

Artist meets choreographer (and *vice versa*)

An introduction by Bert Vandenbussche 1

An article about a 'performance' / An article that forms an 'introduction' [translator's note: 'performance' and 'introduction' are the same word in Dutch]

This article examines several of the historical, methodological and visual philosophy aspects of the sand-table collaboration between Magali Desbazeille and Meg Stuart. 'Several aspects' that will not fully grasp or comprehend the complexity of the process or its result, but will, rather, offer a few clues. They will be illuminated in a particular way, and set on the 'stage' of this article as a partial introduction to *sand table*.

Desbazeille, Magali

Was born in 1971 and currently lives in Paris. She obtained her basic training at the *Ecole Nationale Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Paris* and specialised in video at *Le Fresnoy*, an institute of contemporary art in Tourcoing. She creates 'participatory video installations' in which she often makes use of the specific nature of locations and materials (sand, water, etc.), likes special optical effects (e.g. the principle of the Chinese bag) and seeks the integration of and contributions by the public.

Stuart, Meg

Was born in 1965 and currently lives in Brussels. She trained in dance at *Movement Research* and *New York University*. In 1991 she made her debut with *Disfigure Study*. In dance reviews, her choreographic work is frequently linked to the visual arts, in three ways: 1) since *No Longer Readymade* in 1993 she has regularly worked with artists; 2) critics describe her work by reference to visual art (such as the influence of the paintings of Francis Bacon on her staging of *disabled bodies*); 3) her dance is reviewed in terms of its own positively visual character.

II

Desbazeille became acquainted with Stuart's work in 1997. In that year, *Damaged Goods* showed the result of its collaboration with the video artist Gary Hill in the French capital, as part of the *Insert Skin* series. It was *Splayed Out Mind* that aroused the artist's interest in the choreographer's work. A year later she joined a workshop led by Stuart at the *Le Fresnoy* art school in northern France. At that time Desbazeille was working on a video installation that was projected onto a screen of falling sand.

The choreographer was in her turn interested by the artist's work. It was on this basis of mutual fascination that they started to work together. There followed a few more or less fleeting contacts until, at the end of 1999, they worked towards the creation of *sand table*. This work opened as part of Damaged Goods' *Highway 101* at the Kaaithheater in Brussels in March 2000. It was then performed in the same setting in Paris (Centre Pompidou) and has been shown on its own in Brussels, Tourcoing and Budapest. The work consists of a glass table on which a large quantity of sand has been spread. A previously recorded video tape is projected onto this sandy surface, showing a range of actions and movements by performers.

### III

Dance history has seen many forms of controversial collaboration between choreographers and artists. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Diaghilev's Les Ballets Russes created a furore with their *Gesamtkunstwerken*, for which they called upon a select group of artists. Such major figures as Picasso, Matisse and Cocteau worked with the company. In the sixties, the productions by Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg were perfect examples of interdisciplinary artistic practice. In the last decade there have also been many instances of contact between dance and art: Montalvo and Vandekeybus, to name but two, have integrated video projections into their performances. Regardless of the aesthetic and historical background against which each production is set, it is striking that the majority of these forms of collaboration can be characterised by a more or less absolute functional distinction: the choreographer sees to the dance, the artist to the set. Art degenerates into stage design. The artist's creations serve as a background, to situate the choreography. In this collaboration, the autonomy of the media of dance and the visual arts is confirmed and they hardly interfere with each other, if at all.

There is another type of collaboration in *sand table* too. There is no longer a distinction of function, but the choreographer and artist work together on the entire creation. Each more or less has their own contribution to each individual aspect. And what is more, we see a valorization of the contribution of performers and 'coincidental' passers-by, those who are not strictly involved in the artistic process, such as other members of Damaged Goods. As a consequence, the dividing line that marks out who created what becomes blurred and the functional distinction between dance and art is removed. The reason for these different approaches to the creative process appears to lie in a fascination for the image as such, which is experienced by both Desbazeille and Stuart. Both are interested in such questions as 'how does an

image appear?', 'how can it be manipulated?', 'what makes it visible and what not?', and 'how can you interpret what you see?' The visual qualities of *sand table* is discussed further on in the article. At the moment it is sufficient to say that both the medium of dance and that of video require to be seen. This also implies that in public perception they may become absorbed in each other - something that *Splayed Mind Out* has already demonstrated. In this respect, Desbazeille's remark that *sand table* is a 'video performance' is telling: the work cannot exist as an autonomous installation in a gallery without performers, but nor can it be shown without projections in a classic theatre as a dance performance in its own right. Desbazeille and Stuart present *sand table* essentially as a mixed product created at the point where dance and video art meet, a crossover that removes the autonomy of both media.

