

Between Solitaire and a Basketball Game

Dramaturgical Strategies in the Work of Antonia Baehr

Tom Engels

Antonia Baehr is a Berlin-based choreographer, performer and filmmaker. She has created numerous performances with other choreographers and performers like William Wheeler, Valérie Castan and Lindy Annis. Characteristic is her non-disciplinary work and her way of collaborating with different people, using a game structure with switching roles: each person is alternately host and guest.

Antonia Baehr's work does not offer simple narratives. As a choreographer, she focuses on and isolates the seemingly mundane: an everyday movement or action. Like a surgeon, she dissects not only these acts but also the potential that is hidden within them. At a second level her work also deals with the construct of identity, perception and theatrical mechanisms. She researches the fiction of everyday-life performance and the fiction of theatre. Among others, she is also the producer of horse whisperer Werner Hirsch, who occasionally works as a dancer in the French and Belgian contemporary scene.

For her solo RIRE/LAUGH/LACHEN (2008), Baehr asked family and friends to write her laugh scores as birthday presents, which she used as the basic structure for the performance. For seventy minutes, Antonia Baehr explored the realm of laughter. She showed the audience this expression as a sovereign entity, freed from causal baggage – jokes, tickles, narrative, humour, joy – looking at the thing itself: the sound and shape, the music, choreography and drama, the rhythm and the gesture of laughter.

Her latest choreography, *For Faces* (2010), and her latest film, *For Ida* (2010), were developed parallel to each other, resulting in two different though related works of art. This time, Baehr focused on the face, a mutable locus where expressions appear and dissolve. Minor changes take place. These movements reveal not only known but also unknown territories of facial expression. The face can be considered a landscape. In this interview, Antonia Baehr explores the issue of two different dramaturgies – those of choreography and film – that from time to time tend to converge in her work.

Could you start by describing *For Ida*, your new film?

In *For Ida*, you see a multiplication of Henry Wilde, filmed in continuous takes. You see his face four times, next to each other, while he is performing a choreography for the face. The video is a dedication to Ida Wilde by Henry Wilde, her husband. Ida is the one who created Henry and Henry looks like this because Ida dressed him up like that. It's a true story. The film is a little bit like the game of 'solitaire': you play with yourself. I shot

the film with a webcam in the south of France in a house where I spend my summers, while nobody was around.

Ida is a reference to a Gertrude Stein character. In *Ida: A Novel*, Stein portrays the life of the most ordinary character imaginable, leading an exceptionally ordinary life – a lot like anybody's life. Stein also worked with multiplication: in her novel, Ida has a twin. There are a lot of different Idas that return in Gertrude Stein's work. The theme of the multiplication of the self is recurrent in art history. Duchamp made a multiple self-portrait with a special photographic device en vogue at that time, called *Marcel Duchamp Around a Table*, quoting *Io-Noi-Boccioni* by Umberto Boccioni. You see him multiplied while smoking his pipe. Parallel to *For Ida*, I made a choreography that resulted in my latest production *For Faces*. The latter is a piece both for the faces of the interpreters and the faces of the audience members. The 'for' in the title is like the 'for' in 'for piano' or 'for orchestra'. It's made to be interpreted. The 'for' in *For Ida*, on the other hand, designates a dedication.

So you are playing a game with yourself? I can imagine that working on a film solo is very different from making a live performance executed by four live performers.

I play a game, while asking questions like 'Who is the self?' or 'Who creates the self?'. The starting point for the video was that I wanted to see what sorts of materials and compositions for the face could be interesting and possible to do with the four performers in *For Faces*. It wasn't meant to become a film at all. Secretly I tried out stuff for the piece, creating sequences of facial choreography. Due to the fact that I was creating *For Faces* at that time, I multiplied myself four times in the video. My motivation was very pragmatic at first. I never showed my try-outs to the performers during the rehearsal period, because I didn't want them to copy me. But later on we watched sketches that didn't end up in the final video. And now they are actually doing some of those movements in *For Faces*. And so my two most recent works got interwoven. So there is some classical 'copying' in the sense that the performers do what the choreographer shows



Fig. 1 Still from *For Ida* (2010) © Antonia Baehr.

them, but they copied only small parts from the film, not from me doing it live. In a way, the film and the piece are like the two sides of a record. They are complementary, but they are not conceived for the same audience. Nevertheless, it might be interesting to compare them.

