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INTERVIEW

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Fading out the human presence: A conversation between Barbara Stimoli, Titta Raccagni and Simon Ellis

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pleasure

Abstract

This is a conversation between Italian artists Barbara Stimoli and Titta Raccagni with Choreographic Practices' co-editor Simon Ellis. The discussion begins with how Barbara and Titta began working together, and then focuses on the development and various iterations of their work Pleasure Rocks.

Introduction

Titta C. Raccagni and Barbara Stimoli are artistic and life partners. Titta is a filmmaker, director and video artist, and has worked with, among others, Gabriele Salvatore, Alina Marazzi, Luca Bigazzi and Francesca Comencini. Barbara is a dancer, choreographer and performer who trained with Carolyn Carlson, worked for Arearea and Tpo companies, and has collaborated with, among others, Virgilio Sieni, Iris Erez, Felix Ruckert and Stefano Questorio. Their research and productions blend their different backgrounds, their political activism and the poetic investigation. The *Pleasure Rocks* research started in 2018 in collaboration with the visual artist Alessia Bernardini.

Simon Ellis (SE): *Could you introduce yourselves briefly?*

Barbara Stimoli (BS): I'm Barbara Stimoli and I'm a lot of things. I'm a mover and I'm 43. And that's a problem for a dancer, for the dance field probably. I work in the performing arts, collaborating, especially with Titta. After years of more conventional contemporary dance, I moved more into performance that is related to visual art and philosophy. I got curious about philosophy and reading about a lot of the things connected to the content we were researching. My body cannot act in a way that it doesn't feel comfortable with; I have to find a reason to do a project or to dance. I'm a freelancer, and that means that I also work for other people, but not often. I also organize and do other projects and am also a teacher, even if I don't like the term teacher. I teach Pilates or what I call 'Pilates remix' that is a remix of whatever I learned and passed through in my dancer-mover life: Feldenkrais, yoga, aikido, etc. And now I'm studying traditional Chinese medicine and *Tuina* massage.

Titta Raccagni (TR): I'm Titta and my background is in cinema and video studies and experiences. But since I am a fluid person in life, I am also in research and artistic research. I made cinema and documentaries for many years, but at one point I really needed to be on the other side of the camera. So I started to study with different dancers or performing arts people I liked – very different kinds of practices. When I met Barbara, we started to mix different artistic languages, even if the focus of the topics was above all on pornographic languages and erotic imagery. I had already been working in this area as I belonged to a group of female filmmakers that was called *Le ragazze del porno*.

SE: *'The girls of porn' is the literal translation.*

TR: Yes, and it was a very ambitious project about changing the male gaze and perspective on pornography. We made some short films directed by women. I am an activist, so political issues and topics were and are always mixed with my research.

SE: *It seems like quite a jump from your first meeting as individuals with your own practices to meeting and then going to an exploration of the erotic and pornographic. Can you somehow describe that jump or that meeting?*

1. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibari>. Accessed 24 September 2022.
2. <https://vimeo.com/139586532>. Accessed 24 September 2022.

TR: We were investigating the same topics, but in different ways.

SE: *Did you come together accidentally or is it because you were investigating the same topic that you found each other?*

TR: I would say the latter. I was organizing a festival in Milan, the Lady Fest, that was focused on different practices and it was both theoretical and practical with discussions and performances exploring everything from sex working to bondage. I was looking for a performer who was dealing with *shibari*¹ and a friend suggested Barbara to me.

BS: Titta invited me to do the performance and the workshop and then she fell in love. And then she asked me to do a video also, a movie...

TR: Wait, you asked me to be your bunny.

BS: Ah, OK (laughs)

SE: *Wait, so Barbara asked Titta to be your bunny?*

TR: Bunny. Yes.

BS: The person who is tied up.

TR: This is the truth!

BS: I was missing a partner to go to the workshop in Milan of one my favourite teachers. So, yes, I forgot this. After that you asked me to...

