

Along Each Other. On Shown and Told by Meg Stuart and Tim Etchells

Con-Fusions Between Movement and Linguistic Figures, Between Performance and Critique

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Danced and spoken stories contaminate and comment on each other, they collapse into one another in the performance *Shown and Told* (2016) by American choreographer and dancer Meg Stuart and British writer and performance maker Tim Etchells. What shows and tells here are pointedly incomprehensible body and language gestures, as they ironically and melancholically exhibit the incomprehensible itself, perhaps.

In Sheffield in 1984 Tim Etchells co-founded the group Forced Entertainment, transforming the very idea of theatre with every new performance. In 1991 Meg Stuart created her first full-length choreography *Disfigure Study* for the Klapstuk Festival in Leuven, fundamentally renewing European contemporary dance which she still configures differently with each further work. Meanwhile Tim has contributed texts to several of Meg's performances (from *Alibi* in 2001 to *Cascade* in 2021). Since 2016 they have been touring and performing their piece *Shown and Told* together on stage.



Figure 1: Meg Stuart und Tim Etchells, *Shown and Told*. (Tine Declerck, 2016)

On both Tim's and Meg's homepages we can read:

Shown and Told is a dynamic but fragile performance collage built from studio improvisation, balancing fixed material and possibilities for free-play. Arising from an exchange between Meg Stuart and Tim Etchells, it exposes the different practice and sensibilities of these two artists, exploring the relationship between movement, image and performing bodies. Working with vivid and surprising images, some of them physical some of them linguistic, the two performers develop a conversation that is tough, touching and comical by turns. (Meg Stuart and Tim Etchells 2016)

In this collaborative performance Tim improvises text fragments based on Meg's improvised movement fragments (with every next performance text and movement becoming more fixed). Or is it the other way round? They perform without either of them taking the lead, and we, the audience, cannot stop asking ourselves whether she is dancing what he is saying or whether he is speaking of what she is

dancing. Then she talks, and he moves... a bit, then they, both of them speaking, show various series of movement fragments.

Thereby the danced and spoken stories seem to escape shown and told non-ambiguity and thus become readable – if at all – only in their mutual con-fusions, in their ambivalence. There is no easy going in this complex translation between accomplice languages, there is rather an uneasy going instead of anything goes. In the deconstructive inversion of the linearity of cause / effect, what is shown and what is told will always have been concrete and abstract at the same time, prospectively and retrospectively at once.

Meg and Tim along each other try to get along with each other, perhaps, and to balance against one another: During this “structured improvisation” (Post 2017), “this thought experiment about taking on something from somebody’s practice” (De Meester 2021), as Stuart and Etchells call their work, we are outside their experimental situation and only this way become part of it.

By this ambiguity Meg and Tim abstain from any “shared methodology”, as Tim says during a post-performance talk at Kaaitheater (Brussels, December 2016): What they share is “an interest in fragments, in parts of a movement, gesture or state. What it is to work with them as pieces. Assemble them, disassemble them. And it is interesting to see somebody do the same in another language. And thus: doing this performance together is a bit off territory with elements of it that are still mysterious to us.”

And in an interview with Eva Decaesstecker in the Kaaitheater program (Decaesstecker 2016) Tim speaks about “working on this space between language as a conceptual force and language as a musical or poetic force.” Then, where is this “a bit off territory” between language and movement, but also between “language as a conceptual force and language as a musical or poetic force” – also in all Forced Entertainments’ performances?

Where is this territory of dis/assembling pieces? *Are you there?* – Etchells asks during the performance and Stuart replies: *Is that a serious question?* Tim: *It’s a 52 % serious one.* Meg: *Is it a philosophical question?* Tim: *More of a political one.* I will come back to this morphing. Tim again in the quoted interview:

The biggest and simplest connection is our common idea of a human being as a kind of meeting point for many different voices, impulses or presences. That might be physically, but also linguistically. For me the connection to Meg's work was always around shape shifting and moving. The instability of the human subject and its presence. The way people are many things in performance but also in the world. Many forces, narratives and possibilities move through us in any given moment. (ibid.)

In their pluralistic duet made of voices, impulses, presences, and (in any given moment) run on forces, narratives, possibilities, Meg and Tim fall again and again into the gap between what is shown / told and what is meant, i.e. they are falling into irony. Irony constantly re-opens this gap, meaning is constantly in suspension as it falls in and out of the shown /told. As if the movement could pronounce and the speaking could dance that which eludes both, that what escapes. Who translates, who embodies, who reveals whom and what here? What and who refers to whom?

Tim comments on Meg's movements by starting every sentence – in anaphora structure – with: *It's like ...* Meg's later comments are structured in the same way. The rhetoric device of the anaphor, the repetition of a word (or a group of words) at the beginning of successive verses or sentences, shapes the rhythm of the whole structure. *It's like ...* – as if we could ever spell the elliptic of metaphors, or even spell them out, spelling precisely the difference between similes and metaphors, metaphors as comparisons, but without *like* or *as* or *as if*. Thus, the performance ironically oscillates again and again between the metaphoric and the literal.

While Meg starts and calmly interrupts her highly complex movement sequences, we hear Tim saying: *It's like stone steps, like the sound of voices from a faraway room ... you can't hear what they are saying, you wonder what exactly is going on ... It's like the smell of burning, like the way that condensation forms on windows ...* The gap between the visible / audible / olfactory / tactile opens up at the very beginning: As if Meg's movements were – synesthetic – sounds, smells etc.

