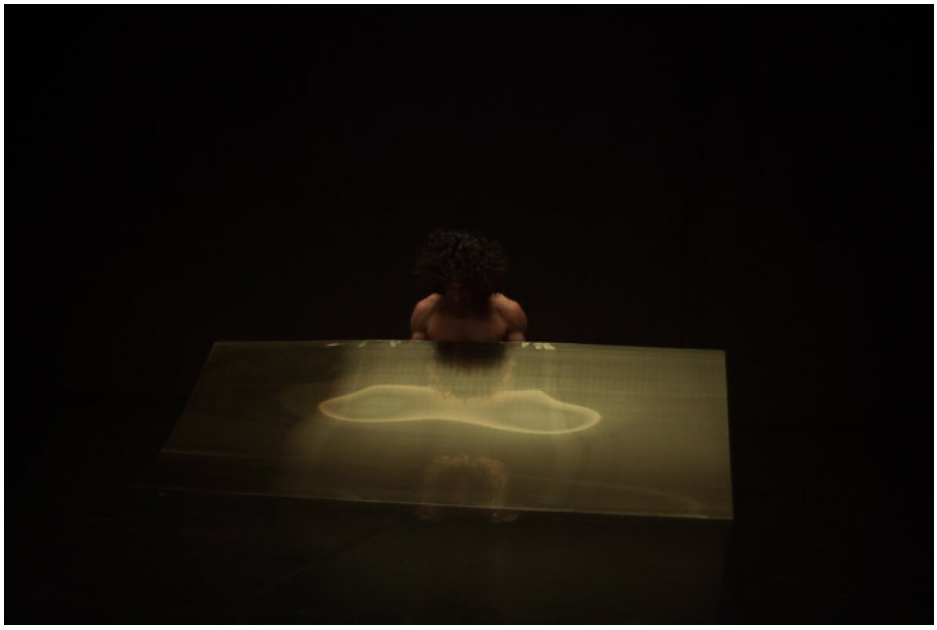


Everything brings us back to the body

EHSAN HEMAT

A Matter of Life and Death



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Gezien op 13 maart 2025
Monty, Antwerpen

‘What is life?’ goes the eternal question. In Ehsan Hemat’s ‘Everything brings us back to the body’, light and shadow dance across the ever-shifting surface of a surprising protagonist: a large, polished copper plate. Its stainless body reflects our gazes as our faces and distorted body parts flicker before us. Extracted from gaping American or African open-pit mines, processed and polished to perfection, the copper plate now quivers and breathes, as if whispering in response, ‘What is not?’.

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It goes without saying that a performance that unbalances our perceptions of life, individuality and the body is a masterful feat. I don’t say this lightly. New materialist and post-humanist themes are nothing new in contemporary dance, but seldom does the result match these ambitions. Hemat’s work, a simple encounter between a man and a metal sheet, starts a marvellous journey through sound, light, space and the self-reflective gaze of the spectator. Crucially, Hemat avoids the pitfall of a latent animism that so often sneaks in through the back door on any post-humanist proposition. The copper sheet remains just that and is never given powers of thought or emotions beyond its physical existence. Hemat’s point is simpler but ultimately more profound. In his hands, the reflections of a plain copper plate become a window into our own intrinsic and fundamental materiality.

The audience is still finding their places, but Ehsan Hemat, dressed in a dark blue working bodysuit, is already fully at work, peeling the plastic film off a large copper sheet positioned at the centre front of the stage. He acts without hurry, with a precise, almost monastic focus. Then, just as we have adjusted to this careful rhythm, he exits. The object remains: a gleaming, reflective metal rectangle. We absorb its presence for a few seconds before Hemat returns, this time naked. But this is no act of provocative self-exhibition; We are way beyond

that now. Here, the naked body is simply a necessity for the upcoming intimate *pas de deux* with the likewise uncovered metal sheet.

It is immediately apparent that the metal is not a passive object; it is an equal partner for the performer, with its own unpredictable agency. Both interact in a shifting dialogue between weight and resistance, a language of touch and reverberation. This dynamic produces a phenomenological effect on the audience as well: it is both witness to and agent of the creative labour of the artist's body. Hemat and the copper plate relate reciprocally, forming a shared action that extends beyond human intentionality. Ultimately, this is a performative-material assemblage that negotiates its own presence, its own breath.