TR: ... to be the protagonist in this video that was produced by *Le ragazze del porno*. It was about gender violence and I didn't want to make something banal, so I thought of working on a *shibari* scene, and to work on self-conscious violence; to work on violence on a different level: violence, pain and pleasure.

BS: Also *auto-determinazione* is related.

SE: *Do you mean self-determined violence or pleasure as a passive recipient or receiver?*

TR: Yes. I didn't want to tell a story about women as victims, but a story of someone who chooses to experiment with this act. It's not violence of course, but it's something strong on your body and soul.²

BS: The ropes in *shibari* are also a tool to talk about binding and the ties that are chosen, or the ties that one receives without consent. During the video shoot we fell in love and started this relationship.

I was selected for a residency in San Francisco and as a choreographer I was able to bring a dancer, even if Titta is not really a dancer.

SE: *So you disguised Titta as a dancer for this residency?*

BS: Yes. I asked her to come with me on the residency and this first month-long research with ropes was about connection and disconnection. It was there that we wrote the application for *Pornopoetica*³ – the project which became our main research together.

SE: *Do you think of Pleasure Rocks⁴ – which is the thing I would like to talk about here – as being part of Pornopoetica?*

TR: Yes, *Pleasure Rocks* was born about five years ago as part of *Pornopoetica*. At the beginning we were researching erotic imagery and worked together with the visual artist Alessia Bernardini.⁵

BS: The *Pornopoetica* website no longer accurately reflects the direction of our current work. Yes, it's still *Pornopoetica*, but it's now opening out into many other things.

TR: We don't see ourselves as *Pornopoetica*, but people identify us in this way.

BS: In dance it was a problem at the beginning – about thirteen years ago, and before meeting Titta – when I started to work with ropes and bring ropes into my performances. Since I was not well-known in the dance scene or a well-known choreographer, I was always seen as the person who was doing BDSM: 'Ah, she's doing bondage'.

SE: *You were labelled as the bondage artist. Are you saying that the Pornopoetica website – which is the website for your company together, doesn't accurately represent how you understand your current practice or the way the practice has developed. Is that correct?*

BS: That is true, and we have to work on it.

SE: *That's an interesting thing for freelancers in particular, isn't it? The way in which things change in time and to recognize 'that's not what this practice is anymore', and then how to communicate that clearly when you've become known for that practice.*

BS: Yes, how to communicate all these different passages or pathways.

SE: *Let's talk about Pleasure Rocks specifically. Titta, how do you describe it now?*

TR: I would say it is research about the relationship between human and non-human bodies. It is research on who we are now as humans, and how to change as much as possible our perspective

3. <https://pornopoetica.org/en>. Accessed 24 September 2022.

4. <https://pornopoetica.org/en/pleasure-rocks-2/>. Accessed 24 September 2022.

5. <https://www.alessiabernardini.com>. Accessed 24 September 2022.



Figure 1: Pleasure Rocks, 2018. Choreographer and director: Barbara Stimoli and Titta C. Raccagni. Photograph by Alessia Bernardini.



Figure 2: Pleasure Rocks, 2018. Choreographer and director: Barbara Stimoli and Titta C. Raccagni. Photograph by Alessia Bernardini.

on the world and our relationship with what is other-than-human. We started with pleasure focused mainly on the human body – humans as a centre of something – but this has shifted to the importance of a non-anthropocentric point of view. This changing perspective was very slow. Now, in our current work, it is as if we are trying to fade out the human presence and to let the rocks be the subject of the research.

SE: *Why rocks?*

BS: We happened by chance across rocks while playing. And we still work with rocks because, among many things, they stand in between life and death. If you say you are stone or a rock, usually it has a negative meaning, since you are ... *fermo*?

SE: *Yes. You're stationary, you're still. Inanimate.*

BS: Yes. Rocks don't seem to move or react, and this is really the opposite of what we are working with. If you study rocks and relate to rocks, you find that they contain a world of change, of moving with and in another time: the time of relation, the time of body experience, or the time of human relation with a world that is changing.

