

Speculative Methodology for Darkness

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the “lights” of science and rationality has lost its validity in the past decades.ⁱ Tellingly, where in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer have explicitly associated freedom to light, Lepecki now alludes to the darkrooms in present-day discotheques to indicate the potential for freedom that lies in darkness rather than light in our societies of control (*Ibidem*). He advocates for aesthetics that would exist far away from “photological imperatives”, or instrumental rationality, and that would “find ways to reenchant experience through darkness” (Lepecki 71; 79). When understood positively, and not merely as light’s negative, darkness becomes full of potential.ⁱⁱ As a realm of mystery that offers space – freedom – for things that are not yet fully named, grasped and reified by instrumental rationality, darkness could have the potential to re-enchant experience.

Evelien Cammaert’s way of working resonates with what Lepecki (2016) and Anna Vujanović (2017, 2018) each in their own terms have identified as a new paradigm, trend, or at least interest in contemporary choreography and performance where anthropocentric and individualistic organizations around a demiurge-like artist-creator retreat in favour of more horizontal ways of relating.ⁱⁱⁱ Things, that unlike objects escape the grasp and control of instrumental rationality, acquire agency while the artist somehow abandons her position as subject who controls the situations, and places herself alongside things. In darkness, space is given for unexpected or unknown things to emerge. Like photographic darkrooms, the black hole of Cammaert’s creation process is a dark space where things can appear – not objects, but *things* that somehow escape our grasp and understanding, things that were there already, but were latent, hidden, not yet defined or perceivable. Just like in dark rooms, it is important that these things (images, ideas or thematic threads) don’t get prematurely exposed to light, or reason; and the light, or reason, should be meticulously measured.

Darkness and time

Now, what we call a “methodology for darkness” is a way of doing artistic research and creation that safeguards space for darkness. It does so, first and foremost, by slowing down. Where light is fast – one can think of the optical fibre, the speed of light, or simply the electric illumination that makes work possible after daytime in an accelerated, hyperactive society —, slowness seems to carry an important potential for tuning into darkness; and *vice versa*: darkness easily induces slowing down. Indeed, the dark doesn’t favour hyperactivity but invites to sleep, rest, hibernation, looking at the stars, making love or listening to the sounds of the forest. If we see darkness as a realm of not-knowing, not-(yet)-being-defined and thus a free space for images, sensations or atmospheres to emerge as they uniquely appear in a particular moment rather than how we think we know they are, then slowness is a basic prerequisite to bring about the contemplative, mindful and sensitive awareness that makes it possible to “see” (or better: sense) in the dark. This slow, contemplative and sensitive awareness

Speculative Methodology for Darkness is an artistic research method that sees its own process as a black hole. It puts into practice Evelien Cammaert's desire to start each new work without knowing what will present itself in and at the end of the tunnel of the creation process. Even though every creation arguably resembles a black hole, in dossiers and applications as well as on websites or in programme books, projects are often presented according to what they are *about* – what they research, want to present, or work towards. *Speculative Methodology for Darkness* proposes an alternative to this habit by explicitly putting a focus on methodology, process, and the unknown rather than on topic or intended outcome. By seeing the creative process as a black hole, this method tries to delay the moment in which information about a final product will be given. Methodology and working process themselves are core objects of reflection in Evelien Cammaert's work. To describe her methodology seems like an effective way to approach her work especially since her performative works themselves often appear as presentations of a working process (this is, for example, very clear in *Grammatica*, 2018). By taking a close look at what this *Speculative Methodology for Darkness* entails as a research and creation method, this text hopes to function as a tool to present Cammaert's next creation without prematurely outlining expected results.

A creation process according to Evelien Cammaert's *Speculative Methodology for Darkness* is a black hole that starts with the first residency and ends at the premiere. The black hole between these two points in time is a region of *darkness*. It is a somehow scary place of uncertainty, where room is given to what we don't know and what is not (yet) defined. Instead of a workspace where an intended object is created or a predefined topic investigated, it opens space for things to emerge. Unlike the blank page, the black hole is not empty. Quite on the contrary, it is full of myriad of things although some might have become untraceable. It absorbs everything that enters its gravitational field, from weather conditions, moods and the sandwich that was brought for lunch, to fascinations that are always subconsciously present.

