

## Child friendly spasm-tease in the gallery

**"Animal Magnetism 1 – intimate", Henriette Pedersen and her three hysterics; Granada, RONALDA and Anesthesia, Galleri Maria Veie, 24th and 25th of June 2009.**

By Elin Høyland

The combination of Galleri Maria Veie's deliberate relationship with its own placing and curation, and Pedersen and co's love for the improvised and explorative, unexpectedly became much more than a cross-over event between the theatre and gallery format.

On the corner of Friis gate and Urtegata, in the middle of Grønland in Oslo, but in a quiet residential area, you find Galleri Maria Veie, which opened in March this year. The gallery defines itself in this way: "Maria Veie is an exhibition space for young artists focusing on public art; installations, video, photography, drawings". The two shop windows facing Urtegata give passers by a direct view into the gallery's relatively small, but pleasant, *white cube* showrooms, as smaller street art galleries should have. With the question *What do you want from me* as part of a painting which for a long time was a feature of the opening exhibition, and the laconic *nothing* placed on the opposite wall, it was like Galleri Maria Veie from the very beginning questioned its own grounds for existence, like a query about the relationship with the people on the street, the relationship between the gallery and the art, and between the art and its audience. In this case on a street corner, Grønland, Oslo, Norway, where I would estimate about 90% of the closest neighbours are either Norwegians with a foreign background or foreign parents, or else immigrants with temporary, permanent or no permit to stay in the country, although I have no specific numbers to refer to. The gallery is without doubt a lonely arts-gallery-bird in the middle of the multi-cultural Norway's statistical gravitational centre (little Pakistan, India, Somalia, Islam town), and as a white Norwegian one might feel more like a minority than a majority when it comes to language, shopping and dominant clothing codes in the streets around Tøyengata, between Grønlandsstredet and Botanisk hage. (Possibly leading to inspiration, xenophobia, cultural freedom, irritation, wonder or a form of uncomplicated accept of the ghetto characteristics the area has gained in the last decades).

(Bildetekst): De unge hysteriske piger i pubertetsalder, hvis sind er et slet og ret kaos af ubændige affekter (The young hysterical adolescent girls, whose minds are simply a chaos of unyielding affects), installation. Photo: Sveinn Fannar Jóhannsson

### The young hysterical girls

So it's through these windows in Urtegata I first lay eyes on a female figure, dressed in Victorian clothing with a theatrical touch of madness, and in the next window a "hanging loft" with clothes-lines, consisting of "rope, clothes-pegs, three cotton table cloths, one crocheted bed spread and thirteen dirty cotton, wool and nylon panties" as the sales description of this part of the work, titled "De unge hysteriske piger i pubertetsalder, hvis sind er et slet og ret kaos af ubændige affekter" (The young hysterical adolescent girls, whose minds are simply a chaos of unyielding affects) says. This coarse-textured "work of panties" points with comical effect to the woman in the purple taft dress, who is one of three female hysterics produced by choreographer Henriette Pedersen as part of her ongoing project Animal Magnetism, where part 1, namely a crossover dance/theatre performance based on hysteria as a phenomenon, has moved south from its premiere at Black Box Theatre, Rodeløkka in March, to Grønland/Tøyen and a refreshingly experimental gallery format, two suitably warm summer evenings in June.

Henriette Pedersen has for a long time stood out with a distinctive signature to her productions, which often revolve around the tension surrounding humans/animals, our physical forms of language, and not least an element of expressive theatricality connected to themes with absurd traits, and through this somewhat subversive cultural comments through all her bubbly comedy. When it comes to genre her work has been based on a form of dance which carries the same adjectives, and which erases the boundaries between dance as a physical discipline, and movement and choreography as a fundamental element and tool in the theatre as a narrative, body based, live medium, with a tendency towards the conceptuality of performance art crossed with relational drama (!). In other words Pedersen's artistic language is such that strict labels of discipline become

redundant, something that echoes in the rebellious motive that seeps through her work in the interaction between form and theme.

I never had the opportunity to see *Animal Magnetism 1* as it was performed at Black Box Theatre, but after the short intimate séance at Galleri Maria Veie, I have no doubt the concept gained many interesting elements by moving. Because what, when you think about it, could suit a show of improvised hysteria better than the vernissage audience's often cool distance to the exhibit, not unlike the clinical professionalism which supposedly characterized Professor Jean-Martin Charcot's open demonstrations in his day, where the worst cases of female hysteria were exhibited to a male audience. Medical vernissage? (It is said that both Ibsen and Strindberg were present).

"Spasm-tease?" I find myself thinking, and, as surely many before me have done, I wonder where the line was drawn between medical research, teasing freak/erotic shows, and a form of humanised witch-hunt, where, more or less consciously in each individual, control over sexual behaviour and in general the power to define, nonetheless was held highly by the enlightened men who made their pilgrimage to Salpêtrière Hospital in France, to witness the hysterical life of women. The period around the turn of the century from 1800 to 1900 is viewed as "the golden age of hysteria," with the neurologist Charcot leading the way, also as the pioneer of a medical method that included more occult phenomena, such as hypnosis, in his research and attempts to cure. Outbreaks of hysteria (Latin for uterus) was, as the name suggests, linked with female physiology, and was assumed to come as a consequence of the uterus wandering around the body. Amongst the symptoms were seizures, untruthfulness, sickly doubt, alcoholism, delusions, aggression, profound shifts of mood, and so on. The treatment could vary from hour-long hot baths, via Bavarian beer and straight jackets to stimulus of clitoris and vagina. Hmmm. (Fun variant of gynaecology, and suppression of female neuroses).

