# Dutch Mime

Marijn de Langen

This book is an ode to mime performers.
Their work is essential because it provokes and confuses,
fulfils and delights, imagines and brings about change.

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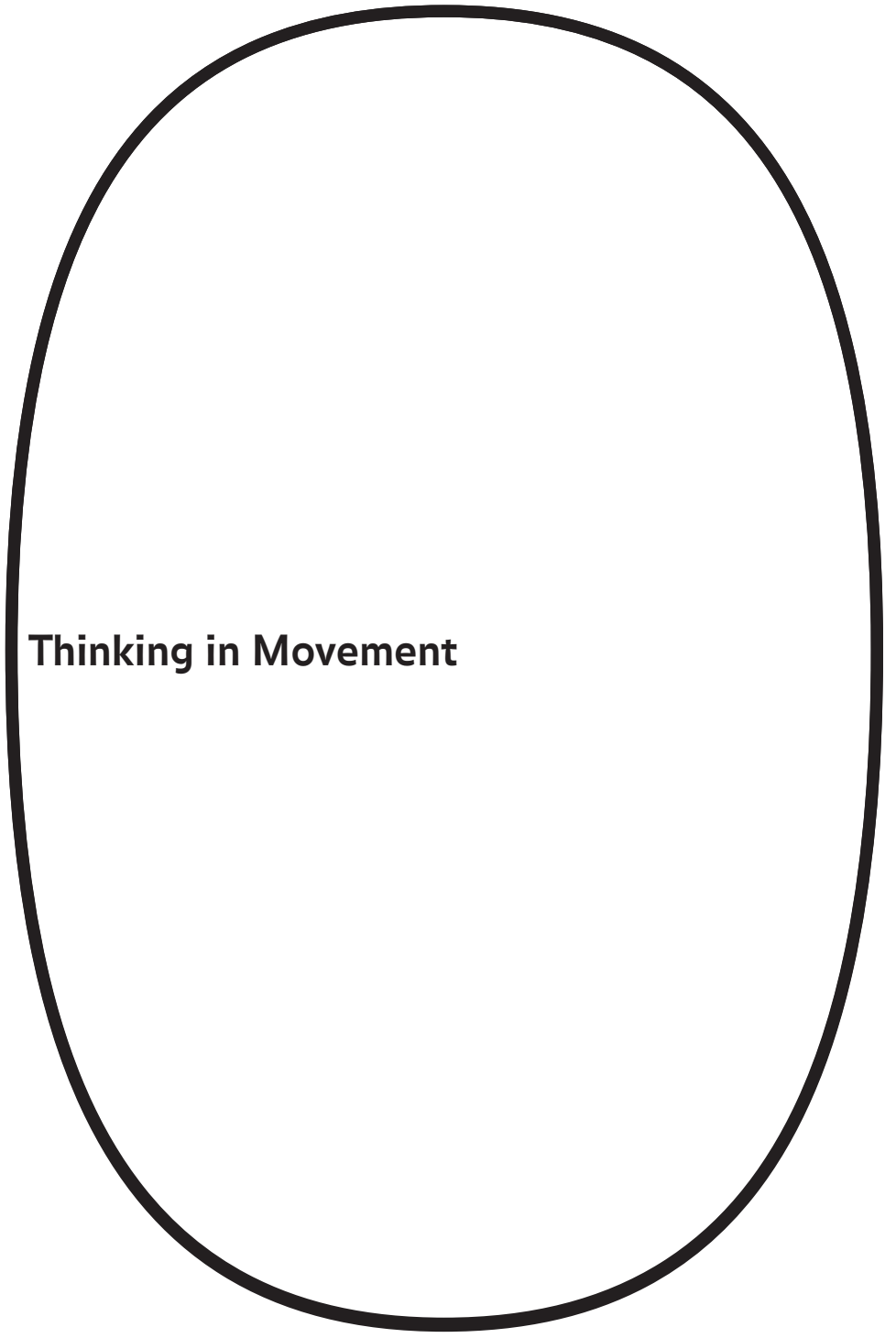
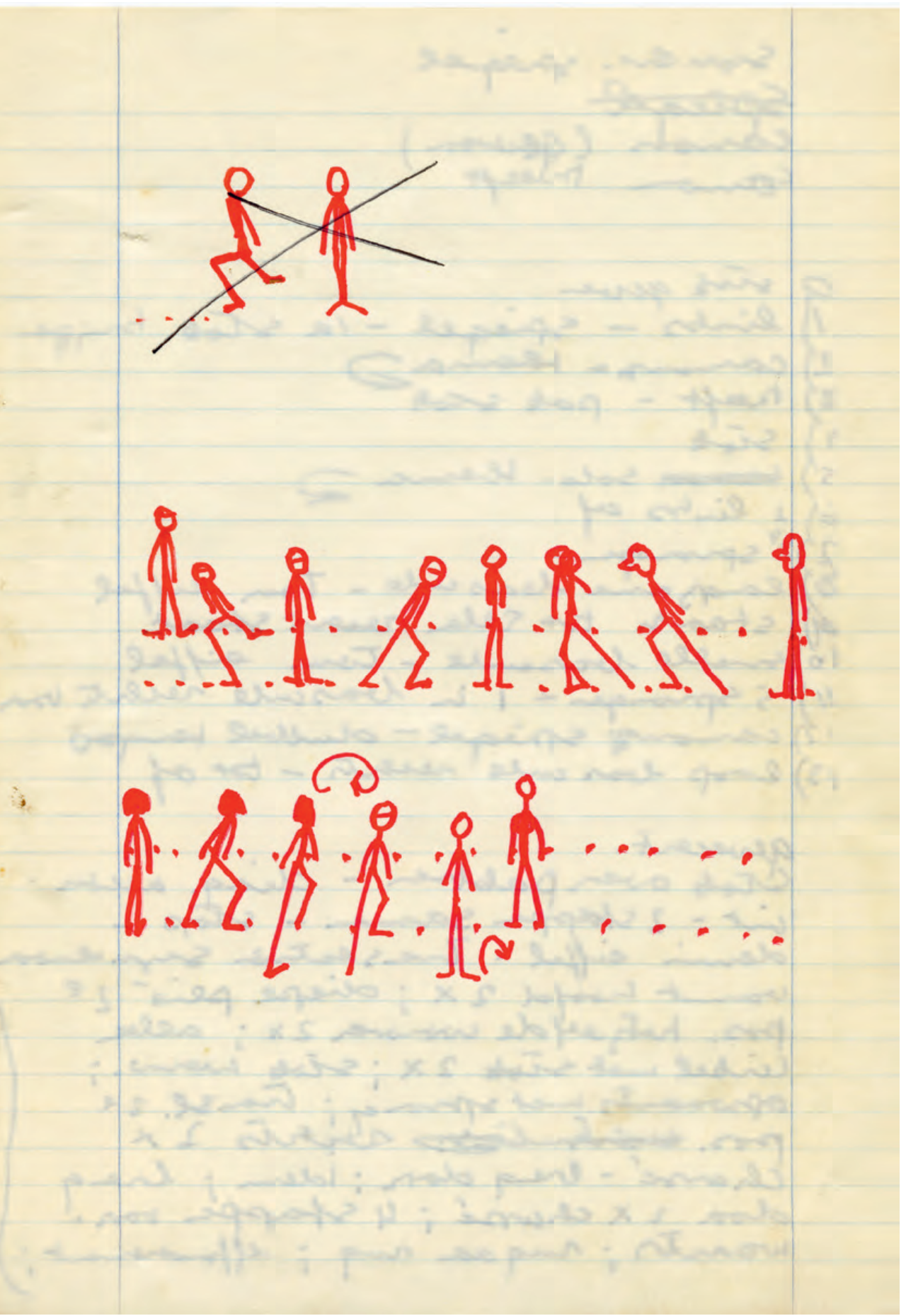

Thinking in Movement



This drawing was made in the mid-1960s, when a group of mime performers in Amsterdam were inventing ways to notate movement as a tool to create mime theatre. It is somewhat lost among other notes in a pad. However simple the drawing is, the exploration it represents is evident, as it captures human postures and movements in a few simple lines. A step up, a twisting motion, a straightening or bending of the knees, reaching forward, standing still. What postures are possible? What meanings do they create? How does movement produce rhythm? The top two figures are crossed out. A mistake? It is an image that shows in the most fundamental way what Dutch mime is all about: thinking in movement.

The drawing is probably intended as a sketch for a movement sequence of one performer moving from pose to pose, left to right across the page. However, if you look at it in a different way, you can see it as the movement of a group of figures at the same time. The drawing is thus a symbol of Dutch mime itself. It always revolves around ways in which people come together: performers, makers, audience. They seek each other out, react to one another, look, turn away, stand at a distance, come closer… too close?

Historically, mime can be seen as the *enfant terrible* of Dutch theatre. The movement has developed in the margins of the theatre establishment since the early 1960s. It is a theatre form which regularly crosses the boundaries of what is theatre, and which challenges the audience's perception and experience. Dutch mime is theatre that centres on the bodies and movement of the performers and audience in relation to scenography, time and space. It is an experimental theatre form, in which the performers are often the makers of their own work. Mime performers and makers are inventors, who are inclined to start from zero, an empty space in which nothing is fixed and no laws have been established. From this void, on the basis of their own fascinations and sources of inspiration, using bodies, materials, space, objects, voice, language, costume, make-up, lighting, music and sound, and so on, they build a universe that can take many forms: from the extremely minimalistic to the exuberantly theatrical.

Dutch mime is an interdisciplinary genre. The performers work in many directions: in that of performance art, installation, dance, community art, text-based theatre, site-specific theatre, pop concert, film, motion capture. They also work in a wide variety of locations: indoors and outdoors, in a church, a studio, a warehouse, by the sea, a field, a museum, a school, a concert hall, a black box, a white cube, a theatre, a water treatment plant. And they make performances for and with children, young people, adults, and so on.

Left: mimographic drawing from a notebook by mime performer Frits Vogels, made around 1964.

Cover of a programme for Théâtre de Mime Etienne Decroux. Printed for an international tour organised by International Theatre Exchange Oxford, New York, Paris. 1952.

Particularly in the past two decades, Dutch mime has increasingly manifested itself as an intercultural phenomenon. It is an art form that bears many different cultural influences, with tentacles extending internationally. Performers and makers in contemporary Dutch mime come not only from the Netherlands, but also for example from Curaçao, Suriname, Serbia, Italy, Belgium, Croatia, Uruguay, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Armenia, France, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Ukraine, Brazil or Singapore. The term 'Dutch mime' should therefore be understood inclusively. In the Netherlands, mime is a theatre form which since the 1990s has offered a lot of room for queerness, for actors and makers who did not identify with the traditional gender roles that dominated text-based theatre for so long. As a kind of 'outside category', mime offered space for the maverick, the outcast and the dissenter. This is one of the reasons for the genre's innovative influence.

