

A photographer and a dancer, both from the periphery of the Folkwang school, come together in an archetype of dance: the revue as a formal language. Spatial experiences and food for thought are guaranteed in WILHELM GROENER's work. By Edith Boxberger

Karl Valentin remarking to the stage manager of the Deutsche Theater: "You always said, the scen'ry is the background! So here we are standing behind it – so now it's the foreground! Mind ya, ya can't be careful enough with such allegations!"

In her first video pieces, Mariola Groener, discovered what would later become a central principle of her work. As she deconstructed the recordings of everyday life into individual images, something surprising happened: harmless laughter suddenly took a sinister quality. In the distension of time, so the visual artist realized, another space opens up, a space, in which there is much room for projection and ambiguity. Günther Wilhelm always had a proclivity towards the isolation of movement. To separate arm and leg work, split individual movements into their elements, was something like a second nature. As the dancer and choreographer studied butoh, he encountered another understanding of time—heavily expanded time that in the process enlarges the space it is in.

EXPANSION AND DECONSTRUCTION

Two correlating systems, which became the point of departure for a collaborative work process. When Mariola Groener and Günther Wilhelm began making pieces together six years ago, they brought with them different art forms as well as separate points of view. The precise observation of movement, the division of movement and filmic images and their assembly into a whole are the basis of their work. This implied two aspects: that, since things could obviously be regarded from various points of view, the decisive factor was the perspective adopted, something which could be fundamentally altered and: that the things revealed in the process have very different, often contrary sides to them and are Janus-faced. Duality is everywhere: it determines time, space and the body.

Duality is also directly written into their collaborative work. Mariola Groener and Günther Wilhelm make up the art figure WILHELM GROENER with which they explore a space beyond that of their own individual disciplines, created through the ensuing extension of the cross-section of their work.

Mariola Groener, trained in photography and audio-visual media at the Folkwangschule, and Günther Wilhelm, who worked with VA Wölfl's Neuer Tanz for four years, have known each other for many years and share a long path of mutual inspiration and friction, a reciprocal relationship of people and media. Their work is about, as Mariola Groener describes it, the continuous "expansion of standpoints" making the importance and the proportion of the each individual art form a superfluous issue.

PIT-STOP

This was impressively accomplished in WILHELM GROENER's last piece "Paravent Privé" which very precisely and very poetically dealt with the fate of the private and the public. The audience wanders between nine cubes covered with transparent plastic, arranged in three accurate rows. The audience chooses its own perspective, changes it and gradually becomes aware of the space and the dim figures in the boxes. Even as the spectator puts together the images, the contours of the bodies and the extracts of activities – perpetual communication, retreat, physical training – new images crop up: in the brighter growing light the audience sees its own mirror image in the plastic sheets. The borders between inside and outside, between actors and spectators are blurred and almost dissolve as the walls of the individual cubes are opened. Everyone is the performer of his or her own self with his own rituals; each person gazes and is in turn gazed upon, stage and auditorium, private and the public space become one: in the same way that the private nowadays is always part of the public arena, the public disappears in the dominance of the private, the simple accumulation of individuals.

PARAVENT PRIVÉ

In "Paravent Privé" a space develops filled with multiple levels and references, a space of extensions and shifts, of contradictions and reversals, a space also for the quiet reflection of things, a space for concentration and thought. The spectator can move around in this space and make his own discoveries, he can associate, reflect, identify, distance himself. He is always part of the event and adopts his own position. Duality, reversal, ambivalence—in "Paravent Privé" we finally realize that these are not just formal principles of construction but fundamental aspects of postmodern existence.

In spite of the sparingly used means, the barren stage, the space is charged with a growing number of questions: concerning life and the practical everyday ins and outs, aesthetic and social aspects. This has not always been the case in WILHELM GROENER's work. Their first pieces were mainly marked by formal precision and abstraction in the relationship of image and movement, body and space. "Getrennte Präsenz" for example, an early programmatic piece, attempts a dialog on the basis of a clear division of dance and video but also between the movements themselves, which are disassembled into single frames and then put back together again. In "Ordnung" the art forms begin to combine. With objects, light and movement, the artists build rooms and take them down again, creating, as the title suggests, places ("Orts") and multiple rearrangements ("Ordnungen").