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To breathe is to be in relation. This fundamental act of breathing, so often unnoticed, is in fact the basis of both survival and connection—between bodies, between species, between the human and the non-human. The theorist Achille Mbembe, referenced in the program notes, speaks of the 'universal right to breathe' as an ethical demand, a call to recognize interdependence in a world shaped by constraint, suffocation, wars and crises. Also mentioned in the program is the spirituality of Rumi's poetry, which invokes an animacy that dissolves the boundary between self and world. New materialist thought extends this notion beyond the human into the vibrancy and agency of matter itself. Karen Barad's concepts of 'relational ontology' and 'intra-action' remind us that agency is not a possession but an emergent property of entanglement, where human and non-human forces shape one another through multiplicity. Here, human agency is de-privileged, no longer the sole source of meaningful expression. Hemat's performance embodies these ideas—not as abstract philosophy but as movement, sound, light, and touch. It asks: What does it mean to share breath with matter? To animate and be animated in return? To acknowledge that, as Mbembe says, 'there is no humanity without bodies' and no bodies without the forces that both shape and resist them?

The theatre room is dim. Light seeps in from the left and right corners, its glow barely illuminating the performer, catching instead on the material's surface, which throws back pale yellow, fractured reflections. Light patterns spill across the floor and crawl up the walls, creating an ephemeral artwork of their own. When Hemat bends the metal, it bends back. The response is audible, immediate and visceral: a metallic groan. He holds it before him, covering his lower body, his hands pressing into its surface. Golden prints of his hands linger then fade. The object is more than a mirror: it archives traces of contact between the two, or, in the spirit of Karen Barad, a shifting record of intra-actions.

Throughout the performance, the metal sheet will continue to have its distinct voice. When shaken, it produces eerie, inhuman sounds, something between a choral drone and an unearthly screech. Its surface distorts not only light but also the bodies of the audience reflected in it. Most importantly, it breathes. At a precise angle, it pulses, mimicking the rhythm of lungs filling and emptying. To breathe is not only biological, but political and historical—it is a claim to life. Barad theorizes about 'relational ontology', in which, in this case, the sheet—formed by human hands—is reanimated through movement, resisting a static state and exhibiting a material vitality that is not dependent on human will

alone.

Each segment flows from sound to silence, from darkness to light and back again.

Yet the pure mass of copper is inevitably a reminder of the exploitative and destructive nature of civilization. Its unblemished beauty is thoroughly engineered; moreover, the sheer mass of 18 kilos of pure copper brings ghostly whispers of the poisonous extraction process. Copper mining in the huge open-pit mines of the Americas digs ever-deeper holes. Heavy machinery kicks up dust and pollutes the air, while chemicals leach minerals from the ore, leaving water sources permanently contaminated and threatening the supplies of local communities.

The pacing is nothing short of exceptional. Each segment flows from sound to silence, from darkness to light and back again. Imagery after imagery passes. The object, grounded at first, takes flight. Draped over Hemat's back, it thuds like heavy wings—an Icarus mid-descent. Light splinters around him, multiplying his silhouette. The metal sings again, now softer, a hush of wind. Two long sheets, previously unnoticed, emerge behind us, bathed in blue and orange light. The unlikely pair's sense of agency shifts between them. As he drags the metal across the floor, friction gives rise to sound and movement. Hemat places the object horizontally and lies in front of it. Crawling, his reflection mutates in real time—a body becoming something else, something fluid, something beyond the confines of skin and bone.

A pause. Hemat sits next to the object. Bent into a new form, the metal resembles a bed—yet offers no rest, for it continues its rhythmic, breath-like undulations. He mirrors it, his own body heaving, spent yet synchronized. They sit together, the dancer and the object, equally exhausted. The shared breath of a moment before silence. The final sequence begins. Hemat lifts the metal once more. As a rope descends from the ceiling, he begins to rotate it in slow circles. He circles the space, feet barely skimming the ground, then releases it. The metal alone continues its motion, spinning with eerie control. Hemat crouches beneath the metal, just for a moment, before emerging, precise and deliberate, somehow without interfering with the orbit of the swirling metal sheet. No longer a burden to be carried, it is now autonomous—a solitary presence on stage. Light. Motion. Breath. The object slows down. Then it stops.

The performance is a plea for a fundamental reorientation in our relation to the world, to matter, to the breath that sustains us. When breath itself is contested—whether through pandemics, ecological collapse, or border geopolitics—what does it mean to breathe together? In this 'planetary crisis' we must arrive at a 'planetary consciousness', according to Mbembe. The sheet, the body, and the sound all pose the same challenge. If movement is a form of knowing, then what this performance knows, deeply, is the inescapable mutuality of being. The faint whisper lingers in the air, long after the final stillness takes hold.