Since the mid-1960s, Dutch mime has generated innovation and upheaval in Dutch and international theatre. In the Netherlands, it formed the basis of genres such as location theatre (also known elsewhere as site-specific theatre), movement theatre, landscape theatre and experiential theatre. It exerted a major influence on the internationally renowned Dutch youth theatre and on the directorial theatre. Performers and makers in the contemporary Dutch mime tradition create and perform distinctive work both in the Netherlands and abroad.

However, despite the important position that Dutch mime occupies in the historical and contemporary theatre landscape of the Netherlands, its history has not been written. This book fills the gap. It examines and articulates specific embodied knowledge that has been characteristic of the Dutch mime tradition since the 1960s. The aim is on the one hand to preserve this unique legacy for the future and act as a memory for the field, and on the other hand to enable new forms of exchange and encounters, both nationally and internationally, between makers, performers, audiences, students in the performing arts, scholars, and academic institutions. The book is an invitation for meeting and discussion, and for continued articulation and research. Because one thing is certain: this might be quite a story, but it is certainly not the whole story. May it inspire others to tell new and different ones.



## Mime is a way of thinking

It is often said that Dutch mime has many faces, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify its essence as a theatre form. Stating that mime has many faces is one of the ways to avoid the complexity of the question 'What is mime?' There is something to be said for this, as the question itself is somewhat oppressive; the debate as to how each pigeonhole in theatre should be defined and defended is not the most interesting, given that any designation of genre can in fact be understood as a collective term within which very different forms of expression can exist. In dance today there is sometimes no dancing, in music theatre there is not necessarily any music, and drama may not have any spoken words. The idea of pluralism also plays an important role in Dutch mime practice itself. In Dutch mime training, which chiefly takes place at the Mime School at the Amsterdam Academy of Theatre and Dance (founded in 1968), pluralism is cherished.[1] 'Everyone invents their own mime' is an important principle. It leads to inventiveness among the students, and to autonomous and individual creativity.

However, regarding the word 'mime' in the Netherlands as simply a collective term for very different kinds of performances is only one unsatisfactory way of looking at the phenomenon. In this book I show that a shared nucleus can indeed be identified within the wide variety of historical mime practices. This becomes evident when you consider the development of Dutch mime not only as a large collection of performances spanning 70 years, but also as the development of a *way of thinking* about performing and making manifested in and through theatre practice.[2]

This book deals with the question *How does Dutch mime think?* Or, to put it in a different way: *What way of thinking about performing and making is manifested through the historical practice of Dutch mime?*

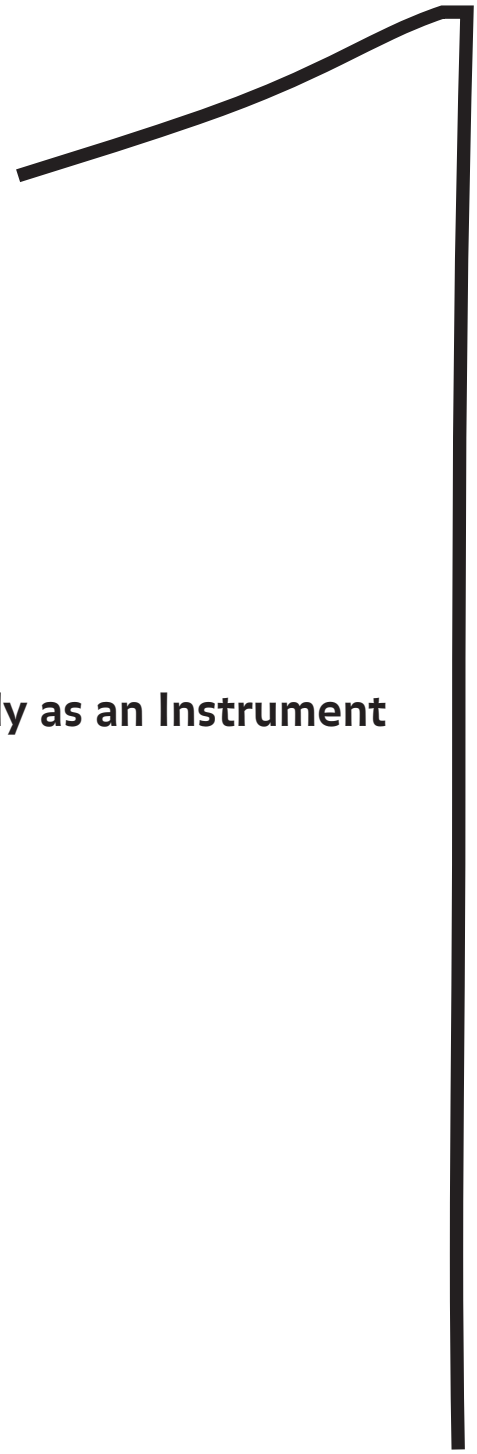
The answer to this question is based on extensive historical research. Since 2003, I have been conducting historical and theoretical research on the phenomenon of Dutch mime. This led to my cataloguing the two largest archives in the field of Dutch mime – the archive of the Dutch Pantomime Foundation (*Stichting Nederlandse Pantomime*, SNP, 1952-1972), and the archive of the Dutch Mime Centre (*Nederlands Mimecentrum*, 1972-1992).[3] In addition to archival research, I have conducted many interviews and arranged meetings among mime performers and makers of different generations. This research has resulted in a number of publications and in a PhD thesis, on which this book is based. From 2019, I initiated a series of interviews with all the living former students of Etienne Decroux who are working or have previously worked in the Netherlands. The interviews and a selection of archive material are available online at www.mimearchieven.nl.



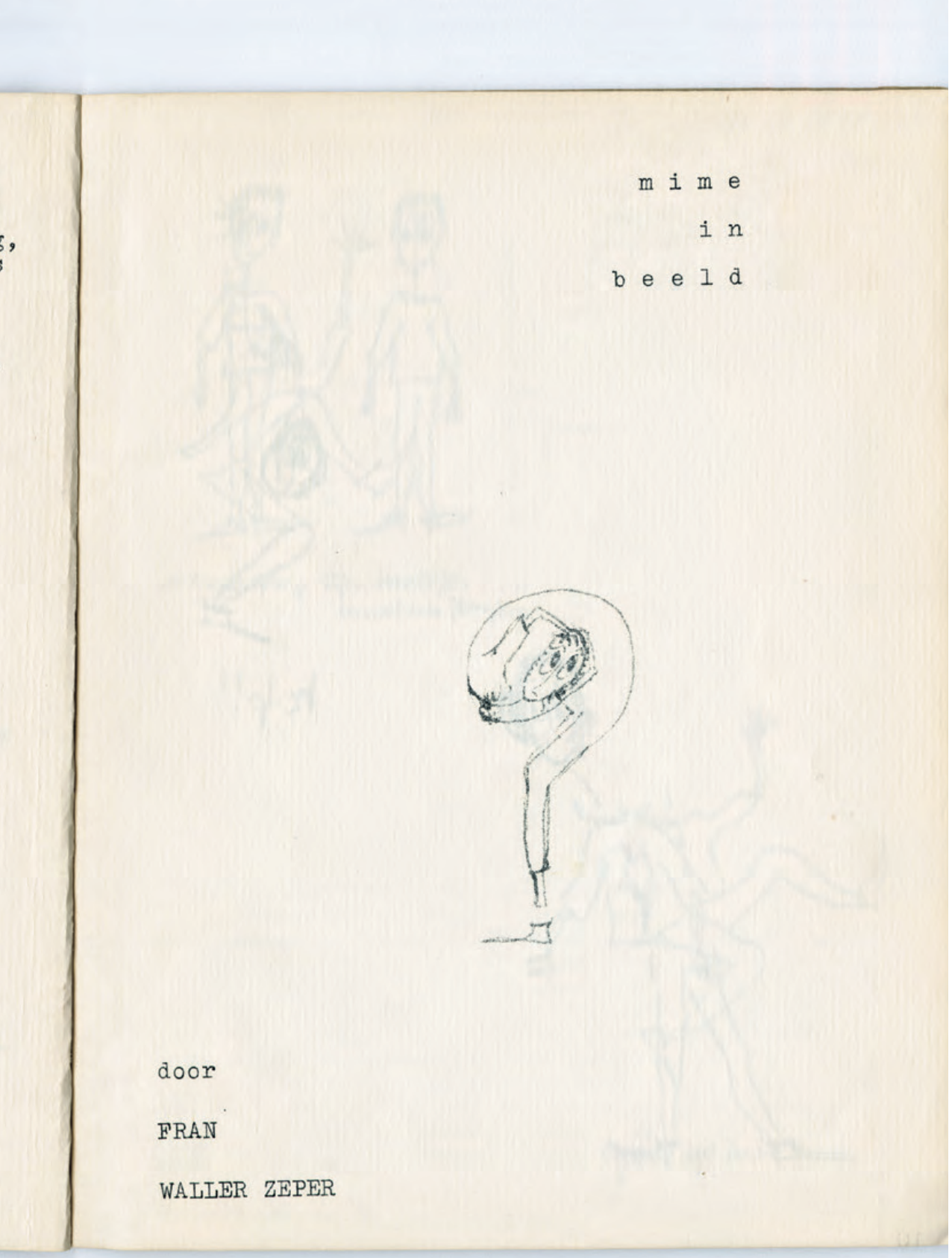
1
The Mime School at the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam is a four-year bachelor's programme and is part of the Amsterdam School of the Arts (see footnote 14).

2
This approach is in line with a development in theatre research in recent years in which a growing interest can be observed in approaching the practice of theatre making as a way of thinking. Examples include the *Thinking Through Theater* series, which started in 2019 (Bloomsbury), and the international platform *Performance Philosophy*.

3
Both archives are part of the Allard Pierson Performing Arts Collection, which manages the special collections of the University of Amsterdam. I also studied several personal mime archives, in particular those of Frits Vogels, Will Spoor and Klaske Bruinsma.



# The Body as an Instrument




'My body is my instrument' is an assertion that can be heard in the corridors of many a contemporary Dutch and international actor training course. The phrase is widely used in contemporary discourse about performing, and in a sense it has become a cliché. But what does it actually mean? And where does this musical metaphor come from? In the context of Dutch acting theory, it is closely associated with the mime tradition, which in turn has influenced other notions of acting.[1] The idea crops up in historical sources dating back to the early 1960s[A], and is still frequently referred to in contemporary Dutch mime[B].

