

MOLD, SARA MANENTE

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9 August 2022

How can we transpose the principles of contamination and connection used by microorganisms (bacteria, yeast, and molds) to the scale of dance and the body? Drawing on biology, fashion, dance, and the visual arts, Sara Manente is currently developing research at the intersection of the performing arts and mycology. Inspired by the processes of fermentation and the methods of growing mycelium, her latest creation MOLD approaches performance as an immersive environment where the bodies and objects that compose it affect each other and interact as living cultures. In this interview, Sara Manente shares the workings of her artistic research and looks back at the research process of MOLD.

Your research seems to materialize differently in each project. How would you describe your artistic process?

Starting with dance as a practice and a tool for reflection, I am concerned with the different ways the projects perform themselves, are performed, and are/become public. For some years now, I have been using the idea of performative publication to consider ways of “going public.” Thinking in an analogue, non-digital, non-binary way, we can establish different degrees between, say, publishing on paper and performing on stage, which means different ways of approaching questions of audience and performativity. For MOLD, my most recent dance performance, the work developed from my previous research on fermentation and branched out into different performative gestures, all called MOLDING, and an open school called *Technologie des champignons*. In relation to *Wicked Technology/Wild Fermentation* (2019–2020), I also published a glossy magazine called *ROT*, and organised a three-day programme called *ROT GARDEN*. For *Spectacles* (2014–2018), I wrote three booklets, which are “dances to read,” and made a 3D film in collaboration with Christophe Albertijn.

Before these projects, I wasn’t using the same terminology. I was talking about the relationship between the dancer, the choreographer, the work, and

the audience, seeing it as a dynamic interaction where the performance actually happens. In *Tele Visions* (2016-2018), a collaboration with Marcos Simoes, we invited five people from the audience to be on stage and guided by us telepathically.

I always start with a desire, an abstract idea that wants to find a body, a doing. For me, this is linked to dance. I question other disciplines, knowledge, things, and people, not because I am interested in translating theories from other disciplines into dance, but rather to understand the phenomenology of the initial question and also out of curiosity. As the projects progressed, I also noticed that the question of “noise” was recurrent, and with hindsight I imagine that it is perhaps linked to my studies in communication and semiotics. Whether it is a sonic-physical phenomenon, a disturbance that is also part of communication, uncertainty before recognition, something unnameable and therefore ungovernable, a background from which the foreground emerges, a third party, or a parasite (as described by Michel Serres), noise seems to be central. There is a plasticity and opacity there that interests me.

Currently your work focuses on the aesthetics and the ethics of the intersection between live arts and live biological cultures. Could you share the major reflections that permeate this particular line of research?

This intersection has to do with matters of taste and ecological matters: the relationship between contagion and immunity, the phenomenology of the repulsive and the nauseating, the notions of entanglement, hybridization, domestication. After giving birth, I wanted to continue working at home and to think with and from the body, instead of going to the dance studio. Pregnancy is an experience that modifies the understanding of the body, of its limits, as well of the general meaning of “self”: my body is not simply mine, it can be colonized and depend on other bodies as a matter of necessity. I began looking into different fermentation techniques and reading books on eco-feminism, post-humanism and neo-materialism (Donna Haraway, Paul B. Preciado, Elizabeth Povinelli, Elizabeth Wilson, Lynn Margulis, Anna Tsing, Deboleena Roy, Aime Bahng, Jane Bennet, among others). As a dancer and artist, I identified with loads of things and could certainly see my practice in relation with my environment. For instance, when we speak of “wild fermentation” there are several aspects at play; watching over a process or taking care of it without killing or exploiting it, creating the conditions for something to happen, and letting it follow its own way. In yeast there are figures such as the “mother” or the kombucha scoby (a symbiotic organism made of bacteria and yeasts), which may relate to how dance practices are shared and how transformation affects different bodies. Currently, I am also interested in other questions, such as durability in performing arts practices: what does it mean to keep a work or a practice alive? What can it mean to preserve or to ferment an artistic

work? How can we conceive of artistic practices in a more durable way?

