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OTTO RAMSTAD & OLIVE BIERINGA TALK "SUPER NATURE"

Jeremy M. Barker | January 8, 2013 | [Feature](#), [Interviews](#) | [No Comments](#)



"We had another show we did in New York at the COIL Festival in 2009, called *Holiday House*," Otto Ramstad, half of the core creative duo behind Minneapolis dance company [Bodycartography Project](#), was explaining to me. "The set was a living room and a dining room and there was a tree in it. And our lighting designer had a daughter who was maybe three years old, and they came to see the show in Minneapolis before we toured it to New York. And she came up to us after the showing—she just walked up onstage in front of all of us—and she said, 'Some of the things that are

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supposed to be outside, are inside. And some of the things that are supposed on the inside are on the outside.' So Olive asked her, 'Was that confusing, or was that exciting?' She said, 'It was confusing *and* exciting.'"

"So that's been sort of our mission statement or underground philosophy for all the work we've made since then," Ramstad's collaborator Olive Bieringa continued.

"What's on the outside is on the inside, and what's on the inside is on the outside," Ramstad summed up. "It's confusing and exciting."

That description pretty well sums up *Super Nature*, the new-ish piece, originally developed for the Walker Arts Center in 2012, that the company is bringing to New York this January as a co-presentation of [PS 122's COIL Festival](#) and [American Realness](#) (at Abrons Arts Center, Jan 14-17; [tickets \\$20](#)). Variouslly described as an exercise in "empathy as a choreographic vocabulary," with references to both evolutionary biology and psychic surgery, the piece is an intense physical performance by a cast of Minneapolis artists (including Emily Johnson, herself part of COIL) inhabiting a complex, ever shifting installation-like set.

Aesthetically, the company's idiom is informed by the co-directors Bieringa and Ramstad. Bieringa founded the company back in 1997 in San Francisco; Ramstad joined in 1999. Artistically, there's not a clear delineation between the roles the two perform (e.g., designer vs. choreographer), with both freely moving into diverse roles in the creative process. The difference is less a matter of discipline, in fact, than approach.

"I think in general I'm more of a structuralist," Bieringa says. "Otto's more of a generator, and I'm more of a structuralist."

The origins of *Super Nature* lie in a 2010 piece, *Mammal*, that was a commission from the Lyon Opéra-Ballet, where, as Bieringa explained, "we created a new piece without writing about it a lot beforehand, where we really just made something with the dancers over 18 rehearsals."



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The result was a piece that raised more questions than they had time to explore in France, and which provided the basis for *Super Nature*. Specifically, they were trying to develop a choreographic language that would provide a means for a deep communication with their audiences. In the past, Bieringa and Ramstad had freely crossed boundaries to create visual art installations—works which offered audiences intense personal encounters with the artists, and in creating *Super Nature*, they attempted to replicate that sort of empathetic communion in a more traditional performance space.

Part of their approach to achieving that sort of empathetic response is through an appropriation of the language of melodrama.

"We're big fans of this little interview from Guy Maddin, the filmmaker," Ramstad told me. "He wrote *The Saddest Music in the World* and *My Winnipeg*, and he works in melodrama or a silent movie aesthetic—over-acting, a lot of crazy camerawork. And he said it was so strange in film that people were so into Realism now. That no one comes up to a painter today and says, 'That's a really great painting, but it just doesn't seem *real*.' And he's saying people say that about film all the time, and so when people say that about him, he talks about how the feelings that you have, in your daily life about small situations, if you were to act physically and sonically, make sound and yell, or just totally collapse when things happen, that it would look melodramatic. But we have this social conditioning that we modulate everything with. So he's saying his films are realistic in that he's portraying how people would actually respond to their feelings if they were enact them."

Visually, the piece incorporates sound, video, and installation components to realize a complex reimagining of the body as an expressive vehicle. The dancers' bodies serve as projection screens. The sound-score was developed by Zeena Parkins, and the design features contributions from Ramstad's brother Emmett, a visual artist. Previously, the work has been paired with an actual installation (which will sadly not be in New York), allowing audiences diverse, direct means to engage with the conceptual elements of the work.

