

A new kind of freedom

Karin Cerny

How can our gaze upon the female body be explored in a new way – beyond the ascriptions of voyeurism, clichés and outdated roles that are commonly used?

The three daring performers, Florentina Holzinger, Eisa Jocson and Ofelia Jarl Ortega provide exciting artistic answers.

A new kind of freedom is a commissioned text about the three artists, Florentina Holzinger, Eisa Jocson and Ofelia Jarl Ortega. The text was written in German, and translated to English by Caroline Wellner.

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He wears cowboy boots and too-tight shorts, chews gum in a casual manner and his dream body has been toned to perfection in the gym. Each of his erotically charged movements is stylised. As if in slow motion, his dancing appears to be self-contained, even though he knows that his audience has come to get turned on.

In Manila, the capital of the Philippines, such red-light performers - the macho dancers - have a long tradition. Originally intended for a gay audience, today an increasing number of affluent women visit these nightclubs as well. But what happens when this sexy macho dance style is transferred to a theatre stage? When a female dancer imitates stereotypes of masculinity?

Macho Dancer is also the title of an equally fascinating and disturbing solo performance in which Filipina choreographer Eisa Jocson, (born 1986), takes on the role of a radically androgynous figure. As part of her preparation for the role she embarked on a gym training programme to build up her muscles. Each of her gestures reproduces an artificially exaggerated image of masculinity, as she brings the nightclub and its patterns of movement into the limelight. In contrast to the Chippendales, who are more widely known in Europe, and who use energetic hip-hop songs, the macho dancers opt for more pathos in their selection of music (from Metallica to Bonnie Tyler) and they move more slowly. She describes the fairly challenging moves "Like a chewing gum that expands and then

contracts again.” There are no classes available to learn this dance style. Jocson had to ask the strippers themselves, who were rather sceptical at first. Over time, they began to trust her and were gratified that someone valued their dancing skills.

Change of scenery: In *Apollo*, Florentina Holzinger stands naked at the front of the stage and hammers an eight-centimetre long nail into her nose. Her colleague, Evelyn Frantti, also naked, inserts a disturbingly long balloon into her throat, which seems to wander through her body. She pulls the empty shell from her vagina.

There is usually an additional layer to the performances by Viennese artist, Florentina Holzinger, (born 1986). The relationship between pain and pleasure is close. Holzinger loves theatrical tricks, which she frequently borrows directly from the generally disparaged world of the circus and freak shows. She attempts the kind of stunts you see in movies. The extreme performer, who studied in the Netherlands, has never cared much about genre boundaries: exhausting acrobatics and the lifting of heavy weights, like in the on-trend sport CrossFit, are interrupted by almost syrupy beautiful, dramatic images; and pornographic scenes (an anal polonaise with dildos) look disturbingly innocent.

The commonality of the two different performer is evident from these two pieces; both Jocson and Holzinger put the body to the test, they demand a lot

from it. They don't go easy on themselves. Instead, they test their physical limits, seizing domains traditionally associated with masculinity in the process. And they also have a penchant for popular culture. Even Holzinger's first piece, *Kein Applaus für Scheiße* (2011), co-created with Dutch artist Vincent Riebeek, was marked by the pop-cultural nonchalance of songs by Rihanna juxtaposed with an ironic reinterpretation of classic body art from the 1960s. What had previously been shocking suddenly displayed a new casualness. When Holzinger slid like a playful child through a puddle of urine made by her colleague, this seemed infectiously and absurdly naïve. When Riebeek vomited blue liquid, it looked strangely beautiful. Provocation had rarely ever been more fun.

Both performers are interested in those at the margins of society. Holzinger is fascinated by freak shows featuring women, like those presented at fairs in the past. Jocson studied fine arts and worked as a ballet dancer in Manila, but she wanted to break free from the classical form, including gender roles, to explore all that dance could be and how much one could shape and change one's own body. At first, she attended a pole dance class, as a kind of hobby. Jocson was intrigued by how this dance style, which has such strong connotations with femininity, spilled from the strip clubs into fitness, and shifted perceptions: suddenly, business women were paying to do

something which strippers did to earn a living. In her performance *Death of a Pole Dancer* (2011), Jocson explored the way we look at this erotic dance style and how far she could move away from the clichés we associate with the pole.

Both Jocson and Holzinger undoubtedly engage in feminist field research. They initiate a pleasurable appropriation and reinterpretation of traditional images of women: *Apollon*, for instance, refers to George Balanchine's ballet *Apollon musagète*, first performed in 1928. The ancient Greek God of the Arts danced to music by Igor Stravinsky, leading three female muses up Mount Parnassus. The choreography was "crazy beautiful", Holzinger once said in an interview, but the gender roles annoyed her. This is why the protagonists of her piece are six women. None of them is a classically trained dancer, which lends a certain 'sexy-rough' and at the same time fragile quality to the pas-de-deux scenes. Besides Holzinger, members of the naked women's team include Renée Copraij, a long-time collaborator with Jan Fabre, and Evelyn Frantti, a sideshow performer. Holzinger takes a pragmatic approach to all performers being naked. "Nakedness rarely irritates anymore. For me, it's about transparency in regard to the dancers' bodies. People fantasise a lot more when things are hidden than when they are made aware right from the start that, after all, bodies have genitals."

