

An Ecological Body in Dance

Introduction

It seems that among certain scholars and artists there is a sort of paradigmatic shift in terms of how we regard ourselves as a species in relation to the earth and to other species. The term "*The Anthropocene*"¹ has been introduced into scientific discourse. It describes our current geological era, which is characterized by human-impact, creates a landslide in our worldview. The ontological divide between nature and culture needs to be reconsidered. Perhaps nature isn't some constant which exists in continuity regardless of our actions. We start to see that on a macro level, we as a species have a great impact in the earth, just like any force of nature.

One writer who is especially occupied with these ideas is Timothy Morton, professor at Rice University, Houston. He explores in his writings what it means to be ecological. His idea of ecology extend itself into a quite visceral language and bodily ideas. He talks about pleasure, intimacy, symbiosis. He talks about having a disco every day and befriending other species. Perhaps therefore he has a certain appeal to dancers.

As an artform based on bodily practices and representation, dance has a certain discursive power in terms of how we regard the body and it's relationship to the surrounding world. Based on this idea, I want to question how an "ecological body" might then look/behave/relate? How can Morton's idea of being ecological be translated into a physical performative practice?

I will examine the work of Jared Gradinger and Angela Schubot, specifically the performance YEW². Jared Gradinger and Angela Schubot are a Berlin based dance and performance duo. Gradinger and Schubot's work often circulates around concepts like symbiosis, intimacy and meetings. YEW specifically explores the meetings with different plant bodies as well as the relationship between the bodies of the two performers and between performers and audience.

Timothy Morton and Dark Ecology

Morton has introduced a concept he calls "*dark ecology*"³. It springs out of the idea that "*the much-feared catastrophe (the climate crisis and mass extinction) has, in fact, already occurred.*" As he says in an interview with the Guardian: "*Our most cherished idea about nature and the environment –*

¹ Alex Blasdel, "*A Reckoning for our species: the philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene*", The Guardian, 15th June 2017.

² Angela Schubot and Jared Gradinger, YEW, HAU – Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 2018

³ "Dark Ecological Chocolate", Timothy Morton, Changing Weathers, <http://www.changingweathers.net/en/episodes/43/dark-ecological-chocolate>

*that they are separate from us, and relatively stable – have been destroyed. (...) We never stood apart from or controlled the non-human things on the planet, but have always been thoroughly bound up with them*⁴. To him the idea that we are capable to control nature – including the climate crisis – is an illusion and not before we let go of the need to control, are we able to be present with what is actually happening, and respond.⁵

In a long poetic talk about Dark Ecology, called Dark Ecological Chocolate, he takes us through the phenomenological layers of Dark Ecology – creating “an experiential map”. In the introduction he already suggests that this idea, this radical shift in perspective, involves our psyche and body and is linked to artistic practice: “Once we have a feel for the phenomenology, we can figure out what kinds of art process and practice we want to involve ourselves in with much greater sense of power and accuracy.”⁶ Perhaps you could say, that Morton, coming from literature, tries to write himself into what this ecological crisis is going to mean to us on a psycho-physical and philosophical level.

He claims that the ecological art lives in “the pleasure airport”. It is about intimacy and sexualities. Intimacy is closely linked to solidarity and to being-one-with, he writes⁷. And how is that linked to ecology? Take f.ex. the bacteria in our gut, all the microbes that inhabit our body and helps to keep it healthy – already at the level of our own body we are in a symbiotic relationship with other species. But western culture (Christian values) have been taught us guilt and shame, especially regarding the parts of us which are considered “nature” “*our ancestors in our bones, the fish swim bladders in our lungs, the bacteria in our guts*”⁸ are abject and the abject is “cut off or “cut out”. It is something we don’t want to deal with. “*We experience symbiosis as a trauma.*”⁹

Instead he says if we can liberate ourselves from this feeling of trauma, from the abjection of parts of ourselves, of the symbiosis, we will experience freedom and pleasure, even playfulness.

Being human is irrevocably strange and uncanny. Our very own bodies are strange and uncanny, but we can let go into the uncanniness, surrender to the fact that we are one with everything, that symbiosis is elemental to our life. The way we come into the world, born through our mother’s vagina, is an example he uses to state this.¹⁰

⁴ Alex Blasdel, “A reckoning for our species...”

