DANCE AND NOT DANCE

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When we attend a dance festival we tend to know what we are looking for: new dance works, perhaps some well-known works by prominent choreographers (if we are nostalgic or enjoy a historical perspective), fresh ideas by younger and emerging choreographers, some experimental pieces by cross-over artists, and promising new companies from abroad to expand our horizons. If it is not dedicated to a retrospective, say, of canonical works by Balanchine, Tudor, Kylián, or Graham, nor celebrates national treasures such as Pina Bausch or Alvin Ailey, we expect a contemporary dance festival to provide insight into how dance is evolving, how changes relate to cultural shifts and, perhaps, to a new generation of audience that drives the change.

This is not to say that many of us would agree on what constitutes the “contemporary” in contemporary dance.¹ But generally, dance enjoys and reproduces a fairly clear sense of community, both in terms of the special interest we hold in the aesthetics of the art form and its various paths of evolution (ballet, modern, traditional, dance theatre, Butoh, Kathak, improvisation, etc.), its relationship to our visual and musical cultures, and in terms of its larger social dimension. We go to see dance because we love movement and enjoy dancing ourselves as it is a vital part of our physical and sexual culture, and perhaps the oldest sense we have of feeling alive in our bodies.

Contemporary festivals, like museum exhibitions or film retrospectives, have come to be curatorially driven: they are conceptually organized and announced with themes that can range from formal concerns, such as the 1999 Nordic Solo Forum (Copenhagen) dedicated to the art of the solo dance, or interdisciplinary visions regarding the relations of dance to film and the moving image (Temps d’Images, La Ferme du Buisson/Paris, 2003) to more political ones, such as Where is the East? (1999 Kampnagel Summer Festival, Hamburg) and The Third Body, the title of the last IN TRANSIT festival presented in Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen. Its curators, Koffi Kôkô and Johannes Odenthal, described this festival for performance, dance, and theatre at the House of World Cultures as an international laboratory for the latest developments from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Their curatorial perspective is transcultural:
The First Body is the physical, biological body. The Second Body is the cultural, socialized body, the body of memory. The Third Body is the ‘impossible’ body, the body between worlds, the body in cross-border transition. In search of a vision of humanity, the body becomes the medium for experience, communication, and transformation. The Third Body awakens echoes of the Third World and a “Third Space”—thus transcending those concepts embedded in bipolarity. The House of World Cultures sees itself as a Third Space—a free, open space for encounters, exchanges and new productions (http://www.in-transit.de/).

When IN TRANSIT refers to the stage using a synonym—“platform”—it emphasizes the discursive dimension of the festival, with its workshops, labs, and seminars. A large-scale international festival, with considerable funding provided by city and government, The Third Body wants to be more than a festival. It wants to take part in the political discussion on globalization, and thus refrains from limiting itself to “individual genres” but moves closer to the threshold of contemporary discourses “between theory and performance.” From its inception, the curators claim, IN TRANSIT intended to be both a laboratory for cultural studies and a platform of the performing arts.

In a similar vein, other events like the Festival de Nouvelle Danse (Montréal) and ImPulsTanz (Vienna), which generally offer dance classes alongside the performance program, now announce “laboratories.” The 2004 ImPulsTanz arranged a “research” series for choreographers and dancers exploring poetry, architecture, video, and sound, and some of the research projects were later exhibited in the festival. The biannual Monaco Dance Forum, which features world-renowned companies on its large festival stage, also offers a wide-ranging program of conferences, workshops, film, art, multimedia exhibitions, and a TechLab which has attracted the attention of many international pioneers in the dance technology field. The December 2004 Monaco TechLab (“Extending Perception”) was dedicated to cutting-edge research in motion-sensing technologies and their kinesthetic effects, the lab team comprising artists and scientists from different fields.

What is the impact of these discursive, conceptual, and scientific tendencies on contemporary dance, especially in light of the recent controversies among European critics about the so-called Konzepttanz—conceptual dance questioning the very medium and the tools, i.e., physical movement and movement technique, with which dance expresses itself or is conventionally assumed to express itself? A British festival (Nottingham, May 2004) may offer some clues: NOTT Dance (subtitled “dance defying”) roamed through the city for several weeks and captured my imagination as it managed to fulfill its ironic promise to be a dance festival that defied our expectations of what dance can be.

