

POLYOPIA

FORSØG PÅ FORSØGSSTATIONEN APRIL 2017



A COLLABORATION BETWEEN
FILMMAKER TAMARA ERDE
COMPOSER GIULIA TAGLIAVIA
DANCER SIGNE BACH ERRBOE
CHOREOGRAPHER JULIE SCHMIDT ANDREASEN

Polyopia explores how physical states and visuals can illustrate the inter-relation between inner and outer worlds. Oliver Sacks' book 'Hallucinations' has been an inspiration for the research and development of the performance.

Context

We have studied and experimented with correlations between internalised and externalised movements, open and closed spaces and the body's integration with it. This has led to our creation "Polyopia", a video and dance performance exploring imprisonment and freedom as metaphors for embodied states, that was presented at Horsens State Prison as part of Freedom Prison at Aarhus 2017, European Cultural City in collaboration with Komediehuset. The research took place in chunks between February and April, and the performances were 13th – 18th May 2017.

Framework

During a residency period of five days at Forsøgsstationen in April, we (Tamara and Julie), researched movement material and visual ideas in the studio and in the outdoor area around, thus creating a scaffold for the piece. The performance period at Horsens State Prison served as another step of research phase, and therefore there is here a chapter of reflections from there as well as from the development phase, as it has equally informed the work.

Aims

The aim was that the combination of moving images and objects with the live movement, would enable us to further develop those experiments and deliver them in a round and complete way to the audience who is both to witness them and reflect on them, but also to experiment them and search for certain sensations within himself, during the performance.

Introduction

The setting of a prison space raises questions about space - open and close and the body's integration in it: In a prison could this be a tool to experience a sense of freedom? We play with how the movement and stillness open up or close down the space around us through the images in the video that would reflect possibilities of changing scales and atmosphere in the environment as a reflection of the internal movement and state of the performers. As part of our research Tamara and Julie also visited Horsens State Prison.

Tools

We use a variety of both physical, musical and visual language. The movement is developed from structured improvisation and set material, derived from released-based contemporary dance technique, GAGA and contact work.

Title

Polyopia means visual multiplication. In the research we drew upon examples from Oliver Sacks 'Hallucinations', that we took as abstract influence into movement, sound and visuals. There is a state described in the book, called "The prisoner's cinema", that directly connects our research questions to Sacks studies. Here is an excerpt from the book 'Hallucinations':

Hallucinations may overlap with misperceptions or illusions. If, looking at someone's face, I see only half a face, this is a misperception. The distinction becomes less clear with more complex situations. If I look at someone standing in front of me and see not a single figure but five identical figures in a row, is this "polyopia" a misperception or a hallucination? If I see someone cross the room from left to right, then see them crossing the room in precisely the same way again and again, is this sort of repetition (a "palinopsia") a perceptual aberration, a hallucination, or both? We tend to speak of such things as misperceptions or illusions if there is something there to begin with—a human figure, for example—whereas hallucinations are conjured out of thin air. But many of my patients experience outright hallucinations, illusions, and complex misperceptions, and sometimes the line between these is difficult to draw.

Choreographic methods by Julie

Objects

One of the hallucinations described in the chapter 'The Prisoner's cinema', is squirrels marching over a field. This image inspired us to create small objects with an animalistic look. They should be duplicates and possible to carry all in two hands. With a combination of porcelain, hair elastic band with fakefur, and golden paint we created the objects, that became a symbol of hallucinations or Polyopia. I used a text called "MAKE A PLACE FOR PERFORMANCE" by Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay from *Body, Space, Images* (1993, p. 150) to experiment with how to interact with the 6 objects. The text is a page, with lines like:

"a summer place
a solitary place
a safe place"

and

“a place under a stone

a place to hold in the hand

a place in a suitcase”

I read each line and Tamara (and later Signe) responded to it by organising the objects, in a way that she found representative and placed herself in relation to the objects. Each line triggered both locating the objects and her body, and an (inter)action of some sort. This ‘play’ was used as a score for the beginning of the piece. I recorded the words and send them to Guilia, who then used the words as an inspiration for the music. That created a fragmented first part of the music, responding to the contrasting scenarios. The words were eventually taken out from the score and the movements of objects and body together with the music stood by itself. Still the performer had the same intention to respond to the lines being memorised. Just as the words was eventually taken out of the scene, another experiment could be to take out the actual objects and just let the movements and music remain.

