

Above: the black box in which dancers – blind and sighted – use echolocation. Left: Leroy de Böck and Bart Bijmens.
© bjorn frins

What if your eyes were in your hands?

Schunck hosts the Museum of Stillness during Cultura Nova. Every day, this space is open to the public for one hour. Talking is not allowed. Feeling, looking, listening, and experiencing are strongly encouraged.

BY KIM NOACH | HEERLEN

Somebody makes a clicking sound with his mouth. Then somebody on the other side of the room responds with another click. Immediately, there is the sound of clothing rustling, as if there are people running around you. There is loud breathing. Silence. You feel the warmth of a person. Close by. Very close by. You jump when suddenly something touches your arm. A warm hand on cool skin.

Unveiling

You literally cannot see your hand in front of your face in the sealed-off, pitch-black room located in the basement of Schunck. The cube is part of the 'Museum of Stillness', a unique 'museum' which opens to visitors for just one hour each day. The museum is the brainchild of theatre producer Lieke Benders from Sittard, actor Bart Bijmens from Maastricht, French choreographer Eric Minh Cuong Castaing, and Romanian illustrator Livia Coloji. They are collaborating on this European art project which, under the name Centriphery, brings together artists of many different disciplines.

The collective are unveiling their joint performance 'Museum of Stillness' as part of Cultura Nova. The idea is to fully engage all the senses, and absolutely no talking is allowed. Primarily, it's about surrendering to feeling, smelling, hearing, and looking, confirms theatre producer Lieke Benders after the try-out yesterday. 'We're asking the audience to literally let go of time, to leave all belongings which stimulate – i.e. overstimulate – the senses, such as smartphones, in lockers for the duration of the performance. To just leave the world behind.'

Visitors find themselves in locations like the big black box. Here, blind dancers, following choreography by Frenchman Eric Minh Cuong Castaing, cavort among the audience by touch, rather like bats. At least, that's how you imagine it, because you can't see a thing.

Echo

You do hear the dancers, however. They use echolocation. Making clicking noises with their tongues against the roof of their mouths, they listen to the echo created

by the sound to determine where something, or somebody is. It requires a lot of training, but if your eyes don't work as they should, your sense of hearing is often better developed.

In any case, the experience in the black box is absolutely fascinating for people who can see.

Another blind dancer taking part in the performance (but outside the black box) is Leroy de Böck (23) from Amsterdam. He dances with actor Bart Bijmens in another part of the museum. De Böck has experience of performing in his home town and loves helping to elicit an emotional response in the audience. He is happy to leave the visitors to interpret his dance themselves, but says that the movement and, in particular, the contact with another body is wonderful. 'I think that everyone needs contact, whatever form that takes.'

Incidentally, the Museum of Stillness is only open to adults. This is understandable, given the sometimes provocative experiences that the museum offers. But it is the silence above all which makes this experience so agreeable. It's so great to take time out for an hour.

Museum of Stillness, until 1 September, daily. www.culturanova.nl