

A Conversation w/ VestAndPage

The following email conversation took place in early October of 2014, upon the acquisition of *sin[∞]fin The Movie* (2013) art film trilogy by VestAndPage (Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes) for active Video Out distribution.

Jeremy Todd (Outreach & Distribution), VIVO/Video Out: *Despite what I think of as the primacy of performance art within your collaborative practice, there's a cinematic lushness too (perhaps informed by Romantic and Surrealist painting?). There's a particular visual sense that permeates the trilogy coming into VO distribution -- it's very striking (and meticulous too given your modest production budget and resources). This is perhaps too big a question to start things off, but I'll ask anyway: How do you understand or situate your work in relation to histories of performance art and cinema? Do you?*

VestAndPage: We work primarily context specific and site-responsive. We avoid as much as possible any form of conceptualization a priori that could derail us from the anthropoetic approach we decided to privilege and focus towards art and life. Questioning continuously us – as humans - in the here and now, we quest for an ideal authenticity, and though we know we cannot prove it, we are inclined to think that all things specifically human can be traced to a common origin yet unknown. We reduce at the minimum degree our personal intention and will, as we prefer to remain open to contamination, eventually be informed, and discover. For us, this is to see where the influences came from and where they lead us.

The question of ephemerality of Performance art and its documentation has always been a crucial one for us. We started to produce the “sin[∞]fin The Movie” trilogy as we have been invited to an artist in residency in Patagonia. We knew that in that land so far away we would not have no (human) audience witnessing any possible live performance produced there. Being the body still our main medium, we had to search for alternative ways of production.

To start saying “why performance art on film”, we see crucial a work of Vito Acconci, “Indirect Approaches” (1973), in which the question of the “medium” is raised and its effects are investigated thoroughly. To acquaint the performative quality of the poetic image on film, the experimental Super-8 films that Derek Jarman began making in the 1970s are for instance an invaluable source of inspiration. Well, all his oeuvre is.

For every action that we imagine coming to life and take shape along a creative process, firstly we ponder on what this action really needs - in terms of time and space - to communicate its core at the best, or if a simple photograph is enough to express the meaning thoroughly, or if

moving images (video) are needed, or if it is necessary to perform it live in front of/with an audience?

For "sin[∞]fin The Movie" we started off with individual actions and moving images that could stand alone as metaphors. The next step was to take these single moving images and merge them into something wider, a score-non-score (as the films are produced without an a priori story board). Then new layers were added to the merged video material by inserting field recordings and stream-of-consciousness writing texts by Andrea Pagnes.

We ourselves were always surprised during the process of making on how things fall into place and reveal their hidden meanings to us, without that we had to be stitched to a too constrictive conceptual framework conceived a priori, but keeping things fluidly organic, and therewith let anything open also to the imaginary of the audience to think further - we wish to inspire, generate free reflection and not to state.

Our creative process is mainly informed by dreams and remembrances, as this is how we often work - with a realm too far too close. Then our philosophical background plays a large part in it. More than a romantic or surrealist influence, which however we do not deny, to be more specific we see and consider our outcome as an attempt where to merge together existential and metaphysical aspects. Actually "sin[∞]fin The Movie" lingers between reality and another subtler veil of reality. Only like this we can provide new imagery while still responding to current states. Trying to go beyond the contingent elements of our sensory experience, we are mostly concerned to investigate the most authentic and fundamental aspects of reality, in the broader and universal perspective as possible. Of course – being two individuals – our point of view is always partial, failure is naturally contained in it, but generally we are not interested to deal with our individual empirical determinations. It is “that which” that is in between the attempt to overcome the unstable elements, changing, and accidental phenomena, and what we see as eternal, stable, necessary, absolute, that we wish to acknowledge, to try to grasp the fundamental structures of being, the immanent and transcendent of material bodies, in the incessant search for an answer to the question "why being rather than nothing?"

