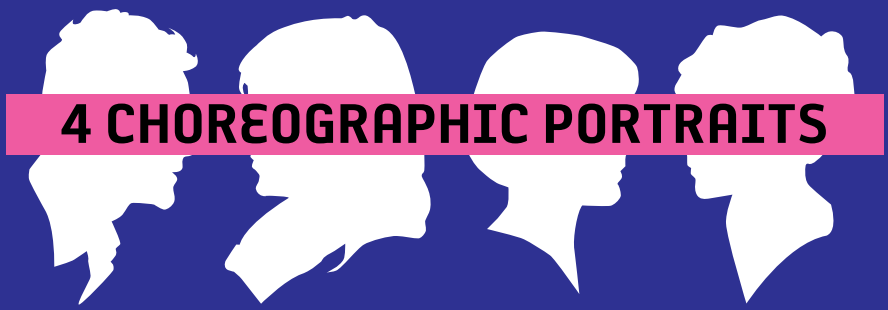
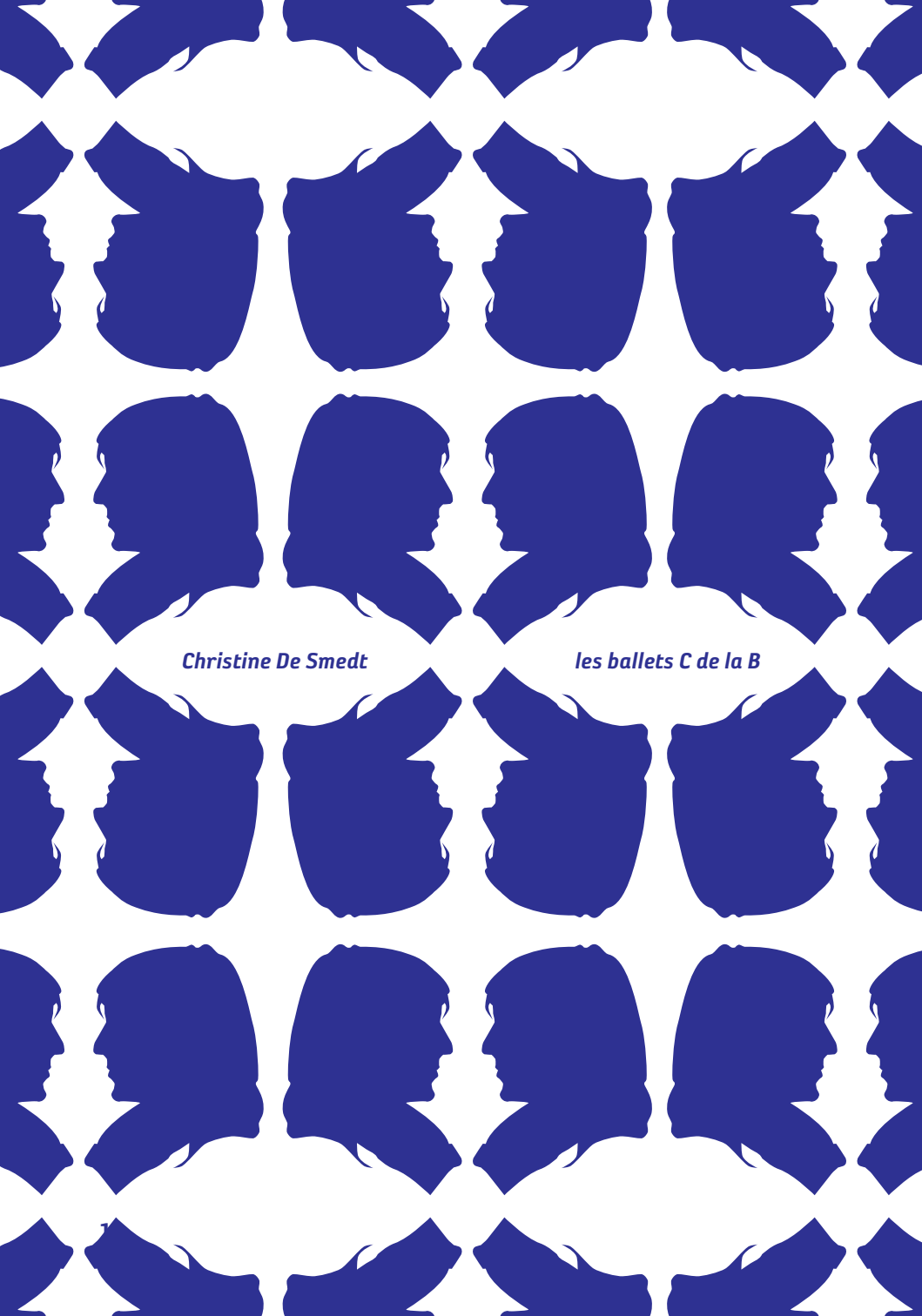
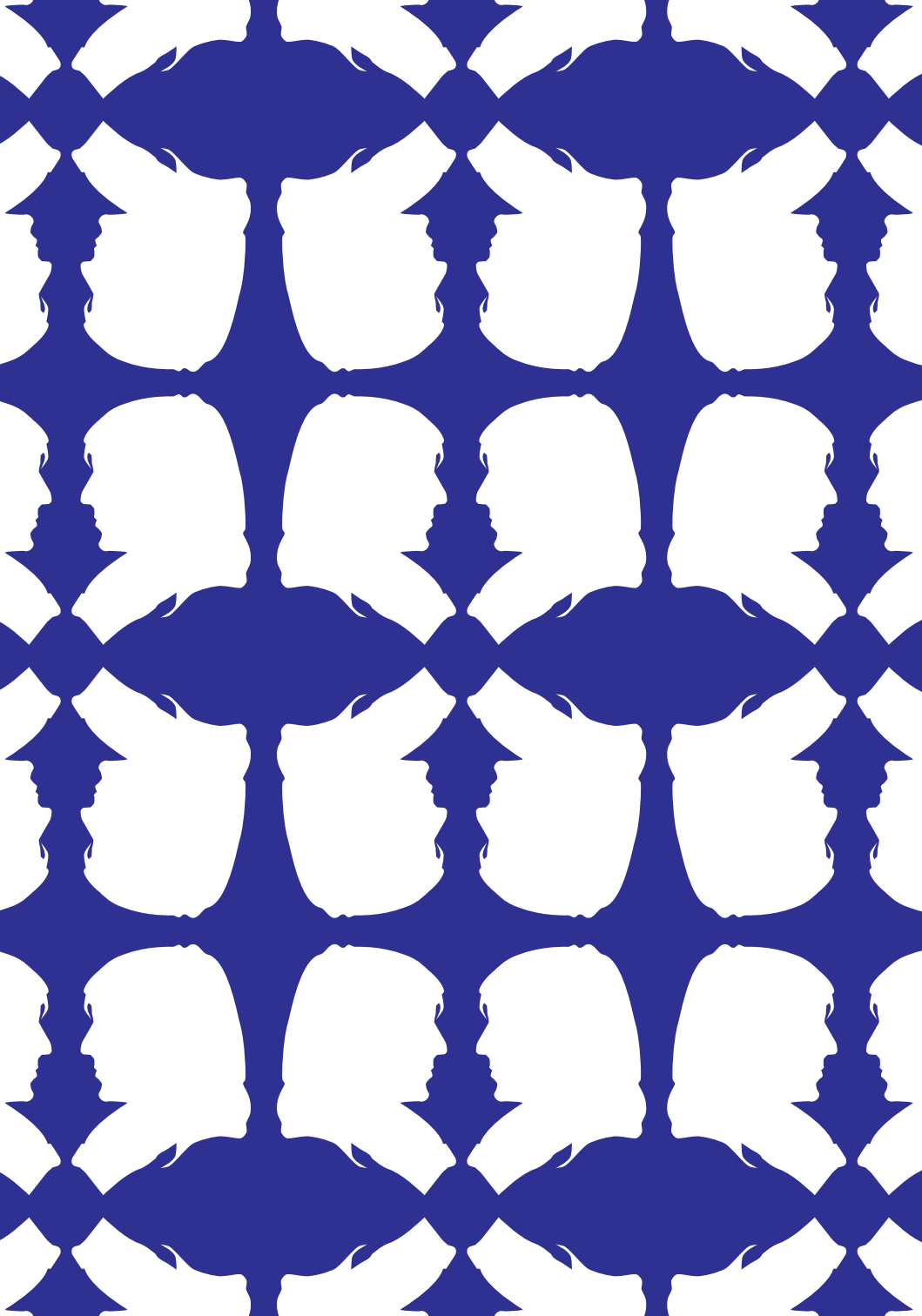


4 CHOREOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS



Christine De Smedt *les ballets C de la B*



4
CHOREOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS:

'I would leave a signature'
The son of a priest
A woman with a diamond
Self-reliance

What is it that I always do? Or rather that I don't want to do?
I realized that in my work there was a hidden premise not to involve biographical and personal elements.
But what do I mean by *personal*? What is the relationship between how I think *the personal* and the work I make?
On the one hand I considered that it is not interesting to involve *my personal story*, understood as my private story, in artistic work.
On the other hand I would consider that what is *my personal* is not only a private, intimate or biographical matter, but a particular perspective, as well private as public, since *my personal* is already being a construction in larger and in different contexts, my personal as a shared identity, which involves different identities, with a lot of contradictions and paradoxes.
I realised that what is behind the notion I used of *my person*al and *the personal* was not clearly defined, that it could not be identified in a single identity and that it is in a state of flux.

Consequently (or inconsequently) I choose 'the personal' to be the issue of a series of encounters. I invited four choreographers with whom I have a particular professional/collaborative relationship (Jonathan Burrows, Alain Platel, Xavier Le Roy, Eszter Salamon). I invited each of them for an interview, a conversation to talk about beliefs, fantasies, metaphors, stories but also about their work, methodologies and artistic concerns. These encounters addressed me with different aspects of how each particular

person thinks and develops his/her artistic work, with different connections between who, how and what. They confronted me also with my conflicting interests in them taking very different positions in the artistic field of dance and performance.

