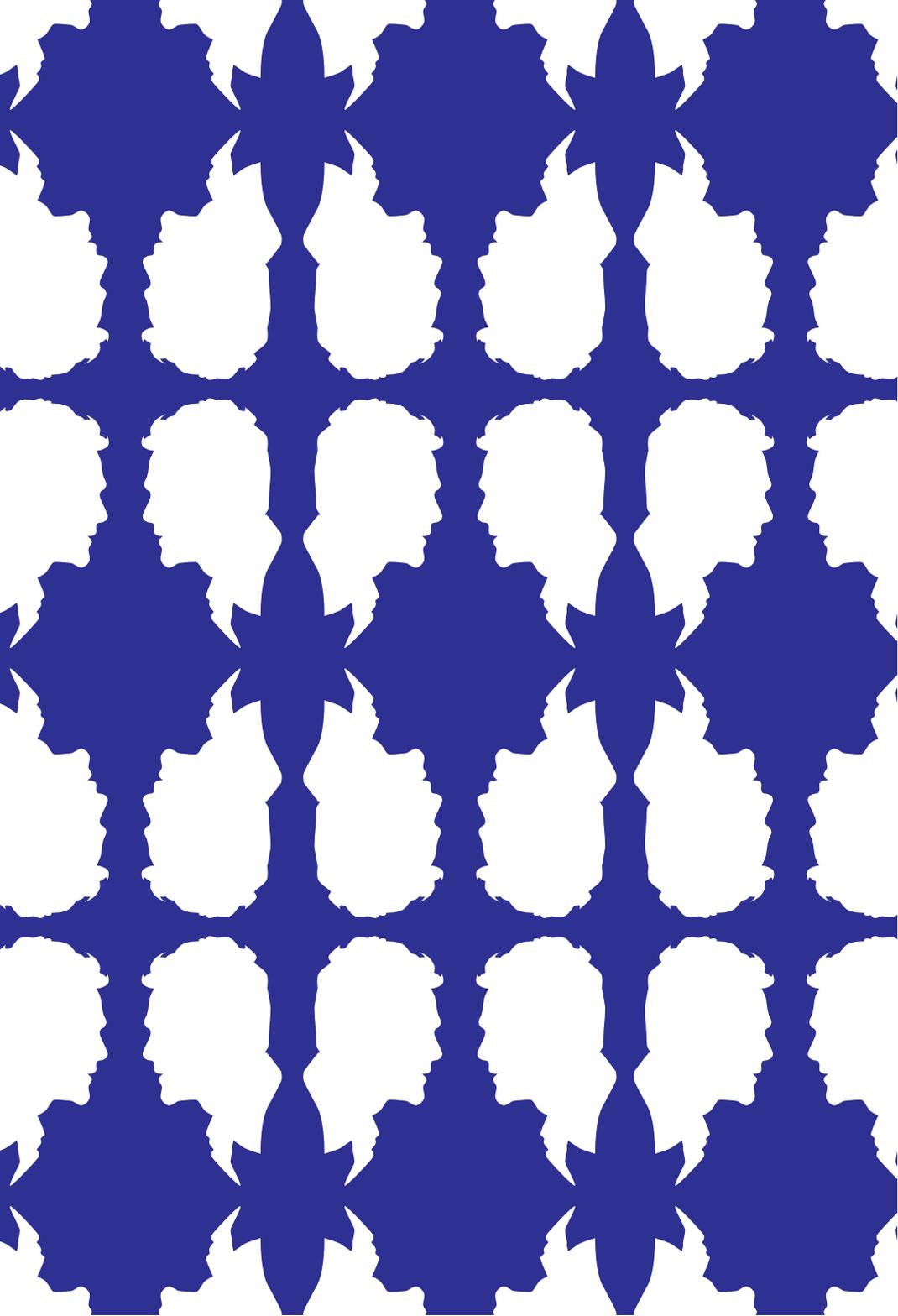




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THE MANY PORTRAITS OF DR. DE SMEDT

With '4 choreographic portraits' Christine De Smedt gives a fresh look at the art of the portrait. These portraits function both in and as space. They create a physical space for the bodies of the choreographer and her audience, as well as a mental space where biographies intermingle and infect one another. Each portrait is thus both a snapshot and a remix; an image of course and a mirror that returns the gaze.

