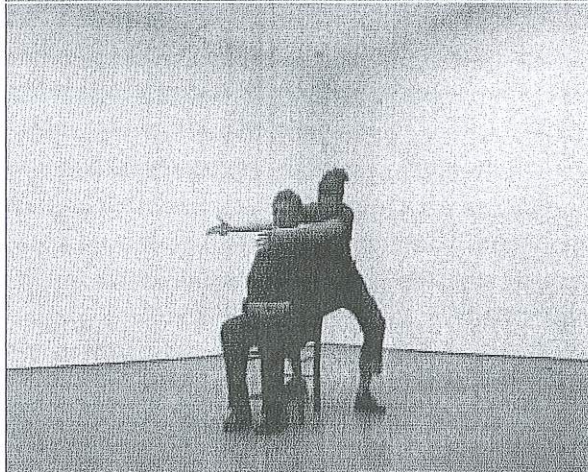
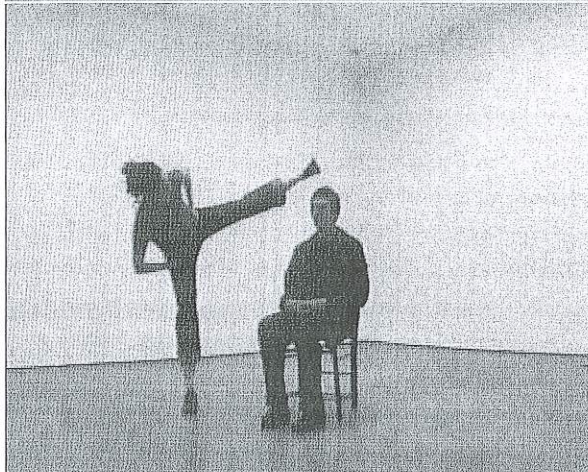
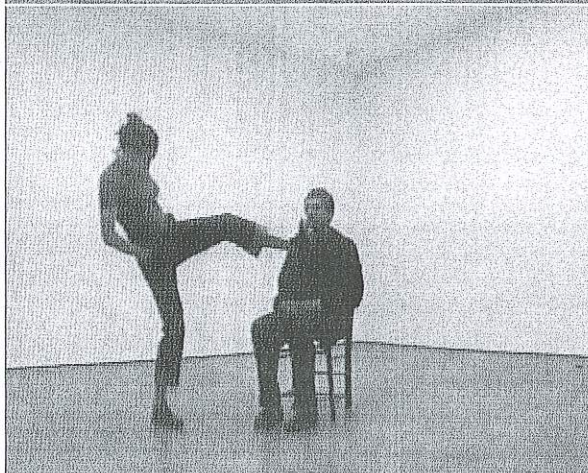
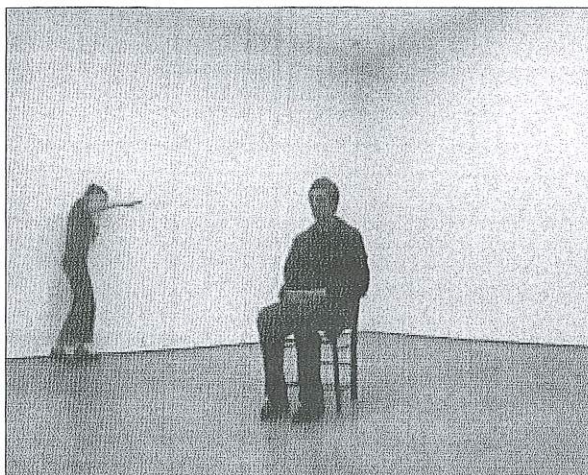


La Chaise. Boris Charmatz and Julia Cima



DIALOGUES ON BLINDNESS

Jeroen Peeters

In the previous issue of *Dance Theatre Journal*, Jeroen Peeters talked to Lisa Nelson about her *Tuning Scores* and to Alexander Baervoets, Lin Snelling and Andrew Harwood about their *Blind* improvisation project. Both share an interest in investigating the limitations of our perception, knowledge and opinions in relation to visibility and the visual. Here this series of conversations concerning sight and working 'blind' continues.