Choreography as a way of thinking and talking: the interviews, the encounters between the choreographer and me, become the basis for the creation of a series of portraits. Movement, dance and choreography relate to patterns of thinking and talking and this echoes in what is articulated in the interview. The specificity of the choreographic methodologies and concerns of each choreographer on the one side and the interview on the other side functioned in a feedback loop system to develop the concept and the composition of each portrait.
Choreographic interests and politics of representation are interacting with their thoughts. For instance by applying the principle of counterpoint to the text from Jonathan Burrows, using repetitions, loops and unison for the fragments of Alain Platel, installing doubt and the desire for re-thinking notions in the portrait of Xavier Le Roy or the continuous movement within a field of statements about gender and capitalism for Eszter Salamon.

The portrait consists of quotations from the interview, in which the personal is presented as an appropriated construction: the personal on the verge of the non-personal. Interiorising thoughts of the other, this solo project becomes an impossible gesture where my own authorship is pushed to its limits. The personal story that is supposed to 'explain' or 'nourish' the artistic work is 'stolen' from other people and the work reflects how even the most personal is described in a language that is not mine.
I turn to the author's person behind the work, not to explain the work or to reconstruct the history. As Marten Spangberg announced one of the portraits: "Interview could be understood as a shared or a sharing of perspective. A particular mode of coming together, not in respect of two becoming one but rather as two becoming a third, an autonomous entity that belongs to no one. Christine De Smedt has in a series of works taken on this third entity in an attempt to continue its autonomy or alien-capacity as a way to uncover her own idiosyncrasies, paradoxes, expropriations as well as those of dance as such."

The portrait does not interpret or explain, nor does it need to be historically 'correct'.

One possible understanding of the personal is that to be personal is taking a position in relation to something.
On the one hand, by making the portrait, I take a position in relation to the choreographer by creating a personage that exists independently.
On the other hand, performing different portraits is a gesture of dis-identification or destabilizing the personal as unique individual. It is an attempt to deal with the basic question of how *my personal* is involved in the artistic work and can be seen as an embodiment of the idea of the constructive, performative or changeable character of the personal.

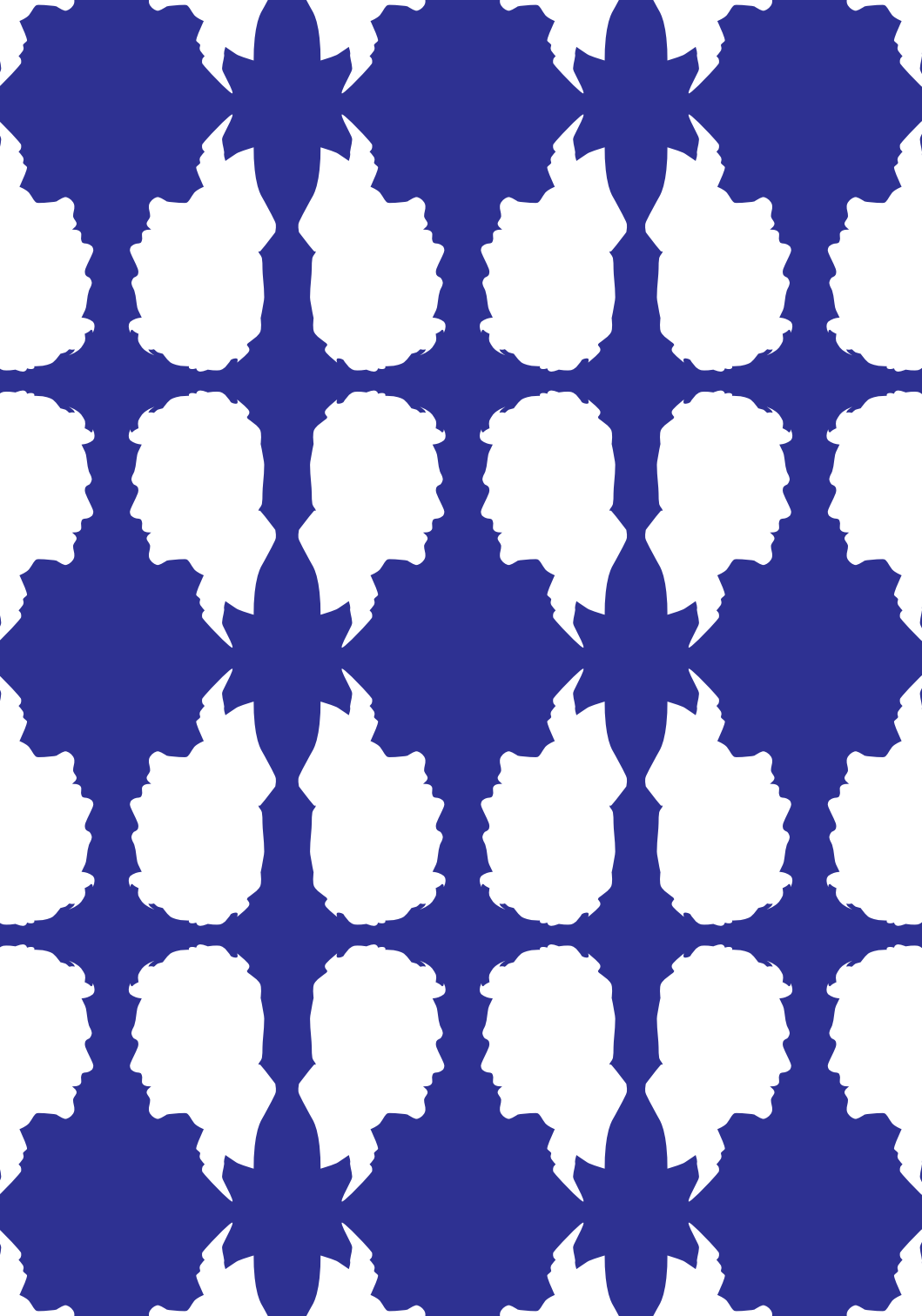
At the beginning, before the actual portraits were created, the title of the project was *Untitled 4*, Jonathan Burrows, Alain Platel, Xavier Le Roy and Eszter Salamon. Since the portraits are finished, as the result of a process of abstraction from its origin and the creation of an independent entity I want to introduce a new general title and a specific title for each portrait that underlines their autonomy: 4 choreographic portraits: *'I would leave a signature', The son of a priest*, *A woman with a diamond and Self-reliance*.

Presenting the portraits as live performances, allows us to view 'portrait as form' with many questions. For example: what is 'the present' in a portrait? Is it a snap shot? Does it imply the future, the past? Does it allow the spectator to look beyond the frame of the portrait itself? What is the role of the spectator looking back at the portrait? We are quite familiar with portraits in photography and visual arts. Roland Barthes writes about looking at a photograph: I see, I feel, so I recognise (identify-acknowledge), I look and I think. These performing portraits operate from a different medium, be it a single performed portrait or the series of performed portraits. How the personage is situated in space and relates to the audience determines the portraits constitution. The portraits vary from a frontal, open and direct relation into a very central position that changes the relation from being distant to close, intimate to directive. This results also in different dramaturgical developments of the portraits: a linear development of thoughts for the portrait of Jonathan Burrows, fragmented reflections on Alain Platel, a re-enactment of thoughts from Xavier Le Roy through dialogue with the audience, a lecture for the portrait of Eszter Salamon. By presenting different portraits, each image creates a context for the other, eventually reflecting on each other. I want to create a performance in which the viewer, the spectator, can experience these personages and

images as framed and fixed, yet open for identifications, resistances and references, open for different interpretations and potential links between fragments and materials.

Christine De Smedt, January 2012

Pieter Van Bogaert



THE MANY PORTRAITS OF DR. DE SMEDT

With* '4 choreographic portraits' *Christine De Smedt gives a fresh look at the art of the portrait. These portraits function both in and as space. They create a physical space for the bodies of the choreographer and her audience, as well as a mental space where biographies intermingle and infect one another. Each portrait is thus both a snapshot and a remix; an image of course and a mirror that returns the gaze.

Space (king, spectator, artist)

But first a short detour to talk about the image as space. In the first chapter of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*, 1966), Michel Foucault writes about *Las Meninas*, Diego Velazquez' 1656 painting. The painting shows the artist at work. He is depicted brush in hand, and a large part of the painting is taken up by the back of the canvas he is working on. Next to him we see his entourage, which includes the ladies in waiting mentioned in the painting's title, the royal child, a dwarf and a dog. In the background, in between the other canvases in the artist's studio, we see a mirror with two people reflected in it. According to Foucault, these are the figures being painted by the artist: the king and queen. According to other commentators (because a great deal has been written about Velazquez' work since Foucault)[1] it is a reflection of the actual canvas that the artist is painting. Standing next to the mirror in the doorway is a mysterious figure; his act of turning, with one foot in the room and the other on the staircase, introduces a sense of doubt. The painting is staring straight at you. The artist's attention is focused on a point right in front of the canvas. This is where his subject, the viewer, is standing. You might imagine that the figures next to the painter – his

1) In *What do pictures want?* W.J.T. Mitchell alludes, amongst other things, to a text by Joel Snyder: *Las Meninas and the Mirror of the Prince* in Critical Inquiry 11, n°.4 (June 1985)

* Las Meninas by Diego Velazquez:
The painter with model and audience.

entourage – function as his audience, but this is not the case. They are in fact the audience's audience. Because the true audience is (will be) in front of the canvas, on the spot upon which all eyes are trained. The onlooker needs to take this place in order to see the painter's canvas. He must stand in this spot to interpret the canvas. To make it work.
When Foucault looks at the painting, he puts himself in the audience's shoes. He takes the viewer's place. This is an unsatisfactory place. To make the canvas work, he needs to move. He must become part of the canvas's space in order to understand what the artist sees, what he is painting: is it about the king? About the spectator? About the artist? Foucault has to move, like a choreographer.
In *4 choreographic portraits*, Christine De Smedt makes the same movement. She also asks her audience to behave in the same way: they must move; become choreographers themselves; in order to make her images, her portraits, work. This makes the stage more than just a space; it is an event.

