

## Covering Letter

### A Farewell to Flesh

Benjamin Pohlig, Sunniva Vikør Egenes, Lea Kieffer and Ben McEwen.

Residency at Dansit (Trondheim, Norway)

6<sup>th</sup> March 2017 - 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017

The purpose of the residency was to continue research in our collaborative project, "A Farewell to Flesh". An investigation into many aspects of the medieval carnival and how they might relate to contemporary performance. We spent a month exploring this in Trondheim, Norway, focussing mainly on the performative and costume aspects (previous work had centred on audience participation). We all felt we had a successful and rewarding month, and that the project has moved forward into exciting areas, while other aspects have clarified.

To be on a residency is a great chance to really get into a work, with fewer distractions, and I'm thankful for the LUTSF for funding my travel to and from Norway.

The project will continue to grow, after our small sharing at Dansit and may take forms such as movement workshops, performances, articles, costume making performances, dance film.

## REPORT

### A Farewell to Flesh

March 2017 - Trondheim, Norway



*A Farewell to Flesh* is a collaboration between myself, Benjamin Pohlig Sunniva Vikør Egenes, and Lea Kieffer, which began in 2015. It takes the medieval carnival as its central theme (indeed “Farewell to Flesh” is a possible translation of the word Carnival), and is part practice, part research and maybe one day will make it into a performance piece. We work in a collaborative way, though there are specific roles within the project.

We were very kindly invited for a month residency at Dansit in Trondheim, Norway in March 2017, and my travel there and back was generously supported by the LUTSF.

Our initial interests in carnival were in its historical role as an environment which makes possible transgressions of traditional norms and hierarchies and we are curious in what ways this could be relevant today. Inspirations include paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder and films such as *Freaks* (1932).

A lot of our investigations in *A Farewell to Flesh* have so far focussed on creating situations where, like the carnival, there is a complete blurring of audience and performer, indeed the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin defines carnival as theatre without an audience. We were very taken with this notion, but it was soon decided that the focus of this residency should be exploring more performative aspects, and we decided on the working motto of “the carnival is between us”. Some themes that stood out were, and formed themselves into, loose collections of material - Opening the Space, Celebration, The Grotesque, and Death.



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We spent a lot of time on the grotesque, and that's what I'll mostly talk about here. We were curious about the body as a container and the permeability of that container, exaggerations of bodily orifices and protrusions, the so-called lower bodily functions of eating, drinking, shitting, pissing and fucking, and how we could imaginatively explore different senses and sense. One practice we developed was called “authentic freak” grossly mis-appropriating the practice Authentic Movement. Like Authentic Movement, Authentic Freak is a solo with eyes shut, witnessed by a single observer who supports through their watching. We allow our imaginations of our own physicality, environment, desires and behaviour to lead us on a journey of the grotesque. This is a very open task, that invites many interpretations, and I think we all found our “greatest hits” and the ongoing challenge to find new interpretations of the freak... the freak as physicality, as states, characters,

interactions, sounds. As someone with a lot of training in a kind of cool, detached attitude to dancing I've always been hesitant about these kind of tasks that require some seriously personal investment, but doing the practice every day allowed me to find a craft in doing the task, learning how to ease into it, be in it, and finally push it to some extremes.

Another practice that came out of the grotesque was the composite body; two (or more) bodies merging into a single entity. It's a really challenging task to expand the boundary of your body and allow others' bodies to become appendages or limbs (or you yourself do!). But those moments where it flows are just magical. It was initially quite a challenge to move away from the vocabulary of contact improvisation, which for many dancers, the four of us included, is a strong reference when working with touch. We found that intertwining our upper bodies and holding that connection removed the possibility of rolling and sliding contact, but opened up the possibility of articulation across both our bodies.



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Throughout the residency we were staying in a small cabin called “Husly” (built from packing crates) which is next to the studio, and the long hours rehearsing were interspersed with fetching water, lighting the woodstove, baking/burning bread in a big iron pot, emptying the urine tank, and a thousand other small tasks. I'm convinced that to be brought back to our basic necessities helped balance the making in the studio, which could get quite trippy at times!

What would carnival be without costumes?! From its conception we've always imagined amazing costumes for *A Farewell to Flesh*, and that we would make them ourselves, so many of our afternoons were filled with sewing and painting. Lea, who is a clothes maker as well as a dancer, oversaw the design and making of the costumes. It was great to be on the other side of the costuming process, not just stood with arms outstretched during a fitting! We made masks, and painted in black on long white underwear, the patterns merged across each of our costumes, meaning tasks like the composite body were accentuated. It's quite a luxury to get to play around in costumes, all too often they are added at the end of a creation when everything is already set. Here we were able to allow the costumes to influence the direction of our research and the two could feed back into one another. I'm always amazed at what wearing a mask or costume does to one's sense of

self, it's really like slipping on a second skin. The combination of the influence from the costume and the internal stimulations from our authentic freak practice allowed for some quite wild dancing!

*A Farewell to Flesh* continues to be a rich source of inspiration and pleasure for me, both professionally and personally, and I consider it an important part of my growth as a dancer. My thanks to Benjamin, Lea and Sunniva for each pouring their energy and expertise into the pot, and to the LUTSF and other organisations who have supported *A Farewell to Flesh* along its way.