Space

(king, spectator, artist)

But first a short detour to talk about the image as space. In the first chapter of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*, 1966), Michel Foucault writes about *Las Meninas*, Diego Velazquez' 1656 painting. The painting shows the artist at work. He is depicted brush in hand, and a large part of the painting is taken up by the back of the canvas he is working on. Next to him we see his entourage, which includes the ladies in waiting mentioned in the painting's title, the royal child, a dwarf and a dog. In the background, in between the other canvases in the artist's studio, we see a mirror with two people reflected in it. According to Foucault, these are the figures being painted by the artist: the king and queen. According to other commentators (because a great deal has been written about Velazquez' work since Foucault)¹ it is a reflection of the actual canvas that the artist is painting. Standing next to the mirror in the doorway is a mysterious figure; his act of turning, with one foot in the room and the other on the staircase, introduces a sense of doubt. The painting is staring straight at you. The artist's attention is focused on a point right in front of the canvas. This is where his subject, the viewer, is standing. You might imagine that the figures next to the painter – his

¹ In *What do pictures want?* W.J.T. Mitchell alludes, amongst other things, to a text by Joel Snyder: *Las Meninas and the Mirror of the Prince* in *Critical Inquiry* 11, n°.4 (June 1985)



* Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez:
The painter with model and audience.

entourage – function as his audience, but this is not the case. They are in fact the audience's audience. Because the true audience is (will be) in front of the canvas, on the spot upon which all eyes are trained. The onlooker needs to take this place in order to see the painter's canvas. He must stand in this spot to interpret the canvas. To make it work.

When Foucault looks at the painting, he puts himself in the audience's shoes. He takes the viewer's place. This is an unsatisfactory place. To make the canvas work, he needs to move. He must become part of the canvas's space in order to understand what the artist sees, what he is painting: is it about the king? About the spectator? About the artist? Foucault has to move, like a choreographer.

In *4 choreographic portraits*, Christine De Smedt makes the same movement. She also asks her audience to behave in the same way: they must move; become choreographers themselves; in order to make her images, her portraits, work. This makes the stage more than just a space; it is an event.

Recording

(interview, audience, performer)

It begins with a recording. The performance is based on the recordings of interviews with colleagues Platel, Burrows, Salamon and Le Roy. The first thing that happens in the performance is also a recording. Christine De Smedt talks into a microphone. The setting is mobile; her microphone, attached to an amplifier, integrated into a speaker, rolls through the space. The talker, pressed up against the wall, creates space: she makes room for her audience. Her position invites the audience to become part of the recording. This is how she will take possession of the space: by being present, fixing her position and then changing again. All these movements taken together, that is what we call choreography.

This snapshot, this recording of time, this game of give and take, of recording and playback, is also one of synchronisation. While she is talking into the microphone her voice is recorded. While releasing these recordings into the space, she tries to keep time with her recorded voice and with the sound of her body. While trying to move in synch with her body, she invites the audience to become part of her choreography. All these different sorts of images, sounds and bodies in synchrony with one another are an attempt to record: to record the voice: to record the voice using the recorded voice: to record the body using its own sound; to record the audience in the choreography. And then let go again: become yourself, become personal (because that's what these portraits are about: about the personal, the autobiographical), looking the audience in the eye: looking back. *Going public*: confronting yourself.