SE: *Do you mean that the way in which we might measure time with humans, vs. the way we measure time with rocks is fundamentally different, like geological time versus human time?*

TR: Yes, breaking chronological time. Time is just a measure for humans to regard ourselves. It's just anthropocentric time, everything is just related to us, with us at the centre of everything. Working with the rocks we learned a lot.

BS: Rocks are a symbol of the cycle of life; for instance how bodies are depositing themselves and creating stratification for rocks. It's circular timing, and we are also working on the experience of the audience, and for them to enter another time.

SE: *Do you understand that the purpose of the work is to make people think about being human differently, or is it more about our relationship to geology or the inanimate?*

BS: I think both. For example, in the workshop [that is part of the *Pleasure Rocks* collection of activities] the audience embodies that relationship to rocks and changes their way of feeling and thinking about themselves on this planet and in relation to rocks. The activity of being with the rocks changes one's perspective. But we've also learned from the feedback after the sharing of the indoor performance, that the audience were changing their way of feeling time and positioning themselves. They were saying things like, 'Yes, we should learn how to think time and to move differently and to see differently or watch or relate differently'.



Figure 3: Pleasure Rocks, 2018. Choreographer and director: Barbara Stimoli and Titta C. Raccagni. Photograph by Alessia Bernardini.

6. Topolò is a village on the border between Italy and Slovenia, where an arts festival has been held for 30 years and where a young community of artists, designers and architects is active (https://www.stazioneditopolo.it/Postaja-2020/index_edizione2020_eng.php and <https://robidacollective.com/>). Accessed 24 September 2022.

SE: *It's worth mentioning to people reading this that Pleasure Rocks takes many forms. Can you give readers a sense of what happens?*

TR: It started as a visual project working with the photographer and visual artist Alessia Bernardini. We produced two different printed publications.

SE: *Were these photographs of a performance?*

TR: Yes, a performative installation between us and rocks.

SE: *And these were presented just as photographs?*

BS: During the first research residency we presented tests or prototypes of printed posters, the visual publication, and a performance by Titta and me with rocks. So, in one week we showed all that work. After that period, we decided to go deeper into the photographic publications and posters with Alessia. Everything was more visual at the beginning and then we started to research more: first into the workshop and then the performance.

TR: This tiny village Topolò⁶ was fundamental to changing our perspective on this research because after a two-day workshop we went to a stream here in Topolò to make a performative installation during the festival. And this was with people who didn't have experience of performance. The installation was an important moment for us in the research because it forced us to consider what it meant to put our human bodies on rocks in a stream in the woods. As we mentioned before, in the first residency we did a performance, but at that stage the relationship with rocks was more like tools – some sexual tools to use or tools to use for sexual and erotic images.

SE: *The rocks were akin to sex toys?*

TR: Yes, we 'used' rocks as kind of sex toys, but here in Topolò the nature is so powerful that of course there was already this kind of step backwards, like starting to change perspective...

BS: But I also think we were moving away from the topic of pleasure, and we weren't sure how to deal with this. A year after that performative installation we realized we wanted to take this experience and bring it inside a black box. We wondered how we could bring it all inside even if it might not work. Testing this idea also changed the research. So now there is also this performance that is an indoor version of *Pleasure Rocks*. But it will not have this title otherwise we will go mad, and *Pleasure Rocks* will be everywhere.

SE: *Every work they ever made for 40 years was called Pleasure Rocks. Pleasure Rocks 1, Pleasure Rocks 2, Pleasure Rocks 47.*

BS Maybe this could be the solution.

TR: *The Return of Pleasure Rocks.*

SE: Pleasure Rocks Strikes Back. *Seriously though, that sense of transformation is very clear – a project transforming and then transforming again, shifting in scale, small rocks to large rocks, etc. Like you were following the project's trajectory, the path of the project. But I'm curious: why into a black box? And what was your challenge to transform it again into a black box space, to make it more conventionally performative?*

BS: Actually, at the beginning we always wondered how we might bring the research inside. Because of you cannot do it outside during the whole year. So how can we bring some of this experience inside? For example, into a gallery ...

