

'HOW TO GO THROUGH THE BODY?'

How to deal with the limits of the body? How to go through the body? Notions of the body's relationship to its surroundings have been part of Gaëtan Rusquet's artistic journey since the beginning. It is often translated into a search for the limits of the body. I meet Rusquet early in the morning in the centre of Brussels, around mid-December 2019. Although he's in full preparation of his performance *the eYe in the light in the eYe* during Europalia at BOZAR, we find the time to go through his work, from his teenage years until now.

An interview with scenographer and artist-performer Gaëtan Rusquet by Eva Decaesstecker (art historian, writes regularly for Kaaithheater, Rekto:Verso and Cc Strombeek)

In the course of your education and practice, you travelled through different disciplines. Where did you start and what made you shift?

I started in a regular secondary school to please my family, but I had always been busy with the visual arts and after graduating, I knew I needed to study arts. I chose Spatial Design, which was a really broad and general study on space. It can lead you to urbanism, or landscape design, or architecture, or set design. These classes gave me good tools to reflect on the concept of space, but I felt I wasn't interested in creating spaces for 'everyday use'. I wanted to understand how space can be expressive, as an extension of the body. I was fascinated, for example, by the surfaces of buildings, and how they capture the light.

My approach was more related to the visual arts and sculpture, I guess. I did try working in an agency for landscape design, but it was not the best experience. I couldn't fit into that kind of office life. After that I worked as a set design assistant and the rhythm felt much better. Eventually I applied for a Master in Set Design at ENSAV La Cambre in Brussels. I added an option in performance and finally felt I was in the right place.

Today, I rarely work as a stage designer; only for specific projects or for friends. Nonetheless, when I make my performances, I pay a lot of attention to the way I structure the space. I prefer working in a way that the audience is able to move during the performance. Like in the visual arts, the audience can look around and choose their position. It also places the audience on the same level as the performers.

Why is it important for you to place the audience and the performers on the same level?

When I'm watching a performance myself, I want to feel a connection with the performers. I like this way of sharing a space, an experience,

the concerns at stake. With frontal audience seating, I struggle more to feel this contact, as an audience member it makes me feel like a consumer. In a seating in-the-round, space and time are negotiated differently. As a spectator, you yourself choose the angle from which you will watch the performance, and you take the time you want for it. That is why almost all my performances have a seating in-the-round.



Meanwhile, © image Giannini Urmeneta Ottiker

When comparing your earlier performances, such as *de deux choses l'une* or *Back and Forth* with your more recent work (*Meanwhile*, and *As We Were Moving Ahead Occasionally We Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*), could you then say you are shifting from performances in a visual arts context to performances in a performance art context? Or do they run parallel for you?

I think my performances take place in both contexts, but recently I have struggled more between the two. In *de deux choses l'une*, a mask of butter melts on my face. This performance is still very static and relates more to the visual arts. The first shift was made during *Back & Forth*, in which I tie up balloons into a large structure around my body. It was the first time I let movement enter the work. After *Back and Forth*, I started making group pieces, like *Meanwhile*, in which we build an installation out of Styrofoam bricks. Somehow this piece is similar to *Back and Forth*. They both have the aspect of (de)construction and the relationship of the body to other mediums which have their own agency.

The body with its limits in and with the space is a topic that recurs regularly in your work. Could you tell us something about this relationship?

I chose the performance option at ENSAV La Cambre because of a need to be involved physically. When I was younger, physical presence was kept away from me, even if movement and dance appealed to me greatly. But it did start appearing during my early studies in art. The body has always been present in my work. In my practice now, I often deal with the limits of the body and what it means to be inside or outside the body. Working on the skin and its wounds, its opacity and transparency, one question keeps coming up: How to go through the body? In my research practice, I'm looking for different ways to enter one side of the body and come out on the other side.

I once went to a concert by Oren Ambarchi at Recyclart (Brussels). He was working mainly with infra-basses, sounds that are so low that you cannot hear them, only feel them. During the concert, the space between the inside and the outside of my body became less clear while the space between the bodies in the concert-hall became tangible, concrete and really sensual. I think sound is a beautiful way to deal with our body and the environment.

