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# Miet Warlop’s Silk Road

Klaas Tindemans on *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE* by Miet Warlop

In the morning the cloths are unrolled, in the afternoon they are rolled back up: this is a rehearsal for *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE*. Technicians and performers intermingle, they are equal, they help each other. The unrolled canvases are impressive in terms of their length – it takes a while to neatly roll up a 100-metre strip – and in terms of their quality, silk in calm colours. The canvases flood the scene, and they recede: like ebb and flow, in incessant waves. Sometimes with hiccups, the material is unruly. It is late February, and this is an important day in the preparation of *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE*, as the power relations between performers and textiles, between (human) life and (dead) matter, are tested. A dancer wraps himself in a cloth doing pirouettes, his body doubling in size. Then he unwraps himself, and that too fascinates. In their manipulations of the fabric, 7 kilometres altogether, you see persons emerge, whose tenacity and awkwardness serve to make a statement.

Miet Warlop wants to avoid straightforwardness in *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE*, and this cannot be surprising to those familiar with her work. During the creation process she sets up, frayed edges emerge from the supposed main thing – in this case, textiles and bodies probing each other, not always gently. Frayed edges, these are the originally unintended but always surprising side effects that a (moving) object or body creates, and which are welcomed. Miet Warlop paints with fabric; she is not bound by a dramaturgy that would demand that the (figurative) frayed edges must be reused, to clarify a well-defined story. So the Silk Road that *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE* travels should not oblige performers (and audiences) to travel from Antioch to Xi'an as efficiently as possible, as merchants did in the late Middle Ages, but rather let them get lost on roads that could suddenly become dead ends. By the way, the ancient Silk Road was not just a precursor of our motorways, it was above all a network for people to exchange not only goods but also life experiences, and it still is today. The idea that getting lost is possible and can even be beneficial is close to the literal meaning of delirium: *delirare*, which is Latin for “walking outside the lines”. For Miet Warlop, this does not necessarily mean that the resulting temporary confusion has to be particularly spectacular; her idea of disruption is more subtle. The figures in *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE* are disrupted by the finest fabric imaginable, silk in soft, shiny colours, which is also soft to the touch. Large areas of fabric can be rolled up or folded into a thing the size of the proverbial handkerchief, but when the silk comes rolling in like waves or crashing down like a waterfall, it takes up much more space, the pleasing matter becomes almost aggressive, the space bursting at the seams, as it were – just as life can burst in the face of dramatic events. The soft materials nestle around our brain, holding thoughts and feelings in place, allowing them to rest for a while.

Philosophers have for some time been under the spell of a “new materialism”, which wants to blur, if not erase the contrasts between nature and culture, between a thing and its meaning, but also between living and (supposedly) inanimate. Not because these differences did not exist, but as a provocation of thought. *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE* is such a provocation, by artistic means: a space occupied by tangible and colourful volumes, themselves being moved by winds that cannot be controlled, wrapping themselves around living bodies. Sometimes this is a brutal fight with the cloths, but just as often a loving embrace, even if the body disappears into it altogether. Miet Warlop sees these actions as a moving, embodied image of “mental hygiene”, a cleansing ritual. A search for resting points, cleaning the mind, complete rest. We train our bodies to death, we drown our brains in real and unreal news, we no longer know whether we are in delusion or reality. Is each of us going through something like this? And can we share this subjective confusion, can we “clean it up”? Together or alone?

In 2023, Miet Warlop set up the participatory sculpture *CHANT FOR HOPE* in Bangladesh. Together with musician Micha Volders, local performers made large plaster casts of simple words, exclamations, cheers – hey, you, never, will, ssst, why, go, ... – as they sang and danced. Words became hard matter, but they also crumbled, they changed, and the performers turned themselves into figures full of patches of plaster. Just as language is always changing, words take on a different meaning each time. This relationship with matter, with a language that hardens but remains vulnerable, is what Miet Warlop is looking for in *INHALE DELIRIUM EXHALE*, together with her performers and to the beats by DEEWEE. Fabrication, in the literal sense.

**Klaas Tindemans** is a dramaturge, researcher and author. Until 2024, he worked at the Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound (RITCS, Brussels) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). He worked for directors Ivo van Hove and Lies Pauwels, among others. As a playwright he wrote *Bulger* (2006, awarded at the Theatertreffen Berlin in 2008) and *Sleutelveld* (2009) and published the collection of essays *The Dramatic Society. Essays on Contemporary Performance and Political Theory* (Routledge,2023).