For example, in the second episode of the trilogy shot in India and Kashmir, the scenes filmed in the ruins of the archaeological sites have a symbolic value of transience, also linked to the nostalgic feeling of a time unrecoverable. Obviously, there is something evocative in all of this, perhaps for the ideal of a "Civitas Metaphisica" that has been lost and that basically never existed, and even if it would have existed, now at our eyes it appears irreversibly devoid of its fundamental identifying topographical elements. Therefore those places, though they may

appear enticing at first sight, however, are "emptied", unreal, almost likewise a "Theatrum Mortis" spectral fifth.

As a result - and inevitably - the documentary objectivity can only leave space to a new vision of poetry, with its process that unfolds and reassembles reality, making it coexist with our imaginary and more, our inwardness.

This is also evident in the first episode filmed in Patagonia, but more in the third shot in Antarctica, because in these vast and uninhabited spaces, any idea – you want it or not - inevitably begins to occur far away from the ordinary world.

The stinging sense of melancholy and astonishment we have felt while living there, the tangible realization of the human frailty even just for the mood of a weather constantly harsh and unpredictably changing, the solitude, the silence, the emptiness, the merciless ruthless beauty that shine from a nature immense and desolate, come to reify this complex of feelings in dreamlike visions which however, for what is human-too-human, are pulsating of life.

It may be quite hazardous to place this work of ours into a historic line, if we were to do it ourselves. We are of course inspired by various outstanding works that have taught us and continue to teach us a lot. For the cinematographic aspect, surely are important the techniques and principles of great directors like Werner Herzog, or the Dogma group, with whom we share also the profound believe that art does not need thousand of dollars funding for being good, but a vision, the guts and commitment to follow it out of a profound urgency. Then Pier Paolo Pasolini almost predominant, anti-virtuous use of the fixed camera with long shots to reach the zero degree of the image, the pure image, and the particular way of Alejandro Jodorowsky of structuring metaphors. We may further see aesthetic similarities with the beautiful performance film work "Die Klage der Kaiserin" by Pina Bausch (1989), or with some moments of "Buster's Bedroom" by Rebecca Horn (1990). About Derek Jarman's short movies we have already mentioned above.

"sin[∞]fin The Movie" has also been compared by a critique to share a cinematic philosophy with Ron Fricke and Godfrey Reggio due to its rejection of narrative and the trust in the intelligence of the audience.

We are not interested in glossy or glamorous filmmaking, neither to work with a team of specialists. This experience begun as we wished to explore what happens when two artists with different backgrounds in visual arts, theatre and writing, decide to use the camera as an additional medium to see, translate and express their urgencies.

Same to our live performances, the trilogy searches for the essential quality of authenticity, which we believe Performance art must have. All the actions of the three episodes are authentic and not staged or prepared (as i.e. in Matthew Barney's outstanding "Cremaster Cycle"). They

are spontaneous responses to the surrounding and have never been repeated twice but shot on site and only edited basically. The setting is authentic, as it is exactly what we found going and being there, in those places. No special artificial lightning or post-production effects are applied. Also the final editing had to be authentic too for us, so the sounds, cuts and final flow are reduced to the minimum.

VO: It's remarkable to consider the "one take" aspect of your process with these films given the grand visual presence they have. Perhaps there's something to that modern imperative of location, location, location in this context. I must admit that Matthew Barney did cross my mind the first time I viewed them, if only because of the graceful athleticism you all seem to share in common. The trilogy could perhaps be interpreted as a kind of metaphysical d rive in relation to the actual landscapes involved (you're certainly not downing bottles of cheap brandy, chain smoking gitanes and stumbling through urban alleyways reconstituting the post war city) but there's also a kind of lyrical, emotive expressiveness sited in your bodies throughout the trilogy that makes me think of modern dance. Is this of interest at all when developing ideas and actions?

VAP: If we consider "modern dance" as one theory – here more than a practice – related to the investigation of movement, therefore not merely as a category or discipline of the arts spectrum, and not only circumscribed to the physical human body, but expanded to thoughts, spaces, objects, space, and all the configuration of the things, we guess it could be said so.

