



Interview

The Soft Animal of Your Body

Wunderland (2016)

The Soft Animal of Your Body

Conversation with Mette Aakjær

By *Thomas Rosendal Nielsen*

In the stairway to a former school, a small crowd of strangers, friends and colleagues are gathering to participate in the last try-out in a row of artistic experiments. They are received at the top of the stairs by a young woman and handed a white boiler suit. They are asked if they are ‘mind’ or ‘body’ today, and they are then handed a very big, soft, white helmet with built-in headphones. They are told to change into the white costume, and, afterwards, with a soft voice whispering in their ears, they are led into a dark room with only a few lights and scattered platforms. For the next hour, they will participate in a poetic game that will potentially focus and challenge their experience of their own body in relation to the collective body of the group. Maybe they will even genuinely encounter *The Soft Animal of Our Body*.

The research project

The Aarhus-based performance group Wunderland, led and founded by Danish performance artist Mette Aakjær, has undertaken a new artistic voyage: a range of experiments/performances that aim to take a “radical physical and sensory audience participation into new fields” (Wunderland, 2016). More specifically, Wunderland is exploring how to facilitate and transform the audience’s perception of their relation to their own body and their part in a larger body of participants through extraordinary physical and sensorial interaction in such mundane environments as a local sports hall. Four performers, a set designer, a text and interaction designer and a composer had prepared the different experimental

interaction frames that were tested during the research process. The performers steered the flow of the experiments by creating atmospheres, formulating tasks through the headphones, and inviting the audience to participate in physical games. The audience entered the experiments with a minimum of knowledge of what was going to take place, and without even knowing for sure which of the other participants were audience members or performers.

This text is based on a conversation¹ with Mette Aakjær after the preliminary artistic research and try-outs that took place at Brobjergskolen, Aarhus (DK), in two weeks in November 2016. I myself participated as a test audience and moderator of the audience talk for one of the try-outs (November 18), and the conversation unfolded both my own and Mette’s thoughts on the achievements and challenges of this first part of the voyage. The aim of the conversation (and my role as a dramaturgical research partner) was to produce a reflection on these research questions, and explicate and reassess the knowledge involved in, and produced through, the experiments.

Reflection, absorption and control

The research questions formulated by Mette emphasise the possibility of creating intimacy, authenticity and a feeling of community and presence in the dynamic between the participants. Recounting my experience of the try-out, I started the conversation by observing that, while all of these things were

1) The conversation was conducted in Danish and all quotes translated and validated for the purpose of this article.

produced momentarily in my experience, I was not – for a number of reasons – absorbed as in a state of flow, but rather captivated by reflections over the tensions between such affects and their opposites. To explain, I felt between a feeling of community and a feeling of isolation, a feeling of being obliged to grab the freedom offered to us in the introduction (“This is your game”) and the feeling of being led by someone else’s agenda; between a desire to find my own place in the game and the easier surrender to following the stream. The experiences of such tensions are valuable in their own right, but perhaps not entirely in line with the expectations that are set up by research questions, such as: “How can a group, through physical, interactive and sensory experiences, be guided into their personal longings?”

Mette: The goal is definitely that it is ‘The Soft Animal of the Body’ that is in charge, and that you forget yourself, that you go into your body and let yourself be led by your intuition and by whatever you impulsively desire to do. We absolutely did not reach that goal, and I think it has a lot to do with the rules: how do you make a frame that is clear enough to make you feel safe, but does not contain so many rules that it all becomes a question of doing it right or wrong? When given a rule, some participants feel the demand for even more rules, other participants find the first rule annoying. How do you balance that?

Thomas: I think it is not only a question of the quantity of rules, but also about transparency. It is more difficult to participate in a game where you have to discover the rules yourself. You have a feeling that there are rules that you do not yet know, but you might be expected to follow in order to be a good guest or a good audience – which I guess most people actually want to be. It is difficult to encourage a mode of *discovery* of the game and a mode of

absorption in the game at the same time.

Mette: I guess it has a lot to do with the initial framing. You somehow need to be told: what you hear is what there is. There are rules, but they are incredibly simple.

