



↑ Alice Chauchat & Frédéric Gies. *The Breast Piece*, 2007. [François Desautels]

About The Breast Piece (praticable)
Alice Chauchat & Frédéric Gies

In this text, we propose a retrospective gaze on the work we did for a piece that we co-signed in 2007 and that Alice is performing: *The Breast Piece (praticable)*. This piece focuses on breasts and representations of the female body. First, we will expose what brought each of us to do this work, as well as what brought us to work together on it. Second, we will expound on our working process for the piece, what was produced by the working methods we chose, and the discourse on the body that is the grounds for what we did.





Between 2001 and 2005, Frédéric's choreographic work dealt a lot with gender representations and was very influenced by queer theory. Frédéric did several performances on this topic in collaboration with Frédéric de Carlo or alone. They were working with gender as a performance and with the images that they were embodying. The approach was thus rather external, and the focus was on producing and/or playing with signs. As a consequence, the working procedures consisted of starting from an image and then finding a way to make it move, to embody it. At the end of 2005, Frédéric took a new direction in his work, and with his colleagues from *praticable* (Alice Chauchat, Frédéric de Carlo, Isabelle Schad, Odile Seitz) he began to work the other way around. The focus became body practices and how they can constitute the ground for representations. Thus, the procedure consists of observing which kind of representations, which kind of images can emerge from a body practice, from a bodily activity. This way, Frédéric started to work on a new piece called *Dance (praticable)*, grounded on the practice of BMC^{®1} and dealing with dance styles and dance history.

From 2000 on, Frédéric had been developing a strong interest in BMC[®], which became an important base for his work around 2005, at the same time as *praticable* was established from common questions about the exchange of body practices and the effects of such practices on the conception of choreographic work.

Frédéric's first contact with BMC[®] was in a workshop with Vera Orlock. It was a real breakthrough for him as he started to reconsider his entire dance practice and to dance in a different way. He felt strongly that during all of his years of learning dance technique and working as a professional dancer it had already behind him, he, and most of the people that surrounded him, didn't know with what they were moving. They knew a bit about their bones and muscles because of the pain they sometimes had (!) and through anatomical drawings. They knew some of their names but not what they actually are and how they function. He understood why most of what the dance teachers he had or choreographers he worked with told him felt so arbitrary. He chose then to go for a body that masters its movements not because it has learned the right shapes and what it should look like, but rather because it has

an inner awareness and understanding of itself and of the origins of movement. A body that, in relation to other bodies, constructs its own knowledge.

Ever since she started doing performances, Alice focused on the ways in which conventions frame the possibilities for performing and for watching, how one's own imagination for making or acknowledging art, for example, is framed by the art works one has already encountered, each time renewed. One particular set of conventions she felt framed by were those connected to her own appearance on stage as a woman; she never thought people would watch her separately from her gender and felt that she had to deal with whatever «a woman on stage» meant for an audience. This pushed her to look at dance and performance culture as well as gender and performance theories and then to develop strategies for opening up spaces within conventional roles or postures, where the individual subject could appear as the inhabitant of a posture to which it cannot be reduced.

In *J'aime*, a collaboration between Alice and Anne Juren in 2004, they energetically presented themselves and their enjoyment in lusty dance, occupying the conventional posture of young dancing women exposed as the surface for sexual projections, and taking on a position of mastery by the very set choreography that contradicted potential (mis-)interpretations of their dance as a naïve or spontaneous expression.

In *Crystalll*, a collaboration between Alice and Alix Eynaudi in 2005, they staged the performer (Alix) amongst sober, formal sculptures by Alexander Wolff and a thick smoke through which the audience meandered, constantly looking for the dancer (i.e. enacting their desire to see her). The choreography became a formalized parcours during which the performer evolves through the space and through the audience, passing through various archetypal postures of the female dancer in our culture such as the ensemble of abstract lines, the mysterious, exotic and delicate creature, the feline body, etc. These are postures in that they are not the exact reproduction of pre-existing images or dances, but rather the re-enactment of particular relations such as the relation in which the





ballerina, with the use of her dance technique, achieves cat-like dynamics and spinal tension, upon which audiences can project the expression of a natural, wild being and thereby reaffirm the idea that women are, indeed, closer to nature than men.

The basic posture taken on in *The Breast Piece (praticable)* is the exposure of female breasts to the gaze of onlookers as an object of desire for the aesthete or consumer (male) spectator, as is repeatedly done in arts, advertisement and popular culture.

In 2002, the two of us took part in an event in the Vooruit in Gent called B-visible dealing with queer topics. This is the way we met. Later, we began to exchange ideas about our respective works, as it seemed that they were rather connected through our relation to representations, and also through our interest in gender questions. Around 2005, the exchange between us and within *praticable* created the possibility for us to focus on the body's own functioning, besides culture's imperatives, and on how it then looks, reversing the relation between the ideas of the body and the embodiment of these ideas. Until then, when choreographing the body we had staged relations or postures in which the body was a surface or an element symbolizing culture. Later, the focus on the body's activity began to let culture emerge as an inhabitant of the body, even when it was not called upon; we could be working on a very concrete thing such as the fat that lays under the skin, over the whole body, and ends up moving in a manner that strongly evoked pole dancing without in any way reproducing exact moves from a pole dance show. Furthermore, this dance could not be reduced to pole dancing, as the possible images associated with it are always derived from a body busy with itself.

Initiating movement from inner sensations allowed us to move away from expressions that function as quotes and from affirming a certain visual language developed within our culture (for example, representing female breasts in a binary

position between that of an object of sexual desire and that of motherly, nourishing agents, in both cases defined by their potential use to others). Instead, for *The Breast Piece (practicable)*, we organized the body in relation to itself, focusing on its own materiality.

