

A solo dance piece

Petra

by Berit Einemo Frøysland



Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant



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2 Introduction Petra

Petra is a solo dance piece on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (1972). The film is a triangle melodrama about a successful fashion designer's tragic love affair with her younger model and *protégée*, Karin, under the constant observation of her dutiful and servile assistant, Marlene. The solo deals with the narrative of the *figure* of Petra von Kant: a peculiar and complex personage from the Fassbinder universe, formed through the embodiment of poses and gestures from Hollywood stars, Greek nymphs and fashion models – *»deine Figur ist dein Kapital«* Petra advises Karin – filtered through film history's male gaze as well as the director's queer-leaning lens.

Petra employs improvisational and experiential somatic tasks that allow to dissect, embody and stage the entangled images, gestures and stereotypes that compose von Kant's performance of femininity. Through a physical translation of Fassbinder's character, the solo interrogates the reasons why one may maintain the performance of the *figura*; probes the ways in which it may also be construed as a plastic, dynamic and living form; and explores the possibilities of resistance to its incessant molding. In a long-term creation process investigating everyday rituals, crisis and spectacle, Berit Einemo Frøysland has invested her body in the performance of the labour involved in incorporating, maintaining, slipping in and out of constructions of femininity.

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Interview with the artist

AL Anna Leon
dramaturg

BF Berit Einemo Frøysland
artist

AL Fassbinder's film is a *huis clos* that only includes female characters. Among them, Petra displays an elaborate performance of a certain femininity through a combination of clothing, accessories, gestures and vocal acts, embodying attitudes present in cinematographic and visual culture.

How does this construction of a female character relate to your own experience?

(How) does the piece stage the distance between Petra's embodiment of female identity and your own?

BF When I watched the film for the first time, I immediately had the sensation of recognizing myself in her. As a child, while playing with my friends, we would take turns pretending to be

a female character who was similar to Petra: refined, classy and rich, but with inner demons that would torment her. There would always be a breakdown, rage, smashing imaginary things on the wall; it was fun and dramatic. As an adult, I started wondering: where does she come from? The cinema that surrounds us is full of these women, whether they are called Bette Davis, Cruella de Vil or Petra von Kant; and I was drawn to investigating this figure. I also recognised Petra's postures and movements from working as a model in the fashion industry: in front of a camera, I often get asked to do the same poses, there is a constant reproduction of imagery. Interestingly, we can also find these figures in visual culture – in paintings like *Midas and Bacchus* by Poussin, for instance, that is tapestried on Petra's wall. The fight between following such patterns and breaking them interests me.

Petra

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AL Fassbinder's film is full of cues and references – be they visual, textual or musical. Your solo, in a further layer of quoting, takes up gestures, attitudes, words and states present in the film and transforms them into physical-kinetic material. Can you give an indication about the ways in which you practically approached this translation in the studio?

BF I started out with simply copying her poses, gestures and movements. In the beginning it was like an alphabet, constructing sentences with gestures. Later, through putting them together, the gestures themselves changed and

acquired a more extreme form. I tried to highlight a gesture by overdoing it. Eventually, I started breaking it up and putting it together in new ways by changing the intention, speed and weight-points. Now, I think some of them are not recognizable anymore; it was never my intention to copy the film or make a dance adaptation/dance theatre. I wanted to extract the movements and see what I found.

AL In the film, Petra's performance takes place under the observing gaze of her assistant – Marlene – but also under the eye of Fassbinder's camera and his directorial instructions. In the process of creating



Petra

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Petra, you are both dancer and choreographer; both body labouring to perform femininity and director guiding its actions. How have you negotiated between these two positions? Has this created relationships of understanding or empathy with Margit Carstensen – the actor interpreting Petra – or even Petra herself?

BF Directing and self-directing is something I see in Margit Carstensen's interpretation of Petra a lot. There is a reservoir of movement vocabulary that is already there from her previous experiences. At the same time, it is evident that she is being directed, it is almost as though we can see Fassbinder's reflection from behind the camera in her eyes. He is very present.

In my case, I have attempted to allow a battle to take place: the dancer in me sometimes wants to do movements that feel and look good (that could even provide me a job if the right person would be in the auditorium), whereas the choreographer is occupied with making choices that the dancer is sometimes not satisfied with. I find this struggle particularly relevant for this piece. Then there is a third eye, if you like, observing all this from a distance, much like Marlene does in the film. When I perform the solo, I hand the role of



Marlene to the audience. Being observed is something that is more relevant in our society than ever – the paradox is that most of the time, we are co-producing this. We are simultaneously behind and in front of the camera when we post photos and stories on social media. I think something dramatic changed, when the selfie became ubiquitous.

AL The figure of Fassbinder's Petra is composed, apart from her bodily actions, through the director's tense script delivered by Carstensen's nuanced, modulated voice. In your solo,

your voice is heard only once and is distorted by the actions of your body. Could you comment on the place of language and the voice in the solo?

