for the stage to intrude into the audience space, to be with people. During this period of researching, I was really affected by the fact that I couldn't go on stage and perform. I felt that my body was not necessary. It was a moment like a sort of small death. One week before the premiere, I realised that in the first part I am Athena, but by the third tale it is Phia, I need to be Phia. Phia is an artist, but in this act, it is necessary to be Phia, a woman who acts to destroy the possibility of theatre. This was the period in which we couldn't go on stage. To me it was like the deed of Jan Palak, who burned himself in 1968. He committed suicide. I decided that to commit suicide I needed to be naked. I am just a human and an artist and I say to you if we continue to lock theatre into unimaginative forms then we might die because imagination is necessary to life. Theatre is one of the most important spaces where we can imagine the future and discuss the past. The theatre is in constant discussion, very quietly, with audiences and actors, about very important subjects. It is the basis of all hypotheses about life, monstrosity, and humanity. You can kill on stage, not in society. So, I killed myself on stage in order to not kill myself in reality.

What are your future plans?

I am working on a new play, called *Article 13*, with Marion Blondeau. The subject is becoming clearer. *Article 13* refers to the thirteenth *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* article, which states that all human beings have the right to leave their country, to go to another country, and to return to their country. It means that there is no homeland.

So, statelessness is a notion that appeals to me in connection with homeland. Homeland is a word that I hate. I am interested in it because I think that the worst thing and most serious disease is nationalism. In addition, I am affected by the fact that I am European, and I am in a part of the world, Europe, which hardly accepts to share space with others or accommodate immigrants.

I am working with Marion, a young blonde woman, who comes from the east of France and is trained in contemporary and classical dance. Marion decided to move to Senegal to study African dances at the École de Sable, later to study Arabic in Tunisia, later to visit Palestine, and later to travel extensively in Iran. In one go, this young woman can visit all these places. She represents the antithesis of a nationalism and her body dances very well even the African dances. She has an incredible ability to switch from masculine to feminine. I think she is the body of the future, in the sense that you can put walls or barbed wire in front of people, but this woman represents the longing to discovery. What is the difference between Marion and an immigrant who leaves from the deep heart of Africa to come to discover Europe? She can do it. He can't. So, I decided to create a piece where her body is going to be challenged, in a kind of circus piece. She's going to dance, and then she's going to do very dangerous things. She will be constantly challenged. She's going to be constantly undertaking tests and if you add up her tests, you'll have the sum of the journey of a migrant who crosses many borders. Except that for her, you will have empathy because she is white, she is blonde, she is beautiful, because she is so sweet. At the end, I really want to ask the question: why don't we have empathy for others? •





PHIA MÉNARD

**THE BODY OF
CONTESTATION**

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Julia Kristeva, in an interview with the highwire artist Philippe Petit (2002), defines contestation as ‘a fundamental version of freedom’ and as a vital motivating force in the student revolts and street protests in Paris in May 1968, which eventually culminated in a nation-wide general strike. She says: ‘One word on everyone’s lips in May ’68 was “contestation”. It expresses a fundamental version of freedom: not freedom to change or to succeed, but freedom “to revolt, to call things into question”’ (12). Kristeva goes on to emphasise that this is not nihilistic but rather, by putting things into question, contestation stops societal values being fixed or frozen and instead they ‘acquire a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life’ with new possibilities emerging for ‘perpetually contestable configurations’ (ibid.).

This essay explores the idea of ‘contestation’, examining it as an important ethos in the development of ‘new’ and ‘contemporary’ circus and also in Phia Ménard’s creative practice. From its very beginnings, new circus contested almost every aspect of traditional circus. French circus scholar Pascal Jacob, writing about new circus, says, ‘Everything which once defined the circus has been called into question, either patiently or with brutality’ (2008: 12). The exact beginning of new circus is disputed by circus scholars but many point to the unrest of 1968 as its germination point, with most of the early new circus companies emerging in the early 1980s.¹ In new circus, the horse-riding acts, which had been the central element of traditional circus were rejected. Traditional circus had been founded by the ex-cavalryman Philip Astley in London in 1768 (Kwint 2016: 331–48), and daring horse-riding became central to the success of traditional circus, so to discard the horse-riding was radical. Archaos, the anarchic French new circus company, in their rejection of the horses in traditional circus, replaced them using cranes and motorbikes to introduce a new industrial aesthetic to their shows.²

New circus also discarded the wild animal acts and the menageries of traditional circus. Other iconic elements were contested or critiqued, including the figure of the Ringmaster in top hat and tails, the circus ring itself, and the centrality of the star performers (Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 55–63). New circus also challenged the hold that the traditional circus families kept over particular circus skills often keeping them a familial secret; for example, the Flying Wallendas with their tightrope walking and the Konyots with horse-riding and acrobatics. The teaching of circus skills was opened to people from outside the circus families and this attracted new people into circus from fields such as dance, theatre, street theatre, puppetry, and music. These people

1. For more information on the historical background, see Maleval 2010.

2. For more information on the historical background, see Mock 2016: 153–70 and Maleval 2016: 50–64.

brought with them fresh ideas and new approaches. Circus began to absorb these influences and began to present elements such as dramaturgy, theatrical lighting, text, costume design, as well as different approaches to the use of music. With France’s year of circus in 2001, and the emergence of many new hybridised forms of circus making, artists and critics started considering new terms such as ‘contemporary circus’. This term had already been introduced in 1996 in a review of Joseph Nadj’s *Le cri du caméléon* (*The Cry of the Chameleon*) but took some time to catch on. The term ‘new circus’ became associated with a very specific twenty- to twenty-five-year period of transformation, whereas contemporary circus touches upon constantly renewable contemporaneity: ‘the contemporary circus is *in its time* meaning that it is happening now, but it is also *of its time*, given that it captures its epoch’s zeitgeist, its essence’ (Leroux 2022: 234).

Phia Ménard, then known as Philippe, originally came to Nantes, France to study microtechnology, but in 1991, at the age of twenty, Ménard was captivated by a performance by the juggler Jérôme Thomas in his show *Extraballe*. This performance integrated theatrical staging and lighting, and new rebound juggling techniques. Ménard decided to change the direction of her³ life, and in 1994 began studying juggling with Jérôme Thomas, eventually joining ARMO/Compagnie Jérôme Thomas and touring the world as a virtuoso juggler. Jérôme Thomas had been influenced by the American juggler Michael Moschen (particularly known for the contact juggling in the 1986 film *Labyrinth* with David Bowie) and the German juggler Francis Brunn (renowned as one of the best jugglers in the world, exploring contact juggling and juggling while dancing flamenco, and a regular on the Ed Sullivan show). Although Thomas began his career as a juggler in traditional circus and cabaret, he became a major figure in the development of juggling in new and

3. Phia Ménard’s preferred pronouns are she/her.



Phia Ménard
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then contemporary circus, being part of a generation, who Thomas describes as transforming juggling into a ‘fully-fledged’ art form:

The generation of jugglers before the ‘80s created juggling performances called ‘un numéro’ [an act], each about 10 minutes in length and designed for cabaret or circus spaces. The virtuosos [skills], which demonstrated great agility (dexterity, nimbleness), were presented in succession. Once trained, my generation broke these rules, on the one hand to create longer format juggling performances of 60 to 90 minutes, and, on the other hand, to combine poesy (in the narrative sense), dramaturgy, and new objects with this virtuosity [...It was] a huge revolution [that] transformed juggling into a fully-fledged art. (Thomas quoted in Birmann 2020: para. 3)

Within the innovative forms of juggling in contemporary circus, in spite of the inclusion of dramaturgy, choreography, and theatrical staging and lighting, the focus still remained firmly on virtuosity. This focus on virtuosity is accompanied by the heart-stopping fear of the ‘drop’. The London-based juggler Sean Gandini has spoken about the anxiety surrounding the drop.⁴ This fear of the drop is directly explored by Sean Gandini and his co-director Kati Ylä-Hokkala in the Gandini Juggling show *Smashed* (2010) in which the stage is covered with tea-cups and saucers which the jugglers begin picking up, throwing down, and smashing: ‘*Smashed* finishes with ten minutes of furious dropping and breaking everything.’⁵

In addition to the fear of the drop, there is also the constant need to perform higher level tricks and to develop innovative virtuoso tricks that no other juggler can do. The hours of daily practice involved in the main-

4. Sean Gandini (personal communication with Katie Lavers and Jon Burtt, July 2018). See also Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 11–12.

5. Ibid.

tenance of these high-level juggling skills and the need to constantly innovate with new tricks can become extremely stressful. The field of juggling tends to be highly competitive with younger jugglers pressing hard on the heels of the jugglers at the highest level. Ménard describes the pressure of virtuosity as a male juggler saying, ‘I was always questioned about my capacity to do more. To achieve more mind-boggling tricks [...] I got to a moment in my life where I understood that the more we look at the virtuosity of the man I was at the time, the more I understood that I was destroying myself’ (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37). Other top jugglers in contemporary circus felt the same pressure. The juggler Adrian Mondot says, ‘I felt the limits of juggling. This notion of invested time in a subject where, if we look at it mathematically, is an asymptote. We spend more and more time to refine juggling further and further or to maintain a technical ability. Because technical ability is important in circus’ (Mondot quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 43).

As a direct result of this constant demand for increased virtuosity, Mondot contested the need for the actual juggling apparatus to be present at all: ‘I asked myself, “What would happen if we replaced the real juggling balls with virtual juggling balls? I would be able to do something else”’ (Adrien Mondot, personal interview with Louis Patrick Leroux, April 2017, quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 43). Mondot, who was a computer programmer before he studied juggling, describes how the process of replacing the physical juggling apparatus with virtual objects changed his focus to an exploration of the forces at play in juggling:

The actual apparatus always seemed to me like a pretext — you could say a working aid to approaching movement ... our working tool is actually forces for all circus artists: we create with forces ... Gravitational forces, but also muscular forces, the axes of rotations that permit us to do things. The forces that we have in play. For me in the beginning my

focus was the juggling balls, but in fact I am more interested in it being these forces. (Mondot quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 14)

With his collaborator Claire Bardainne, Mondot created a new form of interactive juggling. In the works they have created for their company Adrien M and Claire B, computer generated elements are manipulated by the performer moving through the interactive space to create a new form of virtual juggling. The computer interface itself acts as a form of apparatus allowing the performers, and sometimes audience members, to ‘juggle’ or interact with invisible forces.⁶

Another top juggler and wire walker, Johann Le Guillerm, in his search to move beyond this demand for virtuosity, decided to remove everything from his performance that could traditionally be described as circus: ‘All my practices that might be identified as a traditional circus practice, I removed so I could produce more personal practices, moving from the traditional to the personal’ (Johann Le Guillerm, personal interview with Louis Patrick Leroux, April 2017, quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 32). He now creates sculptural objects that he interacts with, creating a form of practice that is a fusion of contemporary circus with sculpture and installation art.

Sean Gandini’s works with his company Gandini Juggling still focus on the potential of the conventional apparatus of juggling — the balls, clubs, and rings — but he and his collaborator Kati Ylä-Hokkala now create group juggling works which interact with the musical score in a way that is tightly choreographed. The focus is still on high-level juggling, but it is now used with *Siteswap* notation⁷ to create sequences

6. See the company Adrien M and Claire B website at <https://www.am-cb.net/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

7. See also Colin Wright and Andrew Lipson (1996) ‘SiteSwaps’, <http://www.juggling.org/help/siteswap/ssintro/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

in which the apparatus often forms a physical realisation of the musical score in three-dimensional space (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 180). The works are often choreographed to minimalist music such as Steve Reich or Philip Glass and become visualisations of the mathematical patterns in the music through the movement of the juggling objects in space. The performers also train in dance and the company often collaborates with dance companies.⁸ The interdisciplinary work that emerges is a fusion of contemporary circus with dance. The work moves from having a focus on virtuosity as an end in itself to becoming a unique choreography of bodies and objects in space.⁹

In 1998, facing this same sense of intense pressure, Phia Ménard created her own company, Compagnie Non Nova¹⁰ and began a series of research and development periods to contest this constant demand for virtuosity.

I arrived at a time when the virtuosity that I had been taught and that I maintained brought me back to a much more human and deeper question [...] why go and show yourself in front of an audience? Is it just to make noise, to notice [...] virtuosity? There is something about virtuosity that is very vain. Virtuosity is a form of comparison. And I got to the limit of that. (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 6; Leroux’s translation)

Ménard’s contestation of virtuosity took a particularly vivid and striking performative form with her notion of ‘unjugglability’: ‘The [notion] of

8. These collaborations with dancers and dance companies include *Ephemeral Architecture* co-created with the Royal Ballet dancer/choreographer Ludovic Ondiela, the work *Spring* co-created with the British choreographer Alexander Whitley, working with Dominique Mercy from the Pina Bausch Company in *Smashed*, and *Sigma* co-created with Seeta Patel exploring the fusion of Bharatanatyam dance and juggling.

9. See Gandini Juggling’s website at <https://www.gandinijuggling.com/en/the-company/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

10. See Compagnie Non Nova’s website at <http://www.cienonnova.com> [accessed 7 May 2022].

MÉNARD: UNJUGGLABILITY AND MATERIALITY

unjugglability came to me and told me that I had to destroy my objects. Virtuosity says nothing' (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 6; Leroux's translation). In an interview we conducted with Ménard, she says that 'the concept of unjugglability emerges in opposition to the notion of jugglability' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37).

The conventional apparatus in traditional Western circus and even now in most contemporary circus usually consists of balls, clubs, and rings. Jugglability for the most part refers to these apparatus, or sometimes objects that are shaped, sized, and weighted in a way that makes them interchangeable with these conventional juggling objects. For example, Gandini Juggling most often uses traditional juggling apparatus but sometimes substitutes objects of a similar shape, size, and weight. In the work *Smashed*, at one point apples are used instead of balls, and the performers stop in the middle of juggling to take a bite out of the apples to show that they are indeed real fruit. The juggler's virtuosity is maintained and performed through the jugglability of these traditionally shaped, sized, and weighted apparatus that they have spent thousands of hours mastering.