Limitations

How bodily limitations in some cases can trigger hallucinations, inspired the next experiment. I wanted to make obvious physical limitations that could generate a particular and unusual way of movement. The task was to keep the arms over the head, exploring the range og mobility in the shoulder joint. The surfaces of the armpit, backside of the upper arms, and ribs were engaged. The image I had in mind were branches from trees reaching towards the sunlight and metamorphoses. As if captured by film, how the plants transformed over time, the film would pause in different seasons revealing a new form. This created a tense and fractured sequence of movement, that later resonated into the spine and knees.

The variety of hallucinations caused by different conditions, inspired this experiment. Here is a note from ‘Hallucinations’:

Some of the chapters that follow are organized by medical categories (blindness, sensory deprivation, narcolepsy, etc.), and others are organized by sensory modality (hearing things, smelling things, etc.). But there is a great deal of overlap and interconnection between these categories, and similar hallucinations may occur in a wide variety of conditions.

Contact

I read that when the body is active in a complex task or in contact with others, hallucinations are less likely to occur. This inspired the next task having to do with contact between two. I called it snail's eyes. The fascinating thing about snails is that some of them can have eyes on all limbs on their body. The image is how the snails stretches it's tentacles to look around (in this case with the eyes at the end of them). The extending towards something of your curiosity and the immediate withdrawal once coming in it's nearness, was the dynamic interaction two dancers got to explore. This with the imagination of seeing from different parts of the body and extending outwards from these points. This developed into a longer improvisation, getting closer and closer, finding trust in one another to then break it again. The last part explored how the dancers can limit each other, so that the limitation moved from being internal to being an external. In this section the visuals were made increasingly harmonious with open landscapes.

Film by Tamara

The video is divided into a few parts, according to the dance parts, in relation to them. The content of each part and its metaphors and references were built at the same time, for those two parts, in order to find an echo between them. At the first part of the video we are witnessing some fragments of everyday life, urban moments, which are meant to send us back to the prisoners memories.



Afterwards, we see detailed frames of close-up of body parts in movements, enabling the viewer to enter more closely and intimately into the movement which is seen on live. And like in an illusion or a modified perception of reality, the dimensions and sizes of things change. Another part of the video is shot in the prison itself, documenting a movement that is taking for basis the idea of freedom, this freedom dance within an unfree space, presents the prisoner's dilemma and struggle, and is to echo with the live dance, in which, being completely in the prison space, those free movement isn't possible in its full capacity.



Towards the end, more abstract and nature-based sceneries are replacing the concrete frames beforehand, serving as a possible escape through the mind and the imagination, while the body remains traded in the prison's cell.



Music by Guilia

My involvement as music composer for “Polyopia” has happened almost by chance. A good chance. I was in Paris with Tamara Erde, that I knew for a few months, talking about find something to work on together. She told me about the residency that she was attending with Julie Schmidt Andreasen at Forsøgsstationen. Even if they were almost at the end of the residency and I’d get not much time to produce an original 20 minutes track, two things got me immediately thrilled: the crossed fields of contemporary dance and video art, and the unusual place of the performance, that was an ex-prison, good set for a new artistic project, with the aim to turn a confinement place into a no-border, cultural area. Of course, there was mainly the chance to work with great artists as Julie, Tamara and Signe. Once I decided to dive in, I further deepened the starting point of their research, the book “Hallucinations” by Oliver Sacks, and the very definition of ‘polyopia’, which meaning was unknown to me. Both of these themes fit very well with my compositive process: hallucinations as inter-relation between inner and outer world, brought me to think to inner and outer ear, questioning about what and how do we listen to the surround soundscape; polyopia, that is the non-convergent view of an object that becomes multiple objects, reminded me to what we get from a non-convergent sound source, that in other terms, is polyphony. I wanted to mix the two things, shake them in one: an “hallucinatory polyphony”, that breaks down a single sound in its harmonic vibrations. Along with this idea, I didn’t want to lose touch with the two performers. I began to consider them as two sound elements, that interact each other moving in the space. With the support of a rehearsal video, that showed their “work in progress”, and moreover thanks to some notes by Tamara about different moments where the dancers interact with objects or particular emotional states, I fixed some “chapters” in the composition. Just like in the condition of polyopia, where the two could result from one, the dancers became a sound and an its echo, an input and its reverb, the memory of a sound coming from our inner ear. The music score begins with a very high-pitched melodic phrase, that is like a music box reminiscence, to which another overlaps at a certain point, like a sound shadow. I repurpose this exposition and some added layers at the end. I like to define it as “exposition”, a word strictly linked to the language of counterpoint and in particular to the fugue, because like in a fugue I was holding the idea of some voices chasing and imitating each other. Then the music moves to the chapters: objects, limitations, snails, contact... I chose and used various sounds, from concrete music to prepared piano, from bugs sounds to flutes and electronic, due to the original idea to mixing up memory, perception and altered perception. It has been a great experience, perhaps I would have liked to work a little closer to the performers during creation, but I’ve arranged to let my music make up for the all time I was not physically there.

