

OVERPROTECTION IS NO PROTECTION

Choreographer Helena Waldmann talking to visual artist Susanne Ristow on cultural virology



Susanne Ristow: *Dear Helena, we first met on the occasion of your fascinating dance piece "The Intruder" in November 2019 when I was giving a short lecture on "The Principle of Virus". We decided keeping in touch and I recently invited you to join my platform for "Cultural Virology" the 24th of March 2020 at the Düsseldorf artist's association Malkasten.*

"AMBULANZ////////Doc Su & Trickster" is an answer to the mainly digital contact with other human beings. Its concept is to establish an ambulant clinic for direct communication and dialogue on culture and arts. Corona-Crisis is forcing us now, to give up the direct contact for a while and get used to what we call "social distancing" - but hopefully gives us the chance as well, to maintain what we wanted to talk about from the very beginning: The content and background of "The Intruder" and your new work with the Wuppertal Dance Company on figures of thought such as "Joker" and "Virus" that have gained somewhat frightening actuality these days...

So, to get started just let me know about your current situation - are you keeping up to staying at home these days of Corona-

Crisis? How do I have to imagine your everyday life, where is your house located, how many of you are living there?

HW: I'm more of a gatherer and a hunter than a sedentary, especially when the sun is so provocatively seductive. So, I go out, alone or with my husband, and steer clear of my fellow man. It's not hunting, it's rather strolling including madding around - and I learn to enjoy the newly gained time. Actually, I have rehearsals in Wuppertal at the moment, but they are cancelled. So, I am in Berlin-Mitte. I read the newspaper and learn that we are now being categorized into systemically relevant and non-systemically relevant people; I decide to voluntarily belong to the latter, to stop watching the news about Corona in the evening, to sleep until late, to have my first coffee in bed and the second in the sun on the balcony. And yes, I admit, I'm trying to figure out how to think positively about what came as a shock, unexpectedly like an intruder and changed things we are used to. George Tabori, the great theatre maker often said in the case of an unexpected obstacle during rehearsals, "Make it productive." In theatre I have always did adhere to that, now I am also trying to remember it outside the theatre.

SR: *Yes, it's getting scary how easily everything might be completely different. I am sitting here in my spacious old house in Düsseldorf-Gerresheim feeling incredibly rich to be in the company of all my pictures, books and two intelligent men, father and son. I am wondering what it must be like to be alone at home these days, or to be with somebody you simply can't stand or, even worse, who mistreats you. But on the other hand I really do appreciate how everybody starts reflecting about life and death and, not least, togetherness. When I've seen your dance piece "The Intruder" for the first time, I strongly felt this kind of strong bodily*

togetherness, which was especially interesting as all protagonists were men - can You tell our public something about Your choice of the characters in this piece and especially about the singing guy?

HW: I knew that I would need professional dancers who were also good at martial arts for the piece. In the wide field of martial arts, I decided to use Wing Chung, a form of Kung Fu. Here you use the energy of the attacker and direct it against him. You don't close yourself off to the opponent, but learn from his attacks. This makes you stronger every time.



What you see on stage is a game with real violence and therefore real danger. The performers do not try to avoid it, they do not fake. This requires great trust among each other and the willingness to take risks and to go out with a wound. But we have been working hard with a martial arts trainer to ensure that this happens as seldom as possible.

I only cast men in the piece because there are significantly more men than women who are also convincing martial artists and dancers. And since I didn't want to deal with gender issues, I decided on this purely male cast. I tried to highlight the system of attack and defense, the transformation of fighting energy, without making interpersonal relationships a subject of discussion.



The singer you are asking about is Portuguese, Telmo Branco. When I first chose him as a dancer, I had no idea he could sing. Shortly before the premiere he injured himself and his part had to be replaced by another dancer. For the piece this accident was a good coincidence. Telmo was literally pulled from the stage to the edge of the action, where he could fully concentrate on his singing.