It's like searching for something, searching through rooms, says Tim while performing it. Artistic research in performance is always a re-searching through rooms, synesthetic rooms. *Shown and Told* is like this spatial research on representation – especially on the trail of the expressionless. It's like Walter Benjamin's formula: "The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling." (Benjamin 1996–2003, 340 [1991, 181])

In performance practice it is not the process only but rather the product too which could appear in an experimental, re-searching mode. Thus, performance problematizes the very conditions of the possibility of re-presentation in theatre and in artistic research. And, as my text proposes, we could go on with this problematizing by cutting the performance parts together-apart, trying to separate their partiture an apparatus, to re-write them through each other, *searching through their rooms*, listening to *the sound of voices from a faraway room*. E.g. to Th. W. Adorno's voice: "It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it." (Adorno 1997, 72 [1970, 113])

But how much does philosophy tolerate performance and / as artistic research, how much does it ask "by not saying it"? The melancholy of irony would perhaps be that "critical violence which, while unable to separate" performance from artistic research and both from philosophy, "prevents them from mingling".

Let us have a closer look at the performance: Meg and Tim enter the stage (almost) at the same time. Tim starts to describe – almost simultaneously – Meg's movement by looking at her precisely and tripping along (with) her rhythm, almost. She and he are together and separate at once, almost in a performer / audience situation.

It's – almost – like Roland Barthes' *idiorrhymy* (Barthes 1977) of living together as the occasional synchronization of action rhythms that remain diverging. If contemporary performance practice is often attempted as a figure of togetherness, it is not a utopia of rhythmic, synchronous community, rather an *idiorrhhythmic* one. What is on stage and at stake here, is the almost coming together in its precise blurring, the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous: As if the perfor-

mance procedure were a kind of a *broken telephone*-game, slightly shifting / dancing responses and correspondences, failing repetitions.

Or: Tim's tripping along Meg's dancing is *like* the movements of a referee during a boxing match, with Tim at the same time being the other boxer. What does Tim see while he watches Meg dancing? What does she hear while she may dance his words? And what do we see / hear by watching / listening to both of them at the same time?

No, it's not voices – it's more like the sound of the wind, no it's not the wind, it's more like the sound of a kind of machine ... You can't be sure ... it's like tiny lines, scratches on paper, on glass, on the service of a film. While Tim is trying to speak what Meg is showing, Meg's arms cross hastily – as if they were drawing chiasms, contrasting crossings in the air. As if their chiasmic rhetoric tells us: I dance what you (don't) name, and you name what I (don't) dance.

It's like people trying to see with someone else's eyes, echoes Tim. Yes, it's like us trying to see what happens on stage with Tim's and Meg's eyes – and them trying to see what they do with the eyes of different audience members, again and again. So, does Tim not speak what Meg dances, but rather how we, the different spectators, may see her dancing? Or how she will have danced?

Either way it will have taken place in the 'Future II', in the future perfect tense – both as a memory of that which never has been present and as re-search, as an opening-up towards something unknown, something *from a faraway room*. For, when we are researching we do not yet know what we are doing – which would be the case especially in *artistic research*: a constellation of words which often rightfully, but sometimes all too inflationarily moves the tongue of contemporary dance and performance (cf. Kruschkova n.d.). A bit like René Magritte's pipe which you cannot put into your mouth – except as a word.

So, who is following whom in *Shown and Told*? What follows what – the description following the picture or vice versa? It's like the philosophical and performative implications in Heiner Müller's *Picture Description* where every sentence deconstructs the previous one. Tim's suggestions for Meg's movements become more and more intricate:

It's like poems that have been translated from German to Arabic and from Arabic back to German and from German then to Italian and from Italian to Icelandic and from Icelandic back to Italian and then back to the German – not keeping much from the original sense. It's like Walter Benjamin's *Task of the Translator* which declares the reverse translation impossible. In this context, Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz who, when translating into German, hopes to *indianize, ingreeze, enenglish* German instead of *Germanizing* Indian, Greek, English (cf. Rudolf Pannwitz in Benjamin 1999, 70–82 [1972, 9–219]).

Or it's like Roland Barthes' *Critique et Vérité*: “Would you blame a Chinese (since new criticism seems to you to be a strange language) for the mistakes he is making in French when he is talking Chinese!” (Barthes 1987, 17) This way, Barthes compares and differentiates critique and truth with and from translation: “A critique [...] is not designating a final truth about the image but simply a new image, itself suspended. Criticism is not a translation but a periphrase.” (ibid., 36)

Under what conditions are ‘French’ mistakes in ‘Chinese’ and vice versa not to be judged but rather to be differentiated (as critique means distinction instead of decision), one might ask? Under what conditions does critique speak sometimes more conceptually, sometimes more poetically, without being just discourse or just art? How to locate the blank space of this ‘without’, of this melancholic-ironic gap?

In the rift settled in the art / philosophy dichotomy of the occidental world, could critique as a kind of artistic research subvert those oppositions, in order to investigate the conditions under which ‘French’ misses its ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chinese’ misses its ‘French’, the conditions under which art and philosophy critically “require” (Adorno) or “periphrase” (Barthes) or cut each other “together-apart” (Barad), missing each other as precisely as possible? Or: it's simply like the game ‘Chinese whispers’ or ‘broken telephone’ again.