The search for an authentic expressiveness of the physical human body is a strong element in our work, though we do never copy, train, refine or re-produce movements, as it is mostly the case in dance. We abandon and reduce because we are not interested to impress, i.e. showing how good we are to make a jump. On the contrary, we wish to express – therefore say/communicate and pass to the other - what “a jump” is for us, the meaning that resides behind the movement that allows us to jump, and why - or if - we really need to make a jump in that particular moment and circumstance. Here, for us, the issue of the question is not “how to make that particular movement at its best”, but “why to make that movement, and if there is a real need – for us - to make it as such”. For example, we don’t have to wobble if our legs are not injured just for the intentional decision of wobbling, but if we have to pass through an expanse of blocks of ice floating on the shore while being blindfolded, we will have to wobble – wanting or not – to keep our balance to avoid falling into the cold waters.

This to say that for us any movement that we look for and make is never to represent, but arises as a conditioned response. Our movements are momentarily, once-in-a-time driven by a

certain condition that provokes them in the very instance, and then, they are no more. Smoke will never raise again the same way it did a moment before, it doesn't even need to make the effort to do so, because it is like as if it knows that there is an infinity of other movements still to do: the repetition would be a loss of possibilities, and any effort would be futile because beauty mainly springs through randomness.

We do work a lot searching for these places or moments where our bodies have to respond in one way or the other, again, the most authentic as possible.

There is no striving for virtuosity, which we consider - with all due respect to any virtuoso - for us and our practice a desolate, momentary one-way-street as it excludes the possibility of discovering beauty through failure (a most human quality).

We're aware that we're both fortunate enough to be gifted with bodies that still - in this moment - allow us to be free and flexible in nearly any condition we're up to.

We don't idealise, or iconize the body in any shape just for the sake of a mere (temporarily) aesthetic image - history has taught us that these behaviours will just lead to further social conditioning and confusion that takes us still farther away from the core. The aesthetic concern must always be attuned to the ethical: they have to be innervated one in another.

Hence we are interested in the body as a hyle - an organic matter, the mechanical stuff we're composed of and that contains subtle content, more subtle bodies, to go beyond the biological.

The Arab theory of the "three bodies", where three words exist and subdivide what in English would all be called "the body": body-body (physical), mind-body (mental) and psyche-body (spiritual), are deserving impulses of creativity.

In the best cases, these three bodies are equally strong present in an art action, so that the image does not only speak in through the physical body which may be intended as superficial, but allows provoking further other and more subtle movements of the other two bodies.

To generalise: an athlete mainly trains the physical body, an academic the mental, a monk the spiritual. As live artists we can use and train all these three bodies, if we choose to work for it.

Of course the physical body is perhaps the most direct tool of communication between humans, into which mental and spiritual dialogues can confine.

However, for us it is important that this communication activates also other factors, what is non-human: objects, then spaces, time, history, and as you rightly said, "Location", which in our work is always determinant. Here again we refrain from idealisation and stereotyping. It has been explicitly difficult to not being seduced or fall into a typical National Geographic or Hollywoodian aesthetics scheme, when being in places like Patagonia, India or Antarctica,

where any photograph or shot simply looks great. A kid or a fool can easily takes a good photo there, as those places carry such strong imagery, but with respect to their history, uniqueness and powerful configuration, we wanted to listen more to them, to finally maybe find other expressions, other stories that these places can tell to us - and to be inspired by them and - in the best case - translate them in a performative action. Not to portray or describe how they are, but what they make us feel and think.

We always feel uncomfortable when we realise that we're imposing an idea of ours onto some place or someone else, as we consider this attitude as a sign of our own ignorance towards what is the other, what is different from ourselves. To do so, it would just tell of our incapacity of listening because we suppose that we already know what to say. We first need to listen. It is important to be open to positive infection given by the space is hosting us in that moment, instead of importing and pouring pre-fixed schemes from our culturally conditioned mind set into another, completely detached context from the ones we are used to. To exclude the possibility of being always freshly inspired through spaces, people, objects and time, even while following a certain investigation, would be a loss of opportunities, acknowledgments and a stolid renounce to grow.

