

The essay as a force field

Interview by Oonagh Duckworth - November 2019

Oonagh Duckworth: *In this piece, you present three 'movement essays': On Tempo, On Shape and Multitudes. These essays feel very organic, but I know that you've worked on them very diligently, almost in a forensic way. Has being very rigorous about the form of the movement essay helped you contain the overwhelming amount of possibilities that come up during a creation process?*

Anneleen Keppens: For me, each process begins with a sort of explosion of ideas and movement experiments that immediately start communicating with each other. So, there's always a period of chaos and confusion. The challenge then is to just spend time in the studio with those ideas, to forge a relationship with each subject; it's an unpredictable process, kind of like dating...some things feel right, others not quite but you have to work out why. What follows is the formal challenge of the editing process. And, as I'm editing, new stuff keeps coming up! Adorno described an essay as a force field that is completed when the right tension between all the elements is achieved. Within an essay, different elements brush against each other, comment on each other, swirl around each other. It's very difficult to go back and explain my decisions. It's quite an intuitive process. I would *feel* something is wrong and keep searching until my force field made sense.

OD: *So, it's a form rather than a formula.*

AK: Yes, there's no formula, there's no template for an essay, only perhaps a certain attitude.

OD: *But can you explain the movement essay form? It seems to have the spontaneity and wide range of a research project or a work-in-progress, yet what we see is definitely a finished performance.*

AK: I guess the most obvious description of an essay is that it comes from the word *essayer* which means to try. That spoke to me because what I wanted to share is my artistic process, which takes much more physical time than the duration of a performance. All the discoveries and surprises and frustrations that come up during an artistic process are extremely interesting. But they have usually already been dissimilated or edited out by the time the piece is shown to an audience. I was seeking a form in which process and product lie closely together, where the audience could detect both simultaneously.

OD: *Are you trying to engage us in the conversation that you had with yourself?*

AK: I'm sharing my process and my questions with you. Of course, it's great if my questions become questions for you as well. Or if you come up with other questions. This doesn't feel like other shows I've been a part of, where you do the show and then you get feedback: it feels rather like an experience where I do my part of the talking, and afterwards the conversations with the audience feel like a continuation of the performance.

OD: *What you said just now is that you're doing the talking. But in fact, you're doing the dancing. That's an interesting slip of the tongue. Because what comes across very clearly in the work is that you're a dancer. Is your dance your dialogue with us, more than the words?*

AK: I'm always looking for ways to communicate through dance, even though it's a medium which is often felt to be elusive. The words sometimes act as verbal prompts as to how you could be looking at the dance, but they propose rather than impose.

OD: *It almost seems as if the dance is the strong part and the words reveal doubt.*

AK: That makes sense, sometimes my body knows something that my brain needs much more time for... The words are definitely not an illustration of the movements. They can contradict or question or reinforce what you see.

OD: *Through this form, and with your body, it seems to me that you are exploring questions that are more intricate than the essays titles would lead us to believe.*

AK: Whereas in the past I needed to simplify in order to understand things better, I feel that now I have found a form that allows for and even enhances complexity and plurality. The form of the movement essay feels closer to how I experience the world; it brings physical, intellectual, emotional, sensorial, philosophical and spiritual dimensions together. This creates more depth, but also more freedom. As an audience member, you are free to select which threads to follow and you can add your personal interests to the experience. I think that has been the biggest shift for me. Letting you go. I don't want to control you. Isn't it interesting that the complexity makes it more accessible in a way?

OD: *Yes, it seems that the essay form that you've defined is one that enables us the freedom to pick and choose what we sense about the experience.*

AK: Not quite, I think 'choosing' is active, while in fact it just happens. You resonate with certain things.

OD: *Even if the work remains open and the questions are still there, it is a piece. The fact that you're in costumes and lighting leaves no ambiguity as to this being a performance, a performative process.*

AK: There is a blurring between the formal parameters of a performance and more informal parameters of a process. The piece starts with an open, bare light and me wearing training clothes, as if you happened to walk into my studio. Then with each essay, the universe we create becomes more and more theatrical.

OD: *So, in a way costumes and lighting mirror the whole process from your research period to now.*

AK: Yes! I hadn't thought of it that way.

OD: *I feel that your last essay 'Multitudes' is a sort of metaphor for what you discovered in the process: that questions can and do remain irresolvable, or at least the answers are multiple.*

AK: Well, when you just said the word 'irresolvable', I felt a release. Because it allows me to no longer waste my energy on finding the truth or the right way or the piece that will please everyone. It's impossible. With each *movement essay* I feel like I get closer to something, while at the same time becoming aware of its utter vastness. So, there is simultaneously a tightening of focus and an opening. This opening is a new experience for me. I tend to want to 'grasp' things. But grasping something is almost like caging it, while here I am freeing it in a way.

OD: *You were talking earlier about how different dimensions of experience, dance and life can crisscross during your work in the studio. Could you give some concrete examples of that in your movement essays?*

AK: Each time I work on an essay, I start by asking formal questions about the role these elements play in dance. But then, with *On Tempo* for example, I discovered that I can get really angry when I need to move fast. At other times, I find it exhilarating. Different tempos can have an instant emotional effect on me, because they point at my struggles with the tempos of life. When I was working on *On Shape*, I found it difficult to go beyond my genuine obsession with the aesthetic effect of different shapes. Then I started to do 'shapelessness' practices, which are impossible of course. This led me to questioning what it means to be in a body. I thought a lot about death when I was working on *On Shape*. So, all these things come up that are very deep... For *Multitudes*, I allowed myself the freedom to explore all kinds of different movement qualities, many of which I don't usually get to express, not even on stage. That spurred a lot of conversations about identity. I've always understood that you can feel and be many things simultaneously but that's a notion that's very difficult to communicate because neither our language nor our society works like that. People need to know who you are, what they can sell you, which category you fit into. So, it is quite a political topic, but I explore it in an extremely physical way.

OD: So, next to them being a formal investigation, your essays feel very personal. There is a lot of subjectivity and examining of your own sensations, memories and thoughts. This makes you quite vulnerable.

AK: What helps me deal with my vulnerability is my obsession with it all: the process, the dance, the forms... There is something joyful about the essay form because it allows me to play with all these elements. I hope my enthusiasm translates to the audience. Dance is what I love. Even though it keeps bringing me to confusing and difficult places, I'll keep doing it.