III. BORIS CHARMATZ

Working on oneself

Since his first works in the mid-1990s, the French dancer and choreographer Boris Charmatz has been deconstructing the allegedly pictorial nature of the medium of dance and questioning the customary perceptual behaviour it brings about. Through strategies of physical limitation and obstruction of the gaze, Charmatz came to explore perception as a discursive site and spurred an awareness of the viewer's mental activities. As a concept, blindness has been with Charmatz on this trajectory, to gain a more central position in recent works and projects. In 2002 he created with the dancer Julia Cima the small performance *La Chaise*, in which blindness is an obstinate figure that raises questions about the relation between visual perception and imagination. For the project *Entraînements*, a collaboration with Siemens Arts Program in Paris in September 2003, Charmatz organised several events accessible for blind people, including a version with 'audio description' of his *héâtre-élévision* (2002) and an invitation to the choreographer Benoît Lachambre to create a special event for a mixed audience of blind and sighted people. To specifically address the issue of blindness in his work, I interviewed Charmatz in September 2004 and July 2005, of which the bulk is printed here.

In *La Chaise*, a chair stands in the middle of a gallery space, on which a spectator may sit with his eyes closed while Charmatz and Cima improvise a short dance performance for them. The purpose is a 'suggested dance' in which the dancers try to elicit a change in the sitter's experience and attitude without any physical contact. The audience's viewing experience increases: they see both the explosive dancing by Charmatz and Cima and the restrained attitude of the blind witness. All the possible sensations the sitter experiences as a result of the uncomfortable proximity of the performers challenge the spectator to an extreme empathy that also knocks his own viewing experience off balance. This means that at the same time the spectator is looking, trying to distance himself from his looking and to analyse it, and then confronting this looking with various assumptions regarding the experience of the blind spectator.

What *La Chaise* is able to evoke with perfect sharpness is a juxtaposition of the actual viewing experience and the mental theatre concerning this viewing; a play of impressions and projections that is actually always a part of dance. Charmatz has a formula for it: 'Mental reconstruction, that is the heart of the matter when you are engaged in dance. We see, hear and feel, and this sensory input is important, but it is the processing of all this data, the work done by the memory afterwards and the whole mental world we create on this basis that are at its heart. So in my investigation of blindness the question is, how can you modify one's viewing experience? In *La Chaise* we try to stimulate the active perceptive process of the spectator with closed eyes. He may for example pay more attention to the dancers' breathing, their tiredness, odour and body warmth, but we are still mainly concerned with his mental reconstruction of the dance going on around him. At the same time there are also people watching, who may in their turn also sit on the chair. So the spectator has direct access to what is happening, and also an indirect access: he imagines what the sitter in front of him is experiencing. In fact you even see what he is experiencing because his attitude radiates attention, fear or irritation. So on this point we literally make mental reconstruction processes visible. *La Chaise* shows not only the image, but also what it brings about: the theatre of vision, that which is taking place beyond what one sees.'

This mental choreography of projection and suspense touches the core of Charmatz's work: 'While we are trying to understand what someone is experiencing, while we guess and predict what is going to happen, we are actively working on ourselves, and constantly have our own potential and limits in view. Perhaps we want the dancer to do things we cannot do ourselves, perhaps the opposite. Perhaps our imagination or our memory is inadequate to the task of predicting what will or may occur. In fact it's nothing other than working on oneself while looking at others.'

