

Jeroen Peeters, Oct. 2013 for Mestre/Simões/Mokum

Tumbling speech, jumbling bodies, mumbling politics

Notes on *Ai! A choreographic project* by Lilia Mestre and Marcos Simões

"Aiaiai!" As I enter the Zilveren Zaal of Beursschouwburg (Brussels), these sounds tumble from my mouth upon seeing a space devoid of chairs and imagining myself spending the whole evening littered on the floor amidst a jumble of cushions and other spectators, my body aching, moaning and groaning whilst yearning for the comfortable body language and formality that comes with a frontal theatre setting, until my thoughts and utterance are met after only a split second with an outburst of laughter at the other end of the space, where Lilia Mestre and Marcos Simões and Yannick Guédon have their ears pricked up for anything that rings like "Ai!", and when these reverberations reach my eardrums I'm already part of a relational spell that imbues me with a sense of lightness ballooning me over and through this dense pile of noise and bodies and stuff to then end in agreement with gravity and the surroundings on a cushion on the floor. Aiaiai!

"Sound overwhelms its own limits, refracting across social space... sound interferes," writes Brandon LaBelle in the essay 'Private call – Public speech: The site of language, the language of site'. "Sound is never a private affair, rather it invades public space, occurs within a multiplicity, as a multiplicity. This greater medium of sound is what one always hears, unframed, unproduced, within ordinary moments." Speech is therefore never fully transparent, but nested in a complex relationality with the body, with others and with the environment that provide it with a material stratum. Wavering between noise and the promise of meaning, utterances like laughter or "Aiaiai" expose the mediality of speech or oral language. They have a gestural quality, in the way Giorgio Agamben discusses gesture as an intention of language stuck in the body: "The gesture is communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality."

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Informal and ordinary though it might appear at first, the proposition *Ai! Objects* is framed and presented as a score. Moving through a series of inflections and moods, Lilia Mestre and Marcos Simões incessantly repeat "Ai!" whilst probing objects like a table, a chair or a piece of rope. Several permutations create a series of arbitrary connections between the different materials, so that the objects are sometimes animated, sometimes used in a quotidian fashion, then again reduced to mere objects. The objects remind the body of its materiality and of language taking place in a relational context. Perhaps a definition of a 'score' could be this: an arbitrary frame to channel desire and negotiate curiosity in order for meaning to emerge from experience.

The actions of musician Yannick Guédon are interwoven with those of the other performers, but have slightly different overtones. His main objects are a guitar, a radio, drum brushes, a heavy hammer and a nail, all of which are used in 'improper' ways, indeed sometimes animated, sometimes used in a quotidian fashion, then again reduced to mere objects. Or not quite: as tools and instruments, these objects evoke a language of the hands as much as they create sounds. Extensions of the body, they afford a world that is literally 'at hand', yet their familiar instrumental relationality is thwarted and pushed into the realm of the gestural. Add interventions like opening doors and windows or randomly tuning a radio and these gestures are literally brought beyond themselves, tied to the outside world.

What dancers and musicians share in the noisy, arbitrary, gestural modes of relationality they explore, is the 'becoming-with' of their bodies, which is inevitably a 'becoming-other' and 'becoming-wordly'. Never quite themselves, they unfold their bodies in the imaginary realm, "inventing improbable bodies yet without face or destination." About these vibrant bodies of musicians, dancers and listeners tuned to their environment, Peter Szendy writes in *Membres fantômes*: "In an acrobatic posture I absolutely forget my body, delivering body and soul to this

unlikely coupling or sound aggregate by which I reinvent myself much more splendidly than by child's play."

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Seeing *Ai! Objects* again at the Japanese Pavillion in Monty (Antwerp) half a year later, this time with Christophe Albertijn performing the music score, I realize I had forgotten certain things that perhaps require the actual co-presence of people and objects. There are for instance imaginary sounds lingering in the tools and objects, most notably the "ai!" that would follow upon missing the nail and hitting one's finger with a hammer. There is also some articulate language: calling out the numbers of the different parts of the score in several languages, or describing the situation – again words that are rooted in the actual performance situation. Or take the projection of written words such as "space", "view", "ghost", which have a life of their own and therefore belong potentially to any time or situation although they are activated in this moment only. Their limited narrative power reveals yet again a medial aspect of language, an increasing abstraction from embodied and oral to written and printed to digital and projected – a language cut loose from its gestural origins.