This chapter is in three parts. The first explores a series of drawings made in 1963 by mime performer Fran Waller Zeper, which show the importance of the idea of 'the body as an instrument' in Dutch mime. The second discusses the way performers play their bodies as instruments in Decroux's corporeal mime, his motivations and use of imagery in relation to the concept, and how this approach can be seen in the wider context of theatre history. Finally, we turn to Decroux's Dutch student Will Spoor, and the work he developed during the period 1964-1970 in collaboration with three other mime performers: Fran Waller Zeper, Ellen Uitzinger and Hein Vrasdonk, who were members of the company Mimetheater Will Spoor.[2]

Spoor (1927-2014) was a trained viola player, and his mime theatre took a unique approach to exploring and developing the musicality of the performer. From the late 1950s he taught many generations of Dutch mime students and thus had a decisive influence on thinking about performing in mime. Spoor's work therefore offers an ideal vehicle for an analysis of the idea of the body as an instrument. Another crucial reason to study Spoor in this context is that he was a key figure in introducing corporeal mime to the Netherlands. No other Dutch person trained with Decroux for so long. Spoor stayed in Paris between 1951 and 1956, and not only took lessons with Decroux, but also performed in his company. Through sources relating to Mimetheater Will Spoor's time at the Arts Lab in 1968 in London, it will become clear how the musical metaphor developed in this work, and how it influenced thinking about performing and making in Dutch mime.

## De tekeningen van Fran Waller Zeper

Among the material in the archives showing that the phrase 'the body as an instrument' was already common currency in the context of Dutch mime in the early 1960s is a series of cartoons by mime performer Fran Waller Zeper, who was a student at the Dutch Mime School and from 1965 a performer with Mimetheater Will Spoor. Her drawings appeared in the mime magazine *Idee*, which was published in 1963 and 1964 by the Dutch Pantomime Foundation.[3] They reveal the

Left: drawing by mime performer Fran Waller Zeper in *Idee* magazine, summer 1964.

1
The phrase 'the body as an instrument' is by no means exclusive to the Dutch and international mime tradition. The metaphor also appears in the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold (Verbeeck 1998, 41), for example, and Jerzy Grotowski ([1968] 1986, 29).

2
During his lifetime, Spoor founded several of his own companies, with which he performed both in the Netherlands and internationally: Mimetheater Will Spoor (1963-1973), Consortium Waste of Time (1973), from which Spoor was ousted in 1977 (Bilder 1992), Inccoprodinc (1977), ONK theater overal (1978), and No.12 (1985). After Inccoprodinc was disbanded, Spoor performed in various productions until his death in 2014. See De Langen (2015b).

3
In 1962, the Dutch Pantomime Foundation celebrated its tenth anniversary; the first issue of *Idee* begins with an extensive review of the anniversary year.

A Spoor 1969a; Vogels 1966; Waller Zeper 1963b, 30-32; Bronk n.d., 19
B Dashwood 2013; De Langen 2009, 47

extent to which Spoor and Vogels passed on the lessons they had learned during their studies in Paris to their students, including Waller Zeper, who refers to their ideas with a hint of irony in some of her cartoons. Under the heading 'Mime in pictures', Waller Zeper gives a humorous view of what went on at the Dutch Mime School at the time.

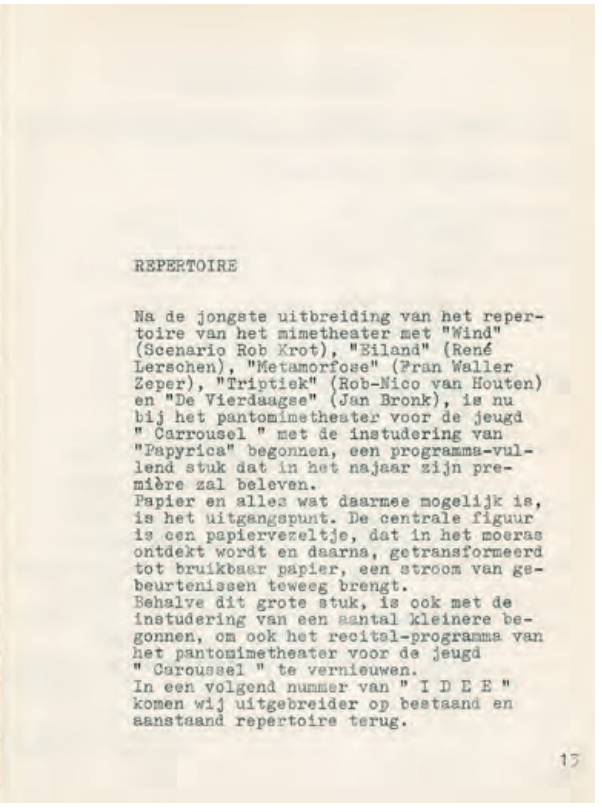
One interesting aspect of the drawings is that they debunked a number of ideas about mime that were common in public opinion in the early 1960s – firstly, the idea that mime is primarily an art form for male solo performers, and not for women. Influenced by the film *Les enfants du paradis* and the growing popularity of the French mime artist Marcel Marceau and the Dutch mime artist Rob van Reijn, the average Dutch person in the early 1960s thought of a mime as a silent, white-faced male performer with an expressive face.[4] This soloist was often dressed in black and white, and his body was flexible and somewhat feminine. In one of the cartoons, Waller Zeper mocks the idea that mime is a 'typically masculine art form' in a drawing of a rather feminine-looking mime artist (with a moustache). He is holding a flower, and is clearly modelled on the example of Marceau and Van Reijn and their respective alter egos, the characters Bip and Mannetje Maccus. Waller Zeper's implication seems to be that this 'typically male art form' doesn't appear to be particularly masculine. In another drawing, Waller Zeper shows that in contrast to the clichéd image of the mime artist as a male soloist, in the early 1960s there were both male and female students at the Dutch Mime School in Amsterdam. Other than breasts, her drawing makes no distinction between the two.

Another cliché about mime performers that was popular among the general public in the early 1960s, as can be seen from the drawings by Waller Zeper, was the idea that their main skill was 'making funny faces'. In mime by masters such as Marceau and Van Reijn, the face was indeed an essential means of expression, and also in *Les enfants du paradis* the public had become familiar with the facial expressiveness of the mime Jean-Louis Barrault. However, Waller Zeper's drawings show that in the early 1960s, under the influence of Spoor and Vogels, the Dutch Mime School was looking for ways to escape the dominance of facial expression. In a number of drawings of a mime performer without a head, she shows that members of the Dutch Pantomime Foundation were trying to make the face less important and let the rest of the body supply the expression. This is an idea taken directly from Decroux (under the influence of Copeau and Bing), as will become apparent later in this chapter. The caption alongside a drawing of a headless mime reads 'No face'.

As mentioned, Waller Zeper also made a series of drawings playfully referring to the idea of students at the Dutch Mime School in 1963 using their bodies as instruments (P42).

4
As indeed they still do today. Although the word 'mime' is now understood very differently in Dutch theatre circles, among the general public it is still strongly associated with white-faced pantomime.


Drawings by mime performer Fran Waller Zeper published in *Idee* magazine. Left to right: { **a: 'can women also perform mime?' b: 'yes, it's a typically masculine art'** } (spring 1963).
{ **in our group there are girls as well as boys \ no face** } (summer 1964).

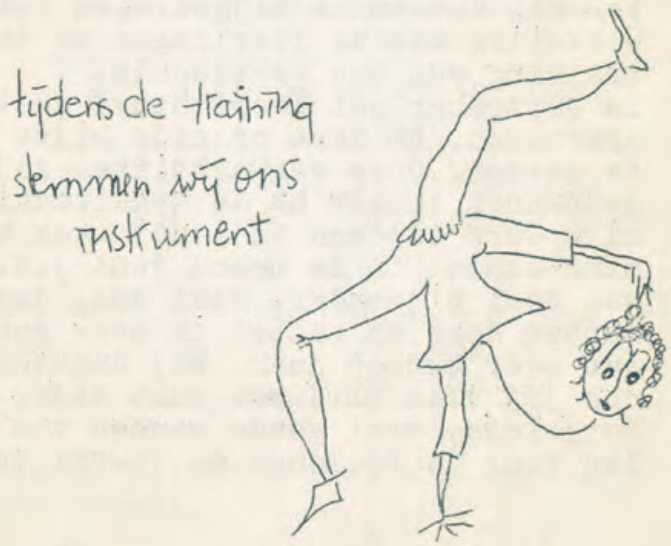


REPERTOIRE

Na de jongste uitbreiding van het repertoire van het mimetheater met "Wind" (Scenario Rob Krot), "Eiland" (René Lerschen), "Metamorfose" (Fran Waller Zeper), "Triptiek" (Rob-Nico van Houten) en "De Vierdaagse" (Jan Bronk), is nu bij het pantomimetheater voor de jeugd " Carrousel " met de instudering van "Papyrica" begonnen, een programma-vullend stuk dat in het najaar zijn première zal beleven.
Papier en alles wat daarmee mogelijk is, is het uitgangspunt. De centrale figuur is een papiervezeltje, dat in het moeras ontdekt wordt en daarna, getransformeerd tot bruikbaar papier, een stroom van gebeurtenissen teweeg brengt.
Behalve dit grote stuk, is ook met de instudering van een aantal kleinere begonnen, om ook het recital-programma van het pantomimetheater voor de jeugd " Carroussel " te vernieuwen.
In een volgend nummer van " I D E E " komen wij uitgebreider op bestaand en aanstaand repertoire terug.

13

{ **'do you do mime?' b: 'yes' c: 'that's nice... make a funny face then.'** }
(*Idee* magazine, spring 1963).

het lichaam is ons instrument






ré

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dó-ré-mi;
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gemakkelijkste uitziet, vergt
van de speler de meeste
inspanning.