Visual deconstruction, mental reconstruction

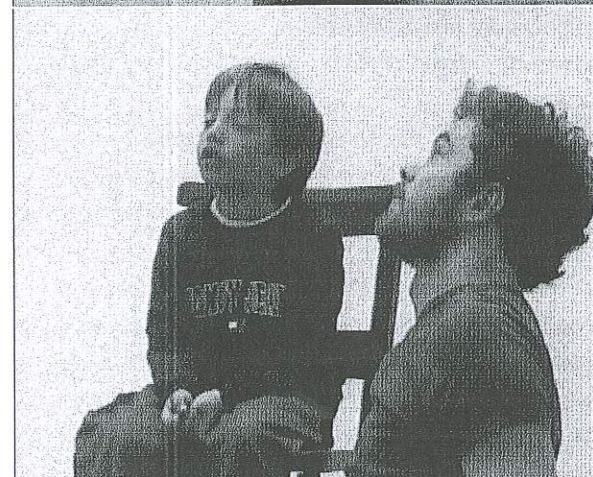
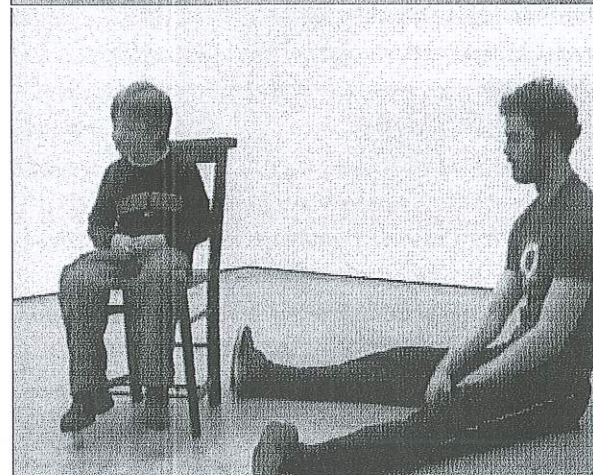
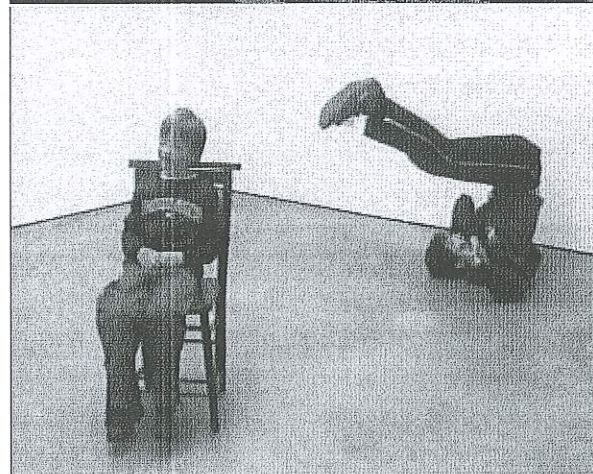
Already in *A bras le corps* (1993) the notion of an indirect access to what is happening on stage was central: placed around the four sides of a small oblong dance floor, all the spectators not only had a different viewpoint, they all actively produced impressions of the other viewers' perceptions. Similarly in the group piece *Con forts fleuve* (1999), Charmatz worked on 'brouillage', on disturbing and clouding the view of the performance and the bodies on stage: the performers' heads are wrapped in trousers, blackouts regularly cut the performance, the spoken text fragments are distorted, at the end a pile of blankets comes down from the ceiling to eventually cover the whole stage.

'When I presented the concept of this work to possible producers, they often replied that I would destroy the essence of a show, which is "to show". In that sense, nakedness on stage is still regarded as an ultimate way of showing. So why still make performances if you want to break with this tradition?' Charmatz continues: 'You may go to a performance with the expectation to see dancers on a well-lit stage, preferably with an impressive dance that radiates enough to reach the spectators in the last rows. When you cut all that, you don't end up with an antiperformance, rather with a hyperperformance: when you can't see everything, the performance urges an awareness of what is going on behind it, it confronts you with the active reconstruction that constitutes your viewing process. Indirect access doesn't mean that the body is absent, it rather makes you estimate on the basis of partial elements where and what the body is. This makes the body a question and a real event for both performers and viewers.'

'Provoking a shift in the visual perception of dance was first of all a way to state that dance is not a merely pictorial medium. That's the traditional doxa of dance: the dancer trains to create a more effective and beautiful body, the performance is a means to present the resulting perfect image of one's own body. In dance you see the image of a constructed body. But by making this aspect absolute, other aspects are disguised: dance produces sound, bodies produce heat, dancers are not mute but do speak a lot in the studio or dressing rooms, etc. Why would you hide all that in order to proclaim the visual as the essence of dance? That's where my interest in creating a different access to the performance initially comes from.'

