Intra-performance: the choreographies of K.G. Guttman

Kitty Zijlmans

Abstract
This contribution takes as point of departure the particular response-ability allowed by the contemporary choreographic performance works of settler (Canadian) visual artist Karen Ginger Guttman, in which the visitor-beholder’s body becomes involved in the choreographic ‘dance’. These site-situated works echo the Rietveld’s works, but Guttman’s site performances take place in a residential environment, they specifically challenge guest-host-site ‘intra-actions’ as coined by Karen Barad and reveal constraints that occur in the choreographic ‘dance’ of continuously changing relationalities.

Keywords
Contemporary art, affect, relationalities, intra-action

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I am an art historian by training and have worked in the field of art history at Leiden University for a long time, I am a regular visitor to – especially contemporary – art exhibitions and presentations and have taught and written extensively about contemporary art, theory and methodology, but not until I came into contact with affect theory (Boumeester, 2017; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) and the work and concept of affordance as elaborated by Ronald and Erik Rietveld (RAAAF), had it occurred to me to dwell upon the idea that it is the encounter with the material object – the art work – that allows me, enables me to engage into a specific relationship with the material work. I had acknowledged long before that my subjectivity plays a crucial role in encountering art and that in the meeting ‘something’ happens: the artwork opens and comes to life, but to actually reverse the viewpoint and see art – in its physical presence – as providing me the possibility to respond, to act or to reposition myself, was an eye-opener. With a reference to Donna Haraway (2016), I realized that it is the artwork that enables me to respond, it makes me response-able. But what if the artwork is a human body, that is, a performance, or to be more precise, one’s own body and locomotion? In the following, I would like to explore Erik Rietveld’s question ‘Could artistic practices show us ways to embed technologies better in society?’ (Rietveld, 2019, p. 5) through the site-situated performance choreographies of Karen Ginger Guttman.

k.g. (Toronto 1975; artist’s name k.g.) is a researcher and a settler (Canadian) visual artist working in choreography based in Tiohtia:ke/Montréal, who was awarded her PhD at Leiden University in 2020 within the PhDArts-programme of the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts of the Faculty of Humanities. Having happily accepted to be a member of the doctoral reading committee, I could not have anticipated that I had to act myself in a performance as part of the assessment process. Together with a printed version of the dissertation, I was handed over a parcel, a large paper envelope with something soft in it accompanied by a note saying not to open the parcel beforehand, but to follow the instructions. So I did, I put the envelope aside and read the dissertation with increasing enthusiasm and awe. It all looks so simple, the perception and inhabitation of a site, we do it all the time, we move within the rooms at home, outside, anywhere – but how much are we aware of it? Do we know what in fact is happening – that we enter into ever-changing
relationalities with non-human entities that occupy a space, and that, because we are in it, these relationalities change? In the process of reading, it dawned on me how deep the bodily experience is of what it means to enter and occupy a space. This is something k.g. sees as an act of colonialism, fueled by the awareness of working as a settler-artist in colonial and settler-colonial contexts, Canada and the Netherlands alike. With regard to the Dutch colonial history, this recognition deeply resonates in me too.

The settler-awareness permeates her entire research and choreographic/dance work, problematizing it even further by connecting it to the guest-host-position that occurs, and how these positions shift. A house, a place, is always someone’s, and invited in, one turns into a guest, entering a space and trying to figure out what to do with oneself, how to behave. k.g.’s choreographies take place, not in a theatre, museum or art venue, but for a large part in everyday residential spaces, situated within the fluidity and unpredictability of the everyday. As sites of ‘social, economic, political, material, and cultural operations’, her residential spaces ‘offer rich and complex relationships within which to move’ (Guttman, 2020, p. 8). Choreography and dance, then, refer to all movement within the site and the creation of ever-changing relationalities, between humans, and between human and non-human equally. In that respect, her performances echo the end of sitting (2014) of Erik and Ronald Rietveld. However, instead of building situations in which, in a playful way, people explore the affordances of any possible position but sifting, k.g. creates situations which ‘animate qualities of territoriality through a choreographed encounter between host-dancer, guest-audience and site-performance’. (Guttman, 2020, p. 184). The choreographies in her dissertation all took place at sites where she has lived: childhood home (Toronto), a sublet (Amsterdam), her current apartment (Tiohtia:ke/Montréal) and a borrowed apartment (Amsterdam), whereas in the epilogue, she extends the techniques of guesting and hosting to ‘visiting’ the work of fellow artists. This brought a different set of constraints to the fore because each artist, their studio, every image involved distinct modes of negotiation and approach. Each time territoriality is an issue, generated through the relations of guest, host and site. (Guttman, 2020, pp. 172–173).

