

# The Dance of Disorder

## Chloe Stead

Due to Corona, *Annika Larsson* (HFBK-Professor of time-based media) had to move her symposium into virtual space. She successfully managed to map humor, performance, moving images and discussion within the framework of an online format, as our author describes in her self-report





Last spring, after world-wide lockdowns pushed the majority of people indoors, arts venues rushed to move biennales, art fairs and film festivals online with often mixed results. The problem was clear: How could any event, especially one conceived pre-pandemic, hope to remain relevant as the reality of the world shifted beneath our feet? Going forward, one answer could be to use this uncertainty as a guiding principle, as was the case in *The Dance of Disorder*, an online symposium organised by artist and HFBK-professor Annika Larsson and curator Isabel Gatzke, which, over two days in November 2020, offered a space for performances, discussions, and screenings that were full of doubt, ambivalence, and the kind of absurdist humour which flourishes in troubled times.

Kicking off on a dreary Friday evening, the symposium opened with a recent work by filmmaker John Smith. Made in the sixth week of the UK lockdown, the three-minute film begins with the artist washing his hands while singing the words to 'Happy Birthday'. Performed in minor key, the normally celebratory song takes on the air of a funeral dirge, the reason for which becomes painfully clear when the scene cuts to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson telling the public to wash their hands, "with soap and water for the length of time it takes to sing happy birthday twice," before quickly reassuring them that they should "be going about their business as usual." Taking its title, *Twice* (2020), from this disastrous soundbite, the work was created when Britain's Covid-19 related death toll reached 25.000. At the time of writing, this number has swelled to over 80.000.

Unlike *Twice*, with its clear-if devastating-message, the next film in the night's program, a rough cut of Larsson's film *Danse Macabre* (2020-), was more open-ended, a result of the artist's collaborative working process, but also, I would argue, a consequence of her desire to reflect our current political climate in the narrative structure of the film itself. As Larsson would later say in a live discussion, "this chaotic moment needs a new chaotic way of doing things." It follows Liv Fontaine—one of the artists Larsson reached out to in order to shake up her current "mode of production"—as she wanders aimlessness through central London. Post-Brexit vote and pre-lockdown, the atmosphere is tense, a feeling only exasperated by a soundtrack partly featuring audio recordings of one Fontaine's own expletive-filled performances as her alter ego VIV INSANE. The hysterical monologue—"Last night my husband called me and said he's leaving me because he wants to fuck a neo-Nazi"—quickly meets its match when Fontaine arrives at Speakers' Corner and stops to listen to soapbox orators give their impassioned views on Brexit.

Unruly bodies that defy the pressure to be productive, useful and compliant members of society have been a long-term interest of Larsson's, whose 2017 film *The Discourse of the Drinkers* explore(d) "the political and social potential of the body, its capacity of overturning our habitual course and to change the order of things (through intoxication, poetry, music, movement, performance and laughter)." Taken from her website, this description could also be applied to the various characters in *Danse Macabre*, as well as many of the works in the symposium's schedule, from Barbara Hammer's 16 mm film *I was/I Am* (1973), also shown on Friday



- ↑ *The Dance of Disorder*, moderator Olympia Bukkakis; screenshot
- ↑ *The Dance of Disorder*, panel discussion with Oona Doherty; screenshot
- *The Dance of Disorder*, headquarter in room 11 at HFBK Hamburg; photo: Max Lequeux



night, to Oona Doherty's dance piece *Hope Hunt and the Ascension into Lazarus* (2015), which live screened the following morning. Fittingly, both works explore fantasy. *I was/I Am*, for instance, was born out of an attempt by the artist to combine "real time" and fantasy time by embodying a number of different personas, from a "damsel in a gown and crown" to a "leather jacket motorcycle dyke". But whereas Hammer, a lesbian feminist filmmaker, was unapologetically interested in exploring the inner lives of women, Doherty's eye is firmly trained on the opposite sex. An Irish dance artist based in Belfast, her work attempts to breakdown the stereotype of the working-class male, the kind of ordinary guy, she elaborated later, that you see when you're "doing the shopping in Belfast or Glasgow". On an empty stage in *Hope Hunt and the Ascension into Lazarus*, Doherty, who plays the Hope Hunt character herself, cycles through variations on this stereotype at warp speed—the drunk dad, the brawler, insecure catcaller—with a ferocity that I so often look for in contemporary performances but seldom find.

