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**[interview] Choreographer Anouk van Dijk**

## **A moment of surrender**

**Anouk van Dijk: 'I always try to capture something of the uncertainty I feel around me'.**

Choreographer Anouk van Dijk is the inventor of her own dance technique, which after 15 years of development will be taught from after this summer in a 4 year curriculum at the internationally renowned Rotterdam Dance Academy / Codarts. Anouk van Dijk's dance style focuses on freedom, speed and manoeuvrability. And about taking risks. 'Dancers have to be in the here and now, and they have to make their own decisions'.

*By Mirjam van der Linden*

"Let it go! Open up! Just fall! Holding back is counter-productive. It's not about control, but delay". In her big, light studio in the 'Kauwgomballenfabriek', a breeding ground for creative entrepreneurs in the former premises of Maple Leaf on the edge of Amsterdam, choreographer Anouk van Dijk encourages her dancers. Nearly everything she says during the class is about letting go and daring to let go, and about freedom.

Arms wave and hang, and heads turn round smoothly. A jump glides effortlessly through a position low down on the ground, as if it is all one movement. It has speed and direction, yet it also looks very comfortable and relaxed. 'Pretend it's summer and you're enjoying a nice drink'.

Anouk van Dijk (1965) has been active for over twenty years as a dancer, teacher and choreographer. This year, her company (anoukvandijk dc) has been in existence for ten years. In the fifteen full-length works she has created in the meantime, the dancers often seem to want to go in different directions at once; almost stumbling or drifting drowsily. Their bodies twist and spin energetically around, manoeuvring into one complicated position after another. Volatile is probably the best description of Van Dijk's style.

Van Dijk was one of the few dance makers based in Amsterdam to receive a positive recommendation from the Amsterdam Arts Council last month. She has no lack of ambition; she tours abroad extensively and she has developed her own dance technique. This 'Counter technique' has now been formalised and accepted to the extent that after the summer it will be included in the official curriculum of the Rotterdam Dance Academy, from which she graduated herself once upon a time.

The Counter technique is essentially focused on more freedom of movement. As its name implies, the technique works through opposite directions. Balance is found not by directing the body from a particular centre, as is usual in dance, but by giving each direction a 'counter direction'. Put simply: if a foot goes downwards, the head goes up, and if a leg goes forwards, the spine goes backwards. One thing is actually always moving away from the other. Additionally – and this is also what makes the Counter technique unique according to Van Dijk – the counter direction is not used to polarise, but to create extension and freedom. 'In our work, things fall apart. It is a frightening concept to learn. Dancers are so used to holding on and being in control. But when you think that movement happens from the joints, it is rather odd to block everything by tensing the muscles. Then you can't move any more'.

That is why the Counter technique is based on 'dynamic balance'. This balance is not a position that fixes the body, but a starting point for change; a balance that can be broken at any moment. So at any point, you can lose your balance. The result of this 'looseness' is that dancers can change direction, height and dynamics very quickly and suddenly. Van Dijk: "Whenever a dancer breaks his balance, he takes a decision. As a choreographer, it is precisely that moment I find interesting. You see the dancer in dialogue with his body. It is a vulnerable moment; a moment of surrender, when he cannot hide behind a particular form, technique, style or set of aesthetics. The person behind the dancer becomes visible".

This evening is the première of her latest work, *Borrowed Landscapes*, which is actually not a typical Anouk van Dijk piece. Whereas her technique is concerned with freedom, in this piece she limits the freedom of her dancers. *Borrowed Landscapes* is inspired by her experiences in China (last year she created the production *Bliss* there with the Beijing Modern Dance Company) and is about originality. Do I move myself or am I being moved? Van Dijk: "In China, you feel that there's no freedom. If the front row of the theatre is occupied by

members of the Communist party, then the rest of the audience reacts in the same way they do. There are guards everywhere – on the streets, in restaurants, in front of parking garages. They are ceremonial, symbolic figures without weapons, who wouldn't hurt a fly. But they have a constant air of power about them”.