k.g.’s work revolves around constraints and the interactions – or rather ‘intra-actions’, which then occur. The concept of ‘intra-action’ is coined by feminist theorist Karen Barad, and it suggests that distinctions and meanings erupt from within (intra) a context and not between (inter) predetermined entities (Barad, 2003). Taking Barad’s theories to heart, k.g.’s performance choreographies are acts of embodiment that are material-discursive, connecting human to non-human all the time in dynamic, ever-changing relationalities (Guttman, 2020, p. 14). We – human and non-human – are constantly in a situation of becoming.

Following the instructions, I opened the paper envelope and found a cloth packet, with the instructions for the performance attached to the outside with a ribbon. We had been asked to download the two audio tracks on our smartphone beforehand and to arrange a visit to someone else’s residence. There we were to pour ourselves a glass of water, place it on a nearby table and when ready, put on the headphones and play the audio tracks. A soft, kind, female voice welcomed us and invited us to open the package. In it were a pair of padded gloves with elongated fingers supported by a light frame. She asked us to put on the gloves, and while listening and following the instructions, such as picking up the glass of water with our gloved hands, close our eyes still holding the glass, open one eye and so on, we got a distinct sense of being situated in the material constellation of this particular room. The voice asked us to get up and find a corner of the room, go there and look anew to the room and the disposition of the furniture and objects in it, to let that sink in, and to repeat this a number of times at different spots. I repeated the performance – my ‘dance’ – at home. I was curious how this would turn out. I chose the room I (thought I) knew inside-out, my study, but also, or perhaps especially there, more than ever before, I became conscious of the site, the constellation of the furniture and objects that fill the room, how I relate to all these non-human ‘beings’ and how the relationalities change while moving through the room. Moreover, when a new colleague visited me a few days later, I was more aware of how she, who had never been to my place before, entered the living room and tried to figure out ‘where to leave her body’. Each house, each place is a material playground, affording an exploration through human locomotion and the ongoing process of emerging new relationalities between humans and between human and non-human. Affordance can be understood as the capacity for becoming; ‘the exact outcome of this process’, so Marc Boumeester (2017) argues in his book The Desire of the Medium based on his PhD research at Leiden University, ‘cannot be described a priori, yet its required actors can be determined’. (p. 12) All we need is humans, non-humans and sites, in short: our world. And artists to make as aware.

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Audio-tracks of the performance piece One eye (2020)

About the Author

Kitty Zijlmans is a Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory/World Art Studies at Leiden University since 2000. From January 2011 to September 2014, she was the Academic Director of the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS). In 2010, she was accepted as a member of the KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. She is a member of the Supervisory Board of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst Utrecht and the Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht. Her fields of interest are contemporary art, art theory and methodology. She is especially interested in the ongoing intercultural processes and the globalization of the (art) world, and increasingly collaborates and exchanges with artists in the context of the field of artistic research. Recent publications include Leon Wainwright and Kitty Zijlmans (eds.), (2017) Sustainable Art Communities. Contemporary Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean Manchester: Manchester University Press; Kitty Zijlmans, ‘Movement of Movements: Resilient Strategies in the “Global South”’, in: Eliza Steinbock, Bram Ieven and Marijke de Valck (eds.), (2021) Art and Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis. Aesthetic Resilience. New York/London: Routledge 2021, pp. 62–74.