Thomas: The fact that the performers were covert as performers also stimulated a lot of guessing: who are they, do they have a plan, and are they guiding me towards something specific? If they were visible as performers, I would be able to meet or reject their invitations without first having to decide whether their action was an invitation or not. The suspicion of secrets in the framing – even if there are actually few or none – displaces my attention as a participant towards a more reflected and self-conscious state of mind: ‘They say it is my game, but I feel they are actually trying to take me somewhere’. With your agenda as it is stated in the project description, it may be more effective simply to state: there are rules and performers, you can follow them or not, it is up to you. It might also be more honest than the very open invitation: ‘it is your game’.

Mette: Yes, because somehow it is not, at least not totally, something that we have set up. This question of control and visibility is even more important than I initially expected. It affects everything. It is new to me to work with groups in this context, and I am very interested in how the performers can be a part of it and inspire and ‘infect’ the bodily presence of the audience participants through their professional training. I know many conventional ways of leading a group, but what I find interesting here is the indirect physical communication. This is definitely a focus for further exploration.

Barriers and degrees of participation

Another central aim of the research was to

explore the possibility of creating a more inclusive frame of participation, a frame that does not alienate audience groups because of their age, social group or lack of experience with art and participatory performance in particular. This ambition comprises a major challenge, and no less so in a research project such as this, because the most easily available test audience is often people with some relation to the performers or prior interest in the type of experiment they are conducting. The day in which I moderated the audience talk, a major part of the test audience had earlier experience with participatory performance – either as participants, artists, researchers or teachers. On other days, the test audience were less familiar with this type of theatre (comprising, amongst others, game designers, software developers and musicians). The question of how a more socially heterogeneous audience group would contribute and adapt still needs to be investigated in future work. However, at the present stage, some observations were made on specific barriers to participation within the framing of the experiments, and the group did try out some strategies for allowing different degrees of participation; from full immersion to retreat into a special ‘escape room’. The obvious hypothesis is that the removal of barriers and the possibility of participating in different ways and with different levels of intensity (if not exactly on your own terms) would produce a more inclusive experience.

Mette: We want to reach places where some of the audience do not see this as art at all, but just as an experience. We want it to take place in sports halls. Regarding language, we have become very aware of the need to remove therapeutic and emotive phrasings, so we borrow some terms from sports and games. We are also working on the costume: can we make it look more like a sports outfit, like a hockey uniform without exactly being a hockey uniform, and make it fit better to

the body? A lot of our participants found the costumes fascinating and funny. But one of our participants said very clearly: “When I got this suit on, it was just like: ‘Kill me now! This was the worst!’” You should not underestimate how big a thing it is for people to put on a costume.

There are enormous differences in what people are used to. Many preferences are very personal. One audience member who was very experienced in this kind of stuff had a lot of need for rules. Some of the audience thought the initial ‘primordial soup’ sequence was very challenging, others that it was pleasant. I noticed many differences between social types and personalities. You need to think very broadly in order to be inclusive.

Mette lists the barriers for participation that she observed during the experiments. Rules: too many or too few. Language: evokes prejudice and determines the experience – therefore creates a language that poetically opens up the mind instead of closing it off. Tempo: slow tempo was, at times, described as ‘ritualistic’ in a negative way by the audience. Energy: fast transition to high-energy activity left some people behind. Lack of clarity: people were confused or became distanced when they had to spend energy figuring out what was going on. The costume: some people felt embarrassed having to dress up in the strange white ‘boiler suit’ and helmet. Loss of control: some people feel anxiety when they are placed in an unfamiliar situation where they do not know the rules. Other barriers, such as the demand for certain intellectual or art historical prerequisites, were not observed. Moreover, the audience seemed surprisingly open to intimacy, even in situations that crossed conventional social boundaries:

Mette: The situation where people lay close to each other on the floor and looked into the others’ eyes is actually one of the things that

received the best feedback. People said that it was 'transgressive', but in a good way.

In order to include and legitimise any possible feelings of discomfort among the audience, the artists had created a chamber, which any audience member could use as a retreat if they felt the need to withdraw from the game. This 'escape mechanism' was introduced very explicitly before the audience entered the room, and it had a double function of being both a safety measure and 'valve' for any eventual feelings of entrapment in the game; you may commit more easily to participating in something you do not know, if you at least know that you have an easy way out. The room was only used once or twice during the experiments, and the question is whether this escape mechanism actually marks a possibility for participating on your own terms, or perhaps the opposite?