### **Hysterical embarrassment, hysteria and inclusive fun.**

Good entertainment, one must nevertheless conclude, when beholding the three hysterics in *Animal Magnetism*, who present three almost cartoonish variants of hysterics, with the Disney-esque names Granada, Ronalda and Anesthesia (the last mentioned even with a suitably medical sound). The opening arrangement is made in such a way that one has to wangle one's way through the panty art before reaching the exhibition room itself, where the audience has positioned itself almost glued to the walls, as usual, quiet and serious, with the exception of a few flitting smiles, facial twitches and laughter, and actually an almost hysterical specimen amongst them – a young woman laughing, yes, hysterically, and unembarrassed regarding the rest of us, several times during the séance, especially when Anesthesia (I think it was) comes too close and expresses her hysteria amongst other things through intense reading and riding/rubbing on various literary works. She, the woman from the audience, becomes an exceptionally clever and interesting mirror of the hysteria phenomenon as a hairline balance between freedom regarding the exercise of one's own bodily reactions in the interplay between self and surroundings, and possibly involuntary eruptions provoked by the hysterical that is performed around her.

The choreography is marked by improvisation-based dramatics where the three performers who embody the hysteria (Marianne Skjeldal, Kristine Karåla Øren and Marianne Kjærsund) radiate a forceful, yet controlled defiance, as if they have taken their hysteria into full possession and demonstrate it as some sort of natural state dressed up in restrictive outfits and left to mirror itself in literary descriptions of life and a stiffly observant audience. The madness presents itself in both a trance-like state and as a play between the three, where the invalid is not presented as a victim, but rather as a sort of existential fool who wrings out what physical commentaries there might be within her in a situation otherwise lacking in language. As a production, the artistic form is just about becomes vulnerable when the three performers leave their own improvised lines, in a space where the audience is extremely close, but not interacting as anything other than (curious/offended/ignorant/tolerant?) wall decor. There is a touch of clamminess, almost embarrassment in the air as the desperate, made-up until they appear sickly and ugly, yet beautiful, hysterics switch between secluding themselves in their own outbursts, and approaching some of us along the walls or windowpanes. Something clammy and embarrassing that makes me think of how little it takes to cross the threshold for normal or "palatable" behaviour in social settings, and even here in an artistic environment, connects with the threshold for our individual freedom of expression, which gladly limits itself, of course, to letting others perform latent aspects of madness for us, whilst

oneself, safely placed within a more or less classical ideal of cultivation, can still call oneself taboo-free.

But then, a wonderful and strange occurrence: from the other side of the pane comes another audience, the children from Urtegata, who with as little shame as the performers execute their spasms, press their noses to the glass to witness the spectacle. The three performers have already, at times, acted on both sides of the glass pane, and thus widened the performing area and played "who's watching whom" with the audience inside. The three so enter a form of dialogue with the children outside, and soon the madness with (not necessarily teasing) sexual undertones in the gallery, has become a strange mixture of clown-princess-circus and street theatre with the physical slapstick choreography of hysteria as entertaining artistry for everyone, where not only the children but the mother and the grandmother with their headscarves also come to and remain outside the window, and observe the princesses of hysteria wrestling with their own spasms, rather than pull the children away.

The "us and them" theme which lies in the hysteria and diagnostics culture, especially considering questions of gender, body and sexuality, mixed in this way with some completely different collisions and dimensions of current cultural-historical themes which aren't just about bygone forms of female hysteria, which might not be so bygone after all, and where this variety of hysteria regardless became a showcase of the freeing potential that lies in exercising craziness to open eyes and open windows, something which there and then in Urtegata became a never so little revolution. Because after a couple of half-nervous minutes both inside and outside the window, something incredibly beautiful arises as street and gallery meet through the mad female figures, the children, the gallery audience and the mothers with headscarves, and the glances and the window panes are dissolved into an abundance of directions where the roles of spectator and performer are softened and achieve a new, positive dimension of the absurd as something welcoming. It was also, in every way, both liberating and touching to see the children of our multi-cultural Norway carelessly run in and out of the art gallery amongst the white wine-drinking "us" – now smiling exuberantly ourselves in the aftermath of this positive séance of madness.

### **Opening for more**

The combination of Galleri Maria Veie's deliberate relationship to its own placing and curation, and Pedersen and co's bold love for the improvised, norm-ridiculing and explorative, in an unexpected way became much more than a little cross-over event between the theatre and gallery formats, and fully proved that much good can come from letting a variety of crazy phenomena become public spectacles - here with a calculated "risk" to include audience groups who rarely frequent OCA or the National gallery for that matter.

There is, in other words, good reason to follow Galleri Maria Veie's further moves, which henceforth will hopefully open up to more gallery-theatre in its refreshingly situated "peep-in gallery," which so far has offered both visual art exhibitions, debate events, and, as we have seen, more physical, defiant performing pieces. As for Pedersen's part, she can safely continue to invest in intimate versions of her subsequent chapters of the Animal Magnetism trilogy, and not least the cooperation with costume maker Ellinor Ström and composer Lars Petter Hagen.