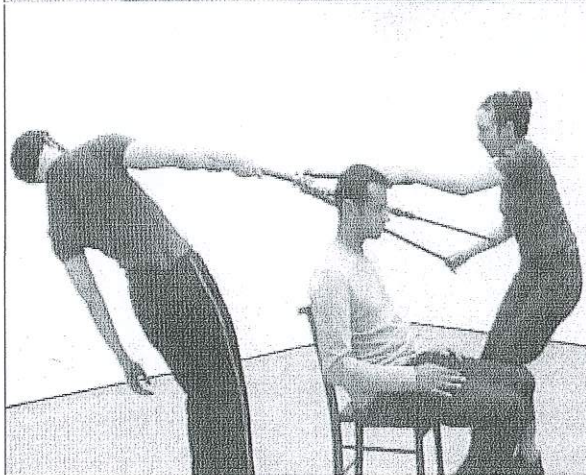
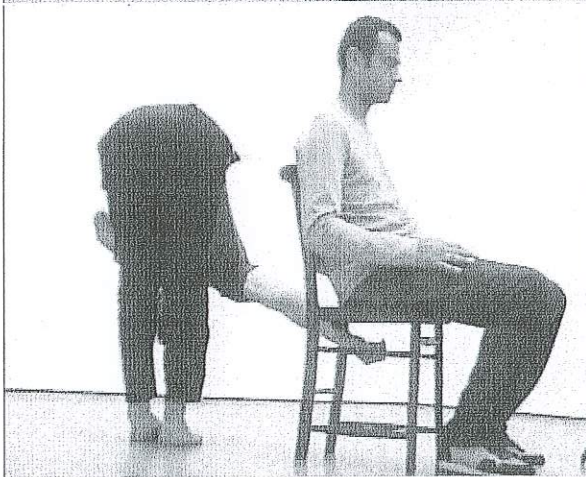
Not only do visual expectations and canonical references haunt the production and perception of dance, also the experience of an indirect access to what happens on stage is a rather common experience, as Charmatz points out. 'When you go to Théâtre de la Ville in Paris to see Pina Bausch, you actually don't see that much. One thing is that you might sit very remote from the stage and see only part of what is happening. And yet you have an 'idea' of what is happening through what you project: information and assumptions you have on Pina Bausch's work, earlier viewing experiences you may rely upon... all of which allows you perfectly to produce a Pina Bausch performance on the spot, in your head, although you actually see rather little. In the end you see what you already know: what you expect the performance to be like is confronted with elements you receive through looking, and this cognitive dissonance or reinforcement is what makes the performance an unforgettable experience.'

On the brink of visual deconstruction and mental reconstruction the concept of blindness surfaces again. Charmatz: 'There is a resonance between blindness and the act of mental reconstruction, where you have to estimate what is around you. You can't see, but you can still hear, touch or smell elements and then create a mental world on the basis of all these perceptions that are not considered as complete or whole. But is a regular look complete? Do you ever have an entire perception of reality? No, our perception of reality is always



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partial. You can use blindness as a tool to understand that even when you are fully sighted your perception of reality is a partial one. When you see, you see only what you can process, you see only what you want to see. Regarded this way sighted people don't even differ so much from blind people: both have a restricted perception. Blind people develop vision in an alternative way, which is, despite their sensory impairment, a complex and positive mental process; their approach of vision isn't just an empty page. A common statement on blindness is that when you close your eyes you increase the acuteness of the other senses. It's not a theme I've been working on. Working around blindness doesn't mean for me to mainly explore the non-visual area of sound, odour and touch, but to work differently with mental images.'

Dances not to be seen

Blindness features as a concept in Charmatz' work, but does he have experience in collaboration with blind people? One of the central characters in the 'pseudo-performance' *héâtre-élévision*, a video installation to be visited by one person at the time, is a blind piano tuner. He is tuning an entire piano, which provides a layer of both imagery and sound throughout the work. Charmatz: 'For *héâtre-élévision* I wanted to work with a piano and use music by the Russian modernist composer Galina Ustvolskaya. As a counter-balance I was looking for another layer of sound in order to connect each dance part or space in the film with a different sound. So at the moment you don't see the dance anymore due to the editing of the images, the dance still continues in the soundtrack. Thus the tuning of a piano became one of the elements in the work and I was looking for a piano tuner to create that footage. Amélie Couillaud, who used to work with us, introduced me to Philippe Bailleul, a great piano tuner. He had interest in the project and joined us. That he is blind was a coincidence, I wasn't specifically looking for a blind piano tuner. In France as well as in many other countries, it is rather common that piano tuners are blind people.'