“Where are the words on the book page?” This is how Jacques Derrida's book *Qu'est-ce que la poésie? / Was ist Dichtung? / What is poetry? / Che chos' è la poesia?* begins (a book in four languages, Derrida 1990a). And where are the words on stage? Where are the movements on stage, always already shaped and at once disfigured by discourse? Words and movements on stage – always already

Damaged Goods (thus the name of Meg Stuart's Company, founded in 1994), broken goods and words and promises and hearts. *It's like a broken I-phone*, Meg will later comment on Tim's movement, slightly shifting the game. Or: *It's always already like a Broken World* (thus the title of a novel by Tim Etchells (2009)).

We (with our *broken I and worlds*) might also call *Shown and Told* a lecture performance in which the 'we' is co-original with the 'I, like in Jean-Luc Nancy's *Being singular plural*. So, it would be a lecture performance only possible as a singular-plural duet, not, as is usually the case, as a solo. Or: *It's like* the confused mathematics, algorithms, rhythms in Heinrich von Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre* – but who is the marionette and who is pulling the strings? While Meg's crossed arms are waving in the air more and more intensely – in their indefinable definitions, Tim responds: *It's like very complex mathematics you can't understand*. This is where the audience always laughs.

Shown and Told: Past Perfect, retrospectively, in a reverse resonance the *and* in the title insists on the list, listening to the undecidable linearity, causality, hierarchy of listening. Even the spotlights to the right and the neon tubes to the left of the stage (Light design: Gilles Roosen) do not bring more light into the matter – as if they were also only shown and told matters: explicitly exhibited stage lights.

And we – *like* Tim's complex-concrete and at the same time absurd abstract, by no means converging, always alternating descriptions throughout Meg's arms crossings – get stuck in the air, in the movement swarm, in the sign crowd, in the opaque, parallel, broken worlds: *It's like fog in dark or very crowded spaces, spaces that are usually too crowded*. The usually overstuffed and over-translated topics and optics remain foggy. Meg is said to dance like the fog over places that are – *usually* – very crowded. How on earth does she do it! Her complex movement is now urgent, now almost bored.

Sometimes *it's like* in *The Last Adventures* (2013), an explicitly choreographic work by Forced Entertainment, where the repeating stanzas of the choir – in their anaphor structure – jump and poetically burst their logic, a tautological thaw of logic:

Sometimes people behave like animals.
 Some animals eat people.
 Some people eat animals.
 Some people act like animals.
 Some animals act like people [...]
 Some people are awake when they should be asleep.
 Some people are asleep when they should be awake.

This chiasmatically constructed cross-over of words is *like* a foreign language exercise, *like* a (broken) promise of a language. Or: *like* echoes of Peter Handke's early pieces in several of Tim Etchells' performance texts: In Meg Stuart's choreography *Alibi* (2001) he contributes a text (that acts as an echo of Handke's *Self-accusation* (1966)) as a verbally and physically escalating recitative of propositions *like* "I am guilty of looking away", or: "I am guilty of being an American ... I am guilty of ..." etc.

In an interview on her latest piece, *Cascade* (2021), Meg says:

For instance, when 9/11 happened, we had just started to work on *Alibi*, which deals with violence among other things and when we were working on kinetic energy and its destructive power for *Violet*, the tsunami struck in Japan, while at the same time the Arabic spring took place. It's spooky! I don't want to mythologize anything or say that I had a vision, it's just really surprising to me that instead of remaining fiction or conceptual, it becomes real. (De Meester, 15)

And the dramaturg Igor Dobricic adds, "that's what happens when you exit linear time."

Back to *Shown and Told*. It's *like crystals*, *like ice melting*, says Tim – while Meg's movement actually seems to melt, but only very briefly. It's *like* the serially melting ice letters LIVE FOREVER in a video installation by Etchells in Time Square. It's *like people fallen asleep in a subway*, or *people looking for some lost information*. Or: *like* Forced Entertainment's *First Night* (2001), which also searches: for lost rel-

atives or lost keys or lost topics: Just *like* a performative artistic re-searching through rooms.

It's like clocks moving too quickly or too slowly – when Meg does her circles counter-clockwise while lying on the floor. *It's like people trying to get out of the situation*. Out of this concrete situation? – we ask ourselves immediately, as we watch the confusions on stage, in a performance situation being always already real and fictional at once. *It's like people hiding behind furniture* – while Meg crawls so close to the floor as if she would like to hide under the stage boards.

It's like wearing someone else's clothes or shoes – while Meg is busy buttoning and unbuttoning her jacket and pacing back and forth helplessly. *It's like dancing at the end of a party at night when you really, really have to go home* – while Meg's exhausted dancing, while Meg is exhausting dance. It's almost like André Lepecki's Exhausting dance: performance and the politics of movement (2006).

It's like seeing people for the very first time. *It's like seeing people for the very last time*. *It's like touching people for the very first time*. *It's like touching people for the very last time*, Tim says coming close to Meg, very close, not touching her and moving away fast.

It's like questions left on Internet platforms which nobody is replying to: Like our missing responds lost in Internet translation over and over again: agon and agony of the analogue. And while Meg is stepping back and forth, wondering what her arms are (still) for, Tim's chiasmic crossings of anagrammatic body images follow her: *It is more like legs that are more like hands and hands that are more like legs*.

