

STEHB�UES–Do You Want to Dance with Me?

Ninel Çam

ABSTRACT

The participatory dance performance *STEHB�UES* was created by the duo of Ninel Çam (an artist) and Chris Schaal (a filmmaker), who travel to different cities, mark a 2m x 2m area in a public space, and display an illustrated sign that lets passersby know that they can dance with the standing-and-waiting artist if they want. Chris Schaal documents the performances through still images and videos. Moving images are live-streamed to the World Cafe in Stuttgart.

In *STEHB�UES*, the artist stands in the midst of the marked field in a public space, waiting until a stranger is willing to slow-dance with her. As soon as someone volunteers, a relationship is created in this sphere of dance and becomes an ephemeral part of the city, of the culture, of the world. *STEHB�UES* travels to different cities that have invited this project to be part of their culture or to cities with which the artists feel a connection.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Osallistavaa *STEHB�UES* –tanssiesitystään varten duo Ninel Çam ja Chris Schaal matkustavat eri kaupunkeihin, merkitsevät julkiselle paikalle 2m x 2m alueen ja pystyttävät kuvallisen kyltin, joka kertoo ohikulkijoille, että nämä voivat halutessaan tanssia 'paikallaan pysyvän - odottavan' taiteilijan kanssa. Elokuvantekijä Chris Schaal dokumentoi esityksen valokuvin ja videoin. Elävä kuva striimataan suorana World-Cafe kahvilaan Stutgartissa.

*STEHB�UES*issa minä, taiteilija, seismografi, seison keskellä merkittyä kenttää julkisella paikalla odottaen, että joku haluaa tanssia hitaita kanssani. Kun vapaaehtoinen ilmaantuu, seismografi muuttuu taiteilijaksi ja kohtaa muukalaisen, joka tahtoo tanssia hänen kanssaan. Tässä tanssille määritellyssä syntyy suhde, josta tulee hetkellinen osa kaupunkia, kulttuuria, maailmaa. *STEHB�UES* tulee/ matkustaa kaupunkeihin, jotka kutsuvat sen osaksi kulttuuriaan.

STEHBLUES—

Do You Want to Dance with Me?

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Reason. Art. Freedom.

Living in the age of reason, one must constantly make up and be conscious of reasons to allow oneself to do things, even if the reasons for an action are not yet known or not yet clear to one. I remember my son and his friends, who were seven years old at the time, using the word ‘art’ now and then. I asked them what art meant to them, since I could not find a common pattern in their uses of the word. They immediately gave me the following answer: when you do something without a reason, it’s art. I was overwhelmed by the simplicity of this answer—above all, because I am an artist who believes it is an important duty of artists to ask themselves again and again what art means to them and what their motivation is. Can art indeed be described so simply? Were the children not intellectually mature enough to have a more sophisticated concept of art? Were they living in a culture where making art was equated with nonsense, or was their description simply wonderful? I was not sure if their answer praised or demeaned art, or if it was free of any value judgement. It took me a while to clarify that they were admiring not just art but also the possibility of not being required to reason. It was the feeling of freedom that attracted them—the possibility to do things, experiment, tinker, and try, all driven by different kinds of curiosity about their body, soul, and aesthetic connection to life, for which they simply do not have many spheres, besides art, where they can play freely and where these very human qualities of freedom and curiosity are activated/asked about/allowed.

Unique. Diverse. Crossing Paths.

If one had asked me what my hobbies were when I was in my teens or twenties, I would have said that I loved to observe people: their bodies, gazes, and gaits, what they wear, the way they move, and how they communicate. I loved to imagine fragments of possible stories that arose from every tiny detail that I was able to observe, and this interest has stayed with me ever since. This is the main reason that I love to be in public spaces, where people from very different backgrounds cross one another’s paths and have the potential for a coincidental encounter. Probably for the same reason, I also love asking strangers for directions, even if I have a map in my hand. This also explains why I loved certain part-time jobs as a student; they gave me the opportunity to get in touch with different lives: factory workers who spend large amounts of time on an assembly line, scientists who work on special topics with accuracy and precision, people behind the camera creating films, music videos and soap operas, or celebrities whom I accompanied backstage at concerts. I consider it a gift to have experienced all of these individual and diverse lives in their uniqueness and the possibility that diverse people can cross one another’s lives and have an exchange. The participatory dance performance *STEHBLUES—Do You Want to Dance with Me?* is driven by admiration for this diversity and the need to have some contact with people who are not normally part of my social surroundings—lives and circumstances that I wouldn’t otherwise be touched by.