Ménard, in her active contestation of virtuosity, introduced the concept of 'unjugglability', choosing to put herself into a situation as a performer in which the objects or apparatus she juggled with could not allow her to display her virtuosity. Her first object of choice was a cactus, which Ménard attempted to juggle with. This created a performance event in which the performer does not exhibit mastery of the material, but instead juggles with an object that demonstrates to the audience that the performer is not able to gain control or mastery of it. Ménard went on to attempt to juggle with heavy tyres. This approach of working with unjugglability demonstrates a very different relationship to objects: 'Paradoxically, the juggler usually masters the object, but I am a juggler who does not master matter, but rather one who follows matter. By this I mean that I must comply with the laws of matter' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 38). This vivid contestation of virtuosity also had the important aim of trying to change how the artist, the juggler, is perceived by the audience. Phia Ménard says it was done partly to contest the notion of the artist as someone who is worshipped or admired. She says, 'I think that the important thing is to bring the onlooker back to the possibility of the artist not being worshipped or admired but above all being human' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37).

With the idea of unjugglability and this vivid contestation of virtuosity, Ménard moves into a new form of circus in which juggling is combined



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *P.P.P.*, 2008
Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

with approaches and ideas from performance art (also known as live art).¹¹ This can be seen in the extraordinary solo work *P.P.P. (Position parallèle au plancher)* (*Position Parallel to the Floor*) (2009). *P.P.P.* is a solo show and the work is mediated through Phia Ménard's own body. As Ménard's collaborator Paul B. Precadio writes, the show was 'created when Ménard began taking hormones' (Precadio 2017: para. 3) and relates to Ménard's transformation from male to female which she revealed publicly when this performance premiered. As a work which fuses contemporary circus with performance art, *P.P.P.* not only goes beyond previously accepted limits in the art of juggling, but also in the performance art exploration of the human body in its interactions with ice. This work was not developed to demonstrate virtuosity or to pander to the audience. Arts writer Viktoria Dalborg recalls a meeting with Phia Ménard in which she was told that 'the title *P.P.P.* [was] a reaction to an encounter with a star producer [...] The producer suggested that Ménard created a show to please the audience, "pour plaire au public," which Ménard saw as prostitution. The initials *P.P.P.* were kept as an ironic revenge and symbolic reminder of the type of theatrical forms that [...] Ménard totally repudiates' (Dalborg 2010: 7).¹² Ménard, contesting this notion of pleasing the public, creates a work in which, as the solo performer in the show, she works in close contact with ice, creating from the very beginning of the performance a sense of discomfort, risk, and danger. Dalborg describes the performance of *P.P.P.*:

11. Performance art/live art is problematic to define but can be considered as an investigation of an evolving practice which considers the body of the performer in space and time and works with the historicity of the surrounds and the materiality of the objects in the space.

12. The 5th edition of Cirko Helsinki Contemporary Circus Festival, Finnish Circus Information Centre and New Nordic Circus Network continued the project started in June 2009 by Circostrada Network which had been set up to develop and foster critical discussions and reflections among European circus critics. This event had four days of lectures, performances, and artist meetings, and Phia Ménard was one of the artists who participated. This meeting between the critics and the participants took place at the Kiasma Theatre, Helsinki.

Five hundred kilos of ice, distributed over hundreds of ice balls hanging from the ceiling and in crushed form on the stage. A frozen, knitted dress, three upright cabinet freezers and a big block of ice — those are the props and the landscape on stage in the juggler [...] Ménard's and Compagnie Non Nova's *P.P.P.* show. A human being in a fur and a fur cap is sitting, leaning slightly forward, on an ice block, showing [her] back to the audience when we take our seats in Stoa Theatre. The ice is dripping and crackling as it melts. An ice ball suddenly falls from the ceiling and smashes to pieces against the floor. We are from the very beginning put in a vice of fear. (Dalborg 2010: 6)

This emphasis on the actual materiality of the ice on stage is an important aspect of performance art. The German performance artist Joseph Beuys said in an interview with American artist Willoughby Sharp, 'I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it' (Beuys 1993: 85). In Ménard's performance of *P.P.P.*, there is an emphasis placed on the substance of ice itself. The white stuff on stage is not polystyrene representing ice, as it might be in some theatrical performances, but rather it is real ice with its own materiality. Her work in *P.P.P.* explores the materiality of ice, the thought, and the metaphorical resonances behind the material that she is working with. By juggling with ice, Ménard brings into the art of juggling a mutable apparatus which contests the solidity and the quiddity of the traditional juggling objects.¹³ She invites the spectator to engage with her and bring to the performance their own experiences of ice.¹⁴ Through the juggling of the ice and the fundamental transformation of matter as the ice melts,

13. Other jugglers have continued investigating this idea of apparatus being mutable. Juggler Jimmy Gonzalez won the Gold Prize at Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain in 2015 for his piece *D'Argile*, an act in which he juggles with wet clay. See *Jimmy-Gonzalez D'Argile – Jimmy Gonzalez – Clay juggling*, online video recording, Vimeo, 8 February 2018, <https://vimeo.com/254800231> [accessed 7 May 2022].

she invites the spectators to metaphorically contest their ‘fixed and frozen’ societal values and instead to ‘acquire a sense of polyvalence and life’ (Kristeva 2002: 12) in relation to their expectations of how the body before them ‘should’ behave.

The materiality of the ice becomes an essential vital part of the performance. The process of the ice changing throughout the show from a hard and dangerous material and through the process of melting, changing forms, changing states, to water, invites a reading of the performance as a metaphorical journey which embodies and explores Ménard’s own life journey as a transgender artist from male to female, and in the process contests the constrictive gender roles of society. The work explores the pain in her transition and the gender fluidity of the body. Precision in this process is key — this is not the ‘undisciplined body’ (a term sometimes used in connection with Ménard by authors whose first language is not English. In English, the term has a problematic pejorative connotation as being a body without any training, which clearly Ménard’s body is not). Ménard presents instead the highly trained disciplined body working beyond the limits of normal arts disciplines and genres, working with precision, engaging with danger to challenge and contest the limits of her own physicality. For Precadio, this precision relates to agency and the will to change her body through the precise taking of hormones to move from one state to another: ‘she confronts ice as

it moves from its threatening, solid state into one of complete fluidity, juggling 120 balls of ice, each weighing two kilos. As with the taking of hormones, biochemical and material precision is key: a little heavier and the balls of ice would be enough to injure her, a little less and they would too quickly melt’ (Precadio 2017: para. 3).

Ménard chooses to present her own body in the process of transition on stage in all its fragility and vulnerability as a human. As this performance was presented over a period of years, it ultimately became a durational piece with Ménard describing audience members coming back over the years to see the changes taking place in her body (Lodi Rizzini 2021: 79–98).

Phia Ménard wanted to contest the critical, judgemental distance that the audience member maintains in traditional juggling while waiting for the next spectacular trick, or for the ‘drop’:

“I knew that the audience spent most of their time waiting for the moment the balls would fall,” she said. “I didn’t want people to expect virtuosity, I wanted them to empathize with me” (Ménard quoted in Capelle 2018: para. 11). In *P.P.P.*, instead of demonstrating mastery, Ménard sought to contest it by displaying instead her vulnerability and her humanity to evoke human connection and empathy from the audience members. Ménard’s contestation of the critical distance entailed in the relationship with the spectator in traditional juggling takes the form of a desire for a body-to-body connection or empathy through flesh. Instead of a critical eye looking for the performer to drop the juggling props, the use of ice as a shared common experience involves the spectator in a form of performance which engages the audience and the performer person-to-person, through the shared experience of ice in connection with the body or flesh. In an interview we conducted with Ménard, she discusses this shared common experience with the spectator:

← 14. In 1973, Stuart Hall the renowned Jamaican-born British sociologist and cultural theorist presented his paper ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’, which he wrote for the Council of Europe Colloquy which described how meaning was encoded by the producer but received and decoded by the viewer (reader): ‘Before this message can have an “effect” (however defined), or satisfy a “need” or be put to a “use”, it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which “have an effect”, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences.’ See Hall in Hall, Hobson, Love, and Willis 1980: 117–21.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Saison Sèche*, 2018
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I lie on a bed filled with ice, and automatically, the audience goes, 'brrr!' [she shivers], simply because they feel the cold by projecting themselves into my body. So, they are imagining their own body. That's an important form. The natural elements, from there, will ultimately be the vector for a dialogue between the onlooker and myself or the performer, simply through the body, and no longer through admiration or the intellect. It is a body-to-body relationship through projection.

(Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 38)

In a recent interview, on the 27 December 2021, for the Radio France show Cultural Affairs with Arnaud Laporte, Phia Ménard discusses the nature of art and the artist's vocation. She describes it as a process of shedding and getting rid of all the impositions of society. Ménard says that from the moment 'you understand, in essence, that you haven't been completely formatted by education and society, you start to grasp the role of art. You start realizing to what extent the artist's undertaking is to shed everything society has imposed' (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 4; Leroux's translation). This process of shedding, or sloughing off, the impositions of society, is approached through the process of contestation. Ménard sees this process as innately political. She describes 'being in front of an audience as a political act' (Ménard quoted in BNP Paribas 2020: para. 3). This can be seen as 'political' in the sense historian Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey has pointed out was also an effect of the events of 1968: 'The '68 movements broadened [...] the horizon of the political. They detached "politics" and "the political" from the state and its apparatus, and so they created a culture where personal politics [...] became central' (Gilcher-Holtey 2014: 11).

Performing in front of an audience as a transgender woman, especially in France, can in itself be viewed as a political act. In her writing for *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*) on the company website, Ménard quotes Judith Butler:

When I started working, I put a lot of emphasis on gender as if it were a sort of law, and I still think that there are certain actions which, when repeated over time, can create and confirm gender identity. But gender is also a category of analysis through which we can consider essential political concepts such as the distinction between public/private, the public sphere and equality. When we say these political concepts have a gender, we're saying that they have been established from certain gender hypotheses. But gender is also something which we endure, a part of our development. This seems obvious when we think of the way gender is assigned to us not just once, but every single day, in the street, in public institutions, at the heart of medical and legal establishments. (Butler quoted in L'humanité 2014, para. 9)¹⁵

Laura Capelle, in an interview with Phia Ménard for the *New York Times*, writes:

While the United States has prominent transgender performers, such as Laverne Cox and Trace Lysette, transgender identity is only just entering mainstream consciousness in France. For a long time, Ms. Ménard said, it remained tied to Parisian night life and to a handful of cabaret performers who came of age in the 1960s, like Coccinelle, who died in 2006, and Bambi [...] There are signs of change: A well-known comedian, Océan, recently came out as a transgender man, and a transgender character was introduced in March on 'Plus Belle la Vie', one of France's most popular TV soap operas. Still, Ms. Ménard said, French culture's 'macho' Latin roots led to societal resistance. (Capelle 2018: para. 6)¹⁶

¹⁵. Butler cited by Ménard on the Compagnie Non Nova website <http://www.cienonnova.com/en/portfolio/saison-seche-2/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

¹⁶. For further commentary on French academia and society in relation to trans people and performers, see Lodi Rizzini 2021.

In the *New York Times* interview, Ménard herself comments on the relationship between danger, desire, transsexuality, and the ice in *P.P.P.*: ‘[...In] *P.P.P.*, in which blocks of ice randomly fell from the ceiling onto the stage, where Ménard stood, exposed. “It struck me: Ice is a material that you look at with desire, yet that you don’t want to touch. It’s the same position as a trans person: They provoke a kind of desire, and at the same time you’re afraid to sleep with them”’ (Ménard quoted in Capelle 2018: para. 12).

In the work *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn (The Afternoon of a Foehn)* (2011), Ménard goes further than in *P.P.P.* and actively contests the need for a human presence in the act of juggling: ‘The actual act of juggling itself and the manipulation of the apparatus are presented as having been handed to an external source of energy’ (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 13).¹⁷ In this work, Ménard takes plastic bags and ties them into the shape of small human-like figures. A jet of air lifts them into the air, animates them, and effectively juggles with them, moving them through the space. This work presents the source of energy and the control of the apparatus as having been moved away from the human to a natural force, jets of air, which effectively juggle with the small human-like figures created from the plastic bags. We comment on this in the ‘Apparatus’ chapter of the book *Contemporary Circus* (2019) as follows:

In the same way that Ménard questioned the solidity or unchangeable quiddity of the juggling prop in *P.P.P.*, in *L’après-Midi d’un Foehn* she has moved the performance of control of the juggling pathways away from the human, to external forces to create a new form of juggling. The scene is post-apocalyptic in essence, as the audience

sees the wind juggling with these small twisting human figures fashioned from plastic bags. The visible human control has been removed, and we see non-human forces juggling with apparatus formed from what is left of the human, their non-biodegradable detritus (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 13).

After these two limit-text¹⁸ works on the art of juggling, namely *P.P.P.* and *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*, Ménard moves into work that contests her newfound reality of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Her works now bring together performance art, dance, and theatre to explore ‘hetero-patriarchal conventions’ through the limits of the performative body in a performance form which takes the notion of contestation as its driving force. The philosopher and queer-theorist Paul B. Precadio, describing the works that Ménard made after 2008, writes: ‘If the first works Ménard made after 2008 explored gender transition as a material, biopolitical process — fighting against ice as one fights against imposed sexual and political identities — the most recent work deepens a critique of hetero-patriarchal conventions and bears witness to a new transfeminist aesthetic’ (Precadio 2017: para. 3). Ménard now mainly creates large-scale group works, but in this scaling up of her performance work, she actively contests the normal *modus operandi* of larger-scale performance companies. She has, for example, rejected the normal approach of auditioning for selecting performers saying, ‘I never organize auditions. So, these are people who know my work, who know my artistic process, and who at some point decide to come of their own accord on the basis that my next step has to be with this woman’ (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 134).

Ménard also contests the trope of the artist as solitary genius (usually male) by, at every turn, placing great emphasis on the role of her collaborating partners. She often works with the female to male transexual philosopher Paul B. Precadio to collaborate in an exchange of ideas

¹⁷. See also Mercat de les Flors, *CIE. NON NOVA – L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*, online video recording, Vimeo, 22 July 2016, <https://vimeo.com/175823718> [accessed 7 May 2022].