Recording
(interview, audience, performer)

It begins with a recording. The performance is based on the recordings of interviews with colleagues Platel, Burrows, Salamon and Le Roy. The first thing that happens in the performance is also a recording. Christine De Smedt talks into a microphone. The setting is mobile; her microphone, attached to an amplifier, integrated into a speaker, rolls through the space. The talker, pressed up against the wall, creates space: she makes room for her audience. Her position invites the audience to become part of the recording. This is how she will take possession of the space: by being present, fixing her position and then changing again. All these movements taken together, that is what we call choreography.

This snapshot, this recording of time, this game of give and take, of recording and playback, is also one of synchronisation. While she is talking into the microphone her voice is recorded. While releasing these recordings into the space, she tries to keep time with her recorded voice and with the sound of her body. While trying to move in synch with her body, she invites the audience to become part of her choreography. All these different sorts of images, sounds and bodies in synchrony with one another are an attempt to record: to record the voice: to record the voice using the recorded voice: to record the body using its own sound; to record the audience in the choreography. And then let go again: become yourself, become personal (because that's what these portraits are about: about the personal, the autobiographical), looking the audience in the eye: looking back. *Going public*: confronting yourself.

It is that look, that gaze, that makes these portraits so confrontational. Looking straight at the audience and addressing them directly, just as Velazquez looks at his model; colleague Platel, who looks you in the eyes; the dancing audience looking at the choreographer; the choreographer looking at the dancers: these are the precursors to the confrontations still to come. She asks her audience a question: "Do you know Douglas Dunn?" She sits with someone from the audience at a table, in the interviewer's place. She asks the whole audience to interview her. And it's always about the recording: what the artist sees and says, that's what concerns us; 'ce qui nous regarde'...

So: what is this about, exactly? Which self is this about? Who (or what?) is the subject of these portraits? The interview, the audience or the performer? Alain Platel (Jonathan Burrows, Eszter Salamon, Xavier Le Roy), you or Christine De Smedt? King? Spectator? Artist? If the performer asks her audience to dance, then every spectator – dancing or not – becomes part

of the portrait: part of Alain Platel, choreographer in spite of himself, who has always encouraged people to take the dancer's place on the stage. The result is a portrait of the audience – which – in spite of itself – becomes part of the performance, of the portrait. And ultimately, the invitation to dance is part of De Smedt's self-portrait. It is an allusion to group choreographies like *9x9* (2000-5, where she put nine times nine photographers on the stage, and even more photographers in the audience); *Escape Velocity* (1998, where she let the audience choose between a track to the left or one to the right: a choice and a movement that shapes the rest of the performance) or *The Long Piece* (2010, in which she spent a whole afternoon with some ten performers moving amongst the bathers on Ostend beach).

Remix

(recording, playback, creation)

During the day, Christine De Smedt works as a doctor. Her patients are her colleagues, her audience and herself. In her office, the Dr. takes notes going over the interviews. She looks for patterns. She separates out different elements and puts them under the reading glass. She organises things into a table. This way, 'a tableau', a composition, is created. And each evening she mixes everything up again. Then the doctor puts on her evening suit and replays the day's conversations. This way, night after night, she becomes her colleagues, her audience and herself. The 'tableau' becomes 'a tableau vivant'.

Every presentation, every movement in this composition, takes place in the same space. It is always the same person. In the same costume. With the same audience. But always arranged differently. Always a different mix. A remix. This dance is musical through and through. The linearity, continuity and build-up in the sequence of the four portraits create an interplay of attraction and rejection, of adding and contrasting, of saying "yes" and "no" (because this is where the Dr.'s treatment begins: what do I say "no" to?). We also find it in the strange (a)synchrony of movement and sound in *'I would leave a signature'*, in the rhythm of words in *The Son of a priest*, in the (a) synchrony of image and body in *A woman with a diamond*. This synchrony becomes complete in *Self-reliance*, when the performer and her audience – for the time the house lights are on – at last totally fall together with themselves.

The remix is a machine. Its therapeutic powers make us think. The Dr. accentuates something, only to shift it to something else. She starts with the way things are and searches for the way things could be. She flirts with the boundaries of acceptability. She sows seeds of doubt at the portrait's

outer limits. She goes in search of the boundaries of technique, of respect, of decency. She plays with the borders between presentation, representation and interpretation. She scrambles up words in order to arrive at a new meaning. She selects fragments of interviews, highlighting and ignoring things. This way she gets close to caricature: the strong statements of colleagues Platel and Salamon, the sober nuances of colleague Burrows, colleague Le Roy's direct relationship with his audience, the doctor herself as a chameleon in her jumpsuit, the searching movements of her dancing audience.

The remix lies in the embodiment. Her generic, blue overall is actually a *blue key* suit: it erases and provides a clean slate upon which anything can be projected. It is unisex – it creates a mix that goes beyond gender. The uniform lends Dr De Smedt a certain authority – it objectifies. This authority takes up space, but also creates space. Barthes' lesson: the death of the author makes room for the birth of the reader.[2] The end of the (auto) biography creates space for a new story, for the pleasure of the text.[3] Thus, this work plays with the expectations of language, of image. It resists cliché: the image that remains fixed and is no longer moving makes us lazy. That's why the viewer is mobilised, or moved, to keep the dialogue flowing. That's why the portrait is presented as a four-parter, whose separate sections infect and influence one another: this too is a way of breaking through the portrait's inherently static nature.

Image
(not quite)

At a certain point, the Dr. alludes to a book by a French philosopher. The book is about another doctor. The philosopher (who is actually an art historian) is Georges Didi-Huberman, and the doctor (who is actually an inventor) is Jean-Martin Charcot. He calls his invention hysteria. Didi-Huberman writes about the images that Dr. Charcot uses for scientific and didactic purposes. The images show a lot of the women, but also of Charcot himself and of his audience. Didi-Huberman demonstrates how things shift. The synchronisation goes wrong: pleasure becomes pain (and vice versa); feeling becomes torture (and vice versa). He calls this 'the paradox of atrocity'.[4] Here, psychiatry is merciless. It wants to know everything. And what it doesn't know, it invents. Because it's impossible to know everything. There

2) Roland Barthes. *La mort de l'auteur*. In: Le bruissement de la langue . Seuil, 1984: pp. 61-67
3) Idem. *Le plaisir du texte*. Seuil, 1973 *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. Seuil, 1975
4) Georges Didi-Huberman. *Invention of Hysteria*. Zone books, 2003: p. 176

will always be gaps in the portrait a psychiatrist sketches of his patient. It will always be an image, 'in spite of all'. Didi-Huberman wrote another book on the subject: *Images malgré tout* (*Images in spite of All*, 2003). It's about 'all' you cannot see, but must nevertheless take into account in order to understand an image (in this case: the cruelty of the concentration camps). The French film critic André Bazin coined another term for it in the fifties (the years directly following the concentration camps): the cinema as window on the world, or 'le cinéma de la cruauté'.

Bazin's strategy consisted of moving with the camera: he was against cinema based on editing, but for the 'plan séquence': where the camera moves with the space. Dr. De Smedt's strategy consists of taking a distance from this *all,* in order to leave ever more space for the image. There are no moving cameras here. Instead, she accentuates her image as a space within which to move. The way she pushes herself against the wall behind her loudspeaker and with her microphone in *'I would leave a signature'*. The way she wriggles along the same wall in *The son of a priest*. The way she again positions herself against the wall – the ultimate boundary of the theatrical space – in *A woman with a diamond*. Here, it is in an interview situation: she is behind the table, the listener on the other side. She, that is colleague Salamon in the body of Dr. De Smedt. The listener, that is Dr. De Smedt in the body of her audience. Next to the listener are two cameras: fixed ones – it is the Dr. who moves, towards and away from the camera. Five projectors send the images out into the space. Just as during a concert or a conference: reality magnified. The magnified images – which match the speaker's magnified statements, her big themes: saying "no", the diamond as a gift both of and for life, fact and fiction, being a woman,... – also serve to increase the distance between her and her audience.

There's something about these images, about these released recordings. They film a one-on-one situation. But by only filming herself, the Dr. duplicates in each individual member of the audience the position of the listener as a representative of this audience. That is how she shares the personal, the intimate. One on one becomes one against all. The magnification makes the shifts more visible: the image is not synchronous with reality. There is a slowness to it, as in the voice recordings in *'I would leave a signature'*. The picture comes a little later, the Dr. doesn't coincide with her image. Furthermore, the image not only shows the Dr., but also part of the space. As well as the Dr., the camera also films the wall behind her. This wall is projected again onto the other walls, behind, beside, in front of and around her. This projection of the wall onto the wall, that never fits. This

projection, that is like a portrait: always just short of the mark. Not quite. Such an image that does not (quite) coincide with itself, that deliberately breaks with itself, that goes outside itself ("hors de soi", as it is said in the performance); such a portrait as "becoming other", as "being hidden in exposure"; such a play with synchronicity, as in masturbation – gratification – coitus: that, of course, is the cliché of hysteria. This performance is about the artist as inventor, as psychiatrist. And the other way round: about the syndrome as invention and as creation; about recovery as (re)design. Patients are living images here. Portraits are 'tableaux vivants'. Theatre is a soft therapy. A play of fascination, fabulation and fantasy. But it's also liberation, a way of letting things go.

Psychiatry is recognising yourself in the other. It means becoming (an)other. Adjusting to the image, conforming to the norm. Synchronising. Becoming like everyone else. Psychiatry is about the creation ("the invention", as Didi-Huberman puts it) of the self, of the self as portrait, of the self-portrait. The psychiatrist searches for himself through the other person. It is a form of narcissism. Of attention-seeking. For an audience.