Its opening night performance featured French choreographer Jérôme Bel’s company with The Show Must Go On, a large-scale piece named after a Queen song and built upon the sequence of eighteen different pop songs. A DJ played the records of
these very familiar oldies, and twenty performers, many of whom did not appear to be dancers, stood there looking at us, enacted a few poses, everyday gestures and disco gyrations, or went through the motions of group behavior that could be variously described as banal, tongue-in-cheek, or charming, depending on how the viewer was inclined to accept it. As a dance-defying proposition, it was a good opening.

The next afternoon, parents sat around a colorful inflatable pod and watched a “performance” (Ooogly Boogly was the nonsense title) by their toddlers, directed by Tom Morris and Guy Dartnell, an intimately playful and cheerful interaction between the two adults and the unself-conscious children who most likely did not realize they had been cast in a dance festival. The children and their proud parents seemed to have a good time, but observing the interaction also permitted glimpses into our basic understanding of trust and confidence in the other as we shift weight, support, and protection in contact improvisation as in life.

The third night took us into the Powerhouse, a performance space at Nottingham Trent University, with one soloist, Cathrin Long (UK), inviting our empathy for her physical pain or her emotional suffering at our presumed inability to see beyond her (self)restricting disability, and the others, Litó Walkey (Germany) and Rosalind Crisp (Australia), testing our patience with a very low-key and dry diet of repetitive minimalism, which in Walkey’s case revealed a particularly disconcerting lack of inspiration when she announced that she would choose her eight set pieces (“commissioned from eight different choreographers”) by random chance. Sitting at a table to the side of the stage, she dealt cards. The pieces she then performed, and repeated in random order, were also announced by her as “occasions of unselfing.” As occasions for dancing they seemed negligible, reflecting the familiar improvisational movement language that has been practiced by students of New Dance since the 80s.

After the first weekend, then, a sense of déjà vu began to mingle with a set of questions raised by Jérôme Bel’s statement which would overshadow the entire festival. Must the show go on? Have we not seen these operations before? The sincere authentic gesture, the chance procedure, the everyday movement improvisation, the infantile regression, the arrogant posture of provocation, the refusal to dance, the self-reflexive turn? What was missing so far was violence and excessive nudity, close to our hearts after decades of bleeding body art, physical theatre, and titillating mass entertainment, the latter now relishing its preposterous Reality TV (“I’m a celebrity, get me out of here!”) and live plastic surgery programs. Other contemporary choreographers like Sascha Waltz, Vim Vandekybus, Jan Fabre, Michael Clark, or Angelin Preljocaj have taught us that naked bodies on stage are merely matter of fact today, devoid of political or formal transgression, defying nothing. After the twilight of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, there is little space left for provocation. The awkwardness of the déjà vu effect, like the embarrassment a spectator feels at a very bad moment in the theatre, must have different reasons.
The questions became more clearly focused a few days later when dance writer Donald Hutera, who moderated the post-show discussions after each NOTT Dance performance, staged *Choreographus Interruptus* at the Sandfield Center, together with the London-based h2dance company. Hanna Gillgren, Heidi Rustgaard, Leo Kay, and with Hutera as MC, invited the audience to sit in a circle around the performance space and become involved in an open rehearsal, a “dance of uncertainties” they compared to a kind of open heart surgery. Gillgren, Rustgard, and Kay performed a 15-minute section from a piece they had been working on, then stopped the process and asked for feedback and suggestions. Hutera, in a friendly and determined manner, wanted to show us the way and interfered first, suggesting to Gillgren and Kay to repeat their duet at the table, only this time more slowly, softly. He asked for a different sound track. Later, as the audience became more comfortable to voice criticisms and to tamper with the choreography, others proposed to continue the duet with reversed gender roles, to focus on smaller details, to alter the music again to achieve a different mood, to relax the facial expressions, to explore another kind of aggressiveness, to perform without music. The workshop became more intense the longer the evening lasted and the more heated, personal, and demanding the audience interferences became. Gillgren and Rustgaard showed further sections of their (prepared) choreography, and eventually invited some of us to join them and perform, repeatedly, a short movement phrase we could choose and enact according to our own pace. This segment concluded the rehearsal. *Choreographus Interruptus* ended with a long discussion that sought to bring closure to the emotions the evening had provoked. One member of the audience objected to the whole procedure, calling it patronizing and fake.

