



Cage sings the blues

Frans Poelstra on *The Caldeirão* Highlanders by Vera Mantero

EN Prologue – written before the performance without reading any promotional material about it

It's late spring 1997, a dance studio in Loulé, the Algarve, Portugal. The first day of a two-week residency, the first day of rehearsals for "The fall of an ego", a piece by Vera Mantero, and also my first day of working with Vera. On that day we checked out the rehearsal space where we meant

to spend the next two weeks. "We" were 6 performers, including Vera, and most of us didn't know each other. It was a comfortable studio. A great place to work. It turned out that it was the only day we went there. The following days we went to the countryside of the Algarve by car, away from the beach; we parked the car in the middle of nowhere and started to walk around in nature; no specific direction, we

just walked, no road map or whatever (there was no GPS in 1997). Most of the time we got lost, but somehow we always found our way back to the car and went home again. In the evening, we cooked (we shared an apartment), talked, read, exchanged views, danced, sang, watched videos. After two weeks of getting lost, we left the

Algarve to continue rehearsals in a studio in Lisbon. There were some producers from abroad who wanted to see something of Vera's new work in progress. We decided to improvise, because we didn't have anything to show, and somebody suggested to play a CD of John Cage's "Music for prepared piano" to accompany us. We started. Sometimes things just fall into place and everybody senses:

“this is it.” Even though we had no idea yet what “it” was. There was a camera recording our improvisation, and afterwards we looked at the video and decided to copy our movements exactly. The improvisation became the first 30 minutes of “The fall of an ego”.

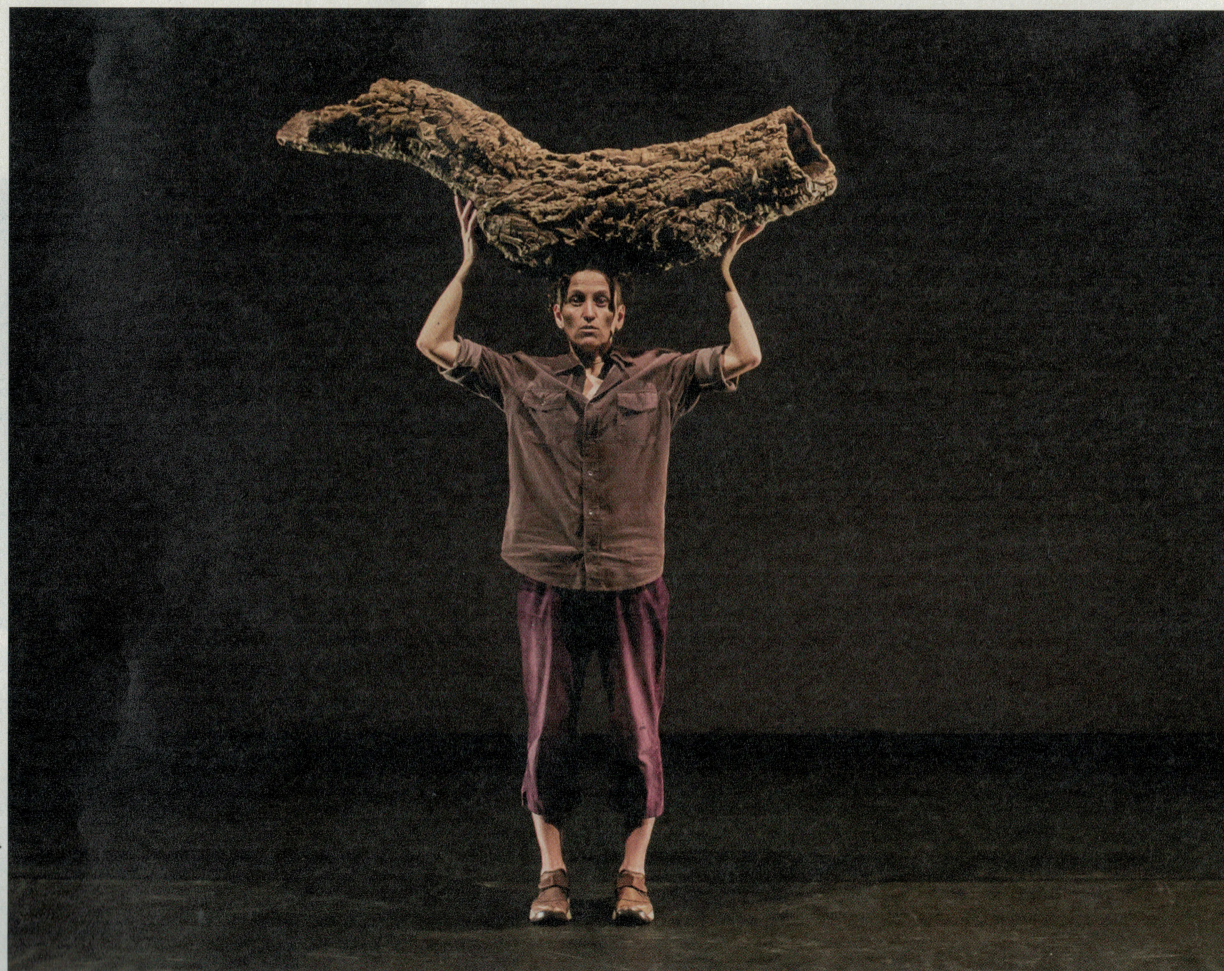
The Caldeirão Highlanders

It's a little bit of a reunion when I enter Hall G: smiles, kisses from friends, colleagues, and, believe it or not, it's heartwarming. Vera is already onstage, sitting on a bar stool, a music stand in front of her, behind her a big screen. I sit right in front of her. We haven't seen each other for years. She sees me and we joke around a bit without words. She pretends to be nervous. I know she is nervous, but I also know that she doesn't mind that. She's playing with her nervousness. The lights dim. Vera starts to sing in the dark in Portuguese. Tears come to my eyes immediately, I'm a sucker for the Portuguese language (even though I don't understand most of it). It has been a while since I heard it and, on top, Vera can sing. She holds a hollow trunk on her head. It's the bast of a cork oak. Every now and then during the performance I ask myself: “How did she manage to hollow it out?” A video starts – images from the Algarve, shot from a driving car. This takes me back to 1997. I feel the wind through the open window. I feel the heat. I hear the crickets. I smell the lavender. I listen to the voices, Portuguese voices from my colleagues. “Keep on talking”, I think, and my mind drifts off. On stage, Vera starts to explain the video in English. She talks about what brought her to the Algarve: the deserted landscape, the silence, the mountain people, their work (farming), their (non-)belief, their singing, their singing while working. We shift backwards and forwards between Vera talking and watching short videos: old footage

Frans Poelstra

started his career as a dancer

when he was 25 and over the years he evolved into a more versatile performer who is constantly questioning (his) life and (his) art in all its absurdities, drama, playfulness, boredom, duties, surprises, awkwardness and still is enjoying this questioning. Since 2004 he lives and works in Vienna.



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Foto: Luiz da Cruz

Epilogue

Lyrics for a song. Choose your own melody and rhythm – sing and record it, send the recording to bibliothek@tqw.at. All songs will be posted on the TQW website. Thanks!

tra-la-la
 la-la-la
 pomtipomti
 pomtipomti
 slipslap
 slubiduwap
 oh-oh-oh-oh-oh

(Repeat until you start laughing)

PS: I know now how the trunk of the cork oak was hollowed out.

1 John Cage wrote a book called "Silence". In *The Caldeirão Highlanders*, Vera Mantero refers to him as the inventor of silence, who at the same time stated that silence didn't exist.