

Source: *rekto:verso* – magazine for art critique
Author: Wouter Hillaert
Publication : March – April 2007

The abattoir closed ?

(letter from a fan)

Dear Abattoir Fermé,

Boy, did I have plans ! At last I would write my first article that would delve deeper into your body of work than my reviews usually can do. My missive would – dogma 07 – avoid three words at all cost: ‘horror theatre’, ‘deviant’ and ‘fallic art’. These are the words with which reporters always pin down your work in the papers, ‘while that is not at all what Abattoir is about’ (is your standard reply, always accompanied by that mysterious grin). Now, I would break the mystery, or at least think everything through for myself. I would use your Chaos-trilogy as a steppingstone. I understood it, I saw the lines, it was clear (I also have orgasms). But then all of a sudden *Lala-land* came along in January. This is the closing chapter (the first two parts were *Indie* and *Tinseltown*) of the final rupture of your work with the spitting, dirty-visionary long texts of, for example, *Dial H for* (2003) and *Life on the Edge* (2004). But then this latest *Lala*-monologue brought another twist. Not only your powerful images, but also my theories were discarded (including my article). It’s 0.48 hrs, I’ve put on pumping techno. I’m going to write you a letter.

A few things became clear to me about your most recent work, when I woke up to reality again next to you, Stef Lernous, after a performance of Romeo Castellucci’s *Marseille*-episode at the Kunstenfestival. You were crying like a baby, completely moved. What had you just seen? Only coloured planes moving around what looked like a flaming cube, vaguely visible behind layers and layers of transparent gauze that was used as a projection screen. Nothing more than flowing mechanics, accompanied by a soundscape by Scott Gibbons that reverberated through your body as if you were sitting astride an airplane-engine. We had seen nothing natural. No actors, no comprehensible content. But you sat there like the hand of God had just slapped you in the face. You had seen the light.

I recently looked at a few DVD’s of your plays. First of all: *Indie*. The stage is a dark hole that spews out new characters, one by one, who face the audience in the small circle of light.

Together they are like a night watch in chiaroscuro: the frightfully whispering dog-killer with his latest catch on a surgical cart, the paranoid, gaunt man in a panda suit (*'I can't breathe in this fucking suit!'*), the necrophiliac who tries to control 238 personalities while hiding behind his whitened face, the big Jew who lays a small Hitler across his knees for a thorough spanking, the manically gum-chewing man from Antwerp who is continuously cursing about his 'fucking cunt' of a wife... It doesn't end. All these freaks live in the same suburban block, with unsafe corridors that are as extensive as the labyrinth one imagines the human brain to be.

I have wondered at times what your brain actually looks like on the inside. A biographical interpretation of a body of work is not only the most appealing, but of course also the cheapest interpretation. But you can't really reproach me for it. Not when I see how your plays are always centred around the same lusting, perverted male artist who wants to make sacrifices, and the projections from his damaged fantasy on stage. In *Bloetverlies* (2004) this happened to be two horny nurses between who the writer couldn't chose, which resulted in his voluntary crucifixion and castration while the stage was bathing in red light. In *Indie* this artist has taken on the shape of the megalomaniac theatre director who opens and ends the play and thus completely curls himself around it. Chiel Van Berkel takes delight in a diatribe against every form of subsidised theatre for amusement and juxtaposes it with his own theatre that is 'ugly, odd and unfathomably deep'. In other words: your kind of theatre. Especially when he proceeds to let a scantily clad exotic dancer wriggle her ass for him, it is hard not to see it as a staging of your own fantasies as an artist. I imagine that an audition for *Abattoir* is very similar, like the audition in *Moe, maar op en dolend* during which Tine Van den Wyngaert is forced to show one breast, to inspect the meat on display.

But more relevant to my castrated theory is how Van Berkel keeps barking authoritatively at the girl 'No, again!'. She stops, starts again and is immediately stopped again. And again. And again. And again, faster and faster: 'Again!' Exactly the same blunt demand to do it 'again' is a theme in the second chapter of the trilogy, *Tinseltown* in which *Abattoir* zooms in on the other side of the Hollywood industry. Van Berkel's protagonist is now a director of snuff movies, but his self-blinding power-neurosis is unchanged: 'Again!', he yells during an audition until the naïve actress starts to cry. An hour and a half later, he will 'again!' hoist her up and down while she is dangling on a meat hook from the ceiling. The core of this scene to me is not the torture itself, nor the perverting of the way a film shot is played over and over again. The core is the fact that the content slips further away with each repetition. Compare it to a word you keep saying repetitively (like 'again'): in the end it becomes no more than

sound, devoid of any meaning. Content becomes the form, and themes become a trance. Isn't that what *M.#10 Marseille* revealed to you, Stef?

