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Nazlı Pektaş and Elif Kahveci visited artist duo's home-studio in Brussels within the scope of Unlimited Visits

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Evrım Altuğ interviewed the artist with an ongoing exhibition at Sakıp Sabancı Museum called On Porcelain

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*Memories about mother,
drifting in time and space*

Moeder

Words: Mehmet Kerem Özel



GABRIELLA CARRIZO, FRANCK CHARTIER, PHOTO JESSE WILLEMS

Last September I was in Lyon to attend *Moeder* (Mother), the 2016 dated creation of Belgian dance company Peeping Tom, with whom the loyal followers of Art Unlimited are already familiar from my article published on the 38th issue (September-October 2016) and, to make an interview with its creator Gabriela Carrizo (1970). *Moeder* is the second part of a trilogy that opened with *Vader* (Father) in 2014, directed by Franck Chartier (1967) who is the co-founder of Peeping Tom and the husband of Carrizo

On a September day, which began chilly and got warmer in the afternoon I met with Carrizo at the Maison de la Danse de Lyon (Lyon Dance House). We walked from the backstage door to the front foyer from the outside, since she had an espresso and deservedly would like to smoke. Till she finished her coffee and cigarette we chit-chatted warming in the Lyon sun. Carrizo couldn't believe that I came to Lyon from Istanbul just to watch *Moeder* and to make an interview with her. We talked about whether it is appropriate or not that the artists themselves describe their works. One time Carrizo came together with high school students; the students often tried to have her confirm their interpretations of the scenes.

Moeder is a work that reveals the troubles, sorrows and memories of family members who deal with the loss of the mother. Instead of treating a particular mother as the protagonist and describing the specific events that happen to her, Carrizo brings together in a dreamy atmosphere ideas and images on the "motherhood" generated by civilization between the last and the first breath, between birth and death. The eight-person cast of 25 to 70 year-old dancers, actors and an opera singer play their roles in a world created by Carrizo which at times reminds one of the nuanced and absurd humor of Roy Andersson's cinema, which at times resembles the horror of B-movies and which at times is eerie like a David Lynch movie or mysterious like a Borges novel. *Moeder* which proceeds in logic of the stream of consciousness as a

narrative technique, contains funny, surreal, horrifying, absurd and grotesque scenes like screams of birth pang turning to Janis Japlin's "Cry Baby", like a girl trying to steal a mid-size tableau by putting it into her tight dress, like making love with a coffee vending machine, like suffocating in a flood of tears which is not materially seen but heard on the stage, or like the bleeding picture of a heart hanging on the wall. However, when incomparable *mezzo-soprano* Eurudike de Beul, in the role of the mother whose funeral has been organized in the first moments of the piece sings Bach's famous aria "Erbarne dich, mein Gott" at a later scene by swaying like a ghost, various moments of the 70 minute long *Moeder* get connected to each other. If you know the text of the aria', in which not only the eye but also the heart weeps, then you comprehend the meaning of the invisible water puddle and the bleeding heart. But yet there are a lot of codes in *Moeder* which cannot be decoded for nothing is what it appears to be, just like in dreams: You can put your arm into a tableau and when you pull your arm back you pull also a male head out, or the inanimate body you think as a sculpture can begin to move, to live and to take its first breath after you leave the space. Also as it is in the dreams, no space is fixed in *Moeder*, it can be transformed into another place at any moment. Space can simultaneously be a museum and a home, the delivery room and a recording studio. Even then, there are conceptual links between *Moeder's* places: big windows through which the relatives watch a new born baby, separate also musicians from sound engineers in recording

studios; houses where high-bourgeois families live are also museums with paintings on the walls and sculptures placed around; there is a -even if it's surreal- connection between putting a new born baby in an incubator and a newly dead human in a coffin; and incubators protect the babies from the effects of the outside world like museums where precious odds are exhibited but also protected.