→ ¹⁸. Limit-text refers to a key work that sets new boundaries in a discipline.

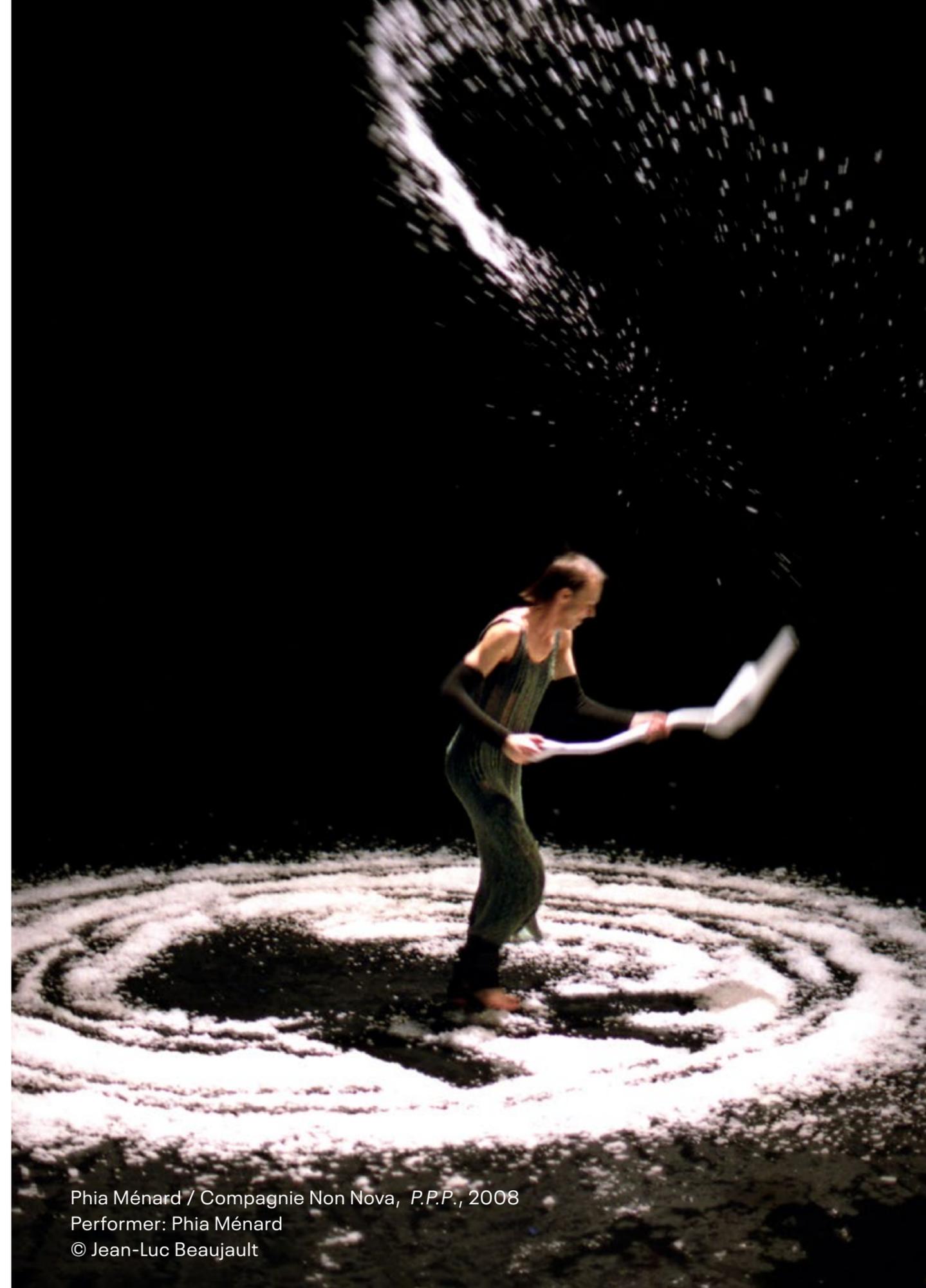
through dialogues and workshops. For the composition and dramaturgy of Compagnie Non Nova shows, Ménard works with a number of different collaborators such as the Co-Artistic Director of Compagnie Non Nova, Claire Massonnet, Jean-Luc Beaujault, and a dramaturgy partner Jonathan Grisset.

Her approach to the content in her newer works has become increasingly feminist. In an interview for *The New York Times*, Ménard talks about the loss of power she has been experiencing now that she is permanently in the body of a woman:

My group shows are political acts. The basis of my work is the body as a political object in society. In every show I write, the body isn't an individual with a personal story, but a political sign: they're female bodies in a patriarchal society. Having had this journey of the body, having experienced power in society first in the body of a man and now in the body of a woman, it's shown me that, in my new condition, I have lost power. (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5)

Ménard now describes herself as 'a feminist warrior': 'While I lived in a man's body, I felt a lot of empathy for the possibilities of feminism out of solidarity, but it was a political hobby. Today, I'm in the permanence of the body, I've become a feminist warrior' (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5).

Two of her group works which actively contest the role of women are *Belle D'Hier* (*Yesterday's Beauty*) and *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*). In *Belle D'Hier*, Ménard contests the myth of Prince Charming which has been handed down from generation to generation: 'One day, my daughter, you will be a princess and you will meet (your) Prince Charming' (Ménard n.d.: para. 23). Huge hooded cloaks that have been frozen stand on stage as 'carapaces' of power at the beginning of *Belle D'Hier*, and then slowly begin their gradual disintegration which takes place throughout the show.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *P.P.P.*, 2008
Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

Belle D'Hier explores how the myth of a Prince Charming can be contested and transformed. Ménard writes, 'Let's look at its transformation, the moment the myth collapses, the moment we reject it, the moment we want to smash up its codes and constraints and explode into action. Once we have got over the disillusion and the violence, let's celebrate the breath of life the myth leaves behind when it's gone' (ibid.: para. 14).

In Ménard's work *Saison Sèche*, the cast of seven women are trapped in a claustrophobic space that changes and reconfigures around the women. Laura Capelle for the *New York Times* writes:

Ménard's work 'Saison Sèche' deals with the violence women suffer in patriarchal societies. The cast [are] trapped in a closed white space, under a ceiling that moves up and down without rhyme or reason. 'It's the glass ceiling, and more,' Ms. Ménard said. 'That's what it's like to be permanently under surveillance and reprimanded as soon as an action is deemed objectionable.' (Capelle 2018: para. 5)

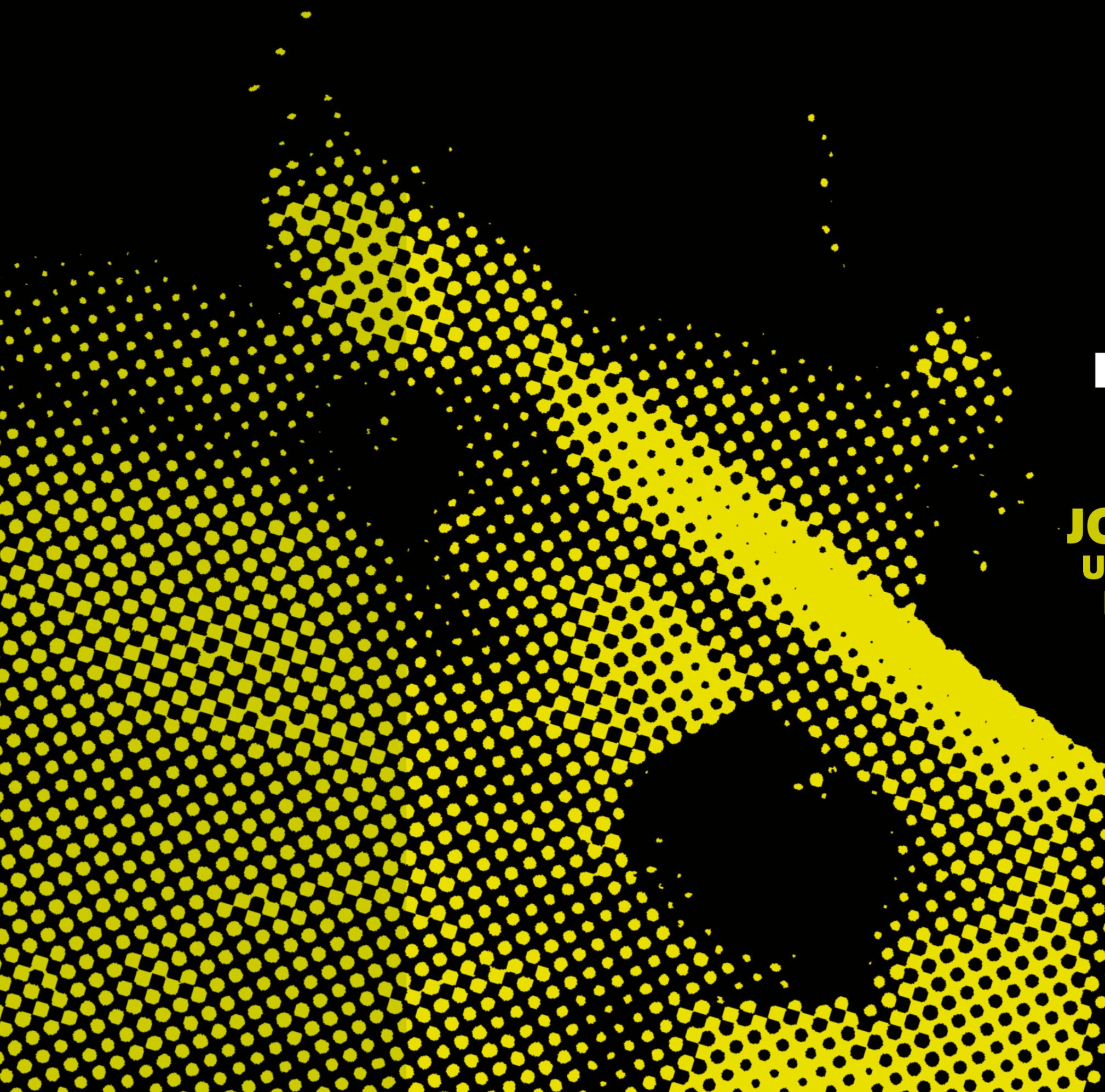
The only way out that seems available is for the figures to take on male personas and gradually transform to become 'drag kings' (ibid.: para. 16). Ménard says about the show *Saison Sèche*: 'Faced with desperate and catastrophic situations in our societies, we as creators have a duty to create worthy and meaningful artistic acts. It might be utopian, but I can't help but dream that *Dry Season* could help topple the patriarchy! That's the mission I've given myself, I'm working on it' (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5).

Ultimately the driving force behind all Phia Ménard's works is the ethos of contestation which enables her to pose questions not to provide answers but to provoke dialogue offering new ways of seeing things to the spectators. As she writes on Compagnie Non Nova's website:

I am not aiming to give answers concerning the complexity of our lives. I just want to question the imaginative world of each individual and maybe, hopefully open up new dialogue. The pieces I propose are sometimes violent, often hypnotic, always androgynous. [...] I want the shows to be limitless, indignant and provocative, yet without superficially enticing the audience. I simply want them to be clear-cut, palpable, so that I can experience something with you, the spectator. (Ménard n.d.: para. 9) •

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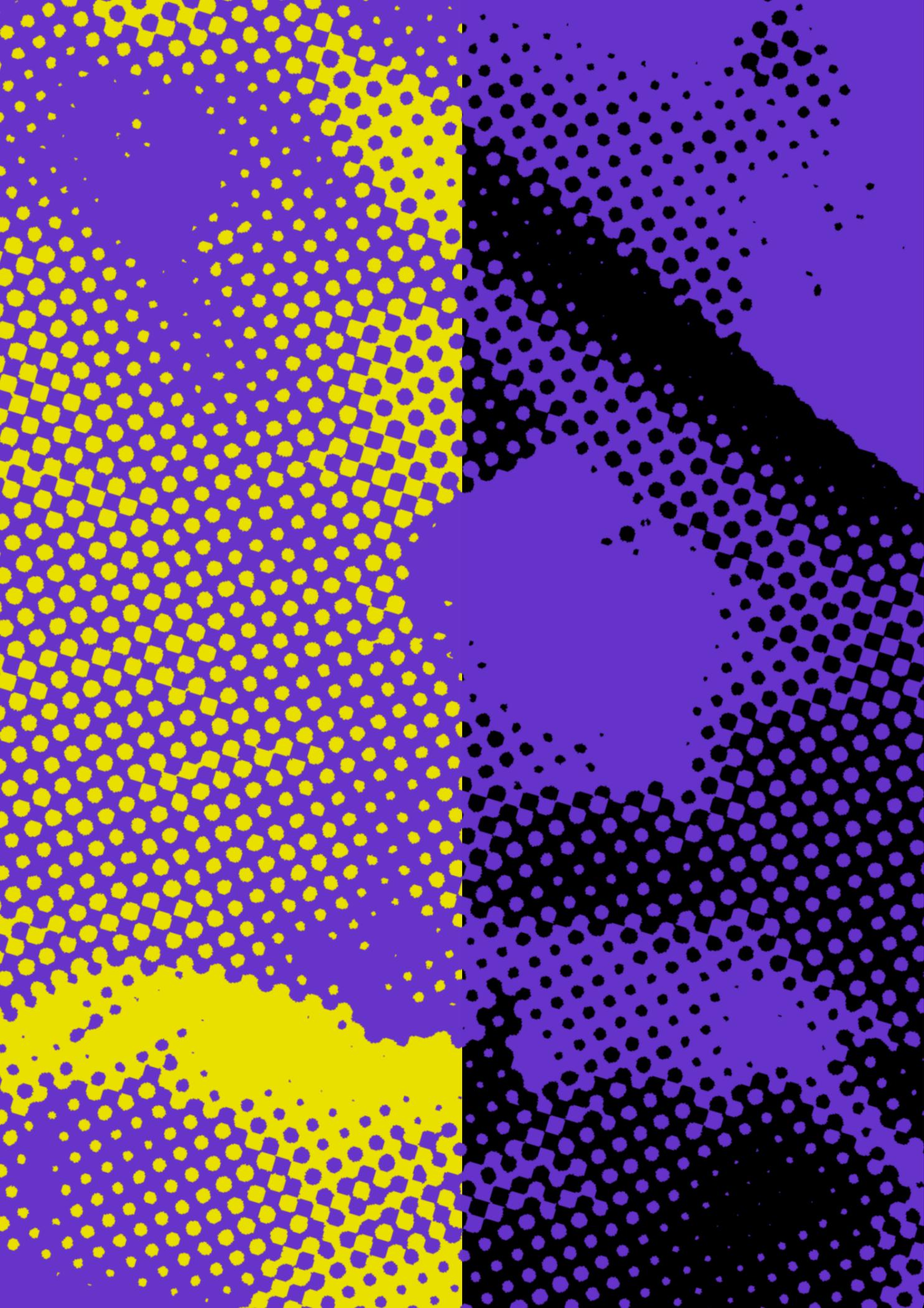
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**PHIA
MÉNARD'S
VORTEX**

**BODY AND SKIN,
PERFORMANCE
AND FICTION**

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In the landscape of postdramatic theatre, which develops from the refusal of the categories of character and dramatic fiction, the body enjoys a privileged status.¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann considers it as the vector of a radical renewal and designates the bodily presence as the place in the theatre where the disappearance of all meaning gives way to a self-sufficient reality: the corporality exposed in its various intensities. According to Lehmann, the shows of Jan Fabre, for example, carry to the extreme a crucial feature of the postdramatic, namely the fact of being a ‘theater of perceptibility’, in that ‘it realizes its own “phenomenology of perception”, marked by an overcoming of the principles of mimesis and fiction’ (2006: 99).