It is that look, that gaze, that makes these portraits so confrontational. Looking straight at the audience and addressing them directly, just as Velazquez looks at his model; colleague Platel, who looks you in the eyes; the dancing audience looking at the choreographer; the choreographer looking at the dancers: these are the precursors to the confrontations still to come. She asks her audience a question: "Do you know Douglas Dunn?" She sits with someone from the audience at a table, in the interviewer's place. She asks the whole audience to interview her. And it's always about the recording: what the artist sees and says, that's what concerns us; 'ce qui nous regarde'... So: what is this about, exactly? Which self is this about? Who (or what?) is the subject of these portraits? The interview, the audience or the performer? Alain Platel (Jonathan Burrows, Eszter Salamon, Xavier Le Roy), you or Christine De Smedt? King? Spectator? Artist? If the performer asks her audience to dance, then every spectator – dancing or not – becomes part

of the portrait: part of Alain Platel, choreographer in spite of himself, who has always encouraged people to take the dancer's place on the stage. The result is a portrait of the audience – which – in spite of itself – becomes part of the performance, of the portrait. And ultimately, the invitation to dance is part of De Smedt's self-portrait. It is an allusion to group choreographies like *9x9* (2000-5, where she put nine times nine photographers on the stage, and even more photographers in the audience); *Escape Velocity* (1998, where she let the audience choose between a track to the left or one to the right: a choice and a movement that shapes the rest of the performance) or *The Long Piece* (2010, in which she spent a whole afternoon with some ten performers moving amongst the bathers on Ostend beach).

Remix

(recording, playback, creation)

During the day, Christine De Smedt works as a doctor. Her patients are her colleagues, her audience and herself. In her office, the Dr. takes notes going over the interviews. She looks for patterns. She separates out different elements and puts them under the reading glass. She organises things into a table. This way, 'a tableau', a composition, is created. And each evening she mixes everything up again. Then the doctor puts on her evening suit and replays the day's conversations. This way, night after night, she becomes her colleagues, her audience and herself. The 'tableau' becomes 'a tableau vivant'.

Every presentation, every movement in this composition, takes place in the same space. It is always the same person. In the same costume. With the same audience. But always arranged differently. Always a different mix. A remix. This dance is musical through and through. The linearity, continuity and build-up in the sequence of the four portraits create an interplay of attraction and rejection, of adding and contrasting, of saying "yes" and "no" (because this is where the Dr.'s treatment begins: what do I say "no" to?). We also find it in the strange (a)synchrony of movement and sound in '*I would leave a signature*', in the rhythm of words in *The Son of a priest*, in the (a) synchrony of image and body in *A woman with a diamond*. This synchrony becomes complete in *Self-reliance*, when the performer and her audience – for the time the house lights are on – at last totally fall together with themselves.

The remix is a machine. Its therapeutic powers make us think. The Dr. accentuates something, only to shift it to something else. She starts with the way things are and searches for the way things could be. She flirts with the boundaries of acceptability. She sows seeds of doubt at the portrait's

outer limits. She goes in search of the boundaries of technique, of respect, of decency. She plays with the borders between presentation, representation and interpretation. She scrambles up words in order to arrive at a new meaning. She selects fragments of interviews, highlighting and ignoring things. This way she gets close to caricature: the strong statements of colleagues Platel and Salamon, the sober nuances of colleague Burrows, colleague Le Roy's direct relationship with his audience, the doctor herself as a chameleon in her jumpsuit, the searching movements of her dancing audience.

The remix lies in the embodiment. Her generic, blue overall is actually a *blue key* suit: it erases and provides a clean slate upon which anything can be projected. It is unisex – it creates a mix that goes beyond gender. The uniform lends Dr De Smedt a certain authority – it objectifies. This authority takes up space, but also creates space. Barthes' lesson: the death of the author makes room for the birth of the reader.² The end of the (auto) biography creates space for a new story, for the pleasure of the text.³ Thus, this work plays with the expectations of language, of image. It resists cliché: the image that remains fixed and is no longer moving makes us lazy. That's why the viewer is mobilised, or moved, to keep the dialogue flowing. That's why the portrait is presented as a four-parter, whose separate sections infect and influence one another: this too is a way of breaking through the portrait's inherently static nature.