This «own materiality» is composed of flesh, bones etc. as well as the culture it evolves in. The process of creation started with a long series of explorations of the various tissues in and around the breasts. Because men's breasts are composed of the same tissues as those of women that are neither pregnant nor breast-feeding, we could go through those together and explore the particular qualities of each component in our own body as well as seeing its expression in the other's movements.

The images produced in *The Breast Piece (practicable)* appear as a consequence of the bodily activity, which consists of initiating movement in the different kinds of tissue that constitute the breasts (fat, milk glands, skin, fascia, lymph, blood, the ligaments that suspend the breasts, the muscles and the ribs under the breasts...). We start from an anatomical fact and use techniques of embodiment of anatomy and physiology coming from BMC®. Initiating movement in these different tissues produces very different movement qualities. For example, initiating movement in the fat can create a very sensuous movement quality, while doing so in the muscles can produce a movement that relates more to strength and resistance. A second step in the working process has been to crystallize these movement qualities into images. These images can be very much loaded culturally. We were looking at what could refer to images of femininity. This way, the images produced by the body performing the activity of initiating movement in the different tissues of the breasts appear and disappear continuously.

Here is one example of how an image appears: at one moment in the piece, the movement is initiated in the lymph that passes through the lymph vessels and lymph nodes in the breasts. Alice walks slowly in a straight line facing the audience. The movement is amplified from the breasts to the arms. Progressively, the breasts look like they are literally pointing out, and the whole chest area starts to look wider and stronger. The arms are also lifted progressively, moved by the





lymph. At some point, the arms are lifted quite high on each side, and at this moment, the image that appears reminds us of the Greek statue «Nike of Samothrace». The breasts look proud and strong, victorious, and the arms tend to look like powerful wings. Then, Alice changes the focus in her body, switching her attention to other tissues within her body, and the image disappears.

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After some months of work, we went to Budapest for a week to study with BMC® practitioner Bori Hoppal, who specializes in female physiology. Whilst we had been focusing so much on the material and on the images of the body, she led us to recognize our past in our own body, personal experiences related to our own breasts as well as to others, such as our mothers' for example. It was a strong and important time for us to link the research we had gone through on the body-as-itself connected to the body-as-image, to the body as a vehicle of personal and emotional life.

A practice such as that of BMC® produces a corporality that exists on its own, i.e. more or less separated from visualization. But visualization is also a base for the practice, through the visualization of the body's materiality in order to sense it. On the other hand, the body's history, training, the images and ways in which it has perceived representations of other bodies inform it as to how it can behave. There is no such thing as a pure expression of the body, or as a natural movement.

People learn how to take on archetypal forms, reproducing and embodying standard shapes and postures assigned as «beautiful», as «correct», as «desirable» etc. And anyone moving «freely» will necessarily go through those pathways that have been learnt and imprinted on the body ever since it was born.

The body's movement is also a daily means of communication, through kinaesthetic empathy and through the use of gestures and signs: from birth we develop our capacity to read through other bodies and to emit signals, i.e. to communicate with our bodies.

We can say that body culture inhabits the body like it inhabits the viewers' gaze.

Therefore, when dancing out of a focus on inner sensations, those recognizable expressive means appear as traces of the culture the body lives in.

One could think that with this way of producing images of femininity by initiating movement in the tissues of the breasts, we are proposing an essentialist vision of the female body. On the contrary, the fact that we put all of these different images one after the other without hierarchy turns them into possibilities and not into stable truths. The fluidity of passing from one shape to another, from one identity to another, avoids this essentialist vision.

The performer's dance in *The Breast Piece (practicable)* creates an ever-changing body. It is not only the images of the body that are changing but its consistency, its texture. Sometimes the breasts, and the whole body (when the movements initiated in the breasts are carried through the rest of the body) look soft or swollen, or on the other hand light or heavy, tonic or collapsed and hanging. Nevertheless, as the performer makes clear that she is at the origin of these transformations, the body never appears as a piece of flesh. It is not a body that the spectator can dissect. It is not an objectified body. This body controls the images that it produces; the culturally loaded images of femininity do not appear as something imposed on the body that is performing them. The fact that images appear and disappear and that no image is fixed produces a floating and changing identity. Not allowing the spectator to grasp and hold the images prevents her/him from setting a stable way of appearing for the performer. So that, paradoxically, working so closely with this anatomical fact of female breasts did not bring us to propose an essentialist vision of the female body but rather a performative one.

The diversity of the images that are produced, as well as the fact that they are juxtaposed in a way that does not correspond





to any kind of judgment or hierarchy, invites the spectator to think about how he/she relates to these images and about why he/she reacts in one way or another to each of them.

The piece can have a particular and direct effect on female spectators who will often reflect on their own experience of their breasts. As the piece in itself is based on a kind of real-time experience of the performer with her own breasts, it can be directly linked to the spectator's experience. Talking after the shows with some of them, a lot of intimate stories about breasts came out. One spectator told us that by the end of the piece, she felt very proud of her own breasts.

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The body as presented in *The Breast Piece (praticable)* is therefore a complex of materiality and culture; flesh that moves along cultural habits, carrying its own history as well as the larger culture around it.

The audience is invited to negotiate the relations induced by the breasts' exposure, projecting emotionally onto the performer's experience in that situation as well as recalling and observing their own relation to breasts and female exposure. At the same time, they are brought to kinaesthetically empathize and to observe the transformations of the flesh as a raw material displaying a life of its own.

They project their own complex of images onto the performer's body and encounter the resistance of a body that owns itself.

→ www.praticable.info

- 1 «Body-Mind Centering® is an integrated approach to transformative experience through movement re-education and hands-on re-patterning. Developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, it is an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind. This study leads to an understanding of how the mind is expressed through the body and the body through the mind.» → www.bodymindcentering.com