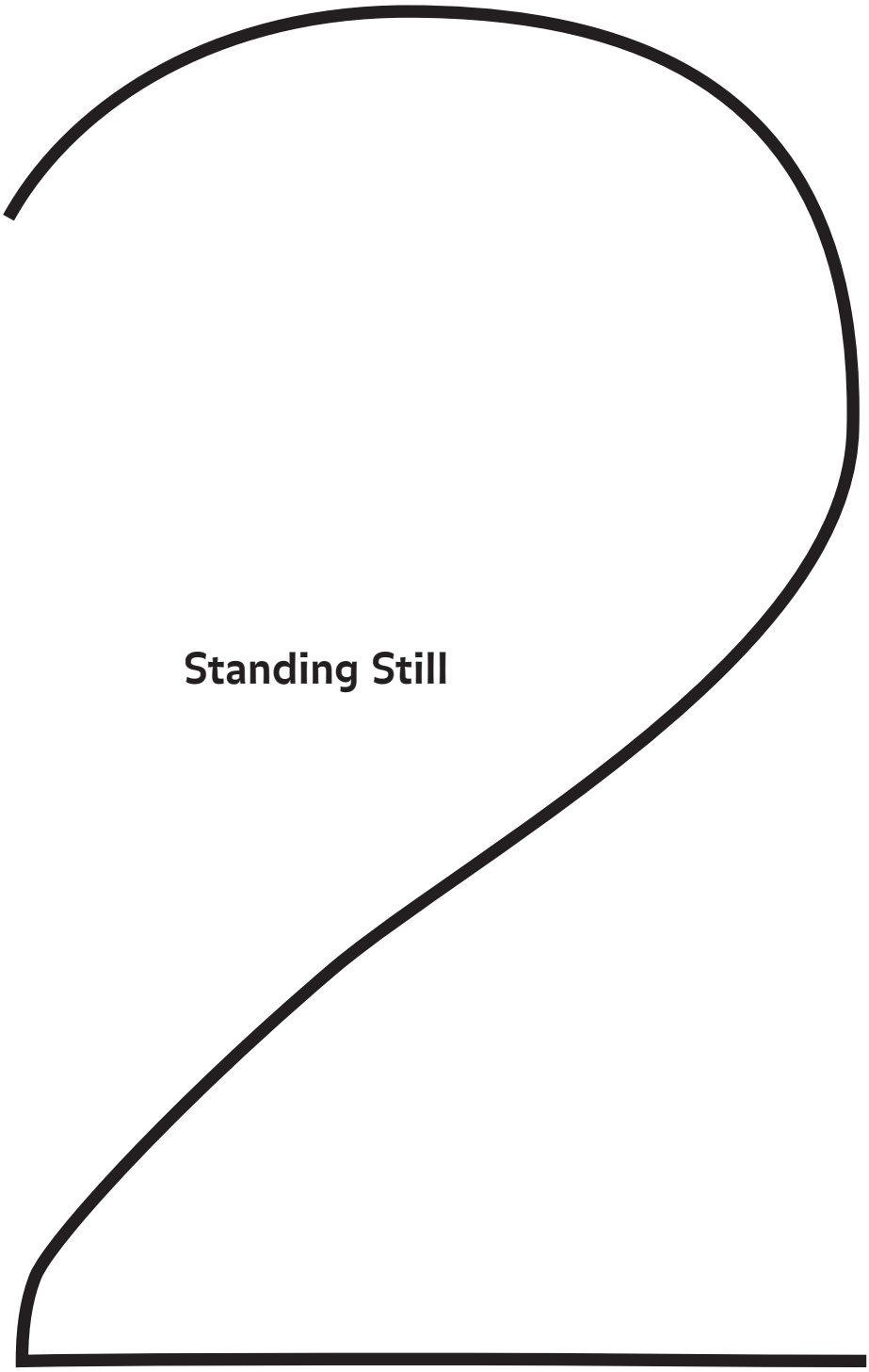

dó



Drawings by Fran Waller Zeper. { **The body is our instrument \ during the training we tune our instrument** } *Idee* magazine, summer 1963.



{ **These drawings demonstrate you the first exercises: do-re-mi; of which 'do' is most difficult. Anything performed on stage that looks easy demands the most of a performer** } *Idee* magazine, summer 1963.



# Standing Still

Mime is often described as an art of movement, but it is striking how often the words 'standing still' (*stilstaan*) are used in the archive and the discourse surrounding Dutch mime. John Cage described silence as a forgotten component of music, meaning that the essence of music is contained not only in the notes, but also in the silence surrounding them[A]. In this chapter I show that Dutch mime makes the analogous case for stillness being the forgotten component of movement. Stillness is as much part of the essence of mime as is movement. The programme for Mimetheater Will Spoor from summer 1966 provides an illustrative example:

> Our mime tells no story, and does not reproduce events. Our mime is situated in that indivisible moment when, in daily life, everything seems to be standing still, in the breathing space before the uttered word; in the silence that follows the blow; in an image played out within our body before the tears flow, or the laughter bursts out.[B]

Mimetheater Will Spoor identified moments of actual or apparent standstill, rather than movement, as their greatest source of inspiration. These are moments when everything seems at a standstill, while, beneath the visible surface, the body and mind are buzzing with activity. The programme also points out that this movement is often 'retained beneath the suit jacket, behind good habits and manners, and in a flow of words.' It was the explicit aim of Mimetheater Will Spoor to show the movement in this standstill and to 'play a new game with it'. This is an important point. Firstly, it suggests that Spoor and his group understood mime not as the art of observation and mimicry of human movement, but as the art of observation of movement in the (apparently) immobile individual. Secondly, it manifests a love for what I would like to call 'in-between moments', a phenomenon that lives on to this day in the Dutch mime performance tradition, and which arose out of an abiding interest in stillness – in showing not the event itself, but the moment directly preceding or following it; in showing not the blow or the tears, but the seemingly insignificant moment before or after them. For the members of Mimetheater Will Spoor, and many mime performers who followed them, it is the moments of stillness surrounding the dramatic highpoints of daily life that turn out to be the most fascinating ones. We could also call these moments 'zero states', or simply zero. At these moments seemingly nothing occurs: zero movement, zero drama.

In this chapter I examine the role standing still plays in Dutch mime thinking, using the concept of zero as my searchlight. In the Dutch mime tradition, zero has increasingly become synonymous with 'standing still'or 'just standing'[C].

Three photos from a series by Annaleen Louwes showing mime performers 'in their zero', 2015.

Left: Floor van Leeuwen. Right: René van 't Hof and Frits Vogels (below).

A Cage 1973, 7-8
B Mimetheater Will Spoor, 1966
C Smits 2007, 70; Boogaerdt and Van der Schoot 2015, 28; Louwes 2015

This phenomenon is beautifully illustrated by a series of photographs featured in the introduction to the 2015 thematic edition of the Dutch theatre journal *Theatermaker* on 'the value of zero', for which Annaleen Louwes photographed Dutch mime performers of various generations 'in their zero'. Each photo shows a performer standing still, upright, the arms hanging loosely at the sides[A].

This is a specifically Dutch interpretation of Decroux's *zéro*, because he saw *zéro* as not definitively characterised by an upright posture. He did not choose a single, ultimate physical starting point. As a point of principle, Decroux considered each position and even movement as a potential *zéro*, as a starting point from which something else would come, as a relative void that would transform itself into something else. This diversity of *zéros* in Decroux's interpretation is visualised in a selection of illustrations in the *Mime Handbook* by Vogels and De Haas, and the report by Anja Pronk. The illustrations show several of these *zéro* 'variations', in the sense that they diverge from the Dutch norm of *zéro* as standing upright and still, as depicted in Louwes' photographs.

Traditionally, standing still has a key part to play in Dutch mime training and schooling. As the cartoons by Fran Waller Zeper show (P42-43) this position was already incorporated in the physical training of mime performers at the Dutch Mime School in Amsterdam in 1963. And, to this day, first-year Mime School students are introduced to the notion of zero, which is defined as a way of standing still and upright that is as neutral as possible, with a receptive sense of presence and no clear expression. Mime performer and Mime School teacher Irene Schaltegger[1] explained the process in an interview:

> When I ask a group of beginners to stand still, there's still a lot of noise. Restless fingers and necks, heads moving. You can hear the buzz of pulsating bodies. You have to get rid of the noise; when a mime performer stands still, it needs to be quiet, silent, with the energy vibrating inside the body.[B]

Decroux's legacy is not the only major influence on the Dutch concept of standing still; from the 1960s onwards, the Mime School in Amsterdam also drew on standing still from the perspective of the Asian idiom, through classes in the Asian martial art Wushu,[2] and more recently in Chi Kung training[C]. Chi Kung and Wushu teacher Jon Silber,[3] like Schaltegger, uses the idea of vibration to describe zero as a 'vibrational energy from which action arises'. In this combination of relaxation and tension, the body is at rest but simultaneously 'present in its full potential', he says. 'You can compare it with a car engine: you turn the key and the motor starts,

1
In 2020 Irene Schaltegger was interviewed at the Decroux Café about her way of working with Decroux's legacy. For the full interview, see www.mimearchieven.nl.

2
From the 1960s onwards, Wushu classes at the Mime School were taught by Phoa Yan Tiong from Jakarta, Indonesia (see page 158-159).

3
Jon Silber attended the classes given by Phoa Yan Tiong (see previous footnote) for eight years, and in 1989 succeeded him as the teacher of Wushu, and later Chi Kung, at the Mime School. He in turn was succeeded by his pupil Erwin Dörr in 2021.


Three 'zéro variations in the Mime Handbook (Mime handboek). The images show three starting positions, each for a different exercise, all of them classified as '0', or zéro. (Vogels and De Haas 2022, 115, 140, 168).

Below: '*zéro* variation' from the report by Anja Pronk (Pronk 1980, n.p.).

A Louwes 2015
B Schaltegger in Oosterling 2015, 48
C Den Dekker 2010



but we remain at a standstill. The mime performer is alert at this point, because anything can happen. The zero does not discriminate.'[D]

The importance attached to standing still in Dutch mime training continues to be reflected in performance practice. In addition to the numerous examples of the staging of standing still, there is widespread interest in themes related to standing still, such as silence, stillness, emptiness, presence/absence, and the passing of time. In this chapter I focus on the work of the mime performer Wouter Steenbergen to analyse the central role of standing still in Dutch mime thinking. Steenbergen graduated from the Mime School in 1973 and performed in a vast number and variety of mime productions until his death in 2000. The mime companies with whom he performed include Waste of Time, Carrousel, De Groep van Steen, Fact, De Daders/Jan Langedijk, Unieke Zaken and Griftheater.

For a large part, the fact that standing still remains such an essential concept in Dutch mime can be traced back to Steenbergen's work and ideas. In 1993, he wrote an extensive reflection on his own work as a performer. The title of his text, *The New Standing Still* (*Het nieuwe stilstaan*, 1993) (P105) refers to a performance technique developed by its author.[4] It offers intriguing insights into Steenbergen's thinking about the type of performance he developed over the course of his career, with particular emphasis on the part played by standing still and the many interpretations he gave to this concept. Through his work as a teacher, Steenbergen passed on his vision of a performance form centring on standing still to generations of other mime performers. It is for this reason that *The New Standing Still* is a core text when it comes to understanding the function of standing still in the context of Dutch mime thinking.[5]

Before discussing Steenbergen I will zoom in on the role played by standing still, or rather *immobility* in the practice of Decroux, to whom Steenbergen was greatly indebted on this subject. Anja Pronk's report on her training with Decroux from 1978 to 1980 (P104) will serve as a key resource here[6]. After first establishing the place occupied by immobility, and its relation to movement according to the ideas of Decroux, I will examine the 'twist' it was given by Dutch mime in general and by Steenbergen in particular.

