

Congesting sound

by Ivana Slunjski, Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, Croatia, January 2014

In an attempt to move away from the saturation by the visual and, at least partly dissolve the usual conventions of performativity and spectatorship, performance artists sometimes displace performing materials into a field of different sensibility, emphasizing audio, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and thermic surroundings, while at the same time perpetually directing our focus on the examination of what could be considered as the subject of choreography. *Undertone* is one of such projects. It is based on the concept and choreography by Sidney Leoni and developed in collaboration with several artists and dance platforms and organizations, *ekscena* ('experimental free scene') being one of them. In addition to Sidney Leoni, Martin Lervik and Christina Vantzou, other artists such as Branko Banković, Iva Hladnik, Lana Hosni, Nikolina Komljenović, Rina Kotur, Zvonimir Kvesić and Ivana Rončević also performed in *Undertone* in Zagreb.

A similar suppression of one sense, by employing or sharpening others, in order to subvert the dominant perceptive scheme and blur or confuse the perceptive-receptive mechanisms, in consequence creating doubt and uncertainty in order to challenge the authenticity of an assumed experiential reality, has been previously confirmed in numerous projects. At Music Biennale Zagreb 2003 the Patrice Barthès Dance Company performed *Silence*, the second and the third part of the trilogy. In *Silence 2*, the audience, seated in the middle of a rotating stage and wearing earplugs and soundproof headphones, that is, left to the sounds of their own bodies, *in silence* observe, while the performers' bodies, separated by a sound curtain, though very close, seem as if they were not part of the same space as the viewers. The recipients experience *Silence 3* blindfolded and lying down, perceiving that there is a choreographic movement happening around them, feeling the closeness of the performers, their breathing, sounds and air flow, but not being able to comprehend what kind of bodies are there. It is only the video recording of the performance, exhibited at the exit of the performing space, that reveals that some bodies were naked, some wore masks, and the clear choreographic sequences. John Jasperse in *Prone* performed at Eurokaz 2006, further complicates and multiplies the perceptive-receptive optics by placing both performers and some prostrate and blindfolded audience members, in the same space with the rest of the audience who are sitting and viewing the performance. At the same festival, two years earlier, in Felix Ruckert's *Secret Service*, the audience members, blindfolded and led by performers, move around the space, not only walking but, based on information received through sounds, movement and touch, thus consenting to manipulation and a submissive role and performing even rather complex sequences. In 2007, at the Extravagant Bodies Festival, the Croatian Theater of the blind and partially sighted 'New Life' organizes the performance named *Taste Experiment*, a dinner in the darkness in which all the participants, whether blind or not, find themselves in the same position – that of not knowing what kind of taste to expect with each following bite.

Therefore, we cannot say that the concept of performing arts retreating from visibility is particularly new. So, what makes *Undertone* different from the examples listed before? The act of intentionally hoarding the visitors as they enter the performance space, which is in complete darkness, creates the impression of impenetrability, and this feeling remains even when the recipients are free to move around the space. The space is bounded in a cube by curtains made from different materials but the initial sensation, as well as different sound patterns to which the audience is exposed and the touch of other bodies, create the impression of a labyrinth. In addition to the audio sensations, the audience is exposed to different smells and air flows, they bump into rubber objects and even bodies in wet clothing. Towards the end of the show, some light is let in, and in the half lit space, the performers, dressed until then, now emerge naked. The nude bodies, however, are not at all intrusive, there is no sense of a gap or discomfort, and they are not vulnerable nor threatened by clothed bodies. Except for this quieting towards the end, when everyone is faced with their own experience, the performance abounds in various stimulations, there is no silence that could be creepier than the creepiest of sounds. By stepping away from visibility, the show remains overloaded with signs, though not visual, still very much congesting.

Translated from Croatian by Ivana Rončević

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