Reminiscing afterwards, I wondered how interjections such as "ai!" operate in that context. Not only do certain objects or gestures evoke imaginary sounds, certain sounds will unwittingly provoke the corresponding gestures. "Aaah! [*Now I remember.*]" or "Oh yeah! [*Now I see.*]" Interjections have a deictic structure, their utterance always contains information about the locus of utterance and hence about the body of the speaker. Deixis is where rhetoric becomes oratory, for instance in the classic posture of eloquence: a speaker with the right hand outstretched and the fingers slightly extended. In a similar vein, interjections like "ai!" and their corresponding gestures are at home in the body of the speaker, marking it as the site of language through an endlessly repeated performative act of inscription. For language to contain promise and a sense of possibility, it requires both these oral and corporeal underpinnings, as well as abstraction and an arbitrary structure.

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Giorgio Agamben ends his 'Notes on Gesture' with an aphorism: "Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and pure gesturality of human beings."

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If *Ai! Objects* seems to point towards an originary moment of language, *Ai! Dubbing* travels in the other direction and insists more on the power of language's arbitrary character. The project comes after all with the motto "A choreographic project. A rite of change!" The question we have to ask is this: despite their deictic character and perhaps despite some of our most opaque desires, can interjections and gestures ever be quite at home in the body? Are we ourselves ever quite at home in our bodies? Cutting loose, migrating, reframing, changing, inhabiting, time and again. For *Ai! Dubbing* the space is reorganized and everyone invited to take up a different viewing position.

Ai! Dubbing unfolds in a series of frames. First, Lilia Mestre and Marcos Simões silently perform a set of gestures and grimaces in front of Marcelo Mardones' video camera, which is framing and trapping their performance. Then the video is played back with Mestre and Simões dubbing their gestures with live sounds, which are taped in turn with variations of "ai!" Two more rounds of physical and auditory dubbing follow. This score reminds me once again of Agamben's association of gesture with a gag, in the double sense of an object in the mouth that hinders speech, and the spontaneous improvisation of an actor to make up for memory loss. Indeed do the performers wear peculiar black masks that frame their mouths – are they restraint? animals? or rather activists? And what else is dubbing than filling out gaps left by the body or by speech? What sketch will result from it?

Again: are we ever quite at home in our bodies? Slowly and unexpectedly, the variations of "ai!" yield to "I", yet another deictic marker that provides one a sense of identity, holding together a heterogeneous stream of feelings, impressions, thoughts and what not. Perhaps the "I" requires the mumbling and the gestural spell of the "ai", yet the movement is onward and outward, worldly yet not transparent. In a gestural rite of change, two manifestos on life and art by Mestre and Simões come out, vacillating between the one and the other gag, and between the "ai" and the "I". Even before things, people, animals, ideas, plants, drugs, voices, impressions, representations and thoughts come in, both the "ai" and the "I" are first of all *mediators* and as such contain noise, doubt and mundane joys as much as disparate yet insecure promises. Severed of their direct object in order to announce other things, the utterances could reorganize themselves like this:

I believe. I cherish. I mingle. I make. I hear. I feel. I fuck. I cultivate. I manifest. I drink. I smoke. I eat. I shit. I dance. I represent. I am. I have. I practice. I go. I claim. I work. I want. I love. I fear. I say. I play. I question. I mind. I value. I copy. I enjoy. I think. I read. I worship. I desire. I combine. I share. I resist. I trust. I imagine. I forget. I fight. I hope.

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"I can't go on. I will go on." Only in the last line do the manifestos of Mestre and Simões coincide. These words resonate for a long time with me and their message is not to be misunderstood. For all the reflections about language and gesture *Ai! A choreographic project A rite of change!* may nurture, its deictic character is never just idiosyncratic: the locus of utterance inevitably also involves the wider institutional underpinnings of production. What does it mean today to speak as an artist? What does it mean to invent a language? What does it mean to produce one's own work? And why do the programme notes of this self-produced project realized with little external means nevertheless contain such a long list of institutional coproducers with vague or altogether limited commitments? After *Ai!* I cannot but read all these names as the traces of power that now shine in their obscene gesturality.

And yet the opening night in Brussels stays with me as an event for that reason exactly. Though it is increasingly difficult to make art in today's financial climate and society's conservative atmosphere that has long been internalised by a self-censoring institutional arts field, it is possible to go on. A small but convinced and complicit audience proves *Ai!* and other self-produced work to not sit fully outside society. If one isn't invited to participate in the mainstream culture of one's time, then the invention of "minor" languages and genres can be a powerful way of documenting life on a different scale. Not as a bold avant-garde gesture lingering in the margin awaiting wider recognition, but as a way to spend one's life, work and time in a relatively autonomous and meaningful way. That, for me, is a future politics of the arts. And, to be sure, it has many historical predecessors, such as the literature of the self-taught women at the Japanese court in the 11th century, about whom Alberto Manguel writes: "To be at the same time the creator and enjoyer of literature – to form, as it were, a closed circle that produces and consumes what it produces, all within the strictures of a society that wants that circle to remain subservient – must be seen as an extraordinary act of courage."