It's more like falling into deep water, really deep dark water: It is precisely Tim's over-precision that makes his naming concrete and abstract and absurd at the same time. Meg is very close to the stage edge, to the invisible fourth wall. Tim: *It's more like pushing against walls*. Meg is meanwhile near the stage wall to the left. We notice: a *more* has now crept intensively into the *It's like ...* structure: *It's more like ...*

What *Shown and Told* is interested in are the over-precise paradoxes of representation, a rhetorical interest in parables that brings the levels of what is shown, told and meant in a relationship that allows these levels to separate just at the moment of comparison – pre-

cisely in order to touch each other: It's *more* about the comparably different, about quivering comparisons and tottering touches.

Or it's *like* Peter Handke's motto (a quote from Osip Mandelstam) for his early play *Prophecy*: "Where to begin? / Everything is out of joint and totters. / The air quivers with comparisons. / No word is better than the other, / the earth booms with metaphors..." (Osip Mandelstam cited in Handke 1976, 3). Handke's piece reduces the usual comparisons to meaningless, supposedly predictive tautologies in order to detonate denotations that too are hastily brought back into the familiar. The usual "People will die like flies" swifts into: "The flies will die like flies", which tacitly implies: 'What do we care about flies', up to abysmal tautologies such as "The Jew will haggle like a Jew", in which there glares an inhuman ignorance and indifference, rhetorically camouflaged as a simile (Nägele and Voris 1978, 77).

Meg is now dancing with her arms spread, as if pulled back and forth between two or rather more options: *Like* a scene in her *Alibi*, in which a female dancer is pulled back and forth between two male dancers, hysterically asking herself, asking us: "Left or right! Left or right!", then turning her back on the audience with her shout "Left or Right!", of course completely reversing the directions, the perspective with her arms spread.

Shown and Told – a performance that is pulled back and forth between two or rather more positions or languages, between original copies and copied originals, between prescriptions and descriptions. With the optics of several – aesthetic, ethical, political – un-given options.

Tim: *It's like sending signals over miles and miles, signals in empty rooms, in the night on the edge of a building* – while Meg, with arms up and her back turned towards the audience in desperate decisiveness and undecidability, is faraway, somewhere upstage: *A bit like* – if we keep *sending signals over miles and miles* or are re-searching with *the sound of voices from a faraway room* – the small figure in the distance in Caspar David Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer*.

Or it's *like* giving desperate signs upstage, *like* giving (up) signals. Or *like* Antonin Artaud's definition of the artist as someone who only gives one-off "signs from the pyre" – urgent, still unreadable signs because they can come only once. Or *like* the upstage projection of

the small white figure in Meg's *Alibi*, who seems to be giving signals at the airfield with two flags in her outstretched arms.

Or it's more like a kind of light, this kind of movement, Tim is now speaking completely breathless, or *it's more like gunshots*. Or *it's like* the catatonic moving performer pretending to be constantly hit by gunshots, in Meg Stuart's *Alibi* again, the same performer, Davis Freemans, who confessed first: "I'm guilty of looking away..." *Like* a poisoned gift instead of guilt of self-quotation.

We notice: an *or* has now crept explicitly into Tim's *It's more like ...* structure (which is now: *or it's more like ...*), an *or* which by its not given optionality has been implicitly floating from the very beginning. *Or*: To the undecidability of the *more* (adding an 'm' to the almost homophonic 'or') now an explicit *or* is added. Tim: *Or it's more like embracing yourself to feel OK* – while Meg just embraces herself. *Or it's more like instruments to detect the existence of ghosts*. But which theatre ghosts as visitors only do Meg and Tim conjure or chase away into the void? *Like* in Meg's piece *Visitors only* (2003) or in Forced Entertainment's *Void* story (2009). A performative exorcism of the much conjured theatrical presence, a performatively marked absence.

And while Meg has long since been on the ground: *Or it's like people sleeping in hotel rooms for weeks and weeks*. *Or it's like scientific instruments to detect changes in the weather or in people's memories, like trying to remember what I felt five years ago, five months ago*. Movement and speaking: retrospective and prospective at once: Often the talk is about *remembering of ...* but then also about *learning to ...*: *It's like learning to walk on hot sand or on broken glass*. The *Broken World*, Tim's novel pops up in my mind again. *Or: It's like* Bill Viola's video installation *Crossings*, in which the same soundtrack evokes water or fire, depending on whether we see the front or the back of the screen showing a figure slowly drowning in water or slowly burning in fire.

Tim: *It's more like* the sound of births on the end of the telephone line. The telephone again. *It's more like* triangles or curves or zigzag, like spilt milk – while Meg is 'spilt' on the ground by her movement to pause for a while, and Tim hesitantly points at her and simply says: *It's like* (short pause) *this*. After the rapid rhythm of the beginning,

speaking and moving suddenly calm down. Do they give up? Give up giving signals?

So, Tim's voice becomes quieter, addressed to the audience, repeating: *It's like ... this*. And after the next moment of hesitation: *It's like ... that*, while Tim's hand flutters back and forth, barely noticeable between Meg and himself, as if he refers to the relationship between the two of them, between what both of them are doing, namely between doing and referring, perhaps.

It's like ... this, Tim says again, while he rolls onto the floor (almost) in Meg's pose and points to or touches the floor with his index finger: *Like* a ballerina would both touch the ground with her pointe shoe and avoid it all at once. Which sore point, which solid base of the references is touched here, which stability is punctured, perforated? Heinrich von Kleist's marionette as well "only touches the ground" – and any ground for being on stage – while pausing for a short moment. A pause, a pose, a point, a touch *like* a peephole through which there flows the moving memory of something that has never been. *Like* the subtle peephole projection in the choreographic installation *the fault lines* (2010) by Meg Stuart, Philipp Gehmacher and Vladimir Miller.