What happened here? One might think that h2dance spelled out, in a more concrete and direct method of involving the audience, what *The Show Must Go On* signaled to us in its choreographic texture. Bel, one of the leading protagonists of European Konzepttanz along with Xavier Le Roy, Thomas Lehmen, Jonathan Burrows, Mårten Spångberg, Boris Charmatz, Meg Stuart, and others, played with the (empty) theatrical space itself as a framework for our imaginative projections, and for the signifying processes that are set in motion once we accept the proscenium as a space of illusions, projections, and memories. *The Show Must Go On* began in complete darkness, as the DJ played the musical prologue to *West Side Story*, then the music changed to *Let the Sun Shine In* and very slowly the lights fade up on the empty stage. It is only during the third popular song, The Beatles’s *Come Together*, that the performers gradually appeared from the side and the back. They looked like a crowd that had walked in from the street in their daily clothes and shoes, one woman carrying her backpack. Now they were here, with us, facing us.

And so it continued, each pop song become a signal, for a change of light (*Yellow Submarine, La vie en rose*) or for a few alibi gestures or mimicked movements (*Let’s dance*), for some spoken citations (*I’m a material girl, I can’t get no satisfaction, I’ve got the power*), for a few curious tableaux, like the now famous posture of the two lovers facing the wind on top of the Titanic, and again for darkness (*Imagine*) which


ends in silence, interrupted by the refrain from *Sounds of Silence*. Bel’s literal-minded structure exposed theatrical devices and cues as devices and cues, the performers themselves did not represent anything or anyone, i.e., they assumed no identities or roles, they developed nothing, their movements expressed nothing in particular. And yet these performers, cued by the pop songs, functioned as “placeholders,” they were displayed as surfaces on which the audience could project whatever it was they associated with the songs and the memories connected with them within a common collective setting. Such a choreographic structure shifted the meaning-making activity to the spectator who would know what to look for.

The structure carried conceptual ironies, playing its games primarily with perception and normative theatrical expectations. It was quite a literal inversion of dance as something that moves us and creates meaning through complex transitory phenomena of movement quality, energy, and composition embodied in dancers who act out a score and articulate the story they tell. In Bel’s pop musical, aesthetic substance lay not in movement virtuosity, abstraction, complexity, or design. The audience recognized that there was nothing to see in particular, except a phantom of dance in the ear of the beholder and in the matrix as such. The matrix is the theatrical apparatus as an ensemble of operations, and the palette of very well-known songs which functioned like pop cultural icons forming a nostalgic hit parade. They caused strong reactions in the audience, laughter, clapping, cheering, and other kinds of fan behavior. These reactions were drawn from our subconscious relations to pop culture; we recognized this world as a world of citations, a program—just as with movies, television, fashion—based on re-runs, globalized retailing, consumer-friendliness. Can we simply enjoy the bare human presence of the performers who have come to be with us? Nothing much happens, everything might be possible, but not really.

My attention drifted from the stage to the auditorium. Several people left in a state of panic as they could not cope with being stuck in the dark for fifteen minutes. I heard them stumble over chairs, breathing heavily. Conceptual dance also creates claustrophobia. It suffocates from the effects of its self-questioning, its clever cynicism. But it has generated heated critical debates, as I mentioned earlier, on the analytic devices with which it defies its conditions of possibility, the ephemeral essence of dance, its constant disappearance, the crisis of the visible, the absence of the body, and the inevitable inscriptions and redescriptions of dance in theory. Krassimira Kruschkova, who had organized a lecture series on the uncertain mode of bodily presence in contemporary dance (Tanzquartier Vienna, 2003–04), asked in her introduction: “Is dance still possible nowadays—even, or just, when it continually subverts what actually enables it, when it constantly displays and omits its own prerequisites? Is dance still possible when it stands still, when it remains absent—outside the scene?” The theoretical defense of conceptual dance undoubtedly suggests that Bel’s *The Show Must Go On* brilliantly reveals how the audience itself performs the work or how spectatorship makes the choreographic score happen. By shifting the emphasis on process, and not result, the processual operations point towards dance as an event that is constituted within a matrix of
possibilities. In this case, and it is a rather simple case, the playlist of sound tracks activates memory and makes us see images.

