

Renée Van Trier
Humble — Performance
21.02.—25.02.2024
25.02.2024, 17 Uhr
Arsenic Centre d'art scénique contemporaine, Lausanne

On the 'home page' of Renée Van Trier's website her everyday face looks at you, overlaid with the following text, which I read as her artistic stance as well as her attitude to life:

*«Renée van Trier a transdisciplinary artist, that mourns the loss of the comfort of disconnected life. Her songs will soothe our anxieties, heal our torments and make us smile for weeks».*¹

The title of her latest work is 'HUMBLE'. I witnessed the performance live at the Arsenic Centre d'art scénique contemporain.

I search the internet for a coherent explanation of the term 'humble' and find 'humility: *«The ability to accurately view your talents and flaws while being void of arrogance. Some believe that being humble means having low self-esteem and lack of confidence, but it's the opposite»*. I would say that the character of Renée's performance embodies these humble-qualities, that's why she can bring feeling and empathy for her concern, which she wants to express in her performance HUMBLE, in their whole ambivalences to us.

HUMBLE is both an installation and a performance, both wrapped up in one act, so to speak. It seems to me to be an investigation of self-representations and their effects in 'social media' times. Renée also gives us a guiding maxim for HUMBLE: *«At birth you are a promise but at the same time also the greatest possible risk»*.

Now which 'risk'? That of being a child, a teenager and becoming an adult 'in times of social media'? Or, in general, the everyday coming into the world again and again? At birth there is no life insurance that can guarantee us a safe life.

Renée investigates this 'risk' in her performance, which has tragic implications as well as being comic, an almost caustically biting entertainment and show. It resonates with me and makes me think. Makes me thinking about the world we live in today, what we are getting ourselves into with the daily use of WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tik-Tok and many more of these platforms. In these virtual-media, fast-changing worlds of dependencies I often feel like a zombie, like a dead person from another time who finds the oneself thrown into a strange world. And yet these worlds have a tangible reality and quality for me: I can network with others who live far away, exchange ideas with them or simply gossip about everyday life.

In the performance space, in the Arsenic, a display is hung vertically on the wall and shows a little kid dancing in the kitchen, in the living room and on the playground. The video is played continuously, with the volume discreetly turned down. Dressed in a sugar-sweet outfit, in pink and soft blush colours, the dancing child can be made out as a girl.

You can recognise Renée, the performer herself, downsized. Her face has been edited with a filter to create childlike features. The whole thing is filmed from a top-down angle, which further emphasises the childlike exposure. And so Renée, the performer, the child who is obviously encouraged to dance by an adult, becomes a girl who wants to please the person and the whole world out there. A person's arm is always visible, encouraging and directing the child to continue dancing when it is exhausted. Who is directing? A parent, Tik-Tok and other platforms of self-performance? Here we are witnesses of physical, in this case childish, self-exploitation that squeezes the media out of infant dancers. The child keeps looking up from below,

somehow shyly tantalising. At first the performance may be enjoyable, but the further the child keeps performing and its obvious signs of exhaustion are not recognised, the more the totalitarian voyeuristic exploitation becomes apparent, in which the maxim 'the show must go on' seems to dictate the game at all costs.

What does this performance give back to the child? To whom does it give anything back at all? Aren't the number of clicks a mere trifle in view of what is happening before our eyes? Renée calls this invasion of infants' privacy to create an amusing image «abusement»^{*2 *3}.

While background sound colours the room, the audience can walk around and take a closer look at what is in two undulating areas lying on the floor. On view is an arrangement of small to large plastic items, children's toy knick-knacks such as microphones, shopping bags, doll's shoes, dolphins^{*4}, key rings, hair clips with fluffy pompoms and a plastic napkin, bent at the bottom to form a collecting container, so that the child's porridge doesn't fall on the floor, cheap jewellery, all peppered with not-so-harmless material such as needles, pill strips and a band of bullets – are they real or fake? At first glance, a childlike menagerie in bright ice cream colours, from white to pink, light blue, glitter green and more, everything that could have washed up on a beach.

A sky-with-clouds projection, the clouds spiced up with a touch of pink, moves across the corner of a wall and is accompanied by a buzzing carpet of sound. In the semi-darkness, the performer walks around the room holding a toddler doll by the hand that doesn't quite reach her pelvis. The performer's facial features are rather sad. Are they trying to match the facial features of the doll she is holding? The doll can take its own steps, it walks wobbly and dislocated next to her, a toddler robot, with a childish face that has the eyebrows of an adult drawn on it. The doll looks confusingly weepy. Is it the performer's counterpart or that of her mother or another guardian person 'downsized' to child size? She and the toddler she is holding intently by the hand are dressed identically in pink leggings and a pink top that ruffles down into a short skirt. Who is a child, who is a mother, who is an adult, who needs protection and is being protected and who protects?