## Immobility transported

The concept of articulation discussed in chapter 1 is central to Decroux's thinking on movement.[7] Articulation implies a way of thinking about movement in terms of standing still and movement as mutual counterpoints – an articulation of the head, after all, presupposes that only the head moves, while

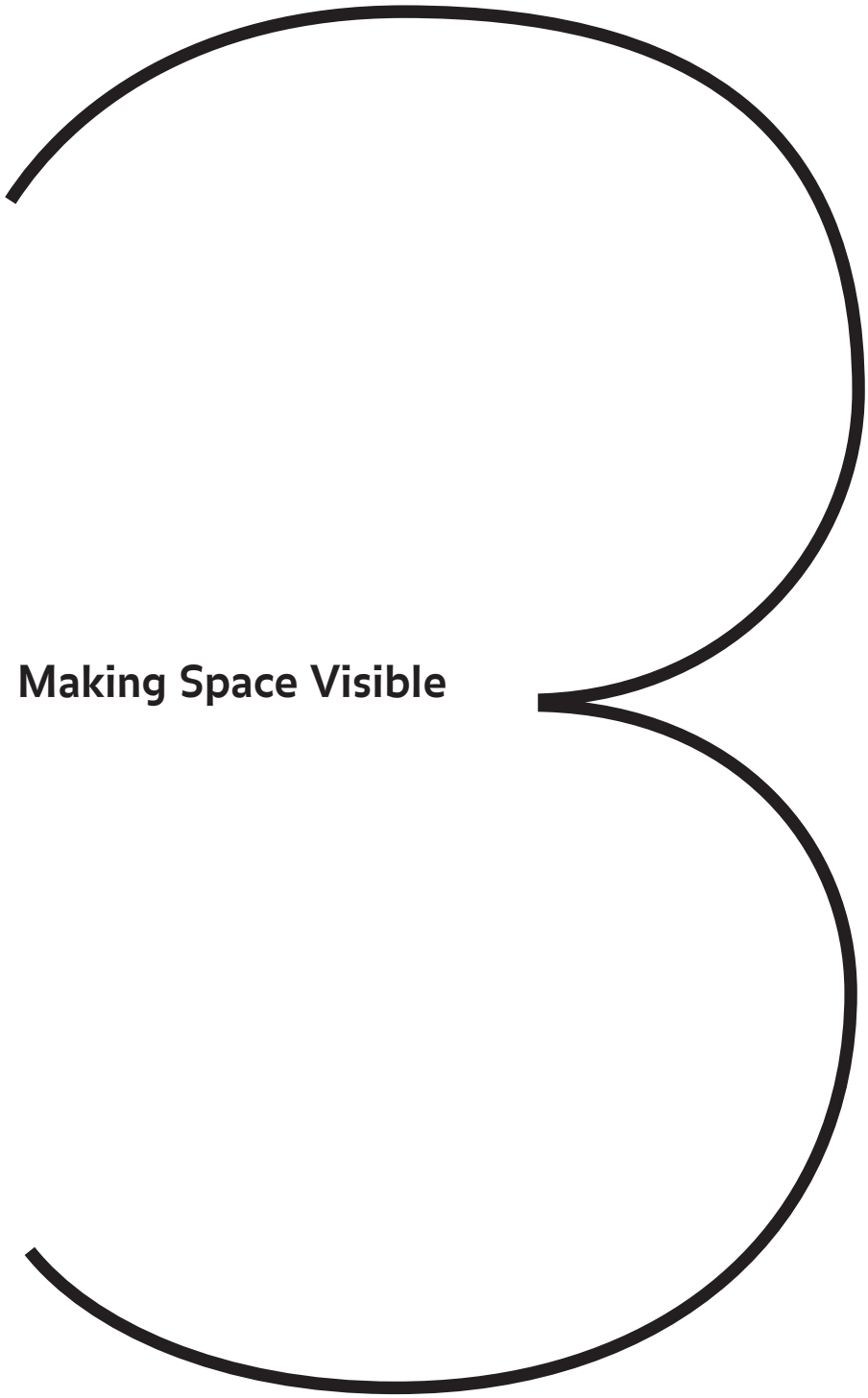
4
Steenbergen read out this text during a lecture during "Stil!", an afternoon of lectures and demonstrations on the subject of silence and standstill at the 1994 Dutch Theatre Festival. An abridged version was published in the journal *Notes* (1994, 19-21). I received the full original text from the personal collection of mime performer and maker Mike van Alphen. This version is untitled, and is headed only by the words 'Wouter Steenbergen', but given that the main subject is 'the new standing still', this is the title I use to refer to the text.

5
For this text, see www.mimearchieven.nl and Steenbergen 1994b in the Works Cited section.

6
See www.mimearchieven.nl for this text.

7
See chapter 1, page 45.

D Silber in Oosterling 2015, 48.



# Making Space Visible

In this black-and-white photograph from 1969, a performer in white overalls spattered with paint is leaning against the Palace of Justice in Brussels. Only a small part of the building is visible: an imposing stone wall with pillars, large stone window frames with friezes above them, steps and ornamentation. The man seems small in relation to this mass of stone. His attitude is intriguing: he is not simply hanging around. His body is like a straight diagonal line. Only his feet, one shoulder and his head are in contact with the stone. It is as if he is literally listening to the building. With one hand he is reaching for the stone, as if he is about to touch it or has just touched it. His eyes are closed. He is standing still.

The photograph is from the archive of the movement theatre group BEWTH (1965-2005).[1] It exemplifies one of the ways in which performer-makers in the Netherlands gave their own interpretation to the ideas of Decroux. In the course of the 1960s, a unique cross-pollination arose between corporeal mime and visual art. One result of this was that space became an essential co-performer in Dutch mime. The photograph shows how the technique of corporeal mime became associated with space and architecture. In Decroux's work, space did not play a major role. In the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards, however, corporeal mime was used in a passionate attempt to 'make space visible through movement'. This twist is central to this chapter.

In corporeal mime terms, the man in the photograph, mime performer Hein Vrasdonk, is leaning against the building in an 'Eiffel Tower' position, his feet slightly turned out, his body extended. He is using *contrepoids*, counterweight: is he pushing against the building or is the building pushing against him? Is he turning away from the building, or turning towards it? As a viewer you see that both forces are present. The performer's standstill, which is full of movement, ensures that the eye of the spectator is drawn to the relationship between the architecture and the body. The performer draws a line with his body in relation to the building, as if he were the hypotenuse of a triangle whose equal sides are formed by the building. We see not just the man, but the performer and building in dialogue with each other.

Ben Zwaal, who was part of BEWTH's artistic core for almost the entire 40 years of the company's existence, said of this image in an interview: 'This is an essential photograph. It shows what it is to give space a human dimension. At the same time, it shows the exciting feeling that the space is being experienced by the performer and [this sensation] is being given back [to the space]. This isn't doing nothing, this is hard work'[A]. The language Zwaal uses to describe the photograph shows how during the course of its existence BEWTH developed a way of talking and thinking about the relationship

1
BEWTH is an abbreviation of *bewegingstheater*, meaning 'movement theatre'; the group's full name was Bewegingstheater BEWTH, but it was generally known simply as BEWTH.

BEWTH performer Hein Vrasdonk leans against the Palace of Justice in Brussels. Picture taken during the event 'Society in Conflict', organised by the Belgian art group Mass Moving. Photo Jacques Evrard ,1969.



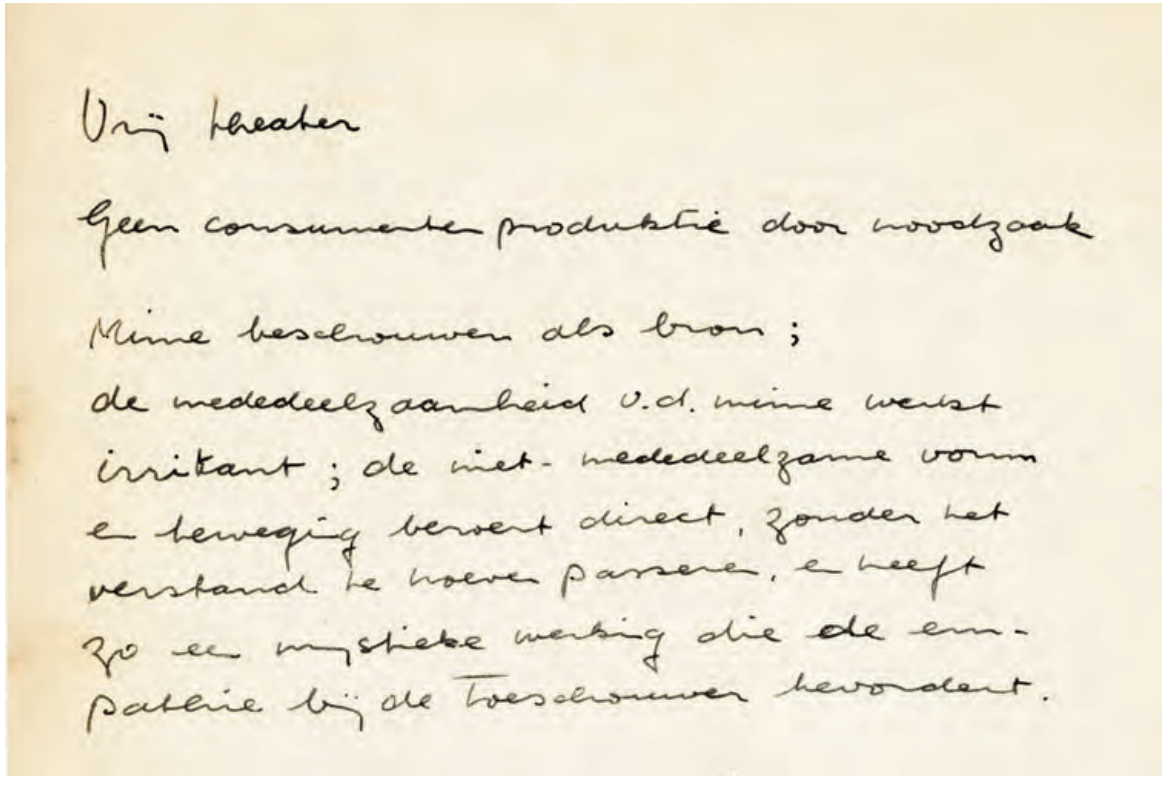
A De Langen 2008c, line 954

between performer, audience and space. In this chapter, using various historical sources, I show that this specific language and thinking is a manifestation of an attempt to reinvent the rules of the theatre, and especially of corporeal mime. In the mid-1960s, Dutch mime performers – in contrast to the performers of Decroux's corporeal mime in his Parisian basement[2] – headed outside and entered into an explicit dialogue with space, location and landscape. Through this outward movement, Decroux's corporeal mime underwent a distinctive development in the Dutch context. As we will see, it was based on a search for forms of equality and exchange between performer, audience and space.

The idea of 'making space visible through movement' is central to this chapter. It was the basis of the innovations that BEWTH introduced from the mid-1960s onwards and, like the other lines of thought I describe in this book, it has been instrumental in determining the identity of the Dutch mime performer and the development of Dutch mime thinking. 'Making space visible through movement' is a phrase coined by the artist Arnold Hamelberg, and should be seen in the context of Hamelberg and Vogels' historic foundation of the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime in 1965. It was from this school that BEWTH emerged in the same year. In this chapter I show that the foundation of the Mime School in 1968 should be seen not so much as the launch of modern Dutch mime, but rather the establishment of the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime in 1965, and the experiments that preceded it.

