

About the installations / performances of Kris Verdonck

Hanging in the air as if frozen...

Few words are used – and abused – so much in the daily business of the arts as the words ‘multi-disciplinary’ and ‘multi-media’. What interests Kris Verdonck in his work is not so much the juxtaposition of disciplines and media, as the tapping of their – often contradictory – essences, finding the moments and the places where those contradictions clash. Like a surfer who, for a single moment, rides on top of a wave. At that point where ascent turns into descent. Momentarily hanging in mid-air, as if frozen.

One of the fundamental paradoxes Kris Verdonck stages for us in his work, is the one between the technological representation and the re-production capacity on the one hand, and on the other hand the singularity of a theatrical presentation, the here and now of a live performance; the reality aspect of what is shown and observed.

In our days, the domain of the arts is one of those areas in society where a feverish search is going on for a new way of dealing with the technology that increasingly monitors and decides our daily lives. In his work Kris Verdonck does not want to just use the new technology and the new media in a theatrical context, he makes the problem of the growing impact of technology on our daily lives the very subject of his work. That impact, after all, goes far beyond utility value and comfort, but touches on the existential questions of humanity, on the search for the meaning of life and in this world.

Turned adrift from what is familiar

In what relationship can, must or wants man to enter with machines, robots, and technology? In every interaction initiated by man with a machine, he relinquishes part of his control over the situation, the activity, the event. This relationship, based on trust, impinges on the free will of the human being. The surrender to the machine occurs in a great many gradations: from no longer being able to live without a mobile phone to the life-or-death dependence of a person on a life-support system. But in whatever degree it occurs, this dependence vis-à-vis the machine brings with it a latent or visible form of panic. Panic as a situation in which everything that is familiar falls away, when one has nothing to hold onto, when one had ceased to realize what is happening to body and or soul, when one is at the mercy of the unknown. There we find the source of the atmosphere of an ‘Unheimlichkeit’ that is so characteristic of Kris Verdonck’s work. The German word ‘unheimlich’ – it was Freud who drew our attention to it – is

difficult to translate: strange, inexplicable, mysterious, alarming, allied to supernatural forces. The literal meaning of un-heim-lich is: without a home, not belonging anywhere. Being adrift from what is familiar.

In the course of history, the relationship between man and machine has more than once been compared to his relationship with God. Because the essence of the divine is: control over everything, omnipotence. Man as an imperfect, unpredictable, uncontrollable and mortal being, longs for the domain of the perfect, the controllable, the immortal. Man longs for the mechanical: he wants to create a robot or to be one in order to escape from his own imperfection and mortality.

Kris Verdonck’s actors, his characters, are situated in the eye of the storm of that longing. They are the transition between man and machine. They are near-cyborgs. But their tragedy consists precisely of this ‘near’. They are intermediate creatures, in full transition and suffering from the fact that they are neither the one nor the other.

Man = machine

“Can we really put futuristic, “disembodied” images on stage? Can we show characters whose functions are taken over by an object?” These are some of the questions that Kris Verdonck asks himself. In his installations and performances this question is approached from two directions: man becoming machine and machine becoming man. In the first category belong the works in which the actors/performers are brought into situations in which they are handicapped as to their possibilities, for instance by not having their sensory perception or mobility at their disposal. In the second category, Kris Verdonck plays deliberately with the ambiguous behaviour of man when faced with a machine, which fluctuates between panic, the panicky fear for the uncontrollable and the unknown on the one hand and on the other hand the empathy, the tenderness almost, with which man proves capable of assigning human characteristic to machines.

The characters put on stage by Kris Verdonck are in a state of complete loneliness: they are left in perfect isolation, alone inside their heads. An uninterrupted flow of thoughts arises that deepens continuously. Parallel to that flow of thoughts, Kris Verdonck often uses text in his installations and performances, a fact that, once again, refers to a theatrical context. The texts are usually from lonely, unruly authors, e.g. Samuel Beckett, Rainald Goetz or Heiner Müller.