
Nine years, six words, one text

- by Vanessa Desclaux

Yael, this is a strange fact: although I have known you for about nine years now, and we have had several opportunities to work together, I never wrote anything about your work. This is exciting, and yet challenging: because I am dealing with a lot of memories, an accumulation of ideas, of texts, of moments shared, and of works I saw. I now experience the desire to think about this past, attempt to recover certain memories, and work through the stuff I kept in boxes and files (texts, books, emails, exhibition leaflets, invitation cards, DVDs with portfolios and videos, scripts and scores). I want to think about the changes that I have undergone within this period, and attempt to show that our relationship has played an important role in my own path, through life and work. I will make some references to texts by André Lepecki and Brian Massumi that you had asked the students to read in the context of the workshop I invited you to lead in Bourges. They overlap a great deal with the texts from the reading group. I take on Massumi's advice in his introduction to the work *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) and I intend to enjoy writing this text very much, indulging in exploring again important aspects of your practice in connection with the philosophical, ethical and poetic fragments that emerged in the context of our repeated encounters.

One note: the writing has been structured through a double matrix. It is organised around six words: each word was singled out by one person taking part in the reading group, constituted by six women: Farida, Eva, Hélène, Zoé, you and I. I will depart from each of these words in order to find a route passing through your works and your exhibitions.

CARTOGRAPHY

The term "cartography" emerged in the framework of the reading group's discussions in response to a plurality of elements: the fictional territory of *W* in Georges Pérec's eponymous book; the ceaseless displacements of Walter Benjamin between 1932 and his death in 1940, which were suggested in his letters to Gershom Scholem; the evocation of the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*; Hélène Cixous's unique perspective on her life in Algeria and her departure to France; and your own description of the distribution of distances, roads, borders and thresholds in the complex and contested territories of Israel and Palestine. We therefore read and poached within many different textual sources, to which you added a series of stories told by theorist and writer Irit Rogoff. In her talk, Rogoff declares her desire of "undoing geography as a disciplining force" and deconstructing cartography as a tool in order to affirm it as an affective force: something we might affect and be affected by. It would be no surprise to affirm that the perspective that we shared on the concept of cartography, or of geography, is that we had to depart from the plural: cartographies, geographies. And it was necessary to challenge the authority that such concepts asserted, and mistrust disciplined, normalised and sanctioned forms of representation. We privileged fictional geographies and embodied experiences of distance. A form of circulation emerged, like a refrain, a story that repeats itself while changing, like this recurring memory shared by the narrator in *W* recounting the day when his mother took him to Gare de Lyon in order to flee Paris for the south, and bought him an illustrated magazine, titled *Charlot*. There was this circular movement in the discussion, letting a form of stillness emerge, an immobility, an inhabitation of the threshold between distance and proximity, which was nevertheless an escape – I'll say more about this later.

When I first got in contact with you had been working on a work titled *End on Mouth*, a performance that you restaged in different contexts in Istanbul,

in Holon (Israel), and with *If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution* in different locations in the Netherlands. In the reader that was published to accompany the work, there is the letter you wrote to Vasif Kortun, then director of Platform Garanti in Istanbul, in which you state:

« You see, it is not the theatrical act or the narrative that fascinates me but the space between a stage and the audience that itself becomes a borderline – the thin skin separating the audience's space from the acting space. »¹

In this complex work, you explored different cartographies: the distribution of places between the actors, the musicians, the performers moving the two boxes, and the spectators, their positions in space, and the distance between these positions. Your work also evoked the gap between one's body and one's voice, describing their essential relation as well as their split. You placed some of the performers inside two large wooden boxes, which embodied separate territories (like a boat? I'll get back to this later), and put to the test the performers' voices, and bodies. I never saw this work live, but I was fascinated by how you approached the work following its live staging, outside of the framework of the stage, and the decisions you made in order to "document" it in absence of the bodies themselves. Initially showed at Galerie Akinci in Amsterdam, *End on Mouth in Abstentia*, was displayed again, in a different configuration, at Tate Modern in the exhibition *Here We Dance* that I co-curated in 2008.

BODY

Putting forward the word "body" as one of the key terms emerging from our reading group was crucial. The authors you had selected shared an embodied experience of writing. Thanks to the complexity of the relationship between author, narrator and character in the texts we read together, the issue of embodied experience overcame the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, and blurred the boundaries between the literary forms of the essay, the letter, the autobiography, the poem or the novel.