How does MOLD fit into that research? How does this project continue and develop those reflections?

While working on fermentation I started to grow skins of kombucha scoby [...]. Kombucha contains probiotics for our intestines, but it has a morbid aspect that is very similar to animal skin, or parchment. It is a symbiotic organism made of bacteria and yeasts with a powerful, sweetish, repulsive smell. The title MOLD came up relatively early in the process as its double meaning synthesizes the uneven and paradoxical forces that interest me. The English word “mold” refers both to a biological organism (*moisissure* in French, *muffa* in Italian) and a sculptural mold (*moule* in French, *stampo* in Italian). On the one hand, it designates a mycelium, or a fungus: a network of threads that develops in a seemingly uncontrollable manner as it colonizes, infects, and digests its own environment; on the other, it refers to a mold, a thing used to cast a sculpture in a specific form.

In connection with this research, you have initiated a series of workshops in collaboration with far° during the 2021–2022 season. Could you retrace the genesis of MOLD?

In 2021, quite early in the process, we presented a series of gestures under the name MOLDING: an unexpected picnic, an unannounced fashion show, a public distribution of waffles, a collection of vacuum-packed handbags, and a text written by four hands. The idea was to play out different situations, to meet the public in a park (Live Arts Week X, Bologna), in a church converted into an art space (Extracity, Antwerp), and in a contemporary art museum (Wiels, Brussels). I wanted to present our still young practices without considering them as “works in progress.” In the meantime, I became interested in mushrooms and wanted to share knowledge with others by organizing an open school. Inspired by the working methods of mycelium and mycologists, we organized, in collaboration with far°, three events under the name of *Technologie des champignons*. These workshops were an opportunity to approach the forests and the world of mushrooms through the stories and knowledge of a few guests: a local forager, a scientist, a journalist, a shaman, and a filmmaker. This project was not meant to be part of MOLD, but was an opportunity to create a study group that made unexpected connections possible, and to place my work and myself in a different context.

I later realized that mushrooming had become a kind of working method, which was not directly linked to a pre-established planning and product, a “fruit”. On the one hand, there is foraging, gathering, searching; a way of looking that gives you a specific body posture, wandering, smelling, looking for signs, asking around, mapping the territory. On the other hand, there is

mushrooming, which consists of “becoming a mushroom”: decomposing to digest, eating from within, thriving on waste or what is available, working in the undergrowth, and fruiting from time to time, taking into account moods, temperatures, electrical impulses.

The polysemy of the word “mold” was one of the axes of your work. How did you deploy that double meaning in your practice?

I started to work from the word “mold” by letting myself be guided by its different semantics. Its polysemy evoked a chimerical form (in Greek mythology, chimeras are usually represented as creatures with a lion’s head, the body of a goat, and the tail of a snake. As a metaphorical figure, the chimera is used to describe that which is made of different parts, and that which is perceived as unlikely. In biology, genetic chimerism is an organism made of cells with two or more distinct genotypes.)

My attention was drawn to the chiasm between those two different meanings: the container and the network. On the one hand, the mold is a container that attributes a form to something, a negative form that must be filled, a structure that supports and crosses the body, a dimension of governance whose action may be based on material and immaterial forces. This object is the mother, the matrix that is able to generate originals and copies of the original. On the other hand, a fungus that forms a network of connections by producing spores is also called mold. In that sense, mold can be seen as a process of contamination that eludes any control, an infiltrating cybernetic system of relations that implies communication and retroaction mechanisms. This is a technology as refined as it is wild, non-cultivated and non-governable. To mold in that sense means to form, to sculpt, to frame, to shape, to control, to create, to influence and affect. We can transpose this relationship to our way of reproducing social behaviours, personal habits and even ways of dancing, because the experience of “another,” as well as of time, desire, influences, can be understood as forms of contamination.