Music indeed also plays an important role in your work, for example in *Meanwhile*,. Could you say something about this?

I have been working with the visual and sound artist Yann Leguay for the past few years. He also created the soundscape that plays a huge role in *Meanwhile*, because it provokes the destruction of the structures that we, the performers, are building. Using Styrofoam bricks, we construct architectural forms such as walls and towers on different scales, on top of platforms with vibrators and speakers placed under them. During the performance, Yann Leguay influences the space by letting the sound vibrations travel from the outside of the performance space to the inside. Once inside, vibrations start pouring from the vibrators and speakers, and finally materialize in the destruction of the tower or wall. The use of the infra-basses makes even the theatre itself resonate. So again, the concept of the limits of the body and the architecture is tested here. How does sound move through bodies, through spaces?

Somehow the process of destruction or erosion or erasing has always been part of my practice. There is something in it that triggers me. It deals with the transformation of matter and materials, and it shows that everything is changing all the time. It's a process that I like to show and create relations to, be it in the body or in the architecture. I guess the cycle of appearance and disappearance, of creation and destruction, also relates to the cycle of life and death.

Meanwhile, has taken on different forms already, from a one-hour show in the theatre to a performance of several hours in a visual arts context. How come? And what happens with the piece for you when you change its duration and context?

The piece is built up in different cycles: loops of construction and destruction. With each new opportunity to present *Meanwhile*, in a different form or context, we developed the tools and scores further. The extended version feels like the most relevant and accurate form, because we really have the time to negotiate our space

and tasks. It also gives the audience more time to observe the different paths through the piece: the path of the light or the sound, the bricks, the bodies. They are all interlaced and each element has its own agency.

When we present the performance in one hour, the dramaturgy is simple: we know we will build walls or towers and we know how things will end. But in the durational version of the performance, we know how to start and we know our tasks as performers, but we don't know how things will end anymore. We constantly have to make choices individually and as a group just by doing, without talking. In general, I like to choose an action and really stretch it in time until it opens and unfolds so you have different ways of entering and reading it.



As We Were Moving Ahead Occasionally We Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty © images Giannini Urmeneta Ottiker

As We Were Moving Ahead Occasionally We Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty also has a very cyclical structure. The title of the piece refers to a film by Jonas Mekas. Why did you choose this film?

The piece is based on Mekas' movie, which is a compilation of his personal home movies spanning a period of thirty years. The way the film is edited makes you feel as though you are entering somebody's life. When you watch the movie, you have the strong sensation that you have entered someone else's memory. The footage even appears in your mind as though it could have been your own memory.

The piece is also based on a video work by Pipilotti Rist called *Mutaflor*,

in which she 'swallows' the camera and lets it come out of her anus, to swallow it again, in a loop. I wanted to take this action and transpose it in a performance with several performers. It proved to be a technical challenge to pass from one body to another, to create the sensation that all the bodies of the performers are connected. The limits of the body again became very fluid. I also was fascinated by the idea of being swallowed by a technological device. In that sense you can also consider this project as a meditation on the selfie.

On a more spiritual level, it questions the limits of oneself and how it feels to be a continuum going from one body to another. It's quite hypnotic, with a trancelike quality, for the performers as well as the audience, because at the end of the show everybody in the room seems a bit disorientated.

Does the idea of being swallowed by technology come from a frustration you experience?

It's one layer of the work, but the work speaks mainly about the idea of swallowing or being swallowed by somebody else itself. While being interconnected on many levels, we struggle between the fear of being swallowed or abandoned. Technology is the main tool or medium to be interconnected today. I see it as an interesting choreographic tool. Just think of the relationship you have with your phone and the new movements you have integrated, with your hands, your fingers, your eyes.