Your work often deals with the construct of the self by staging characters that do or do not biologically exist. Is video work providing you with a safer playground, or is the stage the ideal place to explore these mechanisms?

Both function as my playgrounds. It is very different though, working alone or directing four artists. In *For Faces*, for instance, the performers sometimes choreograph their own phrases, by doing a composition in real time. Interaction takes place. When I am alone, I have to find strategies to get along with myself. It's solitaire versus a basketball game. In *For Faces*, I'm the conductor and there is the dynamic of a team. But the strategies are different, both pieces are about the construct of the self. It is the concept of the 'mimetic faculty' that Walter Benjamin talks about. It enables us to imitate, to use others as mirrors. 'Who am I?' – 'I am myself because I've been imitating all these people.' I think this idea is crucial in *For Faces*. The performers are very strong personalities and they are who they are. They do not represent a normative beauty canon, or what 'female' or 'male' are supposed to be. If you look at the four of them, you see quite a complex image. They did not get in the piece through casting. So yes, I think it is very similar to how I questioned myself in *RIRE/LAUGH/LACHEN* (2008). *For Faces*, on the other hand, is not about me nor about Werner Hirsch or Henry Wilde, but it is also dealing with questions of self-construction through the gaze of others.

The multiplication of the self also has major repercussions for the technical side of producing *For Ida*.

For Ida was shot with the webcam of my MacBook. The camera does not move itself, and produces a moving image that harks back to the technique of the very beginning of cinema, like Edison's kinetoscope or, even more, the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe*. The image moves within the frame but the frame itself does not move. It is a form of cinema that is close to photography. *For Ida* is closely related to that principle: it is a film that plays with the boundary between still and moving image. *For Ida* refers to portraiture in photography, painting and the passport photograph, but also to the close-up in cinema, the star and the figure of identification. Ironically, I multiplied the singular figure of identification. Furthermore, the webcam operates like a mirror, but one with a slight twist in it. With a webcam, the filmed image can be visible to the filming person while she or he is shooting it, it is just like watching yourself in a mirror. I mainly use it for things like Skype, or at least that is how it became part of my life. When you use Skype, you can see the face of the person you're talking to, but you can also see your own face on the screen while being filmed. I made *For Ida* because I was skyping a lot at that

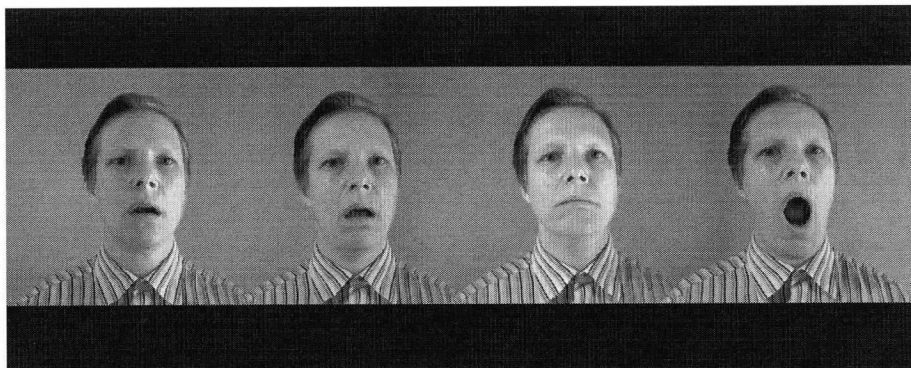


Fig. 2 Still from *For Ida* (2010) © Antonia Baehr.

time. So the webcam was an everyday-life tool that came to be very useful, but also very inspirational. Although at the same time I did not like this way of communicating: the person on the other end seemed even further away than if we had been talking on the phone.

Also, Skype produces a strange form of narcissism, I felt. The wide-angle camera produces a very ugly portrait and the colours are also of very low quality. But it's quite interesting to see how this very modern tool is a member of several families: that of mirrors, of early film, of surveillance technology, but also of the telephone. Therefore *For Ida* is a silent conversation with oneself, a wordless soliloquy, made in a ritualistic frenzy to exorcise myself of my terrible Skype experiences.