So then, we are not incline to favour an art which you can export/import, impose onto something, and which remains the same, no matter at which latitude. Instead we effortlessly privilege a process that always has the freedom and the intelligence to adapt to the given circumstances, in alert and ready to respond attentively and sensibly to the unpredictable and the previously unknown, for one of the meaning of life is also the art of meeting and encounter.

We usually try and focus to strip down actions and reactions to a most human, universally accessible code. However, obviously each context has its own peculiarity, and in any context you will operate – wanting or not – you have always to consider that the human factor (yours and of the other) plays a determinant role. A performance artist will inevitably provide with his/her presence and cultural background the addition of his/her very human factor to the spatial, temporal, social and cultural context where he/she operates. Likewise to say projecting his/her own human factor into the context where he/she performs.

More than anywhere else, we have experienced the issue of identity and the delicate mechanisms of subsequent identification out of context of origin in a foreign land while working at the second episode of the trilogy in India and Kashmir, as also the focus was on the Social and Spiritual.

Being there, witnessing social contradiction and conflicts that we had previously just acknowledged by Western information, we had almost to make a tabula rasa of our beliefs, to work not critically and remain purely open. If at the beginning of our journey something might

have appeared “wrong or strange” to our eyes, with the days passing by, we started doubting not just on what we were witnessing, but more on us ourselves, as there, probably, we were the “wrong and strange”.

So then the challenge has been to not apply any culturally conditioned prejudice, mind sets, politically or historically imposed schemes, though still responding with our provoked sensations to what we lived and saw. It was a like walking on a tightrope or vaulting on a balance beam continuously. Probably this episode was conceptually the hardest to realise. As a saying goes: water doesn't distinguish between earth and dirt, so yes, this was our task.

Fortunately we had the time and possibility to be helped by wonderful people, who gently though determined introduced us and unfolded their context. For example, some friends accompanied us to visit the still highly militarised zones of Kashmir; some others introduced us to people of various social classes with whom we interlaced profound dialogues and relationships. The encounters we had there, just as those ones we had in Antarctica with the Argentinean scientists and the military, were crucial for us to access a part of the reality we suddenly found ourselves drawn into, and to understand better social, geopolitical and historical concerns of the area, which then again could turn into material for our artistic process.

On the other hand, to introduce our context or subjective position as European artists of today to them, we always prefer the direct exchange, simple, genuine, curious, open, very human. A nomadic spirit primarily animates us, as nomadic is also the history of our families. We feel to be citizens of the world, more than belonging to this or that country. Travelling quite a lot, we look for spending qualitative time with people – no matter who they are -, and we enjoy it, speaking, eating together, and sharing life moments. Here any exoticization of the other goes down rather quickly, as you share “that which” that makes us all the same, and friendships are being made.

Still we did encounter moments - within in the collective, not so much in the individuals - in which the clash of culture and identification occurred. Just to tell one of many situations experienced in India, when we were shooting the short scene of us both standing still with our heads covered in a cloud of silk among the vivid traffic of one of the busiest streets of the Old Muslim part of Dehli, we didn't consider that someone in the crowd could have perceived our action as a strong provocation. We were both dressed properly and decently, but still apparently the mostly male passer-by on the street, projected something into this image which was not our intention and that we were not doing at all. They supposed that we were kissing beneath, and as one of the oldest mosques of the country is just some streets away, our presence was obviously unwanted, and some got very excited and threw stones on us. The street had been suddenly filled with hundreds of people watching us and curiously taking photos with their mobile

phones, most of them were more curious than aggressive. But obviously, as our heads were under the silk cloud, we didn't see any of these going on. We just heard Vikash, our assistant, who should have just to start the camera, discussing in Hindi with the crowd and then coming to us saying: "It's better to go now". Another time, dressed in the same way while shooting in one of the most beautiful forgotten stepwells of Delhi (Gandhak ki Baoli), nearby the archaeological sites of Qutub Minar, taxi drivers and families silently watched the whole scene. Soon after they came to us saying: "Thank you. You must be very good people. You looked like two saints to us all." Altogether, these were rather surreal moments for us, but the excitement on one side and our unknowingness on the other, in the end really shaped these images more than we could have conceived beforehand.