In the introductory paragraph of her essay titled 'My Algeriance', Hélène Cixous writes:

« But when I walked barefoot with my brother on the hot trails of Oran, I felt the sole of my body caressed by the welcoming palms of the country's ancient dead, and the torment of my soul was assuaged. »²

Cixous expanded the title of her text, and added, "in other words: to depart not to arrive from Algeria"³. This idea that something remains in suspension, that it cannot arrive and has no destination, no possible ending as such, is essential to your practice, something you share with Cixous. In relation to *End on Mouth*, you wrote: "In my work there is a denial of a fixed territory; my work exists for a moment, and afterwards, what is left is a void, an absence, an object that 'has been'." In a sense, I figured out that your work and your body follow strangely similar trajectories. They embody an approach of movement that Brian Massumi describes through the twofold combination of body and sensation: movement is transformation, it is not the connection between two, or more, positions, or points of arrival; movement consists of constant transitions and variations. The idea of ending, or arrival, is completely absent from your work. Your work is rather inoperative, in the sense that Jean-Luc Nancy has given to the concept of

inoperativity. He asserts that:

« *Inoperativity* is not the negative of the work: it is that which, in the work or more precisely, in the working, exceeds the product, the satisfaction, the fulfillment, at each moment and endlessly. »⁵

I think that each of your works multiplies itself. This transformation does not only happen in the shift from the performance to its form in abstentia. The plasticity of your work is more complex, and these complexities have become particularly visible in the last few years in the framework of your different exhibitions, which were worked out from the inside by your performing body, and your way of approaching words, or objects, as living, metamorphic presence. For me it is as if the dynamics of transformation that run across the totality of your practice mirror what happens with your own body: how the body is transformed, affected by the events of life, and maybe particularly through the moments when you have been confronted with life and death in very specific circumstances (the birth of your daughter, the death of your mother).

A few years ago, I shared with you an interview of Jean-Luc Nancy with Chantal Pontbriand because I had been really affected by his way of writing about the body. His approach of the body continues to resonate with my experience of your own practice. Nancy writes:

« The “body” actually designates two things which are intertwined: the first is coexistence, the second is being-outside-itself. Coexistence is existence in so far as it does not begin with a subject (who would then meet or recognize other subjects), but with the plurality of subjects, a plurality which belongs to being-subject (as I like to say: the singular is plural). Plurality implies space, spacing, distance (distance and touch, the distance of touch). The materiality of bodies is not “matter” in the physical-physiological sense of the term: it is not the material object, it is the spacing, the far and the near, the contact and the gap, the relation and the non-relation. »⁶

A Line, A Word, A Sentence (2007) consisted of a choreography for a group of twenty-five performers who were holding large panels in which the shape of their mouths had been cut out. The performers moved the panels across the room in silence, folding and unfolding different temporary architectures within which the spectators were wandering. As the title of the work may suggest, as well as the symbolic cutting out of the mouth in the panels, language plays a significant role in the transformation of the body and the affirmation of agency. Language appears as a movement that provokes incessant displacements in the self and in relation to others: you have gradually tamed your own use of language, and of your voice in the context of performance, increasingly affirming your choice of words, your rhythm of speech and your idiosyncratic mode of inhabiting a multiplicity of languages.

STRUGGLE

It might seem evident why the word “struggle” was brought forward in the framework of our reading process: all the writers whose texts you chose to share with us experienced different forms of struggle. The most arresting fact is that for each of them, struggle was a complex and polysemous experience, which referred to the precariousness of one’s economic condition – this was very poignant in Benjamin’s letters, his difficulty to survive from writing – the threat to one’s life, the impediment of movement, the obligation to leave or flee, the dispossession of one’s land, or the attempt to affirm one’s own voice. It is not about judging what situation might be worse, evaluating what struggle might generate the greater suffering. Nothing would authorize any form of comparison. I suppose – although we did not declare it within the scope of the reading group – that we approached these struggles searching for different forms of

embodiment, and of inhabitation that emerged in their midst: nomadism, hospitality, multilingualism, the invention of words, and of languages, the abandonment of traditional concepts of identity, and of nationality, the affirmation of an ecstatic community.