The stage lights are now a bit dimmed. While Tim lingers lying down and rotates minimally around his own axis, Meg stands up. Beginning of the 2nd part. Downstage, on the left stage edge, very close to the audience, Meg starts to speak: *I dance because people ask me to*. The anaphor structure of the sentences comes again, this time a different one: *I dance because it is a good way to seduce people, I dance because I have too much energy, I dance because I like making other people look good*, Meg says with a quick glance at Tim who continues to turn his uncomfortable looping laps on the ground.

I dance because of Iggy Pop and Prince, I dance because I can practice dying and it doesn't seem all that bad, I dance because it keeps me honest, I dance because it is a way to manage my anger, because I can travel forward and backward through time, because it keeps me in shape, I dance because I like to dance next to other sweat bodies all night long, I dance because I can make love with/to the floor all day long, I dance because it never leaves traces. I dance because I wanted to be a magician but I'm not good with stuff.

A bit like the paradoxically hesitant magic in Meg's choreography *Until our hearts stop* (2015), that magic of a present absence and lost punchlines. Or more like the void loops in Forced Entertainment's *Real Magic* (2016).

Shown and Told works against "the metaphysics of interiority" (a formulation by philosopher Marcus Steinweg in a different context (Steinweg 2016)), against some dance semiotics of the adequately translatable and obtainable. And at the same time the performance works against some rigorous resignations in dance science, claiming a dance which allegedly is discursively completely inaccessible. Instead, *Shown and Told* just leads all undecidability into aporia still working on translation.

Instead of adequate comparison, Meg and Tim propose a complex accomplishment, anticipating art's and philosophy's groundlessness and still re-searching for more (than) grounds and at the same time for no ground, no reason anymore. Again, like Kleist's marionette just touching the ground for a moment, nevertheless touching it. Even if we do not dance and show and tell for good reason – or on a stable ground, a ground always consists of multiple grounds.

For this second part Meg Stuart asked choreographers about their reason for dancing and collected multiple answers, different languages. Their monologic assemblages act a bit like "more than a language, and at once no language anymore" (Derrida 1990b), as if searching for *plus d'une langue*, probably Jacques Derrida's briefest attempt to define the heart of deconstructive practices. Or: the motivations for dancing are more like Roland Barthes' *plaisir* figure: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do." (Barthes 1975, 17 [1973, 30]) In the quoted interview we hear Tim saying: "I think I can articulate about 30-40 % of what we're doing but for the rest, there is not really a language. That means we are sort of blundering – the work is ahead of my ability to describe or articulate it. I like that." I like that too.

The game of broken readability promises, of *remembering* or *learning* (of something that has hardly been shown or told) continues. Meg kneels with her hands on her back, showing her back to the audience. Like a scene from Stuart's / Gehmacher's / Miller's *the*

fault lines again, that mixes with media execution scenes, while Tim is still stretched out on his side with his head raised uncomfortably. Calming down, pause again. Later, also Tim kneels with his hands on his back – facing the audience. Then he stands up, it is his turn to speak, facing the audience, while Meg looks at him and tries to translate his speech into motion (here the causality is clearer). Beginning the 3rd part:

Tim: *It's like that feeling (the addition of that feeling ... is new here) you get sometimes when the train next to you starts to move and you think you are moving, but you are not. Or that feeling when you put all this effort to take off something heavy but it is not. Or when you are coming down the stairs in a building that is not very familiar to you and you think there is another more step but there is not and your food gets (short pause, maybe also remembering Bruce Nauman saying this once) disappointed.*

The confused stories of confusions and desillusions, of disappointed feet and pointless jokes, of bodies searching for something through rooms, go on: *Or when you look out of the window and see somebody standing down there on the street and you go down but nobody is there and you look up to the window – and you see somebody there.* Again, strange changes of perspectives and of time.

And then time and space move along each other in Tim's stories on moving, pointing and disappointing: *It's like time was coming through walls, walls are making their way through houses, houses moving inside streets, streets are moving through cities, cities moving through countries. It's like Meg and Tim moving / searching through rooms which are also searching.*

Moving rooms, which sometimes are looked at under a microscope, sometimes through a telescope, in order to find out what they are made of and what they are run on: *Cities that are made of memories but run on forgetting, cities build out of forgetting but run on memories. Cities that are made of promises but run on hope, cities build out of hope but run on promises.* The descriptions of the parallel worlds continue to operate chiasmically: made of something but run on the opposite.



Figure 2: Meg Stuart und Tim Etchells, *Shown and Told*.
(Tine Declerck, 2016)

Meg is now standing next to Tim, ‘translating’ into gestures what he says – almost as if in deaf-mute language, but it is not, and that’s what this is all about. While Tim evokes *cities made of old books that nobody needs to read*, Meg suggests *cities made of love letters or rainbows, or of Christmas ornaments*. Tim: *cities made of old shoes*. Meg: *cities made of children’s clothes, very expensive children’s clothes ...* And so on. And already the two seem to be swimming in the same river, in a river that, as is well known, you can only enter once.

So Tim and Meg will ‘build’ further imagined worlds in rapid alternation: *cities made out of guns, cities made out of blood, or just oil or sweet; or artificial limbs, or used tampons or condoms, or nice songs people don’t sing anymore; or skeletons of tiny birds, or limbs of enemies, that have been hacked off (here also gesturally ‘hacked off’ by Tim), or cities made out of hot chocolate, or of picture post cards, or broken I-phones*.