⁵ Timothy Morton, “*Being Ecological*” (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2018) p. 25

⁶ Timothy Morton “*Dark Ecological Chocolate*”

⁷ Timothy Morton “*Dark Ecological Chocolate*”

⁸ Timothy Morton “*Dark Ecological Chocolate*”

⁹ Timothy Morton “*Dark Ecological Chocolate*”

¹⁰ Timothy Morton “*Dark Ecological Chocolate*”

So, to Morton, being ecological is not about “doing the right thing”, being holy and puritan and policing pleasure. It is more a letting go of control and falling into a different layer of existing with other beings. Perhaps something like starting to regard oneself as equal to other beings and objects, living in a sort of exchange with them rather than in control.

YEW

The work of Gradinger and Schubot seems to often circle around symbiosis and the body as a vessel for transgressing the ego. The duo piece YEW was first premiered at HAU, Kreuzberg, Berlin in January 2018 in a black box set-up. Later that year it was reperformed outside in the Blankenfelde-Pankow Botanical Garden in the north of Berlin. The performance is the embodiment of the performer’s meetings with several different plants. During their research they practiced sitting with the plants and being present with them. Without knowing the artistic process in detail, I can conclude, that the performance is a choreography of the somatic embodiment of the plant meetings. The performance can be roughly divided in two parts; the first part which is purely abstract movement/dance and the second part which is more directly interactive with the audience. In the following I will focus mainly on the first part. The dramaturgy and the movement material of the indoor and outdoor version of the piece stays similar, so I will not go into depth with the difference here.

During the whole first half of the performance the performers have their eyes closed. This creates both a sensation that they are in touch with their inner worlds of experience and images, but as well it seems that they are sensing the space and each other through other perceptions, touch, smell, hearing – perhaps like a plant who perceive the world around itself through numerous receptors that we can’t quite imagine.

They create different physicalities together, almost always in physical touch. Their movements are intertwined; if one moves, it will affect the movement of the other, almost like they are becoming one body or just; bodies who are interconnected.

In some sections their arms and legs are intertwined, bringing to the mind images of branches or some kind of tentacles, sensing their way. There is always the feeling that they have no clear trajectory in space. It is not a movement leading to somewhere, but perhaps more a state of being. They are like a sensing organism of bodies, which exists with the space rather than act in the space. The relationship with time and space seems non-linear. It suggests a relationship between the performing body and the environment which is more based in existing next to each other, giving the other bodies; plants, audiences or the space etc. more equal agency.

The breath and voice are a central part of the physicality. In the beginning the voices create soft humming, screeching or growling sounds. What does this voice communicate? Perhaps an expression of an energy – a frequency, of being. Perhaps a way to communicate to the blind companion, I am here. In the last part of the movement section, some sense of climax is created. The two performers start to engage in a fast and heavy breathing, with some voice engaged while they, connected by the hands, circle around each other continuously. They persist with the rhythmical breathing and the circling for quite a while. Sometimes they fall but get up again and continue without hesitation. The breathing/voicing grows in intensity, until at last they tumble around in laughter in a kind of state of release, perhaps high from oxygen.

Engaging breath and voice can, in the context of dance, be regarded as something quite visceral, like letting what is inside spill out. The voice and the breath are the gateway to emotions and letting go into them requires a loss of control. Breathing keeps us alive and with breath we already interact with the world, taking some of the world into our body, and blowing out some of our body into the surrounding. The use of breath and voice points to the condition of the body as a biological organism and creates intimacy by revealing the psycho-physical state of the performer. It is easy to associate the audible, rhythmical breathing to something sexual. Perhaps that is because for most people in western culture sex is the only social space where such breathing is allowed. On the other hand, we could perhaps just regard this idea of sexual in a broader perspective, as a practice of letting go and finding unity. Perhaps also thinking about sex in a Donna Haraway kind of sense of “making kin, not babies”; that there are countless ways in which sexuality – in a broad sense – can be expressed, ways which are not about the reproductive act between male and female, but about exploring intimacy and pleasure in various ways.

Conclusion

Perhaps an ecological body in dance has to do with a circular or vegetative rather than linear relationships to time and space. It has to do with allowing the visibility of the visceral biological qualities of the body. Also it has to do with establishing a relationship with other bodies which allows a redistribution of agency, allow the performing bodies to be regarded more as a part of a bigger landscape – rather than a more classical idea, that they are protagonists in a linear narrative.

Also diverging from or questioning narratives which include dichotomies such as good-evil, human-nature could be part of the “ecological dramaturgy”. It is somewhat how I read Morton; that we are all interconnected and that nature in fact has no good or evil, it only has ecosystems with different agents.

Something I find in the work of Schubot and Gradinger is that though the biological, “nature” condition of the body is very present in their work, this very condition seems to be the vessel to transgress the ego, perhaps a spiritual pursuit. The “Whole” can be experienced through a kind of submission to the nature of ourselves.