BF There is a desire for escaping from oneself that I think we all live with, Petra von Kant more than anyone. In this case, I view the voice as something that escapes the body, rather than defining it. It is like a shadow, as Gilles Deleuze expressed it through Francis Bacon: "Bacon has often said that, in the domain of Figures, the shadow has as much presence as the body; but the shadow acquires this presence only because it escapes from the body; the shadow is the body that has escaped from itself through some localised point in the contour."¹

I guess there is a part of me that wants to rid myself of Petra, because there is something of her in me whether I am pretending to be her or not. I had the idea that through making this piece there would be a catharsis. Ingmar Bergman once said that it was necessary to create *Det sjunde inseglet* [*The Seventh Seal* (1957)] in order to stop fearing death. I like that idea – to jump into something with both feet when you really think you should avoid it.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The logic of sensation*, London: Continuum 2003, pp. 11–12.



figure
shaping
possession
quoting
posture
de/formation
couple
fashion
pose
fear
image
drama
de/composition
control
performance
projection
stumbling
relation
womanhood
identity
slippage
hold
love
clarity
in/outside
object
discipline
interpellation
power
everyday rituals
gaze
articulation
class
walking
emotion
commitment
mannequin
shoulders
labour
release
alcohol
neck
effort



Berit Einemo Frøysland

is a Norwegian dancer based in Berlin. She graduated from Balettakademien in Stockholm in 2016 and has worked with Deborah Hay, Marina Abramovic, Satoshi Kudo, Katrina Bastian, Siciliano Contemporary Ballet and Jeff Pedersen Produksjonar. She has made dance pieces and films funded and supported by the Arts Council Norway and The Fund for Performing Artists Norway and is a recipient of numerous scholarships and awards, among them the Cultural Exchange Scholarship from the Berlin Senate (Tokyo). She frequently collaborates with her twin sister Anna Einemo Frøysland and their most recent duet, *A study in the language games of Wittgenstein*, will premiere in October 2020. Her writing, an important part of her artistic practice, has been featured in *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift* and *Journal for ny dans*.

Philipp Rhensius

is a musician, sound artist, writer, label founder (Arcane Patterns), radio host (Noods),

and dj based in Berlin. His work is driven by the idea that “feeling the chains” is the moment when emancipation begins. While his projects *Kl.ne*, *aphtc* and *INRA* explore kinetic polyrhythms and sonic fiction, his “spoken word project” *Alienationist* connects visceral dub sounds with sardonic poetry. He notably contributed to the soundtrack for the performance *Transcultural Protocol* by Admire Kamudzengere and Rachel Monosov at the 2017 Venice Biennale, and recently collaborated with Rachel Monosov during her residency at Villa Massimo (Rome), creating a live soundtrack for the performance *Olympia* at Palazzo delle Esposizioni.

His latest sound installation on populism, *P++*, was shown in the framework of the Berlin happening *Bring In Weight* in 2019.

Belle Santos

is a stage- and costume designer based in Berlin. She holds an MA in Performance Studies from Goldsmiths College London and completed a diploma in stage- and costume design at the Academy of Fine Arts Berlin Weißensee. She has collaborated with theatre-makers RIMINI PROTOKOLL, Damian Rebgetz, Samara Hersch, Tilman Hecker

and Ran Chai Bar-zvi among others; with film-makers Oliver Adam Kusio and Jan-Peter Horstmann; and recently styled the performance *Remain Calm* by Nile Koetting at the Centre Pompidou in Shanghai. She is co-artistic director of the performance collective THE AGENCY, whose work has been shown at the Athens Biennial, Donau Festival Krems, Tanz im August and Pact Zollverein. She has been awarded with the Deutschland Stipendium (Ministry of Education and Research, Germany) and the Kunstförderung Friedrichshafen. She was a resident at the Nemetski Theatre Almaty (2019) and the Saison Foundation in Tokyo (2018).

Andreas Harder

is a light and set designer based in Berlin. He works internationally and has for several years collaborated with the contemporary music ensemble Zeitkratzer, as well as with choreographers and directors including Jeremy Wade, Angela Schubot and Jared Gradinger, Wilhelm Groener, Sebastian Matthias, Sasha Waltz, Adam Linder, Ligia Lewis and Thorsten Lensing. In parallel, he provides support for students' works at the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz (HZT) Berlin and

proposes lectures and workshops at HFS-Hochschule für Schauspielkunst and UdK-Universität der Künste Berlin.

Anna Leon

is a dance historian and theorist based in Vienna. She studied Psychology and Philosophy in Bristol and Philosophy of Art in Paris, before completing a PhD in the Dance Studies department of the University of Salzburg. Her doctoral research, titled *Multiple Stories. Expanded Choreography and Choreographic History*, was supported by the NEON Foundation (Greece), the Leventis Foundation (Switzerland/Cyprus) and the Marie Andessner Stipendium of the University of Salzburg. Since 2015, she teaches practice-oriented dance history and theory in regular classes (University of Salzburg, University of Vienna, SEAD – Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance, Institut Français) and workshops (e.g. Tanzhouse, PNEU, Sommerszene festivals). In parallel, she works as a dramaturg and was part of the Tanzbüro Berlin 2019–20 *tandem* programme.



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