The fact that the film is twenty-one minutes long, filmed in continuous takes and edited without any time-based effects, is also a clear reference to this sort of communication. But it also makes it a contribution to the genre of the 'performance for the camera', a genre that often deals with the artist as author and performer of the artwork at the same time. *For Ida*, being a work that is performed in front of a camera and shot in one continuous take without any effects, relates to the feminist art of the sixties and seventies. For me, it is made in homage to feminist art.

You have a background in the visual arts. Has that influenced your aesthetics in theatre and video work? Your work always bears that distinct Antonia Baehr signature; it is very atypical and cannot be strictly categorized.

First I studied media art with Valie Export. I also did a bit of painting and other stuff, and then I went to Chicago, for an exchange. There I was enrolled in the Performance Department, but students were free to take classes in other departments as well. So I studied animation film, participated in theory classes, explored my own performative strategies, etc.: so I gathered a really broad understanding of art and the performing arts. I started with film, but I was never any good at it. My friends were much better, so I stopped. I think this problem arose because of the fact that film uses a really different

That is why I would like to show *For Ida* in a big cinema, which would mean that the audience cannot really see the four faces at the same time, and consequently really become obliged to wander through the image, never being able to get the whole picture. In *For Ida*, you get four frontal faces throughout the whole work. You never see the back of a head, like you do in *For Faces*. Those two different notions make for the differences between the two pieces. In *For Ida*, the multiplication happens through the duplication of the self. In *For Faces*, this happens though the multiple perspectives of the audience through the arena that determines the visual structure. No two people see the same performance.

Bill Viola says that we people live in time like fish live in water. For me, this idea is clearly expressed in both *For Faces* and *For Ida*. You dedicate time to an expression on a face, or just to the face itself. That is something you would not do on the street if someone passes by. How different is it to work with time in theatre and in film? Do you want to look for the same kind of time experience?

I would speak about time and space, or a combination of both. In *For Faces*, you are sitting in an arena and there are four people in front of you that you can look at, but they do not look at you. What the performers and the audience do is very similar. They are almost in the same position. You don't have to react like you have to do in real life. If someone smiles at you and you don't smile back, that is a strong gesture. In the performance, we are safe. We can contemplate or we can observe ourselves, how we become reactive. When I watch them, my face also starts to move, like theirs. Then I think: 'Oh, what am I doing?' I contemplate them, the others, but also myself and my own position in theatre. I contemplate what it is to be a human being. You're not allowed to do that in real life, because that's voyeurism. This freedom of contemplation gives you what the cultural historian Aby Warburg calls 'Denkraum', a space to think. It opens up perception, because you're calm. You have time and space to think. Warburg was very interested in the reproduction of the Medea image in art history. She symbolizes the moment of thinking, the moment before she kills her children. That moment of reflection, of taking time to think, is something we are not used to in the movie theatre. Not that I mean to say that film denies reflection, but it clearly is another relationship towards a constant flux of images that we are talking about. That is why I also want to bring that *Denkraum* into the movie theatre.

Since the movie does not happen in real time, there is a difference in responsibility for the audience. For example: if I fall asleep during a film screening, I do not disturb the film. In a performance, however, the audience has an immense responsibility towards the performers and the creation itself. It is in their hands. If someone becomes very loud, then he is going to disturb. That is the dilemma in the performance *LAUGH*, because laughing is so contagious. Your neighbour starts to laugh, but actually you just want to listen to the laughter of the performer. I love to go to experimental films and sleep or take notes. And there is the possibility of watching movies over and over again,

of course. The contract that the spectator signs with regard to the artwork is a different one in the cinema and in the theatre.

The contract between the audience and the performers is very specific in *For Faces*. There is even an unconscious biological contract being made by the ‘mirror neurons’ in our brains. These neurons are activated when we perceive movements or gestures, and they cause a similar reaction, for instance in our faces. I read this as an attempt to bring life and art closer together.