Many young performers are currently focusing on ways to disrupt gender roles; how to provide the often voyeuristically presented body, in dance, with a new radicalness and self-determination, and how to counter an external sexist gaze. Swedish choreographer Ofelia Jarl Ortega, (born 1990, Malmö) addresses these related issues in *Shredder*. Why is the female body perceived more often than not as an object rather than a subject? There is a need for new discourses on stage, new subversive forms of appropriation, especially when it comes to female sexuality. Ortega plays with the aesthetics of porn prevalent in our hypersexualised world. Three bodies must find their way in pulsating light; erotic undertones send irritating signals, sometimes menacing, sometimes pleasantly inviting. The sound creates a peculiar atmosphere, a kind of concert with live DJ and low-pitch auto-tuned vocals, which frequently makes her sound like a man, play an important role in Ortega's works. The stage is a club, which is, after all, always conceptualised as a utopian space where gender roles and social status can be discarded, where an unbridled physicality unbound by convention is celebrated in the metropolises of the world at the weekend. In Ortega's piece, the club is both: liberation, exploration of one's own identity and a means of self-discovery, but also the perfect stage for young, desirable bodies to present themselves, as if in a meat market. Her work is a struggle for female self-assertiveness under the harshness of the strobe light.

But how can the sexualisation that turns women into objects be avoided on stage? “It’s okay to want to see beautiful bodies on stage. But I try to reflect on this view, to make it a subject for discussion”, Holzinger says, “audience attendants that the ‘leather jackets’ – that’s what we, amongst ourselves, call the men who place their jackets on their laps – should not take a seat in the first two rows. In the case of *Apollon* we even asked ourselves if we wanted men to attend at all, but that would have excluded men with a different mindset.”

The new feminism on stage is not limited to the challenging of gender roles, however. Jocson is as much a chameleon as a performer. She assumes roles she studied in the real-world of the night: in preparing for *Host* (2015), she toured the clubs in Tokyo where female and transgender hostesses rehearse a submissive, servile form of femininity to attend to and entertain Japanese men. The fact that they first have to study and learn to be ‘women’ is reminiscent of the well-known documentary, *Paris Is Burning* (1990) about the New York voguing scene, in which not only gender, but also social status, is exposed. Jocson turns the screw further in the direction of social criticism and a critique of consumerism; she is concerned with a political foundation. She asks, in concrete terms: which roles do we take on when we provide various services – from erotic dancing in nightclubs through to patient care? Which long-established images of women and

men are we expected to reproduce in certain roles? Who gets what kinds of jobs in the first place and why is one hired – or, in fact, not hired?

Host was Jocson’s first piece to deal with Filipinos going to Japan for work. The issue of migration is even more clearly the focus in *Princess*. When Hong Kong Disneyland opened in the autumn of 2015, it attracted many artists from the Philippines. At that time, it was more lucrative to dress up as Mickey Mouse or Snow White and entertain children, than to dance as a member of the State Ballet in Manila. And yet no one at Disney wanted to cast Filipinas as princesses – the leading roles were reserved for white performers. Their colleagues had to play zebras, coral and squid. In this regard, *Princess* is an appropriation, at least on stage, of a role that is denied to Jocson’s compatriots in real life owing to the colour of their skin. “In the cartoon film, Snow White is busy doing housework all the time. She cleans, cooks and washes the dishes”, the choreographer analyses. “That’s exactly the kind of work that Filipinas are doing all over the world. They are nurses, caregivers, maids.”

Jocson’s performance lecture *Corponomy* is a good introduction to her body of work. The evening functions like a stock cube, showing all the choreographer’s pieces in a concentrated form. First, she describes a production and then presents some scenes from it. This is far from a dull lecture,

despite what the title might suggest. It's fascinating to see Jocson switch roles as fast as lightning, from a macho dancer to a giggling princess, from a self-confident guy to an obsequious service provider trying to please everyone. The absurdity of these socially prescribed, artificially exaggerated images of women and men becomes all the more obvious when shown in rapid succession. As part of her research for *Snow White*, Jocson studied Disneyworld videos from around the globe, not least to compare the different ways in which the fairy-tale character is presented. "In Paris, *Snow White* was arrogant", she recounts. "In Japan, she was very polite and attentive, and in America she seemed over-excited, as if on drugs. Everything about her was sugar-coated." *Princess* is the first part of her trilogy, *Happyland* that deals with the relationship between work and the performance of happiness in the globalised entertainment industry. Absurdly, 'Happyland' is also the name of a slum in Manila.

The women's artificially subservient smile is simply ridiculous. It's obvious to all those attending the lecture that our gender is the product of (social) learning, there is nothing natural about it. But it also becomes apparent just how extensively performers are marginalised and reduced to certain roles according to the colour of their skin, and how migration is reflected in art. "I don't understand performers who stand about on stage in a sort of underexcited way. Why don't they make use of their

bodies?" Holzinger asks. Her vision of *Apollon* was a kind of *Jackass* with extreme stunts featuring only women.

A grim humour unites all three works. Holzinger, Jocson and Ortega cultivate a dirty, belligerent wit that is extremely contagious and very direct. "The classical ballet elements in the repertoire reproduce antiquated images of women. That's why I try to reinterpret pieces, for example by letting two women dance a pas-de-deux", Holzinger explains her approach. But Holzinger's wild performers also ride naked on a mechanical bull, which they then dismantle and disassemble, wearing welding masks, creating yet another image with an additional layer of meaning; the patriarchy is broken in and then dismantled on the spot.

This is probably another aspect the three works have in common; the artists don't get stuck in criticism but look for a new utopia. Jocson, for example, imagines a world that doesn't marginalise Filipinos by giving leading roles only to white performers. Ortega and Holzinger present a wild, self-determined female sexuality that refuses to be pigeonholed. So it's only fitting that Florentina Holzinger says of the upcoming piece she's currently working on: "Not everything necessarily has to do with gender. That's also my approach for the next show, which will be about genderlessness." The goal is a new freedom on all levels. That's precisely what makes their works so exciting.