The open rehearsal with h2dance demonstrated the activity of differentiation and the tremendous range of propositions that is available in the making/imagining of performance, while it also reflected the vital connection between thought/thinking and moving. We can think movement before we move, and we also experience movement in our bodies as we watch. It was most fascinating to notice that many of us in the rehearsal also recognized the critical frame as an interruption of process; we interpreted what we saw right in front of us differently, we wanted “it” differently, and these constant divergences and reiterations (the “lists” of movement) destabilized any notion of fixed identification. We saw the changing duet and the changing physical relationship between Gillgren and Rustgaard, we saw it taking place, but we did not know the dance, and it would be wrong to claim that we had choreographed it. After all, they came prepared, and we in the audience did not invent the movement material. The movement relationship, and the particular articulations these two strong women dancers brought to the scene, were not “outside” of them. They did not depend on the matrix but on their movement capabilities and the material they had already rehearsed before we were given the occasion to interrupt them. In this sense, the conceptual emphasis on audience interaction could very well be misleading, as the entire contemporary performative theory of interactivity tends to confuse matrix (design) with content.

Here we can draw a link between conceptual dance and participatory art. Many of today’s interactive media-based installations invite the user to become the “choreographer” of actions that trigger responses in a programmed or sensitive environment. The experience of making contact with the “system” moves to the foreground, and media artists/programmers like Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer argue that they create complex adaptive systems that are not “predefined but instead constantly change, grow, develop, evolve,” thus coupling the user-participant in a dynamic relationship with unpredictable information. It is commonly agreed that interactivity shifts the ground of the artistic work (the object, the choreography) away from representation and toward a recursive cycle of reactions through which the participants progress, becoming aware of the elements of the game, of their own virtualization, filling and emptying the circuit of projections. But to heighten our awareness of the conditions—the code—for the medium of dance does not mean that the audience provides the choreography of that which is taking place. Co-creation, as it is presumed in interactive scenarios, tends to become rather mundane when the user is drawn to figure out the functional interface parameters, the playlists, tracks, cues, options, and manipulable operations of the (programmed) matrix. The user-performance does not constitute a work, and thus criteria for assessing the co-creation tend towards the functional, psychological, and social (behavior).

This was exemplified in Stretch, an interactive dance installation created by Sophia Clist. A beautiful sculpture made of hundreds of strands of fine elastic stretched
from wall to wall awaited us in the middle of the blacklit theatre of the Lakeside Arts Center. There it stood, majestically, a brilliant fluorescent white wall of thin strings, an extended instrument in fact, since it became soon apparent that the strings were attached to an amplified sound bridge and could be plucked, pulled, and made to vibrate. As we gathered, the audience underwent a kind of “audition,” so to speak, as it often happens in interactive art installations: two dancers entered to perform with the sound sculpture and show how the seemingly fixed installation could become highly flexible, moveable around its own axis, stretchable and transformable, an effect that was heightened by the subtle changes in the lighting which caused the white fabric to assume different architectural and emotional connotations when it tilted or expanded into the most unusual warped figurations. The two performers (Anouk Llaurens, Hanna Gillgren), accompanied by saxophonist Jonathan Eato, and the percussive sounds their plucking created, were also captured by a closed circuit camera. A video projection of their dance in the white web streamed through the sculpture and threw distorted images of their actions on the back wall. When the performers had completed their animation, the audience was invited to try the interactive kinetic sculpture for themselves, to twist and turn the string-body and—simply—enjoy themselves. Some did, especially the children who rushed to the fore. The parents approached this interactive sculpture more cautiously, as if they could not quite trust the flexible, sonic body of this work that invited them to turn their own (private) bodies into public play.

NOTT Dance continued with performances ranging from satirical comedy (The Electric Tales by New Art Club), a storytelling/cooking skit in a bar (Lawrence Goldhuber), a large-scale site-specific installation (Willi Dorner), to a fiercely serious dance work (by the Czech-Italian company Déjà Donné), and the conceptual high-point, Project (Xavier Le Roy). Rounding off the festival, a relaxed evening of experimental short films curated by Matt McCormick (from the Portland-based collective Peripheral Produce) was presented under the theme of “unintentional collaborations.” None of the poetic and documentary films McCormick offered had anything to do with dance directly. But film, editing, pacing, visual composition, and movement share many common concerns. Two of the shorts, Trevor Fife’s Meridian Days and Brian Frye’s Oona’s Veil, were outstanding, the latter a rephotographed, chemically- and hand-manipulated 16mm film, based on a screen test by Oona Chaplin, and here turned into a stunning abstract poem of decaying color, light, and flickering motion.