However, many theatre productions labelled as postdramatic (because they are essentially visual and present themselves as performances) retain a fundamental relationship to fiction, even as they apparently renounce being a *mimesis* of human actions. Phia Ménard’s *Vortex* (2011)² is one example among others. Its analysis could enlighten us on the functions that fiction can assume in this case. In the context of a very present questioning in Western societies, the political meaning of transgender identity claims could also be clarified, if we approach it from the point of view of the proposed fictional constructions, and more globally of the way fiction can be used in performance.

1. I want to thank Stefania Lodi Rizzini for having drawn my attention to the question of skin, which she addresses about *Vortex* in her thesis, ‘Requestionner le genre: le trans au sein du théâtre de Heather Cassils, Alain Platel, Phia Ménard et Motus’ (2020). Her work aroused in me the desire to pursue her investigation, and to further develop the analysis of *Vortex*, which was initially a small part of my recent book, *Après le vieux jeu: La fiction dans le théâtre contemporain* (2021).

2. Since 2011, Phia Ménard has been regularly touring with *Vortex*; it was in Paris recently (November 2021), at the Théâtre National de la Danse, Chaillot.

A NARRATIVE IN ACTIONS

Like many other postdramatic shows, Phia Ménard's *Vortex* is without text; but unlike them, it is ultimately very narrative. *Vortex* proposes to the spectator a very clear course to follow: by a series of successive strippings, a body is extracted from its superimposed layers. Subjected to the action of a vertical whirlwind of air (the vortex), it is stripped of its overlapping skins, in successive steps that are so many struggles, in order to free, at the end, the 'troubled', combative, and fragile body of Phia Ménard. The show can be read as an autobiographical story, insofar as it seems to retrace the main stages of Phia Ménard's journey, as a performer and as a person. But it is also a tale of metamorphoses, which dilates the final moment of many fairy tales, the one where the vile or monstrous creature is transformed into a prince or princess.

From the very beginning, on the circular stage ringed by industrial fans, one can see the first figure as the incarnation of the unhappy conformity to the male gender. It is a huge stuffed figure of a man in a suit with dark glasses and white gloves, masked and engulfed in his clothes. Despite his size, despite his monstrous heaviness and slowness, the giant is an Invisible Man: his face covered with white strips immediately evokes the well-known hero of H. G. Wells's novel and the iconic face mask costume of Claude Rains in the 1933 horror classic by James Whale. The Invisible Man painstakingly shapes a human silhouette from a plastic bag, then watches it become, thanks to the wind that inflates it, a small coloured creature that struggles to stand up, then walks on the stage, then dances, and finally flies away, rising and falling with the wind, gradually joined by other small plastic bag creatures

that the man takes out of his pockets. This is the first stage of Ménard's journey: musical, poetic, virtuoso, it is the decisive encounter with the art of juggling, an essential step in Phia Ménard's artistic training.

After a moment of what Ménard calls 'anaesthesia',³ the puppet-master engages in a brutal hunt: he catches, tramples, lacerates, and throws away his Lilliputian creatures. It is only after having sacrificed the virtuosity of art that artistic maturity may come, with the double choice of the performance and the female gender. The Invisible Man and puppet-master now goes through a series of laborious moults, struggling with and against the wind, to get rid of his successive 'onion layers'. Clothes blown away, he strips off a first black skin, shiny as plastic, in what looks at first like a desperate fight against the grip and grasp of monstrous black snakes. Then it becomes a duel between two mythical creatures: the old black skin swollen by the wind to the dimensions of a giant, and a new white creature, of a thinner, more human but still undetermined form. The mythical black creature is defeated, and the third silhouette opens her belly to pull from it her long red entrails. With the wind rushing through, it becomes an organic enveloping veil, a protective and caressing canopy over the increasingly feminine and slender body. The woman can now extract herself from her last skin, a thin membrane that tears to reveal at last her hair, her face, her breasts, her true skin.

³. For Phia Ménard, to anaesthetise the spectators means to oblige them to 'be elsewhere in one's body', to put them in a state to be operated or woken up (Ménard 2018; my translation). In *Vortex*, the Invisible Man is momentarily anaesthetised by the enchanting flight of his creatures; but it makes his own invisibility intolerable, and he then destroys what he has created in order to begin his own rebirth process.

A BLOOMING OF FICTIONAL FIGURES

It is not necessary to know the biographical event — the chosen transformation by which Philippe Ménard became Phia Ménard — that looms in the background of this performance. For this event is re-lived by the spectator as an experience, thanks to the intensity of the performer's physical engagement, and also thanks to the fictional hinterland that gradually awakens.

The figure at the beginning is a kind of monstrous ogre that can, like any ogre, take on various forms, frightening or liberating — since they will eventually make a woman blossom at the end of the show. Over the course of the metamorphoses, we come across natural images (such as the cocoon, the larva, and the butterfly), but also legendary and artistic ones. The juggling moment with plastic bags can summon the figures of Pygmalion, Gulliver and the Lilliputians, or David fighting against Goliath. The fight to get rid of the black skin suggests the figures of Laocoon or Tiresias facing the snakes, but also *Alien*, or the polluted river of *Chihiro's Journey*; and the duel between the black and the white silhouettes those of the Golem, of the doppelgänger or the evil twin, that Dostoevsky's novels and a number of mythologies have used.

Most of all it is the figure of Marsyas that seems to prevail and give its meaning to the performance. We may not remember this story of the Greek mythology (the musical rivalry between Apollo and the satyr Marsyas, the consecutive victory, and the retaliation of the god who hangs Marsyas to a tree and flays him),⁴ but the idea of being flayed alive is strong enough in our fantasy (through medical and artistic

images,⁵ horror stories, and so on) to make it work in *Vortex*. In *Le Moi-peau* (1985), Didier Anzieu analyses the legend of Marsyas as a way of encoding that specific reality of the psyche that he calls the 'skin-ego'.⁶ He reviews the mythemes (minimal units) of the legend and shows their relationship with the functions of the skin as it appears in the psyche (as a maintaining and unifying envelope for the self). Many echoes of those mythemes can be found in *Vortex*: suspension as the negative version of human verticality (the plastic puppet trying to stand upright after its creation); the skin torn off but whole, as a protective envelope that can come back to life (the swollen, living black skin) and transform an evil fate into a beneficial one (after the duel with the black skin, comes the 'pregnant woman'); the skin as a pierced container that empties its content (the red entrails). And Anzieu finally adds to the legend a last mythical meaning linked to the skin: its destructive power (that we can find in the story of the Tunic of Nessus) can be reversed into a creative power, which consists of 'turning the skin imaginatively inside out like a glove, making the content into a container, the inner space into a key for structuring the outside, the inner feeling into a knowable reality' (1985: 52; my translation) — and this could summarise the whole performance.

The wind is the decisive disruptive element that Phia Ménard introduces into Anzieu's somewhat static vision to make it come alive, to make it tell a story of transformation. When the wind gives life to the plastic bags, they become a skin-container, but which contains emptiness;

← 4. See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2008), among many other ancient sources.

5. The torture of Marsyas was the subject of many paintings, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Guido Reni, Juseppe de Ribera, Luca Giordano, Titian, Rubens, etc.).

6. *The Skin-Ego* is the English translation of *Le Moi-peau* by Didier Anzieu (1985). Anzieu defines the skin-ego 'as a containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible' (1989: 98).

it is a moment of virtuosity and poetry, but based on emptiness — a form without content, like juggling in a way.⁷ After the ‘puppet prologue’, this function of the wind (to fill an empty container) returns a last time to give life to the black skin. But in the ‘Marsyas moment’, the wind plays another game: it does not fill but empties the container; it unveils, unrolls, and unwraps the supernumerary skins which cover the core of the body. And it is yet another game that the wind plays with the long red veil: the organic colour, the soft veil that dances around the (now apparent) body can remind us the serpentine dance of Loie Fuller,⁸ or the figures that rise in a whirlwind in Tiepolo’s domes, and the numerous paintings of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; they can also remind us the heavy red velvet of the baldachin, in *The Lock* of Fragonard, where the forms of the feminine and masculine sexual attributes can vaguely be guessed in the clutter of the unmade bed. After having been virtuoso, then violent, the wind has now become a way to caress and love the body. The wind was the means to explore the layers of meaning of the skin as a psychic reality, but also to put this reality in motion and make it tell stories.

Introducing her performance,⁹ Phia Ménard begins by asking us a rather banal question: beneath how many layers do we hide our true selves to protect them? This question can create the desire to get rid of these layers, at least in the protected cocoon of the theatre. But we are soon led elsewhere and further, by the gripping yet elusive materiality of the action (the fight with the wind), by the blossoming of archetypal and fictional figures, and also by the encircling device of the show. Gathered in a few rows around the circular stage, the public is very close to the performer. We encircle her and she involves us in her research. The object of this research is the body, the ultimate body, the finally true body, and the central questions, re-launched by each moult, become: where is the body finally? And what is the body?

In *Vortex*, the body functions as energy, but it is essentially presented as skin. We first admired the wonders of the skin, only to discover that it can be an empty container (the puppet moment). Then we experienced the labour of delivery, by skinning and emptying the body, in a desperate search of its core. Did we finally find a ‘real’ body? And is Phia Ménard’s final body ‘real’ because it would be free at last of all the layers of fiction that encumbered it? I do not think so. The last image of Phia Ménard’s body is that of a wet, fragile, and exhausted newborn, rather than that of a triumphant self. It does not provide a certain answer to the question ‘where and what is the body?’. This was only one of our possible births.

7. While acknowledging her debt to her training as a juggler, Phia Ménard considers that virtuosity was a mask which she used to escape the questioning of her position as a human being (Ménard 2016, para. 9; my translation).

8. Loie Fuller (1862–1928) was an American dancer who achieved international distinction for her technical innovations in lighting and costume, and her exploration of natural movements; she developed her serpentine dance as a variation on the popular ‘skirt dances’ of her time.

9. See her interview online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljF1MkxwX18> [accessed 4 may 2022].



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Vortex*, 2011
Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

At the very end, she is not naked, but she has become ‘touchable’ — and all the more so because she is now addressing us directly, as the exhausted performer that she also is. She tells us about her political struggle. There is no breaking effect, as when an actor steps out of his role: this body, born of the struggle in which we, the spectators, have participated, this body that has created images and fictions, simply speaks out, and the word emerges naturally, as if it were born of this struggle and of these images and fictions as well. Phia Ménard’s final body is ‘real’ because we feel that we could touch it and be touched by it. A ‘real’ body is only what we can touch and be touched by; from the beginning, it is a connected reality, created by relationship. According to Anzieu, our first envelope, essential for the future development of our psyche and consciousness, is mainly a sound and tactile envelope (1985: 159–60). What Winnicott called the caregiver’s ‘holding’ and ‘handling’ of the child’s body (Winnicott 1976: 37–55), along with the music of meaningful sounds, maintains, contains, protects, unifies, informs, and makes it sensitive and capable of love. It is a primary and founding experience, which can be ‘good enough’ or unhappy.

Vortex suggests the idea that an artistic form can be a way of re-enacting and re-experiencing it, or at least of reflecting on it. It seems that the performance goes through the various pathological forms (narcissism, aggressive violence, anguish, dissociation) that can result from the deficiencies of the skin-ego, to finally regain its beneficial protection. By turning her skin inside out like a glove, and making the content into a container, Phia Ménard’s *Vortex* succeeds in making her inner space and feeling into a structured and knowable reality. This has been achieved through a performance in which bodily perceptions and fictional images are intimately linked and constantly relaunch each other.

The reading of the many images and fictional figures that appear in *Vortex* is our job. Phia Ménard does not overplay them; they just appear for a brief moment, which we can capture or not. Like the real actor, Ménard reactivates a ‘primitive’ body, not yet subjected to the law of the image; her work is about organising and sharpening bodily sensations. In short, she reminds us that the body is a means of sensitive knowledge — and that it served essentially as such in the first place.

