

English translation:

## **I am a fiction / Identity games**

Alexandra Baudelot

Antonia Baehr constructs performances based on scores that structure and stimulate actions. Her scores usually function as a double-sided game that is differently activated by the artist and by another person invited to work on the project. *Merci* – premiered in December 2006 at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers – is a choreographic work for two performers, based on and structured as a dialog between two voices and two bodies, in which each submits the other to its own logic of construction and its own desire for projection and appropriation of the stage. Two identities meet, confront, modulate, and accompany each other.

A white wooden pedestal stands in the middle of the stage. Antonia Baehr enters the stage and gets on it. It is striking that it is impossible to fully grasp the sexual identity of the character she plays. In fact this character has all the attributes of a male body and yet disturbs us through the barely revealed femininity that it emanates. Right away, this gender imprecision provokes our perception to slide, and we let go of our take on the series of movements performed by Antonia Baehr. Initially, fully mastering her score, Antonia Baehr takes us into her abstract and playful game.

Her identity forms one body with her simultaneously burlesque, captivating and disturbing gestures. The action repeats until one can consider several possible fictions. Then another character intrudes by entering the stage. At her prompting, the forms of this strange abstract choreography become charged with another meaning, coming little by little into a dramaturgy that unites both performers. While the game flips over, this character – a kind of director, who pressures Antonia Baehr into a casting for a choreography which is actually the one we saw in the first part – takes hold of Baehr's gestures in order to play the game of a performer submitting to the artistic demands of the performance.

The body becomes awkward, its weight a handicap, its attention becomes clumsy. At the same time, these two distinct parts start a tacit dialog revealing the power issues characteristic of self-exposure and of the demonstration of a body whose identity is being damaged. This dialog inverts the relationship of self-enjoyment present in the first part – an enjoyment that brought forth the sovereignty of an identity bound to its own invention - in order to subjectify this identity to the other and expose on the contrary an identity looking for itself, manhandled by the other's gaze.

These games of roles and of staging the self disturb us through the shifting of the activated fictions, through the variety of coexisting perspectives. Antonia Baehr wonders what it means to be on stage and to present oneself for viewing, while putting to the test the elements of performance and visibility. Is it enough to ask the specific questions at the moment of performance? Doesn't the performance obey logics that are specific to it, away from the terms of the stage? In other words, can we invent fictions on stage that overcome the frame of representation – and inversely – can the real contaminate the fictions that are invented onstage and disturb the rules of appearance?

The answer to all these questions is entirely contained in the identity game played by Antonia Baehr. It is an identity of the self as it is invented daily until it disrupts all attempts at a female or male gender definition. It is an identity that is projected onto the time and space of the performance, free to invent and constantly play with the passages

from one fiction to another, thus transforming our perception of her on stage. The character Antonia Baehr embodies is alternately female or male according to the recognition of gender-specific codes.

But it's mainly in the in-between space of these genders that everything takes place. The Berlin artist inscribes her work in an aesthetic and a political line that she humorously defines as "post-moustache lesbian". She creates her own style based on Drag King and Queen principles, not in order to claim the transformation from one gender into another, but to create transfers of identity as so many inventions of the self – dynamic and playful, and thus full of possibilities.

If *Merci* is a choreographic work, it is because it uses gesture and repetition of choreographic material as motor elements of its reflection on gender identity. Absurd and nevertheless familiar gestures are performed with a pleasure that the artist never hides. The execution of a gesture is therefore not performed for itself, but in order to reveal the intimate dynamics of the artist and her way of confronting them.

Translation: Alice Chauchat, Geoffrey Garrison