Audience
(indiscernable, indecidable, imperceptible)

While this story begins with a Dr. of Philosophy, Michel Foucault, who puts himself in the painter's place in order to understand his portrait. While it makes a detour past a Dr. of Psychiatry, Jean-Martin Charcot, who forces the performer (the hysteric) to take the place of the audience (the Dr.). Then it ends with a Dr. of the movement of body and mind, Christine De Smedt, who displaces herself towards the audience. How do they interpret these portraits? What do they see? What do they imagine? How do they behave? It is an expansion of choreographic practice and another break through the cliché of the portrait: by setting the image in motion, she moves the audience (and vice versa).

These portraits are there for an audience: without they no longer exist. The audience is the point of this performance, if not its subject. It is both its strength and its weakness. It is its substance and renders it vulnerable. This whole performance – and not only the last part – is about articulating the audience: the pronunciation (articulation) of the listener (or of listening: *audience*, from the Latin 'audere': to listen). The person is more than a space, more than a mask. He is a sound box, an echo chamber, a presence that resonates (and articulates): 'per-sonare'.

* Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière:
Dr. Charcot with patient and audience.

The moment the house lights come on is the moment where things coincide with themselves again. The game changes to one where performer and audience play themselves. We know that we are acting. Or do we? There is always an element of doubt. What is known in this performance as a "zone of indiscernability" is, in the words of *anti*psychiatrists Deleuze and Guattari (because here, the Dr. uses the words of colleague Le Roy, which he in turn has borrowed from Gilles Deleuze) also a 'zone d'indécidabilité'.[5] It is an in-between zone, within which performer and audience meet one another, become one another. Something new is created between the actor and his character. Not a combination; more a kind of common ground ("Ce n'est jamais combinaison de formes, c'est plutôt le fait commun").[6] Here – again – lies both the strength and the vulnerability of these portraits. The return to the personal gives the portrait the space to work. It creates in-between space, and – once again in the words of Deleuze and Guattari – 'inter-esse': being in-between as a form of involvement.[7]

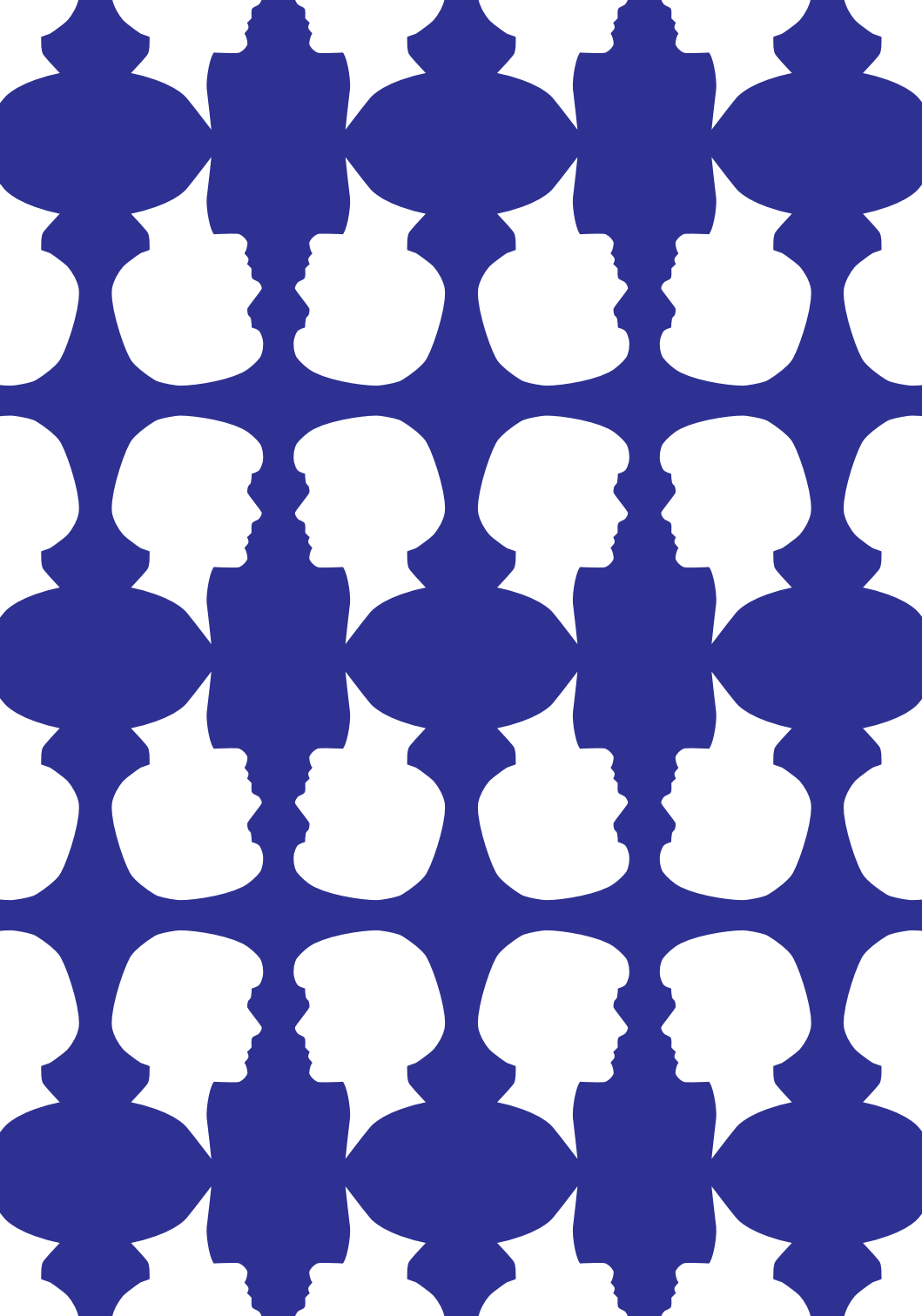
5) Gilles Deleuze. Francis Bacon, *logique de la sensation*. Éditions de la différence, 1981: pp. 19-22
6) ibid: p. 20
7) Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*. Minuit, 1980: p. 36

This doubt, formulated in the 'inter-esse', in the in-between zone, in the 'zone d'indiscernabilité', is also the first step towards becoming imperceptible.[8] It does not mean disappearing, but rather being absorbed into the environment. The blue key suit – her genderless body – is what Deleuze and Guattari could call a 'Body without Organs'. In his book about Francis Bacon – his only book about the art of the portrait – Deleuze describes an intensive body (*corps intensif*) that becomes a figure. This is how this commonplace should be understood: organism becomes body, face becomes head ('défaire l'organisme au profit du corps, le visage au profit de la tête').[9] Dr. De Smedt does not give her patients a face, she gives them a body.

Every portrait is a self-portrait. You cannot understand it without becoming part of it, without recognising yourself in it. This is where the audience's input becomes essential: as a dancer, as a listener, as an interviewer, as... an audience. This articulation makes the final portrait the most vague, the most imperceptible. It is potentially endless, always improvised on the spur of the moment and yet always synchronous – a permanent remix that always converges with itself. It is this ultimate role reversal that opens up this work both *in* and *as* space.

8) ibid: pp. 284-380
9) idem. Francis Bacon: pp.33-34

Ana Vujanovic



(IN) THE PERSON OF THE AUTHOR

Being invited to collaborate on *4 choreographic portraits* by Christine De Smedt, I was immediately intrigued by the cluster of questions that lie behind the project: Why don't I, an author, involve the personal in my artistic work? Do I resist it? Or, do I hide it? Why?[1] Taking this further, the following questions arise: What does this avoidance result in? In an artwork which is less authentic, less sincere, less credible, less my own? Which is more general, more indifferent, more technical, more a cold speculative construction? What intrigued me in this was not the author as a person; I wasn't curious to reveal the secret of the personal that supposedly had been hidden – supposedly for a good, personal, reason – by the gesture of exclusion. No, what challenged me was exactly how these basic concerns were constructed in the epistemic and socio-political senses, namely, how the paradigm of art predicated on the expression, manifestation or actualization of a person's individuality, her will and creative force, has been silently naturalized to the extent that these questions seemed a reasonable concern of an author herself. Indeed, there is no stronger paradigm of art today, and it looks like the personal and authorship are inseparably connected in an organic liaison that renders what we call art as such. The liaison is so smooth that it directly leads to the ultimate question: What is art if not an expression of individual will and creative force? Apart from the last instance, it appears in many variations, and today – when the artist's name functions as brand, and when she with her individuality and personality is the art product *par excellence* – it is gaining momentum.

Since starting out from the initial questions, the project has been carried out as artistic research and four solo performances that examine the ways in which the person and the work of art are related in contemporary performing arts. However, the 'object' of examination is shifted from the author herself to other authors: the choreographers and theatre directors

1) "I realized that in my work there was a hidden premise not to involve biographical and personal elements
But what do I mean by *personal*? What is the relationship between how I think *the personal* and the work I make?", Christine De Smedt, *4 choreographic portaits*, see p. 3

Alain Platel, Jonathan Burrows, Xavier le Roy and Eszter Salamon. In this way, instead of a self-examination that would give us an answer to the question of why the author doesn't involve personal elements in her art, thereby reaffirming the imperative to fuse the two, Christine De Smedt makes the portraits of the named authors, (re)constructing the relations between how they think, their artworks, and the ways they work.
In this essay, I wouldn't analyse what this artistic process produces, but would rather step back from the project's initial questions in order to understand better the conceptual ground that makes these questions reasonable and worth worrying about. In this, I will start off with the Foucauldian premise that the tie between the personal and authorship, however 'solid' it looks, in fact 'came into being' at a particular moment in Western history, and it may pass out of being in some other social context or historical moment. Thus my concern is not 'What is the problem with me, an author, not including the personal in my artwork' but 'What is the problem with the art for which the personal is an essential condition for it to be art?'