It had become apparent that Jane Greenfield, artistic director of the festival and the regional Dance4 agency, believes in a philosophy of programming which puts contemporary dance in a wide field of creative energies. When I inquired how this came about, Greenfield explained that much of the national funding that goes to dance comes from Arts Council England, but that the Council, which supports the London-based Dance Umbrella, an organization that celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with considerably more mainstream programming in 2003, at the same time encourages regional dance centers to shape their own distinct identities. Unlike London or Leeds, Nottingham does not have a resident ballet or modern dance
company or dance academy, and the regional performance culture has been more deeply affected by generations of artists and independent groups who graduated from Nottingham Trent’s famous live art and design schools. Connected to music, film, theatre, fashion design, and new media, live art has sprouted its own underground network and thus has helped to build an audience interested in intermedia forms. Greenfield also collaborates with other regional agencies and venues, and recently formed a new commissioning network (“Guardians of Doubt”) to develop projects, education, and audiences. She insists on an approach to dance that “is unencumbered by form, not bound by disciplines or criteria” but dedicated to freedom of thought and movement.

NOTT Dance thus programmatically supports a diversity of performance modes that is perhaps unthinkable in any other festival in the UK, with the exception of the well-known National Review of Live Art, now part of the New Territories Festival in Glasgow. The balance struck by NOTT Dance 2004 was precarious, but the theatrical works, such as the excellent Electric Tales which used light, text, and movement in a fascinatingly quirky and humorous manner to explore the nature of electricity, or Goldhuber’s down home, slightly self-indulgent autobiographical cooking monologue at the Wax Café (When the World Smells like Bacon) in which he confessed his weight problems and humiliating performance experiences, corresponded well to the overall festival strategy of engaging audiences, making them part of the installations, the open rehearsals, the fun, and the thought processes that marked the more conceptual dance projects.

Willi Dorner’s installation concept for back to return, exhibited in and around the Lakeside Arts Centre, was a troubling event, since it encompassed both the liberating and the stifling aspects of conceptual dance in its defiant attitude. A continuous three-hour exhibition of dance, film, and sound installations, back to return was a mixed bag, neither exhibition nor concert, neither a clear continuum nor a straightforward loop as we would have it in a video installation. The audience was handed a complex schedule and location plan, invited to roam freely and explore the various aspects of the installation, which comprised nine solos, a duo, a trio, as well as a number of audio and video pieces which, in some cases, functioned like a solo (in one audio installation a voice spoke a monologue in three different tempi, in another the recorded footsteps of a dance were heard). Solo 4 was scheduled eight times on the main stage, which was empty and deserted. It involved a technician coming out with his remote control and operating the retractable seating. He moved the seats out, and then moved them back in. The technician did a meticulous job.

Although this environmental installation did not use any computer-assisted real-time interactive processing, the conceptual treatment of the “dance material” (both live and recorded) or the “site material” (building architecture, foyer, staircases, surrounding green, parking lot, lakefront, pavement) as database or samples indicated a digital approach to a locational and temporal mapping and dispersion of information which required each visitor to form her own synaesthetic picture of the
whole. The relationship between microelements and macrostructure was transmedial, and since individual components of the installation were performed repeatedly, and thus could be viewed more than once, from different angles and in an accumulative manner, the process of reception was both nonlinear and gradual, without a center of gravity and perspective. The perspective distortion of the multi-layered (frame)work was deliberate and liberating.

*Solo 3*, performed in the Green Room for one visitor at a time, stands out in my memory. I had to sign up and wait my turn, and was then asked to close my eyes upon entering the room where the dancer was waiting for me. I was led to a chair and told to keep my eyes closed, and as the dance unfolded, I found myself in the challenging situation of accepting this sense deprivation (the conventional visual perception of movement) and relied on my other senses and my imagination. A strikingly simple parameter for an intimate interaction, I found this solo to be the most provocative piece of the entire installation. I heard the dancer move, in close proximity, sometimes further away, I followed her breath and energy expenditure, I sensed movement and began to form “mental pictures” of what this movement might be like based on my calculation of its speed, energy, strength, and subtlety. My sense apparatus began to perform complex operations, activating my body while my fantasy drifted into other areas of association and interpretation. I could not see this dance but I could hear soft and hard motion. My temptation to look decreased as I imagined myself in a darkroom, necessary to develop film, frame by frame; in this case I developed a space in which my attention shifted to breath and circumference. I sensed movement all around me and I became enveloped. The proprioceptive intimacy was exhilarating and erotic; instead of clear pictures I formed a tactile apprehension of the world of felt movement in which I was submerged.

