Alice de Visscher : Fragments of Melancholy in Performance
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Some of the states of mind brought about by melancholy seem to have found an echo in contemporary performance. Aside from the harmful effects traditionally attributed to melancholy, it is also noteworthy for its frequent association with an intense psychic life, ranging from studious reflection to the most acute hysteria. Moreover, it has the particularity of affecting both the body and mind. The performance by the Belgian artist Alice de Visscher, presented as part of the third edition of *Viva! Art action* at the Bain Saint-Michel, provides an opportunity to study this proposition. It is not our intention here to treat performance as a melancholy act, but rather to draw some parallels between melancholy's various figures and contemporary performance, notably in regards to the viewer's position, the objects of the performance and the figure of the performer.

The performance was scheduled in the evening at the Bain Saint-Michel where it took place in an empty pool divided into three lanes by dark floor tiles. Each of these lanes was to house a specific action. Alice de Visscher put two large yellow sponges—resembling the traditional big wooden Japanese shoes known as *getas*—on her feet. She approached the transparent water-filled trays placed against the pool wall. Just below, two black tiles echoed the colour of the scarf tied around her hair. As she entered the recipient, the performer immersed her sponges as slowly as possible. She stepped back out a few moments later, still pressing the sponges carefully so as to regulate the water flow. She inevitably came into contact with the dark tiles which were actually covered with a black water-soluble material. The darkened liquid accumulated until it spilled over the thin

levees containing it. The constant transfer of water between the recipient and the tiled floor very gradually caused the thin streams to make their way towards the deep end wall. As the black trickle stopped against the wall, the artist also stopped squeezing the sponges, took them off, and headed for the swimming lane on her left where she unfurled a canvas roll for the whole length of the pool. She then placed herself in the middle of the cloth, and using her feet, she very slowly pushed the large piece of fabric to the opposite side of the pool. The canvas was stained as it came into contact with the black liquid, which had by then spread to the pool floor and the fabric. The first actions were delimited by the length of the pool. It is through this sideways movement across the pool, there where the artist brought ink and canvas together, that the border lines were eliminated

At this point the artist walked out of the pool, made her way through the audience and entered the former shower stalls. Facing the viewers, she reappeared naked in the doorframe separating the showers from the pool. Here again the borders did not delimit the action, but instead allowed it to be carried out, all the more so because they created a closeness between the artist and viewers rather than separating them. Carrying a sponge on her head the performer got up on a stool, and as she slowly rose on her toes, very gently squeezed the sponge against the top of the frame. Some water then trickled down onto the scarf placed underneath the sponge. Small streams of black first appeared on her prominent parts, and then all over. Her milky skin and characteristic facial features recall the physiognomies of the North Sea region. Aided by the canvas, we imagine a picture of prosperous merchants typical of 16th and 17th century Flemish painting (Hals, Rembrandt…), in which rich black fabrics are contrasted with the pale complexion of the

models. After several minutes of immobile tension, flexing to maintain enough pressure, she came down from her promontory, while the sponge recovered its rectangular form. End of performance.

Rather than being concerned with the evocation of art historical figures, Alice de Visscher focuses primarily on bodily fluids and the interplay their discovery can lead to. The sponge and the liquid (predominantly black) are two frequently recurring elements in her work. The first is flexible: both soft and solid, it can be bent out of shape at will, but it always returns to its initial form. As it absorbs water the sponge becomes heavier and drips. The liquid trapped within it tries to escape through its pores. The analogy with the human body is evident: the body is an absorption factory and an evacuation business. We now know that the circulatory system requires a well functioning heart, an organ whose contractions echo those of the sponge. Moreover, it is William Harvey's 1620 demonstration of blood flow and the heart's role as a pump that put an end to the millennial theory of humours.[1] This theory consisted of an attempt to explain individuals' temporary states (health, vitality) or permanent ones (proclivities, temperaments). The well known "black bile" from which melancholy derives its name was one of the four constitutive humours of the human body. In watching Alice de Visscher's performance it is difficult not to view this emerging *black bile* as a bodily flow on her skin. The scientific proof of its physiological absence led to a gradual change in the perception of melancholy. During the Enlightenment era, the condition thus passed from a primarily medical and biological field to more philosophical considerations until it reappeared in the scientific field at the beginning of the 19th century by way of a nascent psychiatry.

Noga Arikha interprets the invention of black bile as being linked to the fact "that a state of mind must be embodied in some way."[2] Black bile is currently perceived as an old historical symbolization of the body's influence on an individual's psychological life. This reciprocal influence is now well established by the life sciences and psychology. The contemporary interpretation of melancholy (outside of the medical domain) can be understood as the state of an individual who is coming to terms with his or her own limits—the first of which is the body—without any possibility of dissociation.