A stuttering vocabulary

But first of all: what does the personal mean? We all know, of course. Or do we? I have an idea in my mind, but when it comes to saying it, I start stuttering: individual, unique . . . probably distinctive, also particular, authentic . . . sometimes private, even intimate . . . somehow one's own . . . The problem is that we cannot induce a coherent definition from this, as the same term has some quite different denotations. On the other hand, the notion of the 'person' is close to concepts of individual, self and identity, which, from a theoretical viewpoint, deserve serious definition. Still, the way they operate in the Artworld doesn't presuppose a clear demarcation line, and the terms often overlap, from which I would assume that the overlapping is a part of how we understand the personal in this context. And while I will discuss its foundational status in a moment, at this point I would like to introduce a basic systematization of the ways in which the term 'personal' is employed in art, wherein it addresses:

- unique and associated qualifications, like particular, distinctive, one's own, etc., which refer to the particular and distinctive identity and individuality of the artist, expressed in art by her specific 'signature', by the artwork that only she can do
- the private and the intimate, which address the life-story and related experiences, thoughts, feelings and self of an author as individual human, which serves as a repository of her inspiration or even forces her to make art

~ the authentic and the original, which refer to the proximity of a work of art to the model-image shaped in the mind of its author, then materialized in the unrepeatable piece of art, whose aura of authenticity provides the audience with a unique artistic experience.

Although I would refrain from hasty conclusions, I cannot but remark that the systematization given above already demonstrates that the personal signifies at least three different concepts as well as different registers of the realm of art, hence being a quite elusive object of analysis or critique. Yet it leaves enough space for a problematization orientated towards pointing to and discussing the constructive seams of the seemingly smooth and organic tie between art and the personal, which is my priority here.

MAKING AND DOING ART IN *THE CENTURY OF THE SELF*

Art production and the cult of personality

After the historical construction of the conceptions of art in the context of Western industrial capitalist society and its liberal and individually oriented epistemology – which feature: divisions of production (poiesis) into industrial (reproducible) and aesthetic (original), a transformation of practice (praxis) to an expression and actualisation of the artist's will and creative force, and a reconfiguration of the public and the private in bourgeois society which gave preference to the private as authentic – what we encounter in the 20th century as commonsense is a personalization of art sustained by the consensus of creative will. Giorgio Agamben's list of the 19th- and early 20th-century art practices, in which we may come across such a conception,[2] might be broadened by many recent inputs such as abstract expressionism / action-painting, the majority of emancipatory and ludic neo-avant-garde theatre, humanistic theatre anthropology, expressionist dance, post-modern autobiographical and identity-based literature and performance, graffiti and similar street art forms, numerous contemporary open and processual formats of work, including the expanded notions of energy, creativity, liberation, expression, impulses, etc. From a critical standpoint, it may be claimed that these artistic forms and concepts tend toward an atrophy of the political potential of art practice. This criticism rests upon the notion that, in these cases – which are many and paradigmatic for the 20th-century

2) See Giorgio Agamben, 'Poiesis and Praxis', in *The Man Without Content*, Stanford University Press, Stanford Ca, 1999

Western Artworld – the aspect of free human doing in the social realm is, in principle, replaced by a creativity that strives for the humanistic emancipation of the artist as an individual: her personal realization, affirmation and liberation.

This trend was fostered further by the emancipatory politics of the 60s that was condensed into such slogans as 'be individual', 'be unique', 'be different', 'be yourself', etc. This kind of celebration of the individual, invested in resistance to the mass society developed after World War II, gradually led to the cult of personality in many social spheres. Accordingly, in the art field, the artistic aura has shifted from artworks – which since then have been able to be produced both as unique objects and reproduced copies – toward artists themselves, who are assigned the social role of being authentic, different, outstanding and above all non-conformist personalities.
Today, we may observe how this trend is gaining momentum in the course of further blurring the borders between practice and production, understood – by post-Operaist and bio-political theorists such as Negri, Hardt, Virno, Lazzarato, etc. – as the general human condition of contemporary Western capitalist society, the production of which is based on the post-industrial fostering immaterial labour and on the post-Taylorist and post-Fordist organization of work. The theorists I mention above claim that post-industrial production is more concerned with the cultural-informational content of material products than the products themselves: the production of images, tastes, opinions – and subjectivity. Likewise, as Lazzarato warns, in the work process, management is based on the slogan 'become a subject (of communication)' and tends to become more totalitarian than the old divisions of poiesis due to its attempt to engage the whole worker's personality and subjectivity in the production of value. Thus the expression of a supposedly unique individuality becomes a social imperative in the capitalist world. An employee is no longer obliged merely to 'get the job done'; in Lazzarato's words, 'one *has to* express oneself, one *has to* speak, communicate, cooperate',[3] therefore: 'Actually, subjectivity is capitalism's biggest output. It's the single largest commodity we produce, because it goes into the production of all other commodities.'[4] The same is true for the Artworld, where the imperative is reflected, for instance, in the

3) Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labour', in *Radical Thought in Italy*, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt (eds), Minnesota University Press, 1996; www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm
4) Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Conversation with Maurizio Lazzarato', in 'Exhausting Immaterial Labour in Performance', Joint issue of *Le Journal des Laboratoires* and *TkH* Journal (no. 17), 2010, p. 14

proliferation of artistic events organized as 'encounters' between artists, whose primary task is to be present, in person. The imperative has resulted in the glorification of the artist's signature, in establishing the artist's name as a brand, and in promoting the artist's personality as the art product *par excellence.* Thereby, the principles of work in production and in art overlap, and artists are becoming the paradigm of immaterial workers – but in a quite opportunistic sense. In saying this I am trying to focus attention on the fact that, apart from being romantic and metaphysical, the exaggerated role of the personal in art is also very profitable for the capitalist art system.

The Author is dead – Long live the scriptor, narrator, and social engineer!

And if, in spite of this criticism, it still seems difficult to speculate on an art practice that is extricated from the organic ties between the personal and authorship, I would like to give some concrete 20th-century examples of different or even opposite conceptions of art.

Firstly, we should depart from the idea of the Western Artworld as the only possible horizon for thinking about art. And we don't need to travel far; the paradigm of art in real socialist states – except Yugoslavia – already faces us with a quite different perspective: socialist realism. It can be traced back to the post-Revolutionary Soviet Union, and then it became prevalent in the whole post-war Eastern block, where it affirmed the socialist social order, also functioning as a counterpoint to the abstract expressionism that was promoted in the US as a paradigm of art as an expression and actualization of the artist's personality and creative impulse. In the socialist realist conception of art, instead of being regarded as a creative genius, the artist is seen as 'a social engineer'. That is to say, she is a cultural worker who works in the domain of the social super-structure and who – like all other workers – deals with and works for society in her own domain and by her own means instead of expressing her unique personality against the community. Moreover, focusing on the individuality of the artist is seen rather as a 'bourgeois luxury', quite inappropriate in the situation where the new social order, based on collectivity and equality as a radical critique of Western capitalism and individualism, was meant to have been established. Although this approach gives us an example of the real, existing conception of art in which the personal is an irrelevant or even a forbidden aspect of making or doing art, it has its widely discussed shortcomings. First of all, since it developed in the states that tended toward totalitarianism, the

approach often resulted in replacing the Western pressure put on artists to be unique and to invest their unique personality in art with the even bigger pressure to exclude any particular, individual or personal elements from art. This way, socialist realism finally affirmed the figure of the 'artist as party member', an impersonal art maker who was subsumed under, and thus merely promoted (by artistic means) the party's politics and its vision of society. And this is surely not a solution that I would propose to 'the personal troubles' of contemporary art.

The other case that I would mention is the famous theoretical debate on the relation of the author to the artwork, which belongs to the 60s-70s theoretical platform marked by (post-)structuralism and was opened by Roland Barthes's 'death of the author', followed by Michel Foucault's rethinking of the discursive position of the author subject. Barthes[5] breached the commonsensical thinking of art by (revealing) its connections to the author as a person and claimed that the author was 'dead' since: neither is she the one who controls the meaning of the artwork regarded as text, nor does she, accordingly, have the key to reading it. Namely, in the complex cultures of signifying practice, meaning is determined only intertextually, whereby artworks interact freely among themselves and are closer to each other than to their authors. From this perspective, the author as an individual human is completely irrelevant to the functioning of artworks in society, and the artist is more a 'scriptor', an operator of the surrounding texts, than a lone genius from which the artworks spring. Foucault[6] will agree that the author's personality is not essential for an artwork, and the notion of 'author function' which he affirmed shouldn't be confused with the person of author, nor does it refer to the real individuals. However, according to him, we still need the author as an artistic/textual subject in order to reconstruct a genealogy of a discourse, to link it, and to understand it in this linkage. And while the author's name here has a primarily classificatory role, the 'author function' is rather a 'narrator' who is only a part of a larger social and discursive system of beliefs and assumptions that limit the meaning. This determination is associated with Foucault's great resistance to the vision of the artist as an individual isolated from the rest of society, and it further implies that even that which is seen as the individual personality of an author is always-already a socially constructed subjectivity.

5) Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1977
6) Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, James Faubion (ed), Penguin Books, London, 2000

Seeing the author constitutively involved in social contexts and discursive frames instead of as an isolated unique individual – which the *Four Choreographic Portraits* performances latently reason out as well – might be a direction that overcomes its withdrawal, as implied in Barthes' proposition. Keeping this remark in mind, at this point I would leave the Barthes/Foucault debate and once again change the terrain of discussion.

NOTA BENE: TO BE A PERSON, I NEED THE MASK

The last topic that I would open here is triggered by the fact that the *Four Choreographic Portraits* are solos, all performed by one person, the author herself. Taking into account that these performances are the portraits of other authors, we find 'this person' in a double position – as the performer speaking and doing in the first person singular, but not acting, she embodies the others on the stage, at the same time keeping the position of the author who constructs them as portrayed figures. While this implies, in some interpretations which appeared in the course of the project, that the four portraits are ultimately about creating the self-portrait of Christine De Smedt, she explains the decision this way: 'The fact that one person performs four different portraits is a 'gesture' towards the multitude of interests, recognitions and possible positions, inconsequence and paradoxes.'[7]
In thinking about this topic, I would keep going backward and concentrate on how 'the multitude of interests, recognitions and possible positions' relates to the supposedly unique and relatively long-lasting entity that we call a 'person', and how the 'inconsequence and paradoxes' may be seen as its integral elements instead of as that which undermines it. This could require a broad rethinking of the notion of the person, but I will narrow the discussion down to the performing arts framework.

