



The Memory of the Crowd

Milla Koistinen on absence, distance and closeness

Interview: Beatrix Joyce

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Milla Koistinen

In her previous piece, "One Next To Me", Berlin-based Finnish choreographer Milla Koistinen explored group dynamics with around twenty performers of different ages and backgrounds. Following the restrictions of the pandemic, she developed the solo "Breathe", which she now brings to a Berlin football pitch.

Beatrix Joyce: What inspired you during the creation of "Breathe"?

Milla Koistinen: I started with the keywords 'joy' and 'ecstasy' and read texts by Barbara Ehrenreich and Jules Evans, who both explore collective joy and ecstatic experiences. I then approached my choreographic material in a similar way to "One Next To Me" – I worked with images of joyous celebrations, such as street parties, raves and sport events, and derived tableaux and stills from them. I also worked with the compositional technique in music known as 'hoquet', in which a melody travels between different instruments. I transferred this technique onto the bodies of the performers. Now, as I am dancing solo, the melody is built into the poses of my body.

BJ: The piece on the pitch includes two coloured textile bubbles, designed by your set designer Sandra E. Blatterer. Can you tell me more about these larger-than-life air balloons?

MK: When Sandra E. Blatterer first saw my movement material and the sheer size of the field, the question came up: what do we do with all this space? How do we frame it? She proposed to have these two large fabric bubbles freely float around the pitch. They create this interactive landscape for me: they are soft and light, and I can move them and influence their pathways. But they also have their own life, as they travel in the wind and are unpredictable in their movements. It's almost like having a dance partner! It also

creates an interesting experience for the audience, as the effect of the bubbles is different from afar than from close by.

BJ: Where did the idea to set the piece on a football pitch come from?

MK: My parents live in a small village in Finland, and as I was visiting them last summer, I stumbled upon a freshly renovated football pitch that no one was using due to the pandemic. It was massive, and I found the architecture of the space very impressive, and it was just sitting there, empty. I asked myself: what would it be like to change this space into something else? I thought of bringing an artistic work here that contrasts the geometrical lines and structured forms of the site with roundness. I also thought of other ways of proposing a collective event here, such as holding workshops with teenagers and young people.

BJ: What is your relationship to football?

MK: I always wanted to be an athlete. My father was a professional football player in Finland, so it's through him that I hold a dear relationship to the sport. When I told him I was making a piece on a football pitch, he asked me: "Where will you start the piece? The game starts in the middle!" I think it's important to take the rules of the game into account and consider them as inspiration for the choreography. After all, it's not a meadow – there are expectations that come with the site which I can play with.

How can we come together to share something intimate, even across distance? How can we sense and feel those things that are absent, together?

BJ: As the field is so large, there may be quite some distance between you and the audience. How do you imagine to bridge this gap?

MK: The bubbles can move close to the audience. And when one of them approaches you, it obscures your vision

as it is so big; you can't see the others. Questions come up: am I alone here? Where are the others? Regardless of how many people there are in the audience, the group will feel small on this vast field. So with the interactive element that the bubbles bring I wish to create a sense of closeness. With my body I can play with how far away I am and what is revealed when I come closer. And as the sound is played over headphones, it ties everything together and creates a shared experience.

I try to evoke a sense of joy and ecstasy, without drawing people into this state physically.

BJ: Yes. And there's an intimacy to your movements.

MK: My work is quite minimal. I see my body as a reflection surface for the audience on which they can project their own images. I try to evoke a sense of joy and ecstasy, without drawing people into this state physically. With the work I propose another way of experiencing these emotions. I wonder how can we come together to share something intimate, even across distance? How can we sense and feel those things that are absent, together? 🗨️

Milla Koistinen
Breathe

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