The situation in *For Faces* is similar to an everyday-life constellation. People are sitting in front of other people. We experience this all the time: in the subway, at a dinner table, in face-to-face encounters in cafés or anywhere else, when we are not speaking to each other, when we cease to use words to back up our experience. But in *For Faces*, the theatrical contract makes the situation different from a quotidian one. In making the difference between life and art as small as possible, I make it as big as possible. What I mean by that is that the power of the theatrical contract becomes visible and the audience can physically experience it. The spectators might observe themselves mirroring the facial movements of the performers’ faces in their own faces. Then the spectator becomes the object of self-observation. Or, on the other hand, the viewer might contemplate the performers’ faces and those of the other spectators sitting across from him or her as if they were objects, sculptures, or paintings. Or one might just fall asleep too. Each spectator experiences the theatre’s fourth wall differently in this piece. But the fourth wall is clearly there. The piece does not ask the audience to participate, unlike



Fig. 4 *For Faces* (2010). Photograph: Anja Weber.

this kind of theatre in which the actors ask the audience to sing along or clap their hands or come onstage. The particularity of *For Faces*' setting might enable us to scrutinize the theatre, but also life in itself, through comparison, and because here in the theatre, we have time to think and observe. We are not asked to react immediately.

There is also a practical difference between performance and video work: the reproducibility of the work. With the proper distribution channels for your film, everybody can see your work. With performances, that is different. Does this matter to you? You position yourself in the art scene in an entirely different way if you leave artistic relics.

It totally matters. I started to do live art because it was too confusing not to know for whom I was going to do the work. While doing performances, I really knew that I was doing it for very concrete persons, for all those people present in the room. It was very comforting to know: 'It's going to be for them.' That simplified not only the situation but also my capacity to produce work. Actually, any work of art is for anybody, also when it is live art. But there is another sense, like writing someone a letter, or thinking about somebody that you are doing it for. The piece is for Ida. Just like in the Sixties when it was a habit to give scores as birthday presents. *For John Cage* (1982), for instance, is a beautiful score that Morton Feldman gave to John Cage as a birthday present.

There is the problem of how to document live art on video. It's a whole problem in itself. What I am doing here is approaching the problem from the opposite side, in the sense that I am not doing it at all. The registration of the piece is finished before the actual piece. They are related, the two, but it is not the idea of documenting. That is where everything goes wrong. That is where people do not get that it is really a different language. You cannot just aim a camera on a performance in order to catch it.

There are numerous performance DVDs nowadays, from Merce Cunningham, Marina Abramovic, or very recently Wim Wenders' 3D movie *Pina*. It seems that those registrations are transforming or even replacing our memory. Do we have to learn to live with the ephemeral aspect of performance again in this era of audiovisual expansion?

I changed my opinion about this. At first I was really against this idea of documenting performances and, by that, denying the ephemerality of live art, but now I do not know. We are now so thoroughly surrounded by moving images. We use Google and YouTube constantly. Now artists, but also the audience, have easy access to a really broad range of material. So our way of thinking, making and composing has changed because of that and there is actually no escape, or you have to isolate yourself in the mountains. But we can observe the differences that it makes. *Holding Hands* (2000) for instance, a piece performed by William Wheeler and myself, consists of pieces made with a video camera as a working tool. First we filmed the rehearsal and then watched the videotape. Again and again. A camera functioned as the outside eye. That way of working produces pieces that are very flat. It has one vanishing point, like e.g., *Self-Unfinished* (1998) by

Xavier Le Roy and many other pieces of that time. For *For Faces*, it was very remarkable that I lost all the videotapes of the rehearsals and that we almost never used a television or camera to give feedback on the work. The set-up is round, so it completely escapes the camera logic. You cannot put it in one image. When I see people and how YouTube and those other flat images inspire their work, I think how different *For Faces* is. There is so little that we took from video during the creation of *For Faces*. It changed our vocabulary completely. There is a little part that we transposed from Trisha Brown from video, but mainly paper and colour pens became our working tools. The piece is so complex that we just would not be able to make a simple movie version out of it.

Tom Engels completed his master's degree at the Department of Theatre, Performance and Media Studies of Ghent University. He is an editor of *Oral Site* and has worked with artists like Needcompany, Antonia Baehr and Eszter Salamon. In 2011, he will be a dramaturge for Adam Linder and Rodrigo Sobarzo's *Such Gathering*. In 2012, he will be Eleanor Bauer's assistant for *A Dance for The Newest Testament*.