The participation of a blind performer in *héâtre-élévision* raised the question of how the video-installation could be made accessible for him and for other blind people. Eventually the collabora-

tion lead to the organisation of *Dances not to be seen* and other events accessible for blind people within the project *Entraînements*, including a radio play workshop on France Culture radio and the publishing of postcards with instructions by William Forsythe printed in Braille.

'The first thing we developed was a version of *héâtre-élévision* for blind people, that is with audio description,' says Charmatz. Audio description is an additional narration track for blind or visually impaired viewers of visual media such as film, available in movie theatres via a wireless headset. The description narrator talks through the presentation and describes what is happening on the screen. On the particular nature of the audio description, Charmatz says: 'We know description can't be neutral, and yet audio description is an attempt at it: a very flat and impersonal way of describing by an almost neutral voice. The voice is clearly not speaking as the actors and tries to not be emotionally entrained – it's the soundtrack and dialogue of the film itself that brings the emotions. Moreover the description has a precise timing in order to match images and sound. We gave the DVD of *héâtre-élévision* to the audio description studio as if it were a Hollywood production and they made a description of the dance and the lighting.'

That the piano tuner in *héâtre-élévision* happened to be blind was a coincidence that doesn't determine the reading of the work. But in what way did this collaboration influence the working process or Charmatz' view on blindness? 'I never took the decision to work with blind people on blindness. It was more about trying out different things and blindness came up as an issue with potential,' Charmatz reacts. 'The idea behind *héâtre-élévision* was to make the viewers look at a highly fragmented piece that they had to reconstruct mentally, their heads being the ultimate space where the choreography is taking place. Interestingly, we as performers had a similar experience, we also had to face this kind of mental process. The team of collaborators had to connect several disparate elements, such as a blind piano tuner, the music of Ustvolskaya, dances in very different spaces etc. Moreover, the scenes are edited into one work, but were filmed separately, so that Philippe Bailleul or Myriam

Lebreton never met the other dancers in the studio. We all knew about the participation of the others, but rather on a mental level. In the end it's only in the video installation itself that all the collaborators come together. I like the idea of a performance with several performers that only meet in the piece itself and not during the working process. It's a virtual meeting so to speak, which raises interesting questions. The meeting is only what you think it is.'

Apart from the intricacies of the working process of *héâtre-élévision*, Charmatz is reluctant to address blindness beyond the conceptual meaning it has taken in his work. How to create through the work a discursive space that deals with blindness, without being trapped into a naïve humanism or exoticism? 'That's indeed an issue for me, although I need to think more about it. I don't want to claim to have worked a lot with a blind person, as if the work would suddenly become more interesting through such a curiosity. I think that blindness is a concept as much as a real handicap. Of course it's necessary to consider the impediment, but perhaps the main handicap is how we regard the handicap. If society wouldn't regard blindness to be a problem, it wouldn't be one. We would just organise things differently, so that blind people would be more comfortable in the society. The way we think about it is what produces the problem. In the future I want to continue working with Philippe, but I wouldn't be comfortable with the idea of casting a blind person. I don't want to consider people only through one specific quality which is to be blind or to be handicapped or to be a good dancer. That's not the way a collaboration starts, I prefer to see how things come and grow. I meet someone, we discuss and two days later I wonder whether he knows a certain poem and ... it's a mixture of interests and feelings that in the end makes a piece. But certainly not a casting of people.'

Boris Charmatz and Dimitri Chamblas will present *À bras le corps* and *Les Disparates* at The Place on 29 and 30 October as part of the France Moves season within Dance Umbrella.

Jeroen Peeters reviews dance for the Flemish daily *De Morgen* and is editor of www.sarma.be – an online platform for dance and performance criticism. He is a collaborator with Meg Stuart/ Damaged Goods and Paul Deschanel Movement Research Group. www.pauldeschanel.be