Thomas: The orange chamber works like a 'vent' or safety device, but it also draws a very sharp line between taking part and opting out.

Mette: Yes, if you withdraw, it is from the entire game.

Thomas: That might even make it more difficult to find a small, individual distance to what is going on. The room offers me a decision: there is something going on here that I do not like, but not to a degree that I want to retreat into that room and demonstrate my rejection. So, I might as well just play along.

Mette: I think we need to make it more obvious that you are allowed to say yes *or* no to all the small invitations, in every detail.

Thus, the question of barriers of participation connects directly to the theme of control.

Communitas and self-consciousness

A suggestion proposed in the project description that the newly formed group could "become a clan, a family" could perhaps be specified by relating it to Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*. Turner distinguishes between the type of community produced by social structure (such as family, market or political relations) on the one hand, and the more ephemeral, spontaneous, 'a-structural' experience of *communitas* as "direct, immediate and total confrontation of identities" on the other. Mette infers that some kind of intimacy and group feeling was produced – with different qualities and intensities – in the different experiments, supported by the observation that the group of strangers were willing to share very personal considerations after a very short time of common action. I would suggest that the group feeling produced here is precisely that of *communitas*. Mette also adds a critical reflection to the terms of this experience:

Mette: In order to build communities, it is important to feel safe and secure in the possibility of taking personal initiative. As it is now, it is a 'dictatorship' of a kind. You need to follow, but you also need to be able to initiate action. Now, we are closer to knowing what needs to be done in order to make greater freedom.

Thomas: The idea of community you are working with here is not founded on a common and external frame, like a language, work or life situation, political agenda or common purpose. You experiment with creating communities based on basic considerations about "who am I in these specific circumstances?" It is a community that emerges between two poles of experience: A self-conscious reflection that might feel like agency, but also as isolation and loneliness, and a group-conscious reflection that might

feel like group flow, but also as manipulation or submission of control. I think this basic experience of what it is like to be part of a group – even in its ambivalence – is important.

Mette: In the first test, which was more physical than the later ones, and in which people mostly followed the performers, a special kind of community emerged in the action: ‘Now, we are drumming on these horses and one of us is lying there and feeling the vibrations. We do not speak, we just do, and everybody takes turns in lying there’. It is a community of *action*. If we made it possible for other participants to take more initiative, more such communities of action could emerge.

At this point, a distinction between community as action and community as experience manifests itself in the conversation, and though they are not opposites, the distinction points to a question of values. What kind of community are we idealising here? This is not so much a question of whether reflection or action is the most important, but on which level *unity* should be achieved: collective unity of action or a collective unity of ‘state-of-mind’? Of both? Of none? Victor Turner makes another useful distinction between the concept of *communitas*, and the concept of *communion* (with reference to George Gurvitch, cf. Turner 1982, p. 45): “[communion is] when minds open out as widely as possible and the least accessible depths of the ‘I’ are integrated in this fusion (which presupposes states of collective ecstasy)”. The question is whether this artistic practice values the idea of ecstatic communion suggested by Gurvitch over the “confrontation of human identities” (p. 46) suggested by Turner. This choice perhaps specifies what Mette envisions when she talks about “greater freedom” (above).

To be continued

So far, the research of Wunderland has managed to produce specific, practical answers to a number of the research questions outlined in the project description – in the form of the development of material, but also in the form of specific responses to questions of framing, technology, costumes, audience/performer-ratio, etc. In order to achieve Wunderland’s artistic goal of taking “radical physical and sensory audience participation into new fields”, the question of how to make the control mechanisms transparent, inviting, and discrete has emerged as the most pertinent question for further research. This – I would add – might require some further reflection on what kind of hopes and imaginations are embedded in such central and equivocal value markers as community and freedom.

References:

Turner, Victor, 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.

Wunderland, 2016. Research for The Soft Animal of Our Body. Project Description. Available at: http://pure.au.dk/portal/files/118165715/Answering_Research_for_The_Soft_Animal_Of_Our_Body.pdf (03.11.2017)