The idea that imagination is not only visual but also involves the sensory-motor system has been reinforced by the discovery by neuroscientists of the mirror neuron mechanism. Namely, the fact that when we watch one of our fellow human beings perform an action, the neurons activated are the same as when we perform this action ourselves. The discovery of mirror neurons makes the conventional division between perception and action obsolete and makes the process of intention-action-understanding an indivisible event. For the theatregoer, the resonance of the performed action is conditioned by the presence or absence of a real intention on the part of the actor (see Sofia 2016: 94–8). In performance, and particularly in *Vortex*, the physical commitment of the performer is equivalent to an extreme form of intention. But this resonance is also sharpened by an ‘attractive ambiguity’ that the actor creates around his action (ibid.). In performance, where the spectator cannot speculate on the character’s intention, this attractive ambiguity is often created by the presence of micro-fictions. In *Vortex*, the different phases of the performer’s struggle give rise to shreds of fiction that we may or may not pick up on, but whose seductive intensity we feel anyway, even unconsciously.

And at this point, we can return to the political issue of gender transition raised at the beginning: should we think of it in terms of a struggle between nature and culture, or in terms of a struggle between two (at least) cultural registers of sexual difference (one of which would be normative and the other dissident)? The shreds of fiction that are offered to us in *Vortex* are so many diverse answers provided by our culture to the question of difference and confusion (inside and between beings, inside and between sexes). By placing their reading in our hands, Phia Ménard leaves us free to choose the answers that resonate most with us — but she reminds us, without words, that they all belong to our common culture. As Paul B. Preciado puts it, ‘our sovereignty is not given to us by birth (it is not identity-based), it is made of a scaffolding of fiction, a kind of social exoskeleton that keeps us alive’ (Preciado 2018: para. 7; my translation).

Actors or performers mobilise the attention by composing their actions so as to intensify the sensory-motor resonance provoked in the spectator. To that scope, actors must refine their own body schema, which is neither conscious nor automatic, but pre-reflexive. They incorporate neuro-motor routines more sophisticated than their daily routines, more ambiguous, more surprising. They thus build themselves, by a specific training, a performative body schema (see Sofia 2016: 94–8).

In his tragic way, Antonin Artaud asked the theatre to be the means of remaking the body: ‘he sought a new anatomy in the theater by demanding a gestural language that could transform the actor’s body into a kind of “animated hieroglyph”’ (Noël 2001: para. 38; my translation). The desire for a new body or a second nature has taken various directions in the theatre, and its history keeps record of them (for example, Stanislavski’s ‘line of physical actions’ or Meyerhold’s bio-mechanics). But it is only in performances like *Vortex* that the idea of remaking one’s body may become ‘real’: because it is both the form and content of the

performance, its means and its meaning. The goal is always to make possible for the spectator the experience of a new world (perceived-acted differently), co-constituted with the actor-performer. But of course, a performance whose subject is the remaking of one’s body is a particularly suited place to highlight and fully realise this co-working — this remaking the body together.

SHARED SKIN

In *Vortex*, Phia Ménard’s body is a product, an instrument, and a vehicle of fictions. It does not embody anything precisely. It acts in the present, it performs. But while performing, it tells a contemporary story of transformation, and gives birth to legendary images. The spectator thus discovers new uses of very old fictions (one obviously thinks of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*). What was for a long time an imaginary experience (becoming another body) has become real today — without ceasing to be imaginary.

Vortex is a physical experience and a visual tale. We relive the stages of a long metamorphosis, where the body suffers as in the labour of childbirth; but, at the same time, we enjoy the thousand imaginary lives of a fictional body. The legendary and the concrete constantly refer to each other: an Assumption is triggered by the fans that line the stage and the plastic material is ‘such stuff as dreams are made on’. Thus, the contours of an encounter, of a contemporary intimacy, take shape. For intimacy, threatened today by what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘liquid life’ (2005), as well as by various forms of narcissistic overexposure, is first and foremost an intersubjective experience. As such, it is the opposite

of privatisation and appropriation. As an experience of otherness, it is a resource and a recourse against the cult of the all-powerful Ego. The intimacy that *Vortex* offers us is of course inserted in the public framework of the theatrical performance. But within this framework, the incompleteness, non-transparency, and fictionality of the self-narrative allow for intimacy. *Vortex* ultimately creates between the performer and the audience something like an artistic shared skin, an exchange of sensations and phantasies.

By focusing on a narrative, *Vortex*, though it is a performative show, demonstrates how fiction and reality are closely entangled. The performative gesture that creates a second reality by unfolding real phenomena reveals shimmers of fiction hidden in their folds. In doing so, it also makes us feel concretely what we know theoretically: that our body is essentially changing, transformable; that it is made of imaginary constructions as well as of inner sensations, outside encounters, and biologic data. And we are reminded that theatre is the place *par excellence* where our bodies can expand, join others, experience imaginary constructions unknown to us, including the most disturbing. •

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**THE BODY
THREATENED BY
DARK MATTER IN
PHIA MENARD'S
WORK**

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A bird believes that the day rises, sings and flies away in the dark night, deceived by this ‘poisoned ray’.¹ Blinded by the absence of light, his environment becomes hostile to him, hurts him, making him sink. It is with this short story, told in voice-over, after the light is extinguished in the audience, that the show *Les Os Noirs* (*The Black Bones*) (2018) begins.² The body of Chloée Sanchez is this bird threatened by the dark matter that devours the stage. During the show, Sanchez performs a solo, while some figures are there at given moments in the performance. I will call these figures ‘scouts’.³ They open and close the proscenium curtain between each act and have specific functions that I will describe later.

1. Expression used at the beginning of *Les Os Noirs* (2018).

2. The performance is no longer touring.

3. The characters are non-gendered, completely covered with black suits, and hooded. They hold a flashlight in their hands and draw the curtain between each act as one opens or closes the page of a chapter. I will use the term ‘scout’ (*éclaireurs* in French, which also means ‘who hold the light’) to designate these characters, although this is not a word used by Ménard and their function is diversified, as they do not only bring touches of light during the transitions but also participate fully in the darkness of the show.

In Phia Ménard's creations, the use of matter (ice, water, plastic, cardboard...) has *agentivity* (a power of action). It enters the stage and affects the scenic space as well as the bodies. The ice balls falling from the ceiling cool the body of the performer and risk knocking her out in *P.P.P.* (2008). The ice is also fought by the water to better dismantle the myth of the charming prince in *Belle D'Hier (Yesterday's Beauty)* (2015). The dark liquid which infiltrates through the defects in the paternal house destroys the walls in *Saison Sèche (Dry Season)* (2018). The cardboard puts to the test the resistance of Phia Ménard in *Maison Mère (Mother House)* (2017) before being annihilated by the water and hidden by the smoke. The wind animates the figures of *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn (The Afternoon of a Foehn)*⁴ (2011). The material is often of elementary origin or serves the architectural construction of the scenography. It is conceived as a play partner. It holds our attention, as a spectator, by its unpredictable, random characteristics. It has a capacity to surprise us, to destabilise the human body and to overflow from our horizon of expectation as well as from the stage frame.

In *Les Os Noirs*, the colour black is manipulated as a material itself. The symbolism and the physical properties associated with this colour are transferred to different materials (fabric, plastic, metal...): blackness invades and swallows other elements or contaminates them; blackness weakens the human presence and hinders access to the body; blackness, which prevents us from seeing, becomes the material of death in action. The materialised black embodies, on the fictional level, the darkness that surrounds the 'suicidal puppet', performed by Chloée

4. The title is a play on words. In French, the music of Claude Debussy to which Phia Ménard refers is called *L'après-Midi d'un faune*. She replaced the term 'faune' (faun) by 'foehn', which means a warm, dry wind that comes from the south. The French pronunciation of both words is very close. In this show, Phia Ménard makes plastic bags dance with the help of a wind tunnel.

Sanchez (Ménard n.d.: para. 3).⁵ Materiality and spirituality intertwine to propose a performance that plays with the senses, bringing together the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, reality and fantasy. In this essay, I will investigate how Phia Ménard makes the colour black an active material that threatens the real body of the performer and the fictional body of the 'character'.⁶

In order to act sensorially on the body, blackness is associated with three other elements: wind, light, and space. The first two are apparently immaterial and the last one is more conceptual, but all contribute to different aspects of perception. Schematically, wind relies on tactile or kinesthetic sensation as well as hearing. Light enables vision, and space engenders the apprehension of surfaces and depths. By this multiple alliance, the black ceases to be treated only as a colour — or a 'non-color' (Pastoureau 2016: 11). It is embodied materially, and it confronts the body of the performer. It also bathes it in symbolic references. I will analyse black as a constitutive element of theatre, but also as an invasive one. I will base my analysis on the study of the colour black, its history, its symbolism, as well as the concepts or founding narratives with which it is associated (for example, the association of black with mourning, or with the chaos that precedes the creation of the world). Additionally, I will draw a parallel with black as an element of painters and photographs. All these aspects ultimately construct the action.

5. It should be noted that Ménard is originally trained in circus. The allusion to puppetry is not a coincidence. She usually works with objects or material that she puts in movement. All citations from the description of *Les Os noirs*, provided on the company's website (Ménard n.d.), are my translations.

6. I will use the term 'character', not to refer to a traditional theatrical entity, but to distinguish the figures that emerge in each part from the performer although the fictional fabric is quite thin.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Belle D'Hier*, 2015
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BLACK AND WIND: A BODY OF FLESH TRANSCENDED BY A MORTUARY BREATH

Les Os Noirs is part of the cycle of ‘wind plays’, just like *Vortex* or *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*. In this performance, the wind is as an invisible presence that spectators can feel against their skin but never grasp. The wind evokes the ultimate hint of life, the final death rattle, death, or the memory of the disappeared.⁷ The wind animates — from *anima*, life, breath — the piece. It circulates from one act to another and sets the black materials in motion. For Ménard, ‘*Les Os Noirs* is a series of suicides and an accompaniment to the last breath’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 7). Thus, in the opening scene, it is with the wind that black waves of plastic rise. They slowly engulf the performer, whose pale body patiently awaits death. Covered with a black plastic tarpaulin, the stage swells progressively to become a turbulent sea that we can see nibbling one by one at the dancer’s limbs, in almost total darkness. The death of this figure comes slowly, almost cradles the body of the dancer who sinks without a cry. Only the sound of the wind blowing can be heard.

In this initial scene, the colour black is thus associated with the wind in order to make the body float before its complete disappearance. If the wind represents the immaterial or the spiritual as opposed to the bodily, the black is immediately associated with the death and the figure of Thanatos. The historian Michel Pastoureau, who has dedicated a large part of his research to the study of colours, recalls the

7. On Compagnie Non Nova’s website, Ménard writes: ‘They are revenants whose beauty I dig up in the act, I call them “black bones”’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 31).

founding and ambivalent role of black in several cosmogonies or foundation stories. In the Bible, darkness precedes the light that brings life. In the Big Bang theory, the dark matter is also the place of the expansion of the universe. And even if we consider the universe as an infinite thing having no beginning, ‘the founding image of a world made of darkness nevertheless imposes itself. This darkness would be the result of a matter absorbing all the electromagnetic energy that it could receive: a perfectly black world, matrix on one side, terrifying on the other’ (Pastoureau 2016: 35).

Throughout its history, black has alternated between sublimation and demonisation. Since antiquity, several conceptions of black have existed side by side, the most fundamental opposition of which is structured around brilliant black — *niger* in Latin, perceived positively, and matt black, associated with ugliness and dirtiness — *ater* (ibid.: 28). The pejorative dimension of the latter can still be perceived in terms such as ‘atrocious’ which have been derived from it (ibid.). Beyond this tension between sparkling, fertile black and debasing black, this colour becomes that of mourning. The presence of black in clothing is first observed from the second century BC among Roman magistrates (ibid.: 35), before becoming a common practice in Europe from the seventeenth century (ibid.: 135), and whose modalities will be more or less codified depending on the time and place. This association of black with death is found aesthetically in the Romantic and Gothic movements, exploiting the darkness of melancholy and the taste for the macabre. By covering the scene with black materials to evoke suicide and disappearance, Ménard is thus part of a chromatic tradition that is both social and artistic.

But it is not enough to isolate a body on a dark, dimly lit stage to create the feeling of imminent death. If the death of the different ‘characters’ performed by Chloé Sanchez is accepted by them because it is



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Les Os Noirs*, 2017
Performer: Chloée Sanchez
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

voluntary, the blackness nevertheless imposes itself as a threatening presence. It does not seem to frighten these characters, but it is constantly preparing to emerge, to take over, to annihilate the fictional body and the real body. To do this, Ménard seeks to provoke a haptic experience, calling upon the kinaesthesia and the tactile sense of the black. The combination of black and wind provokes an intimate and sensorial perception of the performance, notably because the director creates a system of wind circulation that subtly breaks the fourth wall. She explains that she wants to set up ‘a framing and a conditioning of the wind which will pass from one backstage to the other or sometimes directly towards the audience’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 44).

This discreet touching of the audience plunged into the darkness participates in a feeling of presence. The black breath of death slides out of the stage frame to tickle the neck or make the hairs on the skin stand up. And audibly, the wind takes over the scream that we can project, imagine. As the wind howls, the blackness becomes deafening and the still visible skin surface diminishes, the dress is carried away by the waves, a hand reappears before disappearing for good. The black and the wind combine a physical sensation (an impression left on the skin) with a phantasmatic projection, that of death in a sea and a darkest night. This creates a melancholic image (deep sadness, desire of death, Baudelaire’s spleen... etymologically ‘melancholy’ also means ‘black bile’). This image can notably refer to the ‘Ophelia complex’ studied by Gaston Bachelard, the projection of the image of Ophelia’s floating body (in *Hamlet*) on the representations associating water, night, and femininity (1984: 121).

This macabre wind continues to invade the scene in the following sequence, when the dancer’s body, stranded in a nightmarish no-man’s land, awakens. From the stage ground, forms gradually rise, evoking trees with blunt branches. They slowly swell. Imprisoned in this erectile

forest, which can metaphorically evoke sexual violence, the interpreter starts to run. She vainly seeks her way. In a fairy-tale atmosphere, she collapses twice. Her falls trigger a kind of howl that turns into a shrill alarm. It gives the impression that the sound is not external to her but restitutes her intimate perception of the situation. The progressive swelling of this howling forest creates the feeling that it threatens the performer’s body, attacks her. The trees erect themselves in a jerky movement and then remain twisted and pointed. The ‘scouts’, the black-suited figures briefly mentioned in the introduction, are part of this wounding landscape. They roam the stage with sticks or picks that they use to better erect the trees. But they remain invisible to the eyes of the young woman who continues to run, to collide with her environment.