Travel. Encounter. Exchange.

I don't remember when and how my attitude of curiosity toward exploring different countries and cultures changed into not wanting to travel unnecessarily. It was probably the feeling that tourism resembles a kind of consumerist plundering, with tourists adorning themselves with the images of special places, which overrides the inborn human interest in experiencing different cultures and ways of living. Tourists who move through continents in five- to ten-day programmes, visiting galleries and museums with their eyes glued to the viewfinders of their cameras, constantly accompanied by selfies at every step, must have caused my reluctance to travel. Having respect for the lives and spheres of others instead of consuming their ways of living, spaces, art and food overcomes my curiosity nowadays. Asking myself, «What do I have to offer when I visit a new place and a new society?» became my credo.

With *STEHLUES*, I can allow myself to travel to other cities. The filmmaker Chris Schaal and I go to different cities and find outdoor places to mark a

2x2-m square on the ground, where I stay and wait to see if anyone wants to slow-dance with me. We display an illustrated sign in the corner of the marked space so that passersby know what we are offering. The sign has a quotation by the Austrian poet and author Ingeborg Bachmann that emphasises the importance of any simple one-to-one relationship, which we all experience: «[W]here does fascism begin? It does not begin when the first bombs are dropped ... it begins in the relationship of the people.» If we want to think about peace in Europe and on Earth, we should be aware that it is closely related to every single encounter we create and experience.

Curiosity. Questioning. Understanding.

My son and his friends taught me that art can be defined as the sphere where you have freedom to do things without being obliged to give a reason. I also consider art to give us the possibility of expanding our own spheres of experience. Art is caused by and also

provokes curiosity, questioning, and the acquisition of new understanding. These statements may seem paradoxical at first, but they're not. The keywords that make it clear that there is no paradox are 'obligation' and 'freedom'. When making art, it's not that there is no will for or interest in reason, understanding, or insight; it might even be that these are fundamental parts of any artistic action. The point is that curiosity, action and drive do not necessarily need to be framed, regulated or underlain by reason. An analogy could be to imagine yourself writing to your loved ones at every moment you can, driven by the need to share as much as possible of your life while you travel. Now, imagine yourself writing postcards to friends every time you are on holiday because you have been educated to do so—as an automatic act, an action without imminent will or necessity. When the children spoke about art as the sphere where they have no obligation to reason in a determined way, it was not because they don't like to reason. They want to experience reason through an intrinsic curiosity for life, like the traveller who writes for the sake of sharing. The children simply do not enjoy being educated to reason rigidly through disciplines that do not allow them to follow their genuine, overflowing desire to explore and understand.

Woman. Man. Camera.

When I first had the idea for *STEHBLUES*, it came to me as an image of a one-woman performance project. I soon realised that that would not be at all easy for me. It would require an enormous amount of strength and energy, so I had to create a frame for it. I asked the filmmaker Chris Schaal if he would accompany me to my performances of waiting in public spaces and dancing with strangers. As soon as the camera was included in the performance, the forces that had sapped my energy simply disappeared. The camera provided a reason for my performance to the passersby and allowed them to understand what I was doing. Occasionally, some people still made offensive and



even humiliating gestures or spoke unkind words as they walked by, but my main problem—that my empathy was constantly 'hearing' the thoughts of the passersby—disappeared. I could perceive their criticism and this disturbed me, I could not feel free. However, when the camera is present I felt justified by making art. The camera, which is constantly directed at me, not only 'gives a reason' to my actions, but it also has a protective quality, since people are aware that their actions in my space are being documented. Having a cameraman instead of a camerawoman helps to reinforce this protected space. It is certainly sad that this is true, but it must be confessed.

Listening. Singing. Intimacy.

Our first performances were in Stuttgart, Germany. Whilst waiting for people to approach, I developed the





idea that I am a seismograph installed in a public space to experience what that particular part of the city makes me sense. Achieving this requires becoming extremely sensitive to the outer world, which is something we normally prefer not to do in public spaces. Listening to the city became an important parameter to which I gave more attention as I was performing. I turned this awareness into part of the performance: before we begin to dance, I now ask my volunteers to pay attention first to their own breath and second to the sounds of the city, as if the collection of sounds were a symphony. The volunteers should oscillate back and forth between these two states of attention as they wish.