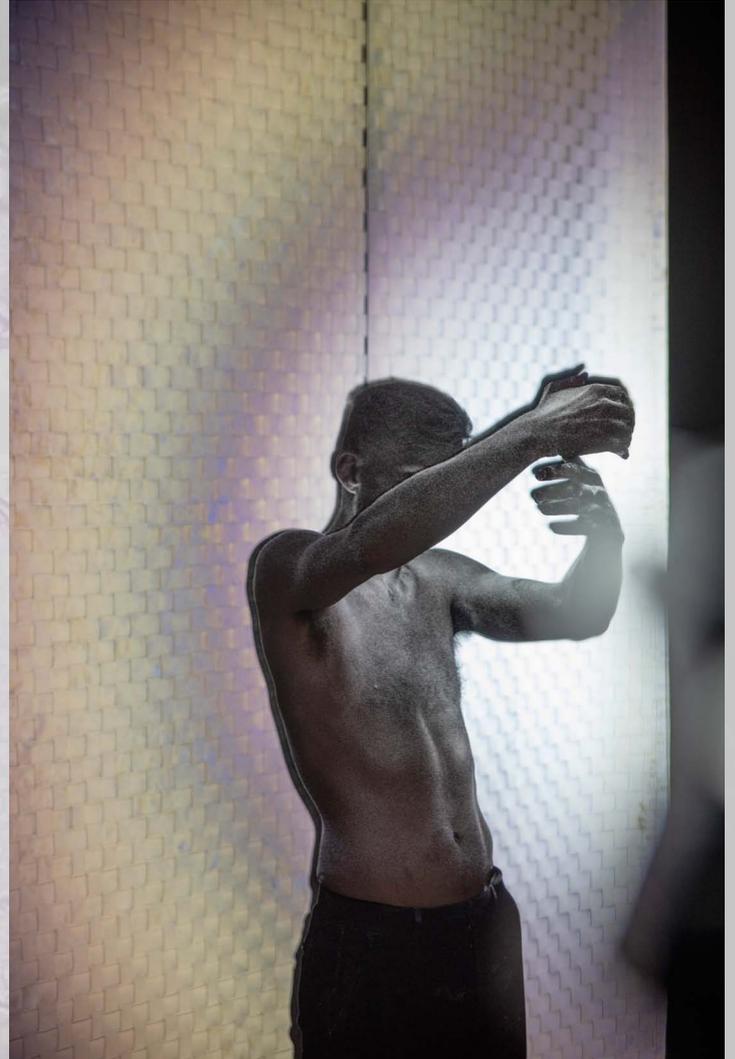
For As We Were Moving Ahead Occasionally We Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty I also wanted to deal with technology on stage in a critical way. How do we relate to it? I don't believe in the endless technological progress, the idea that you should keep on creating new technological inventions. I think we should also look at how it affects us and how to be critical towards it. But I don't want to be didactic about it towards the viewers. Rather, I want to experience something together with the audience, that cannot be reduced to a critic of the technology. There are many layers that allow the audience to travel inside the work: the visual dimension, the choreographic approach, the use of the technology, the body and the connection between all of these elements.

And now you are working on a new piece, *the eYe in the light in the eYe*. What form does the body's relationship to space take here?

Europalia invited me to create a performance which will be shown in January 2020 at BOZAR, in the framework of the Brancusi exhibition. I collaborate with visual artist Philip Janssens - who works a lot with reflective fabrics - and with Yann Leguay - whose sound approach can be considered sculptural. I started from Brancusi's work, his relation to the sublime and how he photographs himself and his own work. He controls everything in the image.

The project has now turned more to the relationship between the dark, shadow and light. The way the light falls on the body and the reflective fabric and how it can make a body appear and disappear. Depending on the angle of the viewer and the direction of the light, you can see my body becoming a shadow or a being made of light.

Sometimes it disappears or dissolves, looking almost virtual. I mainly hide my face to be seen as a body without an identity. I try to create a connection with the viewer using various strategies such as proximity and the attention and the direction of my hands. Hiding from the light or from the gaze of the viewer, they see a 'phenomenon', an undefinable figure, while at the same time I look for intimacy with the viewer. I also play with Brancusi's controlling attitude: I decide what the audience sees by creating only one point of view from where you can see this 'phenomenon'.



the eYe in the light in the eYe © images Alexandra Bertels

In addition to the Brancusi project, I'm working on *The Edge*, a new research project in which I will explore ways of dealing with the limits of the body, sometimes extreme, like the rituals of Filipino healers who operate with bare hands. By researching practices like holistic medicine, hypnosis and 'fouloscopie' (the studies of crowds), I'm seeking again for different ways to relate to the body and its limits.