Next to him there is the Japanese dancer Ichiro Sugae, who mutates into a new being at the end of the piece - and becomes one with an Alien. He floats in danger, because an unknown being evokes a special potential of violence. At this point, Telmo sings so incredibly touching, as if he, with all his human vulnerability, would ward off the violent potential of the alien attacker or the Alien with all his might. This Alien, which connects with Ichiro, creeps out of one of the protective martial arts pads used by dancers Tillmann Becker and Mattia Saracino against danger and injury a few scenes earlier. Here, the two show that too much protection is no protection, because the Alien, any alien, only arises from overprotection.

SR: *Indeed, even Nature can become completely foreign to us. Philosophically spoken: The Alien is often the excommunicated Own. Yesterday I have been out to the woods just behind my house, meeting rather conspirantly a friend to join me on that walk (keeping a certain distance, of course.....) and I think I*

never enjoyed the first green leaves as I did this year, I am really having a strong sense of an universal life's principle regarding the logic of the virus. I did not see any children in the woods, normally there is always one or two youngsters strolling around. If I think of my own childhood in the seventies, I was easily aloud to stroll around anywhere, as far as the sound of my mother's whistle could still reach me to call me home for lunch. You impressed me by saying that overprotecting life is like this kind of German "Helicopter-Parents" running after their children all the time and monitoring the infant to protect it from life. Can you tell us more about it?

HW: Funny, you were whistled back, I was rung back with a ship's bell that hung in our dining room! Thank God I didn't have helicopter parents.

The image that I have in my head when I talk about helicopter parents is this: A child is placed on the slide in the playground wearing a helmet. But even then, it is not allowed to slide until father or mother have built up at the foot of the slide to catch it with their arms spread out. In my opinion, it is much more dangerous not to learn how to deal with danger than to make a crash landing. Because the later actually works like a vaccination. My body is attacked and thus weakened and at the same time strengthened. If I am familiar with the dangers that may come to me, I will always be able to deal with them better than if they remain unknown to me.

Learning to deal with possible dangers is therefore more than helpful. Especially in emergency situations you will be able to react smarter and not be completely surprised.



SR: *Taking somebody by surprise reminds me of "The Art of War" by the ancient chinese general Sun Tzu. I am listening to a lot of 19th century warfare talk regarding microbes these days, especially from the country of old Pasteur. Emmanuel Macron lets us know that France is willing to fight for eradication of Corvid 19. Is this kind of bacteriological speech still up to date concerning the knowledge of immunitary therapies in oncology, of retrovirology in the context of AIDS/HIV and new models of interaction and contextual medicine? The chilenean biologist Francisco Varela calls immunity a dance of the body with the immunitary system.....is dance a better way of fighting?*

HW: Maybe it's a little too easy to say, it is a "dance of the body with it's own immunitary system" when one thinks of the actual deaths. With the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, I would say that an immune reaction is more of a bodily fight, which in the majority of cases will lead to immunity against Covid 19. This is quite different from AIDS or Ebola, against which no immunity can be acquired. Both diseases were stronger than politics. With this much weaker virus, politicians can now act as if they were heroes of a "war" against the virus. To describe the fight against the viral outbreak with war metaphors like the "eradication" you mentioned is part of a rather long tradition of military thinking.

Fighting Corona like an invisible enemy - even if the enemy here would only be a metaphor - makes people think of war and makes them accept restrictions like the curfews we are dealing with now.