Reflections by Signe Bach Errboe

I got into the project a week before we went to the prison to perform. It was a great challenge for me to get into the world of 3 female artist, each of which had already contributed to the piece with video, music and choreography. So the piece had already taken a shape when I got on board. Julie was very clear explaining me the score, but still I felt she gave me space to contribute.

The aspect of the piece inspired my performance and my contributions was the multitude of contrasts: in particular the distinction between inner and outer, stillness and movement, linear and circular spaces.

One element of the theme for the piece (hallucinations arising from restricted sensory stimuli) got my attention: both imagination and hallucinations have the same effect: you see unreal pictures, but they have different origins, imagination has to do with will, while hallucinations are involuntary. This talked to me about a split, a tension, a distinction between up and down (voluntary – involuntary), inner and outer (conscious will – sensory). These intuitions manifested themselves as movements following either straight lines and patterns or circular or spiraling movements.

Another aspect of the hallucination that captured our attention was their random nature. Inspired by this we made a conscious effort to not force an alignment between music, video and movement. This intuition also manifested itself as variations in the dynamics of our movements: slow movements and even long-time stillness and bursts of playful dance or fight.

The immediacy and involuntary nature of hallucinations also inspired our work with improvisation in the contact part. It is almost as if our will is suspended and what is left is our bodies reacting to our senses, made extremely sensitive by the lack of stimuli.

Reflections by Tamara

In this work I (Tamara) wanted to research the way our imagination influences our physical sensations and states. The prison space, both physically and mentally as a theme imposed by the event for which the piece was done, served as the ground, the field in which this research is done.

At the early stage of the work I have read an article describing experiences done with prisoners and disabled people, in which they were asked to imagine themselves doing different physical activities and movements. Then, they were measured, and apparently the physical activities in their body,

through the different systems, was equal to those of people doing those actions for real. That phenomena brought me back to an author whom I like the work a lot - Oliver Sacks. I have offered thus, to base our work process on certain passages and ideas expressed in his books. For me, this theme propose a rich and interesting play field to the combination of video and dance. Imagination consists in a big part from images, and how those (imagination, hallucinations, dreams) influence our physical state and movement.

A big question for me was to manage and see if the work can go beyond the site specific area to which it was created, meaning the prison corridor, and see if it can be extended to different, more neutral spaces, and still communicate the ideas behind it.

The images in it are to represent different realities of the person "imprisoned": his memories of freedom, his way of conceiving his body and movement in the limited space of the present.

At this point, we have done a first stage at the process, creating the elements and languages. I feel we have managed to set the bases for the perspective languages, having materials that can express our ideas and questions. The next steps for me, to take it from here, are to see how those universes of images, movement and sound, can work together, echoing in each other, complementing each other, playing with each other. For this, a further experimentation and work phase is needed, as I see it, between all of us the artists involved, in order to bring the work further forward.

I have enjoyed working with Julie on the research and experimenting together in studio, learning from her approach to movement and choreographing. For the sound, I have proposed to integrate in the collaboration Giulia, whom I have met in Paris recently and found her music, composed mainly for films before, very suitable to dance pieces as well, being sensible and sensorial, elements that were very important to this work.