The invention of the term 'movement theatre' (*bewegingstheater*), creating a distinction between movement theatre and mime, illustrates a distinctive new direction that was taken in 1965. Hamelberg and Vogels' new school split from the Dutch Mime School (part of the Dutch Pantomime Foundation, founded in 1951), where they both worked. There was too great a divergence of artistic views on mime and pantomime between Jan Bronk, founder of the Dutch Pantomime Foundation, and Vogels and Hamelberg[A]. In a note from this period entitled 'Free Theatre', Vogels expresses a desire to free himself from the idea that mime should be an 'explanatory' theatre form, easily understandable and accessible. In contrast, he argues for 'non-explanatory' mime, by which he means that he saw mime as a way not to offer explanations or provide information to an audience, but to affect an audience 'directly' through form and movement. In Vogels' opinion, Mime should not aim to explain, but should have a 'mystical effect' on the audience, 'without having to go via the intellect'. These ideas are indicative of the break between movement theatre and the mime and pantomime tradition as it existed within the Dutch Pantomime Foundation, which Vogels' believed was too much defined by 'explanation', and the need to produce a lot of material for audience consumption.

2
Decroux rehearsed in the basement of his own home, which is mentioned by several former students in their publications about him. In particular, several of them vividly describe how in order to reach the basement, one had to go through the kitchen. There one would invariably bump into Madame Decroux, who would offer you a piece of advice or pearl of wisdom. See, among others, Pronk (1980, 1); Vos (1999, 31), Boyer (2019). See the picture on page 149.


Vrij theater
Geen consumenten productie door noodzaak
Mime beschouwen als bron;
de mededeelzaamheid v.d. mime werkt
irritant; de niet-mededeelzame vorm
e beweging bereikt direct, zonder het
verstand te hoeven passeren, e heeft
zo een mystieke werking die de em-
patie bij de toeschouwer bevordert.

Note from a notebook by Frits Vogels, titled 'Free theatre', 1964.

{ **Free theatre \ No consumer production out of necessity \ See mime as a source; \ the explanatory quality of mime has an irritating effect; non-explanatory form and movement touches directly, without having to pass via the intellect, and thus has a mystical effect which promotes empathy in the audience.** }


A Vogels 2003

It was at the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime that Vogels began to give shape to his vision of free theatre. It was a highly interdisciplinary laboratory which consciously and enthusiastically sought innovation, with corporeal mime as a basis[A]. 'Out of the theatre, to place and time,' was a phrase used by BEWTH members during this period, neatly summarising the innovations they were pursuing. They wanted to leave the theatre building and the rules that were traditionally and naturally associated with it: ideas about the role of the audience (buying a ticket, sitting still), ideas about the place and time in which theatre should take place, ideas about set design, ideas about performaning as psychological transformation, ideas about stardom. BEWTH's makers and performers were at odds with the traditional theatre system. According to Vogels, the decision to leave the interior space was partly prompted by the fact that 'the theatres didn't want us at all'[B]. It led to an explosion of exploration and innovation, in which time and space became the new protagonists.

On the basis of the historic moment of the foundation of the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime and BEWTH in 1965, as well as the experiments that preceded and followed it, this chapter will explore how mime performers questioned and challenged the identity of traditional theatre, and how the idea of making space visible through movement became a fundamental aspect of modern Dutch mime thinking. I draw on a variety of historical materials, including photographs and films of performances, reviews, publicity material and interviews. As in the other chapters, one particular written source is central, in this case the articles by Frits Vogels and Arnold Hamelberg that appeared in the mime magazine *Idee* (Idea).

In 1963 and 1964, the Dutch Pantomime Foundation independently published *Idee* in small editions.[3] This 'rhythmically published writing chiefly regarding mime', as the subtitle read (P170-171), was published three times in each year, and it offers a fascinating insight into the ideas about mime as they developed during this period. In chapter 1, the drawings by Fran Waller Zeper which appeared in the magazine played an important role. The idea for the magazine came from Vogels, who wrote several contributions and was also responsible for compiling and editing the content. In the Dutch mime tradition, Vogels can be regarded as the person from the field who has written by far the most about the genre and its development[C]. In 1964, *Idee* magazine ceased to exist, until Vogels gave it a new lease of life in 2020. New issues appeared in 2020 and 2021, honouring the idea of the magazine as an irregularly published piece of writing.[4] However, this chapter focuses on the 1963 and 1964 editions, in which the contributions by Vogels and Hamelberg reflect the way of thinking that led to the establishment of the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime. In analysing this thinking, *Idee* is an essential source, and it plays a key role in this chapter. In addition to Vogels and Hamelberg, the mime performer Klaske Bruinsma is also a valuable voice. As a student, Bruinsma moved from the Dutch Mime School to the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime in 1965, and was a performer with BEWTH from its inception until it ceased to exist in 2005.

Here too, the term zero functions as a searchlight. Based on the specific interpretation of zero as it arose during this period within the School for Movement Theatre Based on Mime, I will show how the aspect of space, and the aim of making it visible, was able to gain such an importance in Dutch mime. To begin with, as in the other chapters, I will turn to Decroux to explore how the idea of 'making space visible' relates to his work. I will then show how in the Netherlands, these ideas were given a twist.

## A mime-centric vision of the arts

Decroux distinguished different planes in which the body moves, such as the lateral plane *(plan laterale)* and depth planes (*plan profondeur)*, which can be thought of as running through the performer's body; his thinking on movement thus certainly had a spatial dimension.[5] But space in itself was not a subject to which Decroux paid much attention. His daily work took place indoors in the rehearsal room in the basement below his home, and the specific characteristics of this space were of no interest to him.[6] Only in exceptional cases did Decroux show his work in official theatres. He was not a fan of auditoriums, but preferred to invite a limited audience to his own home. His basement studio was his laboratory.[7]

Decroux's point of departure was a radical specialism: he focused on the body and nothing but the body. In his first published text, a manifesto from 1931 entitled *Ma définition du théâtre* (My definition of theatre), he diagnosed the French theatre of his time as being morbidly populated by what he described as '*arts étranger*', 'foreign art forms': music, dance, costume, song, painting, lighting, set design and other arts made the actor a 'stranger in his own home'.[8] To recover from this condition, theatre would have to cut off its right hand, Decroux said. It would have to radically eliminate all these arts to focus on what was essential: the performer. The definition of theatre which he proposed, influenced by practitioners such as Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing[9], was therefore simple and limited: 'Theatre is the actor art'[D]. In order to underline his point, in this manifesto Decroux prescribed a radical treatment for the theatre: a 30-year period of recovery during which any interference by other arts would be banned. The actor would finally be alone. 'Every art enjoys the privilege of expressing the world in its own way, without calling

3
The makers of *Idee* ultimately aimed for a print run of 500, which in the spring 1964 issue was described as 'a number we are nowhere near ready for' (Vogels 1964, 3-4). *Idee* was published three times a year, in the spring, summer and autumn.

4
For these last two editions of *Idee*, see www.mimearchieven.nl.

5
The terms *intercorporel* ('viewed spatially from the perspective of the body') and *interspatial* ('viewed spatially from the perspective of the space'), as they are somewhat cryptically defined in the *Mime Handbook* by Vogels and De Haas (2022), probably originate from Decroux. However, Decroux did not develop a detailed vision of spatial effect in relation to the performer.

6
At the same time, the dimensions of this space will certainly have influenced the kind of movement sequences that Decroux created. Former student Luc Boyer, who studied with Decroux between 1965 and 1967, recalled that the studio floor was painted blue, 'like a small swimming pool', and because he was two metres tall (6' 7"), he was unable to do the jumping exercises which were part of the warm-up up at the beginning of the lesson, because the ceiling was too low (Boyer 2019). During the time that Vogels was studying with Decroux (1957), Decroux rented a large gym in the mornings, which could accommodate large groups. At other times, a smaller group worked in a side room of his house.

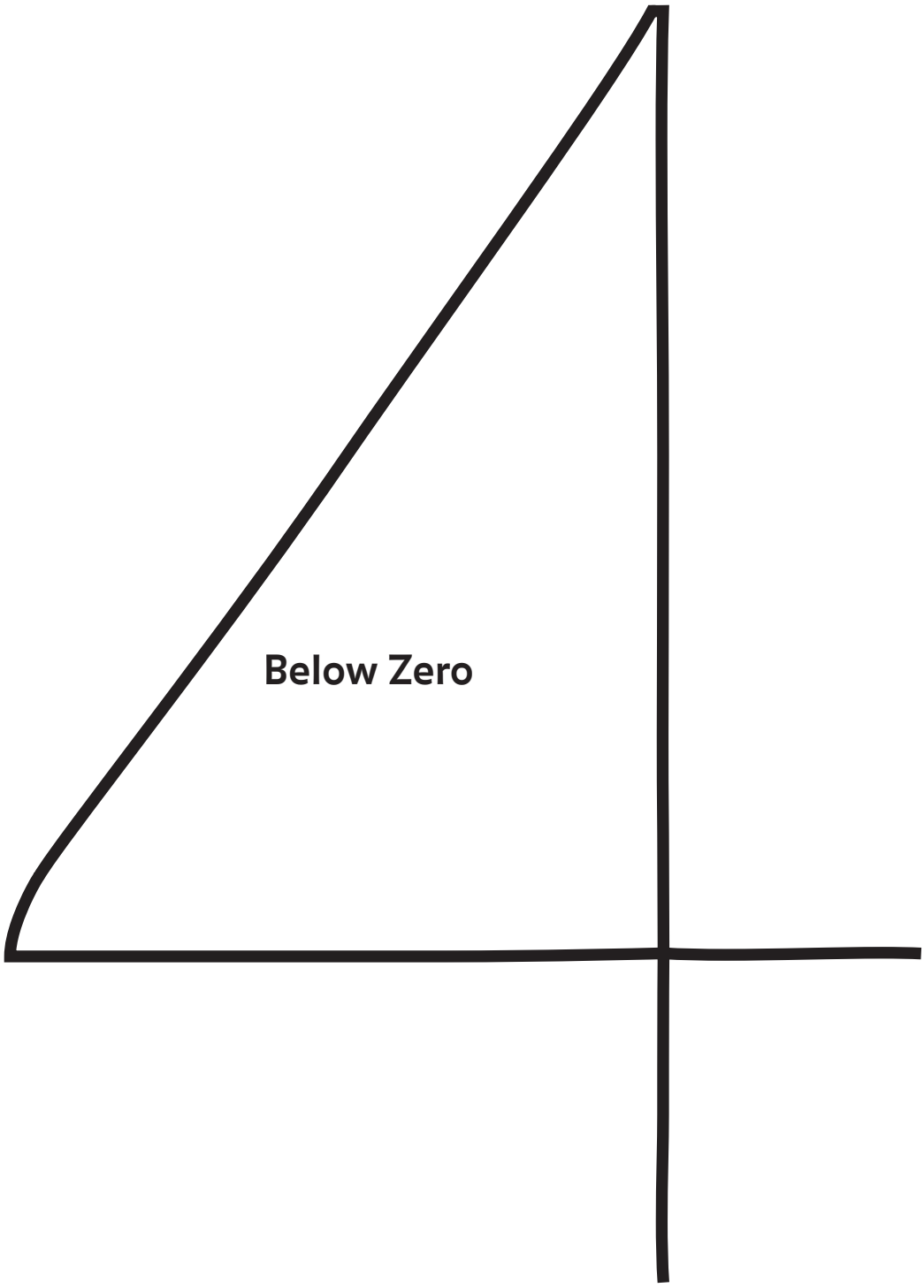
7
Edward Gordon Craig (1947) and Martha Graham (1951) were among those who visited Decroux in Paris to watch a demonstration of corporeal mime. On these occasions, Decroux most likely rented a somewhat larger rehearsal space elsewhere in the city.