#### IV

The actual creative process was spread over a period of three months. In the beginning, one or two days a week were spent looking for interesting video material: performers were filmed in their more or less everyday movements in public places (such as the station and the street) and in less common locations (such as on the roof, against the sky, etc.). But when projected on sand these images turned out to be too complex: the eye cannot 'read' the projections adequately. The images have too many layers. Stuart and Desbazeille therefore decided to simplify them: from then on they worked on a sand-coloured wooden floor. Next to the sand table they marked out a frame on this floor which, after the camera has been adjusted, exactly fits the size of the area projected on the table. In this way they were able to simultaneously analyse the improvised movements and the video projections. The advantage of this is that the actual movements on the floor can be immediately adapted with regard to the performers' manipulation of the 'sand pictures'.

#### V

The camera's eye is directly above the frame in which the dancers move. The visual relationship between the viewers and those viewed is no longer determined by horizontality, but by verticality. This shift corresponds to the experience of an *être en dedans* instead of an *être en face*. In the projection of the video this has a somewhat disorienting effect, to the extent that it creates the experience of an *environnement*: the viewer is inside rather than looking at the art work's space. It gives the visual impression that one could tumble into the underlying image-space. This has its greatest effect when a projected performer looks up out of the image space towards

the upper space where the audience is. In another of Desbazeille's installation pieces one also becomes aware of a similar unease by the avoidance of the ordinary frontality (meaning that with which we are familiar) of perception. In *tu penses donc je te suis* (2000), for example, where pictures of passers-by are taken from a worm's eye view: the camera is on the ground and records the routes taken by people above on a glass floor of several square metres. This video tape is then projected in slow motion onto the floor under the feet of its viewers. Here too another space beyond the video screen unfolds before the viewers' eyes.

Another consequence of this bird's eye view is the pressing together of the 'dancers' bodies in a three dimensional space' to a 'body image in a two dimensional plane'. The image loses its depth and becomes one with the sand screen on which it is projected.

## VI

The framing of the video projection is very strict. It is photographically fixed, as if by a photographer making a deliberate choice of what he does and does not keep in frame before capturing it on film. The working process of improvisation and simultaneous projection also enables Desbazeille and Stuart to choose deliberately what they do and do not want to show. What is more, they can constantly adjust and manipulate, or 'stage', what they want ultimately to appear on the tape, during the improvisations and until it is 'completed' as an image. It is a 'charged' image, because what can be seen in the image area in *sand table* presents itself with a more powerful visual impact. 'More powerful' firstly because the viewer is at the same time aware that all he gets to see is a carefully chosen image, a bodily appearance that has already been watched and conceived. Secondly because the visibility of the body in the image area only stands out in contrast to the invisibility outside it. Performers show themselves briefly inside the image frame and then disappear into the black hole outside it.

This framing of visibility/invisibility offers several possibilities for 'illusionist foolery': an arm appears in the projection as an independent 'thing', separate from a body (which remains stuck in the blackness). This body part has broken away from its normal appearance and opens itself up to all manner of unusual associations (meaning not related to a particular notion of the body). In this way the absence of 'the' body makes the visual presence of the arm that much more intense.

## VII

The image needs a support in order to become an image. This is a simple but often ‘forgotten’ fact. As a viewer you ‘forget’, you *have to* ‘forget’, that a cinema film is projected onto a smooth white screen. The ‘neutrality’ of the white screen guarantees this: it shows, true-to-life, the ‘reality’ that the eye of the camera has filmed, even if this reality is directed and acted. Just as the actual space of the cinema auditorium ‘vanishes’ when the lights go out, the screen also ‘vanishes’ in the public’s perception behind the succession of images in order to let the viewer believe in the fictional element of the film. The viewer must be absorbed by the film. This is the cinematographic image as metaphysical magic: viewing makes the illusionistic element real.