Later, in Lodz, Poland, while dancing with an extremely open and charming woman, I began to softly sing some improvised melodies into her ear. Since it was such a magical experience, I decided that singing quietly should be a part of this project going forward. Creating a shared, intimate sphere with the help of the voice and music is much more joyful and also easier, since it distracts the volunteer from needing

to reason about what we are doing there.

These quietly sung songs, which are evoked by the encounter/relationship/movement of two people in a tiny concert for two, have expanded the intellectual sphere of this project for me. The action of singing has added a new dimension, sensibility and vulnerability. I am still thrilled by this new depth that *STEHBLOODS* has gained, which makes it much easier for *STEHBLOODS* to create intimate relationships, which I greatly appreciate and wish to explore.

Struggle. Shame. Confession.

What am I struggling with? It is so difficult for me to confess and directly state what my issues are, because I want to be sure that you will empathise with me. But I will confess. I experienced and still experience a certain helplessness about dancing *STEHBLOODS* in some countries. I am struggling with this helplessness even more in light of everything that is happening currently in the Middle East, the 'immigration problem' around the world and the attitudes of left- and right-wing





politics toward fear and trust, respect and responsibility, inclusion and exclusion.

Here are the facts: *STEHLUES* is partly sponsored by the Office of Cultural Affairs of the city of Stuttgart and the Office of Affairs of Sister Cities of Stuttgart. We therefore perform in Stuttgart's sister cities, amongst others, and document the performances. The recorded performances will be exhibited in the last quarter of 2018 in Galerie b at the City Library of Stuttgart. We have already performed in Stuttgart, Germany; St. Louis, USA; Berlin, Germany; Lodz, Poland; Warsaw, Poland; and Brno, Czech Republic. However, there are other sister cities of Stuttgart where we should perform, but we have decided not to go because I am afraid! I am afraid of going to countries such as India, Tunisia and Egypt to dance with strangers and seek and create intimate moments. I am ashamed of this fear. I have spoken about this issue with many people, both women and men, some of whom are citizens of these countries. No one I spoke to had a positive opinion about this project working well in their country or the

worth of trying. They could not imagine that I would *not* be harassed during such a performance. A friend even asked why I should risk my life; what would I gain if a crazy person plunged a knife into my stomach?

- Surely this would not happen.

- But am I really certain that it would not happen?

- I should have my own experiences and not be driven by other people's fear.

- The Italian artist Pippa Bacca also wanted to have her own experience in Turkey, believing in the good of mankind and wanting to reinforce this belief. She was raped, violated and killed because she had decided to travel in a wedding dress.

- Why should I risk anything?

- I am thinking about the mind-soothing talk 'Don't Panic' by Hans Rosling, in which he visualises the big data of global development, where hope and confidence in humanity can find fertile soil to grow. During an optimistic state of mind, we even bought tickets to Tunisia.

- Collecting big data, interpreting them and





using them to create the future of our society and world is quite a new phenomenon for humanity. On the other hand, every single human being is creating their world through their own experience and from their own point of view and perspective, and this has always been the case. To have access to big data certainly is important. Engaging with this can be very influential on political and economical development, and therefore on the lives of masses of people. This means that big data should and will be a field or a medium for the arts to work with. However, the importance of one's own life is the priority for anyone. I should not unnecessarily endanger my life.

- Maybe we should go to these countries without the fixed goal of performing *STEHBLUES* but should try to imagine what it would be like once we're there. That way, our reactions would be based on our experiences in that society and what feels right to us, instead of being based on a preconceived fear. Or is this fear a protective instinct that I should listen to?

- The Office of Affairs of Sister Cities informed us that they cannot support the performance in Tunisia. It is not difficult to comprehend their decision; they don't

want to back a risky project.

- The lack of funding doesn't matter. We can afford to travel to these countries on our own.

- The International Institute for Foreign Relations recommends that people do not visit Tunisia if it is not necessary.

- Chris Schaal believes that it is I who must decide. I am grateful for his respect. The woman has to decide; the performer has to decide, because she is the vulnerable one.

- The camera is probably no longer able to create a secure space for the performance in these countries.

- It might even be that a camera would incite someone to perform an act of violence.

- What a nonsensical space of fear I find myself in, as if all the men in these countries are abusive!