The performative situation as I described it above opens the issue of the disidentification or destabilization of the person as a unique individual and, as regards the basic questions of *Four Choreographic Portraits*, can be seen as a corporeality of the constructive, performative and changeable character of the personal. A verbal explication of such a conception can be found in the inference that the author drew at the end of her research:

7) Christine De Smedt, After-talk, Buda Kunstencentrum, Kortrijk, 23 February 2012

'On the other hand I would consider that what is *my personal* is not only a private, intimate or biographical matter, but a particular perspective, as well private as public, since *my personal* is already being a construction in larger and in different contexts, my personal as a shared identity, which involves different identities, with a lot of contradictions and paradoxes.'[8]

In some aspects, these two explications resonate with postmodern thought, where well-known theses about multiple identities have been articulated. I will now skip them and focus on the branch of social constructivism that sees performance as constitutive of the person as a social subject. It can be traced back to one of the first 20th-century analyses of the theatricality of everyday life: Erving Goffman used the theatre model to explain the social construction of self and put forward the notion of the 'performance of self'.[9] His basic premise was the constructivist claim that there is no preexisting inner self that is to be expressed, but foremost a learning of patterns of expression that we subsequently enact in order to construct our-selves, in certain socio-historical conditions. Thus, according to Goffman, without understanding performance, we cannot understand what the person is, as it is nothing other than a social role or, in other words, its own performance. Goffman's theses interfered radically in the prevalent Western understanding of the person as formulated over the last few centuries. Richard Sennett[10] notes that from the late 18th century on we have faced 'the fall of public man' caused by the view that while the public is the sphere of artificial social roles, the private is the domain of the human being's authenticity, the realm where we are closest to ourselves. In this sort of interpretation, it stands to reason that the authentic, private person needs to wear a costume or a mask to go public, and that public social performances are exactly what depersonalize us. However, only a few decades earlier, the 'man as actor' had quite a different connotation. In his study, Sennett describes[11] how the early bourgeois public sphere at the time of the *ancien régime* was formed in the theatre during and after performances, and then how conventions of social relations and behaviour in the theatre passed into the street by way of two conceptions: body as mannequin and speech as sign (instead of symbol). From this point of view, what a person did in the social situation had a founding role; it was real and not what masked the real.

8) Christine De Smedt, *4 choreographic portraits*, p. 3
9) See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1959
10) Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, W. W. Norton, New York and London, 1992
11) Sennett, 'Public Roles', in *The Fall of Public Man*, pp. 64–89

The etymology of the term 'person' signals the same reversal of our habitual thinking. The 'person' and 'personal' come from the Latin *persona*, from the Greek *prosopon*, which meant 'mask' and derived from Greek theatre, then migrated to theatrical vocabulary as *dramatis persona*, meaning 'theatrical character', and further 'persona' in current everyday speech. So originally the person is used to refer to someone other than oneself, someone other than we 'are', and obviously other than that which we today consider 'person' to be. In a word, the person is a persona, not its opposite. This brings us in *medias res* of the ambivalent title of this essay, which oscillates between theatrical and legal denotations, suggesting that the person (of the author) is what emerges from being in the person (of the author). In other words, the person is a persona since there is no individual human who is not a social being from the start, constituting herself with and before others. Seen in this way, what seems to be a complicated situation in which we are put by the *4 choreographic portraits* performed by one person in fact evokes that the personal is basically about founding self-performances in their own right. This constellation was almost lost in the later history of Western thought – theatre discourse included – due, partly if not entirely, to the influence of the Christian understanding of the person in terms of hypostases as different appearances of the same, of the essence of being.

Such reasoning still reverberates in the dilemma that we have today when speaking about the person and the performance, be it in art or in the wider socio-cultural sphere: Is there such a thing as the person who performs different personas, or is the person an outcome of these performances? Although postmodern multiple identities and Barthes' dead author can give us a clear answer and contest the traces of Christianity in this matter, I would take the problematics further. The reason is that this answer cannot resolve the problem of the responsibility for doing art, which latently resides in the dilemma and which I will introduce as the final point of my discussion in order to open it up to future debate. These conceptions point precisely to and relieve us from the pseudo-essential constitution of the author by means of the personal. I find it their biggest achievement, since what is latently present throughout the text as my standpoint could be summed up in the thesis that the essentialization of the author by the personal, that is, her personalisation, means a privatisation of the author subject and ultimately leads to its depoliticisation. However, in order to repoliticise the author, de-essentialization is not enough. And at this point we meet the limit of the Barthesian and postmodern theses which empty the locus of

responsibility, either as a result of the author's loss of control over meaning, playing freely in intertextual space, or by a dispersion of the author subject to multiple identities. This is why I found Foucault's remark worth keeping in mind, as it implies that although the author as an individual human does not control the artwork, as a part of larger social and discursive systems she determines it – or at least takes part in determining it, thereby taking part of the responsibility for it as well. Therefore, what seems to me politically more radical than the withdrawal of the author is to reassign her the responsibility for what she does in art as a public matter. Not in this case due to a pre-existing personality expressed or actualized in her doing, but because one is what one does in a certain context, wherein 'self-construction work' is shared among self-awareness, bodily existence and social agencies. In the end, I would reverse the entire problem of art and the personal by concluding that no one can indeed escape this responsibility, and 'the person' is too weak an alibi to mask it for long.

An epilogue

It looks like I have used too many words to say such a simple thing – you are what you do, though what you do might have nothing to do with you personally. However, I'm completely aware that all I have said – contributing to the huge theoretical effort to contest the essentialization and depoliticisation of the author as a social subject by the personal – is still not enough, since it can explain the ways in which this conception of art is constructed, but cannot really destabilize it. It cannot do this because the cult of personality in art, as well as in all other spheres of contemporary Western society, has nothing to do with its conceptual strength, nor with a humanistic concern for the fragile human being terrified of false public life. It is rather an aspect of the overall privatisation of the social, which has to do with (neo)liberal capitalist social and production relations, which promote individualism and personal rights, thereby legitimizing private interests, and, if you will, property, as publicly relevant.

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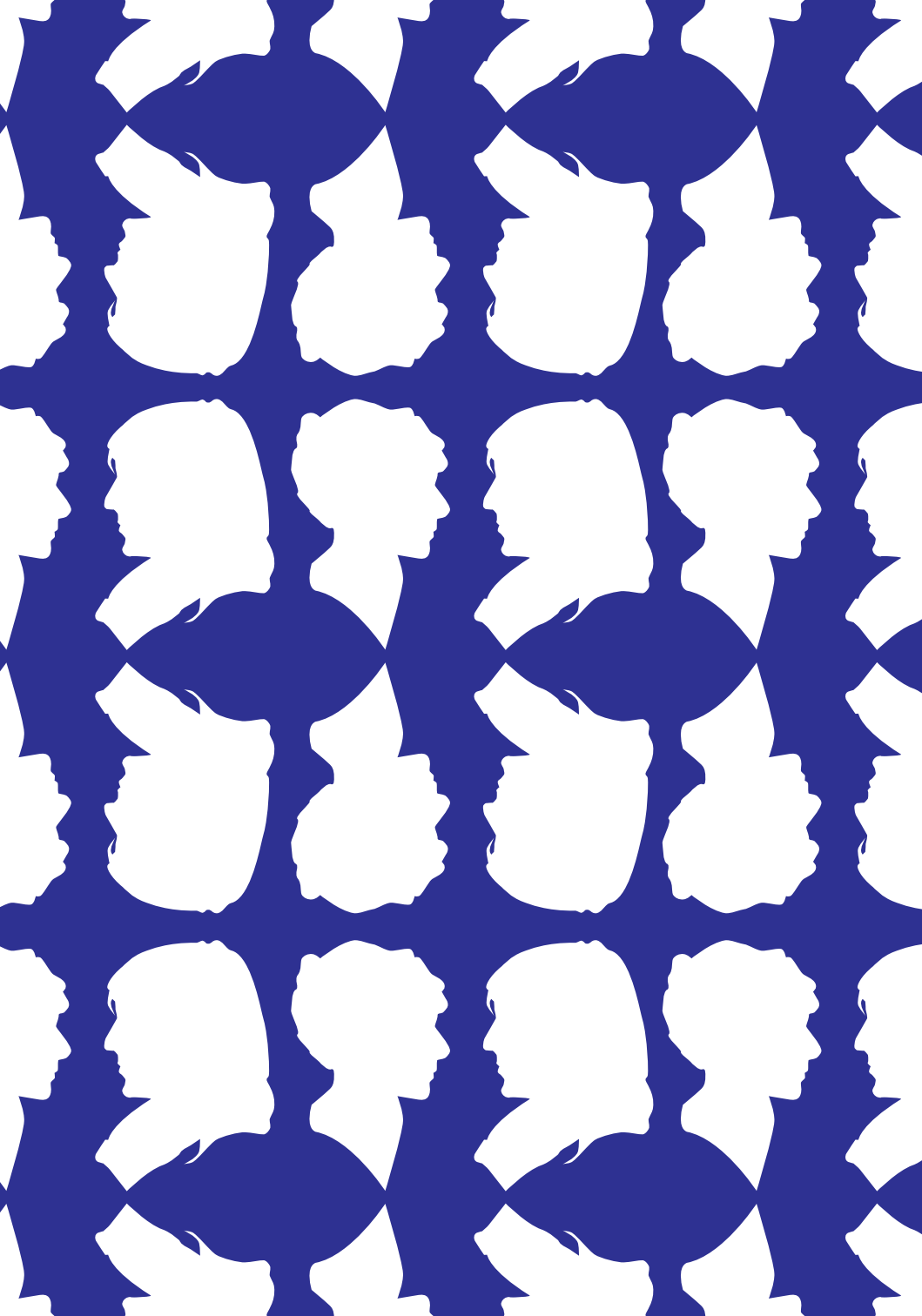
Sarah Vanhee
Christine De Smedt



Monday 27 February

Hi Christine,

Let's make another attempt to make sense of something in words. To make a new construct. You asked me to conduct an interview with you about 'the portraits', as you yourself spontaneously call them. I'm happy to accept the invitation, I have lots of questions. The first time I saw anything of 'the portraits' was when you were working on the one of Eszter in the studio. I found it fascinating. And I thought: 'Why on earth does this woman want to put herself through all this?' I have infinite respect for people who create solos: who shut themselves away in a studio to work on something that might just mean something to somebody else in a few months time – a sort of zero point of theatre. The solo is always a sort of self-study, an inner monologue – where do you keep finding the motivation? In this case it is even more extreme: you isolate yourself in total solitude with four absent people as living material. A strange thing for a person to do: shut yourself away in a studio so as not to become somebody else. Five months or so later, two days ago now, I saw the finished portraits. There are 4 monologues, 4 solos, 4 stories, 4 etudes, which depend on each other for their existence. They demand respect. I think I understand what you are doing, how by pointing to others you also allow us a cursory look at the hand that points; what the construct is, the composition; how I am a witness and a conspirator.

