

Let's Not Get Used to This Place
Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods



Edited by Julie De Meester, Astrid Kaminski, Jeroen Versteele

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DUET OF STRANGERS

VIENNA

We had met before, over the years, at a distance. Through rumour and innuendo. Americans abroad, but me circling within the United States as a homeland, as a resource and urgent place for being in dance, while you spent all those years in Europe. Being with you in a theatre, though, as you explored ideas old and new, cemented our relational possibility.

You lit a torch to be sure we might notice each other. It worked; we can see our shared difference. We can see how different we are, even as we dance together through curiosities of punkish extravagance; a non-normative assembly placed in front of an interested yet uninitiated audience. It matters that others who see us together wonder why, wonder how we could have common ground. We are so different. We are strangers, duetting.

You surprise me with nonsense and violence. Punching, pushing, waiting before the next attack. Burning the air with ominous sounds, inevitably suggesting a warehouse where inventories are taken and contents become unexpectedly repurposed. A rhythmic pulse in the background, just behind where I can hear it but bleeding forward. Our bloody assembly: a vampiric enlivening of what we are willing to do with each other. Making me hurt as you pierce yourself and our expectation of propriety.

You haunt me. (Of course.)

These visions in smoke and sweat, with pulse and steam, that predict something while always delivering something else. Something other, something more than. More than crawling, resisting, failing, flailing. Trying to account for. More than just a being or a being done to, or a being manipulated and *made to* somehow. More than just... well, more than *just*. Not just this or that, or not just fair or improper. An extension, like your spindly stilt legs that enable as much as they disallow. To stand after we meet and tussle, with a motorcycle helmet or an unwitting table partner; to give in to the desire, unquenchable

desire for a more than this or now or us or we or body or movement or gesture.

So greedy. So, so, greedy.

You walk on my back, literally on my back, as if it were a bridge, and I resist, because that is what you want, what you need. We might fold into each other. We might support each other. We might walk away.

I applaud you.

You sound like a mistake to me sometimes; as if you can't make the sounds you intend, so we have to find our way with echoes and kerns, screams and scratchy glitches. But then, you can be tender, and almost soft sometimes, as if caring and caressing. But this doesn't last. Sobbing, howling, crying, wailing are our noises and our comforts; rising to ecstatic decibels before dropping, inexplicably, into a faraway mutter. We stay lively in our strain to hear, to listen, to understand. We might not know each other well, not yet, not ever maybe, but we can strain towards a detente of some sort, a willingness to not understand what we need from each other. How lovely to be willing to misunderstand.

You TRIO A me. Sort of. That is, you place me in a frenzy wondering at your satire. Are you making fun of me? Is this ridicule? We enjoy a tease together, as movements wind, rewind, misalign, and unpredict each other. Being with you, I don't need to be with the others, and a TRIO A falls out of favour for us both as clearly it did for you. I think it's fine for you to be you among us; I don't have to know what you think of them in order for me to embrace you. I'm happier when you stop citing to explore the sadness you cherish. And you are sad—often. A sadness beyond breath, and just outside of life. I think this is why you push so hard: you resist so much. To be discouraged is to be enlivened. To think *there must be something else; something more*. And so you explore, again and again.

We play together. A cacophonous roar of pounding and beating, keeping the beat, losing the beat, hitting the air and the ear, wilding the body. A wild body exceeds its limits, shaking and gesticulating without effect. Well, without literal outcome: dissembling itself into the wilderness.

The play turns brutal as it becomes unrelenting. How long can we shake and oscillate, control ourselves and release within a beating without form? You become angry as I become unsure. When you stop making sound and start to explore the folds of your skin facing away from the drums, my ears still ring, and I can't hear the quiet. There seems to be little quiet for us; there seem to be gaps between the tumult.

I enjoy our mutual exploration of your body. The postures it can hold, and the way the skin can be manipulated. How you feel it feels. You adjust your hair, you think about moving. Even when you sit on the floor, quietly, you speak volumes. Mary Wigman makes an appearance in a *Totenmal*; we smile among ourselves at the reference. You know so many things. We know so many things.

Pause. Holding a heart, clutching a hand. Sort of stillness for a time, and the quiet does indeed come. An outstretched arm distended as if to disavow its use, turned from human tool to erratic appendage. You move on, discarding this idea for that, exploring this way to be after that. Here, then there.

An *Untitled* Xavier Le Roy appears. Fleeting. We like this version better, your version, amid the other remains of other dancing, and after the dissemblances of the drum. Tasks of touching the floor, and the foot on the floor, defining a volume again and again, here and here and there, to help us see the exquisiteness of a minor gesture. We nap together, in public. And in private, as we duet, really, just the two of us under the stars of the flyspace in the theatre. Lying near each other, we can trace the space, and we can move our arms to outline the clouds that we imagine passing by overhead. An almost-happy tune can filter into the space to accompany our idyll.

