

During Beyond the Black Box, the three-day festival that showcases cross-border performance practices—which overlooks #metoo to focus rather on the fusion of theatre and other performative institutions and regimes—it's amazing how often a relatively straightforward action, if carefully conceived and conceptualised, can have enormous impact.

223m, created for the festival by SoAP's collaborative artists, invites the public to walk repetitious laps in and out of the building, through alleys and along streets, usually at a brisk pace. It's an excellent example of how a simple but carefully conceived action can have enormous impact on everyone who perseveres with their engagement as a spectator. The piece inspires associations with military groups and scout troops, juxtaposed with the energy generated by dance, choral singing or bike racing: the intense focus, energy and euphoria induced when a band of people moves at the same tempo.

Twelve circuits, during which I gradually progressed from last man to just behind the leader, weren't enough for a hyper-intense experience, but amid the hustle and bustle of the festival and the pressure of a busy schedule crowding my mind, marching in formation was quite soothing. Besides the numerous adjustments and synchronisations of the bodies and mentalities in the group (although for me the most disruptive thing was heels tapping out of sync), the rushing about is in itself very relaxing. And as the group's movements through doorways, up steps, sidestepping droves of dawdling tourists and other traffic become increasingly automatic, the mind stops its ceaseless chatter.

Although the principle is simple—a string of people with a leader at the front and a 'closer' bringing up the rear—there's still plenty of room for creating gently choreographic experiences. Apart from the physical and mental group dynamic, little by little the spatial experience provokes a handful of choreographic proposals, such as when the group surges through a stream of passers-by, decelerates and accelerates en masse, and twist and loops to avoid sharp turns. This shifts attention from the physical act of moving at a rapid pace to the shape of the group as a whole.

"Mindfulness army-style," remarked an artist friend, and it's true that 223m does make you think of splinter groups and bubbles—soft on the inside, hard outside. Each September the Brakke Grond is the site of student hazings which regularly involve demeaning, exhausting group practices, like sitting on the pavement for hours and, of course, running in line. The waiting area where you can join or leave the line is painted a relentless white. This white cube doesn't just mercilessly objectify and aestheticize—the well-known stratagem for presenting art—it also makes you think of other white spaces, from rehab and isolation cells to research laboratories.

In their one-week collaboration, Johannes Bellinx, Benjamin Vandewalle, Rita Hoofwijk, Nick Steur and Breg Horemans succeeded in discovering a structure or 'score' which can, in all its clarity and neutrality and with relative subtlety, evolve into a choreographic machine for the public domain.

*Fransien van der Putt in Theaterkrant | 9 Feb 2019*

Photo: Katarina Jazbec