When the sand in *sand table* is wiped aside at a certain moment, the projection passes through the transparent glass table onto the floor. The image disappears, only to appear again on a lower background. Without sand (and thus without support) there is no image. This awakens the viewer to the fact that the screen is essential to any formation (and therefore also distortion) of an image. Present-day image technology is not yet capable of projecting images into a vacuum. Desbazeille suspects that we shall have to wait many more decades for this ‘aerogram’ technique. Until then the images need a screen, or a certain material background, to be reflected. Or rather, in order that their projected light can be reflected back to the viewer’s eyes. The following scene proves that this is not just a ‘simple’ observation. When a performer gathers together a heap of sand on the projected belly of a woman, her image changes. She suddenly appears to be pregnant. The screen is not just a ‘neutral’ background (as the experience of cinema would teach us), but counts as an essential determining factor in the appearance of the image. The shifting of the ground means you watch and ‘read’ the image of the body differently.

## VIII

The use of sand for the screen makes the image highly ephemeral. Whereas the cinematographic image wants to show the viewer a certain stability, and convince him of the reality of what is being shown, the image in *sand table* is in danger of perpetually slipping like sand through the fingers to an indeterminate invisibility. This visual fragility corresponds with the ‘thin’ visual character of Stuart’s arrangements of bodies.

For example, the opening scene in *Splayed Mind Out* makes intensive use of a stroboscope, whose lightning-fast succession of flashes folds up the three-dimensional stage space to form a two-dimensional screen. Just as on a television

screen, 'something' appears at the bottom right. Stuart lets the viewer stare for some time at this indescribable 'image', even after the stroboscope has been stopped. She calls this a strategy of *'over-time*, to form associations beyond what is to be seen'. In the public gaze, the image opens itself to a plurality of meaning, and lets itself fall recurrently from one image to the next: a sort of strange living organism, spattered brains, perhaps a sort of act of love? Ultimately the 'image' turns out to be composed of three entwined dancers' bodies. Well, in this sense the visual quality is 'thin' because the image the viewer forms is given no depth and remains only superficial. It lacks the illusion of cinematographic perpetualness and thereby lets itself always be rendered in a different way. Stuart's and Desbazeille's image concepts meet in their 'thinness', their fluidity.

## IX

The choreographer and the artist look for interactions between the projected bodies and the actual performers. Broadly speaking, Desbazeille distinguishes two strategies for dealing with the projected images of the body: manipulation and erasure. Here is an incomplete list of the 'manipulation' operations: a performer throws the head of a body image upwards or makes a cushion to rest on. Performers manipulate images of others, and sometimes of themselves (duplication). Whereas the projected figures sometimes appear to assist in the manipulation, at another moment they appear to undergo manipulation by the actual performers. And here an equally incomplete list of the 'erasure' operations: performers mark out the surroundings of the bodies, performers erase the sand body images completely. Or the reverse: they let a body reappear by covering a 'black hole' with sand. And so on.

At the moments of most intense interaction there is a short circuit in the audience's perception: the distinction between the actual and the projected performers becomes blurred. In the viewer's eyes the boundaries of the two realities become porous and they are absorbed into each other. A process of two-way osmosis: the real hand of a performer who fiddles about under the skirt or the face of a projected woman loses his corporeality, becomes part of the projection and ultimately becomes entirely image. Paradoxically enough the skirt or the face assumes a more material character, a certain depth, and becomes a body.

Put differently, the performer wants to fill the immaterial image - flat, smooth and two-dimensional - with sand and give it a certain thickness, corporeality and three-dimensionality. For Desbazeille this notion runs parallel with the dream of being able to grasp the image in its fullness. Psychoanalysis tells us that the public lust for

watching wants, after all, to violate a positive referential depth: the images can be 'read' as metaphors of social dealings between people. But conversely the pictorial logic of this scene seems precisely to avoid this seriousness: 'the more you look, the less you see (of the 'truth'/'meaning')'. The performers' manipulations and erasures mean that the 'thick' image is repeatedly thinned in the public's act of looking. The metaphor loses its referential depth and becomes superficial, visually superficial.

## Epilogue

*Artist meets choreographer and (vice versa)*, that is the title of this article. It is related explicitly to the theme of this publication: the relationship between dance and art in the present day. Perhaps when we consider the collaboration on this *sand table* 'presentation', the title should be changed to 'artist of images meets image-maker (and *vice versa*)'.

## 1 Note

The author sketches out a few comments regarding the collaboration and installation entitled *sand table*, on the basis of an interview with the French artist and on his Master's dissertation *De dialectische beeldmatigheid. Toepassing op het werk van 'beeldenmaakster' Meg Stuart* (1999).