

The impenetrability of the face

The new choreographic project by Lenio Kaklea, *A Hand's Turn*, is placed in the semiotic gap between corporeality and cultural representation, thus making apparent that apart from being a biological entity, the body is also a vector of meanings. This inherent embodied and embedded polysemy is rarely noticed in everyday life; especially when it's not within the art world, where mediated varied conceptualizations of the body abound. However, "unintentional" movements in everyday life unravel not only from the functions of the brain, but also "illuminate" the most secluded aspects of those who perform or repeat them. These silenced and profoundly signified "microtunes", despite their being often objectified by scientists into "neutral" neurobiological data, acquire a specific performative importance within society and culture.

The choreographer has chosen for her performance a space not exclusively theatrical: One that balances between the remotely human environment of a laboratory and the seemingly casual privacy of an artist's studio. In such an ambiguous space, every twenty-five-minutes, only two spectators are invited in for a "private meeting". This arithmetic constraint is not a sly trick to maintain a desirable proximity to the proposed actions during the performance. It should rather be taken as an inherent condition of our fragmented reality; besides, one soon realizes that the partiality of vision and the functions of selective attention are, among other things, topics of the performance.

The performance begins with a series of questions addressed to us, the spectators, seemingly unrelated to what is yet to come. The answers are one-worded ("yes", "no"), if not unnerving because of their dubious validity. The key to this opening section is that the viewer understands that he/she is being watched, or to put it in other words, there is no "safe place" to hide, as in an ordinary audience of a theatrical space. Awareness has thus been achieved. Our gaze now shifts on two stacks of paper, positioned symmetrically in front of us. Left-handed activities are on the left pages (eg *right-handed people tend to hold the fork with the left*) and right-handed ones on the right (eg *voting with the right*).

However, this particular, plausible separation should not be considered as just a personal way of observing and classifying data; its significance penetrates the whole range of human actions. Sometimes such divisions provide us with handy information about the social context of perception (the use of the toilet in different cultures), other times their interpretation derives from psychoanalysis (where is fear coming from?) and most frequently they acquire a political connotation, which may also refer to the distribution of power (right and left-wing politics). Our concentration on the hands of the performer, whose rhythmic turning of pages commands our attention and thereby furnishes the above data, reveals how easily our senses are organized into steady forms and perceptual stereotypes: Our eyes move naturally from left to right while reading the text, however, when the order of appearance changes or when a page is deliberately left blank, we quickly discover -as readers/viewers- the automations that the brain has assimilated. Accordingly, from a purely rhythmical point of view or in terms of content, the quotes appearing on the pages remind us of free associative thinking; assembling them does not help draw any conclusion, it rather works as a self-observation mechanism.

In the above action, therefore, the viewer becomes the protagonist. The way we focus on the text, the wandering of the data, "subtracts" the performer from our visual field. We only see her hands, her fingers placed on the stack of papers while turning the pages. Our experience is basically structured over what we have "agreed" to pay attention to, and in this case it is the text. In the second part, this approach is reversed: the performer stands upright, turns her back to the spectators. At the other end of the room there is a small hand mirror mounted on the base of a microphone. In the mirror we see the reflection of the face of the performer. But a paradox also occurs: while her body moves to our right, our gaze stays firmly stuck in the mirror, in the image that looks at us from the left. This detachment of the body from the face is terrifying, obviously recalling an archetypal, intimate fear. It is not the identity of the performer that is lost, but the connection between the individual and her face.

The body of the dancer, dressed as to remind us of a stripper, is offered to the viewer, consumable and sexually charged. Instead, her face that looks at us steadily through the mirror remains impenetrable, odd and distant. This “workmanlike impassivity”, which is mastered and operated so ably by professional ecdysiasts, porn stars and models alike, emphasizes that the human face “does not know nudity, because it is always naked” (Agamben). Exposed as a pure means of communication the face brings us “face to face” with an ethical qualm: “I am free to consider the Other as a person or a thing, but if I choose the latter, I discover that my freedom is guilty, for it disregarded the alterity of the Other” (Levinas).

The viewer’s discomfort arises from this guilty acceptance: the “imperialism of the gaze” is an inappropriate reaction when it comes to facing the other. It seeks to reveal what is not exhausted by its manifestation. In other words, the performer, through her approach, does not allow us to see other than what she allows us to see: her gaze. Lenio Kaklea, with *A Hand’s Turn*, manages to present a series of complex and fruitful reflections on the correlation of dance and pornography, without referring to the nakedness of the body. On the contrary, she approaches the mediality of the body and the face, stripping off the desire of every viewer to behold the desired.

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