

the dance in *Antithesis, the future of the image*?

The first part of the performance ends with an open question: shouldn't we be collecting more knowledge about the way digital images work, and should we maybe even learn how to hack? The dance tests this out by giving the quoted images an own twist and by embodying them. In fact the essence is not so much about what exactly is said in the text, but what I'm really trying to do is to expose the mechanisms of how we currently deal with texts and images and from there formulate a proposition for a slower and more critical visual culture.

I agree with the analysis stating that if you want to distillate knowledge from images, you will always have to transform them into spoken or written language. Images are not a language in and of themselves. In this performance the text can be conceived as a kind of subtitle to the images, and the danced images are the transformation of a specific discourse.

Even if you consider language to be a device, it remains the only means through which we as people can communicate. If an art critic analyses a performance for example, she or he thereby, directly or indirectly, defines what the future spectator will see. If you want to share knowledge and use it critically for political ends, you have no choice but to rely on language.

So do you consider yourself to be both a choreographer and a writer? Are those two cross-cutting practices in your opinion?

Well what I can say is that there is no hierarchy between both. I have only

developed my writing after graduating from P.A.R.T.S. Language generates the dance and vice versa. This performance originated from certain ideas about movement and then evolved in the direction of writing, even though for *Antithesis, the future of the image* I mainly collected quotes. The text is also a consequence of working on my own: I needed to have a conversation with someone! One medium makes the other problematic and vice versa. Based on an analysis of television, media scholar Neil Postman says, in his book *Amusing ourselves to death*, that 'Thinking does not play well in an image-based culture. There is not much to see in it. It is not a performing art'. I then ask myself the question: what does that mean for theater and the arts, and what is therefore the role of theater in our Western society? You could actually see theater as the negative of a photograph: as the 'negative' space of our public space, a building that occupies a central space but at the same time is very closed off from the outside world. That's what gives theater the power to distillate an image of society and to contrast it with whole different images. That is also what *Antithesis, the future of the image* is trying to achieve.

Interview by Charlotte De Somviele, March 7, 2015

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**INTERVIEW WITH
MICHIEL VANDEVELDE**

How does this performance fit within your artistic trajectory?

In *Love Songs (veldeke)*, a production I created in 2013 at fABULEUS, nine young people sang philosophical and political citations about love mixed with pop culture melodies. One of those songs was based on a quote from the film *Eloge de l'amour* by filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, that says: "The image: the only thing capable of denying nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness on us." This quote made me reflect on the essence of the image. What is an image? According to the quote, the image is the only thing that can hide that there really is nothing, the image is nothingness's gaze on us. If an image is the gaze of nothingness, then what happens on a theater stage? How do

**'Theater as
a negative of society'**

Creation and dance: Michiel Vandeveld **Feedback:** Dries Douibi **Graphic design:** Ward Heirwegh **Technique:** Menno Vandeveld **Text:** Adam Curtis, Vilém Flusser, Jean-Luc Godard, Victor Hugo, Aldous Huxley, Neil Postman, Jacques Rancière, Anna Siegel, Michiel Vandeveld, Kristof van Baarle

images function in theater? Those are the questions I wanted to explore in *Antithesis, the future of the image*.

Using movement material through ‘reappropriation’ (or re-using) of popular video clips picks up a quest I outlined in *Love Songs (veldeke)*. These video clips are watched massively through channels such as YouTube. Clips like Gangnam Style by PSY or Single Ladies by Beyoncé; a large part of the world knows the steps to those. I think that’s interesting. For the first time in history we can maybe say that it is possible to share something universal—the universal not being a collection of norms or values but a variety of often insignificant information. This, however, does create a new kind of culture. *Antithesis, the future of the image* uses this observation as a starting point.

Another catalyst for Antithesis, the future of the image was a commercial by denim giant Levi’s. What was it that struck you?

