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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Reconstructing Identity in *Layers* (2010)

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Abstract

In Performing Arts the concept of identity plays a central part either in a declarative and assertive way or in a less obvious and visible manner. Starting from a Contemporary dance piece, *Layers*¹, a solo work by the Romanian choreographer Cristina Lilienfeld, we will interrogate the relation individual-society, discussing the cyclic process of building identity which consists, in the context of the presented performance, of the following phases: construction, deconstruction, re-construction.

Lilienfeld appears on stage affirming the ontological identity emphasised through her naked body which sends to the original state of being. During the performance, the process of socially constructed identity becomes visible once the spectators are invited to act by scribing their thoughts on the performer's body. Follows the denying phase in which Lilienfeld peels off the fake skin on which the society imprinted identity on the individual. The final phase is that in which the individual appears in front of the audience-society clean and shiny, re-constructing the individual identity, an acknowledged and affirmed identity, the result of the confrontation with the society.

Illustrating with recorded sequences from *Layers*, our perspectivation brings forth the possibility to refine the understanding of the individual identity as a consequence of the confrontation with the society, confrontation which could be read as conflict or as opportunity in the sense that provides the necessary tool, that of a mirror, for re-constructing the individual identity.

performance, individual identity, reflection, transformation

To reflect upon identity is to reflect upon the nature of this concept, is to emphasise the transformative aspect of identity. We rarely refer to identity as something accomplished, but rather, we refer to the construction of an identity whether national, linguistic, social, individual, etc. We can also refer to a certain phase of the formation of the identity or to the quality of that identity of being well-structured and founded and therefore durable or, on the contrary, weak and subdued to menaces of destruction. Addressing identity is addressing its processual aspect. In the field of performance studies, "Crossing Intercultural Border through Dance" interrogates identity as a constitutive process in the context of the solo-piece *Layers* by Cristina Lilienfeld. Questioning by whom and by which processes identity is produced, we will analyse the conditions and the dynamics of these processes. The relation dancer- audience developed in *Layers*, mirroring the relation individual- society, explicitly reads and aesthetically reveals the stages of identity construction, bringing forth the auto-reflection, fundamental in Performance art, as a necessary condition in the demystification of the identity construction process. In her solo, Lilienfeld brings two paradigms of individual identity construction: one is on the relationship individual- society level; the other refers to the extra-quotidian level, to the level of the origins of the human being, levels which are continuously explored, connected, disconnected. The dynamics of the transition from one level to the other brings forth an essential characteristic of identity construction, that of cyclicality. The process is never accomplished, an ending point leads to a fresh start of the process, as if developing on a spiral.

The main elements of the performance are the light, the empty space and the dancer and develops the relationship between dancer and audience. There is a traditional setting of the performance, the dancer is on stage and the spectators are seated in front of it. It is a classical relationship in which the dancer performs and the spectator receives. Every detail indicates, sets up and directs this traditional relation: the stage is separated from the audience by the setting of the chairs in front of the stage, the lights illuminate the stage while the spectators remain in the dark, the sound, either the music or those produced by the dancer's body in contact with the floor, every sound comes from the stage and reaches the area designated for the audience. At some point in the performance this setting is reversed, the active-passive relationship between dancer and audience distorted by stimulating the agency of the spectator only to return to the initial setting of the performance. This cyclic structure of the performance which describes the cyclic process of the identity construction is constituted of some phases: the formation, the construction, the negation, the re-construction.

Formation

In the semi-darkness of the stage there are some sounds coming from the stage; as the light grows the naked dancer can be seen on the floor, moving slowly, trying to have a full contact with the floor, looking for every part of the body to be in contact with the floor; it looks as if there is no body yet or as if that body does not know yet what kind of body it is and tries to explore all possibilities before finding the one which is irreplaceable. It carefully and fluidly explores crawling, rolling, twisting, stretching. The legs play an important part in this exploration of possibilities, in this

primary grammar of the body, as they are the motor, initiating all movements as the main element of the foundation of the body. The floor is sprinkled with soft soil which adds to the body reminding of the material nature of it. The contact with the ground is the main theme of this part, the contact which delineates the body, which awakens the skin preparing it for further explorations. It is a double process that of the work on the skin: on one side it establishes the borders of the body, on the other side, through this contact with the floor which stimulates sensitivity, it opens the skin in order to become an antennae able to catch further stimuli.