Back in the Netherlands, Van Dijk wondered how complete our own freedom is and what freedom is exactly. Van Dijk: “It is also a topical subject in the Netherlands. How do you combine freedom of religion with the separation of church and state? Is Islam subjection or actually freedom? What do I think of the fact that the Dutch government no longer pays for the security of Hirshi Ali abroad? To what extent do we need the community as a structure, and can we find freedom within it?” Van Dijk herself does not believe in unlimited freedom. ‘I do my own thing, but I’m not somebody who goes in search of provocation. I look for freedom, but within the structures that have been imposed on me. Even in a democratic country like the Netherlands, you have certain responsibilities”.

In order to give shape to the theme, Van Dijk did not work with improvisation, as she often does, but with strict assignments (“dance with your eyes shut”) and during the performance she will even give her dancers orders. How the audience will perceive this, and how noticeable it will be, she doesn't want to say, as she is afraid that then the effect will be lost. In any case, her dancers will have to fight for their freedom.

Van Dijk's vision of freedom has a lot to do with her respect for ‘the larger whole’, which surpasses the needs and interests of the individual. She has been strongly influenced in this by oriental ways of thinking. From her childhood on, she became familiar with Japanese norms and values. Her uncle had a Japanese wife and he always brought presents and stories home to Velp, in Gelderland. Her father, an administrator from before the computer age, lived a Buddhist life, without calling it as such. “He saw himself as a particle of dust in the universe”, laughs Van Dijk. “Actually, without realising it, I had a very oriental upbringing”.

The title *Borrowed Landscapes* comes from a Japanese method of gardening, in which the garden is designed in such a way that it blends in with its surroundings. The boundary between garden (individual) and surroundings (society) is not clear. In other words, the outside world can never be ignored and it influences your perspectives and your actions. That sounds like a restriction, but paradoxically the surroundings outside the garden in the Japanese tradition also stand for rebirth and therefore the path to nirvana; the ‘ultimate freedom’. These are metaphors and images that Van Dijk has kept in mind when choreographing.

Although Van Dijk is not trying to tell stories in her dance, her style is emotionally charged. The Countertechnique makes Van Dijk's dancers very manoeuvrable and their movements have a very irregular look. It gives her dancers a certain absurd character. Their world is a turbulent one. People

regularly fall to the ground (only to spring back up again immediately) and they have a remarkably soloist attitude amid all their toils.

“Actually, my pieces are always about disunity”, she explains. “I always try to capture something of the uncertainty I feel around me. Something of the loneliness, the fear, the loss, the decline and the attempt to grope your way out of it again. People can get terribly bogged down in misery, precisely because our society is so individualist”. Van Dijk looks on in wonder and amazement at everyday things. If she sees a nun sitting in silence next to a loudly crying man for the whole tram journey, it stimulates her imagination. “You flash past lives of which you know nothing, and past situations that become completely unreal in their elusiveness”.

Van Dijk incorporates this alienation in her pieces, often along with a comic undertone, as she thinks it is a great bonus to put things in perspective. She sees her dancers on stage as normal people, but then magnified. She compares it – slightly apologetically – to the way the great Christoph Marthaler directs, or with how a miniature temple in a Japanese garden makes the eye zoom in on one element from reality.

The Japanese frame of reference keeps cropping up. Van Dijk finds the beauty of her volatile dance idiom even more important than its psychological significance. For her, this beauty is all to do with Japanese aesthetics. Van Dijk: “In Japan, they really love asymmetry. Japan has influenced me most in that respect. A crack in a teacup can be glued, but it must remain visible. Something like that is a sign of travels through life, of history and of soul. Detailed craftsmanship, which the Japanese are also crazy about, only creates harmony along with something ugly. In my dancing, too, I like to combine something that is unfinished with something that is perfectly streamlined”.