"We did maybe five work in progress showings, and the installation, so we really got test the 'if we do this, what kind of empathetic response happens?' So we actually oddly achieve this goal of doing something paradoxically impossible," Ramstad explained. "And I think it's an interesting piece because it starts in the social, and we're really playing with interruption, and this social response people have, and at some point it drops into the forest."

"It nose-dives, you don't even know how it got there," Bieringa continued.

"And then it becomes instead of this social—which a very vertical sort of relationship—it gets really horizontal and spread out and goes into the poetic and personal-emotional," Ramstad said.

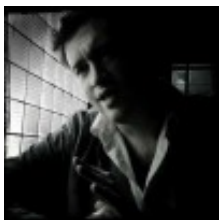
"It really asks people to shift how they're watching it," Bieringa concluded. "It's an experience."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeremy M. Barker



Review: BodyCartography's wild kingdom

Article by: CAROLINE PALMER
 Special to the Star Tribune
 October 26, 2012 - 10:55 AM

You might worry about a show that first requires you to avoid running over a performer darting about the cavernous Walker Art Center parking ramp. It's like he broke loose from his pack. But that's the sort of unexpected wildness that defines "Super Nature," a sneaky-smart world premiere conceived and directed by Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad of Minneapolis-based BodyCartography Project, with music by Zeena Parkins.

In the beginning "Super Nature" is like a droll social experiment gone awry. Eneka Bordato Riano, formerly of Lyon Opera Ballet, delivers an eye-catching entrance, each limb moving at odds with her entire self. The other dancers subtly shift away, ill at ease with such a spectacular display of awkwardness.

This standoffishness doesn't last. Soon everyone has a tic, making visible the internal gyrations we endure when subjected to intense scrutiny. Breath is audible and synchronized, morphing into gasps or shouts. Language comes out in fragments. Torsos tremble and shimmy. Interactions are brief and bizarre, as when Francesca Mattavelli (another Lyon alum) runs a contact microphone over Anna Marie Shogren's body, aggressively violating her personal space. Shogren deftly conveys a range of reactions through her physical response, evolving from curiosity to confusion. The strong cast also features Emily Johnson (a recent winner of New York's Bessie Awards), Justin Jones and Timmy Wagner, plus a chorus.

"Super Nature" does more than explore quirks of human behavior. Its latter half unfolds in a nocturnal setting, shaped by Parkins' meticulous live score, which layers harps and synthesizers with field recordings and spare ambient sounds resonating from the balconies of the theater. Within this realm -- mirroring the darker reaches of the psyche -- actions are uninhibited, bodies are revealed. At times the dancers are captor and prey, as in a feral duet between Ramstad and Johnson. And then it becomes very quiet onstage. Movement is minimal.

The work demands patience but it yields many rewards. The collaborators and performers, along with set designer Emmett Ramstad, create a familiar yet mysterious world, reflective of our ever-changing relationship to others. And as the many white ropes strung overhead catch and shape the light -- eventually entangling the dancers -- it becomes clear that our experiences are more common than different. We all flail in our personal orbits, and sometimes we break free.

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Francesca Mattavelli, left, Eneka Bordato Riano and Timmy Wagner of the BodyCartography Project during rehearsals for "Super Nature."

Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

SUPER NATURE

Who: BodyCartography Project with music by Zeena Parkins.

When: 8 p.m. Fri. & Sat.

Where: Walker Art Center, 1750 Hennepin Av., Mpls.

Tickets: \$22, 612-375-7600, www.walkerart.org

The BodyCartography Project | Video & Sound

[The BodyCartography Project in Conversation](#): Talk Dance podcast interview, Oct. 2012

[Minnesota Original video](#): on BodyCartography Project's process and residency at Walker Art Center

Additional Text:

[The Animal Human: A SpeakEasy for BodyCartography Project](#): Summary of themes from a Walker "SpeakEasy," an informal audience discussion facilitated by a Walker tour guide and a local performer or choreographer.

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