Trance-form-ation

This is my premature theory about what your Chaos-trilogy entails: the development of text material into pure materiality. *Indie* evolves from a dark revue of monologues to the much talked about final in which all characters participate in an orgy of smashing pig's heads, while the naked exotic dancer writhes her body on the same slaughter block. What makes this scene so powerful is the mechanical aspect of the action, the sensuous stirring music in the stark white light and the fact that it just goes on and on. This Dionysian rite was more a raid on all my senses, than on my moral conscience. It was more than an image of a degenerate society; it was a picture on its own: every meaning was knocked out of it, before the actual hammering began. It is exactly this trance-form-ation that you continued in *Tinseltown*. There was hardly any text; instead there was an unstoppable surreal sequence of film scenes with goggles, lesbian erotica, Oscar award ceremonies, scary gasmasks, poisonous green light, metallic sound, smoke. Again, more, more! If you are extreme, than that's particularly true for your visual excess.

What is the purpose behind all of this? This is the first question I have been asking myself for the past four years every time I woke up to reality again after one of your performances. What do these guys want from their audience? I believe the answer to that question lies in the aspects that have evolved the most in your work. I'll make an attempt at an overview. The brothel-play *Het hof van Leyden en Afzien* (2003) and the male-sectarian *Super Seance* (also in 2003, under the name of Eland Nieuwe Stijl) were full of sexist jokes and politically-incorrect ways of breaking taboos. Its purpose was similar to that of stand-up: elicit chuckling from the audience. The kind of verbal exaggeration like Joost Vandecasteele saying he used to be so ugly 'that a law was passed effortlessly to allow abortion fourteen years after conception'. I often thought it was all a bit silly. Thankfully *Bloetverlies* followed and this was your first play where you didn't feel the need to score with irony and the characters on stage were now taken over by psychological shabbiness. This transpired in short scenes that only revealed their connection at the end. The audience still had to be confronted, but not necessarily with the outsiders on stage, but with repressed traumas within themselves. This is where the trip truly began.

With the bloodcurdling *Galapagos*, your breakthrough in the Theaterfestival 2005, this trip finally received the visual sovereignty I mean. Bathing in your favourite light of phosphorescent purple, green and deep red, the play suddenly got a cinematic air. I mean: aimed at the sophisticated visual tableaux, that generate half their suspense by not giving themselves away completely immediately. Take the beginning for example. The way the body of Nick Kaldunski was lowered at the back of the stage with only the amplified sound of the chain rattling. That's horror: suggestion reigns and (daring) to look is a theme in itself. Your penchant for all sorts of sexual and social anomalies found a visual voice here, an aesthetic. 'What is beautiful and what is ugly?', the waitress would later ask in *Life on the edge* with her face completely taped in. I found this significant. You started to talk about theatre itself more and more in each new production. First about its content ('The artist should observe the whole world and play it back to the people' in *Life on the edge*), but later on you talked more and more about its core being: performers portray a certain meaning live for an audience. How do you challenge that basic fact?

Your answer came with *Moe, maar op en dolend* (2005) and in particular with *Testament* (2006), two plays that came out in the same period as the Chaos-trilogy. Every situational frame (a hotel, a brothel, a flat) was blown away, most text was deleted, and the oddly dressed characters you built previous productions on, became objects. After her audition, Tine is transformed into a hilly landscape with clay and afterwards dusted with white powder like a mannequin and wrapped up in plastic foil. Her mummification is what happens to each dynamic process of meaning. She is what you see: a statue of pure matter, a painting in which the paint itself is the most important element.

In *Testament* the viewer was even barely able to see the paint because you had hung up irritating mourning gauze between the stage and my voyeuristic need to watch. What I did manage to see of this performance about death, were loud stylistic statements: a manic clown who goes on ranting for such a long time that he ends up becoming pure noise, a soul on a car wreck with a flashing neon sign above saying 'another lonely soul', endlessly repeated images of autopsies and crash tests. Everything has become sensory superficiality, is what it is, like in Castellucci's *Marseille*. 'We need to go to the core of language and superficial meaning', as the film director propagates in *Tinseltown*. He sees language as something ritual: a numbing cry, a blinding light. I found this hard in *Testament*, but I only understood why later on. Maybe I had asked the wrong question. It's not about 'what you want to say, and how I understand it' anymore but about 'how you do it, and what I experience'. Or not?

