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THE INTERNET IS A STAGE AND THE PEOPLE MERELY MEMES

gasps

jan: *starts screaming*

varja: whoa, what's that all about?

jan: sorry, I just realised we need to make a performance out of all this material

When Jan invited me to work with him on this performance, I literally gasped for air when I saw its working title **gasps** in the application. The concept seemed topical both in terms of subject matter as well as methodology, while delineating a certain contemporary mode of performing I found quite interesting, so I quickly warmed up to the idea of collaboration. But soon I had to ask myself “how the hell” do you make a performance about memes. With living bodies. Using movement. Aiming beyond some basic illustration of the format or listing a string of references and associations. How to address a relevant theme through the problematisation of memes in a way that it doesn't end up totally banal and random? This radically bold idea, which at the time had me wondering how it would develop, was a real thrill and, as it happens, still is a source of excitement, two weeks prior to the premiere as I am typing these words.

when you watch a Netflix documentary and start questioning everything

Nothing. Nothing is. Nothing is not. There was nothing. And then there was the word. And the gesture. And the meme. It all originally started with the idea to explore the phenomenon of the internet meme at the level of content and research mimesis, memetics, repetition and duplication at the level of movement and form. The team returned from the residency, where they had the first part of the creative process, with stacks of movement material that encompassed everything from everyday rituals, constructing rituals with smart phones, sets of movement memes and their combinations and sequences, to fifteen pages of contextualised references that included viral songs *and I will always love you, don't go breaking my heart, can't touch this, ai ai ai ai ai ai, Puerto Rico, do you believe in life after love, living in Americaaaaa*, videos, images, phenomena, events, personalities, citations, *Houston, we have a problem, May the Force be with you, They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom, This is Sparta!*. These stacks of material, which in the beginning stages included also the ubiquitous use of “face filters” of recognisable pop icons, politicians, emojis and characters, poured out into a conglomerate of everything that surrounds us on a daily basis. How, then, to extract out of all this exciting, bursting scope of ideas that which is the most recognisable, the most meaningful and, if we put it in meme terms – the most viral? *And then the MEMEMEME happened.*

when you are trying to sleep but start overthinking

The meme is an idea, a multiplier and reproducer of ideas; it is repeating an idea through variation and selection. *Richard Dawkins*, the first to define the meme, understands memes as a sort of behaviour that continues to proliferate in a society despite its randomness or nonsense. All that surrounds us, all that makes up human life – languages, stories, habits, knowledges, behaviours, patterns – constitutes human culture and communication, which memes as ideas' replicators multiply, mutate and upgrade. *KEEP* With the emergence of the internet, these patterns have been digitalised in the form of “internet memes”. They generate and reproduce fragments of images and contents, which by way of global virality constitute subversive clashes between contexts and meanings. Since the meme relies on instantaneity (that is ephemerality), it is strongly tied up to feeding on attention *CALM*. Ever since advertising has existed, we have known that the economy of consumption is inextricably linked to marketing with human attention. As the goal of both advertising and the meme is essentially to spread as quickly and as widely as possible, *AND* they actually function according to the principle of creating distractions that break with and distract us

from our daily routines. By investigating the ecology of attention and the so called echology, theorist *Yves Citton* has been attempting to decode the mechanisms of how ideas and images spread. The ecology of memes *MEME* can be understood with the principles of dissemination and reproduction, given that they at their core function as viruses and genes. Like genes, memes evolve, mutate and associate with other memes. The strongest are reproduced the most and thus become viral. In the age of the economisation of attention *ON*, i.e. attention as capital, *Citton* examines the mechanisms of distraction and human attention, thus addressing the question of its critical value. *Keep calm and meme on.*

when things are good, but they are too good so you are wondering when you are going to have your next tragedy