Urban and social contexts and cultural and religious symbolism are matter that opens into huge discourses, and of course we do work mainly with our own cultural connotations, though on every new place we continue to learn.

To sum it up, all the identification schemes are something that we are aware of as well as of what they can provoke, but it is not something that we explicitly work with, as we look for a poetical language that can be universal, as poetry is and must be. Here again "authenticity" is what counts the most, as the above mentioned scene show that life provides a much better script or concept than any artist could ever draw up with, and hence that it is life that brings the most shining revelations.

VO: Given your European base and the busy, global logistics involved with your practice lately, an awareness and interest in VIVO and Video Out is pleasantly surprising (but of course, not completely unexpected). Could you talk a bit about your relationship to the centre so far?

VAP: Chance wanted our professional path to come across VIVO and Video Out twice in the last year. Given the always very pleasant contact and the important work developed by VIVO and Video Out, this seemed like a sort of unspoken invitation for us to let this connection grow.

In September 2013 we performed *Thou Twin of Slumber: Hemolymph* at VIVO as part of the LIVE! Performance Art Biennale, curated by Randy Gledhill. There, the dedication and collaborative work that we encountered with the VIVO team, our performance itself, and the feedback of the Vancouver audience that assisted that night was simply wonderful for us – it was a great experience to perform there.

We still remember wholeheartedly Paul Wong (whose work we admire) coming to greet us after the performance, saying: "You guys tonight made me feel to believe in Love again." To

heartfelt words like these the only answer is to listen in silence. Paul kindly offered us a bottle of red wine for cheer, and left.

Then, as curators of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK in 2014 we were doing research on documentation material of performance artists working on the theme of the Ritual Body – Political Body, and on this occasion we came again upon Video Out, having already selected two milestone works by Paul Wong (60 Unit: Bruise and In Ten Sity) to be included in our exhibition. We then discovered more artists of great interest to us in the distribution catalogue/archive.

So altogether, independently from where one is based or heading to — if collaboration is fluid, pleasant and has already proved fruitful, it's worth it for us to have it strengthened. We sincerely appreciate the work you're doing and the precious support and opportunities you provide for artists, as well as the communities and publics that go along with that support and opportunity. We're honoured that Video Out considered our work worthwhile for being included for distribution, and we hope that our contribution can repay this with inspirational and poetic moments.

VO: The trilogy must have been exhausting to complete. Were you working on other stuff as it was wrapping up or did you need some time to recuperate first? I'm also wondering if you can talk about anything currently in development?

VAP: We spent this three years period (2010-2012), which encompassed the production of the trilogy with one episode each year, preparing the logistic frameworks for the single episodes, while travelling with new live performances and producing mainly performance cycles, in Latin and North America, Asia and Europe, lecturing, giving workshops, and writing.

We were rather tight about the production schedule of the single episodes: the artist-in-residences, in which we produced the performances and film material, had a duration of 30 days in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego; up to 2 months in North India and Kashmir; and 3 months in Antarctica (with post-production in Buenos Aires). So this was the time frame that we had to follow, as we wanted to finish these residencies with consigning the final episode work completed before leaving. We didn't want to carry the material unfinished away from these places; it was important to keep the spirit of those places even while editing the material, and also to put an end to it. One could always improve, change, re-change, consider and re-consider the editing, but here again our approach was just like it is in a live performance: what goes, goes, and it is just what it is, remaining as such after this period of time. We didn't touch the editing again after we left the residencies – though of course, sometimes we think that this cut or

this sequence could have been different now. Nevertheless, we have decided to leave things as they have fallen into place at that time. We can't erase errors in life and in time, and we think film can work this way too. It is just a matter of acceptance, and then to let go of what we have found, and, if anything, pass it to others who will watch it as we have found it.

Once we had finished the first episode in Patagonia in 2010, we still didn't know where and how the second and third episodes were going to be produced, though we knew that *sin[∞]fin* would become a trilogy, as we were working with the conceptual frame of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's trilogy *Spheres*.

So we had to search and apply for possible occasions to produce the other two episodes.