After leaving this room I came across *Trio 1* in the foyer, performed by Helena Arenbergerova, Anna MacRae, and Matthew Smith, members of Dorner’s Vienna-based company. The short perfunctory piece, a vignette like all the live dances shown outdoors and indoors, had no particular relation to the site nor involved the audience. The mundane, floor-centered movement, derived from release technique, felt like an exercise, each dancer in her or his own internal space going through motions, hand pushes knee to straighten leg, upper body follows, another impulse, turn around, pull leg across, follow with left arm, bend down, shift weight and turn, etc. Perhaps a structuralist display, laying bare a “system” of motion and reaction, initiating movement and following it. My excitement crumbled, my imagination was not active here, I lost interest. From the corner of my eyes I saw a video monitor displaying a boy at a table trying to read a complicated text by the philosopher Merleau-Ponty on the “phenomenology of perception.” I translated from the Austrian boy’s halting rendition: “... my body has its world or understands its world without having to make use of my symbolic or object finding function. Certain patients can imitate the doctor’s movements and move their right hand to their right ear, and their left to their right nose . . .”
What troubled me here is that generally Dorner’s conceptual organization of the exhibition, with all the interlocking parts and their potential discursive threads (linking architecture and structural repetition, stasis and movement, bodily gesture and citation, visible and invisible dance, the live body and its traces in media, matrix and active reception which depend on the viewer’s moving through/beyond the frames), was stronger than anything his dancers actually did. The “doing” did not amount to a work but remained fractured; the unusual design of the event could not hide the fact that the choreography and the dancing were weak. If “choreography is the organization of movement in time and space” (William Forsythe), we’d have to see Dorner’s method of organizing the multi-perspectival event-structure of back to return as his choreography, his interest in the (de)structuring of perception. He seemed much less interested in dance and in his dancers.

The opposite was the case in Déjà Donné’s there where we were, performed in the modified white cube of the Bonington Gallery by Masako Noguchi, Teodora Popova, and Simone Sandroni under the direction/choreography of Simone Sandroni and Lenka Flory and the exquisite lighting design by Vincent Longuemare. The original music by Bruno de Franceschi was performed electronically by Michal Vanhal. Credits were given to the dancers as co-creators and interpreters, and the close-knit collaborative nature of this tightly woven 70-minute piece was apparent from the opening moments when the intensely physical drama between the two women begins to take shape after our eyes adjust to slowly emerging, always subtly changing “seasons” of light. Longuemare does not use any spotlights or sidelights, as is common in dance, but points the instruments upwards where they hit reflective surfaces. All his lighting moods and temperatures were generated through this indirect method, and the refractive patterns he created on the white floor were strikingly beautiful and evocative, as is the intensely elongated struggle for superiority and attention between Noguchi and Popova, observed by the silent Sandroni who did not move until half-way through the piece. When he entered the triangular relationship, we had almost forgotten the male presence, and he never managed to establish much of a male force, since Noguchi’s and Popova’s movements, their characterization and dramatization of emotional-physical power—to seduce, to attack, to coerce, to give in and take back, to demand love, and to be irritated and crazed by its withholding—were so clearly dominant.

The sheer physical strength, stamina, and technical precision (despite some very fast movement) of the female dancers were breathtaking and energizing. I was drawn to the explosiveness of gesture (inspired by martial arts techniques) which was always ambiguous, threatening and caring, loving, tender and rejecting at the same time, with many small nuances in between, infinitely extending the complexity of human or same-sex attraction and our ultimate loneliness of being, so that the emotional relationship between Noguchi and Popova cannot be resolved in my mind. The man in this universe, demurely performed by the short, strongly-built Sandroni, was an afterthought, nearly irrelevant to the more complex gender relations between Noguchi and Popova. His role as observer and interloper defeated him, and there
was a sardonic moment near the end when he laid down on stage, exhausted, and Noguchi, dressed in red, sat down on him as if she had hunted down and killed her prey. There where we were was a strong dance drama which spoke through the quality and intense focus of movement alone, through the piercing and jabbing arms, the constant transformation of shapes when the two women’s bodies become entangled and then pushed off each other, resisting comfort even as they were finally spent, almost collapsing with exhaustion. All this was embedded in light that was nearly metaphysical. It transported us, it lifted up the space and took us far into the world in which we live.

