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# Michele Rizzo

## Moldable bodies

BY VANESSA VAN 'T HOOGT

During the project period of Michele Rizzo at Het Resort, I had a chance to interview him at the former gay sauna 'Pakhuisje' shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic made meeting in person impossible. I was sitting across the table from Rizzo and could follow his process of creating while we were talking. He was telling me about himself, his education and his much-discussed choreographic work *HIGHER* (2015) with the extended version *HIGHER xtn.* (2019). Last but not least he explained how he came to write a proposal for a sculptural project at Het Resort. This short theoretical exposition of Rizzo's choreographic and sculptural practice examines the commonalities between two seemingly very diverging actions: sculpting and dancing.

### "In the beginning is movement"

"In the beginning, after all, we do not try to move, think about movement possibilities, or put ourselves to the task of moving. We come straightaway moving into the world; we are precisely not stillborn (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 117)."

Dance philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues in *The Primacy of Movement* that we come into the world moving. In the beginning, we are not thinking about moving or trying to move, but we are simply moving. Already in the womb we are "kicking, stretching, sucking, swallowing and so on" and these movements come to us spontaneously.<sup>1</sup> Through these spontaneous movements, she argues, we come to make sense of ourselves and the world around us, we understand ourselves as animated and cognitive beings. "In effect, movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement."<sup>2</sup>

Choreographer and visual artist Michele Rizzo (1984) argues that the experience of dancing in the club to techno music evokes the memory of being in the womb, or, in the words of Sheets-Johnstone, the memory of the spontaneous movement at the beginning of our animated lives. His intriguing work *HIGHER* (2015) emerged from his interest in the repetitive immersive trance-like quality of the movement in the techno club, compared to the academic dance he studied at the School for New Dance Development

in Amsterdam. With *HIGHER* Rizzo created, out of passion and desire, a dialogue between the rehearsed academic dance in the studio and the spontaneous moving in the club and thereby incorporated these two divergent contexts and languages in one choreography. In the piece, three performers, including Rizzo, repeatedly perform one phrase to a hypnotic soundtrack composed by Lorenzo Senni (fig. 1). This phrase is constituted of movements from the clubbing experience. Strikingly, the audience can observe how the dancers embody the movements in their own idiosyncratic way; making the same movements highlights their individuality.

*HIGHER xtn.* is an extension of this work and was performed at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam at the beginning of 2019. Again dancers, increasing from two to fifteen each performance, make repetitive movements to the music of Senni (fig. 2). The "individual dancers make their way through the galleries, ultimately converging in the Stedelijk's Audizaal. Then, pairs of dancers begin to perform in sync until the entire group is eventually dancing in unison."<sup>3</sup> While *HIGHER* highlights the primacy of movement and the individuality of the performers, *HIGHER xtn.* further accentuates the correlation between the collective and the individual. In the Stedelijk the audience was able to move around the performers in 360 degrees, a way of viewing



FIG.1 | HIGHER, MICHELE RIZZO, 2015, STILL [REGISTRATION VIDEO](#)



FIG.2 | HIGHER XTN, MICHELE RIZZO, 2019, STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM, FOTO: MAARTEN NAUW

comparable to looking at a sculpture on a pedestal. The way of viewing is not the only similarity between the choreography and sculpting. Both versions of *HIGHER* can be regarded as a kinaesthetic sculpture, because the repetitive movements mold the dancers. Rizzo summarizes this sculptural aspect of his choreographic work in the proposal for a residency at Het Resort as follows: "In many of my choreographic works dance is conceived as a sculpting agency that chisels the kinaesthetic identity of the dancer; the choreography itself is treated as an ever-changing object, and as such it is offered to the gaze of the museum's audience."

### Sculpting the body, dancing with clay

"As the artisan thinks from materials, so the dancer thinks from the body (Ingold 2013, 94)." In the quote from Rizzo's project proposal above, he emphasizes the material aspect of the body comparing it to sculpture and sculpting. His interest in dance and the body as material things, comes from a new understanding of ourselves and our environment as fundamentally animate. In *Making: Anthropology,*

*Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), Anthropologist Tim Ingold defines the body as "a tumult of unfolding activity" and stresses that we think from our body rather than about our body.<sup>4</sup> The body is not a container and hence we do not transcribe our thoughts into movements or think by means of movements, but the thinking is the movement.<sup>5</sup> Both the artisan and the dancers are moving, that's why the artisan thinks from his body and the materials and the dancer from the body. Ingold follows aforementioned Sheets-Johnstone in his definition of thinking. To quote her once again:

"To think is first of all to be caught up in a dynamic flow; thinking is itself, by its very nature, kinetic. [...] It [thinking] is motional through and through; at once spatial, temporal, dynamic."<sup>6</sup>

Ingold goes on stressing the importance of overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object and pleads for the recognition of the body as a thing; not an object, but a thing.<sup>7</sup> He follows philosophers Martin Heidegger's argumentation and stresses that a thing is a gathering of materials in movement.<sup>8</sup> "To touch it [the thing], or to observe it, is to bring the movements of our own being into close and affective correspondence with those of its constituent materials."<sup>9</sup> The object, on the other hand, is complete in itself; "we may look at it or even touch it, but we cannot join with it in the process of its formation."<sup>10</sup>

Rizzo's general fascination for the fact that things (bodies, people and materials) have their own life, are animate, in addition to the sculptural aspects of his

choreographies lead him to write a project proposal for Het Resort. In this proposal he does not suggest working on another choreography (the moldability of the body) but proposes to mold bodies with clay. The finished, glazed and fired sculptures gave as much impetus to the project proposal as the process of sculpting. Rizzo is not trained as a sculptor, but has started to work with clay for pleasure during his master's degree at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam (Dirty Art Department). Like dancing, he experiences sculpting as a way to access a space beyond the physical space, a cognitive space that he calls the space of imagination. Sculpting, to him, is a bodily experience where he immediately recognizes shapes and forms in the clay. He has an idea in mind that he wants to express in the clay. In the process of working with the material, a constant *correspondence* between the material, his idea, his body, and his brain emerges. Rizzo said during the interview: "The space of imagination is where I end up when I let this dialogue happen."