Framework

In *Singularities* (2016), performance theorist André Lepecki builds on thoughts by Gilles Deleuze to develop a concept of darkness as a place of freedom and singularity. He refers to Jonathan Crary (24/7, 2014) to describe how contemporary society is permanently illuminated, not only literally because people work like crazy, day and night, but also metaphorically: since Enlightenment, light has been associated to science, knowledge, and rational understanding – the “lights of reason” that gradually triumph over “obscure” superstition and reverie. Lepecki uses the terms “photologics” and “photophilia” to describe a drive to understand, name, logically and rationally grasp the world and thereby exert control over it (59-60). Yet the modern promise of acquiring ever more freedom for the human condition by controlling the world thanks to

characterizes Evelien Cammaert's mode of working from beginning to end. It brings about a capacity to listen with all senses and in detail to phenomena as well as one's own experience of them. Contrary to recognizing visually, identifying and classifying – in other words: bringing to the “light” of the rational and the graspable –, contemplative listening is a passive mode of action that requires slowing down simply because the right time for things and experiences to appear to one's reflective perception needs to be respected. Of course, these slow ways of working ask for specific organizations of space and time. Sometimes they go with a need for isolation. That's probably why Cammaert preferably pursues residencies in isolated, green places.

In Cammaert's black hole, darkness has much to do with time. Uncertainty about what will be the next step or what will happen the very next moment doesn't only refrain from controlling the process, it also brings attention sharply to the here and now. What is present now? Which desires? What sensations? What is the present context in which the work will emerge? What is at stake in this context? In each present moment of the process, past and future potentially merge. Past, latent fascinations come up from the darkness and impose themselves; memories colour the experience of a present image. A near future is also constantly present as that which makes the research and creation a process that unfolds progressively through time. This future is dark in the sense of unknown. Each next point in time remains potentially open. A constant critical reflection of the experience and process makes it possible at each moment to change, revoke. No decision is permanently binding. Nothing is necessary.

Guiding questions and working phases

Next to slowness, Cammaert's methodology for darkness is guided by questions involving memory (“do I feel like I have been here/seen this before?”), intuition (“what do I feel like?”), attraction (“is this an image I would like to live in?”), listening applied to all senses (“am I touched?”) and mystery (“does this fascinate me?”). These questions are precise enough to function as guides through the black hole of the creation process, yet they are also vague enough to put a hold on instrumental reasoning and leave space for things to happen as they need to. They try and preserve space for the unknown, offer alternatives to strategic choice making, and resist a steady progression towards pre-made projections as to what this process should lead to.

Very concretely, Evelien Cammaert generally works in three phases. First of all, she photographs. Through photography (but also scenography and live performance) the material Evelien Cammaert works with is atmosphere. Originally a meteorological term referring to the envelope of air around the planet that carries the weather, the word “atmosphere” indicates a mood that is “in the air”. According to Gernot Böhme (2013), atmospheres have a vague ontological status, somewhere between objective and subjective reality.^{iv} They are that

“something more” or *je ne sais quoi*; something vague, intangible, and not fully graspable or expressible. But despite their vague nature, they also always carry a specific character (cold, warm, serious, holiday-ish, cosy) that communicates a particular feeling to subjects. Approached from the point of view of the subject, atmospheres thus are vague yet characteristic realities that affect emotional and cognitive states through bodily-sensuous perception. They touch something in us and can bring up memories, emotions or bodily sensations because we recognize their specific combination of light, colour and texture. On the other hand, the centuries-old practice of stage design proves that atmospheres can also be approached from the objective world. They can be “made” or generated indirectly by setting the conditions, manipulating and organizing objective material, sound and light. For Böhme, it is not the formal and material properties of things that generate atmospheres but what he calls their *ekstases*: the way in which things express their essence outward, the way they radiate, the ways they step outside oneself, or yet in other words, their very specific “tone” or “odour”. Maybe this idea of *ekstases* can help to understand why, for Cammaert, the quality of the physical presence at the moment and place of photographing is crucial. At the moment when the photographer is experiencing *something*, something is also captured by the camera. And this *something* will contribute to the specific character of the atmosphere that will emanate from the resulting image. The image and its atmosphere arise from a dialogue between the subjective experience of the photographer and the objective reality chemically created by her camera that has its own body of perception. This dialogue determines whether the photographer should press the shutter release button or not and defines the image that will or will not emerge, as well as the atmosphere that will inhabit it.