How was the writing of MOLD organized? Could you talk about the creative process with your collaborators?

I first did a residency in a theatre to conceptualize the space as a device. When mold grows on food, it develops as spots that become circles, growing bigger and bigger. I therefore imagined an immersive space organized from the centre outwards with all the elements, bodies and objects, which are gradually integrated into it. Estelle Gaultier then developed this idea by using light as a material, as an object, as a heating system, etc. I wanted to work on a dramaturgy of temperatures. In fermentation processes, the temperature changes according to the chemical process in action. I was curious to see how temperature could be an assembly of tactile and physical

sensations and visual images, like pointing a projector at the audience's back, diffusing a burning smell, and dancing until you sweat.

In a second phase, during my residency at Wiels for MOLDING, the sculptural work began to take shape. I used mycelium, cement, epoxy, food, kombucha, building materials, and make-up, so we already had a lot of content for rehearsals when we started MOLD in 2022. Christophe Albertijn composed the music for MOLD and MOLDING by synthesizing, destroying, and breaking down sounds from the various stages of creation and the sounds we make on stage. Sofie Durnez, with whom we had done research on perfumes and smells for ROT magazine, developed different olfactory situations, like a fresh wind that smells like a swimming pool for example. Sofie also made the costumes using mixed techniques (bleaching, upholstery, painting on lycra) with references to mycelium sculptures. I was interested in how the elements could affect each other, including synaesthesia (a disorder of sensory perception in which a normal sensation is automatically accompanied by a simultaneous complementary sensation in a different region of the body from the one in which the arousal occurs or in a different sensory domain), how the audience would be involved in the dramaturgy of the performance, how all these a priori heterogeneous elements could be articulated and create meaning.

Have you developed any compositional or writing tools specifically for this new research?

During the process of MOLDING, I proposed two movement practices to the dancers that could be reminiscent of a picnic and a fashion show. The idea of the picnic came from a state of mind opposite that of the fashion show: a relaxed, disengaged, less spectacular way of carrying the body, a panoramic view, a tableau, not to mention that I often work with food. On the other hand, I am interested in the space-time conceived by a fashion show: a passage, in perpetual change, a restricted space giving a close-up perspective that is both non-frontal and non-narrative. My two partners, Marcos Simoes and Gitte Hendriks, embodied and enriched my initial proposals, interrogating them with reflections from their experience of these two practices. Jaime Llopis, who collaborated on this project as a dramaturge, also helped me to define and deepen the different reflections at stake in this research.

When we began the process of creating MOLD in 2022, I reintroduced the picnic and the parade as a principle of experimentation to find textures of bodies and to compose new situations from assemblages and declensions. We then worked with, against, or alongside the objects and sculptures to create dances: for us it is a question of affecting and being affected. As we went along, the gestures were woven, transposed from one body to another. The objects were substituted and accumulated as installations in the space. I imagined a choreography where we are both alone and together, where we are linked by asynchronicity, moving from different centres, like the gears in a

machine, like molds growing. Throughout the piece we compose and decompose, we make and unmake.

In order to work on the body at this intersection between the living arts and living cultures, I have been examining the figure of the chimera in biology, anthropology, and archaeology (cf. the works of Lynn Margulis, Elizabeth Povinelli and Mihnea Mircan). For me, the chimera embodies this enigma of the hybridity of the body: at once material, immaterial, synthetic, organic, mechanical, composite, etc. It is a way of approaching the dancer's body as an object that embodies different incommensurable logics. The instruction is not to dance "like chimeras"; we simply welcome these questions and forget them. We work with the body as a paradox. Dance becomes a hinge between care and ungovernability; doing the dance and letting the dance unfold on its own. This work for the dancer consists of shifting attention, to deconstruct and reconstruct, knowing that everything is already there and that everything is in motion.