Whereby the whole scene in its broken seriality is like – again – a broken telephone game: *Or cities made of feelings, or stories, or eye lashes, or skin, or tiny teeths of snakes, or confetti, espresso cups, regrets, dust, mist, words, just words, just breath, sleep in the eyes in the*

morning, or nothing, nothing at all. So, this list, this juxtaposition of our non-classifiable worlds on and on.

It's *like* the showing and telling of stories along each other beyond causality, rather as a listing that lets commonplaces go to pieces instead of claiming communal availability. The mere listing, serial enumerating of the performative material names nameless differences. Therefore, we often find the hierarchy-less stringing together or 'alphabetizing' of the material in the work of Forced Entertainment.

In the program of Forced Entertainments's 24-hour performance *Who can sing a song to unfrighten me* (1999) Tim Etchells lists the inventory: "Dogs, alphabets, panda bears, fatalities, fairy tales, horror stories, dances, and jokes." (Etchells 2001, Kruschkova n.d.) Listing, especially in processes of artistic research, avoids the hierarchy of terminology, short-circuits parallel levels of articulation. After a theatrical singular *as if* there comes a plural *what if* mode of an exploratory performance practice, which also considers the possibility that scenic presence and linearity might turn into marked absence and *nothing, nothing at all.*

We are dealing with a performative rhythm of heterogeneous listing which ever anew disarticulates fixations imminent with articulation and which is conclusive only if it avoids conclusions. As a continuous de-positioning of dispositives – with an "aggressive humor", with its contaminated, 'con-timed' instead of well-timed lists and levels.

"Humor is something totally aggressive", performer Kristof Van Boven says in Meg Stuart's *Until our hearts stop*, a group work which attempts an enigmatic animality, innocent nonsense und sensual insanity, gamy games, tenacious tenderness – with a sensual nonsensicality and humor, and hesitant magic. "I used to spend my holidays by the Mediterranean. But now I cannot swim in the Mediterranean" – Kristof Van Boven says in this piece, created in 2015, and comments: "Here we transgress all our boundaries." And all the performers and musicians on stage are doing so also literally – by an abysmally comical scenic obscenity which at times seems to go too far, precisely because our intimacy, our coming together can never go far enough (cf. Kruschkova 2016).

In *Until our hearts stop* the dancers come uncannily close to each other in all kinds of constellations – -ménage-à-trois, groups of four, five, six, seven –, before they hastily get out of each other’s way (cf. Kruschkova n.d.). Several couples then whirl around vertiginously, each with their counterpart’s fist in the mouth, the fist in the other’s mouth only holding the rotating couples together. A bit *like* the overdependence of the couple in *Shown and Told*, only that they cannot hold their mouths.

Or it’s *like* show-and-tell, the school activity in which a child brings an object into the class and talks about it. Or *like* – back to the lists – *Show and Tell* (2013), a 15’ long performance by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion which attempts to list some of the artists who have influenced their collaborative works, a list which can never be completed, of course.

In fact, the infected, contaminated lists and levels of humor do not play anything down, provided they are working with their own grounds and abysses, with the non-convergence of motives (*I’m dancing because...*), with the desire for and disorder of the different/iation we all are beholden to.¹ Thus, the laughing dance’s sense might go insane but never loses sight of differencing – even threatening thereby to lose its mind, minding understanding, rather “releasing from understanding as a proof of love” (Steinweg 2016).

Instead of just co-understanding, rather problematizing the ‘co-’, e.g., the audience’s unproblematic laughing along. Instead, the singular vibrations of laughter jolt the automatism of community and identity by continuously laying open new asymmetries. Thus, Tim Etchells instructs performers and audience: “Split the audience. Make a problem of them. Disrupt the comfort and anonymity of the darkness. Make them feel the differences present in the room and outside of it (class, gender, age, race, power, culture). Give them the taste of laughing alone. The feel of a body that laughs in public and then, embarrassed, has to pull it back.” (Etchells 2001)

Those instructions suspend hypotactic connections, conjunctures and conjunctions, they plead for paratactical instead of order-

1 The following section is based in part on material previously published in Kruschkova 2016.

ing listing, which foils the control and relief functions of collective laughter: instead of subordinate conjunction and conjuncture – a conjunctive or subjunctive mood, the mode of possibility in contemporary dance and performance (*or it's more like ...*) and in their theory too, which does not have to take itself too seriously.

The humor in *Shown and Told* focusses on the calculated missing of time, on bad timing, on the rapid standstill of punchlines, on the doubts of language about the body telling, the despair of the body about language showing when body and language upend each other, come across each other, talk at cross-purposes. As an *idiorhythmic* tremor of surfaces, laughter addresses the vibrating aesthetic intervals, *the fault lines* between the parallel worlds to which we, strange humans, funnily enough belong, simultaneously.

It's *like* that stringing-together instead of the ordering classification of animals by Jorge Luis Borges which Michel Foucault cites in *The Order of Things*. In this precise chaos the humorous, paradoxically short-circuits parallel surfaces of articulation and problematize witless theories of witnessing, affiliation, and community, make them falter by getting stuck within them, in the desiccated theories, *like* in one's throat. *Or more like* Walter Benjamin's definition: "Laughter is shattered articulation." (Benjamin 2002, 32) So bitterly apposite for our time, this chaos of articulation.