Peeping Tom does not narrate specific stories that have a clear beginning, development and end, in their works; they create fragmentary and irrational worlds like one can experience in dreams. Since I was very curious about the beginnings and the process of these kinds of work, my first question to Carrizo was how they start working for a piece and their working process. Carrizo replied that the space is usually the first thing they think about. And regarding the space, they are usually inspired by and depart from the works of visual artists. Especially in their early works they were inspired a lot by the photographer Gregory Crewdson for their set and light design. They are very fond of Crewdson's works that depict strange moments where it feels as if something has just happened or as if something is just going to happen. In *32 rue Vandenbranden*, (2009) where there were mountains at the back of the stage and two caravans in the front, they were inspired by a picture that they saw at a friend's house depicting two caravans in the snow. The stage-sized landscape miniature with its houses, trees and hills of *The Land* (2015) which Carrizo created with the actors of Residenztheater (Munich, DE) was inspired

by *Trickland*, a painting by Michaël Borremans, in which the artist paints giant-like adults sitting and playing around with a rural landscape.

Carrizo continued to explain: "From there we start to think about the set and then we think about the group. In a way, with the casting we start to think about the group; not the dramaturgy not the story, they more or less come intuitively together. And the characters come little by little, some characters came at the beginning or others very late, others transformed during the process, also the relations between them." Carrizo said that they worked for 4.5 months for *Moeder*. She gave themes, exercises to the dancers and actors and they made compositions and improvisations with them. "We had a lot of props, costumes, things in the studio. We tried things; sometimes things came at one instant, sometimes we had an idea and we searched for that. So, in the beginning there are images for me, which I don't know how they will evolve during the process; like this incubator image that I had from the beginning, with the child inside. In the beginning there are themes that I discussed with the dancers and actors. I work especially more with the dancers than the actors, because with the body we take more time, because we want to go to the extreme with the bodies, to deconstruct the body. For me everything comes from the same, like you work with a person, you work with a real state or a situation and then you choose a detail and you put a loop or a zoom like in the cinema and what you want to amplify and how far you can go in this distortion or



MOEDER, PHOTO HERMAN SORGELOOS

Peeping Tom created a world with an incredible sharpness and fluency which at times reminds one of the nuanced and absurd humor of Roy Andersson's cinema, which at times resembles the horror of B-movies and which at times is eerie like a David Lynch movie or mysterious like a Borges novel.

simplification so that it becomes completely something else, maybe you can go back to something very recognizable; you transformed, you distorted things and then they look different and weird, surrealistic and extreme but in fact they come from somewhere real. Even there were certain things and scenes that we said 'ok this is important during the process' the last period is the period of editing."

I asked Carrizo how the protagonists took shape in a piece like *Moeder* where places, situations and figures come together in a continuously fluid and free composition. She answered: "After the idea of the museum came, there was one guard of the museum, Brandon. Then we found the second guard, Simon." It was new for Carrizo to work more on the profession of the characters: The guard, the nurse, and the cleaning lady. And in *Moeder* relations of the characters are more based on the professions they have. Carrizo said: "These people, they have professions but we don't know so much about their lives. In museums we see people, but we don't think about them; maybe this guy lost his mother the day before, maybe he is going to be a father, maybe the other has a child. So you can invent histories about these people."

Until this new trilogy, the content and the

form of Peeping Tom's pieces were free, surreal and fragmentary, but their spaces were created as close to reality as possible, they were hyper realistic, and the space was only the specific place that it described: when it was a living room of a house then it was the living room, or when it was a remote place on a mountain then it was that, or when it was a garden then it was a garden. However in *Moeder*, the fluidity of the content and the form echoes also in the space. In *Moeder* it is uncertain whether it is a house, a museum, a recording studio or a funeral home or a hospital; actually it is all of them at the same time. Just as in a dream a person wanders freely between places, how one leap irrationally from one place to another, so too in *Moeder* different places are juxtaposed in one single space. So, the fluidity of the story and the indescribability of the space –or that the space is hosting a lot of definitions simultaneously– are overlapped. Carrizo explained the reason for the difference between this approach and their old approach to the scene as follows: "A few years ago my mother died. Thinking about themes like death, funeral, and ceremony brought lots of associations and images. Strong feelings in life, to have a child, to say goodbye to somebody, death and everything; the memories we keep all the time