Image (not quite)

At a certain point, the Dr. alludes to a book by a French philosopher. The book is about another doctor. The philosopher (who is actually an art historian) is Georges Didi-Huberman, and the doctor (who is actually an inventor) is Jean-Martin Charcot. He calls his invention hysteria. Didi-Huberman writes about the images that Dr. Charcot uses for scientific and didactic purposes. The images show a lot of the women, but also of Charcot himself and of his audience. Didi-Huberman demonstrates how things shift. The synchronisation goes wrong: pleasure becomes pain (and vice versa); feeling becomes torture (and vice versa). He calls this 'the paradox of atrocity'.⁴ Here, psychiatry is merciless. It wants to know everything. And what it doesn't know, it invents. Because it's impossible to know everything. There

2) Roland Barthes. *La mort de l'auteur*. In: *Le bruissement de la langue*. Seuil, 1984: pp. 61-67

3) Idem. *Le plaisir du texte*. Seuil, 1973 *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. Seuil, 1975

4) Georges Didi-Huberman. *Invention of Hysteria*. Zone books, 2003: p. 176

will always be gaps in the portrait a psychiatrist sketches of his patient. It will always be an image, 'in spite of all'. Didi-Huberman wrote another book on the subject: *Images malgré tout* (*Images in spite of All*, 2003). It's about 'all' you cannot see, but must nevertheless take into account in order to understand an image (in this case: the cruelty of the concentration camps). The French film critic André Bazin coined another term for it in the fifties (the years directly following the concentration camps): the cinema as window on the world, or 'le cinéma de la cruauté'.

Bazin's strategy consisted of moving with the camera: he was against cinema based on editing, but for the 'plan séquence': where the camera moves with the space. Dr. De Smedt's strategy consists of taking a distance from this *all*, in order to leave ever more space for the image. There are no moving cameras here. Instead, she accentuates her image as a space within which to move. The way she pushes herself against the wall behind her loudspeaker and with her microphone in '*I would leave a signature*'. The way she wriggles along the same wall in *The son of a priest*. The way she again positions herself against the wall – the ultimate boundary of the theatrical space – in *A woman with a diamond*. Here, it is in an interview situation: she is behind the table, the listener on the other side. She, that is colleague Salamon in the body of Dr. De Smedt. The listener, that is Dr. De Smedt in the body of her audience. Next to the listener are two cameras: fixed ones – it is the Dr. who moves, towards and away from the camera. Five projectors send the images out into the space. Just as during a concert or a conference: reality magnified. The magnified images – which match the speaker's magnified statements, her big themes: saying "no", the diamond as a gift both of and for life, fact and fiction, being a woman,... – also serve to increase the distance between her and her audience.

There's something about these images, about these released recordings. They film a one-on-one situation. But by only filming herself, the Dr. duplicates in each individual member of the audience the position of the listener as a representative of this audience. That is how she shares the personal, the intimate. One on one becomes one against all. The magnification makes the shifts more visible: the image is not synchronous with reality. There is a slowness to it, as in the voice recordings in '*I would leave a signature*'. The picture comes a little later, the Dr. doesn't coincide with her image. Furthermore, the image not only shows the Dr., but also part of the space. As well as the Dr., the camera also films the wall behind her. This wall is projected again onto the other walls, behind, beside, in front of and around her. This projection of the wall onto the wall, that never fits. This

projection, that is like a portrait: always just short of the mark. Not quite. Such an image that does not (quite) coincide with itself, that deliberately breaks with itself, that goes outside itself (“hors de soi”, as it is said in the performance); such a portrait as “becoming other”, as “being hidden in exposure”; such a play with synchronicity, as in masturbation – gratification – coitus: that, of course, is the cliché of hysteria. This performance is about the artist as inventor, as psychiatrist. And the other way round: about the syndrome as invention and as creation; about recovery as (re)design. Patients are living images here. Portraits are ‘tableaux vivants’. Theatre is a soft therapy. A play of fascination, fabulation and fantasy. But it’s also liberation, a way of letting things go.