I saw that Levi’s commercial in the documentary *Metamorphose of a crisis* (Backlight, VPRO, 2011) a criticism on the economic recuperation of the crisis in which American media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser analyses a series of commercial clips. The Levi’s clip mixes intimate images (showing scenes of love and people playing and making music) with images of public protest. There is nothing wrong with that intrinsically, were it not that those images are shown with the sole intent of selling jeans. To top it off the images are slyly captioned with a poem by Charles Bukowski, of which the first line reads: ‘Your life is your life, don’t let it be clubbed into dank submission...’ This type of commercials implicitly

depoliticize the viewer by reducing people to mere individuals who must first and foremost pursue their own happiness (through their buying power). The power of the collective, as seen in the images of protest, is thereby rendered harmless. A parody of the commercial has since appeared on YouTube, using the same images with different captions expressing how capitalism has stolen everything from us, from our love to our political combativeness. Both video clips brought me back to my initial question: what are images, how do they function in our current society, how are they being hijacked—and how can I maybe reclaim these images through reappropriation?

How did you create a choreography based on this reappropriation?

Reappropriation is a term used in the context of documentaries and found footage films. A similar phenomenon exists within dance and the visual arts: ‘re-enactment’ and ‘appropriation art’. While re-enactments mostly refer to art itself, reappropriation is about quoting non-art related references. Italian art historian Frederico Rossin once described this during a film seminar as ‘the smartest way of artistic and cultural rebellion that originated in colonial countries revolting against the dominant culture by means of cannibalism rather than rejection’. As a choreographer I don’t always find it easy to collect movement material. Dance often remains to uninvolved in my opinion and that makes reappropriation a rewarding principle. Popular video clips are very relatable because we are exposed to them on a daily basis. In that sense *Antithesis, the future of the image* is the exact opposite of what I

tried to do with one of my previous projects, *The Political Party*, in which I wanted to develop a vision for a new political party, starting from a blank slate - What if there were no existing ideas about politics? With this performance on the other hand I am starting with a crowded slate. What happens when you start appropriating and revisiting references and placing them in a new composition? What is interesting for this performance is that it very much forces you to work with the raw materials, with (the logic of) the image itself.

So where does the body stand in your dance? Is it a symptom of this reappropriation in itself, always modelled after images from the media, and to what extent can it rebel against this and ‘claim’ an own identity?

For me, those video clips don’t represent people, but some type of ‘aliens’: people who are so perfect, so computer-processed that they cannot be real. Because they dominate our culture however, they do become a norm for many young people growing up. This creates a crazy idea of what is ‘real’, in a society ruled by an unrealistic cult of the body. During the sixties and the seventies choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer and Deborah Hay (members of the Judson Dance Theatre) integrated ‘everyday movements’ into dance. Today it is interesting to take a look at what those ‘everyday movements’ are that define our public sphere. One could argue that the ‘everyday movements’ that dominate the public space are coming from advertisement or video clips. By transferring those movements from one context (commercial) to another (theater),

it becomes clear that they are not that ‘everyday’ at all but rather hyper-constructed. That evolution occurs gradually in *Antithesis, the future of the image*: in the first phase the body is an instrument that quotes and exposes the most popular video clips. I then apply the typical tools of contemporary dance (accelerate, slow down, magnify, shrink) to discover what else you can do with this material.

The performance in itself is a rebellion against the norm because it shows a different body (one of flesh and blood, vulnerable, not altered by machinery), a body that therefore carries the first bud of a different, maybe more anarchistic or wayward, visual culture.

Philosopher Vilém Flusser made a striking analysis in the eighties as the internet was coming up: either we all become image-makers or a select few will take control. Today we are seeing an interesting paradox: through Facebook and Instagram everyone is creating a multitude of images, but they remain limited to the private sphere. There are only a few companies who create images ‘that matter’, but then in a negative sense. They hollow out the political aspect of an image by making it into an economical instrument, or they hijack our private images through Facebook to use them for other purposes.

The performance’s announcement states that it shows ‘danced images competing against projected text’. The projected text is a collection of quotes by a series of philosophers, sociologists and historians. You could say that you are practicing a form of “philosophy-choreography”. What is the relationship between the text and

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