

Anouk van Dijk's toolbox

Counter-technique

Light, tough and analytical is how you'd describe the counter-technique of choreographer and dance educationalist Anouk van Dijk. This way of moving – still young but gaining in international influence – gives professional dancers more independence in their professional practice. What exactly is counter-technique? Van Dijk explains: "That pelvis – just let it be a pelvis".

Anouk van Dijk developed counter-technique in order to survive as a dancer, so that she wouldn't die of exhaustion in the merry-go-round of training, rehearsals and performances night after night. So about twenty years ago she started searching for a more efficient way of moving, which would enable her to continue to excel as a dancer. It resulted in a method that teaches you not only to conserve your energy, but also to give your movements more space, speed and agility. "Counter-technique makes it easier to move", says Van Dijk. "It feels like you're doing less. And that feels strange for a dancer. Although you do less, it looks better and is less painful for your body. As a dancer, you learn that pain is all part of it; that pain is good. Once you've mastered counter-technique – which takes a few years – you find a new relationship to your body; a new way of thinking about how you warm up and how things should feel".

So what makes this counter-technique so fundamentally different? Put simply, it is based on the principle of *direction / counter-direction*, i.e. for each direction you give your body, you give it a counter-direction as well. For instance, if you move your arm forwards, your ribs move backwards. If you move your head and torso upwards, you move them away from your legs. By giving your moving body counter-directions, you find new control of the movement: a *dynamic balance*. Unlike many other contemporary techniques, your balance does not originate by moving from one central point of your body, like the pelvis.

"Many dancers are obsessed with the position of their pelvis", says Van Dijk. "It has to be just so, otherwise you get an injury or it doesn't look right. Dancers can become so obsessed with their pelvis that in fact they no longer know how to use it. They block their emotions and can't move properly anymore. If dancers ask me 'What's the position of

'Energy and rhythm: that's dance!'

my pelvis in this exercise? Should I keep my hips square?' I don't answer the question but say 'I've talked about these principles in the class already. Focus on them first. And that pelvis – just let it be a pelvis for the moment'.

Sit bones

'Inspect your toes', says Van Dijk. 'Have you taken good care of them, or not? Are they clean? There's the sound of laughter.

Anouk van Dijk
foto Annaleen Louwes





It's almost three o'clock on a grey January day. The second-year Dance Performance students at Codarts have their noses on their toes in a stretching exercise. Their hands rest on the floor, palms down. "And your armpits", continues Van Dijk. "What do they smell like? Yes, that's all part of dance too". The students keep chuckling – relaxed yet focused on the exercise. "Bring your weight forwards a bit. Make your back longer".

Asja, a tall Slovenian girl with bright red hair and a greenish-black outfit leans so far onto her hands that her heels leave the ground a bit. Van Dijk gives feedback. "You're thinking too much about bringing your weight forwards. Think more of making space in your ankles and hips, and making your legs longer". Asja tries. "Heels on the ground. Move your sit bones away from your heels". Now Asja's position changes. It looks lighter. As she puts her heels on the ground, her bottom points straight upwards. Her legs are nice and straight, and her upper body and arms form a slight arc from her hips to the ground.

The exercises Van Dijk gives the students in this class are relatively straightforward. It's not about teaching them steps, but rather about letting them experience this fundamentally different approach to moving. At Codarts, Anouk van Dijk is investigating the didactic component of counter-technique. Every year, for the whole month of January, Van Dijk teaches all the year groups on the Dance Performance course. She does so in conjunction with the dancers of her company

anoukvandijk dc, who have already mastered counter-technique. "Counter-technique was developed on good dancers and quick thinkers. At Codarts, we are looking at what happens if you teach it to students from the first year onwards. Is it possible or not? Is there a way of developing exercises and methods to help them learn the principles quicker?"

The beginning of February saw the publication of the book *Dance Techniques 2010*, which is a comparative study of influential modern dance techniques like Cunningham, release technique, Muller and Humphrey/Limon. The contemporary Dutch counter-technique is described in detail alongside these renowned techniques, including its historical context and relationship to other dance techniques.

Superballerinas

In the late eighties, Van Dijk danced with the Rotterdamse Dansgroep, now known as Dance Works Rotterdam. There, she learnt the principles of Alexander technique from Tom Koch, which changed her way of thinking. She learned to manage her energy more efficiently in her movements. A few years later, when Van Dijk toured the US with Amanda Miller's *Pretty Ugly Dance Company*, she went even further in investigating her way of moving. "Amanda had assembled a colourful group of people, with ex-dancers from William Forsythe and

•
Protect me
by Falk Richter
Anouk van Dijk
photo Arno (Jeclair)



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Protect me
photo Arno
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and the former Rotterdamse Dansgroep, including myself. While one stood on pointe yawning, another did ten pirouettes out of sheer boredom, and yet another could do handstands like a gymnast. Every morning, we did a classical class. Although I was used to classical training, these classes didn't give me the suppleness I needed for Amanda's choreography. And I must say I was rather intimidated by all those Forsythe superballerinas. So I developed my own warming-up. Every morning, I investigated which exercises from all the ones I'd learnt were best for my body. I looked into why that was and whether they were still good for me if I did them in another way. And so I developed my own exercises".

"Then I started to choreograph, which required me to analyse my way of moving and train others in it. It was during this period that I discovered the importance of counter-directions. When working with Michael Schumacher, for instance, I put weight on his shoulders with my hands. I wanted to a promenade in plié and he said, "You have to push your hips back while your hands go forwards". I realised that this made it so much easier to bend my legs and turn out. I realised a couple of other things as well, such as when I choreographed for Gaby Allard, who is now director of ArtEZ in Arnhem. We

danced together for years with the Rotterdamse Dansgroep and I choreographed my first pieces for her. We discovered how we could get more length in her arms, by making the arm go in one direction, while the opposite shoulder went the other way. Or by the arm going forwards while the spine went backwards. She was also a very analytical dancer and said, 'That's such a different sensation. There's so much more freedom in my arm joint. Hey, so that's what people mean by extending!'"