Psychiatry is recognising yourself in the other. It means becoming (an)other. Adjusting to the image, conforming to the norm. Synchronising. Becoming like everyone else. Psychiatry is about the creation (“the invention”, as Didi-Huberman puts it) of the self, of the self as portrait, of the self-portrait. The psychiatrist searches for himself through the other person. It is a form of narcissism. Of attention-seeking. For an audience.

Audience

(indiscernable, indecidable, imperceptible)

While this story begins with a Dr. of Philosophy, Michel Foucault, who puts himself in the painter’s place in order to understand his portrait. While it makes a detour past a Dr. of Psychiatry, Jean-Martin Charcot, who forces the performer (the hysteric) to take the place of the audience (the Dr.). Then it ends with a Dr. of the movement of body and mind, Christine De Smedt, who displaces herself towards the audience. How do they interpret these portraits? What do they see? What do they imagine? How do they behave? It is an expansion of choreographic practice and another break through the cliché of the portrait: by setting the image in motion, she moves the audience (and vice versa).

These portraits are there for an audience: without them no longer exist. The audience is the point of this performance, if not its subject. It is both its strength and its weakness. It is its substance and renders it vulnerable. This whole performance – and not only the last part – is about articulating the audience: the pronunciation (articulation) of the listener (or of listening: *audience*, from the Latin ‘audere’: to listen). The person is more than a space, more than a mask. He is a sound box, an echo chamber, a presence that resonates (and articulates): ‘per-sonare’.



* Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière:
Dr. Charcot with patient and audience.

The moment the house lights come on is the moment where things coincide with themselves again. The game changes to one where performer and audience play themselves. We know that we are acting. Or do we? There is always an element of doubt. What is known in this performance as a “zone of indiscernability” is, in the words of *antipsychiatrists* Deleuze and Guattari (because here, the Dr. uses the words of colleague Le Roy, which he in turn has borrowed from Gilles Deleuze) also a ‘zone d’indécidabilité’.⁵ It is an in-between zone, within which performer and audience meet one another, become one another. Something new is created between the actor and his character. Not a combination; more a kind of common ground (“Ce n’est jamais combinaison de formes, c’est plutôt le fait commun”).⁶ Here – again – lies both the strength and the vulnerability of these portraits. The return to the personal gives the portrait the space to work. It creates in-between space, and – once again in the words of Deleuze and Guattari – ‘inter-esse’: being in-between as a form of involvement.⁷

5) Gilles Deleuze. Francis Bacon, *logique de la sensation*. Éditions de la différence, 1981: pp. 19-22

6) *ibid*: p. 20

7) Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*. Minuit, 1980: p. 36

This doubt, formulated in the 'inter-esse', in the in-between zone, in the 'zone d'indiscernabilité', is also the first step towards becoming imperceptible.⁸ It does not mean disappearing, but rather being absorbed into the environment. The blue key suit – her genderless body – is what Deleuze and Guattari could call a 'Body without Organs'. In his book about Francis Bacon – his only book about the art of the portrait – Deleuze describes an intensive body (*corps intensif*) that becomes a figure. This is how this commonplace should be understood: organism becomes body, face becomes head ('d'effaire l'organisme au profit du corps, le visage au profit de la tête').⁹ Dr. De Smedt does not give her patients a face, she gives them a body.

Every portrait is a self-portrait. You cannot understand it without becoming part of it, without recognising yourself in it. This is where the audience's input becomes essential: as a dancer, as a listener, as an interviewer, as... an audience. This articulation makes the final portrait the most vague, the most imperceptible. It is potentially endless, always improvised on the spur of the moment and yet always synchronous – a permanent remix that always converges with itself. It is this ultimate role reversal that opens up this work both *in* and *as* space.

8) *ibid*: pp. 284-380

9) *idem*. Francis Bacon: pp.33-34