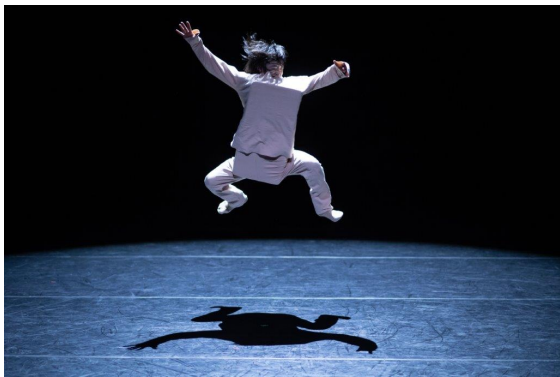
It all starts by creating victims. The highest worldwide death toll was paid by people over 80 years of age, particularly in Italy. The weakest are usually wiped out first (there is this military term again). And in such an at least paramilitary case, we are undoubtedly obliged to protect our weakest, usually women and children, first. In the present case we have to protect our grandparents first, which seems obvious to everyone. But we are forgetting their previous illnesses, some of which are serious, and many of those affected are suffering from a number of diseases which have already weakened their immune systems considerably. To put it very clearly, Corona is not Ebola, which kills thousands of people of all ages, but is a new virus from the genus of influenza viruses, which needs more than its own effectiveness to kill people. I think that people like Emmanuel Macron, or at the moment even more clearly in the case of Benjamin Netanyahu and Victor Orban, you can see how they all follow the old adage of Winston Churchill's sovereign deciding on the state of emergency. Such guys now take their chance. Even if no political sovereign decides on death rates (as the Nazis did): But unlike AIDS or any other recent outbreak of disease,

politicians, ministers, chancellors and presidents have gained much more power than ever before over any other disease.

SR: *For good reason until now we have been well aware of any politician trying to declare the state of emergency: It was not just Churchill reflecting on sovereignty but this goes back to the right wing intellectual Carl Schmitt's famous phrase: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." We should keep in mind, that it might be for that very precise reason - as Giorgio Agamben points out in his theory on "nude life" (Homo Sacer 1995) - Hitler had to prove sovereignty by declaring the state of emergency. Unfortunately at the very moment of our momentary "Corona-Crisis" conspiracy theorists from the left as from the right are referring to this complicated context in the same, biologistic way and that is something that really frightens me more than any biological viral outbreak: the viral outbreak of conspiracy theories gaining incredible influence day by day. I hope we will learn to gain immunity against fake news by and by. What about your new work with the Wuppertal Dance Theater? Will your experiences with the Corona-Crisis be influencing for your new production?*

HW: Working with Tanztheater Wuppertal will be again a real adventure and at best a mutual artistic infection. Five choreographers are called upon to work on a joint evening entitled "Encounters". This will be a real encounter between Rainer Behr, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Monika Gintersdorfer/Knut Klaßen, Richard Siegal and myself with the entire Wuppertal ensemble and guest dancers from the ensembles of my fellow choreographers. Bettina Wagner-Bergelt, the director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal, acted with foresight when she asked us last year

whether we would like to embark on this adventure together. In the current situation with Corona, all exaggerated egoisms are going to hell. And hopefully we will have the same experience during the "encounters". Nevertheless, we will all start with a self-chosen topic, than we will look for possibilities to connect.



I am interested, for example, in the theme of the Joker, which will be presented in the old theatre form Balagan. Do you know what "Balagan" is? This was a dance on the volcano, then at the fairs and in the theatres, just before the Russian Revolution of 1917, and today the mask of the Joker again stands for a revolt. Radical demonstrators all over the world wear this clown mask just as it is worn by radical rulers from Boris Johnson to Donald Trump. It is a time of upheaval. Even in the theatre. The Joker marks the uprising of the old guard of the Tanztheater Wuppertal. No "joke"! The uprising of the Jokers is the result of a standstill that nobody has to endure any longer. Not with and not without a virus.

And now I would like to ask you, Doc Su: What do you think happens to bodies when they are separated from each other, as we are currently experiencing?

SR: Well, I must admit that this is what worries me most not since we got to deal with Covid 19...If You look at the history of the virus and virality it is pretty obvious that the virus was needed from the very beginning in virology as a "missing link" between biosphere and technosphere.

When John von Neumann and Max Dellbrück discussed the possibility of "selfreproducing automatas" back in the late 1950es at Princeton, informatics, physics and molecular biology gained an universalistic turn again. Nowadays everybody seems to be concerned with questions of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and Big Data and Surveillance are playing a significant role in the actual Corona- Crisis, too. Just think of all the discussions tracking infected people by their mobile phone data.