This children's world in the adult media world takes on pronographic features: Grotesque faces of babies and children stare at us from the wall, their mouths open and silently crooning. The sound changes: The 'upsized' version of the adult Renée child, the performer next to the doll-child now falls into the 'cool' sounds of dance-beats. She seems to be tired of making any further effort to walk in sync with the 'downsized' doll-version, dragging her dancing along. The monster faces on the wall deform into skeletal face-body schemes. They 'tune' themselves into further afterimages, and bring about my own monster-fantoms, which are composed of images that we unconsciously receive in daily doses: I am shown a somewhat blurred phantom face of Mr. Trump with his distinctive yellow hairstyle.

The projection on the wall mutates further into two caricature clown faces.; they are so intrusive that they could jump out of the wall at all of us here.

At one point, the performer stands so close to me that I can look into the face of the doll next to her: it is wearing the same earrings as Renée, the adult one, who somehow also looks childlike. She takes the doll in her arms. Is she going to be its mum? Yet she makes synchronized with the doll forced baby-child noises. With a microphone in her hand, the performer begins to sing with a 'rosy' voice that tips dystopically into a low register. Then her pitch changes and she sings in childish high tones repeating it over and over: «*How can I make it about me again ... How can I make it about me again*» and then «*...It is not all about you again ...*» as a

reply. A haunting sound, whose pitches change like the sound of an organ, falls into the song: «*This ain't't Disneyland ... Being excluded is the worst thing to happen ... Less and less room for animals to chase ... Less and less room to call home ... Nature has the last laugh ...*». I can only vaguely remember the specific sound of the voice, of the beat and the sound carpet. It seems to be more difficult for me to remember the sound of voices and of soundscapes than images.

The doll is now lying in one of the two plastic alluvial landscapes on the floor. The thought goes through my mind: How do human beings grow up today, where the worlds of social media overlap and mix with the worlds of 'mums', 'dads', extended families, friendships, schools and societies? How can they get onto their own two feet and stand on their own two feet? How can human beings navigate through the world (safely)? What nature of 'oneself' can they become?

During the next song «*You won't be able to return to your original state ... stay little, stay loyal, for ever and ever ... can I make things better ...*», I see a shiny metal dental grille over the performer's teeth, like those worn by boxers or rap fashionists. 'Fatty' solitary clown monster heads move across the walls while many in the audience, including me, hang on the performer's lips.

She sits down close to one of the walls. Is she, the lonely performer, looking for protection from this world of things and projections and from us in the audience?

She changes into a grey wetsuit on top, grey tracksuit bottoms and black leather shoes on her feet. The upper part of her body and the leg parts don't really want to fit together. They deform the performer's body into what kind of a grey what? One of those grey plastic toy dolphins on the floor? The sound lurches in the waiting loop and becomes more and more intense. The performer places black and white portrait photos on the floor: I look at dead features mixed with dolphin ones.⁵ And she waits. Then a sharp, cutting sound. From her place at the wall she spits the words from a song at us and at the world: «*Nothing attacks me because of my cuteness*»⁶. She sings mantra-like and repetitively until she is exhausted, repeating this song passage over and over again.

In the meantime, the projection on the wall has changed into a doll's nursery landscape, this in turn into a world-castle-fairy-tale world and this into a hospital-laboratory world and then again into an overflowing doll's nursery-disaster world, completed by the singing «*I feel like this isn't going to end well ... please remember me ...*» and «*... being irrelevant*» which she sings and raps again and again.

Is the doll smoking a cigar or a cigarette? The change of sound into a pulsating beat and into metallic string-like ascending tones encourage the performer to floppy dancing. When she, the performer, laughs and puts 'stuff' in her mouth – are they real pills? – her shiny metal teeth flash. Behind her on the wall, we look 'through' a projected glass front onto a clinical pool landscape; the performer continues with her floppy 'dance moves', while she attaches a something to a telescopic pole and swings it over the heads of the audience and then places it in a microphone stand. To me it looks like a witch's head.

