

June Johnson Dance Prize 2017

**“Hyperion – Higher States Part 2”: Antibodies/Kiriakos Hadjiioannou**

**“I’m interested in mature artists.”**

*Kiriakos, you’re a Greek who’s received an award as a Swiss choreographer. How did that come about? What have been the most important milestones in your career?*

After training at the Greek State School of Dance I felt I had to go to Berlin to explore different dance genres. My training was very academic, you see, with ballet, Cunningham, Graham and release technique, and so on. While I was there I encountered conceptual dance and minimal movement and I saw post-dramatic theatre, all of which made a lasting impression on me. After that I went travelling: I taught in Iceland, worked as dancer in Italy and built up an international network of collaborators. All the time I longed to progress beyond my work as a dancer. Then, when the Choreography & Performance degree was offered in English in Giessen I saw my chance to develop further in that direction; so I applied and was accepted. Giessen was the only university that really interested me, because it had an approach that blended discourse, theatre and performance. At the same time I moved to Switzerland and immediately started producing my own works, funding them with generous grants from the Canton of Basel City. The years from 2011 to 2013 were very creative. I was heavily inspired by philosophy, architecture and dance history and came up with the idea for “Antibodies” – a platform I set up that supports my productions and is intended as a creative place for my team to input knowledge and ideas and share with each other.

*What does the award mean to you personally?*

The award came at a critical moment. As an artist I’m always questioning myself, having doubts about my own work. At the time I was wondering whether it really makes sense to work in dance and how far it benefits the world. So the award was a kind of confirmation that people really do get something out of my work. That gave me the strength to carry on.

*Your works are all quite different from each other. Is there a methodology or a choreographic signature running through them?*

They are, yes. I’ve done full-length evening shows with performers but also events and happenings. I’ve worked on projects with children and as a performer and dancer for other choreographers. So no, I don’t have a consistent methodology. Every project has a different signature that I develop from scratch for each new piece. So I’d describe myself as an interdisciplinary artist. Of course I make intensive use of my body. For me, movement is about working on body intensities or physical states – I never work with countable or precisely reproducible sequences of steps, but more with movement qualities that are created afresh each time round.

*You’ve devised a conceptual framework called “Higher States”, consisting of a series of five pieces.*

Yes, my works are linked together conceptually and thematically, so I come up with what you might call overarching concepts or thematic axes. “Kuhle Wampe” and “Secondskin”, for example, are part of a series that I describe as “a past that hasn’t left the body”. They’re about collective bodily memory, in other words what bodies carry within them as recollections of history – specifically, I was dealing with the persecuted or marginalised body in the Third Reich and the 1920s. The “Higher States” series is an investigation of alternative states of consciousness and my desire to link different genres of art together. “Mysterion” was about states of trance and the art of costume. In “Hyperion” I worked with literature – Hölderlin’s epistolary novel – and its musical transposition, teaming up with Ensemble Modern from Frankfurt. Right now we’re working on the third piece in the series, “Erotikon”, which will tackle the mental and physical state of Eros from a queer feminist perspective in a performative discourse format. The next in the series is “Pharmakon”, which is about a pharmaceutical industry scandal in Basel and is conceived as a film. Of course I’m working with experts from those artistic fields, because I can’t do things on my own.

*How do you work with your team? Can you tell us something about them?*

The performative arts are a collective enterprise. If I wanted to work alone I would have become a painter. That’s where I start from. As I see it, the works are formulated jointly and then offered up to the audience; I just take responsibility for the structure to create a framework for all of us to work in. The people in the Antibodies platform are like family to me; I want them to recognise themselves in the works and be able to develop. I think the era of choreographers who have a specific sequence of steps in mind and teach their team to perform it has passed. My work is about improvisation, so I don’t cast dancers who are fresh out of university and expect me to show them steps they are supposed to reproduce. I’m interested in mature artists – my team have specific aesthetic attitudes and their own creative practice that I try to exploit productively in the works. That’s the only way I can operate. Of course my idea is the starting point, but because I always like to work with the same people our interests and ideas intertwine and at some point the boundaries of authorship become porous.

*You work with some very well-known material, for example in your “Le Sacré Du Printemps – Suite Baloise” or “L’Oiseau De Feu – Danse Infernale” and your stagings of “Kuhle Wampe” and “Hyperion” – how do you come to be working with those themes and contents?*

I’m interested in an alternative reworking of that material. With Stravinsky I tried to express the musicality in a new way through Swiss folk dances from pagan traditions. I’m also interested in tackling the works of authors who haven’t yet been taken up by the performative arts. Brecht’s film “Kuhle Wampe”, for instance, has never been performed on stage. For me, it’s relevant today given the economic crisis in Greece. Hölderlin’s “Hyperion” is another difficult work that many shy away from. But the novel talks about things we in our group can appreciate personally, such as the sense of political disillusionment and the need to go away and live as a hermit, which we’ve interpreted as a response to the modern-day disease of burn-out and the popularity of retreats. So I take what some regard as “old” works and try to see and express something new in them.

*Do you have a sense that dance is attracting greater attention in Switzerland; and if so, what needs to happen next?*

Yes, there's definitely a new wave of dance and performance works in Switzerland. The fact there's so much going on out there is very helpful to me. There's a scene growing up where you can discuss your own works, and there are new initiatives being launched to present dance productions. There's a growing audience and new kinds of funding for our work. That motivates me as an artist to keep going. While theatre in Switzerland is very strong, dance needs an extra push to get up to the same level. Personally I'm very grateful for the support that Switzerland gives me despite the fact that I wasn't born here. That's why it's also important for me to present Swiss dance internationally, seeing as now I represent it too.

Interview by Margarita Tsomou