



Still Life & The Pensive Image

Part of the research for *Homemade Remedy for Patching Time* from my fourth semester was studying still life paintings from 1500-1800 as an inspiration to compose the table that is on stage in that performance. The table is something in between a “day-after-the-party-table” and a vanitas⁽¹⁾ composition. In the piece the table is for me a materialization of the ‘90s as a time which has remained frozen and needs to get unstuck.

In parallel to the creation of the table I got intrigued by the idea of making a dance that is a “group of things” standing side by side like objects in a still painting do: a plate, a lemon, a glass with water, some grapes. I tried to imagine what it would take to compose a dance which mirrored the table I was creating and/or the paintings I was studying. Following that line of thought I had to face the fact that the ephemerality of dance would not allow the ‘things’ to stay in space through time, they would only last as long as that part of the dance was going on. The paradox made me curious and I kept on inquiring about the possibility of finding ways to approach a dance as a still life. Reflecting upon it in hindsight now, I see a connection between this curiosity for the paradox and my interest about the queer perception of time that I believe can be evoked by the dance I practice (see *Amulets*). To make a dance as a still life is another attempt to challenge the norm of time as linear: it is to play with the idea that different parts of a dance solo could become objects in space by staying in the memory of the audience. Or that dance could appear like an image through which the gaze of the audience could travel guided by the movement.

I would like to reflect about the origin of this connection between still life and the sense of a queer time by considering what was in the still life paintings that interested me other than their well-known reference to the passing of time that paintings like vanitas emphasize. One book was especially useful in widening my horizon: *The Pensive Image*⁽²⁾ by Hanneke Grootenboer. The author investigates the thought that “philosophy needs images in order to articulate complex constellations of ideas that cannot be formulated in words.”⁽³⁾ To do that Grootenboer takes her point of departure in still life paintings from the late XVII century in the Netherlands, to then touch on artworks from different times and parts of the world. Her intention is to demonstrate how “artworks serve as models for thought and how they act as instruments through which thinking can take place”⁽⁴⁾.

Homemade Remedy for Patching Time is a piece about how to process difficult experiences, how to find ways to metabolize trauma and defreeze the times that got stuck in the past. I have been searching for ways to do so in a different realm than the logical and some of Grootenboer’s writings resonate with that. The still life paintings and other images she describes in the book are like moments suspended in time, which are open for the imagination of the viewer to be contemplated. While that happens another temporality becomes evident, that of the gaze moving around the image, wandering, pondering, being caught in details, getting lost. This is a special occasion when different senses of time mix together and other thinking modalities give access to alternative understandings and solutions, which may be out of reach for rational reasoning.

1 Art Terms, Tate, viewed on May 16th 2024 - <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/v/vanitas>

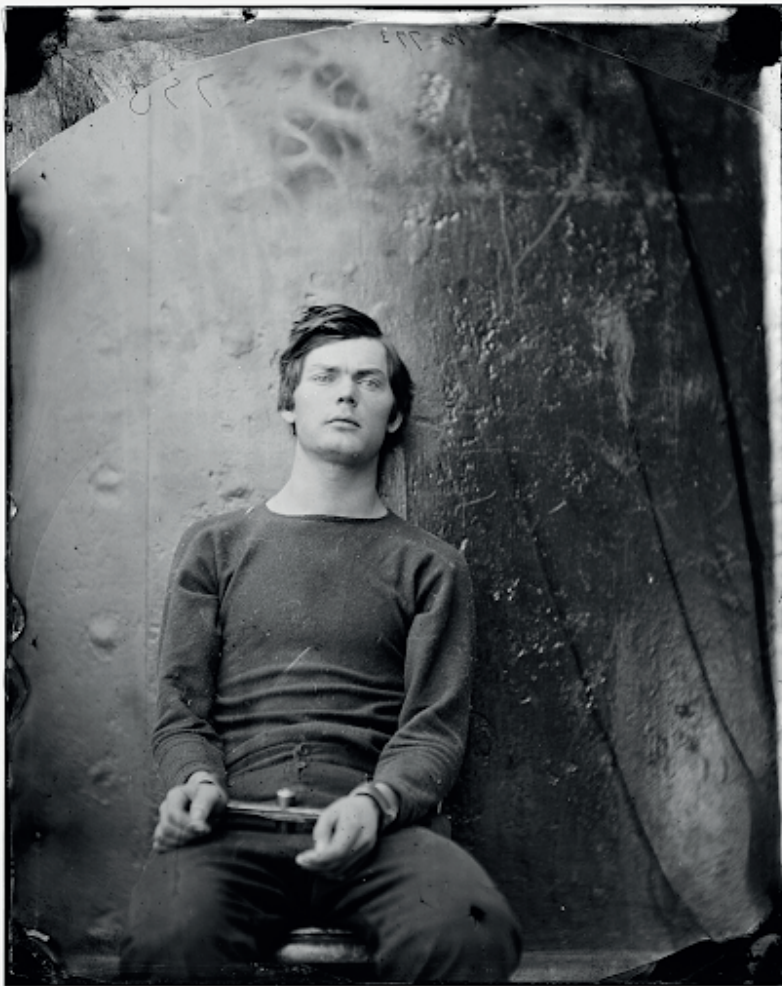
2 Grootenboer, Hanneke, *The Pensive Image, Art as a Form of Thinking*, the University of Chicago Press, USA, 2020.