So You ask me what happens to the bodies: As You know the definition of a virus keeps it open, whether to define it dead or alive, viruses are obligatory parasites and need a living cell to reproduce. So does cultural information. Imagine a song that is never sung by anybody.

I am personally convinced that there is no such thing as a vital piece of information reproducing itself on an abstract level. I am convinced that there is no "life of images" as some will call it, that's empty talk. Cultural information starts living by infecting a living host, by using the body of another human being in a symbiotic way. Culture always deals with bodily resonance, imagine a gesture without a body expressing and another receiving it. In my opinion everything is still about body and soul. I am thinking with my whole body not just with my mind, I could never keep up with this sort of dualism. Actually, I always wanted to do sensual Concept Art. I think, great dancers do that anyhow.



HW: Perfect, let's end with: To living life!
I'm looking forward seeing you soon to
enjoy our meeting and the arts again - live
and together.

In my artistic approach I try to bring together traditionally devided categories such as imagery, spoken word, music, media and science. But from my heart and soul I am a visual artist doing drawings and etchings, so it is about tracking vital signs of a living body. In our isolation we all embrace digital communication these days. But body and soul are suffering from isolation in a very short while.

And I simply cannot listen to a concert on a screen the same way I would be involved with every single cell of my body sitting in front of a stage. And I do miss terribly the direct dialogue with real people after one week of video phone calls.

I even did not like phone calls before! I always preferred meeting the real person, the real artwork. I miss the smell of a museum, I miss the sound of my footsteps in the museum hall, approaching a work of original art, surrounding it, feeling the resonance. And I cannot imagine how anybody should survive without embracing and being embraced. So I just hope, that we go back to getting in touch with the other very soon. Knowing about the importance of others means to be touched, to feel our vulnerability. It is our way of understanding, without touch, without the real stuff, without the presence of the other the world turns out to be just an empty smoke dream not worth living for.

All images in the text are scene photographs from the dance piece "The Intruder" (2019) by Wonge Bergmann and Christopher Schmidt.

CV Helena Waldmann (* 1962 in Burghausen) is a freelance dance director. Her pieces have been touring internationally since 1993. From 1982-86 she studied Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Gießen. Since 2003 she has been producing worldwide in Iran, Brazil, Palestine, Bangladesh among others. She is invited to hold lectures and workshops, most recently at the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority in Hong Kong. She is a juror for various dance competitions, since 2018 also for the German Dance Prize. Hans-Thies Lehmann published about her in his classic Postdramatic Theatre. In 1995 she received her first teaching assignments at the Université Paris 8 and at the Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies, University of Frankfurt/Main. In the winter semester 2018/19 she was Bertolt Brecht's visiting professor at the Centre of Competence for Theatre at the Theatre Studies Department of the University of Leipzig.

She is currently working with four choreography collaborators on a piece for Tanztheater Wuppertal | Pina Bausch.



Helena Waldmann at the rehearsal of „Made in Bangladesh“ with dancers from Dhaka (2014)

CV Susanne Ristow (born 1971 in Lübeck) is an interdisciplinary artist, museologist and media scientist. Drawing, graphics, painting, video, performance, installation, sculpture, artistic research – she herself summarizes all disciplines with the term BILDNEREI [IMAGERY].

The Düsseldorf based artist is present worldwide not only with exhibition projects, but also as a passionate art mediator.

In large drawing cycles such as “Agitatory Drawing,” “Lonesome Heroes,” “Adonis Depot,” “Infectious Basterds,” “Viral Love” and “Tricksters,” she tests the infectious as well as participatory possibilities of images, texts and actions in public spaces. In performance lectures and interactions with collaborators, she uses the concept of the virus to develop complex connections between art and science.

Lately she opened a mobile platform for direct communication and dialogue named “AMBULANZ ///// Doc Su & Trickster” starting from Düsseldorf to expand gradually to the international context.



Susanne Ristow presenting „Attention, infectious! Experimentation with Images“ Kunstpalast Düsseldorf (2017)