Slightly transformed by the singular touch of the device that has been used, the photograph, once revealed (printed on paper, digitally visualised on a screen or projected through a diapositive) gives rise to a second phase of work: looking at images. In his book on photography *Camera Lucida* (1980, 2000) Roland Barthes beautifully distinguishes the immense multiplicity of photographic images that surround him in two groups: on one hand those that to him evoke indifference, irritation and sometimes even disgust, and on the other those that evoke “an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labour too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (19). He chooses the term *adventure* to describe what happens in the second case because the picture “comes” or “happens” to him. So, when this or that picture “advenes” to him, it *animates* him, and therefore he animates it back. Referring to Sartre, Barthes suggests that when a picture “advenes” or “speaks” to him, he mentally foregrounds the photographed object as existing or having existed. In contrast, pictures without *adventure* may well represent existing objects or persons, but he will look at them as mere images, sometimes not even really making effort of fully creating the mental image – “a tree” or “a soldier” rather than *that* tree or *that* man in uniform – stating neither their existence nor their non-existence. Very similarly to Barthes

practice of looking at photographs, in a second phase of working Cammaert takes time to let the photographed images speak. She is attentive to their singularity, and observes whether they bring up memories, fascination or simply touch her. This experience then motivates a selection of images that are gradually forming some kind of whole.

Finally, a third and last phase researches how the selected images can be presented in a performance setting. Rehearsal and presentation spaces enter in dialogue with the images. The spaces need to be appropriated by the work. Pieces by Evelien Cammaert therefore always have a somehow site-specific character. Collected and selected images, space, scenography and the quality of presence and movement of Cammaert during performances jointly – maybe through what Böhme calls their *ekstases* – bring about a characteristic atmosphere. Beyond showing photographed images in one way or another, this atmosphere to some degree also makes present the working process itself. It stages the mode of working that has been practised in the black hole, while making sensible some of the richness of experience that emerged inside it. The performer hosts a particular time and space with a particular physical concentration and invites the spectator to spend some time there, inside the black hole.

Let us conclude by stressing that the three phases should rather be seen as planes or layers of work than a strict chronological step-by step. Each phase starts one after the other but isn't over once the next one has started. Indeed, this methodology is a *speculative* one. It is speculative not only in the literal sense of having mirrors (inside reflex cameras) and “watching” (from the Latin *speculare*: to watch secretly, to spy on) into dark, mysterious or hidden places (like doctors do with a *speculum*) at the core of its practice, but especially because it is radically open. It proposes potential futures, always in reflection and open to redefinition. Where artists are often asked to present (and justify?) their work by describing *what* the final product will be like, *Speculative Methodology for Darkness* is inhabited by a resistance to decide too soon on the outcome of a work. Thereby, it goes against a certain demand or even pressure from supporting structures and institutions to do so.

This proposition is especially delicate in the current political situation where art, and especially experimental and thus potentially critical art is being purposefully discouraged by a drastic reduction of funds that make its practice viable. In this political context as well as in the light of today's ecological crisis, it feels ever so important to defend ways of working that resist modes of organizing ourselves driven by a desire to control and dominate human as well as other-than-human entities for the sake of whatever productivity and efficiency.

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ⁱ Read Jonathan Crary *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Byung-Chul Han *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger* (2017), and Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (2010).

ⁱⁱ When considering the potential of darkness when it is understood positively, Lepecki includes racial blackness. He gives a political dimension to his thoughts on darkness that connects white imperialism and racism to the values of enlightenment and criticizes our society of control. (Lepecki, 59)

ⁱⁱⁱ “Yet we cannot speak about a new, robust paradigm, which is just replacing the perspective. The attempts at creating landscape on stage partly come from deliberate experiments with democracy, while partly requiring a truly new epistemic of perceiving the space around us, be it mental, physical, emotional, political or social. The dramaturgical tactics of co-existence in that space as one of its elements largely emerge from probing that new, post- Anthropocene, so to speak, epistemic. They are uncertain. They promise new beginnings. We may best understand them as prefigurative artistic experiments for a time that is coming” (Vujanović 8).

^{iv} In his article “The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres” (2013) Gernot Böhme makes of the elusive term “atmosphere” an actually workable concept. Böhme takes the discipline of stage set as paradigm to study the possibility of making atmospheres with objective reality. Since the art of staging has become a basic feature of society (staging shops, festivals, personalities, sportive and even political events), this paradigm exceeds now by far the realm of the theatre (Böhme 6).