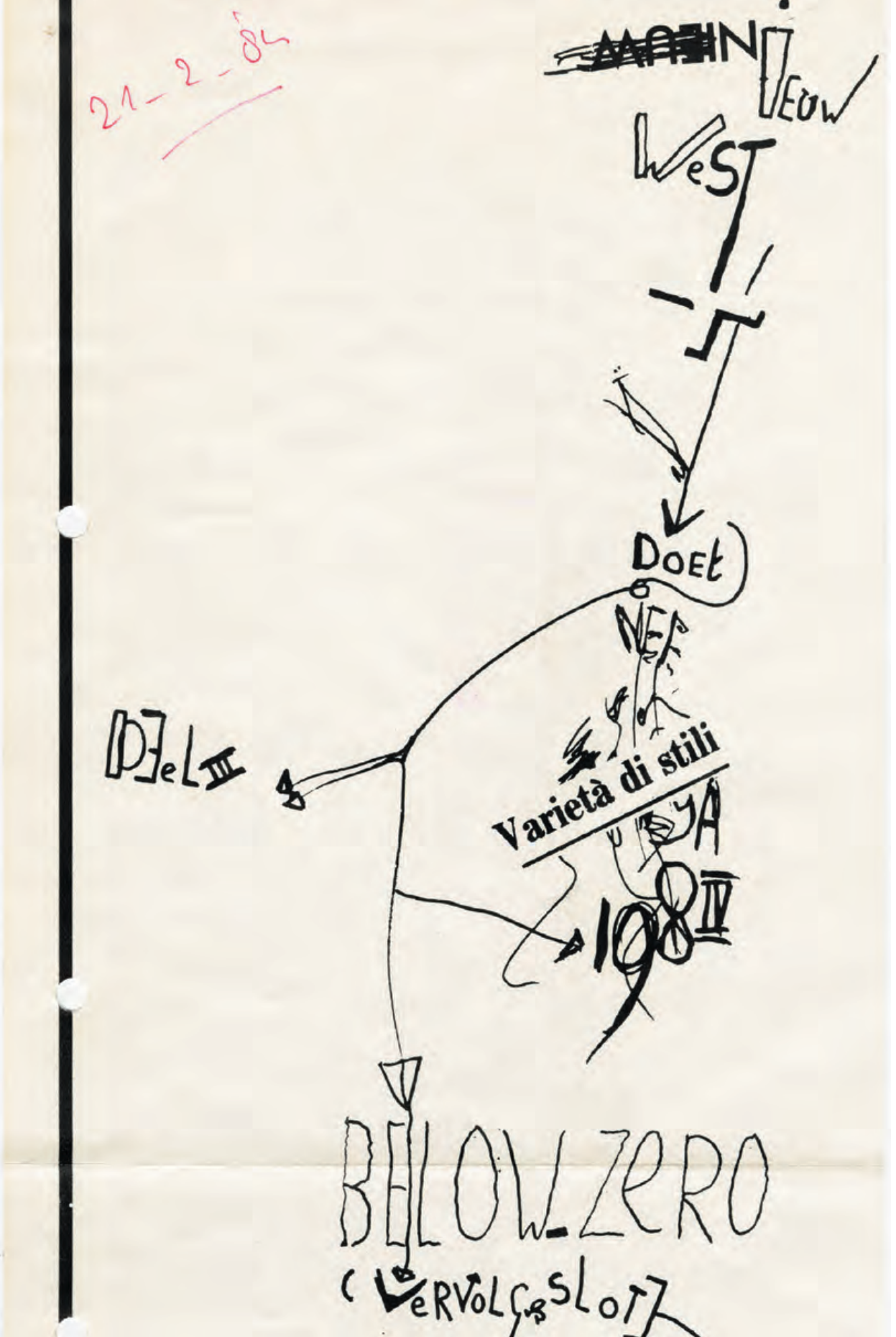
8
Decroux's manifesto of 1931 shows similarities in this respect with other, later key texts in 20th-century theatre written in the same minimalist spirit, including Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* and Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, both from 1968.

9
See chapter 0, page 20-21.

Etienne Decroux (right) and Thomas Leabhart at work in the rehearsal room in the basement of Decroux's home. Photographer unknown, 1970. Courtesy of Thomas Leabhart.

A Vogels 2010, 62
B Vogels 2003
C See, among others, Vogels 1963, 1964, 1966, 1994, 2006, 2016, 2020, 2021, 2022
D Decroux [1977] 1985, 26


Below Zero




In this chapter, I analyse a shift in Dutch mime thinking that has manifested itself since the late 1970s, and which can be summed up by the term *below zero*. Under the influence of mime performers and makers such as Karina Holla and the company Nieuw West, in the 1980s a culture arose in Dutch mime which I describe as going below zero. By this I mean questioning the *zéro*-associated notions of the first generation of mime pioneers under the influence of Decroux, such as neutrality and personal objectivity. I show that despite the liberating effect these notions had on the mime pioneers of the 1960s, to the second generation of mime performers and makers, they needed to be questioned, challenged and, in the case of Nieuw West, also parodied and torn down.

I have borrowed the term 'going below zero' from the work of Nieuw West, and their performance *Below Zero* (1980, 1984, 1987, 1990), which is the focus of this chapter. The performance reflects not only on the ZERO art of the 1950s and '60s, but also on the Decrouxian concept of *zéro*, and on zero thinking in Dutch mime. By introducing the term below zero, Nieuw West opened up a new space and a new question: a question as to what lies below zero on a stage – that which crosses a boundary, is taboo to say or show, is inappropriate, uncomfortable, trivial, out of control, intensely emotional, affected, destructive.

Although below zero is a term associated with the work of one group that is central to this chapter, Nieuw West, it can also serve to describe a broader development in Dutch mime thinking from the late 1970s onwards. Different mime performers gave shape to what is below zero on stage in different ways. This led to a new way of performing mime, and the emergence of a new type of mime performer who did not so much take objectivity and a musical and sculptural presence in the space as their starting point, but who based their work on physical shamelessness, taboo subjects and the need to question and transcend the boundaries of what is accepted on stage. They were physical performers whose starting point was irresponsibility (Marien Jongewaard), the grotesque (Karina Holla), and an interest in the psyche and psychiatry (Dik Boutkan, Karina Holla). Performers and makers who delve into the depths of the human psyche to share with us all its absurdities, who confront the audience with thoughts that should not be thought, with excessive aggression – in short, with that which is below zero.

This generation of performers questioned the idea that a mime performer should not 'ham it up', as Vogels put it[1], and the associated taboo on performing with exaggeration, affectation or excessive emotion. The transition was marked by the departure of Frits Vogels as artistic director of the Mime School, and the arrival of the actor Tom Jansen, who

1
See chapter 3, page 172.

Left: detail from a flyer for the performance *Below Zero*. Nieuw West, 1984.
See page 226 for the complete flyer.

also performed with Nieuw West. Mime performer and maker Jan Taks, who trained at the Mime School from the end of the 1970s, recalled that in addition to following technical mime classes taught by Steven Wasson, which he loved, he was also 'forced' to attend the acting classes of Dik Boutkan, which he initially resisted, but which opened up a new world for him. Boutkan's lessons at the Mime School at the time were notorious: one of the assignments he gave his students was to steal something from the De Bijenkorf, a large department store in centre of Amsterdam.[2] Jan Taks remembers other exercises:

> He showed us a picture of the painting *The Raft of the Medusa*,[3] which shows 20 people on the point of drowning, on a raft 50 meters from Calais. And then you got to spend an hour drowning. That was amazing. Or a long improvisation on a blue mat with only the word 'silence', then you'd hit your wrists till they were bruised and you'd be rolling on the floor... they were almost therapy sessions. Another thing we did, in the Pillar Room at the Shaffy Theater, was with a lot of wine bottles. You stood in front of the audience, looked at them, and as soon as you thought you had eye contact with someone you picked up an empty wine bottle and smashed it against the back wall. It was a playful mischief.[A]

Below zero as proposed by Nieuw West was the other side of *zéro* and ZERO art, with its aura of objectivity, form and control. In this chapter, as in the others, I begin with Decroux, and his ideas about what lies below zero. I then discuss the below zero of mime performer and maker Karina Holla, who created her own genre in Dutch mime with her grotesque, intensely physical performing style. I then extensively discuss the work of Nieuw West, and in particular their performance *Below zero*, to analyse the implications of this concept in Dutch mime.

## A double zero?

Decroux also gave space in his ideas to that which lay below zero. He called it *double zéro* or *zéro lâché* (released zero). Like the notion of *zéro*, these concepts do feature in discourse on corporeal mime in the Netherlands[B], but not so much internationally[C]. Spoor describes 'double zéro' as follows:

> Decroux was always talking about 'double zéro'. Double zéro was when absolutely nothing was going on anymore... Then at a certain point you have to determine where the *zéro* is. So you have the double zéro, and then from that point you develop the *zéro* that indicates what is going to happen next.[D]

As Spoor remembers it, 'double zéro' was inextricably linked with zero.[4] The notion indicates a shift in the amount of energy and tension in the body from *zéro*. *Double zéro* indicates 'under-tension'.[5] In the *Mime Handbook* by Vogels and De Haas[E], instead of 'double zéro', the term *zéro lâché* is used: 'released zero'. The accompanying drawing in the book, as shown on the opposite page, shows a standing posture with a somewhat collapsed upper body. 'The body gives the impression of being stupid and without will,' Vogels and De Haas note.

*Zéro lâché* as shown in the *Mime Handbook* by Vogels and De Haas (2022, 55).