- Certainly, I don't think so. But I lived for long enough in the east of Anatolia, where the roles of women are strictly defined and limited, to know that some people may not be able to make sense of such a performance. I learned that even the length of a woman's t-shirt can carry sexual connotations that I could hardly make sense of. Through the

filter of this mentality, *STEHLUES* could easily be mistaken as an invitation to sexuality, since it seeks the intimate and the sensitive.

- Doesn't this statement also apply to more liberal countries? A German journalist once asked me whether slow dancing is not a way for people to approach each other sexually. -Yes, it can be, since sexuality often happens in intimate and sensitive spheres, but it's one thing to have sexual thoughts and quite another to act inconsiderately/ impulsively on them. Crossing this line might be likelier to happen in cultures where there is less respect for women. Or perhaps it's just the image I have of men from these cultures, in relation to sexuality, which causes me this fear.

- I am considering adapting *STEHLUES* for these countries. What would such an adaptation look like?

- I am sorry, very sorry, but I cannot come up with an adapted version that works for me. It would be unfaithful to the project itself. I'm not interested in turning *STEHLUES* into a performance only for a female audience or turning it into something completely different, such as walking around and greeting people and probably handing out some small pamphlets with best wishes, or something similar. No, I don't want that!

- Why am I struggling? If a certain society doesn't have the conditions required for me to perform there, in that culture, then that is a fact that

I need to accept.

- But perhaps it is not a problem with the society but with the image that is created in our minds.

- My spouse, who has accompanied me in my struggle, reminds me how rapidly violence against women has increased in Turkey in recent decades. The Turkish political system, dominated by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, results in human rights abuses such as an increasing number of child marriages.

- Since Chris Schaal is a man, his presence will protect me.

- No, it might not.

- My son asks me why I should do such a performance in a country that I have nothing to do with.

- Because I want to believe—I want to prove—that, in essence, there is a shared humanity between us and 'the other' and that every one-to-one encounter can be respectful and even magical.

- Do you really believe that?

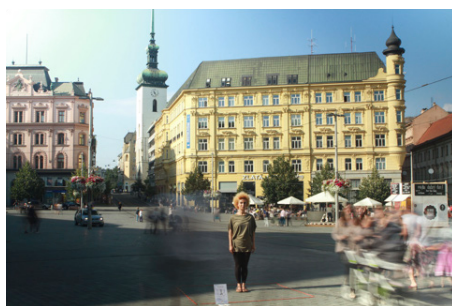
- I don't know!

I have decided not to visit some of the sister cities of Stuttgart. Unfortunately, these are countries where the dominant religion is Islam, which is a pity. I feel guilty and wonder if I am supporting Islamophobia. But I am afraid! I believe that I must accept my fear and not ignore it, so that it is possible to work with it. In 2017, we will visit the United Kingdom and some Nordic





countries. I am certain that while we are touring in the north of Europe, my thoughts related to my fear and struggle will accompany me, since this is a complex issue with many aspects that must be differentiated. This fear, which seems to be my fear, and this struggle, which seems to be a struggle of *STEHBLUES*, is certainly not unique, as no autoethnographic work is solely about the researcher him- or herself. This fear and this struggle are our issues, belonging to our times, and I hope to achieve some insights through *STEHBLUES* that will contribute to our well-being and happiness.





BIOGRAPHIES

Ninel Çam is a Turkish-German choreographer and performance artist who is based in Barcelona. She is affiliated with Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland, and is working currently on her doctoral project entitled *Dancing Dialectics—Thinking with the Moving Body*. For her dissertation, she is specifically interested in the concept of collective flow, the self-regulating abilities of groups, and improvisational techniques for exercising to deal with states of not knowing. She considers dance and performance to be the places where the mutual relationships among the intellectual, psychological, and physical worlds of any person can be amplified.

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LYHYT BIOGRAFIA

Ninel Çam on Turkkilais-Saksalainen koreografi, joka asuu Barcelonassa. Hänellä on yhteys Aalto-yliopistoon Helsingissä ja hän työstää parhaillaan väitöskirjaansa nimeltä *'Dancing Dialectics - Thinking with the Moving Body'*. Väitöksessään häntä kiinnostaa erityisesti sellaiset konseptit, kuin kollektiivinen flow, ryhmien itsesäätelykyky ja improvisaatiotekniikat harjoitteina eriasteisen ei-tietämisen kanssa toimimiseen. Hän näkee tanssin ja esiintymisen ihmisen älyllisen-, psykologisen- ja fyysisen maailman välisiä yhteyksiä vahvistavana paikkana.

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