by ourselves, our childhood. To put these in a kind of space which is very cold like hospital or in a space with a distance like museum. That the memories and thoughts are not static; that the stories about a space juxtapose when we enter it. My mother was painting in her last years of her life and at home we had a lot of paintings. And my sister taught it could be nice if we bring her paintings and exhibit them in her funeral because a lot of people didn't know about them. When I went to this place to say ok we would like to bring the paintings, in a moment a juxtaposition of things filled me; suddenly I thought what time I am in, what I'm doing, my mother is going to be here tomorrow. Sometimes there are things in life, which are very strong; putting them in another context makes them strange and absurd. So, I didn't want to close the space to one place. In the beginning I said ok if it is going to be about the mother, a home then, but to be able to talk about the grief I need to take distance; that's why it's a public space. So, I started to think about the space to find the keys; museum, maternity, recording space. A house, which is converted to a museum. Thus, I wanted to look at things as a piece of art. For example, this incubator, with the baby/mother growing inside, becomes a piece of art in

the museum. I like this kind of contradictions; other significations come from them. I'm also interested in the inverse of situations. For example, we worked a lot about how life becomes death or vice versa; that's why a lot of images are freezing and I wanted to hold it like a picture, like a memory to keep in time."

For Carrizo, sound has a very important significance in the memory and in the memories. In line of this thought she entered a zone she had never been before and used the sound and sound effects creatively in *Moeder*. I asked her how sound became an integral part of the piece. She said that the sound is very much connected to mother, that the mother's is the first sound we hear as a human being and, continued: "How could we go with the sound inside; the sound of the water reminds me to go inside, to go in another universe, to go into the memories. There are lots of association with the sound of the water. We discussed with (*Moeder's* sound designer) Raphaëlle (Latini) and we worked with a foley² for a few days. He brought things and we experimented. The idea was not that we do the foley all the piece long, we wanted just to see which kind of doors could we open through it."

Even if Carrizo and Chartier directed

Vader and *Moeder* separately, we recognize from the credits that they worked in each other's pieces as dramaturges and artistic collaborators.

Besides, in these last two pieces stage, costume and light designs, items that make the artistic and technical world of a work, were mostly undertaken by themselves rather than by artists from the outside. Thus, *Vader-Moeder-Kind* trilogy becomes a *gesamtkunstwerk* with all the details about the creation realized by them. Actually, it is no surprise that the creative team of a trilogy about the family is almost reduced to the size of a family. When I shared my observation with Carrizo, she didn't find them strange, on the contrary she added: "From the beginning on, in Peeping Tom, Franck and me, generally we are working about family relations; things and relations which are very close between parents and child. Maybe we start like this because we're a family, we have a child. For us this theme is very complex and rich. It gives us also the opportunity to explore small things and to talk about them a lot. Themes like intimacy, conflicts, fears; a lot of time fears. Fear of people from other people they don't know, fear of losing the child, of losing everything, one's career; all these fears. Fear can block but fear can also



VADER, PHOTO MARIE GYSELBRECHT

set things in motion.

We in general have our cast. People go and they come back. And we work like a family, with people in the office and technicians, we're really like a family; we are a 'family group'."

Peeping Tom, whose pieces are always about the family relations from the beginning on, will premiere *Kind (Child)*, the last episode of their trilogy each of which is named after the core members of the nuclear family, in 2019. Carrizo and Chartier will co-direct *Kind* after having been worked separately for eight years. Let's see if their only daughter will get involved in the creation process of this family trilogy's "child" part?

¹ The original text of the aria: Erbarme dich, mein Gott, Um meiner Zähren Willen! Schaue hier, Herz und Auge Weint vor dir bitterlich. Erbarme dich, mein Gott!

The English translation: Have mercy, my God, For the sake of my tears! See here, heart an eye Weep bitterly before you. Have mercy, my God!

² Foleys are people who make the sound effects in movies.