

For Blinky Palermo

The issue of '**attention**' occupies a large part of philosophical and public debate today. 'Attention' is a scarce commodity: although it cannot be expressed in a specific unit that can be measured precisely, it is clear that humans have a certain and therefore limited amount of attention: paying attention to something takes time and a certain form of mental energy, which is not entirely separate from the physical energy and condition in which a person finds themselves at a given moment. 'Attention' is also a kind of unit in the sense that at any given time, people can only focus their attention on a very limited number of different things – even people who are good at multitasking can only switch their attention very quickly and effectively between different things, and they can do the things they do at the same time because they can rely on certain automatic responses. Such as when you drive through heavy traffic and can have a conversation with a fellow passenger at the same time.

Opposite the scarce commodity of 'attention' is an infinite number of stimuli that want to demand your attention and therefore compete with each other to obtain it, constantly seeking new ways to do so more effectively than the rest, often in ways that we are not fully aware of, using means that tempt us to focus our attention on A rather than B. One of the consequences of this is a fragmentation of our attention: by dividing our attention into smaller pieces, we can spread it over a larger number of things, even if this does not always benefit its quality. Our ubiquitous smartphones, social media, and the ever-growing influence of artificial intelligence are causing what some call a serious attention crisis—we are much less able than before to hold our attention and distinguish between important and less important stimuli. I am simplifying a bit, of course—not everyone will agree with this.

In this **context**, a theater auditorium is still an old-fashioned attention machine, and a performance is a moment when irrelevant stimuli are eliminated or banished as much as possible to ensure that the stimulus of the artwork easily captures our attention—at least as long as your neighbor has washed up, your phone is on silent, and you have managed to relegate that annoying meeting earlier in the day to your subconscious. Of course, a dance performance does not consist of a single stimulus: it is an interplay of bodies, movement, sounds, light, and possibly objects, which, according to the artist's intention, must all work together to create a certain kind of unified stimulus that evokes a certain unified experience in the viewer. The question here is not whether there must be agreement between the intention of the creator and the experience of the viewer. But this can, of course, be achieved in many different ways.

Since modernity in art, in which form and content no longer coincide seamlessly, artworks can also thematize the way in which they attract and organize attention by problematizing it. You

find yourself in a situation that very explicitly demands your attention: I am sitting in a theater, so I expect to see a work of art, I expect to have to focus my attention on it, but the work does not immediately reveal itself and the way in which it can be viewed, and as a viewer I become aware of the effort my attention system has to make to construct a unified experience. That game, that search, that self-awareness of attention is part of the pleasure of viewing much modern and contemporary art, and it is also what is at stake today.

The **premise** of 'For Blinky Palermo' is as simple as it is radical. Two choreographers independently create a solo piece lasting approximately one hour. They have two shared references: the title of the evening, which is an ode to the German visual artist Blinky Palermo (*I will return to him later*), and the music, a series of sound designs by composers Daniel Vanverre and Raphael Malfliet. Only when both solos are finished are they performed simultaneously on the same stage, with the agreement that one choreographer occupies mainly the left side of the stage and the other the right side – crossovers are allowed. It is only in the final phase of the creation that both choreographers see each other's work for the first time. Again, there is an agreement: unless it is physically impossible to do otherwise (i.e., only if they would otherwise collide), they will not adapt the choreography to each other. They then seek a compromise on the lighting together. And as that final phase drew nearer, they also realized that they had not made any firm agreements about how the different music fragments would be brought together and that they therefore both had a different version of the soundtrack in their heads, which meant that some negotiation and experimentation was still needed about how it would ultimately sound.

Fortunately, neither of them had based 100% of their choreographic structure on the music and had interpreted it in a rather fragmentary way themselves, so that they could reconsider their own constructions based on a different sequence of the music. So you get two choreographies for the price of one, but Marc Vanrunxt has firmly placed the ball in the spectator's court by relinquishing control over the way you view the whole. The context of music, space, and lighting is indeed one and the same, but the audience comes to see a dance performance, so their attention will primarily be focused on the bodies and movements, which they know are not one but two works of art that demand their attention at the same time.

The idea of bringing together autonomous sub-works by different artists in a single work of art is, of course, not unique in **art history**. Consider choreographer Merce Cunningham, who had his choreography performed with live musical accompaniment that was completely different each time and had no direct influence on the choreography itself. For him, too, the different parts only came together in the viewer's experience.

For Marc Vanrunxt himself, the idea of allowing others to break into his work is not new: in 1998, he invited choreographer Alexander Baervoets to break into his performance 'Antropomorf' with a 10-minute choreography somewhere in the middle of his own choreography. Over the past 25 years, he has often collaborated with visual artists such as Koenraad Dedobbeleer and Katleen Vinck, who created scenographic objects that populate the dance space as autonomous visual works to which the dance and choreography had to relate, willy-nilly. Occasionally, he also invited writers to create a text to accompany the performance, not as an explanation or deepening of certain themes, but again as an autonomous object. In 2010, he applied the idea of split-screen choreography for the first time in the performance 'For Edward Krasinski', in which he placed a solo by himself alongside a solo by Salva Sanchis.

