

## **Review on Jan Burkhardt's solo in the *Clouds On Clear Sky* project**

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In the collaborative space of *Vierte Welt*, Jan Burkhardt's solo melted the private into the public through his interpretation of death. On such an intimate yet universal topic, the setting of no-limelight, purely coexistence worked its magic in bridging personal sentiments to the audience – who were more like participants, as they were free to wander around and establish as much distance, or none at all, with the performer. Two downwards hanging bouquets adorned a wall, insinuating the funeral practice of ritualistic flower-gifting. Other than that, the space was rid of cultural references; instead, a large black chalkboard lying on the ground and a few grey screens for projections tinted the space with minimalism, allowing a neutral environment that enabled emotional connections to the universal experience of humanity – death.

Burkhardt was dressed in equally minimalistic clothing. In a grey shirt and khaki shorts, his style is as subdued as the space surrounding him, in order to shine the spotlight onto the other elements – movements, props, audio – of the performance. Throughout the whole performance he was barefoot, in the most intimate way of interacting with the ground and the blackboard. The intimacy of grief was further emphasised through the projections on the screens; the screens never showed the full range of movements of the performer as the image was enlarged. The body was always shown only partially, in a way reflecting the impossibility to fully empathise and understand the grief of another person: some aspects of pain are known only to the individual and can never be directly communicated.

In addition to the spatial design, the audio added an extra layer to the theme. It alternated between scripted monologue and utterances that recall the first sounds of consonants and vowels that babies make. This was affirmed by the swift, directionless motions of Burkhardt mirroring explorative gestures of a toddler. Supposedly, the motif of birth is conceptually opposite to death. However, in the face of death, human beings are rid of their societal armour and forcibly returned to their organic human form. On the other hand, the grief from experiencing the death of our loved ones is difficult to be reduced to mere words and parallels the defenceless vulnerabilities of a child who is succumbed to emotions.

Amongst the forty minutes of performance, there were mainly three moments that I found most striking. In particular, the use of props – chalk, water and cloth – was notable, as these materials served as a medium of emotional expression and creating dialogue with the audience. The first notable part, which was also what started the show, is the act of drawing big chalk circles with the whole body sprawled on the floor. Burkhardt's slow writhing movements were pregnant with tension, communicating a sense of contained emotional intensity. Overlapping circles of varying sizes were traced, eventually extended outside of the blackboard onto the floor, and shot out into a straight line in a rupture from suppressed force. After this the performer shrivelled into a curled up sitting position against the cement column, staying still in agony. The progress of energy from stifling to outburst, echoed in both movement and abstract lines, was particularly effective in prompting a psychological

association: this segment mirrors the efforts to contain grief: going in circles when attempting to keep it within oneself, thus ultimately exploding into overwhelming pain.

This pain is, in another segment, relieved through the act of self-care and caring for others. Burkhardt rinsed his feet with water slowly and carefully, then imprinted a set of footprints on the blackboard. The sounds of the water softly echoed through the space as it trickled from the water jug, through his toes, then breaking the surface tension of the water basin. The combination of movement and sound enraptured the audience in a calming atmosphere. Besides, cleaning routines, especially when slow and deliberate, are often associated with self-care and mental rehabilitation. Hence, this act delivered a mood of tranquillity and peacefulness. Perhaps the most memorable part of the entire performance followed: Burkhardt sat on the floor in front of a seated audience member, then delicately washed the feet of the girl with soap and water, not forgetting to use the cloth to dry thoroughly. The girl, uninformed about this interaction previously, was slightly startled but accepting of the sudden intimacy between the performer and the audience. This unadulterated exchange illuminated a pure, supportive act of caring, and reminded me of the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet in the Book of John. Another association is when the healthy care for oldening persons. Both actions recall the humility and selflessness in willingly caring for other people. The theme of mutual-care is hence highlighted in caring for someone near death and the community of the living grieving together. After this act, Burkhardt asked if anyone else would like their feet washed. I remember the pang of "I hope not" within me, but when no one volunteered, he continued with performing solo. This underscores the importance of consensual caring, which would otherwise be crossing boundaries, whether physically or emotionally. One's processing of grief may be isolation, as at times the correspondence with another could be burdening and confronting. Although supporting each other may reap benefits, this is only possible when both parties are willing and ready.

The prop of the water jug is further utilised in another part when Burkhardt created various spillages on the blackboard. He pours a little out, then swishes the small puddle back and forth with rhythmic swaying motions of his right foot. The water was smeared into a curved splash, as he flicked remaining droplets of water with his toes. He then moved to another spot, repeating the same action, this time dissolving some parts of the chalk circles. After some movements around the space he returned to the first spillage, turning on the spot with the feet rubbing into the water, until the act ended with him sitting on the ground in stillness. This series of actions was very open ended and was up to the audience's interpretations. How he poured water out then engaged in various movements, to me, alluded to releasing emotions and dealing with it. It is a learning process, resulting in the last stage of grief: peace.

All in all, this performance succeeded in using an abstract emotive language of movements, space, and materials to connect an intimate topic to a diverse audience. Its construction was highly open ended and allowed us to form personal associations and develop our own interpretations. For those desiring intense emotional upheavals and guided understanding, this performance may fall short of that expectation. However, those wishing for flexible freedom in extending their own thoughts in a meditative setting will find this fitting. After all, facing death and grief is a highly personal experience, and cannot be holistically concluded in an outward presentation.