3 Ibidem, p.5

4 Ibidem, book summary on the inside of the cover.

In addition to the presence on stage of the table that functions like a still life (that the gaze of the audience can return to even - if not especially - when is not activated) I wanted some of the dancing in *Homemade Remedy for Patching Time* to also share this feature of suspended moments. My intention was to find dances that could be experienced as something paused in time even if in movement. I imagined dances which would get the audience to a state of pensiveness in which time unfolds in its multiplicity and unspoken knowledge could emerge.

To support my imagination I turned to Jacques Rancière's essay "The Pensive Image"⁽⁵⁾ in which he explains and "try(s) to impart some content"⁽⁶⁾ to Roland Barthes's notion of pensive image, which Barthes introduced in his *Camera Lucida*⁽⁷⁾. In the essay Rancière criticizes Barthes for ending up with making the pensiveness of the (photographic) image all about how the "death or dead people affect us"⁽⁸⁾ while Barthes intention, says Rancière, was to affirm the singularity of the image and how it resists being an object of knowledge. Rancière's reasoning is complex but what I took with me from the reading back to the studio was some of the alternative suggestions he proposes as what pensiveness can be understood as: 1) pensiveness as the circulation of indeterminacy and 2) pensiveness as the conjunction of different regimes of expression.



Pensiveness as the circulation of indeterminacy

Rancière illustrates this by referring to Alexander Gardner's picture of Lewis Payne, condemned to death in 1865 for trying to kill the US secretary of state (the picture is one of Barthes examples in *Camera Lucida*).

I understand this kind of pensiveness as the doubts that I, as a viewer, feel while looking at the photograph so many years after it was taken. There are things that I as an observer cannot know about the image, like what is there by choice - of the photographer or the subject - and what is by chance. I don't know the feelings involved in the moment or what is the effect of time on the paper and what is a desired result, a compositional element.

Photo by Alexander Gardner

⁵ Rancière, Jacques, "The Pensive Image", *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliot, Verso Edition, London, United Kingdom, 2009/2011.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 131.

⁷ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, RHUK, Vintage Classic, United Kingdom, 2001.

⁸ Rancière, Jacques, "The Pensive Image", p. 96

I translate these observations to the indeterminacy that is present between the performer and the audience: what in the dance is decided in advance and what is spontaneous? Is this specific movement happening in every performance or just during this one?

If the combination between set and improvised material was already a trait of *Homemade Remedy for Patching Time*, reading Rancière's thoughts about the notion of indeterminacy helped me becoming more conscious of the ambiguity between the two performative modes and how to work with that on the level of the execution as much as the composition.

For example I always start the sequence at the table where I record sounds through a loop pedal with the same object/action: the CD case that I use to make a drum line. The water in the vase comes often second but after that the sequence is open to the inspiration of the moment. Of course I learned with practice which object is producing which sound, and which kind of movement around and through the table I enjoy doing, but I am not following a script. I like to believe that the decisions are made in the meeting with the particularity of a specific performance, in my encounter with the audience. I like to believe that my process of making decisions, between intuition and taste, doubt and confidence, is feeding a sense of indeterminacy that can result in pensiveness for everybody present.

After the loop I walk in front of the table and lay on the floor. There I start a very slow sequence of set movements that transition between different poses by holding the muscular tension in the body and controlling the gradual transformation of one position into another. Even if the material is set, the timing of my execution - how slow I go when - and which poses I decide to hold a bit longer are improvised. Somehow the concept of pensiveness helps me explain my resistance to fix the material too much. I always need a range of uncertainty that keeps the dancing alive, a moment of decision making that gives some kind of blurry contours to the movement. The slowness of this part is also an attempt to create a dance that the audience can observe. I hope that they feel invited to let their gaze wander and that the pace allows an oscillation back and forward between the present of the dance and the present of associations or diversions - such oscillation is for me another good definition for pensiveness.