The ambiguous, more than obvious and not at all obvious anymore gestures of the comical dis-articulate dance and performance (hi)stories, too, make their academic dryness twitch. The act of listing is about differentiations and con-fusions and chaos: Tim celebrates "the way that Meg orchestrates chaos", as he puts it in the cited interview.

When speaking about lists, about them and through them, we are talking beyond causality. Again: *it's like* a coordinating, paratactic and not like a subordinate, hypotactic conjunction. Meg and Tim 'build' houses, streets, cities, worlds out of words in order to tear them down at once. Whole cities appear macroscopically, made up of smallest particles, micropolitically. In this concrete poetry of onomatopoeic promises all references dissolve, the language becomes an illegible sign (a bit *like* Friedrich Hölderlin's "ein Zeichen sind wir,

deutungslos" (Hölderlin 1953, 203), or again like Antonin Artaud's giving "signs from the pyre").

Tim intensifies himself more and more into his talking and showing of *nothing, nothing at all*, spreads his arms, takes everything that has been said, danced, and imagined between his hands, quite literally, squeezes it into an imagined package, squeezes it further, the package always becomes smaller, until he swallows it, as if he were letting it disappear into his mouth: What escapes here could be a tongue or language or lingua. Thus, Tim swallows everything that has been said, which can be more than words and no more words anymore. Then he stretches his hand forward – a gesture that will appear again later, more explicitly, I will come back to this. Then he is on the floor, Meg is upstage, both are alone again, solitary, a short pause.

And then – it is no longer possible to count the performance parts which become shorter and start to interfere more and more – Tim's 5-minute voice loop comes: *We let go of each other's hands slipping past each other slowly, very slowly until only the fingers were touching. We let go of each other's hands slipping past each other slowly, very slowly until only the fingers were touching. ...*

Meg comes closer, it's like her wanting to save him from the obsessive repetition and at the same moment being magically attracted by its gentleness. The voice loop, the broken record. Remembering Tim's movement at the end of the first scene when he put his finger on the floor – as if the dance floor were his dial and his finger a dislocated clock hand. As if the floor were his gramophone, on which it spins like a broken record ... *A bit like Friedrich Kittler's Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.*

And then – Meg's and Tim's impossible dialogue, their dialogue on the impossible: *We wanted to say good bye but there was too much noise, we could hardly see each other. / We made plans to travel and send us photos but the camera couldn't focus, the internet doesn't work, we wanted to, we had many ideas ... but some communication problems ... / We wanted to have a beautiful moment ... to sing Rolling Stones, but we thought it would be too much. / We wanted to dance together naked in the rain but there was only sunshine.* The paradoxical overcalculation, the failure, the failed plan: "Our strength is being

unable to plan well”, says Tim about the work with his group Forced Entertainment (Etchells 2001, 1c).

In our being with, our wit(h)nessing of this iconoclastic performance, nothing remains in the picture, so that we cannot just consume it. Tim continuing the failure list and leading border politics (remembering Meg’s *Until our hearts stop*) into an aporia again: *The pictures in our passports looked nothing like our faces, so on the border they said: “No! Would you please step out of the line, Step out of the line please! Step out of the line!”* Tim repeats the instructions of the border police walking backwards, fanatically, louder and louder. These repeated instructions fall out of the previous order of the sentences and paradoxically deconstruct every order.

Meanwhile Meg is in the auditorium, Tim is upstage, repeating obsessively, panicked, *like* a broken record again: *I’m here, are you there? I’m here, are you there? I’m here, are you there?* Is he addressing us? Or Meg? After repeating it several times, the concrete question is: *Are you there, Meg?* A bit *like* the title of a book on Meg Stuart’s work: *Are We Here Yet* (Damaged Goods/Stuart 2010). Or *like* Bruce Nauman’s *You may not want to be here* (1968).

Or *like* Forced Entertainment’s *Bloody Mess*, in which a performer acting as a clown asks himself several times: “What am I doing here? What am I doing here? On stage, but also in this world.” As if we were in this picture puzzle between stage fact and staged fiction too. Meg will soon calm Tim down: *Yes, I’m here.* But it’s not that simple, they both know. Tim: *No, I’m here, you are there.* Only a perspective change, again?

Remembering: “Where are the words on the book page?” (Derrida 1990a) And the words and movements on the stage? “They go from being words on the computer screen or on the page to words in a body, in the air. I think, the way I am trying to work with the language is also about how the language sits in my body and how it animates me in space,” Tim says in the quoted interview.

Are you there? I’m here! – time and again. Words and moves and spaces and places yet to come. And just before Tim’s *here-there*-panic explodes, he just removes another presence / absence dichotomy: *I used to be here, but now I want to be there.* And he moves to another place on the stage. Meg picks up the game: *I was here but now I want*

to be here. A 't' runs out of control here and it becomes hard to separate here from 't'here.

Tim also changes his position – now he is on the ground again like at the end of the first scene (the interfering and self-quoting of the single, shorter and shorter performance parts continues), again with his head uncomfortably raised: *Now I want to be here, but I start to regret it, it is not very comfortable, it's like I lost my moment, I'm stuck in this, but it's just a proposition.*



Figure 3: Meg Stuart und Tim Etchells, *Shown and Told*. (Eva Würdinger, 2018)

Are you there? Are you moving? – Tim Etchells asks dancer and choreographer Meg Stuart of all people: in contemporary dance, (non) presence and (not)moving are a topic of course. At that moment Tim, in his uncomfortable reclining position, does not actually see Meg. But we also hear this question in a figurative sense – already being sensitized by what *Shown and Told* could be about: by this floating fictional / real and literal-figurative in every scenic situation.