Struggle calls on forms of resistance, of dissidence, as well as forms of protest. In your work, you have put your body and your whole self to the test, challenging your ability to speak, and perform, while undermining the verticality of standing up, not giving your lungs the space necessary to breathe and project your voice. In Learning to Imitate and Learning to Imitate in Abstentia, you used ropes, stairs or slanted structures, which extended your initial experiences with the large enclosed boxes that were moved around by a group of performers, lifting it from the ground, and moving it around the space. In your practice, you gradually focused on your own body – although your body was sometimes doubled, like a voice is dubbed in cinema, as if you could translate yourself in another act of metamorphosis, extending yourself through the other on stage. Your body was put in relation with large wooden structures that André created for you, and with large panels of glass: a material whose transparency would usually divert our attention from its sickness, its depth, geared to meet the needs of war fights.

At the occasion of a workshop that I invited you to lead in Bourges, you made the students, Claudia (Triozi) and I read a text by André Lepecki about William Pope.L’s crawls. Crawling supposed giving up verticality altogether, and making the experience of progressing on the ground, the whole body in contact with a variety of surfaces, with dirt, with smells; feeling the whole body weighting, struggling to move forward. Lepecki writes:

Pope.L’s coming into presence after the stumble through crawling invents a choreographic program, a slow dance, which retells Fanon’s relation to movement and verticality after stumbling in the racist field: “I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval” (Fanon 1967: 116).

Stumbling on racism, making the experience of violence, of dispossession, of precariousness: declaring the body as a site of resistance, and as the resource for new beginnings and new possibilities: I think of your practice of Feldenkrais as a new attempt at caring for yourself, and caring for others; a new departure for the body.

ESCAPE

The term “escape” might at first seem contradictory with the term “struggle”, and yet, in the context of the reading group, we evoked the density of such a concept, unfolding its philosophical potential in relation to the writing of Gilles Deleuze, bringing closer together “escape” and “flight”. Lines of flight: letting something escape, go astray, stutter, and go off the rails . . . But we explored the possibility of escaping within a reduced space; immobile. You have experienced this first hand when you accepted Grant Watson’s invitation to work in Mechelen city prison. You worked with prisoners who volunteered to participate in workshops with different people from the world of the circus: jugglers, magicians or acrobats. Inmates particularly held on to the promise that they would learn the escape trick, the illusion that they could free themselves from an imaginary bind. The Hand is Quicker than the Eye (2009) bears witness to these sorts of stolen moments of flight, ways of mentally escaping the day-to-day routine of confinement.

IDENTITY

Naming, renaming, lacking a name, faking a name, exploring the significance of one’s name, took a central place in our conversations at Les Labos. The texts brought us there.

Cixous tells the story of how her and her family wrongly, yet unknowingly, named their Algerian maid Aïcha. Cixous writes:

« There had been I know not what initial error, a parapraxis and Messaouda had docilely let herself be expropriated and reappropriated. She had not dared. We who had wronged her and Fatmatized her for twenty years »⁸.

Cixous' own name: « A non French name. A bizarre, and unknown name. Without origin. Neither French, nor even Jewish. An ugly duckling among the Jewish patronymics of Algeria »⁹. Cixous recounts that she heard that her name was the name of a Berber tribe. She thought of taking a different surname when she published her first book, trading Cixous for one of the Jewish names in her family.

« I caught myself just in time: my name, my nose too big too aquiline, my prominences. My excessive traits. At the last minute I renounced renouncing my marks. Accept destiny. What I kept away from, in keeping my name and my nose, was the temptation of disavowal »¹⁰.

In Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*, naming similarly plays a significant role, entrenched in infinite forms of translation and metamorphosis. The novel consists of two alternating narratives: one is a fiction, apparently based on a short story written by Perec at the age of thirteen; the other is presented as an autobiography; and yet both parts are written in the first person, allowing any name to be hidden to some extent behind the "I" of the narrator. In the fictional part of the novel, the name Gaspard Winckler – a recurring character in Perec's books – designates a false identity. In the autobiographical part, the narrator claims his desire to recover some of his childhood memories through the act of writing. His first souvenir has to do with the designation of a Hebraic letter, translated as 'gammeth' or 'gammel', which he believes to be the Latin letter 'G', and could refer to his first name, Georges. The family name of Perec later emerged, opening up a dense and complex history of transformations: the original Jewish name is "Peretz", but the narrator affirms that in Hebrew the letters P and B are one and only letter, further expanding the labyrinthine relation to an origin that is ceaselessly postponed.