There are two aspects of the naked body in *Layers* which require deeper reflection. The first aspect is the nakedness itself which evokes the beginning, any beginning, the concept of the beginning itself, a state in which there are possibilities and not realizations, explorations and not actions. The naked body sends to origins and, by doing this, actualises the origins with all its possibilities. There is a pre-identity, the possibility of an identity which requires realisation; the process has started with the interaction of natural elements, the body and the ground, and is to be continued. The second aspect is that Lilienfeld's naked body is not an erotic one. It presents herself as a child rather than a woman, a child before falling into the category of a gender. This aspect of "before something" also emphasises the state of being of the beginning, of possibilities, of pre-identity.

Construction

Along with the growing lights, Lilienfeld gains the standing position, continuing to explore the relation with the space, the possibilities of the body to move into space, to affect space. The process of constructing identity has already started once Lilienfeld assumed the verticality. This part of the performance emphasises the passage from pre-identity to an individual identity constructed in contact with "the other" and it is realised by changing the nature of the relationships between dancer and audience. There is a moment when Lilienfeld stops moving and affronts directly the spectators, explicitly inviting them on stage in order to write on her naked body. When affronting the spectators, Lilienfeld affronts the concept of the subject being reduced to an object externally inscribed, an individual identity built under socio-cultural conditions, concept aligned with the Enlightenment and the postmodernism discourse:

"However, the Enlightenment discourse is not alone in rejecting the experience of being an embodied mind; postmodernism has done so in its turn. Since the subject is to be thought of as wholly decentered, all notions suggesting that the subject can co-determine anything are considered sheer illusion. Instead, the subject turns into the object, acted upon by abstract entities such as language or cultural inscriptions. The subject does not speak and use language but is spoken by that language. The dialectic of <being a body> and <having a body> proves to be an idle fancy. The body is instead seen as a passive surface for cultural inscriptions." ⁱⁱ

Lilienfeld literally tests the idea of socio-culturally inscribed identity on her own body. From the moment the first spectator accepts the invitation and steps onto the stage, the relationship between dancer and audience is reversed: Lilienfeld consciously assumes the passive role and accepts to become the canvas on which the spectators scribe their thoughts, thus becoming co-creators, co-participants in the construction of the performance. It is to be noticed that the simple fact of crossing the border, the simple fact of stepping from the audience's place to the dancer's place produces transformations. The people who assume the active role in the performance are transformed by a single step on stage; they step out their ordinary body and step into a pre-performative body; the walking on stage is different from the everyday walking, is carefully performed under the eyes of the other spectators and under the eyes of the dancer herself; the way they write on her body, using eyeliners or markers, is not the way they normally write on paper, but they experience the feeling of writing on something (someone) precious and delicate. There is a tenderness which expresses through their hands which is nothing else than the right response to the delicate energy of the dancer. There is a continuous care with which they measure their acting, their desire to be the right act which is complete but does not damage.

The transition from the ordinary body to a pre-performative body is realised through a change in the quality of their attention as a consequence of changing the status from passive spectator to active participant and therefore the assumed role of being watched. The quality of attention is one of the important factors in performer's training which mediates transformation when experienced by the spectators, as Fisher-Lichte argues: "performance induces an extraordinary heightened attention in the spectator, thus transforming what has been ordinary into components of aesthetic experience. The commonplace is transfigured [...]"ⁱⁱⁱ This "heightened attention" is directed not only towards external situations but also, through the very fact of being observed, inwardly. This switch of direction of attention in the spectator who assumes the role of the performer from exterior to both exterior and interior occurs with the switch from observing to being observed. Consequently, under performative conditions, spectators become conscious of their own acts, of the manner in which they walk, pick up the eyeliner, choose on which part of the body to write, write on the skin of the dancer, put down the eyeliner, leave the stage.

and therefore develops responsibility.