One way of achieving an unpolished look is to leave space for vulnerability. Though Van Dijk’s dancers have to be absolute virtuosos, this is not done in the traditional way. For her, virtuosity is not striving for the ideal way of doing something, but pushing forth your own boundaries. It is about speed, manoeuvrability and taking risks – things that belong to the present and which are easier to achieve with the Countertechnique. Van Dijk: “If you have to dance more than half the piece looking up at the ceiling, as in *Bliss*, how can you let your body go in all directions without losing this position? As a dancer, you have to feel and do this yourself. It’s not a question of imitating an existing image. If you try to do what you did yesterday or what someone else does, it doesn’t work. You have to be in the here and now, and make your own decisions”. And after a short pause, she says: “The latter, by the way, is a very Western way of thinking!”

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As a little girl, Van Dijk tap danced all round Velp, but the eye-opener came later, in the jazz classes given by David Hutuely. He created dance to poems he had written himself – “it was so beautiful”. As a birthday gift, a friend who was a professional dancer in Paris presented him with a choreographic work. Anouk was allowed to go and watch it. “Then I saw everything that still absorbs me today: energy, power, virtuosity, individuality, freedom, personality and risk”. She put aside her dream of becoming an astronomer (“I can never sit still anyway, and I hated physics”) and told her mother that she wanted to become a dancer like that. When she was fifteen, she started professional training and she went on to become a remarkable dancer with the Rotterdamse Dansgroep and Amanda Miller's Pretty Ugly Dance Company.

All the time she was dancing, Van Dijk also taught classes. This was certainly not unusual, especially in those days, as it saved companies the expense of a teacher. Gradually, she became more and more involved in the question of what a dancer actually needed. Van Dijk's dance can definitely not do without the Countertechnique, but the Countertechnique can be applied on a much broader basis. According to Van Dijk, it is a training method that greatly enhances dancers' physical awareness – anatomically, physically, mentally and spatially. As there are few modern dance techniques that have been worked out in detail (“in our scene, we mainly depend on interpretations and on the teacher passing things on”), Van Dijk is writing down a teaching method and training various teachers in it.

Some people prefer Van Dijk's movement idiom to the way she uses the space and constructs her pieces. And indeed, those who are used to the classical construction of solos, duets and trios set to polished pieces of music might feel cheated. Van Dijk prefers to work with soundscapes, and does not see choreography necessarily as an orderly series of movement patterns in space. “I'm quite able to create ‘nice’, well-formed pieces”, answers Van Dijk airily. “But there are already so many people in that tradition who can do it just as wonderfully. I don't want to use formulae. The driving force for my work comes from the authenticity of the dancers on stage and the sincerity with which they take certain risks”.

Yet space is essential for Van Dijk in her choreographic work. It is just that she takes a different view of space – associative and based on senses. She doesn't see space as being fixed, but as a plurality. She sees the possibility of several spaces in one space. They can exist alongside one another, but also transform. Van Dijk: “Space is not abstract or static, but tangible and fluid; a force field that can change colour or emotion. The dancers fill the space with their energy and shift the air. This produces dramatic tension”.

A wall in the dance studio is hung with lots of small papers with variations on the word ‘space’. They come from the architect Daniel Libeskind, who put them under one another in long lists in one of his books, like a sort of poem. *Fallen space. Liquid space. Painful space. Movement space. Kissing space.*

*Borrowed space*. Van Dijk reads out the texts in raptures. "Isn't it wonderful? With each new sound, you feel the space changing! I also enjoy making the space feel different in my dance – but by other means than by just changing the lighting. Actually, you should look at *Borrowed Landscapes* as a poem as well. A visual poem".

More information:

Both the trailer of *Borrowed Landscapes* and a short film on the Countertechnique can be found on anoukvandijk's Youtube website [www.youtube.com/anoukvandijkdc](http://www.youtube.com/anoukvandijkdc).