

IntegrART Symposium 2019 – Panel discussion “The Way You Look (at me) Tonight: Moving Perspective”

**Prof. Dr. Sandra Umathum**

**The way I look (at you) tonight: a response to “The Way You Look (at me) Tonight”**

The audience members are dispersed on the floor, some sit leaning against the wall, others take their seats in the rows of the auditorium. They are looking from different angles – and see, as audience members do anyway, different things. Or rather: see things differently. The way we look at someone or at something is influenced by who we are and who we have become thanks to our individual features, experiences, skills, knowledge, or interests. Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis underline this fact by offering various kinds of access to their performance.

In the mode of showing and telling, of doing and saying, the audience is taken on a journey over the course of which they encounter two dancers with different physicalities, who introduce us to their individual choreographies, techniques, and capacities that they let interact and engage in dialogue with each other. Claire and Jess bring the abilities, the potentials and limitations of both a disabled as well as a temporarily non-disabled performer body to the stage equally. Without provoking value judgements, they allow the audience to look at different ways of moving, of improvising movement, of taking control over one’s body and weight (or not), of supporting the other person’s movements, of defining what dance and choreography is and can be, of using crutches, or of conceptualising the relationship between a crutch user and their crutches.

When I first watched the performance I witnessed it as a person with only little access to the experiences of people living with crutches – and this is all the more remarkable as I had grown up with a great grand aunt who had a walking impediment. We lived in the same house, we shared the same spaces, she helped taking care of me when I was a child, but her specific walking movements as well as the presence of her one crutch were so familiar to me that it never came to my mind to ask her about the effects the crutches have on her identity or the social interactions she entertains. Over the course of the performance I hear and learn things I could and should have known already, and I speculate on how my aunt, who was born in the second decade of the 20th century and died when I myself was only 15 years old, would have reacted to Claire’s outspokenness and the way she locates queerness in her relationship with the crutches. I imagine how my aunt would most probably have loved Claire’s playful use of the crutches, the way she makes them an integral part of her choreography and the enlargement of the repertoire of walking movement and movements in dance. I look at the performers, but more often than not they redirect my attention back onto myself. I look at them and learn about myself, about the things I did not see back then and do still overlook today.

Right in the beginning of the evening, Jess invites audience members to leave the performance space whenever they feel they need a pee break or any other kind of intermission. Even if they wish to go home before the end of the performance, they are being explicitly allowed to do so. Like the cushions provided for people who feel more relaxed when sitting or lying on the floor, like the appearance of the sign language translator (the third performer, choreographer, dancer on stage), or like the texts

projected onto the screen, this invitation is not just a generous gesture. As it assures access to people who so often feel or *are* in fact excluded and stay more often than not away from theatres, it bears quite a strong political implication – and I wonder, if the performers' research on accessibility has left its marks also in their subsequent pieces.

And then the dramaturgy of the performance. In my opinion it helps to encourage the audience members to take breaks when needed or desired. With its short and loosely connected order of events, this dramaturgy does not affirm the logics of strict sequence or unfractured consistency that ask for the spectator's continuous attention and throw them out of the boat once they dare to indulge in distraction. The dramaturgy of this piece supports distraction by ensuring the spectators' smooth and fast re-entry at any time. I am interested if the concept of crip time was a reference for the composition of the piece and the decision that each single scene does not exceed a couple of minutes only? Alison Kafer writes about crip time: „Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock; crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.“<sup>1</sup> Is the dramaturgy of *The way you look (at me) tonight* meant as a statement against the supremacy of normative time? And all the more against the normative temporalities still dominant in the performing arts?

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Kafer: *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2013, p. 27.