The existence of the notion of 'double zéro' in Decroux's system indicates that he regarded the concept of *zéro* as dynamic. As I described in Chapter 2, to Decroux *zéro* was a stage in a process, not a fixed point of standstill. One could move from below zero ('double zéro'), to zero (*zéro*), to slightly above zero (*zéro dynamique*). This was not limited to a specific physical position.

Nieuw West's below zero can in a way be compared to Decroux's 'double zéro'. Both concepts refer to that which could precede a *zéro*. However, to Decroux, 'double zéro' was a tool, a preliminary stage that was intended as a kind of stepping stone towards *zéro*. He assumed that what lies below zero was not particularly worth showing to an audience. As I showed in Chapter 1, Decroux believed it was precisely through the visible presence of the musculature (and hence the play of muscle tension) that the intellect could be manifested physically. He was not interested in the 'under-tension' in itself, but in the climb towards *zéro*. In contrast, the mime performers and makers of the late 1970s such as Holla and Nieuw West were attracted to the movement in the opposite direction: they preferred to propagate a movement of *descent*: from zero to below zero, arriving there and staying there. Below zero: towards the depths of humanity. And at the same time towards freedom.

## The roaring engine of Karina Holla

In 1969 Karina Holla was in the first class of the Mime School at the newly established Theatre School in Amsterdam, with fellow students including Dea Koert, Michael Helmerhorst and Ide van Heiningen. In an interview in 2021, she remembers her training and the atmosphere of theatre in Amsterdam at the time as cheerful and exciting. 'We were a wild class,' she says[F].[6] Under the artistic direction of Frits Vogels, the school offered a lot of freedom: 'You were allowed to be yourself, with all your crazy stuff.' Students were given the opportunity to introduce teachers with whom they wanted to work. In Holla's case, they included voice teacher Madeleine Lehning and actress Shireen Strooker, co-founder of the renowned theatre company Het Werkteater.[7] 'The school was like the shell of a building in which you could build your own house.' Holla was particularly inspired not only by Het Werkteater, but also by international practitioners such as the Living Theatre, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski. She did not find her sources of inspiration in

2
I was told this anecdote by Irene Schaltegger.

3
This work was painted in 1818 by Théodore Géricault. It is interesting that in 2018 the young director Davy Pieters made a re-enactment of the painting in the performance *What we leave behind*, developed in collaboration with the Mime School.

4
Frits Vogels remembered Will Spoor also using another version of *zéro/double zéro*, namely *trut* and *supertrut*. This comically uses the colloquial and pejorative Dutch word *trut*, which generally means something like 'frump'; *trut* could be interpreted as 'sexless', and *supertrut* as 'super sexless'; in the context could might also be compared to the idiom 'left standing like a lemon'. According to Vogels, *trut* and *supertrut* were words that 'clearly imply under-tension' (Vogels 2015, n.p.).

5
Interestingly, Frits Vogels writes that Decroux's son construed this double zéro differently: 'to Maximilien Decroux double zéro was/is a tense starting position to arrive at a lower tension.' (Vogels 2015)

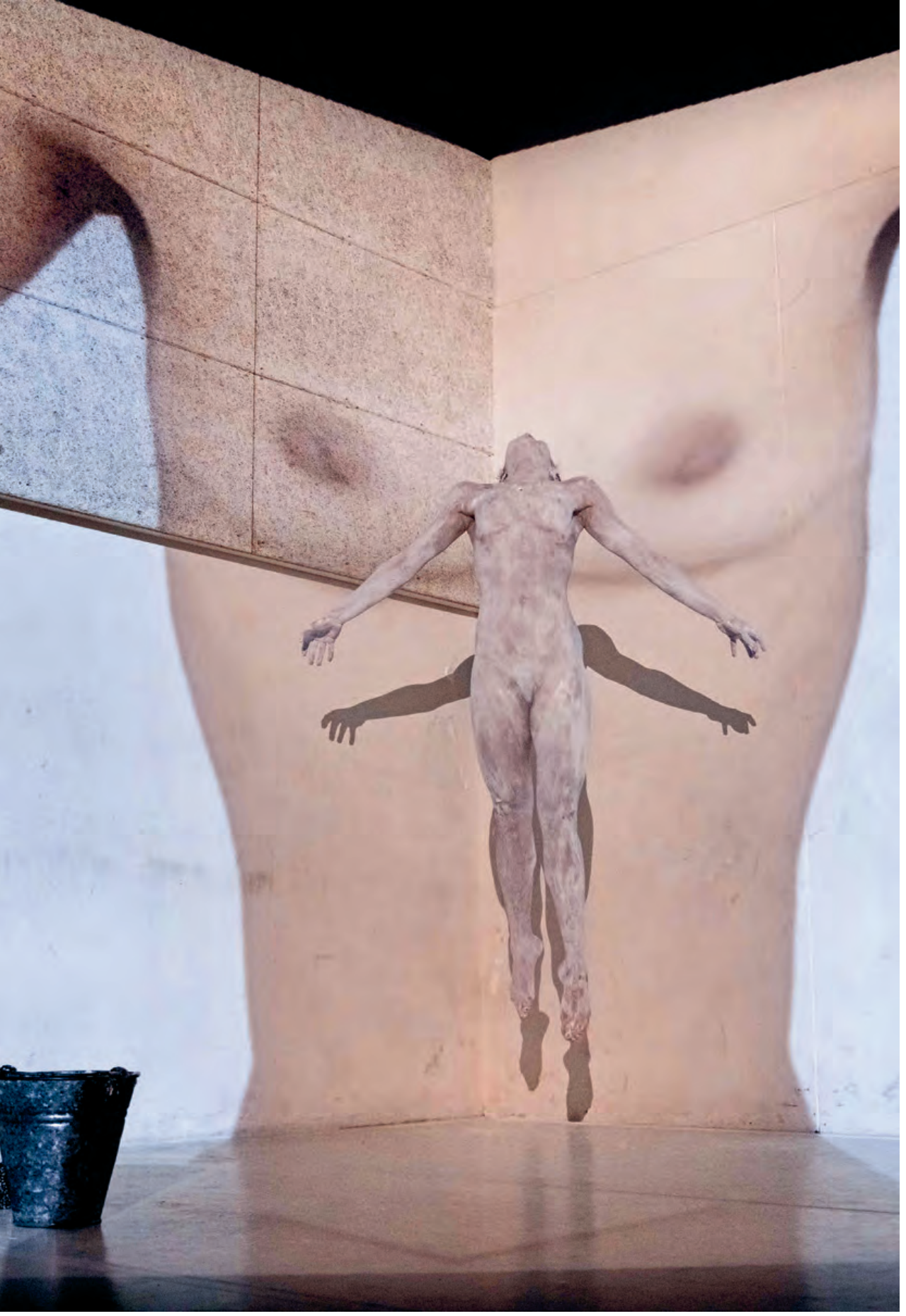
6
All quotes in this section are from Holla 2021, unless otherwise indicated.

7
Het Werkteater (1970-1987) was a company founded by 12 young actors who wanted to change the theatre; to achieve this, they started by unlearning everything they had been taught about acting. They then rejected plays, directors, premieres and any kind of hierarchy. As a group, they created a unique style of work, based on social themes and the lives of 'ordinary people', devised through improvisation. At a time when modernised phonetic spelling was popular in progressive circles in the Netherlands, their spelling of the word theater without an 'h' was a statement symbolising the innovation they were striving for. See www.werkteater.nl and *Hello Fellow Humans! The History of Het Werkteater* (*Hallo Medemens! De geschiedenis van Het Werkteater*) by Margot van Schayk (2001).

A Taks 2021
B Spoor 2008, Vogels 2015
C Dashwood 2013; Leabhart and Chamberlain 2008; Leabhart [2007] 2019; Pezin 2003
D Spoor 2008a, line 506
E 2022, 55
F Holla 2021

# 5

## Dutch Mime in the 21st Century



*Becoming* Bodine Sutorius. Photo Robert van Ree, 2019.

The analysis of four historical lines of thought in Dutch mime thinking creates space to reflect on contemporary mime in new ways. Each of the four preceding chapters followed a particular line of thought, but, as we shall see, there are commonalities to them, and in this concluding chapter I will explore a number of broader, overarching themes that are characteristic of Dutch mime thinking as I have described it in this book. I will show how these overarching themes permeate contemporary Dutch mime.

## Visibility and invisibility

When considering the four lines of thought discussed in the context of their interrelationship, one recurring notion that emerges is that of visibility and invisibility. Inspired by Decroux, over the course of the 1960s the idea grew within Dutch mime thinking that obscuring the performer's own ego and personality (at least to some extent) created the conditions to make visible other elements of a performance, such as time, space, thought, movement, setting, composition, musicality, rhythm and spectatorship. This urge to 'make visible', one that is deeply rooted in Dutch mime thinking, can be shown to have historical connections with pantomime. As a form of theatre, pantomime likewise endeavours quite literally to make the invisible visible – as with the imaginary drinking glass or passing butterfly – if only for a brief moment. Dutch mime thinking took this age-old pantomime effect into more complex, poetic and political territory, with practitioners embarking on a search for ways of making visible that which was invisible; that which exists only in our imagination; that which goes unnoticed or unconsidered; and that which we do not want to see.

One of the manifestations of this fascination for visibility and invisibility in Dutch mime is the staging of what, in chapter 2, I call 'in-between moments'. Historically, mime practitioners tend to have a preference for presenting those moments that precede or follow the *moment supreme*, the turning point, the climax; moments when nothing seems to be happening, when apparently unimportant, unseen qualities can be made visible[1].

A related phenomenon is Dutch mime's great interest in the dynamic between presence and absence. Is it possible as a performer to be simultaneously present and absent? Can one be both visible and invisible? Historically, questions such as these – which can also be traced back to Decroux's ideas – have had important parts to play in Dutch mime thinking. They pertain not only to matters of the performance itself, but also to directorial and dramaturgical strategies; what dramaturgical strategies could best be deployed to ensure that the field of

1
See chapter 2, page 101.



*Schwalbe Seeks Crowd XL* (*Schwalbe zoekt massa XL*) Schwalbe. Photo Arno Bosma, 2013.



*Wall* (*Muur*) by Floor van Leeuwen. From left to right Silbe Mijnlieff, Maria Madeira, Josse de Broeck, Koen van der Heijden, Felix Zech, Hali Neto, Petra Steindl. Photo Bart Grietens, 2018.



Suzan Boogaerdt in *Antibodies* by Boogaerdt/VanderSchoot. Photo Wikke van Houwelingen, 2020.



*When Everything is Human, the Human is an Entirely Different Thing* by Wild Vlees. Tamar Blom (left) and Francesca Lazzeri. Photo Miloš Štáfek, 2019.

*Bambie 8*, Bambie. Performers from left to right: Gerindo Kartadinata, Paul van der Laan, Jochem Stavenuiter. Photo Ben van Duin, 2003.



*Year Rings* (*Jaarringen*) by SLeM 2006. Photo Bruno Doedens, Oerol 2006.