Ingold uses the word *correspondence* instead of 'interaction' or 'dialogue' to stress that it is not about two distinct entities reacting to one another (back and forth). "It is rather that the attentive bodily movements of the practitioner respond to the flows and resistances of the material; going along with one another."<sup>11</sup> "As with any dance, this should be read not laterally, back and forth, but longitudinally as a movement in which partners take it in turns to lead and be led."<sup>12</sup> Ingold defines this correspondence as *dance of animacy*: "In the dance of animacy, bodily kinaesthesia interweaves contrapuntally

with the flux of materials within an encompassing, morphogenetic field of forces."<sup>13</sup>

Rizzo responds to clay, a sculptural material of high plasticity that is ubiquitous, affordable, and durable, provided it is fired. Rizzo's body is not only dancing/ corresponding with the clay, but he also uses sculpting tools to cut and carve the material. Ingold calls these tool *transducers*. In the animacy of dance they "convert the gesture, flow or movement" of Rizzo "from one register, of bodily kinaesthesia, to another, of material flux."<sup>14</sup> The pressure or soft touch of the cutting and carving by Rizzo is converted from his body to the material. Sitting across the table from him while he is sculpting folded or praying hands, I can witness the correspondence between him, the clay, and the sculpting tools. He tells me that his practice of sculpting clay (especially figurative sculpting) coincides with his ability of creating movements: "While dancing I have learned to master a specific attitude which also guides me while I am sculpting: a sensible dialectic relationship between movement and material based on a symbiosis between the knowledge of the human body and *proprioception* (the feeling of my own body, position of my body)." Observing the choreographer as sculptor, I notice how he takes his own hands as reference point, looking back and forth between the molded hands and his moving sculpting hands, comparing them with each other. Sometimes he stops to lay his hands next to the sculpted counterpart.



FIG.3 SCULPTING, WORK PERIOD S03E02



FIG.4 MODELLING, WORK PERIOD S03E02



FIG.5 SCULPTING, WORK PERIOD S03E02, PHOTO: HACHE

## Getting in the flow

During the interview at the beginning of his residency at Het Resort, Rizzo stresses another important parallel between his practice of dancing and sculpting: "Both practices unfold in long sessions in which I abandon myself to a trance-like state, and in which I witness the material (body and clay) assuming shapes of which I accommodate the appearance." This trance-like state was defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the experience of flow: "an intense experiential involvement in a moment-to-moment activity."<sup>15</sup> "Flow is a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself."<sup>16</sup> In the case of Rizzo, he is fully immersed in the activity of dancing/ sculpting in such a way that it feels to him as if he is in trance, temporarily disconnected from the sense of self.

Csikszentmihalyi argues that one can experience flow when 1) perceived challenges or opportunities for the action match existing skills (neither overmatching nor underutilizing) and when 2) there is a clear proximal goal and immediate feedback about the process that is being made.<sup>17</sup> Even though Rizzo is not trained as a sculptor, his experience with and knowledge of the human body and the high plasticity of the clay make it

feasible for him to create life-size figurative sculptures. The affordances of clay, e.g. its high plasticity, provide immediate feedback during the sculpting process. The movements of Rizzo's hand, the molding of the clay, is directly visible in the material and his actions leave traces (e.g. a fingerprint). Art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann, building on the theory of affordances by psychologist James Jerome Gibson, defines affordances as "the ways in which properties [of materials] draw out, encourage or inhibit certain actions."<sup>18</sup> Clay affords molding but not casting, bronze affords casting but not carving, stone affords sculpting but not casting and so forth. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the immersion in the moment-to-moment activity, the experience of flow, is characterized by:

- 1) "intense and focused concentration,
  - 2) the merging of action and awareness,
  - 3) the loss of reflective self-consciousness,
  - 4) a sense of control over one's actions,
  - 5) distortion of temporal experience (time passing by faster)
  - 6) experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding,
- such that often the end of the goal is just an excuse for the process."<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned above, Rizzo regards the process of sculpting as being important in itself (intrinsically rewarding) and summarizes the merging of action and awareness as entering the space of imagination. To him, this is a place where he feels in trance, where time is distorted and passes faster, and where he is not aware of time. While I was talking to Rizzo and observing his molding

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- <sup>1</sup> Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 118.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>3</sup> Stedelijk Museum MICHELE RIZZO: HIGHER XTN.
- <sup>4</sup> Ingold 2013, 94.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>6</sup> Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 421.
- <sup>7</sup> Ingold 2013, 94.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Ingold 2013, 101.

- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.
- <sup>15</sup> Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 230.
- <sup>16</sup> Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 230.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.
- <sup>18</sup> Lehmann 2012a, 18.
- <sup>19</sup> Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 240.
- <sup>20</sup> Lehmann 2012b, 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Lehmann 2012b, 14.

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