Her dance movements become more angular, looking, bobbing, dancing, grinning at us, devilishly exhausted. She seems to be controlled from the outside, as if in a trancelike state, on a trip, engulfed by another body world. The sound becomes more immersive, ritualistic with softer beats, sounding like a handpan drum. The beats get faster and faster, a 'cool sound' makes the floor beneath me vibrate and interweaves with the body-images on the wall, which move past in rapid succession, these are cupped and collapsed bodies. They convey the hidden disturbing state of abused bodies in a blurred way.⁷

The performer is hunched forwards 'out of her body', her arms at her sides with limp palms turned forwards and upwards, indeed they look lame: Her whole being turned in on itself, as if she were nauseous. She holds this pose, which seems extremely uncomfortable, but which she could keep holding, if ... until she lets herself slide to the floor. She lies tilted sideways, the doll next to her, both lying in the alluvial landscape. Have they succumbed, have they given in, have they given up? Are they asleep, are they dreaming, in what kind of daze are they? What if the dancing (Tik-Tok) child on the display on the wall could slide to the floor and ...?

From the angle of my seat on the floor – everyone sits on the floor, there are no chairs in this performance space – I look up sideways into a soft blue sky that becomes a watery sky in which a sea cow – is it a sea cow? – swims. This is reminiscent of Walt Disney films, including the motif of the swimming mammal, which is a somewhat deformed dolphin. But the mammal or the sea cow could also be a large axolotl, a caudate whose amputated limbs simply grow back, even parts of the heart, brain and spine.⁸

Is the dolphin supposed to be a protector, the creature that Walt Disney and children as well as adults turn into friendly, human-loving beings? Although dolphins are also said to engage in sophisticated, even hostile hunting practices and have a pronounced sex drive, not only with conspecifics of both sexes, but also with other animal species - even humans are not safe from them. Children are not safe from adults and (not even grown-ups) from the media that drives them to peak performances: the girl on the display dances through the whole long performance (about 60 minutes) and even longer – a dance marathon – while a sky-deep water realm on the wall and a world of sound nudge me spherically into an unknown territory, beyond where I am right now.

Then projection and sound disappear. Dimly lit, we see the body of the performer and the doll on the floor; it feels like a short circuit after this visually powerful, driving event and makes me pensive. I am jolted awake by bell-like sounds that could herald a mobile message. We, the audience leave the room and 'the girl has to keep dancing, over and over again: 'hey one last time and one more last time ... '.

HUMBLE' is a strong piece, with a vulnerable performer-protagonist who does not give up, who does not accuse, but who nevertheless addresses issues that affect us all, really all of us. They (mis)lead us into an experimental laboratory of the agonies of representation, which can be both eccentric, pleasurable and exciting at the same time, whose songs and sounds were created under the performer's own direction, which is remarkable. The disturbing visual worlds created with AI in the projections and on the displays are likewise remarkable: Outside the performance space in the corridor, visitors are immersed in a gallery of outlandish portraits: Projected are childlike-looking bodies with pronounced adult features (breasts, faces, etc.) garnished with baby accessoires. They affect me in some way as baby prostitutes (à la Cindy Sherman). They want to appeal to me with their forced, sweet, harmless features and, and, yes, somehow and somewhere they charm me too.

Renée seems to have explored the limits of AI systems in order to create identities that can suggest pain and turn our feelings and emotions inside out once again.

Who are the children, who the adults, who the Tik-Tok communities to whom the childlike is served up as a super-performance for consumption? What do they experience? Who isn't and won't grow up? Because we are all always the children of someone or of something, of systems and societies?

Renée Van Trier invites us benevolently and 'humble' to turn to our hidden desires and illusory hopes, feelings that lie dormant deep within us and spill out from the media showers and are repeatedly washed over by them. An exceptional performance experience in all its components! Thank you Renée.

Dorothea Rust, in June 2024

*1 <https://www.reneevantrier.nl/>

*2 quoted from this article: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/knuffelcontent>

*3 «The title of this dancing child TikTok video is called 'Abusementpark'»: quoted from information I received from Renée

*5 «6 handmade silicon dolphins (without their mother)»: quoted from information I received from Renée

*5 «this is what a TikTok kid said once in her influencer video»: quoted from information I received from Renée

*6 «It is called 'Dolphin Mort', in these images I tried to do a dolphin face with a pouty mouth and also played like a dead corpse»: quoted from information I received from Renée

*7 «These are AI images made of fentanyl junks ... »: ⁸ « quoted from information I received from Renée ⁸

*8 «The end is a handicapped dolphin»: quoted from information I received from Renée