There are texts and interviews which reveal to me how it is all put together: the being and the not being, presence through absence, and the third person that arises from the confrontation between you and your interviewee. I can't help it, it reminds me of *I'm Not There*, the film by Tod Haynes based on the life of Bob Dylan, which consists of five portraits, but 'he's not there'. In theory it all works. It works, we have a story. But there is something in it that makes me suspicious. Or is it just a desire to shed another light on it (again: that eternal, crazy urge to stand out, to make a difference, to be a 'author'. Which is why your 'authorship' is so special: it starts from the idea of the copy, rather than from originality.)

If I look at 'the portraits', my intuition tells me that there is something perverse in what you are doing, perhaps even something parasitical. I have to be on my toes; 'I' am not safe. It is somewhere in the strange combination of distance and proximity. In text that describes the body but quickly lets

the body disappear. Your voice is what I still remember most: the tone, the timbre, the tempo and the rhythm, which are so very present throughout the four portraits with their little nuances, an immaterial fingerprint.
A metaphor?
A criminologist who is investigating a crime for which he is the chief suspect.

Regards,
Sarah

Tuesday, 28 February

Hi Sarah,

That's a great metaphor! It made me smile, so it must work.
The portraits could provide nice criminal profiles, not forgetting the different social contexts. Something that has always thrilled me about crime investigation is the reliability (or unreliability) of memory and the fine line between reality and fiction.

My motivation for getting involved in this sort of thing is an irresistible curiosity, especially about things that I don't immediately understand or about things I suspect I have formed too general a picture of. I have great problems with generalisations and so with my own generalisations too, even though I'm aware we need them. The way I cope with this is to throw all my physical and mental energy into it. Submitting myself blindly, as it were, without knowing how I will give the material its final form. But with a sort of persistence. That's why it again lasted so long. The idea emerged in 2005, and has assumed a multitude of forms – duets, a group composition – until the final idea arose of making and performing these four portraits. I think it is important to look at something from different angles, to shift myself to another vision. Hence these different interviews. And I see myself as a privileged instrument that has to 'experience' the thing I'm focusing on. The solo seemed to me to be the perfect opportunity to bring this whole project to an 'end'.

In this case, therefore, I was able to construct this inner monologue, as you call it, thanks to a dialogue. To avoid egocentrism, certainly, but even more from a desire to learn something from the other.
It doesn't bother me if there's anything parasitic about it. It does sound pejorative though. Is that from an underlying hypothesis, that has an individuality, a voice that belongs to you personally? But what is my voice and what is his or her voice... the sound of the voice is indeed a sort of fingerprint. Yet, during the course of this project and after a great many blunders, I have learned that the thought itself convinces the voice. For instance, if I mimicked too much the voice of Jonathan or Eszter, I ended up in a peculiar pastiche and far too much of the text was lost. Bojana told me that in the beginning I performed the text like a sort of dance phrase that I had learned. It was important to make the thought game my own, and in doing so the rhythm, a timbre and tonalities too.

I often wrestle with things, but preferably in the form of a physical and mental game. Eurudike, the voice coach, said I seem to have to work very hard physically before that voice comes through. And that is indeed what I had to do in this case, expose the idea, the question and myself to danger. Spend hours with myself, try things and abandon things, work on something that probably won't amount to anything, tinker. It's all part of the process. And then something emerges that stands alone, that third entity.....

Sarah, that's all for today!

Regards,
Christine

Thursday 1 March

Hello Christine,

'Finding your own voice'... It's interesting that this is exactly the expression used when referring to discovering your own 'authenticity'. The voice, and not the body, the consistent elements, the material – that which is intuitively and inextricably linked to the self.
You have to encounter resistance before that voice manifests itself, you have to put 'yourself' in the way of danger. And at the same time you write: 'what is my voice and what is his or her voice?', what does it matter?
It made me think of a phrase Foucault uses when quoting Beckett in his text 'What is an author?': " 'What does it matter who is speaking', someone said, 'what does it matter who is speaking?'"
That made me smile.
You write that it is the thought that convinces the voice. Does that mean that thought is more powerful than the need to speak, the need to give voice? Where do you think the voice is in relation to thought and the body?

It's no coincidence that I use the word 'power'. Throughout the 4 performances there are various references to the power of the author and how he/she handles it. You refer literally to questions concerning fundamental ethical principles in *Self-reliance*, while in the *'I would leave a signature'* you introduce someone who is less occupied with questioning and more interested in convincing: convincing the audience, the press, himself. Somebody who openly manipulates.
We keep seeing the same 'I' who is speaking: Christine as performer who says what Christine as creator has selected from what the choreographer has done, in response to what Christine as the interviewer has requested. A 'hall of mirrors'.
During the process you also place the emphasis on dialogue: dialogue with the thoughts of the choreographers, with the artistic partner.
As an author you have found a complex way to orchestrate your own relationship to power: as if you are speaking from a very precisely organised and historical forcefield, rather than on the basis of direct impressing/imposing.
And yet, it is Christine De Smedt who is talking, and you lend your name to this series while the other names have disappeared.
You write that you have a problem with generalisations. But you have ended

up giving each of the portraits a rather generic title, e.g. *The son of a priest*, *A woman with a diamond*.
By separating the title from the name of the author, you also separate that title from 'the body of work' that the author has made, and even from the literal, physical body connected with that name. It becomes a narrative instead of an identity. Do the portraits become 'more general' as a result? And if so, what does that mean?
I am suddenly reminded of the end of *Pina*, the Wim Wenders film, where I disliked how the members of her dance troupe resort to banalities to describe her. Perhaps the question they were asked was too general. If they had been asked about a specific memory, for example the first time they met her, their story might have been more specific and more individual, but also more detailed and more animated as a result. Then it might have been called *a thin lady in a white dress* instead of *Pina*.

Are you now a potential, walking, collection of stories of living choreographers?

Much love,
Sarah

Thursday 1 March

Hi Sarah,

Those living choreographers entrusted me with many beautiful and interesting thoughts.
And they gave me permission to do what I thought was interesting and necessary.
They are not documentary portraits. But they do tell a story and I continue that story. I infected myself with them.

And at the same time you write: 'what is my voice and what is his or her voice', what does it matter?
I don't mean 'what does it matter' but rather 'what makes that voice?' With what do we associate it in the first instance – with authenticity?
I notice that by learning the texts and imitating, you can speak like someone else, adopt their way of speaking, the timbre or where the mechanical voice is situated in the body. I worked hard on the timbre, the rhythm and the musicality of how Jonathan talks. And then, sometimes in a normal conversation with somebody, I hear myself talking the way he does in the interview. Or I feel a resonance from having learned that text. As in any learning process, after a while, you do it without realising. That's also why I see that individuality as a construction, as an acquired individuality that can't easily be reduced to a few character traits.

The voice is a very complex thing. Something physical and mental, and yet much more.
There's a great book that you've probably already read: *A Voice and Nothing More*, by Mladen Dolar, a Slovenian philosopher. He analyses the voice from a linguistic, metaphysical, physical, ethical and political perspective. At a certain point in time he analyses and describes how the voice is situated at a paradoxical and ambiguous point, at the crossroads between body and language, but that crossroads belongs to neither of them. 'Language and the body have the voice in common, but the voice is not a part of the body or of language'. In the analysis made here, the voice is not that which we empirically hear, but rather the desire to say something, to articulate, to communicate.
In the case of the portraits, wanting to give shape to a thought and to communicate it, I have to look for the acoustic voice that can best

communicate these meanings. But I wouldn't express that relationship between thought and voice in terms of power. They are very closely linked. With the series of portraits, I look for the thought and the voice, and I try my best to lose the body which says it, i.e. me.
Why didn't I just use a recording?
Or let somebody else perform the portraits?
Why didn't I publish a text?

So, that acoustic voice, the timbre, the resonance, the pitch, rhythm, melody and expression are very important after all. And they can change, metamorphose, adapt. The analogy with the fingerprint is therefore not entirely appropriate.
We have different voices in different moods, depending on the nature and intention of how you want to communicate something.
And the fact that so many different voices can exist in one body is an attempt to enable contradiction, the inconsequence, the impossibility of capturing an identity, one thing, in one name.
In my opinion, the concept of authorship should be regarded with a lot of suspicion and nuance.

Mladen Dolar describes at one point how, for five years, Pythagoras gave lessons to his students from behind a curtain, without ever appearing before them. The acoustics is what we hear without seeing its physical origin. So, here was a supreme attempt to separate the voice from the body. And the result was that the voice, the philosophising of the 'teacher', acquired more authority and extra power. More power?