After Patagonia (where we focused on the question of the Individual and the Couple) with CONFL!CTA Contemporary Art and Science Research, the artist-in-residency in India (to investigate the Social and the Religious) at the Sarai Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies came up as a possibility to produce the second episode. Still we didn't know where to realise the final one, but it was clear that it would have to be an extraordinary place as the subject of this concluding episode is Nature and the Universe. Yes, we were dreaming about Antarctica for this, knowing that it would be impossible for us to go there, considering the costs and that then you'll be just hanging around on a ship... But once again things fell into place, and through a rather impressive series of coincidences the opportunity came up for us to apply for a one-month residency at an Antarctic military base, as part of the Cultural Program of the Argentine National Antarctic Direction initiated and run by Argentinean artist Andrea Juan. The application process and the bureaucracy for it were so complex and difficult that we thought we would never be chosen for it, and that Antarctica would remain a dream forever. After our submission, we didn't hear back from them for a long time.

One morning in November 2011, we were sitting in a coffee place in Singapore after a long and inspiring tour on performance festivals in Asia that followed our residency in India, and checked our mails. There it was written: "In 6 weeks you'll leave with a military plane from Buenos Aires for one month to Antarctica, you better get ready." It was a most amazing, moving moment.

Two weeks later, while we were still on our last night of the tour in Bangkok, we received a phone call saying that Verena's father had died unexpectedly. So we had to be there in Germany, while at the same time preparing ourselves for the journey to the South Pole and the production of *sin[∞]fin* there. A lot of once-in-a-lifetimes came together in these dense few weeks. It was overwhelming, and artistically it charged us enormously.

To talk about the present, currently we're fully taken by the preparations for the 2nd VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK Ritual Body-Political Body, which we curate and co-organize. It is a seminal live art exhibition project, which will take place at Palazzo Mora in Venice on the week of December 13-20, 2014. The project will present works in exhibition and live program of over 50 artists working in performance art — from historic documentation of pioneers to live works of established and emerging artists from around the globe. Among those we're glad to exhibit are two video performances by Paul Wong from Video Out Distribution, as well as a selection of Indigenous artists' live video works curated by Doug Jarvis from Open Space, Victoria B.C. We've also had the pleasure of hosting as visiting curator the Director of LIVE! Randy Gledhill, who has contributed to the event with his poignant writings, reflections and poetic considerations.

Meanwhile, we're also continuing our current live performance cycle Dyad, which speaks about the danger of dichotomies, attachments to dualisms and the paradox of ego. The next chapter will be shown on October 16 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig, Germany (presented by Galerie KUB).

In November we'll be in the UK to hold a challenging 24-hour intensive workshop on notions of Failure and Ability in the framework of the event Tempting Failure in Bristol, and we have been invited to visit the SPILL Festival in Ipswich. We continue to produce texts, as reflection on how, why and what to perform is an urgency for us.

Concerning new moving image projects, we are currently verifying the logistical aspects of two new proposals, which we hope to be able to start next spring (2015).

One is an experimental film collage, a rather complex project about exile, history, memory and belonging. It will document a long durational performance walk of 600 miles along the Baltic Sea, as Verena will actually walk, exactly 70 years later, the path that her grandmother and other members of her family had followed by foot and train, under constant attack, on the great exodus of those expelled from East Prussia at the end of World War II. Andrea will follow, scouting into his own Marrano gypsy origins, adding a second layer interlacing with Verena's more recent family story.

The second one is again a more poetic, nature-responsive project in the line of "sin[∞]fin The Movie": a performance-based film tetralogy on the four seasons, with performances by both of us and poetry, to be realised in the beautiful, ever-changing woods and forests, as well as in the enormous salt mines beneath them, and the ruins of the castles of South West Germany, where we're currently living.

A Conversation w/ VestAndPage

VO: Thank you Verena and Andrea for this wonderful opportunity to engage with the ideas and working processes within your collaborative practice. It's been very informative and a great supplement to the work coming into distribution. We look forward to your next submission to Video Out.

Vancouver, 2014