

'Choreographer Jan Martens is always on the road, with his laptop close to hand. And it is precisely this hectic activity that he is resisting', Mirjam van der Linden, *de Volkskrant*, 24.10.2017.

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The performance *Rule of Three* as a remedy against information burn-out.

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by Mirjam van der Linden



Rule of Three by Jan Martens. Photo Phile Deprez

When two years ago the Flemish choreographer Jan Martens (33) started preparing his new show *Rule of Three* ('all good things come in threes'), his plan was to repeat a single choreography three times, but then each time 'peeled back' a little more: stripped of music, stripped of lighting, etc. This would enable spectators to have three different experiences of the dance. But all of a sudden he was tired of it, tired of the slowly unfolding single concept. He had done that several times already, as a voice against all the hectic activity in life. 'Now the moment had come to set to work with that hectic

activity itself, with that ever-increasing fragmentation of our existence', Martens said after the world premiere in Antwerp last month.

One of the most successful exponents of the current generation of dance-makers, Martens is a child of the digital age. For a long time his laptop was his only office; communicating quickly and virtually with the whole world is absolutely normal for him.

And yet he feels resistance to it and he translates this into dance. In his (international) breakthrough *The Dog Days Are Over* (2014), the dancers presented variations of a single movement, the jump. The hectic society was here shown in a bad light, and the 'genuine being' gradually reappeared through the exhaustion. *The Common People* (2016) was a tribute to the physical encounter. The piece consists of a long series of 'duets' made up city-dwellers who meet for the first time on stage and where, guided only by a few choreographic indications, they feel each other out.

Rule of Three, which after London and before Paris can now be seen in the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, is about how our brain works in the information society. Martens: 'We are subjected to so much information that we don't have time to digest it. We jump from impulse to impulse and remain hungry for new stimuli. The result is that we lose our focus: we no longer study anything in depth or can no longer muster the concentration to do so. We consume a tweet by Trump the same way we consume the footage of a devastating hurricane or showbiz gossip about the singer Selena Gomez. Even on the website of a quality newspaper like *De Standaard* these reports appear side by side on an equal footing. Superficialization and information burn-out lie in wait. One day war is imminent, the next that's old news – so what?'

In the show, Martens immerses the spectators in an abundance of images. There are two male dancers and a female dancer, dressed in the primary colours red, yellow and blue. They form triangles in different ways and the number three also plays a role. The short scenes have little to do with one another and are interrupted by blackouts, when everything is plunged into darkness. 'No gradual transformation, but always a new beginning, a new empty sheet', Martens explains. 'That is why the movements are taut and staccato, not flowing and legato.'

'The dancers now have to find out what that means, being yourself. Who are you and what do you think in the midst of all this information washing over you?'

With live drumming and electronica by the American musician Michael Kuhn, aka NAH, which moves between punk, noise, hip-hop and avant-jazz, and with striking lighting effects that include bright pink, *Rule of Three* is built up as a concert. Kuhn's playlist is even screened. But between all this 'racket' and the at times robotic movements, Martens has added touches of poetry and tranquillity. These lend depth to his story. For instance, in the texts of the American author Lydia Davis ('what do the slow treatment of writing and a specific signature still add in an age of acceleration in which everyone can have his say?') and in the carefully spotlighted sculptural poses of, for instance, two necks or two

juxtaposed backs, which appear beheaded because the necks are bent deep.

Those cut-outs announce *Rule of Three*'s unexpected conclusion: a long, nude scene in silence.

Without any sexual connotation, the dancers fold themselves into all sorts of positions on and against one another, as though they were trying to mould the ideal statue. Martens: 'Throughout the whole show I pushed their bodies into little shapes, as it were. They can't be themselves, there's no time for them to be together, and when there is contact, it contains a kind of threat. At the end I remove all context. So, no music, no costumes, no lighting any more, nor any choreography; the dance is largely improvised. The dancers now have to find out what that means, being yourself. Who are you and what do you think in the midst of all this information washing over you?'

In doing so Martens too is entirely himself. Because so far he has always opted for dance and dancers that appear as unaffected as possible. Not prepared, not virtuoso, not spectacular. '*Rule of Three* would be meaningless without those final 20 minutes', Martens says with a grin. 'Paradoxically enough, that nudity is my signature.'

Rule of Three, 24 and 25/10 Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam.

Jan Martens

Jolted awake by a performance by choreographer and visual artist Jan Fabre, Jan Martens, a bookworm from the West Flemish town of Vrasene, enrolled in dance classes at age 18. A while later he traded his study of Germanic Languages for a training in contemporary dance in Tilburg and later in Antwerp. As a performer he has worked with choreographers such as Koen de Preter and Ann Van den Broek. His career as a maker began in 2010, at the age of 26, and took shape very rapidly. Duets about love, solos about unconventional beauty (such as the older body of the Dutch dancer Truus Bronkhorst) and in 2014 his first group work. His choreography platform GRIP has been the recipient of long-term subsidies from the Flemish authorities since 2017.