



face...ä, direction: Helena Waldmann; Photo: Herbert Cybulski

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# Spaces in Texts

## The Audio and Visual Plays by Performance Artist Helena Waldmann

Helena Waldmann is a researcher in the field of gazes. Her stagings establish fantastic experimental conditions which play with the audience's desires; they create visible and audible spaces which confront the audience with the eroticism of proximity to the stage. In Marguerite Duras' text *The Sickness Death*, which Helena Waldmann staged in 1993, a man pays a woman. He pays for her presence, for her willingness to make love, for her body's openness to his gaze, his body, his yearning, his desire. Perhaps for a day, perhaps for an entire lifetime. She names her price. He agrees. Within the text, the space for this erotic experiment is a room, a bed, a terrace overlooking the sea. The sea contains the same desire, the same feminine form which is the source of the man's uneasiness, the source of a movement. In Waldmann's staging, the spectators participate in the protagonist's voyeurism. They lie beneath plastic sheets that have been filled with gelatin and a variety of other materials and colors; they watch as the body of dancer Kiri McGuigan glides between the layers of transparent plastic. Dance in slow motion brings the woman's body into unprecedented proximity; a moment later, her body becomes a distant silhouette, a filmed image, as aloof and abstract as a contemporary painting or video artwork. The text too is within the space, replayed on audio tape, plainly spoken, occasionally distorted through repetitions, stillness, omissions or changes of direction. Peter Handke's German translation of Duras' extremely erotic text is spoken by the dancer herself, whose slight Scottish accent adds another level of resistance. As her body sensually progresses through the gelatin, her voice passionately works its way through the spoken words.

In the text, it is the female body which is infinitely present yet simultaneously unattainable. The man approaches that body, moves away, returns to it, penetrates it, yet never overcomes the difference. Waldmann's installation gives the spectators space to participate in or divorce themselves from his lust. Despite the intimacy of the situation, the beholder as voyeur is free, much the way the simple availability of a chair provides one with freedom to sit and watch a video installation in a museum. „Try to see it. You've paid for the privilege.“

Literary texts are the starting points of Helena Waldmann's works. Her idea for a theatrical installation fundamentally derives from the pleasure she takes in the text itself. Each of her installations uses the various instruments available in a theater — the body in space, the human voice, lights, text, sound — and brings these elements into a transformed and exciting relationship. She creates a text-space which the spectator can enjoy, in an uncommon way, as a radio drama and/or visual event. And each new text-space redefines the spectator's position.

In part because of her background as a theater director, Helena Waldmann's interest is devoted to a textual practice which emphasizes personal composition of methods rather than stressing the ways in which „theater“ is interpreted. This personal composition leads to dance as a means of putting distance between a text and the act of speaking; it leads away from the inevitably false claims and pretences of bad theater, both of which pretend to dominate a text or an image on stage. Her work becomes especially interesting when it creates irritations, enigmatic contradictions between the staging on the one hand and the limits of

significance as determined by the human body on the other. The mystery takes shape within the spectators, sparks their urge to see, hear and reflect upon the media. This mode of perception is similar to the pleasure we experience when we read a good book in solitude. The pleasure lies in the joy of inventing our own images; the author's precise, polyphonic composition serves as the catalyst of our own personal „readings“. Waldmann is a technician of performance, and this may also include the encounter between several artists. She is more of a theater director than a choreographer in the narrower sense of the word.

The theater, as a room for collective experience, can give space to this „pleasure of reading a good book in solitude“. It can lead us to reflect upon nearness, distance, and upon the wholly corporeal preconditions of perception — and such considerations have always been and still are essential to theater itself. In Waldmann's stagings, the spectators are turned atop rotating stages, or lie beneath the action and observe it through a tautly stretched transparent stage; they may hear the text through headphones or witness the action only indirectly, in mirrors which reflect a cunningly designed architecture of light, sound, space and human bodies.

The spectators who view the *sickness death* lie comfortably supine beneath the staged events; but in *sainte-sebaste* (1994) and *circuit* (1995), Waldmann finds an entirely different solution for this reflection about the relationships between the body of the audience and the bodies on the stage. In these latter pieces, the spectators sit atop a rotating stage while the performers — a singer, light and sound technicians, and a huge, omnipresent eye — are stationed on motionless risers behind the rotating audience. Once again, the central point of the staging is the female body: dancer Angélique Wilkie, androgynous, elevated in sublime beauty atop a minimal stage. The perpetual rotation of the stage (and thus of the audience as well) produces continual changes in the staged situation and in one's view of that situation, and it also creates a subtle threat. The texture is provided by descriptions of Saint Sebastian, by the eroticism of destructive fantasies and the invulnerability of the dancer's beautiful body. The various actions of the lights, sound, voice and eye are coordinated with these textual descriptions.