Marc Vanrunxt, who has created dozens of choreographies over a period of more than forty years, has never been interested in the classical notion of 'repertoire' in the sense of recreating and showing old work. Nor is it the case that his earlier work belongs solely in memory and the archives: he actively considers how he can transform that archive into new and contemporary work. Rather than reviving 'For Edward Krasinski', he wanted to reapply the concept, inviting Georgia Vardarou, who was the dancer in Salva Sanchis' solo in 'For Edward Krasinski', to place a new solo alongside a new solo by himself. Both the concept and the title refer to that earlier performance, but with entirely new content.

Since Marc Vanrunxt made his debut in 1983 with 'Four Short Dances', he has built up an extensive body of work that is above all highly idiosyncratic and has a very distinctive signature. Vanrunxt was one of the pioneers of contemporary dance in Flanders, but his work is very different from that of his contemporaries, and he has always continued to produce work on a relatively modest scale: he never had a permanent company of dancers, has been less visible abroad, but has always stubbornly continued to do his own thing.

When he was the first to receive the new **Career Award** from the Theater Festival in September, he said in an interview that his greatest achievement is probably that he never gave up. But what is striking is that despite the fact that he was never recognized as a 'big and important name', new generations of audiences and programmers have continued to discover his work. A body of work spanning four decades cannot help but be extremely diverse, but there are a number of features that recur consistently and have been developed: the alternation or tension between minimalism and the excess of camp, between inspiration from expressionist dance and abstract, non-narrative movement, between the accessibility of pop and disco and the idiosyncrasy of radical modern and contemporary composers. His approach to choreography has also evolved considerably: today, he guides the dancer with ideas and qualities, which the dancer autonomously translates into movement material. By working very often in small ensembles and with solos, Vanrunxt's choreographies have almost become portraits of the

dancers, not in the sense of a representation of their biography, but as a very precise and lived-through refinement of the presence, physicality, and movement forms of the person on stage.

Marc Vanrunxt first met **Georgia Vardarou** in 2010, when Salva Sanchis created a solo for her in 'For Edward Krasinski'. Vardarou is originally from Greece and came to Brussels in 2004 to study at PARTS, where she graduated in 2008. She then worked as a dancer for Salva Sanchis and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, among others, and since 2011 she has also been creating her own work. Her first creation was the short solo 'Hardcore Research on Dance', whose title immediately revealed her ambition as a choreographer: a focus on movement and movement alone, searching for what movement means to her, how movement plays with meaning. In the performance 'Trigon', Vardarou revisited that solo, alongside two 'remixes' of it by Salva Sanchis and Marc Vanrunxt. Vanrunxt would coach her next work, the trio 'Phenomena', and the company Kunst/Werk, of which he was the artistic director, would also produce and support her work from then on. Vanrunxt also asked her to dance in his group works 'Prototype' and 'Drawings'. Since 2017, Vardarou has been living and working in Barcelona, but Kunst/Werk has continued to support her work from a distance.

'For Blinky Palermo' was a great opportunity for Vanrunxt to work together again without having to fly her back and forth constantly: Vardarou developed the solo autonomously in Barcelona and only came to Belgium for the final week of rehearsals. Vardarou's work has always focused on movement as such, although her attention has shifted from project to project. Her first work was about movement towards oneself, after which she explored the question of how movement incorporates stories and meaning without the detour of language, and how the perception of movement is influenced by the impact of and interaction with space and music.

The performance is dedicated to **Blinky Palermo**. It is a variation on the title of the previous split-screen choreography, 'For Edward Krasinski', and once again names a European artist from the second half of the 20th century who worked in the tradition of minimalism and conceptual art. Blinky Palermo was a German artist who had a short career, from the mid- 1960s to 1977. He studied with Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke under Joseph Beuys and had a brief but explosive career that was cut short by his early death. Palermo was influenced by abstract expressionism, but also by abstract European artists such as Malevich and Mondrian, although he sometimes took a more playful approach to abstraction than his role models. He usually created monochrome works, using paint or tape on both traditional surfaces and found objects, or directly on the walls and architectural elements of the space.

For Marc Vanrunxt, Palermo is nothing more than a reference, a finger pointing to something else, as it were, and a kind of gesture of gratitude to another artist with whom he feels an affinity. It may shed a different light on his own work, but it is not necessary to know him in order to fully experience the choreography, because Palermo has hardly any influence on the choreography itself. Dedicating a performance to another artist is a gesture that Vanrunxt adopted from composer Morton Feldman, whose music was central to 'For Edward Krasinski'. Georgia Vardarou did study Palermo's work, however, and found a number of things that she felt resonated with and incorporated into her work, particularly the way in which Palermo, in some works, destabilizes the boundary between the work and the space in which it appears by painting walls or door frames.