Deconstruction

Lilienfeld wears a costume of words. There are the traces of the others' thoughts all over her skin: on the neck, chest, belly, arms, legs, feet. There are words on her back, as well. After the spectators who chose to write on her skin return to their places, Lilienfeld remains still, looking at the audience, letting the time pass, allowing the spectators to acknowledge the traces they left on her. She gives fully importance to this moment of a posteriori reflection. Both dancer and spectators have been exposed to interaction; they are now exposed to the double-process of reflection on their actions as well as on the reactions generated by those actions. Lilienfeld looks at the spectators as if looking into a mirror; she also offers herself as the image from the mirror. Slowly, she starts peeling off her skin. The fake skin which has been covered her body, wearing the words written by the spectators, is now taken off piece by piece, and dropped to the floor. Gradually, from top to bottom, she clears her body, carefully removing the traces left on her. In front of her and around her on the floor there are layers of skin, words and thoughts. She allows the audience to look at her and, once more, gives plenty of time for them to reflect on the process, to compare the two images, the one in front of their eyes, a naked body, and the one from their memory, a body wearing a suit of words. As always in this third part of the performance she moves as looking into a mirror in front of her, into the area where the spectators are sited, offering herself as a mirror to the spectators, face to face with the audience, exposing herself and the spectators to reflection, allowing herself and the spectators to acknowledge the process.

Reconstruction

The last part of the process is the reconstruction. This part has already started once Lilienfeld peeled off the inscribed skin, which was the return to the beginning. The essential difference between the initial beginning and that of the deconstruction phase is that the latest one bears the marks of the time in terms of memory. To speak about erasure is to think right away of what has been before erasure, since there can be no erasure without the thing that has been erased. Therefore, erasure includes what has been erased. Lilienfeld peels off the fake skin which lies there, an evidence of the process of the construction of identity. The waste of skin, thoughts and words could be cleaned up, the matter could be disposed of. And yet, there is another piece of evidence, not visible but perceived, left under the form of memory into the dancer's body: the sensation of the marker along the skin, the pressure of a hand, the sound of the steps coming towards her, the scent of another body, a warm breath close to her skin. But the memory does not belong to the dancer only; the spectators who actively participated in the performance also have inscribed into their bodies the memory of their experience: the moment they made the decision to act, the way they walked from their place to the stage, the way they chose the tool to write, the light into their eyes, the feeling of the dancer's skin. The evidence does not stop here; the spectators who decided to keep their places and continue to watch are vivid testimonies of the process; they also have their bodies inscribed with visual and auditory sensations, with thoughts and reflections.

The materiality of the memory as incorporated in the bodies of the dancer and audience is not the end of the process. As the performance is titled *Layers*, Lilienfeld approaches the next level of experiencing and understanding the process of building identity. The materialisation, the end is only a new beginning; but the materiality of memory needs to suffer a transformation in order to make possible a further cyclic development of the process. If the main element to initiate the performance was the earth, at this point of development, the element chose to accomplish the transformation and facilitate the passage from a stage to the next one is the water. Lilienfeld brings a small basin full of water and in the lights which create a sort of aura around her body, steps into the basin and starts washing herself. The water is splashed onto her body making small particles shine in the light. She remains clean. The materiality of the memory has been transformed, purified by water, and therefore could become the land of a fresh start.

ⁱ *Lay(ers)* is a solo by Cristina Lilienfeld (concept, choreography and performance) produced by George Apostu Cultural Centre Bacau and Centre Choreographique Trois C-L. It was premiered in 2013 and received The Grand Prize at the National Contest for Choreography in Bucharest. It was performed regularly at the National Centre of Dance Bucharest since November 2013. It was part of Seattle International Dance Festival (2014) and of Dance Roads Programme touring five European countries (2016).

ⁱⁱ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*. Routledge, 2008, chap. 6, Kindle.

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