SE: *It was a pragmatic rationale?*

BS: No, it was moved by a challenge, because of my background. We had been rehearsing many months to create a choreography before doing this installation. I wanted to figure out what it could become *inside*. We were thinking of having an indoor version, but maybe for a gallery, a museum or a non-conventional space. Then we had a residency in a theatre and there was a black wall, black floor, etc. We tried to see what would happen, and the magical aspect of theatre became really attractive. For example, the rocks in the black become very present. We dress in black and disappear, so the rocks come into the foreground.

SE: *Is it a bit like a magic show?*

BS: It is like the rocks create a constellation; they are like stars.

TR: Yes, we jumped to the universe.

BS: This version also connects to the reading we have been doing by Karen Barad and on quantum physics. There is tension or dialogue with all these theoretical materials.

TR: The focus of this period of research [in the northern autumn of 2022] was the nature of matter. There are some philosophers, above-all transfeminist philosophers, that come from a scientific background who are putting together this thinking that every relationship is a relationship between matter. There are many levels in the work but the rocks are still the protagonist. With the outdoor installation it was so powerful, but we were afraid that it was too easy. I mean, when you have naked human bodies in such a huge magic forest, nothing can compare to this.

SE: *To the grandeur and the scale of the natural world. Yes, I understand. But they're beautiful bodies as well though. In the photographs I've seen there's something about the aesthetic, which is a kind of reifying beauty. It's making something of beauty. Would you agree with that?*

BS: Yes, even if – as sometimes the curators say – it looks too aesthetic. We always think, where is the limit? We didn't choose the bodies because the bodies were the people here in Topolò and they were beautiful in a way. And if there had been different bodies we would have used them. But it's not about the bodies. It's the composition. It's the frame. It is how you present it.

TR: Coming from a visual arts and cinema background creating a good image, a pleasant image, is still something important to me. Even if the research brings us to experiences and the body and transformation, and audiences ... the video of the installation we recently shot is only one angle or perspective in which nothing much happens. It's a still frame, and the movement is provided by the light and just very small, small, small movements.

SE: *Do you think it's correct to say that of all these transformations of one project, the transformation from the body as subject, to rocks as subject, to the rock as protagonist, is that the clearest transformation in your thinking and practice, would you say? Or do you feel like rocks have always been the protagonist?*

BS: I think at the beginning, even visually, the rocks were probably always the protagonist. But from our point of view the bodies were in fact also protagonists. We used the rocks for showing the body and to create other images, especially erotic and the pornographic images. It was more related to human bodies in fact.

TR: We realized we were using visual stereotypes of eroticism. To me, the video of the last *Pleasure Rocks* is very erotic, even if it doesn't give, you know, a strong image. I mean, what is eroticism? The American feminist writer Audre Lorde says that eroticism is the power or potential that is inside everything. It is a power of connecting, a power of relationship, so that the image is not simply my mouth and your ass and tits. Working on that imagery we were inside a kind of bubble trying to understand the nature of eroticism.

SE: *You talked about being in this bubble, like they're cliched erotic images, and yet even in that bubble, there's something about eroticism, which I understand to be a kind of celebration of the imagination. What might be erotic is only based on the limits of our imagination. It is as if the limits to what is erotic have become so narrow or cliched. I love that tension you are describing between wanting to open up what might be erotic, but also feeling like slightly trapped in a bubble of cliched eroticism.*

You mentioned Karen Barad before, but who do you see as the key influences in this work?



Figure 4: Pleasure Rocks, 2018. Choreographer and director: Barbara Stimoli and Titta C. Raccagni. Photograph by Alessia Bernardini.

BS: The transgender philosopher Paul B. Preciado was the main influence for *Pornopoetica*, and is still a key reference for us.