Reflections by Julie

Performers space and audience space

The performance space at Horsens State Prison encompassed two cells and a corridor. We (Signe and Julie) chose to begin and end the piece in the cells, and perform the majority of the piece in the corridor in front of the video projection. The journey for us as performers inside the work, seemed to have a logic. Reflecting back from the outside for the audiences it may not have had the same effect, because very few of the audiences went close enough to the cells in order to see what was

happening there. The challenge of how to both use the unique space that was available to us, whilst taking into consideration that only a minority might get the full experience, was a dilemma that stayed throughout the process. We decided early on to move the screen out in the corridor which allowed everyone to see the full film, but we kept the actions and interactions in cells, because we found it build up a tension and journey. Several had responded to the piece by reading narratives from it, and the interaction between the two dancers each from their own place moving into one, was something that seemed to resonate. So despite the lack of view we decided to hold on to the original idea of the cells.

Communication

In the first out of many performances the only thing said about the piece before the audience came in, was that it was a piece inspired by Oliver Sacks book "Hallucinations". Later on we experimented that the host would tell more about the work before the audience entered. Our (Signe's and Julie's) experience, confirmed by the host, were that people had found it useful and easier to "understand" having been introduced to the concepts beforehand. Even though in the beginning our intention was not to elaborate on the work, it turned out to give the audience a greater sense of understanding. This allowed the audience to reflect on the themes we explored, and have a sensuous live experience. As it was performed for all ages, this was in particular useful. As we (Tamara, Guilia and Julie) hadn't yet arrived to a point where the connection was made entirely clear between the elements, the explanation could help (on this stage) to make the audience see the link between the visuals and movements. For instance, how an isolated body can make the mind hallucinate, and how an active body in contact with other is less likely to hallucinate, which was some of what Oliver Sacks examined. The correlation between physical states and the mind, how it can be freed through touch for example, and how hallucinations in the mind can occur from a lack of hearing, seeing or sensing, is yet to be explored creatively - to portray, visualize, musicalize and physicalize in a way that communicates clearly.

Research and results

The informal and 'open' context of the State Prison made it possible to experiment with the material. Instead of arriving with a finished result of a research, we came with a structure and three elements: music, visuals and movements all created around the same concept. There was a bridge between the elements as all of us had been in dialogue whilst developing, and this gave a certain feel to the overall experience of the piece. If to take this further towards a more complete result of a performance, the next steps would be to investigate the interrelations between the elements and experiment with how each have it's say and how the audience ears, eyes and feelings are drawn

towards only one idea at a time. At the performance stage, it became clear that the coherency and interplay varied throughout the work, and sometimes happened coincidentally and other times planned. In that sense, it has been a learning process, in accepting the imperfections and limitations of the work, which in some way also goes with our theme, ironically.

An audience member fed back that she enjoyed the rawness of the space, and thought that it gave the piece an edge, it would not have had in a 'clean' space. This perspective made me curious about the different experiences and ideals we all have, and how sometimes discovering the beauty in the ugly, can be just as liberating than constructing the beauty and forgetting the ugly. The space was mixed in colours, with old furniture, graffiti and had a sense of both an institution and a theatrical setting with stage lights. The context was a mismatch of concepts in that sense, and despite that I think it did something and it was possible to 'move' people. For the people wandering around the prison experiencing a large variety of performing art forms such as circus, theater, puppetry, dance, presented as short pieces with different degrees of completion, they got a broad insight to concepts and paradoxes linked to freedom and prison. Some artists had taken it as a residency to create and get inspired by the place, others came with a finished piece, that was repeatable all the days. These various approaches and the multiplicity of methods and aims, was for me truly inspiring.

A way this research could also develop to is exploring how we can limit or open the audience senses. We could discover the range of possibilities stimulating senses, so the audience themselves can experience how physical conditions can affect the mind. This could perhaps give the audience/participants more of an embodied experience of freedom or imprisonment. We could do this by experimenting with a wide span of medias, sometimes only using a single musical note, or light, and other times overstimulating by combining film, dance and music. An idea Signe and Julie discussed after performing, realising a bigger potential for audience involvement. A direction Tamara and Julie from early on in the research had found common interest in.

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Photos by: Mikko Seppinen (Front and more) and Emma Micallef (from the prison)