Melancholy can manifest itself in performance because this art form calls for a presence which is necessarily embodied. Despite the increasing digitization of contemporary society's every sphere, performance resists. It remains an alliance of bodies and minds conceived as such. Its radicality is rooted in presence. The concentrated attitude of its witnesses evokes the classical figure of the melancholic, who is not so much frozen in despair as plunged in an intense and active reflection; even if performance only materializes the object of this reflection in action. The duration and slowness are part of the means used by performance to realize this desire to induce a state of intense psychic attention among viewers. When Alice de Visscher squeezes the sponges, she does so with a meticulousness that is characteristic of her discipline.

During the performance she transform sponges into something other than an everyday and trivial object. The use of a common object to ends other than those it was intended for is a well established strategy which opens a field of infinite possibilities. Objects have an immensely important role in contemporary performance, because they allow

performers to anticipate structured actions that are partially determined by the presentation space. This strategy can, among other things, be explained by the frequent traveling required of performance artists who participate in numerous international events. Objects also play an important role in the iconography of melancholy which initially consisted of strange and exotic objects gathered in a cabinet of curiosities that served to stimulate the imagination and senses of the melancholic.[3] This was subsequently followed by scientific and measurement instruments: "Everything that surrounds Dürer's *Melancholia* […] could have been taken from the shelves of a *studiolo*: the inkpot, the compass, the sphere, the scales, the bell, the athanor…"[4] While the object is a source of passive rapture or a tool which makes it possible to understand the world through the establishment of scientific laws, for the performer even the most trivial of objects can be revisited both in terms of its function and signification. For instance the performer does not squeeze the sponge with her hands but with her feet and head, and she does so without the intention of washing anything whatsoever. Viewers take part in artistic propositions which reveal a certain limitation regarding the actions that can be applied to an object. Bodily and conceptual automatisms linked to the use of objects point to the individual's finitude, to a reciprocal forgetting of the body and mind, both in terms of space and time. Melancholy emerges in the viewer's sudden grasping that a good number of limitations are in fact inherent in people and not in objects.

For its part, the performer's body, unknown to our own, becomes gradually more strange. Its actions contradict common sense and turn it into a figure caught between resistance and anxiety: a resistance to our habits, which are shaped by our customary ways of

perceiving the world; and an anxiety regarding our ordinary security which is triggered by the performer's transformation into a naked figure covered in streaks of opaque colour, a figure which evokes a variety of images in the viewer's gaze, for instance images which recall old Flemish paintings. Though it is not quite the same as melancholy's bestiary with its lot of monstrous figures, one can propose an analogy between the gestural transfiguration practiced by performers and the melancholic's social transgression: including Goya's cannibal Saturn, Cranach the Elder's werewolf,[5] the mentally ill of the industrial revolution, as well as the melancholics who were banished for turning away from various revolutions. Melancholia and performance transgress the various norms, ranging from the law to our habits, which govern our lives.

Performance is considered a factor of melancholy in so far that it is a figure of that which escapes us, not because of an absence but by way of a presence. The tense languidness with which Alice de Visscher carries out her gestures and the slow discharge of the black bile may not embody melancholy, but they certainly evoke it. It is the presence of bodies and minds, of the viewers and the performer alike, that for an instant freezes the water seeping out of the sponge. An experience that is of the moment, and hence difficult to quantify because it is already engaged in disappearance, just as we human beings are moving towards death, just as the liquid descends to the deep end.

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1 *Cf.* Noga Arikha, "La mélancolie et les passions humorales au début de la modernité," *Mélancolie, génie et folie en Occident*, exhibition catalogue, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, from October 10, 2005 to January 16, 2006, Gallimard, 2006, p. 232-240.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 238. (Translation mine).
3 See: Brueghel the Elder, *Allegory of Vision*, oil on canvas, 65 cm x 109 cm, coll. Museo del Prado, 1617.
4 Jean Clair, "La mélancolie du savoir," *Mélancolie, génie et folie en Occident*, *op. cit.*, p. 202-208. (Translation mine).
5 Lycanthropy was actually considered to be a symptom of some melancholics. See: Lucas Cranach the

Elder, *The Werewolf*, woodcut, 16,1 cm x 12,5 cm, coll. Cabinet des Estampes et des Dessins de Strasbourg, 1501-1515; the work is reprinted in *Mélancolie, génie et folie en Occident*, *op. cit.*