“Teilstücke/Time is Relative” reveals references outside the art context: the disco atmosphere, staged as an ambiguous stage, the bodies, reflecting and absorbing rays of light, are highlighted or made to disappear, and the glamour and heights from which the negotiated identities can fall from are implied on various levels.

In the course of the work, the forms increasingly draw together, the focus shifts towards the social significance. The context with which the forms are processed and treated has now become the subject of interest. “Textur/tour de force”, a piece for five dancers from different linguistic backgrounds, describes communication as a tour de force and a balancing act between the various cultural codes, but also between the codes of physical and written language: a endeavor, which is never completely clear and moreover fragmentary, sometimes malfunctioning and sometimes working, and yet always risky while continuously pursued.

REGRET OR REVUE

“Reality”, so Mariola Groener and Güther Wilhelm, “has a lot of influence on us. We constantly observe and reflect what is happening around us.” Of the flood of events and perceptions, traces remain behind that are condensed into a core, around which images develop that may lead to a piece for the stage. But new pieces also develop out of previous projects.

“RE(V)UE TOTAL”, on which WILHELM GROENER are currently working, ties in to the work in “Paravent Privé” and continues the subject of “Textur”. The body, once a transmitter of codes, is in the next step an interface between the private and the public and in the current piece a multi-significant surface. The revue, in the 1920’s symbol of entertainment and extravagance and on the flip side symbol of the economic depression, serves the artists as a model to regard our reality. Lack and plenty are equally observable today: lack of work, end of the welfare state on the one hand, media overload and event culture on the other. Nonetheless there is one serious difference: the formation of the body, which in the revue was that of the identically proportioned body, the particle of beguiling ornaments and simultaneously model for standardized production processes, today give way to a comparatively more intensely factual and medial treatment of the body that encompasses all areas of life. The ornament governs reality much more extensively: reality, one could say, is itself a pictorial ornament.

THE IMAGE AND THE STAGE

Everything once again comes together into a compact arrangement. At the center stands an ambiguous object, in which form and connotation are in close correlation. The flight of stairs, as a place for the presentation of the stars as well as physical ornaments, the symbol of the revue par excellence, is for WILHELM GROENER, these specialists of the ambivalent, not only a vehicle for ascendancy, but also of decline, a symbol of excess as well as emptiness. At the same time, riddled with contradictions, it reflects both the space as well as the audience. In “RE(V)UE TOTAL” the audience is always also regarding its own image: the spectator with his regular place on the grandstand, now takes his place in stage to view from this perspective the action on the stairs of the auditorium. As usual WILHELM GROENER once again employ an extremely efficient stage concept. They use what is already there and integrate it into context of the piece. Nothing stands only for itself; everything used must be in itself consistent and produce a context of meaning.

But first and foremost, the staircase exposes the body, which is a variety of (incompatible) things at the same time: it idealizes, manipulates, distorts. “RE(V)UE TOTAL” addresses both sides, the promise of happiness represented and transported to us in a flood of images, and the other side of a body in denial, the foundering and fragile body. In the embodiment and manifold transformation of movements extracted from the revue—in these floundering, delayed, reduced movements projected onto the male body—something is revealed that the revue itself, in which there must always constantly be action, tries to avoid with a vengeance—emptiness. Revue and regret: the bracket in the title refers something removed, something missing, to the “longing for something that lies beyond what is offered”.

Günther Wilhelm studied dance in Berlin and was a member of VA Wölfl’s “Neuer Tanz” in Düsseldorf from 1996—1999. Back in Berlin he worked with Anna Huber and dumb type. He has been developing own work since 1995, later in collaboration with Mariola Groener (since 2001 under the group name WILHELM GROENER). Mariola Groener studied photography and video at the HdK Berlin and at the UGH-Essen. Her work soon expanded to include an interdisciplinary approach, which spans spatial installation and performance.

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