Are you there? Tim asks again and – as we already know – Meg replies with a question: *Is that a serious question?* Tim: *It's a 52 % serious one.* Meg: *Is it a philosophical question?* Tim: *More of a political*

one. “Yes, exactly, there is also a political dimension to this performance not presented as a militant vendor’s tray.” (Ploebst 2018)

Then a guessing game begins in this performance, which is all along a charade, in the multiple sense of the word, where no guessing can succeed: *Do you remember this hand?* Tim asks with a quick walk forward and (again) with his arm outstretched to the front. After Meg’s perplexity, Tim explains his gesture: *Bad news in hospital, when you hear the long peep-signal and see the line on the monitor. Like the moment in Bloody Mess, when two performers, while re-searching for a ‘beautiful silence’, imagine a peep-life-signal in the hospital room which suddenly stops.*

Meg picks up the guessing game: *I have one: Do you know what this is?* Meg seems to be throwing something away, maybe shaking it off, the movement remains of course opaque. *An apology*, she explains her gesture to perplexed Tim. A bit *like* the confusion and intimacy of Philipp Gehmacher’s words in his solo *my shapes, your words, their grey* (2013): “I’m done with apologizing.”

Now Tim continues the guessing game and lies down – Meg guesses: *It is very minimal, something with water, a river? Or is it a business negotiation? No, a political protest*, says Tim. Now she kneels – like much earlier – with her hands on her back. Tim is at a loss. Meg: *This is classic* (as if quoting again the execution posture in Stuart’s / Gehmacher’s / Miller’s *the fault lines*).

And then Meg brushes the contours of Tim’s, then of her own body. (Like a gesture in *the fault lines* again, which seems to become ‘classic’ exactly through this self-citation. Does Meg trace / picture the other’s and her own’s body counters? Do pictures hurt?

Do we yet *dance because it does leave traces?*) So, what is it? *Making friends in a new town*, Tim guesses here correctly for the first time, at least this time Meg does not say ‘no’ but maybe, because she has to suppress her laughter.

She strokes her face with both slopes, then slightly opens her hands, which are still touching each other at the sides. So, what is that? He does not know. It’s so *simple: Facebook!* – she triumphs. Then both of them simultaneously make superimposed wave movements with their hands, surfing in stage instead on the Internet, then they do curves, lines, circles together – as if they were spelling their own

movements. While Tim makes stomach rotations as if with a hula-horn, Meg guesses: *It's like ritual*. Tim's answer: *A washing machine*.



Figure 4. Meg Stuart und Tim Etchells, *Shown and Told*.
(Tine Declerck, 2016)

We are at the end. Meg: *Do you want us to stage dive but not really do it?* They run towards the audience and stop just before the stage edge. What kind of representability are they at the edge? The irony gap between what has been shown / told / meant explicitly becomes a gap between stage and auditorium, which also can only be overcome ironically.

So, in the end, the two speculate about the possible bending of the edges, just as superimposed waves in physics diffractively bend sharp edges and cause territories to interfere. *Like* in Karen Barads “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart”. *Or more like* Tim’s quote about his dis /assembling work with Meg as “a bit off territory with elements of it that are still mysterious to us.”

Shown and Told: A text choreography and dance performance that deals with the legibility of our gestures. Gestures which explore and lack their own readability at the same time. They are both microscopic and macroscopic gestures, too big and too small at the same

time – as big as if they were about to tear; small enough as if they were not there yet. So, these gestures despair, almost disappear, in all their / our inconsistency (cf. Kruschkova 2016). Gestures which reclaim their complexity and call for new, affective, resistant forms of understanding, also for a challenge of theory *like* Paul de Man's *Resistance to Theory* (Man 1986), *maybe* resistance *against* but also *towards* theory.

Tim in the quoted interview, one last time:

Language can be a kind of controlling or fixing force in relation to image or to doing, which often seems to be more ambiguous and less defined. Something that I have struggled with in my work since the beginning: being in love with language, but also trying not to let it be this controlling, fixing form. To upset the capacity for closing things down that spoken language has. One of the things that Meg and I are exploring, perhaps, is trying to find ways of working with language and image and language and movement, that allow the language to be open, poetic and on the same level as other kinds of material. I think that this is really important: to allow the language to exist as texture or musicality or energy rather than semantics.

As if the performance were an always shifted correspondence which does not resolve into semantics, just *like* potentiality does not resolve into actuality. “Some friends of mine call it potentiality [...]. Things waiting to happen”, a clown says in *Bloody Mess* by Forced Entertainment, a performance of repeated soundchecks: “One two... one, two, two”.

“Things waiting to happen”: we might hear a homophonous short-circuit here between *two* and *to* – in order to destabilize any causality and linearity, in order to subvert any telos, any *to* simply as *two*, as test counting too: *Like* all the lists in *Shown and told* – too multiple to just classify. While things are waiting to happen, the two on stage happen to do other things with /out or rather out of words and moves, as if they were suggesting ‘how to do things made out of words and run on moves, and things made out of moves and run

on words', to try out a short-circuit with John L. Austin's *How to do things with words* (1962), as confused as it is.

As if philosophy (of language) as well as critique, performance and / as artistic research had to rehearse their problems along each other after all, melancholically-ironically: *One two, two... One two, two...* Speculative and spectral instead of spectacular: *Do you want us to stage dive but not really do it?*

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