This quest for an impossible path in a forest lit only by a ray of moonlight producing moving shadows evokes *Tom Thumb*. As the wind swells the trees and then lets them soften and fall on the collapsed body of the performer, the character seems out of breath and her breathing is panting. The forest breathes slowly, while the young woman suffocates in her own scream that reverberates and distorts in the stage space. This sensation of suffocation is due to the representation of a feeling of anguish. But it is also induced by the chromatic work carried out by Phia Ménard who explains that ‘saturation is one of the axes of [her] experimentation’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 3). These successive layers of black that are strategically superimposed on stage create different densities of blackness that give the feeling of a dead end, of suffocation. Black is everywhere, and, if it gives depth to some elements, it is to better enclose the body that is caught in its trap. The thin net of light that runs across the scene, overhanging it, makes the forest exist by accentuating its movement. It also creates just the right amount of light to better bring out the black and transform the shadows into new threatening spaces that pursue the performer. As in a three-dimensional painting by Pierre Soulages, Ménard plays with the black textures, their shape

and intensity. The flat, matt black of the shadows brings out the shiny black of the volumes. Here, we can feel how much Ménard is inspired by the art world.

In the second act, the wind takes two main forms. First, it is the monstrous growl of the thing that hides under a black rigid plastic cover. We hear a body, but it remains hidden, and its sound productions are sometimes like a human snoring, sometimes like an animal growl. Under the tarpaulin, which covers the entire stage, sharp blows are struck, provoking a noise of crumpled or brutally stretched plastic. The shape swells or flattens and then moves. It is disturbing because it is audible but invisible. It is stirring under the cover like a cancer that acts inside the body. Ménard speaks of the body of the performer as 'a tumor in the making' (Ménard n.d.: para. 28). The body is here present in the hollow. There is the real body which is hidden under the cover. And there is a more phantasmatic one (parasitic, gangrenous, sick body) which is expressed by the construction of a scenic organism made only of black, of breath, and of sound.

The theatrical device used by Phia Ménard allows us to hear and wonder about the performer's struggle with the plastic cover. As a spectator, however, we only see the agitated surface of the black tarpaulin. The performer's body is completely hidden. Thus, we only see the surface of this struggle and we do not have access to the heart of the action. Then, the black tarpaulin is gradually gathered, as the grunts become more human. A clear break occurs when the face of the dancer emerges, from behind. The scene resembles the sudden awakening from a nightmare or the passage to another dream. The performer finishes folding this immense dark blanket, forming a large, crumpled ball that she deposits on her belly. It looks like an immense weight, preventing her from getting up, leaving her nailed to the ground, moaning. The relationship is reversed: the dark matter is located on the body and shows

this time an external oppression that prevents all human movement. It especially prevents the bipedal posture that distinguishes us from most animals. The body of the dancer is reduced to a swarming thing, crushed by a formless mass. It is reduced to a continuous cry and a permanent pain that prevents humanity from expressing itself. The scene is understood as a mirror of the previous one. Grunts and screams answer each other. The inner fight gives way to the outer one. The surface spread on the stage and hiding the body is replaced by a crumpled ball put on the body.

When a scout removes this insurmountable weight — it is laughable at the same time, since it is only a plastic cover — another black wind takes over. A symbolically violent sequence takes place and 'loads' the body of Chloée Sanchez. The performer is undressed and then dressed by a scout. This scout then pushes her in an infernal round to the rhythm of the *Masquerade Waltz* by Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov. Sanchez then begins a round and dances in a more and more disarticulated way. She adopts an almost puppet-like posture (simple, jerky gestures, and a relaxed body, as if pulled by threads). This recalls, as previously noted, the fact that Phia Ménard comes from circus and usually works with objects and materials that she puts in motion. While the performer turns and repeats her gestures, she imitates a gravelly and masculine voice which gives her orders ('go run, go, we said what, faster than that...'). At other times, she uses a childish but worn-out feminine voice which mumbles politeness ('yes, yes, sorry, thanks, sorry...'). The round breaks a first time, then a second, to allow the dancer to pass thresholds. She clarifies her body state and her gestures when she then starts dancing again. She looks more and more like a doll manipulated by invisible threads. At the third stop, she freezes, looks at the audience, and then jumps out of the window of a white wall set up at the back of the stage with only a square hole open to nothingness. The wall collapses after her jump, producing a wave of air, again accompanied by a howl:

the wind carries the body away. The defenestration literally ends the alienating cycle. It cuts the breath of the performer who exhausts herself turning and spitting out words heard or pronounced, like a traumatic scene replayed in a loop in the memory.

In the third act, the wind turns into the sound and visual echo of a post-apocalyptic scene represented in a purified way. In a white room, lit by a cold light coming from the floor of the room, there is a pile of metallic remains reminiscent of graphite. The thin sheets of crumpled metal are agitated by a continuous breath that produces a high-pitched tinkling sound on contact. This sound is always unpleasant and is once again associated with darkness. From this heap, a humanoid silhouette emerges little by little. This silhouette is difficult to decipher: it is, indeed, covered with this metal which confers an allure of science fiction, like half a robot and half a knight in armour. A new struggle takes place: a body seeks to find its form, its figure, its humanity by removing this layer of noisy dirt which covers it. The pieces that envelop it are torn off one by one like a crust and fall back to the ground. The pile of metallic remains becomes a mass grave, this external skin blending perfectly with the environment from which emerges another body. This second body is reduced, fragile, deformed. It gives the sensation of being burnt. This double is carried by the performer who manages to extract herself from her metallic envelope. She carries it delicately and rests it on the ground, an inanimate thing among others. Only the wind agitates these metaphorical human remains and makes them tinkle. The wind — even the air — combines with the darkness and the sound — breath, grunting, screams, tinkling — to make the scenic environment as a gigantic body that shudders, breathes, or expels its suffering. Becoming a quasi-tactile and constantly audible presence, this black wind circulates from the stage to the audience to give the sensation of an imminent death. It seems ready to cover the body of the character and the performer from one moment to another.

BLACK AND LIGHT: ON THE TRACKS OF A BODY ALREADY SWALLOWED BY DEATH

The devouring and threatening dimension of dark matter works by saturation. But it also acts thanks to the contrast and the creation of a universe apart from the world. It's a universe in black and white, from which the other colours are excluded. Michel Pastoureau reminds us that black has been considered for several centuries as a 'non-color':

As the white its companion, to which of the remainder it was not always bound, the black had gradually lost its status of color between the end of the Middle Ages and the XVIII^e century: the appearance of the printing and the engraved image — with the black ink on white paper — had given to these two colors a particular position that the Protestant Reformation initially, the scientific progress then had finished by locating outside the world of the colors. (Pastoureau 2016: 11)

The coloured spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), elaborated by Isaac Newton around 1665 and 1666, excludes definitively the black. The white remains associated there since the colours compose the white light. The combination of black and white is then built-in opposition to other colours. The very conception of *Les Os Noirs* as 'a series of achrome paintings' testifies to this dualistic heritage (Ménard n.d.: para. 21).

Ménard explains that she sees her performance as ‘photographic and sensory prints’ (ibid.: para. 2). She evokes her ‘need for aestheticism [which] involves reflections, the impression of an image’ (ibid.: para. 2). Specifically, the chromatic strategy adopted is based on the contrast between black and white, the reflection of light, and the scenic exploration of the principle of photographic revelation (the scenes emerge little by little from the black). These scenographic choices are complemented by a relationship to time, also of the order of the instantaneous. Ménard proposes to the spectators to seize fugitive moments. The sequences are mostly built-in crescendos followed by a sharp stop. Meanwhile, she establishes a melancholic feeling via this two-colour universe which can be associated with the notion of past. The white body of the interpreter, who is agitated or revealed by the scene, prints itself on the black. It emerges and stands out, like a white trace on the black matter, giving the sensation of retinal persistence. It is a body that crosses temporalities, still in action, but already swallowed by death. The flashes of light also allow us to see the dark. Symbolically, the light, associated with spirituality, immateriality, even transcendence, is opposed to the black, which is on the side of the body, of materiality, and of its fatal destiny. The body then seems ghostly. This world, all in negative, is always to be understood according to the play of the mirror. What the black environment reveals is the capacity of the body to disappear, to become dark matter too. And when the body is already camouflaged by obscure matters, when it is more object than human — when it melts in the scenography and is situated more on the side of the corpse, of what ceased to embody an identity — it evokes the last suspicion of life, the ultimate material resistance before the passage to the act.

By installing this two-colour universe, Ménard chooses to impact the spectators’ sensoriality to better make them experience the sensation of a threshold, of a definitive passage from one state of body to another. As a complement to the manipulation of the wind, Ménard decides to

play with sensory deprivation. The dark allows a momentary alteration of the sight which, paradoxically, is considered as pertaining to ‘an extreme sensory’.⁸ To perceive less in order to better experience, or to perceive differently. The director thus develops a strategy of sensory displacement. She resorts to the haptic sensation and to the apprehension of volumes to experiment the performance under another angle since ‘the manipulated or flying elements [are] textured in the black tones to develop the curiosity of recognition of the matter and their transfigurations’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 45). The black becomes palpable.

This dark matter is the trace of a dead body seized in its ultimate startlement, and it is revealed, literally, by its alliance with the light. It is the reflections of the light which, associated with the sound, make it possible to guess the body under the sheet. It is also the white dress which floats on the surface of the waves which testifies to the disappearance. Finally, it is the scene of the waltzing ‘doll’ that is staged like a Polaroid photograph: the back wall of the stage is bright white, with only a square window looking out onto the dark, and it is in this frame that the performer turns one last time towards the audience by standing on its edge before jumping. The light captures in a fatal flash a series of moments of tilt, hence the comparison that Ménard makes with archaeology:

The form is archaeological. A superimposition of layers whose rebirth we are going to attend according to the excavations. It tears off the ground in search of what preceded it. She identifies what we have become by the exhumation of traces and memories. It is her body that abandons

⁸. The full quotation from which this notion of ‘an extreme sensory’ is taken reads as follows: ‘From the light to the dark, it is through this prism that I conceive the rupture. To enter the dark, to put oneself in the shelter of the light or to extract oneself from the day, as a premise to extract oneself from the world of the living. What I imagine to be of an extreme sensory, a dark poem’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 20).

itself to each new disappearance. We follow her in the reintegration of a distant carnality. Forms reappear, stories in snatches, spectres and glimmers. (Ménard n.d.: para. 24)

The stage, painted in black, underlined by some traces of white, hides the real body of the performer while enhancing her fictive disappearance. Thus, different layers of bodies are superimposed, engaging the spectators to carry out a search. Spectators explore the bodily memory that is staged: the body of Chloée Sanchez acts as a memorial sepulchre of other stories. But they also try to distinguish the symbolic, real, and fictitious bodies nested in each other. The final swallowing is presented as a constant threat. But it is always perceptible, just as the black absorbs colours but reflects light according to the texture that composes it.

A BLACK SPACE: THE BODY ISOLATED IN A DISPROPORTIONATE ENVIRONMENT

The swallowing achieved by the black matter is fed by the construction of space, with the management of volumes and scales. Like white, black is a colour conducive to projection, imagination, and fantasy. It is the colour of the screens that are then filled with images, but it is also a colour favourable to mythical stories. From the fertile black of the caves — places of rituals and ancestral creation — to the black of the labyrinths sheltering monsters, passing by Hell in all its variations or by the Platonic cave and all the imaginary of the prison or the dungeons (Pastoureau 2016: 22), black is sometimes the space from which one does not return and sometimes the one from which emerge magical beings and things. Ménard generally thinks of her works as Herculean works.⁹ She seeks here to ‘bring back a mythical meaning’, through images recalling, for example, the story of Persephone or the image of the woman married to death: ‘She [the character] is the image of virginity that plays with death’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 4).

Despite its performative and non-linear nature, the piece uses more traditional theatrical elements. It is guided by a sense of tragic

⁹. Phia Ménard asks the dancers of *Belle d’Hier* to ‘do the world’s laundry’ and the ones of *Saison Sèche* to ‘destroy the patriarch’s house’ (Phia Ménard, unpublished interview with the author, 2018).

inevitability¹⁰ and is based on immemorial stories of death, war (external or internal), or violence.¹¹ And it is the size of the space that restores this sensation of a power game, of a superpower that dominates the characters. Phia Ménard speaks of ‘oversized moving black matter’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 22). These materials allow the body to be lost, to give the feeling of its fragility in front of a universe too big for it, as when the body is swallowed up by the waves or covered by the immense tarpaulin. The monochrome or bichrome environment also produces the impression that no way out is possible, as when the performer runs in the middle of the ghostly forest or turns in circles like a music box doll.

The role of the characters I have called ‘scouts’ is also intimately linked to the space and its fatal dimension. They are not only opening and closing each act, but they work as external presences that set up the stage space and create a temporal sequencing. They intervene at rare moments on stage: for example, in the first act, they help some trees to stand up, completing the action of the wind. They completely ignore the performer who does not seem to see them. Then, in act two, they undress the performer, put her in a more childish dress, and push her to initiate her circular movement. They are like manipulators or external forces, mostly unseen by the dancer or indifferent to her drama. They are there to put in place the elements essential to the ultimate outcome and to watch over the character’s fate. Thus, hovering the sense of a higher power, they are the visible cogs (for the spectators) of a gear that goes beyond each character. This gear refers both to the tragic tradition and to the perception of society as a ‘device’ (*dispositif*), a field

10. ‘The act of suicide has always accompanied me, like the hemlock in the pocket of the resistant, without compromise. It follows in our footsteps from the moment it appears to us as a possible way out/ [...] The suicide victim does not need moral, he/she is in the certainty of his/her gesture’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 17).