At the end of the road

I'm not sure yet. But if this theory is right, it is definitely very difficult to position myself against it. Formalisation is something that theatre should always watch out for, definitely when it is combined with the urge (that many artists these days possess) to talk primarily about theatre itself. It quickly looks like masturbation. But on the other hand, your extreme visual style achieves something which makes me forget everything else, and I don't see many other performances who manage to do this. Your trips eliminate time. I feel again what theatre can do to someone and what fascination is: a physical experience. To me, that is the basic goal of your style development: turning performances into something which happens between the stage and the audience, instead of on stage. And I stick to it, no theory can beat that. So let the smart heads be cut off of everyone who concludes that your productions are nothing more than 1960's-type shock performances. I believe you are thinking up the future, no matter how black and sugarless it is served.

Would this be the reason by the way that all those mellow art centres still don't dare to program you wholeheartedly? 'Our audience', what a lame alibi. Surely there's nothing as democratic as fear for roaring chainsaws or eagerness to see nudity? But on the other hand, I would really start worrying when gods like Jan Fabre and Jan Lauwers descend from their Olympus since *Moe maar op en dolend* to attend your premieres. Then the big reception into the institutional Walhalla of Flemish Art is looming on the horizon. This is the double challenge you appear to be facing now: what to do with the ever growing expectation of your fans against the supposed aversion of the mainstream audience?

Lala-ladida

In this sense I can understand why *Lala-land* has turned out to be a simple monologue: its audience-friendly form confuses fans. Maybe this is even the biggest step in your body of work. Tine is alone on stage, in a simple light that covers nothing and will not change much. Behind her is a wrecked bus stop, unseen naturalistic for Abattoir. It is not an image in itself, but one big metaphor for the cold and dehumanized suburban America which is the basis for your Chaos-trilogy. 'Lala' equals L.A., city of fallen angels. Tine tells us about it, rather than she's talking from inside it. With the exception of the masterful reading *Prothese* (2006, with Unie der Zorgelozen), you have never before chosen such an objective-contemplative point of view against the surreal reality. After a helicopter point of view of a smouldering wrecked city, the story (as if we still need that word for Abattoir!) zooms in on the two main

characters: Joan and Jack. *Lala-land* is a love story of all things, between a fallen successful girl and a dumb loser who meet in the lavatory of a grubby cinema. Of course this is where all your work originates, in the virtual cloaca of modern urbanisation, like a strong laxative. But now it's a woman unblocking! This Joan was in *Indie* and *Tinseltown* just another *tais-toi-et-sois-belle* dancer who was there to pleasure the male artist who's looking for kicks. Here she suddenly gets a voice as a *subject*. Never seen before, come and see! Throughout the monologue, Tine slowly slips into Joan's I-perspective and tells her history: from married and clever to battered and numb in the porn-industry. A small step for the woman in your work, but a major step for Abattoir.

And yet I thought *Lala-land* was a weak facsimile. No matter how unique your apocalyptic image of the hollow-eyed metropolis continues to be, how much your cinematic texts have grown in their suggestive detail, or how uncomplicated Tine manages to play these roaring slabs of text successfully (for a considerable time at least) with her stand-up acting, in the end this play edges towards ordinary, down in the dumps textual theatre. Instead of aiming towards the belly of the audience, you're suddenly trying to move their hearts. But I didn't experience that much emotion, it was lost in all the sidelines the text keeps opening up. All of a sudden, this was the Abattoir from four years ago: too much attached to its furiously scribbling pen in the night-time, going back and forth to the video, internet and CNN. Whilst that one short real soundbite with the screaming sirens at the end of the performance touched deeper than all your tales of a 1001 disillusion before: a flash of sensory contact. This is what you should aim at, in my humble opinion. And I'm not saying this because of my little stylistic theory that *Lala-land* undercut by using this amount of text and content. I'm talking about the big void in Flanders: where theatre becomes a powerful experience again without having to make concessions on an intellectual level. *Tinseltown* and *Galapagos* showed with plenty of verve that it is possible and that the way you achieve this seems to be through the use of images. Don't close the abattoir, the fan in me is crying out to you.

The critic in me understands of course: it's impossible to become more extreme every time and Abattoir should grow. But the beautiful image at the end of *Lala-land* (Joan who rides a bus past a collapsing L.A. and who develops hope of a new future from scratch out of this total annihilation), can be extended to the body of work of Abattoir. By ending the Chaos-trilogy, you close the books on your work until present so you can start something new which communicates in the same direct way. From *Testament* and *Lala-land* I have understood that this is not only my own personal need. Where do you see it go from here? What is Abattoir

Fermé really about? What do you want to achieve with your audience first and foremost? It's 7.37, I've run out of techno, dawn is creeping in. The answer remains a question mark, which is probably a good thing.

I happily await your reply,

Wouter Hillaert.