The creation process was a condensed, saturated case of gathering and testing out the material, searching for a performative language of gestures and, especially, narrowing the field of reference within the topic that relied on the vast universe of the internet as its pool of reference. So, where to begin? The methodological approach of researching memetics, duplication and repetition shifted from the movement-dance logic to a simultaneous construction of an associative universe inhabited by the performers – agents and carriers of digitalised communication. Looking back at how the performance was created, it seems right to talk about its construction as, for me, direction and choreography in this case do not capture the complexity of the process of interlacing this fragmented structure, which at once translates the internet logic into a performative code as well as invents a language that could constitute a construct of an analogous stage world beyond illustration, I realise that what we are constructing is actually a stage lexicon for understanding what memes are, how they function and what exactly their virality, instantaneity, informative power and ephemerality produce. So, if we are dealing with construction, then the principal tool becomes the score – composing the performance literally, with all the elements and levels of expressive media. In this context, dramaturgy takes on the mechanism and logic of memes. It takes a simple movement that communicates something and pastes layers and media onto it; with each additional layer, its communicativeness accumulates another mutation, another subverted meaning, another semantic gap or contextual subversiveness. How to speak the language of memes which resides within the internet, is reproduced on social media and “embodied” only digitally? How to build a bridge which would, through analogous logic and liveness (of the stage and performers) – as the main component of performance art – decode the mechanism and the purpose of the meme as a digital communication format and carrier of ideas?

when everything that could go wrong goes wrong, but you are still okay

At a certain point, we had to ask ourselves “why this performance” and what are we trying to open up with it. It seemed as if the very assumption of the world of meme, of pop culture and of the instant topical-political or, better, the social, demanded a “statement” that was behind all of this. What do these four bodies, producing repetitive, copied and mutated movement, communicate and in what kind of a world can they exist at all? In our world. In a world that translates emotion to “emojis”, serves knowledge and the global state of affairs in the form of a plethora of information we have no idea where they are coming from, who is controlling them and if they are real at all. We live in a society that is individualised, alienated, passive and increasingly narcissistic. We are getting entangled into a vortex of identifying with social networks, into filtering our lives to neatly uniform conventionality and conformism. What can we do? Who are we? Reproducibility of attractive and meaningful images gives us a sense of security and inclusion. And although critical distance is something we all try to have and maintain in the anonymity of commenting on the forums and posting endlessly, we are engulfed in an abyss of a fictitious reality tailored specifically for us, for consumption, for affiliation. All this is transforming us into carriers of learned patterns that infest us without us even noticing or being able to control it. Like clones of a universal ideology, we are plunging deeper and deeper into a global existential crisis, which is described by the first search result for the word **meme** on *urban dictionary* as “the cure for depression”.

trying to excel in my career, maintain a social life, drink enough water, exercise, text everyone back, stay sane, survive and be happy

As I watch the performers in rehearsal, I start to realise that we can no longer speak about dance and the choreographed body but about re-programming the body to think and act differently – in a fragmented, digital, inorganic way, subjected to gesture and one's smart phone. The performers are neither characters nor beings, they are hardly even bodies; they are carriers of ideas, executors of contexts, fillers of semantic gaps. Simultaneous with the construction of their movement language, the performance layers the textual narrative layer, the fragmented and referential music soundtrack and the visual backdrop, introduced and worked visibly by the performers. *In ...* This entire constellation *Ter ...* calls into question the concept *In ...* of identity. Who are these *ter* performers, *I* stranded in *Den* the associative *idem* “loop”? *In, ter* And who are we, *I den* people who *dem der* convinced about *In, ter, I, den*, our own autonomy *ti ti, net* of patterns *In, ti, ti, net, net* duplication *In, ti, ter, net*, reproduction *I, den, ti, tet* and repetition, *A!* are losing track of *Aaa?* what our identity *AAAAA* emptied of all copied *AAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaAAAAAAAA aaaaaAAAAaAAAAAAAAaaaa* and learned patterns *AaAaAaAaAa* is *AaAaaaaaaaAaAAAAAAAAaaaAaAaAaAAAAAAAAAAAA aaaaaa*

applause