11. ‘There she is, scattered in the middle of a cold earth, barely out of a trench, searching for her burned limbs, breath as her only link to life’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 29).

of reciprocal influences, as described by Michel Foucault in the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*) ([1976] 1994: 99). These scouts fold and unfold the space of the drama or contribute to its strangeness and sense of perdition. This is notably the case at the end of the first act when a slightly transparent curtain falls and flashlight lights criss-cross it, looking for something or someone. These lights have a magical aspect, they remind us of fireflies carrying hope. But they can also remind us of the light of a doctor’s lamp that sneaks under the eyelid, when he checks if the patient sees and remains conscious. The presences behind the lamps are vaguely distinguishable and form unidentifiable silhouettes in a black space, also confused and blurred.

The creation of these limbos on stage or of these very large spaces, also allows the derealisation the environment, to show the human body itself as a thing, a puppet. Ménard explains having conceived the scenography as a gigantic puppet booth (Ménard n.d.: para. 44). The puppet deals with the notions of animate and inanimate, which, once again, recalls Ménard’s initial training in circus. The body that emerges is thus manipulated by invisible hands, while the size or smallness (the white room in the last act) of the space conditions the states of the body (confinement, isolation, repetition) in a non-naturalistic aesthetic. Since the director is less interested in the cause of the suicide than in the ‘preparation of the act’ (ibid.: para. 18), particular attention is paid to the concrete elements, to the space, to the material, and to the way of using them to manufacture a desired death. The scenography is thought as an organism with a rather mechanical functioning, recalling the image of the clock or the machine regulated by the hands of God which is used by René Descartes in *Le Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on Method*) to evoke the functioning of nature ([1637] 2004: 58): a cause generates an effect, matter induces a device of putting to death, a space generates a bodily state preceding the death.

CONCLUSION

With *Les Os Noirs*, Phia Ménard creates a framework of aesthetic experimentation around the representation of suicide. She manipulates the wind, the light, and the space as parameters allowing the measurement of the black, to grant it different characteristics. The black is sometimes fluid and spread on the stage like water, sometimes rigid, erectile, all in volume. Shiny (the waves, the metal), matt (the shadows), or highlighted by a contrast (the white wall, the white room), the black traps the body of the performer, imprisons it, hits it, covers it, or makes it seem ridiculously small. As for the fictive body, it seems sometimes assaulted, sometimes soothed by this chromatic universe that reflects its anxieties, its sufferings, or its memories. It summons, at the same time, the notion of mental space and a Romantic heritage based on the parallel between the external landscape and the emotional state of the main character. The use of black as a material allows for both the symbolic play of colour and the working of the senses (hearing, sight, kinaesthetic and tactile sensations) of both the dancer and the spectators. Such use of colour can be seen as the use of a ‘super-stimulus’, as described by Erin Hurley (2010: 24). In his work, Hurley discusses Dion Boucicault’s 1858 staging of *The Poor of New York*, in which the ubiquitous use of red serves to evoke fire and put the spectators in an emotional state of alertness. He also mentions Wassily Kandinsky’s willingness, in his piece *The Yellow Sound*, to feature all-yellow colossi. According to Hurley, Dion Boucicault and Wassily Kandinsky ‘expanded color from a point of punctuation to fill the visual field and, thereby, increased its affective impact’ (ibid.). Phia Ménard updates this ultra-sensorial use of colour by also playing with the borders of non-perception in order to better evoke death. This question of the threshold, to be crossed or not to be crossed, finally allows a treatment of the black as a colour of the passage opening on the possibility of a ritual-intimate, funerary, memorial in *Les Os Noirs*. •

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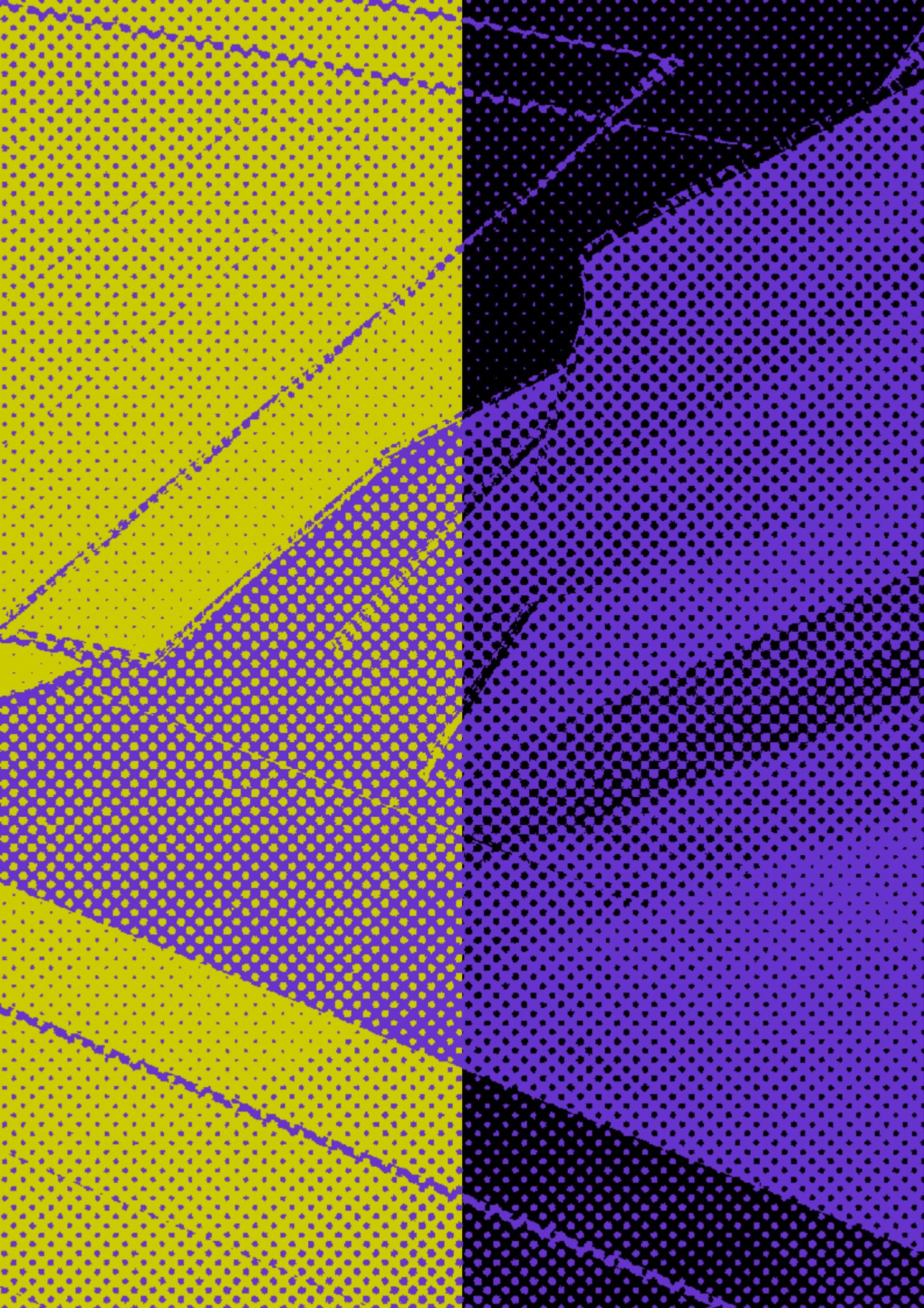


PHIA MÉNARD

**ESTABLISHING THE
RELATIONSHIP OF
MATTER TO THE
COSMOS**

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TRANSLATION



In this conversation, collected in January 2022, Phia Ménard looks back at the creation of *Mother House* (2018), the first part of *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (For Europe)*. She places this work in her broader relationship to the elements, and the way they orient her writing and guide her creative process. Meeting at the crossroads of installation and performance art, she summons up new imagery, perspectives, and gestures that shift our foundational myths. It is up to the spectator to accept this invitation and be mesmerised, to embrace the singularity of the rhythms and durations, to let their imagination run free: in other words, to pay attention in another way, more intensely.

FROM MATTER TO THE COSMOS

In your work, you cohabit with the elements, and often, in the most literal sense of the word, you face them. How do you approach this relationship with materials?

It may sound strange, but I think I am very animistic, and I am becoming more and more so. My approach and relationship with matter is almost spiritual. I find myself talking to my plants with joy, delighting in touching their soil. I love having conversations with them — it's like a feeling of the cosmos. But it's a simple relationship. When I started working with ice, I quickly developed a relationship of equals. I wasn't going to be there to control it, but to follow its movements. To consider its presence, its power, which is much stronger than mine. I believe it's the only way to relate to a material nowadays. To surrender to the material and accept what it is, rather than asking it to be what I would like it to be. Any relationship I may have now, I start writing when any kind of matter comes into play, is really a relationship with a partner. And it is a relationship that is more important because it is a common partner. Shared between the audience and I, it brings us together. My approach to using materials keeps bringing me closer, not to virtuosity, but rather to sharing knowledge.

In what I hear of this relationship with the material partner, there is a kind of negotiation, but also an intention of dialogue, a striving for agreement. However, one has the impression that this negotiation passes through a confrontation. In other words, some sort of struggle to be led in front of the material, which forces you to comply with its intentions. Does this kind of confrontation also reflect your relationship with the elements?

Yes, for the viewer it seems to be a confrontation. But for me, and at every moment, it is a sharing relationship. If I take the wind, it gives and shares with me an energy, and, at the same time, a trace. All the elements will come to nourish a certain relationship, which is almost an 'animal' relationship. This is also why it is very ritualised. All my relationship with material is within the ritual. This is because it's in the ritual that we pay it the most beautiful tributes, and we assign a value to it again. It is also through ritual that theatre expresses itself. It's in that precise place that I want to summon the relationship to materials. Finally, it's the combination of the matter's energy and my own animality, which knows how to play with the matter. When I look at raptors, they know how to play with the wind and with ascendant currents admirably well. All of this brings me closer to a relationship where I would almost have the desire for matter to be stronger than us. To have this humility, which is perhaps what we are experiencing little by little with global warming. When the wind becomes a storm and can no longer be controlled, we go back to a certain kind of humbleness and, at the same time, fear begins. And it's this fear, perhaps, that will finally lead us to humility.

Beyond the humility that matter forces you to consent to, what is the larger effect it has on your presence on stage?

I think my presence is affected in that the viewer sees something that might not exist. For example, one could very well have water on a stage and not consider it at all. We would completely miss out on something that connects us. What does it mean to walk in a space that is soaked? What comes out of it? What smells? What stories? What traces? I think that my enjoyment of the approach to materials is what constantly questions me about what I am. In *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales* (2021), when I think of the end of *Mother House*, when the flood comes, it is certainly one of the most beautiful yet hardest moments. We see several elements of humanity collapsing. We're confronted with the impossibility



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of looking away, of ignoring the catastrophe, of not wanting to face the catastrophe. It is also impossible not to feel the cold of this material that reflects life, because only the living feels the cold.

These materials, are they also alive? Coming back to the previous question of animism,¹ is your constant work with materials what allows you to say they're alive?

Yes, they have a life of their own. Obviously, there is a real gap with the question of life and the question of awareness of life, but of course they live. The water that flows in a certain shape on a stage simply lives because the floor is not necessarily level, the water follows its path. We cannot say that water is inert, principally because it is subject to the laws of gravity, like us. Maybe the most incredible life force is the one that reminds us of gravity. This is perhaps the starting point of my work; the whole process is constantly linked to gravity. If I take *Mother House*, the cardboard Parthenon has a weight, and can only be constructed because there is gravity. That forces me to put the bases that support the building here or there. *Father Temple* is also a constant gravitational challenge. And then, with the last scene of *The Forbidden Encounter*, it's the question of coming down to find a place where gravity is controllable. The paint that I hurl in this scene has an effect only because it falls due to gravity. So, I think that yes, matter lives because it is reactive to a force and reactive to the cosmos. This is where it becomes obvious to me, that relationship is what is alive.

Has this question of gravity, which is at the heart of The Trilogy, always been so important in your performances, and more broadly in your artistic career?

¹ In relation to this question, see issue 3 of *Revue Corps-Objet-Image* on 'Ré-animation', to which Phia Ménard contributed. This issue tests the hypothesis that artists re-engage animism and its 'weird' resurgences, disrupting ordinary experiences of our modern naturalism (see Damian 2018).

It always has been. My artistic practice began with juggling, and juggling is an act of defying gravity. I just resonated with that question. The moment I discovered a healthy relationship to my existence was the moment I understood that my body can defy the laws of gravity. The permanent struggle with this force has an incredible transcendence. It was also the first moment when I became aware of this cosmic relationship. Coming from a mostly atheist working class, spirituality was always very distant but at that point it became a spiritual relationship — cosmic — and juggling balls became planets. The expression of the body became a pressing matter. The challenge of balancing the object, not falling, took a bigger scope that is both existential and metaphorical, could be compared to the feeling you have when you play music. The moment you understand the notes and you don't have to look for them anymore, you realise that you are opening a kind of infinity — a cosmos. The relationship that we can establish immediately with a material becomes a cosmos.

AT THE RISK OF FAILURE: THE UNTAMABLE PART OF ELEMENTS

I would like to return to the construction of the Parthenon in Mother House. You start with a very confident pace and sharp gestures, perfectly cadenced. Then you begin folding and taping the cardboard. Little by little this mechanism jams. You face forces that destabilise you, that wrestle you. It is clear that this destabilisation is not fake, you do not feign it. How do you deal with this unpredictable and threatening part of the object, that could possibly make you lose all control?

This is precisely what I'm looking for. In *Vortex* (2011), there is a moment where I dance with my own skin, which is bigger than me and with which I am in a relationship of desire. Except that I don't control this skin. It's the wind that controls it, and it's a form of despair when I see it fade away from me. This is also the moment when it becomes absolutely enjoyable. Finally, you have a real partner. And the viewer sees this partner. In *Mother House*, when the house starts to begin its collapse and needs to be tipped over, you give that house the value of Hercules. You give it symbols, you give it names, you enter the myth. In the same way, when Punk-Athena begins and leads her combat on stage, you lend her the fights of Ulysses in his Odyssey.