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1994 Berlin 1996 Frankfurt 1998 München 2000 Hamburg



vodka konkav, direction: Helena Waldmann; Photo: Dominik Mentzos

The essential precondition for Waldmann's stagings is less dance per se than the dancer's trained body, which has become fluently conversant with abstraction. The dancer takes the place ordinarily occupied by the actor who, since the beginning of the century, has become an increasingly problematic figure in the more interesting theatrical genres. The dancer's form as a part of the compositional act indicates that the subject of the staging transcends the subjectivity of the performer herself. The event on stage arises from the interaction between various independent artistic media, and each medium pursues the text. The precondition for this interaction is a precise reading of the text which often derives from close collaboration between Helena Waldmann and dramaturg Susanne Winacker. The goal of this style of reading is the genesis of the images rather than the images themselves. The visualization tracks the textual material and uses it to build the architecture of the staging. Marguerite Duras' texts are characterized by her use of verbs in the subjunctive tense as a way of stressing the contrafactual impossibility of the described events. He „would pay her“, „would have left her in the hall“, she „would come every day“, etc. The narrating, constructing „I“— the ideal voyeur of the staged situation — noticeably intervenes between the reader and the written descriptions. *face...à* (1996) continues this exploration of Marguerite Duras' texts: in this piece, it is *The Man in the Hall* which provides Waldmann with her textual basis and uncompromisingly radicalizes the drama of the spatial situation. Here again, she frees the audience from imprisonment in rows of fixed chairs and invites the spectators to lie opposite one another at the extreme opposite ends of the theater space. Beneath the stage. Each wears a pair of headphones; each hears the text, whispered, for „your ears only“. One's left ear hears the words; one's right

ear apprehends the tiny noises which a mouth makes when it speaks — the barely audible sounds, the preparatory movements of the human voice, the whoosh of inhalation, the sound of swallowing. This is very much in accord with Roland Barthes' idea that the physical presence of the human maw is a precondition for experiencing sensual pleasure in, with and through a text. While the body of the anonymous voice is being thrown so immediately into their ears, the spectators gaze into a long narrow mirror hung at a 45 degree angle above their heads. The mirror reflects the emptiness of the stage itself. Two dancer-performers (Anna Huber and Armin Dallapiccola) design a choreographic structure in dialogue with the lighting (Herbert Cybulska). This structure continues the unprecedented uneasiness of the scene described in the text, yet never directly alludes to the described images. It is the rhythm of a situation which has been stretched so taut that it is about to burst, a scene of extreme perseverance under a shimmering midday sun. The interaction between distance and nearness, dancing figures, light and darkness creates an architecture of gazes which makes this scene perceptible and which brings the bodies of the spectators into play. *vodka konkav* (1997), based on Venedict Yerofeyev's poem *The Journey to Petushki*, is Waldmann's most recent work and one in which she exploits theatrical methods to create a cinematic stage. Unlike the situation in her earlier pieces, this time she seats the spectators in front of the stage in conventional rows of chairs. The viewers become voyeurs, seduced by the magic of an enormous visual laboratory. The fourth wall of the stage space is raised so high that the spectators cannot directly view dancers Giuseppe-Michele de Filippis, but can only see his reflection in the polished surfaces of five Plexiglas panes which have been hung above the stage. The various angles at which these panes are hung combine with the white dance floor, the clever use

of light (Herbert Cybulska) and video projections (Anna Saup) to transform the stage into a gigantic kaleidoscope. The textual component recounts the delirium of an alcoholic: a tightrope walk between a philosophical flight of fancy and a descent into the gutter, between political backgrounds and human abysses. Just as the staging makes it difficult to determine whether the dancer is in fact actually present or absent on stage or in the video, so too the text makes it difficult to judge whether the protagonist ever actually leaves the starting point of his mad journey or circles back there again. The movement here is the passage of thoughts: it leads into surreal spaces and towards hallucinatory figures, all of which turn out to be myriad reflections of the narrative „I“. This multiplication and splitting is matched by the stage machinery which multiplies and isolates the dancers (like a pair of twins) or allows them to disappear or rotate. A cunning interweaving of dance and video projections, moving bodies and moving lights unhinges time, space, gravity and presence. On the acoustic plane, this „sampling of the gaze“ corresponds to DJ Tricky Cris' treatment of the text (spoken by Thomas Thieme). The result is a visual and audible drama which celebrates the extreme delicacy and black humor contained within the composition of this seemingly inebriated text as a virtual world which ultimately belongs only to the theater. Helena Waldmann chooses sensual texts which, although they are prose, all share an inherent theatricality. Her precisely calculated experimental situations exploit the aloofness and tension of the literature to create celebrations for the five senses. There are no dramatic figures here who articulate themselves, lust after one another, suffer, come and go, or are incapable of loving or living; instead, she offers her audiences a space into which a spectator peers, wide-eyed, as though through the narrow slits of a closed Venetian blind. Sometimes the slits close again, transforming the voyeurs into sharp-eared listeners, or else Waldmann simply allows the audience to watch its own interior film. „Best of all, you wouldn't even know her; you would have found her somewhere, in a hotel, on a street, in a train, a bar, a book, a film, within yourself, inside you, each of you, at night“. It is with these enigmatic, enticing words that Duras commences her text about l'amour, la mort, la mer, le corps.

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