TR: *Testo Junkie, Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* is the main book.

BS: Since he spoke and wrote about pornography, he was the main inspiration. And then we read Donna Haraway, *Chthulucene*, *Staying with The Trouble*, and Karen Barad and *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett.

TR: And also the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia who teaches in Paris at École des hautes études en sciences sociales.

BS: He's a bit trendy in Italy, sort of a star in the performing arts field. We had a very nice seminar in Topolò organized by the people here from the Robida collective. It was with this philosopher, Michael Marder (*Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*) and he resonated a lot with us. In terms of practices, I learned a lot from Marta Ciappina, an amazing Italian dancer, because I like how she verbalizes, how she speaks about the movement, and how she drives the class through a narrative. I was very inspired by her, even if quite tangentially, for how we presented the *Pleasure Rocks* workshop, which then influenced the performance.

TR: In other practices maybe even meditation and just learning how to breathe deeply, and how to stay still for 40 minutes on rocks – just breathing and trying to find if there is a relationship, what kind of relationship? How is your body pushed through breathing to find a new shape? It's quite uncomfortable with rocks of course, so you have to deal with your limits. I'm not very good at that so I try to choose some warm and round comfortable rocks because I cannot stand ...

BS: You're not a masochist.

TR: No not at all a masochist. For me, pleasure is in finding the shape, and a way to breathe well, and melt and merge as much as possible with the rocks.

BS: For practices, during the whole COVID winter lockdown – I don't remember which – we did a lot of breathing exercises and anatomy of breathing and Qigong breathing. I would also say when Titta talks about adjusting and finding the space and this masochistic way of relating, I found so many connections with ropes again.

SE: *This journal Choreographic Practices broadly explores the edges of what you might say choreographic practices can be. It includes things that people would regularly understand to be choreographic, but there are also levels or gradations of what choreography might be. How do you understand Pleasure Rocks to be – or not to be – choreography?*