Pensiveness as the conjunction of different regimes of expression

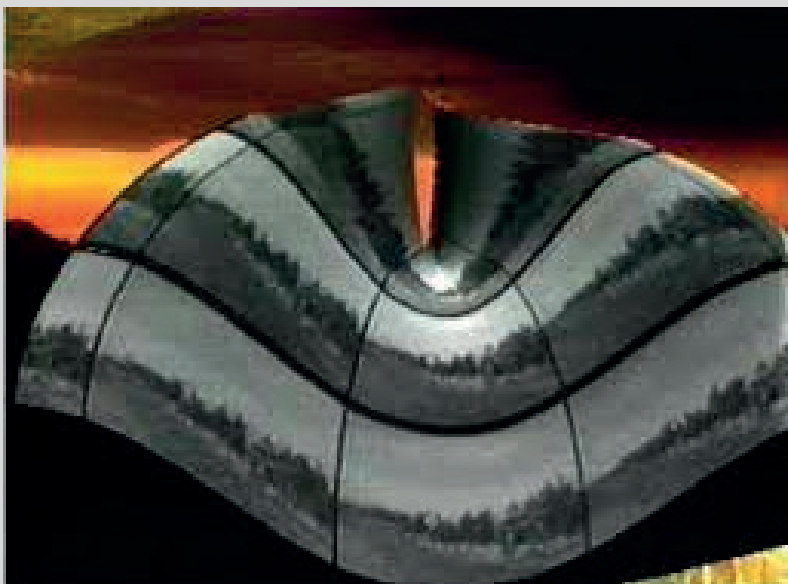
For this second kind of pensiveness Rancière refers to both literature and video art. I understand it as resulting from the intertwining of different languages or modes of using the same language. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is the literature reference Rancière writes about. He points to how in the novel there are moments in which it is almost like "if painting has taken the place of the text's narrative sequence"⁽⁹⁾. Suddenly the words on the page create an image that has no function in the plot: it is not supplementing the action, it is not an analogy, nor a metaphor. It is like a suspended moment in the chain of events that does not obey the logic of cause and effect. The contamination between the logic of literature and that of painting produces a pause in the rational sequencing of events. In that suspension unusual connections can be made by the reader that are out of the grasp of the author and his intention. Furthermore, the effect produced on the audience is not traceable to a specific cause/object, but leaves her pensive: as a reader I don't feel the need to completely grasp how the connection works, instead I feel in a state of contemplation which embraces the juxtaposition of the different elements and how they resonate together.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 123

The other reference I would like to mention is Woody Vasulka's *Art of Memory*⁽¹⁰⁾ from 1987. Vasulka combines in this video-work different kinds of images: a futuristic/mythological landscape and its visitors, digital sculptures which look like alien artifacts and real archival footage from tragic moments of the XX century. This conjunction makes the video, writes Rancière, into a "site of a heterogenesis"⁽¹¹⁾.

It creates a space that does not impose on the audience a calculated message from the artist. Instead the distance between the elements in the work offers to the gaze of the spectator the possibility to find her own "balance between the metamorphoses of computer 'matter' and the staging of the history of a century."⁽¹²⁾

What I see in common between Flaubert's writing and Vasulka's video is the intertwining of narrative with more surprising elements that resist the logic of cause and effect. Those elements are like cracks which expose a



Woody Vasulka's *Art of Memory*(10) Video still

different texture of reality where not everything needs to make sense in a rational way.

In the final section of *Homemade Remedy for Patching Time* I overlap two scores: the Memory score nr.1 and The List score (see *Memories Scores* and *The List Score*). The first is the base of my research of the relationship between dancing and remembering and gives the material and texture to the dance. The second is related to the study of still life and offers the paradox of making a dance as making a list, thus influencing the rhythm and dynamic of the dancing. I detect in this part of the piece what I understood as the heterogeneity at the base of the second kind of pensiveness that Rancière proposes. And I believe that it appears at different levels.

First, the intention of dealing with the paradox of approaching dance as a list to make it closer to a painting is already playing with different regimes of expressions (see *The List Score*).

Second, working with two different scores at the same time and the consequent overlapping of two tasks creates a double presence which interrupts the linearity of the dance.

Lastly, there is in my dancing in general an ingrained conjunction of what could seem opposites: abstract movements and gestures, narrative and not-narrative, memory as a line of thought and the collapse of it into something else, something ungraspable. My dancing is often precise and specific, but difficult to decipher and therefore open to infinite interpretation. Movements happen to remain suspended and incomplete. I believe these attributes of the dance are connected to how I work with dance and choreography as fragments and samples (see *Fragments & Samples*).

¹⁰ The Inter Media Art Institute, Vasulka, Woody, *The Art of Memory*, 1987, viewed on May the 16th 2024, <https://stiftung-imai.de/en/videos/katalog/medium/1566>

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² Rancière, Jacques, "The Pensive Image", p.129

To conclude: an intuitive interest in still life paintings showed parallels between my research and the notion of the pensive image as proposed by Rancière and re-elaborate by Grootenboer. It has to do with creating a time and a space where a suspension of rational understanding is supported by the elements of indeterminacy and heterogeneity: a zone of reflection that eludes the logic of cause and effect and remains open to the magic of the ungraspable. This zone is the place I want my practice to happen and be shared.



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CREDITS:

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In the photos: Alice Martucci in the performance *Homemade Remedy for Patching Time*, The Danish National School of Performing Arts, May the 4th, 2024, Copenhagen