There is all the symbolism that opens this form of combat threatening your mastery and grasp. Concretely, what kind of attention do you call for in these moments?

I have never been an animal tamer, nor have I ever been a fan of animal taming. However, one day while I was on tour in Russia, I saw an animal tamer at the Moscow circus with two animals that are worst enemies: the tiger and the elephant. I was on the edge of the cage, and what I found quite incredible was that the part left to chance was monstrous. The only thing the tamer could do was to be the little mouse that is there and says from time to time: 'maybe we could do that'; that is, to have the role of mediator. And as a mediator, to accept a certain number of given elements. I think we stand at somewhat the same place. I realise that when I play with a material — and I think this can be found in Johann Le Guillerm's work — we know that something is happening. We accept this something and take it as an event that will allow us to find a new sensation, yet also to discover where the danger is. That is to ask: at what point do we approach risk and danger? And what is the risk, what is the danger? The beauty for me is in all the moments when something fails. You don't necessarily succeed on the first try. You really enter a true personalisation and incarnation of the material.

You speak of failure. Is there a real risk of failure in the assembly of the Parthenon?

Yes, it is certain that there are risks: it can tear, it can reopen completely... anything is possible. It is also the limits of this performance that are interesting. I know what would be effective and easy, but I choose not to take it. I want it to be uncertain. It's like an ascension, when you've already climbed to the summit, you take the path, but see something new. That flow wasn't as solid as you thought. You've been through it already, but the second time around, you're not sure if it will hold. Yet something inside you makes you say: 'Of course, I have to take it!'. In *Father Temple*, the path of the four slaves who climb the tower is an extremely treacherous path. It only takes a few misplaced props for it to go wrong. And there we could really talk about danger.

THE LOGIC OF ANESTHESIA: CAPTURING ATTENTION CHALLENGING IT OVER TIME

You speak often of 'anaesthesia' to describe the way of seizing the viewer's attention and making them aware of the importance of what is happening. Could you be more specific as to how you achieve this?

We can take *P.P.P.* (2008), for example, which is the first play where I used this. You would walk into a room that was cold. When you came in, the first thing you saw was a beautiful device with smoking ice spheres hanging from the ceiling. You'd see your friends, you'd look at them, you'd call them, and then at one point one sphere would drop



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from the ceiling. The noise would be so loud that everyone would look back at the stage. You'd discover that on this stage, one of the hundred and twenty hanging spheres has fallen to the floor. At that moment, you realise that I am in fact under this ceiling, and the 'anaesthesia' is built up. You suddenly realise and think to yourself: 'Am I going to witness a suicide? What's going on?'

In *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn (The Afternoon of a Foehn)* (2011), in *Vortex* (2011), the process of transforming from plastic bag into a puppet is very long. I often say when I am in *Vortex* that I hear in the bodies of the viewers going: 'I hope that this isn't what she's going to do for the whole show!'. So, the question is: how do we get the viewer to be willing to 'be there'? How do we captivate their attention, as they are a very active in society? So, you have to be able to get their attention, and that's what I'm always working on. It is when I have found the form of their 'anaesthesia' that I begin writing the show. In *Mother House*, the 'anaesthesia' operates from the beginning when the spectator notices that I am there, when they see that I am looking at them. By the time I decide to get up, I have given them enough time to stop and wind down. And when I start to go around the cardboard that covers the floor and stop for a while at each corner of the stage, the audience thinks: 'it's going to be long!'

Concerning this work on time, waiting, and duration, it participates in affecting the attention of the viewer and creating this effect of 'anaesthesia'. But more broadly speaking, what do these temporal experiences inspire you?

I think that first of all it is a 'reappropriation'. I mean, the fact of reappropriating temporality and with it, the senses. Today, the times we allow ourselves to focus, to be 'isolated with others', are very rare. There are only a few places that can induce them, and the theatre has that power. The cinema has almost lost it, in the sense that the economic efficiency demanded makes it very rare today to see a film in the way

the director intended it. A few years ago, when Lars Von Trier created *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) with Björk, the rule was that for the first five minutes of the film's screening, the rooms were to remain dark, so that only the music was played. I was lucky enough to see it in an alternative cinema that respected these conditions, but many cinemas never respected them. The artist's proposal to enter this space through sound for five minutes before the slightest image is a proposal to reappropriate one's senses. This is also why I say that temporality is a reappropriation of oneself and of the senses. When you become bored your senses awake. You suddenly start to feel your body. You start hearing your heart, you start to be able to interpret your breath. You become aware of your touch; the slightest noise becomes matter. It's also frightening, the fear of being with yourself. As soon as we have time, we find ourselves.

CREATION PROCESSES: BETWEEN LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES, MAKING MATERIALS WORK

We can say that dramaturgy is a way of writing time, arranging actions and durations. During the creative process, how did you come up the dramaturgy of Mother House? Is it the building process that imposed the temporal structure? Did the materials prescribe the logic of actions?

In fact, it's the exact combination of the principle of assembly, the fragility and weight of the material. During the creation, all the dramaturgy

as well as the way we want to set up the event, comes as required by the material. At first, I thought that a cloud had to appear over the Parthenon during its assembly. It was in testing this idea that we realised that it was more interesting to make smoke go down in the rain. It created a sort of inversion of the image, with an outstanding scenic effect. In dramaturgy, we work simultaneously on the relation to the materials, to the space, and to the sound, which plays a very important part. In *Mother House*, we worked in particular on time-lapse effects, and on the inclusion of the audience in the sound space. All these elements gave birth to the dramaturgy.

With Mother House, in order to optimise this use of materials, did you consult with builders, model makers, or architects?

Not at all. We do everything empirically, which is also part of the creative process. When I made the 'Wind Performances',² if I had asked an engineer to draw or give me a wind prototype to do my shows, he would certainly have given me an equation. But what would I have done with this equation? Because what interests me the most in an equation, is the human factor. For *Mother House*, when we decided to work with cardboard, we choose to do it in a very rough way. It's always our experimentation that's going to define how I'm going to write. Without that, it's like working with a set. I never want to work on sets. I work on my scenery by asking myself: what is a scenography that will live? My team and I are permanently playing the sorcerers' apprentices. It is also an extremely rewarding phase for us. We have our desires, but like any cook who would like to bring out a taste or achieve a certain shape, failure can happen. So, we analyse, we discuss, and this teamwork feeds our desire to create together, embarking on an adventure without knowing if we will succeed.

2. *Laisse les gondoles à Venise !* (2005), *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn* (2008 for 'Version 1'; 2011), *Vortex* (2011), *Les Os Noirs* (2017).

'PERFORMANCE-INSTALLATION': GESTURES AND IMAGERY

I would like to come back to the expression 'performance-installation' that you have used sometimes. It seems to me to be a fruitful way of naming the decompartmentalisation of the scenic and the plastic arts, going beyond the assigned categories. In what sense do you use this expression, and what does it inspire in you?

I think it's a way of saying that everything that will be created on stage will not be created beforehand but will be visible to the viewer. This principle of installation immediately refers to the performance, since if it's made under the gaze of the viewer, it cannot be treated like a simple assembly. This is what also supposes that this principle of installation is staged, that it brings the question of dramaturgy and creates a path that leads to a form of story. The viewer will be the custodian, they're the one who will tell the story.

When you speak of 'installation', is it in the way this term is used in the field of contemporary art?

It's not exactly from that perspective. If we take *Mother House*, we can say that when the show ends, an installation remains. An installation we could keep. This also means that when we stop, the state of the object and the trace that remains say something.

In Mother House, there is also the process of installing which tilts the question of installation. What is specific about these installation gestures compared to the gestural grammar that you are used to?

These gestures are hugely banal. And it's because they are so commonplace that they become interesting to question. All of these small gestures, like pulling on tape that can break, is an opportunity to say: 'how about I pull the tape to see if it moves? Just for fun? What's stopping me from doing this?'. We come to question our docility and what we conform to. It is also because we start from the banal and a very simple gesture that we can begin to mess around. We take a piece of tape we realise that we missed, we roll it into a ball, and inevitably we're filled with desire to throw it.

The act of installing allows Mother House to summon these ordinary gestures. In other creations, did you already conduct this research on the qualities of a simple gesture?

I think that in *Mother House* it is the first time that I completely own it. And it was extremely important that this banality was at the service of boredom. The previous plays were always linked to choreography. I think back to Théo Mercier and Steven Michel's project putting together this closet [in *Affordable Solution for Better Living*, 2018], and it's kind of the same thing. You have to get something together. Then you either try to do a Monsieur Hulot-style set-up [in the film by Jacques Tati], and it doesn't end up at all the way you planned so, you add a piece of tape to make it stick. Or you take Athena's style. At the time I decided to embody her, Athena had to do very ordinary things, when everyone is expecting extraordinary things from her. The only thing that comes out of banality is that she cuts the columns with a chainsaw. Suddenly, her warrior side awakens.

One last word to end this conversation, echoing the initial question about your relationship to the elements: if you were an element, which one would you be?

Water, because it has the most transformations. •

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PORTFOLIO
PHIA MÉNARD
& COMPAGNIE
NON NOVA

P.P.P., 2008

Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean Luc Beaujault



L'après-midi d'un foehn, 2011

Performer: Cécile Briand
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Vortex, 2011

Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Vortex, 2011

Performer: Phia Ménard
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Belle d'Hier, 2015

Performers: Isabelle Bats, Cécile Cozzolino, Géraldine Pochon, Marlène Rostaing, Jeanne Vallauri
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Les Os Noirs, 2017

Performer: Chloée Sanchez
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Les Os Noirs, 2017

Performer: Chloée Sanchez
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Saison Sèche, 2018

Performers: Marion Blondeau, Anna Gaiotti, Elise Legros,
Phia Ménard, Marlène Rostaing, Marion Parpirolles,
Jeanne Vallauri, Amandine Vandroth
© Jean Luc Beaujault



Saison Sèche, 2018

Performers: Marion Blondeau, Anna Gaiotti, Elise Legros, Phia Ménard, Marlène Rostaing,
Marion Parpirolles, Jeanne Vallauri, Amandine Vandroth
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Maison Mère, 2017

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Maison Mère, 2017

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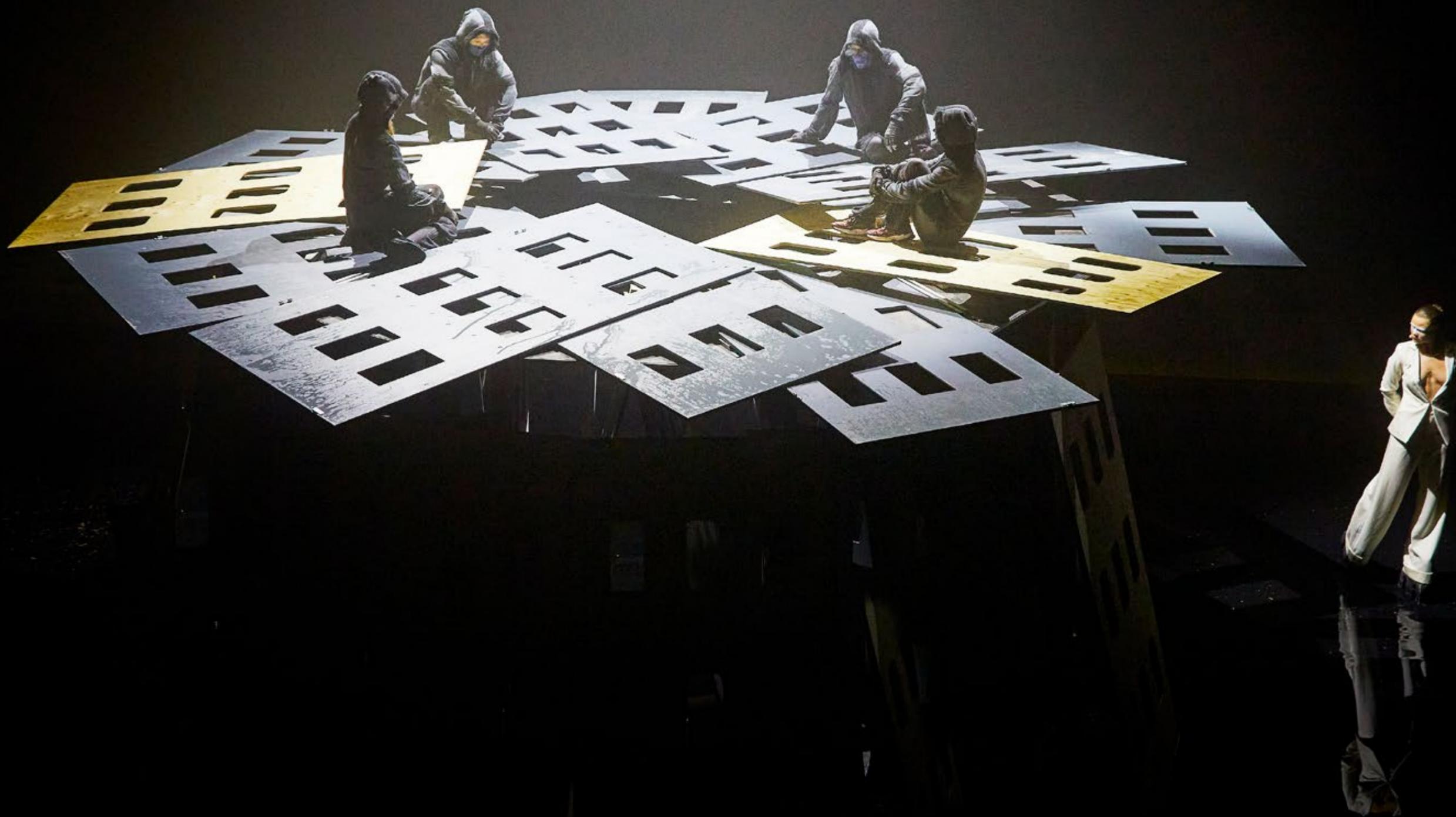
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