The music is provided by Daniel Vanverre and Raphael Malfliet. Vanrunxt has collaborated with Daniel Vanverre on several occasions. As a sound designer, Vanverre usually takes existing music and transforms it into a new soundscape—he has done this for Vanrunxt before with pop music from the 1980s and with the music of electronic music pioneer Lucien Goethals. This is Marc's first collaboration with Raphael Malfliet, but this connection stems from the long-standing collaboration between Vanrunxt and the Champ d'Action ensemble, for which Malfliet worked extensively, and an event in which a sound installation by Malfliet unintentionally became the soundtrack for a performance by Vanrunxt in the same space. Malfliet creates installations and sound works based on field recordings and specific contexts, but also composes for ensembles with classical instruments and has collaborated with other choreographers on numerous occasions.

Both were given carte blanche and created various tracks, which were combined in the final phase of the creation, blurring the differences between their two approaches. The idea of asking two composers was an extra challenge to the split-screen idea, to further expand the duality of the concept, although it was not the intention that two soundtracks would run simultaneously.

For his **solo**, Marc Vanrunxt collaborated with **Robson Ledesma**, a Brazilian dancer with whom he had previously worked in a dance installation and in the performances '4.48' and 'Hyena Hyena'. Together they created a solo in four parts, each interrupted by a break and a costume change. Each part is a scene, a movement that could theoretically be a complete performance, which he slowly and consistently unfolds and allows to happen. As usual, Vanrunxt incorporates various influences and references that are then completely absorbed in the step-by-step crystallization of movement ideas written for and developed by the specific body and appearance of the dancer.

A first reference was a text fragment by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk from *Spheres*: "We have no choice but to confront our own monochrome blackness. Anyone who grapples with this soon realizes that life is deeper than autobiography. The written word never penetrates far enough into our own blackness. We cannot write down what we originally are." Another reference was the "Parangoles" by Brazilian visual artist Helio Oiticica, who made colorful and multiform costumes from recycled materials, which he used to make people dance in the streets.

Vanrunxt uses a flag by Anne-Mie van Kerckhoven, part of a larger work by her, as a costume. As with much of his work, Laban's theory of space is a strong influence, an analytical system for describing the possibilities of movement in space and their almost infinite combinations. The duality between requiem and revolution is another pair of concepts that played a role, as did the idea, conveyed in the final scene, of dissolving and disappearing. These are very diverse elements that give the movement direction but are ultimately also suspended by it; the audience is not expected to recognize them in order to complete the experience of the work.

Georgia Vardarou's work is equally focused on movement, but with a completely different starting point. One of the issues she explores is how movement and space influence each other, in the sense of how space influences movement and our perception of it, and how movement influences space and our perception of it. In her solo for the Catalan **Júlia Rúbies Subirós**, she plays a lot with the inside and outside, the edges of the theater and the surface of the dance floor, as well as the invisible edge that separates her half of the stage from the half occupied by Vanrunxt and Ledesma. Not only does real space play a role in this, but also imagined space, the space you create through presence and movement. The blurring of the clear boundary between inside and outside, between center and periphery, between dancer and space itself was also an important parameter in their research process. The costume also plays an important role here, because it is a connecting element between the dancer's body and the space, and helps to blur the boundaries between them. Whereas Marc Vanrunxt tries to describe the intentions of the movement as precisely as possible, without fixing the movement itself, Vardarou works with broader improvisational tasks.

As I wrote earlier, a dance performance is an attention machine. It can be quite dynamic and complex, yet still effortlessly hold our attention: in a performance such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's classic 'Drumming', there are often 12 dancers on stage, none of whom perform the same movement at the same time, yet it feels like a unified whole because behind that multiplicity lie strict organizational principles, which you may not recognize as such but whose presence you can sense. In 'For Blinky Palermo', there are only two dancers active at a time, who will never perform the same movement at the same moment, but there is no unifying principle underlying this because we know that they have sprung from two divergent artistic

visions. From the shared references of Blinky Palermo, music, and the stage design, we know that they do not constitute the essence of the artistic thought of both choreographers—the live music played by Morton Feldman in ‘For Edward Krasinski’, on the other hand, did have a much more central place. So what should you, as a **spectator**, do with this irreducible multiplicity? More than ever, the ball is in your court, and the invitation is to experience them together and to discover for yourself how they resonate with each other, how they influence each other, and how, despite everything, they come together in your perception. It is the viewer's attention that is at stake, which can sharpen their perception machinery with the performance.

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