

Photo;Wim Vandekeybus: tumultuous flow of body portrayals.  
(© Annick Geenen)

**Fascinating body portrayals in Wim Vandekeybus' solo performance**  
Anatomic manipulations reveal a captivating record of our time

Pieter T'Jonck

BRUSSELS - *Lichaampje, lichaampje aan de wand ...* (Body, body, on the wall ...) is the second part of Jan Fabre's series of four solo performances entitled *De vier temperamenten* (The four temperaments). In a long monologue, preceded by a carnivalesque dance number and completed by a short film, Wim Vandekeybus gives the audience a rendition of the reality of the body. The production has become a remarkable contemporary record concerning the body. In this production by Jan Fabre, Vandekeybus gives a surprisingly strong and convincing actor's performance at the Kaaithheater.

The central idea is that we only become aware of our body from the looks that other people give it. Such an awareness is thus always only partial. To a certain extent it abstracts from the organs and tissues that are hidden under the skin and constitute the ultimate reality of the body. In a manner of speaking, the continual change (ageing for example) and vulnerability also stay out of the picture.

The disorderly, alienating aspects of the body are suppressed. Nevertheless, it is precisely these aspects that can play an important role, for example in the erotic imagination. When the body rears its head, apparently of its own accord, then all hell breaks loose.

Ever since the Renaissance, since the discovery of blood circulation by Harvey, we have come to find with a certain shock that the body is not a unity that reflects a cosmic order, but a complicated machine that functions separately from the human spirit. At the end of the twentieth century this has given rise to a radically new attitude: the body is no longer accepted as given, but is taken as a producible, manipulable thing that consequently has a producible and manipulable identity.

This causes fear and horror of the monstrous reality behind the "ordinary" surface of the body. In popular visual culture, this horror has acquired a stunning imagery in films such as *Alien*. At the same time, it is becoming a daily reality: shaping, moulding and smoothing the body are widespread practices. Although few go as far as the artist, Orlan, who had her entire body rebuilt.

Wild

In Wim Vandekeybus' monologue, all these aspects and thoughts come to the surface in a tumultuous stream of ideas. There is a surrounding story to structure it all: a photographer manipulated his body for an exhibition full of phantasmic images of the body. The strangest of anatomical constellations are grouped according to the body systems (nerves, skeleton, muscles, etc). The result of this process is that the narrator feels sucked dry by that photography.

The text contains many references to Vandekeybus himself, to Fabre, to the artist Orlan, and to the painter Robert Schultaff, unfortunately disabled in an accident. Although the overall story is a little dry and theoretical, it does serve to direct the wild, often distinctly erotic imagery of the production.

Initially, we see Vandekeybus as a kind of ape man roaring loudly above a loudspeaker, dancing to Frank Zappa's "*I'm a dancing fool*", an unmistakable reference to his own career as a choreographer. After this amusing beginning, follows a monologue that is intensified by an accompanying ritual: chained to two microphones Vandekeybus has to obediently allow his body to be painted by a woman. First, all the colours of the rainbow make him unrecognisable, then a black layer is applied, as if only the negative of him remains.

The end is a film in which we see Vandekeybus dancing wildly against a highly contrasting background. All the surprising aspects of the preceding performance (the body as a painting canvas, a superior mechanism, but also as the place where strange subcutaneous processes take place) are brought up again in this brief review. It is a visual demonstration of what was dealt with earlier in the text. A fascinating end.

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- This evening at 20.30 in the *Kaaitheaterstudio's* at *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Vaakstraat 81* in Brussels. Resumes in the autumn.