What do you mean by the power of the author? Where is the power of an author to which you refer?
I didn't focus on an idea of power, but when you create, you always relate to those you collaborate with and your audience, as well as to the corresponding responsibility.
How an author relates to authorship is also reflected in HOW you set about the work process. That's what Alain is talking about when he refers to the relationship with the group. In Jonathan's case it's when he refers to the contract between him and Matteo and the third person that intervenes at the moment of conflict. Xavier says something about strategies for taking decisions.
And yet, it is Christine De Smedt who is talking, and you lend your name to this series while the other names have disappeared.

Have I got myself tied up in knots?
Strangely enough I look at it from the perspective of wanting to remove power from the author and the strength of 'the name'. Wanting to get away from the personality culture. Or at least, as far as possible. Sometimes I find it unhealthy the way the current media overloads us with that personality worship in a voyeuristic way, with all those 'personalities' in interviews.
At no point did I want to expose the choreographers I interviewed to any kind of voyeurism. They are a part of my life and work environment and have something to say about that from a different perspective.
I don't want to represent them as the authors of 'a body of work' because their authorship and 'a body of work' also exist thanks to others and the accompanying context.
It is about creating a field of ideas and thoughts.

I see signing with my name more as a way of saying: 'The picture that has emerged here is not a reliable picture identical to the original, but a selection, a subjective reflection. The production of that picture has been through a process of reworking and selecting, and in that process the maker and the material influence each other.' In the end I am responsible for the picture but I do not equate with it. When the picture becomes public, something emerges for the audience, and that something has to be able to stand alone. 'What does it matter who is speaking'. I transmit these portraits, like a sort of medium.

The removal of the names of the choreographers was an attempt to be more concrete or more specific, to refer to something that is to be found IN the portrait itself if it has acquired form and content. It is now the title of the portrait and no longer the 'title/name' of the person to whom it refers.

I still remember the first play, a performance for schools, which threw me off balance: *The Apology of Socrates* performed by Julien Schoenaerts. The fact that it was Julien Schoenaerts is not very important, even though he was a very good actor, because what really impressed me was that I was so carried away by the speech. I found that powerful and scary. The narrative, the patterns, the inflections, the shifts in thinking, playing around with all that intrigued me.

Sarah, warmest wishes,
Christine

Friday 2 March

Hello Christine,

I'm writing from Amsterdam, a city with which I have a love-hate relationship. In loud voices (they say hard voices) they call a spade a spade. You get something you can relate to, the positions are clear. I like that. But there is so little searching, hesitating, dialogue. As if the thinking has gone out of speech and language has become primarily a means to differentiate you from me, or us from them.
Another generalisation? How can you speak, write – which in itself is a manifestation of the self – without losing those subtle distinctions you talk about, without closing off any possible doors?
I don't think you have tied yourself up in knots at all. But I am interested in the moment when you decide – after that meticulous process lasting many years, with different perspectives, partners, working methods, voices – that this is it, this is what you're going to put your name to. I don't regard that as anything negative; in my view, it is a gesture that says: this is what I am prepared to take responsibility for, for this 'thing' that I have launched into the world, at this time. In my opinion that doesn't devalue the awareness of the complexity of the concept of being an 'author', and of all the discourse and work on that concept. The author, the person, and identity, are three totally different concepts not to be confused with each other, and they are all there in your work.

Regarding identity and continuity....
Back to the crime: the question of whether somebody is 'accountable' or not, is interesting: was someone really 'himself' at the moment of the deed? It is confusing, because physically one remains 'the same'. And what if somebody hears voices: can we still assume in that case that one and the same person has committed the crime?
These are extreme, transgressive cases.

The voice changes with time, circumstances and emotions anyway, just like the personality. And indeed, by copying, incorporating a number of formal characteristics, not necessarily in a psychological but in a quite technical way, you can get under the skin of another person... Charlie Chaplin was, physically, a master at that – and there is nothing 'unauthentic' about him. It seems wonderful to me that you can carry all those 'beings' inside yourself or put them to use – whatever their name.

I have never believed in identity as an immutable fact. The worship of personality and celebrities goes hand in hand with the cultivation and fixation of the 'self' on which our whole culture and economy is currently founded: because only when you are a 'somebody' you can get things done, stand out – by way of achievements *and* consumer behaviour, be on the map, be pathologised, etc. We need the isolated 'personalities' with their obligatory one-liners and banal biographical trivialities, as a reference point with which to compare ourselves, to look up to, to measure up against.

I've talked in various ways and perhaps confusingly – for which my apologies – about the aspect of 'power' in the portraits, and about consciously allowing it to flow into manipulation and force.
Specifically and as an elaboration of the above: I think the person in *'I would leave a signature'* very consciously plays with the cult status around his person, i.e. (at least in your text) in relation to the public and press. The person in *The son of a priest* addresses it as an – almost technical or at least factual – element which he has to take account of in his work (e.g. reference to the *A woman with a diamond* in case there is any inequality between two colleagues). I think there is something in the third one about formality and concentration – but that would be taking us too far at this point. And in *Self-reliance*, you offer a proposal for exchange, searching together in dialogue. It is about how these people deal with their position in relation to fellow workers, the audience, the work itself. Things that you are also confronted with, so these same questions play out on a meta level. And something which an author – such as you – always has power over is what he/she consciously makes visible. And your role here is very precarious: what you (un) consciously make (in)visible in what he/she (un)consciously makes (in)visible. Part of what I appreciate about your work is how carefully and precisely you deal with this.

So here's a more bold question:
Is there a difference between what you do, and the acting of Julien Schoenaerts?

Very best wishes,
Sarah

Sunday 4 March

Hi Sarah,

I think that 'the thing' is the result of the work process I subscribe to, and the moment when I present it to an audience and say 'this is how I want it to relate to that audience', then I say 'this is it for now', that is the moment when I decide, this is it (for now).
Everything that precedes it is a process in which decisions are continuously being taken.
I also reworked two portraits after they premiered. The proximity of and the contact with the audience, and how I relate to the space that we share at that moment, all these factors are part of the portraits and so I have to continue working on them after the premiere. One portrait is even conceived so that it will never be finished. Because of the interaction that it requires with the audience, I only know after the performance how it turned out and I use that experience to adapt my strategies for the next performance.

Your rhetorical question about the difference between what I do and the acting of Julien Schoenaerts made me think of an analogy: the process of appropriating a text and the thought patterns that are characteristic of that 'individual'. Or how an individual appears by appropriating those thoughts. The challenge for me was to let the 'acting' in the performance disappear as much as possible, so as to allow the text to speak and at the same time to show the construction of it. In performance and theatre the appropriation may well be different because the body is the medium that appropriates something and has to convince an audience 'live', and in a 'lively' way, about what it wants to communicate. For me that process requires quite a lot of time. It doesn't just happen from one day to the next.
I attach a great deal of importance to the autodidactic process of researching something and learning from it through projects. Appropriation is a part of every learning process. And for me it's vital that a process of appropriation is also a learning process.

See you very soon, warmest wishes,
Christine

Friday 9 March

Hi Christine,

I've since spoken to you and we also discussed this correspondence briefly, and it's strange but now I find it harder to write because the person I was speaking to and the person to whom I was writing, am writing, are no longer the same, not even the same as that person in the blue suit.

But I still have one question, about 'appropriation' and about 'the moment': Can these portraits – 4 monologues or 4 solos? – exist on paper, and if so: would someone else also be able to perform them?
How can/may/should this work continue to exist, Christine De Smedt?

Warmest regards,
Sarah

Tuesday 13 March

Hi Sarah,

These 4 portraits are 4 performances and as such don't exist on paper. Of course, you could transcribe them onto paper: the text, the directions about to how to deliver the text, how the texts are interwoven and rhythmically determined by a recurring word, and the actions can be outlined in a score. For the 'self-reliance' portrait, a description of the concept would be needed with all the available textual material that can be used and the description of the strategies for conversing with the audience. On paper you then have the 'score', the description of the concept, the directions for the movements, the description of the approach to take with the audience and the space, and the textual material, but these are not the portrait itself. The audience and the space are not on paper either, and they also define the 4 portraits.

I have already had a request from someone who wants to perform the portrait of 'the son of a priest'. I said yes. So it's okay with me if someone else performs it.
Nothing has yet been decided about the way the portrait has to be appropriated, by video, through my directions and scores or a personal interpretation of the textual material alone, and I still have to think about that.
If I think back to Julien Schoenaerts, I think mainly of someone who doesn't act but who transforms what he performs.
So if someone else performs the portraits I would be very interested to see how they make these texts and directions their own.

Obviously, I hope that I can perform this series myself as much as possible. The premiere is now over and I'm very curious as to how it will evolve after various confrontations with and reactions from different audiences.

For me the best-case scenario would be if the four portraits could be shown together in a series. That best expresses the project in terms of the question posed and the objective. I know that's not always possible. It's not a normal format and there are conditions and restrictions. That always means consulting those that do the programming about the manner of presentation.

If somebody else wants to appropriate a portrait, should I then demand that this person appropriates all four? That would be a particularly radical condition, but not unappealing for all that.
If only one portrait is shown, then it should be made clear to the audience that they are only seeing one part of a greater whole. The relationship of the portraits to each other in the series is particularly important.

The "Self-portrait with Reich and Riley (and Chopin in the background)" by Ligeti and "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" by Gertrude Stein are two of the many examples that counter the cliché of the portrait as image.
So I hope that these 4 portraits can find an audience that will help create them.
They are portraits that appear and disappear. Should I be responsible for ensuring that, if I can no longer perform them, others are able to? I will have to think about that, because it seems to me like an interesting way of un-appropriating them.

regards!
Christine

4 CHOREOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS:

'I would leave a signature'
The son of a priest
A woman with a diamond
Self-reliance

editing ~ Christine De Smedt
original texts ~ Christine De Smedt, Pieter Van Bogaert, Ana Vujanovic, Sarah Vanhee
translation ~ Edith Ulens, Gregory Ball, Pieter Van Bogaert
final reading ~ Hilde Debuck, Iris Raspoet, Christine De Smedt, Pieter Van Bogaert
graphic design ~ Katarina Popovic

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Christine De Smedt ~ les ballets C de la B