Fuck it!

Crucial to the counter-technique is the 'toolbox' Van Dijk made a couple of years ago. It is a plan of the various elements of counter-technique, which are divided into six main categories. If you have mastered counter-technique, then you carry this plan around in your head, as it were. The problems you come up against in training, rehearsals or performances can be solved by using one of the many tools. If movements feel stiff, for example, you can use 'popping' to reduce the tension in your joints. Or if you've worked for ages on a problem in a particular movement phrase and you just can't get it right, you can decide to work on something else for a while and return to the problem later. This tool is called 'fuck it', in line with Van Dijk's characteristic humour.

"'Fuck it' is often the thing that dancers remember most from their first course with us. That's because it's very difficult for a dancer to accept that something's not working and that they should leave it for a while. Dancers are usually eager. It's not possible to be a dancer without perseverance, but the problem is that they can get their teeth into something so much that it becomes an obsession. As soon as you want to perform a movement

'Hey, so that's what people mean by extending!'

perfectly, there's a big risk you'll literally block it. And then you can never really let your movement fly in space. This is what we work on in counter-technique: how to accelerate your weight in space so that you achieve enormous speed and agility. You can only do so by letting go – both mentally and physically".

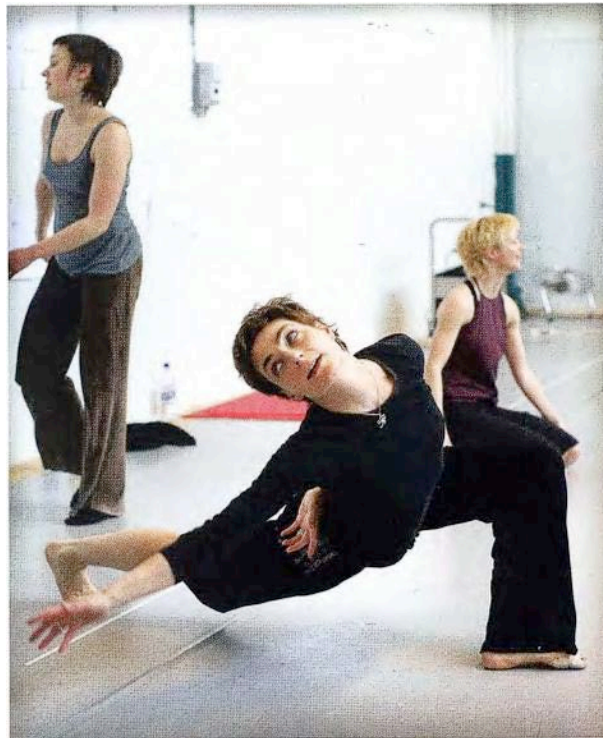
Poppoppop!

Van Dijk's counter-technique is the driving force behind her choreography. The power of her dance idiom is expressed in supple, capricious movements and rapidly switching jumps and turns. A few years ago, Anouk van Dijk renewed her collaboration with the German director Falk Richter. At the beginning of their creative career together,

they made *Nothing Hurts* (1999), for dancers and actors. The latest product of their collaboration is *Protect me* (2010), in which the stage is populated by disillusioned figures. The warm timbres of their voices contrast with the emptiness and despair of the lives they are talking about. They meander their way through their existence. "We both realised that we wanted to enter into relationship with the other art form in our work. In my choreography, for instance, I sometimes missed text as an element for conveying meaning. And Falk thought that physicality was important. He directs scripts more on the basis of energy and rhythm than on the meaning of the words. And energy and rhythm: that's dance".

In *Protect me*, as well as in her previous production with Richter, *Trust* (2009), Van Dijk is dancing again herself. "I improvise a lot on stage, within a certain framework; on musicality, for example, or maybe on a theme of alienation or trust. While improvising, I'm in a very alert state of being, with an openness to the here and now. And that openness creates the emotional charge in my movements. But during that emotional process, I'm also operating on another level; that of counter-technique. I'm forty-five, so I have to think very smartly about my body if I want to express my own explosions of movement. So I think 'Popopopopop: loosen your joints, keep open, think big, gently, gently!' Dancers Nina Wollny and Philipp Fricke also work on these two levels simultaneously. While the first level inspires the choreography, the counter-technique level ensures we can cope physically".

For the moment, Van Dijk is continuing her collaboration with Richter. And along with other dancers and dance teachers, she will keep on researching and refining her counter-technique. Eventually, that will lead to the publication of two handbooks: one for dancers and one for teachers. Besides the workshops Van Dijk and her dancers give to companies and schools in the Netherlands and abroad, there will probably also be a Counter-technique Summer School in Amsterdam. "The ten-day Summer Intensive that we give at the moment is really



Dance training
Anouk van Dijk
photo Klaas-Ian
van der Weij

much too short", says Van Dijk. "However, we won't be offering it all year round. Then there's the danger that everyone gets too obsessed with it, which is counter-productive. And we'd have to shout 'fuck it' really loudly!"

Dance Techniques 2010 — Tanzplan Germany, edited by Ingo Diehl and Friederike Lampert, was published by Henschel Verlag at the beginning of February. It can be ordered in English or German for €19.90 via the website of anoukvandijk.nl.

In the coming period, *Protect Me*, *Trust* and *STAU* will be performed in Germany, among other places. Anoukvandijk dc will also be performing at the Oerol and Over 't IJ festivals this summer.

www.anoukvandijk.nl