

WHAT DOES LUBRICANT HAVE TO DO WITH SOCIAL ISSUES?

How should we watch contemporary dance, and how should we think about it? Visual artist and author Teemu Mäki writes about contextualizing Wauhaus's dance work *Fluids* and suggests ways to link it to the social reality that surrounds us. "Slippery bodies can't be controlled through pure reason," he muses.

TEXT Teemu Mäki TRANSLATION Lola Rogers PHOTOS Dmitrij Matvejev

FLUIDS IS A DANCE performance that happens on a floor covered with lubricant.

Once you hear the concept you can easily have a pretty good idea what the result might be and how it might be a worthwhile exploration for a contemporary work of art. After all, art doesn't necessarily have to have any theme or subject matter other than the examination of its physical materials: "What are these things, what are their properties and relationships, and what can you do with them?"

The Wauhaus group's pieces have often taken extreme slipperiness or some other technical peculiarity or constraint and used it to create an unusual premise for a performance. And yet their pieces are not formalistic works, or at least not in the sense that Clement Greenberg meant, but rather art that takes an activist stand concerning society. In what way, you ask? I'll tell you.

Five performers come onto a stage covered in lubricant and begin to explore what it's like to be and behave in such a

slippery environment. They slide and spin in place, alone and together, in a variety of seated and lying positions. Then they spin each other like tops and let go, sliding each other around like curling stones. They also embrace and perform lifts and wrestling-style moves, but since both the floor and the performers are exceedingly slippery, everything is difficult; bodies can barely stand up and one dancer's grip on another is always a weak and uncertain one.

But it is not a matter of improvisation, it is choreography manifestly founded in investigative practice: how does our corporality change when our strength, certainty and sturdy support seem to have vanished?

The results of these investigations are fun to watch in and of themselves. It's a bit like watching Laurel and Hardy, but without those actors' comical sadism and gloom, one of them always trying to beat, humiliate, or trick the other. The performers in *FLUIDS* aren't dramatic personae and the performance isn't built on tension or conflict between them. Instead they behave like





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a choir or a construction crew, working toward a common goal.

The political and philosophical nature of the piece opens to you when you think of it as a portrait of the world. It creates a world with its own laws where slipperiness reigns, but what is this world's relationship to the rest of reality? Is a lubricated world just an absurd, unusual world that's fun to watch precisely because it's so removed from the real, everyday world we live in? Or is the slippery world and its stumbling, delicate, vulnerable bodies that need each others' support an apt portrait of us, and of the true nature of our world? I, of course, favor the latter interpretation, and I believe most of the audience shares my sentiment, whether consciously or unconsciously.

As I watched **Joanna Kalm, Salla Loper, Karolin Poska, Sigrid Savi,** and **Joonas Tagel's** actions and affect on the stage, I had a constant, powerful feeling of recognition. "That's exactly what life is like. That's what I look like through my soul's eyes—people are helpless, fragile, but playful, just like that. Or they would be if they didn't try to hide their helplessness and fragility and their need for help under weird bravado and a pretense of competence."

When you interpret it that way, FLUIDS is not only an exploration of form but also and especially a sociological declaration, because every model of society and every political conviction is founded on some concept of the human, and FLUIDS embodies, incarnates, a concept of the human that emphasizes weakness, the need for cooperation, and the slipperiness and contingency of the boundaries between individuals. And the piece doesn't just emphasize weakness, it celebrates it. The mood at the performance is good-natured, even funny. It can also feel erotic, even though no one fondles or even kisses anyone and there is no pretended intimacy, but because watching scantily clad, slippery bodies intertwining is perhaps at some half-abstract level an automatically sexual experience. The eroticism in the piece, however, comes from the joy of surrendering to unboundedness and helplessness rather than from conflict or tension. That joy is enhanced by the bright lighting and the recorded music that begins shortly after the midway point, part of a baroque violin concerto that is then repeated by **Heidi Soidinsalo's** personalized, minimalist version of the same piece. [editor's note: The piece is **Max Richter's** Vivaldi variations.]

If my description of the work's content and its image of humanity sounds boringly tepid or vague, let me remind you that consumer capitalism is founded on a quite different concept of the human being, roughly this: "Human beings know what is best for them and by their very nature strive for personal advantage. Through free markets, this personal striving of 'all against all' advances the common good, because ruthless competition raises productivity and always results in new innovations that increase comfort and prosperity."

Of course one might think that it doesn't take any great philosophical-political insight to make a work of art that says that people are actually much more fragile, helpless, and wobbly

than is generally believed or demanded or hoped for within a competitive consumer capitalist society, and you don't need five dancers slathered with lube bought at a porn shop.

I disagree. A work of art doesn't always have to have an especially complex message, some dazzling, never-before-heard point of view, some new vision that tests the limits of our understanding of humanity and the world. Some masterpieces have super-insights like those. But it's much more common for a good or even masterful work of art to say something that could be said directly and concisely in one sentence or one paragraph. A sentence said through the physical, sensory medium of art, however, can be much more powerful. It can cause such great internal upheaval that our minds, our existence, and our behavior is changed.

Why lube? Fluids, slimes, and secretions have often played a peculiar role in the history of art and psychology. They remind us of our physical body, remind us that our separateness and autonomy are relative things—that the boundary between myself and my environment is a slippery one. A person can't live in a world of pure ideas and you can't channel or control a world of damp bodies by means of sheer pure reason.

The final act of the performance is a stylized birth. Four performers sit in a circle and hold each other by the shoulders. They form a sort of birth canal of mother nature into which the fifth performer dives, in order to be reborn. Then the circle breaks apart and reassembles, the newborn becomes part of the circle, and someone else breaks away to be born in their turn. This was, for me, fantastic, a delightful, physical way to express the circle of nature, the cycle of birth and death. ■

The writer is an artist, author, director, and researcher (with a doctorate in visual art), who has written numerous essays on art, philosophy, and politics.

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FLUIDS BY WAUHAUS (2018)

Directed by Anni Klein and Jarkko Partanen

Sound design by Heidi Soidinsalo

Sets and lighting by Samuli Laine

Produced by Soltumatu Tantsu Lava (STL, Estonia),
W A U H A U S (Finland)