The title of the exhibition at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers is *The Distance between V and W*; it alludes to the possible confusion between the names of two significant women in French culture: Simone Veil and Simone Weil. Between V and W there is both distance and proximity. Through the designation of this gap, which is produced through a slight change of name – only a letter, you point out the tragic negation and erasure of Palestine by Israel and the tragic irony I believe you find in the resemblance between the names of Arab villages, of which little often remains, and the new Israeli villages built at a short distance (or on top of them)¹¹. You refer to the name of the kibbutz where you grew up: kibbutz Tzuba in Israel was built west of Jerusalem near the ruins of the village of Zuba, uphill, which was depopulated and destroyed in 1948.

Although you often allude to your life in Israel, to your family, you refer to yourself as an immigrant and affirm that you have no fixed place, no fixed identity, or that your identity resides in constant movement, implying the transformation of your body, and your subjectivity: it transforms through performance, and repetition. You declare:

« I repeat my previous performance. It is now a score and I follow step by step my own footsteps—detecting the moments and things that were not named. I am the background. I am the stage. I am the story. I am a repetition. I am a repetition »¹².

Your refusal of a stable identity is not contradictory with the importance of family, of transmission or of care. You make use of personal narratives, of the intimacy of experience to fabricate meaningful stories. You mentioned your admiration for Irit Rogoff's approach to theory as storytelling, and

I suspect that you were also interested in Massumi's affirmation of the importance of examples, "parables" as he calls them, the significance of the details within these stories, and their role in the enjoyment of writing.

BOAT

Glissant's boat: the only object among our list of words. A drifting object: an object in diaspora? You paid a very beautiful tribute to Glissant's boat and his poetic approach of the abyss in your lecture during the symposium at Les Labos. It would be redundant to repeat what you said. I would rather conclude this text by drawing attention to another object that, upon the reading of your lecture, operated as a mirror image of Glissant's boat: your family house. Your house is a bit like a boat: "our tiny house in the kibbutz. A narrow wooden door with a small window on the top of it, separating the kitchen from the toilet." As you recount the – both funny and dramatic – story of the fight between your father and your mother, I have the image of the accumulation of bodies in the small space of this house. A community: beings exposed to each other, being-with each other, weighing on each other, at once too close and distant.

Your reading of Glissant brought forward the significance of the abyss and exposed depth. We can now envision verticality, horizontality, and depth. The accumulation of bodies. Weight. Thought. The hope for their difference, for their intrusiveness.

1. Yael Davids, "Letter to Vasif Kortun", in *End on Mouth: All talking is shit. I go*, 2007.

2. *Mon Algérie* was first published in *Les Inrockuptibles* 115 (20 August – 2 September 1997): 71-74; the English translation first appeared in *TriQuarterly* 100 (1997): 259-279.

3. Ibid.

4. Yael Davids, "Letter to Vasif Kortun", *op cit*

5. Chantal Pontbriand, "Jean-Luc Nancy: an exchange", in "The idea of community" *Parachute* (100): 2000.

6. Ibid

7. André Lepecki, "Stumbling dance. William Pope.L's crawls", in *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.

8. Hélène Cixous, *Mon Algérie*, *op. cit.*

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 73.

11. You made a list of these villages for me: Zvad – Zvat; Tveriya – Tveira; Bisan – Beit Shean; A-Nazra – Nazerat; Yafa – Yafo; Ramle – Ramle; El Kads – Jerushaleyim; Br Al Sabha – Beer Seva; Suba – Tzuba

12. Yael Davids, from the script of *Learning to Imitate in Absentia II*, 2011

13. I refer directly to Jean-Luc Nancy's essay titled "The intruder", in which he writes about his heart transplant, describing his new heart as an intruder who prolongs his life although he is being fought by his entire body, due to the defence performed by his immune system. Nancy writes: "To exclude all intrusiveness from the stranger's coming is therefore neither logically acceptable nor ethically admissible." He adds: "To welcome a stranger, moreover, is necessarily to experience his intrusion" (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The intruder*, in *Corpus* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 161).