We get busy getting to know each other better. We strip down. We approach each other. We wrestle. Naked, we feel skin as the armpit presses to the nose, knee to the groyne. We slap our skin, not like a high five, but as a body blow, nipple to navel. I grab your head. You grab my chest. We slap each other's legs. We pull hair.

Struggling, we find some measure of joy and camaraderie. We can present our 'privates' to one another, and bounce our bottoms

together. We can bend each other, playfully slapping to produce the sound of skin and the pleasure of touch. Licking, pressing, hiding, and hounding each other, imagining a madness of relentless ambiguity. We tittytwist, as in a moment of fun, we kiss and flit apart, as in a moment of concern.

Noisemusic to wake the dead, to challenge the imaginable, to bleed the ears. Noisemovement of a senseless humming into each other's mouths in the dark.

Sometime after the show, we sit together briefly in a stairwell and wonder towards each other.

BERLIN

We meet to talk about a future date. You are there with a friend, but we try to connect as two, as Americans in Europe, perhaps; as unsure people curious about connecting. You tell me of your rage, and your desire for an alternative sort of international formation that might include unexpected voices landing in your now almost-native Germany/Belgium. I think we will meet for half an hour; two hours later, we say 'so long.' Our affair has begun.

MINNEAPOLIS

We meet at a museum in the Midwestern United States. You surprise me with a US premiere of a recent invention; I am invited to chat with you over food, discuss with you in public, witness the work. I smile to know you a bit better in this circumstance. I'm glad that you are sexy in your theatrical gestures and in person. Alluring, provocative. Intriguing. And willing to chat.

We are so different. Our ongoing getting-to-know-you dance and chatter is composed of missteps and half-sentences. New Orleans—Indianapolis. Queer, we can both encompass, in some ways. Maybe non-normative suits us both, and offers a place to meet. Us and thousands of others who attend to your inventions; we are eager to know differently. Maybe. You tell me things I don't expect to hear.

(A duet of truly unexpected intimacy.) I want to tell you some things, and I need to hold some things back. I meet someone you care about. I learn that you've been ill recently. Maybe we are all a bit better now.

The work that you share receives an ambiguous response. I enjoy it immensely, seeing it as an extension of the you I begin to feel closer to. I see the places where we misunderstand each other in the work. These differences concern me as places we can grow together tomorrow, I think; conversations we will need to have sometime that I can look forward to. I write about your work for the museum. We meet in public to dance together with words about how we got here; what you want; where you hope to take us all.

Some artists from the area come to lean into the conversation that we have in front of them; they treat you badly. Angry that the US offers a shitshow to the world and itself, again and again, they lambast you for not living here and not being a part of the daily crap. In your work, you seem willing to play still, to explore and pursue an innocence of the moment. These artists are not willing to go along with it, and demand that you explain how you are not involved in a too-obvious movement of social justice through artmaking. You are as kind to them as you can be, even as I am embarrassed that others have taken your attention from me. From us. I thought we were just beginning to move together, but the possibility is foreshortened. Minneapolis is a strange place to dance.

DRESDEN

We meet in a huge container for hundreds of people that you have designed and implemented. We see each other there briefly, again and again, amid other meetings of so many other people at the Tanzkongress 2019. You craft something unique here, something that artists can appreciate, something that allows us to imagine towards each other in our differences. Of course, we feel puny in this formation, we few hundred of seven and a half billion on the planet and millions upon millions interested in performance and live art. We hundreds are tiny here, asking questions of social space and misalignments, national consequences and the ghosts of fascisms surrounding our gathering.

Following you, we fail. We fail to acknowledge what you've done to bring us together; what and who you have rejected in order to allow us to meet instead. The group complains about this failure next to that; we tell each other that we missed out on something that might have been better, more inclusive, more thoughtfully rendered. You acknowledge the failure, even at the end of an extremely long haul, a marathon performance of designing and staging the event.

I see you across the Festspielhaus Hellerau. Smiling, sort of, you are taking it all in, as you will. You refuse to be taken in completely. You hold your presence; that thing that you do so well onstage in front of me, in front of hundreds at a time. Sharing a vulnerable truth as you undress, unable to know whether we will move to embrace you or to shove you away. You hold your presence. Amid the ghosts of Hellerau and Dresden, the racisms and misogynies beyond measure, you manage to say something to me even here. Something elliptical and tender; something entirely forgettable. Americans do this all the time: say nothing that means far too much.

Our duet is not finished at all. One day, you will let me lead. Or maybe you won't, as is your prerogative. You hold your presence. We don't understand each other at all, really, you and I. One day, you will let me lead.

Or maybe you won't.

You hold your presence.

Please.

Thomas F. DeFrantz