After the screening, Doherty joined Larsson, Gatzke, moderator Olympia Bukkakis, and writer Kelina Gotman (who, earlier in the day, read her text *The Feeling of Plague*) for a live streamed conversation. It is here that the online format of the symposium really came into its own. Less formal than many in-person panel discussions I've seen—after all it's difficult to stay in professional mode when you're live streaming from your bedroom—the conversation dispensed with long introductions and kept the questions simple, giving room for Doherty and Gotman to talk in-depth about their processes. But that's not to say that the digital format doesn't come with its own set of challenges. Although the organizers

had ironed out most problems by the second day, the difficulty of streaming videos in Zoom, for instance, was clear in the first few hours when images refused to behave as they were supposed to, which seemed fitting given the context.

It's impossible to talk about dissent without acknowledging its importance for queer, black and brown bodies throughout history, a topic that was addressed in a number of works in the last section of the symposium, which opened with The Black Audio Film Collective's *The Handsworth Songs* (1986). Using footage from the 1985 Handsworth uprisings, where local ethnic minority communities clashed with police, the film essay convincingly frames civil unrest as a result of years of suppression and overzealous policing. As one interviewee described it in the film, "black people have had enough."

The police, or more specifically, the ACAB movement to abolish the police, were also the topic of poet, writer and artist Caspar Heinemann's reading, which was written in England at the beginning of pandemic. Starting with quote by adult film actor Bailey Jay, which uses an anal stretching kit as a metaphor for increasing your ability to show compassion to others, Heinemann's text explores the possibility of political speech that doesn't "operate with a single, clear destroyable enemy who is the reason things are not the way we wish we were" but instead practices compassion for those we hate, even if—or especially when—it hurts a little. As my attention ebbed and flowed throughout the conversations, per-

formances and films that followed—including Jasmine Schädler's *The Possessed Gaze* (2020), Yulia Lokshina and Angela Steiger's *Subjective Hill* (2019) and clips from Dana Michel and Tracy Maurice's video installation *Lay them all down* (2020)—I grew frustrated with myself before I thought back to

Heinemann's reading. After all, if we can practice compassion for our enemies, we can also practice it for ourselves.



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*Non-Knowledge, Laughter and the Moving Image* presents: *The Dance of Disorder*, Online Symposium, 27-28 November 2020  
With contributions by: Black Audio Film Collective (Screening: *The Handsworth Songs*), Oona Doherty (Screening/Discussion: *Hope Hunt and the Ascension into Lazarus*), Liv Fontaine (Performance), Kelina Gotman (Lecture: *The Feeling of Plague*), Barbara Hammer (Screening: *I Was/I Am*), Casper Heinemann (Reading: *The Devil*), Annika Larsson (Screening/Discussion: *Danse Macabre*), Yulia Lokshina & Angela Stiegler (Screening/Discussion: *Subjective Hill*), Dana Michel and Tracy Maurice (Installation/Screening/Conversation: *Lay them all down*), Semiconductor (Screening: *20Hz*), Jasmine Schädler (Lecture Performance: *The Possessed Gaze*), John Smith (Screening: *Twice*) as well as conversations between Kelina Gotman, Oona Doherty, Liv Fontaine, Casper Heinemann, Yulia Lokshina, Jasmine Schädler, Annika Larsson, Paul Niedermayer, Michel Wagenschütz and Isabel Gatzke, moderated by Olympia Bukkakis.  
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[www.nonknowledge.org](http://www.nonknowledge.org)

- ↑ *The Dance of Disorder*, HFBK Hamburg, Aula; photo: Annika Larsson
- *Art Criticism and the Market – A Case for Social Distancing?* – Julia Voss und Matthew Muir; Screenshot