





This talk between Martina Garbelli [MG] and Yvon Chabrowski [YC] took place in April 2021 and is part of a series of conversation pieces.

YC Martina Garbelli, you are the performer for *Swaying* in which you are seen swinging upside down. That video sculpture is part of my *Bodies and Values* series, which shifts the focus to the screen, namely the glass surface of the monitor as part of the sculpture. In the series' four works—*Screen*, *Swaying*, *Level* and *Horizontal*—the performance makes the surface of the screen visible as part of the image itself. You hit, touch, feel, breathe and slide on the glass membrane, the surface of the screen, which defines the interior and exterior of media images, and becomes visible and tangible through your performance.

During the conceptual stage for *Swaying*, I was preoccupied by the streams of images that run vertically on social media platforms. We come across all kinds of images there—including personal photos, media imagery and ads—and we literally touch them through the glass surface of our devices. The news feeds on social media channels are endless, and they “feed” the reward centres of our brains as we swipe the glass surface with our fingers. After a while, we lose oversight and any sense of time. Something like vertigo sets in and we can no longer localize our own bodies. Where are we—and what perspective do we take as users of end devices with a glass surface? Who is guiding our gaze? How can we determine our own stance when our bodies are in the grip of vertigo?

Proceeding from this analysis and experience, I worked with you to develop *Swaying*. In contrast to the virtual space of a social media platform, we provided a secure hold to the body swinging upside down. Your movements are precisely aligned to the visual space—a 50-inch monitor. You swing yourself toward the surface of the screen—sometimes touching it softly, sometimes with force.

Could you please describe how you set yourself up in the position of hanging upside down by your feet? And how from there you developed the swinging movements you directed at the glass surface—at the glass in front of the camera?

MG It was a new and exciting situation for me: I'm not used to hanging upside down and moving. At first I was afraid the support structure was not strong enough, but after a while I learned to trust it. I remember the resistance in my body during the first run-throughs, especially in my back and spine, and then the release the more time I spent hanging upside down.

The whole body system is reversed: blood flows from the feet into the head. The pressure on the head and eyes became really strong, my sight blurred and my view was reversed. What I found very interesting was the connection between my physical experience and the topic we were working on: spending a long time in front of a display, we develop the same “symptoms”.

The swinging was a fun and liberating dynamic, a kind of movement that generates energy out of itself. But the fact of not being really free—my feet were fixed, fortunately, in the support structure—actually created the illusion of freedom.

Because of the lights, I was sometimes able to see myself reflected in the glass. I aimed at the glass with different intentions—with delicacy, curiosity and even violence—as if I were discovering a new, different and alien image of myself. At the same time, the glass felt like the only window to the outside.

YC The experiences you describe sound like the ones I have when working with a digital device. My body remains in a posture that I have to change from time to time to shift the load and get my blood circulating again.

The period we have now spent in the pandemic lends an additional dimension to your description. Our devices seem to be our windows to the world, with a variety of different imageries and news from different sources.

In order to retain an overview and not slide down some type of conspiracy-theory hole—in order not to fall—we have to find modes of vision and comprehension within this world of countless images and messages. We are dependent on the ability to differentiate. Seeing and perceiving thus become an act of self-determination within the framework of possibilities. Seeing is an active process we must engage in. If we want to understand narratives and visual worlds, we need to study their origins and continuities. Seeing also means recapitulating different points of view and locating those that are open to different perspectives and to all bodies.

Since the pandemic began our communication has often transpired through glass surfaces. Especially when communicating on digital platforms. Some interpersonal information gets lost—even though we see each other, we are missing something.

Over the past months we have all perhaps responded at times with sensitivity and curiosity, like you do in your performance, and then also with annoyance or even anger at the limitations inherent in these circumstances. All these states and emotions, including being thrown back into a medially limited space, can be experienced in your performance and while beholding the video sculpture.

In collaborating with you, I appreciated the process of conceptualizing a performance. You take content and translate it into movement and expand it. After our initial discussions, we worked together almost wordlessly.

You develop your performances out of the respective film settings, out of the space and out of the tactile and physical experiences. How would you describe the process of developing a performance or a movement? What is dance and what is performance for you? Have you evolved from a dancer to a performer?

MG In working with you I took the role of an interpreter, as “someone whose job is to change what someone else is saying into another language”.

What I tried to do is take the images and concepts you researched and developed and told me about in the form of words, and translate them into movements or a specific physical quality or performative attitude. In this sense, I don't distinguish that much between performance and dance, because in this type of context what's important is that my body serves the idea, and that happens in dance as well as in performance. My body contains tools acquired over a lengthy education in dance, but in the work with you I often felt that “less is more” and that I had to put aside the “extras” that divert attention away from the ideas.

YC The performances are based on research about the circulation and origin of media images. Which images are part of our collective memory and which are inscribed in our bodies?

I develop rather reduced settings. I would like to enable beholders to have an intensive encounter with the performers who have become life-size images at eye level. I aim for a moment of trust in which all imaginal strategies and possible perspectives are comprehensible.

You bring many qualities to the performance. You translate my research and questions into movement. And you never stay within a learned pattern of movement, such as ones learned in dance sessions. I appreciate how you develop movements entirely out of yourself, out of the experience with the space, materials and surfaces of the performative film setting.

You also work in a collective called Grupo Oito. What is the group's composition, and how long has it existed? How do you develop a performance in the group?

MG I've been with Grupo Oito for six years now. Right now the group consists of Ricardo de Paula, who is the founder and artistic director, and Laura Alonso, Natalie Riedelsheimer, Caroline Alves and Miro Wallner. We come from different countries, position ourselves as white, Black and PoC, have different cultural imprints and gender identities.

We've been working in this constellation for a long time, which is something special in the dance panorama where dancers often “jump” from project to project. I think this continuity is part of the reason we've been able to develop a consistent set of work whose basic components are anti-racism, decolonisation and feminism as well as a critical eye on the social structures in which we live.

Your second question of how we develop a performance in the group is not easy to answer, because each performance is born in its own special way. But in general I can say that we start from our bodies, as places where all our experiences accumulate, and then connect the personal to the political, considering the topic we are dealing with. Starting from the body means that the body is the channel we use to communicate and relate to each other and it goes far beyond words and thoughts.

YC I was thinking about something that connects the cultures we come from. You are Italian. I often find myself in the situation of having to deal with the heritage of National Socialism and its contemporary tendencies. In what ways do you feel related to the culture and heritage of your country?

MG Oooh... you're opening Pandora's box right now!

What is the culture and heritage of my country? Classical culture and the splendour of the Roman empire? The Renaissance and the arts and opera? The good food and beautiful landscape? The mafia and corruption? The dominance of the Catholic Church? The ever present chauvinism? The semi-successful colonialist enterprise and therefore the lack of accountability for it today?

It is a complex topic... There are things about Italy to love and be happy about, but there are also things to criticize and take responsibility for. I think not only Italy, but many European countries (and European people) are going through a crisis: their prestige, their power, the narratives they have produced and the history they have taught are being questioned. And I think it is time to be open to these critiques and to really take steps in a different direction.

YC I completely agree with you. I feel crushed in this crisis, and demand for example that German and European museums and governments return the goods they looted from other cultures with a very large gesture of compensation. And that people who are blocked at European borders, seeking protection as refugees, be taken in and cared for and supported.