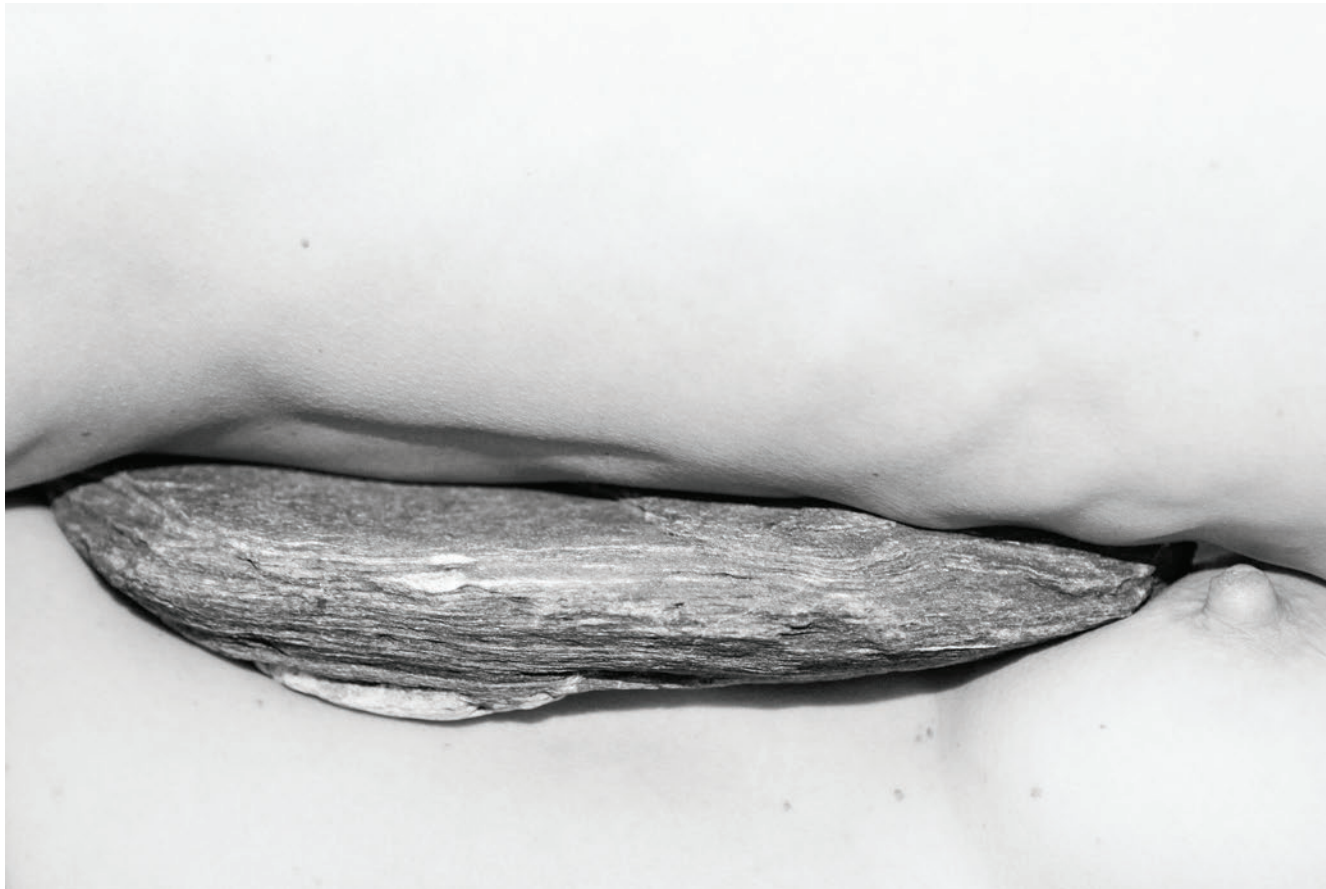


Figure 5: Pleasure Rocks, 2018. Choreographer and director: Barbara Stimoli and Titta C. Raccagni. Photograph by Alessia Bernardini.

BS: I don't have an answer to that. Sometimes I still describe myself as a mover and choreographer. Right now, I feel the pressure of this term, choreography, because maybe I don't feel like a choreographer while doing *Pleasure Rocks* either indoors or outdoors...

TR: No, I would say you Barbara are releasing all this choreographic background. At the beginning of this new indoor version of *Pleasure Rocks* you tried to find some choreographic links in the movement between human and non-human bodies. We were moving and thinking, '[s]o there's a start and there's an end and in the space you move from here to there and then...'

BS: It was more a composition in the conventional sense, or how visual artists work when they choreograph a performance as a visual work. But we could say that it's a choreography too...

TR: In the video credits we put direction that is mine and choreography that is Barbara's.

BS: It's also stretching this idea of choreography because it's choreography where bodies are just being or move just a little bit. It's funny for me and it's challenging for the people watching.

TR: Even if the constraint was that they had to be there 40 minutes, to just breathe and to be there with the rocks. Barbara gave some tips to the people who were involved in the video and the performance installation so that they were free to feel.

BS: And I was a naked choreographer. [laughs] There are backstage pictures of the video shoot where I as the choreographer am naked on a little path and saying to the people, 'You go there and you stay there. No, no, a little bit on the right. OK, let's move very slowly'.

SE: I find it interesting that just to deploy the word choreographer in those conditions does work on the word. You know, it works on the word choreographer and gently changes what we might understand choreography to be.

Contributor details

Simon Ellis is an artist working with practices of choreography, filmmaking and dance. He was born in the Wairarapa in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but now lives in Coventry and works at Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE). He grew up in a family where politicized conversations about equality, consumerism and even technology were common. These conversations have shaped his values as an artist, and underpin much of what his practice is about, and how it is conducted. He also thinks about the ways humans might value things that are not easily commodified, and likes to imagine a world filled with people who are sensitive to their own bodies, and the bodies of others.

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