Sandroni and Longuemare afterwards responded to questions about the lighting and the content of the choreography, questions so rarely asked in the context of NOTT Dance. “Light changes as time changes,” Longuemare said, “and light is the basis of life. But in life, light is never focused, it is always refracted. If you want to find light that reflects the people in this dance, you have to observe them for a very long time. And then I had to find light that reflects silence, the time when we are afraid of being alone.” Sandroni added that of course the company started out with conceptual ideas, questions about intimacy, relationships, loneliness, and need. “But what you see now is the result of many weeks of creation, a long process of sedimentation. There are reasons why we make these movements, but now we have forgotten the reasons. The piece changes, and we perform without displaying the reasons. The piece is inside us now, and we can act without knowing why.” Not surprisingly, Sandroni suggested that the choreographic process, which he associates with sedimentation, cannot remain conceptual: it moves from concept to a more instinctual and organic performance, it is internalized and then becomes very palpable to us. This does not mean that the dancers are not self-conscious or are not intelligent and intentional agents in their creation. On the contrary, their craft, and the composition of the piece, allow them to intensify their positions and movements in time and space, to make them distinct. The precise movement qualities that I remember seeing in this dance, and which I experienced through their emotional affect, made them meaningful for me.

Perplexingly, the kind of dance work I just described is now generally referred to in Europe as Tanz-Tanz, or pure dance, an almost pejorative oxymoron applied to those artists who want to express something through the craft and composition of their dancing. It is implied that they do so unthinkingly, whereas the politically progressive Konzepttanz experimentalists know how to examine the medium of dance, to lay bare the mechanics of the production process and negate its aesthetic modes of representation. It is surely a strange dialectics we see here at the beginning of the century; the critical attention conceptual dance has received strikes me as oblivious to a long history of such vanguard examination, if we only think of dada, Duchamp, and the conceptual tradition in the visual arts, Brecht’s epic theatre, Godard’s critical cinema, Fluxus, the non-objective art movement and tropicália in Brazil, or the Judson Dance Theater experiments with “not-dance” movement in the 60s. Judson considerably broadened the scope for choreographic ideas and methods
of collaboration, but it was a moment in history. Some of the protagonists (Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Deborah Hay) went on for decades to build a substantial body of work as choreographers; Yvonne Rainer is now remembered as a filmmaker since she stopped performing regularly.

Other collaborations of the time, such as Robert Morris’s choreographed sculptures, Gilbert and George’s performance tableaux, or Robert Rauschenberg’s multiform compositions in his work with Cage/Cunningham, the new media experiments with engineer Billy Klüver, and his kinetic sculptures for Trisha Brown’s dances, have had an ancestral, inspirational influence on today’s performance architectures and the choreographers’ attraction to hybrid worlds, as seen in Wim Vandekeybus’s use of film (his recent Blush), Stephen Petronio’s and Meg Stuart’s work with visual artists, Frédéric Flamand’s collaborations with the architects Diller + Scofidio, Zaha Hadid, and Jean Nouvel, and Angelin Preljocaj’s choreography for a digital environment (programmed by Granular Synthesis). Architects (Libeskind) now direct operas, choreographers make films, filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway build installation art. One can indeed take the intermedia collaborations in contemporary dance as one of its more significant characteristics, and many examples could be mentioned here that point to a shift in choreographic understanding, away from pure movement towards a baroque theatrical sensibility which now envisions movement within complex, dynamic, and interactive spaces full of information—a fluid, transformational space undoubtedly becoming available to the choreographic imagination through electronic technologies and the impact of digital processes on our everyday environment and our altered perceptions of how body images and images of reality are generated.

The “baroque” here does not contradict the conceptual dance. It engages similar questions about the limits of dance and the limits of the physical, not by abandoning dancing but by exceeding it. This shift in sensibility dovetails with other areas of contemporary cultural production, such as the baroquely extravagant collections of fashion designer Alexander McQueen, with his habit of turning fashion shows into hypertheatrical performances. When choreographers such as Forsythe seize the “digital” as a strategy to overextend, compress, dissolve, isolate, and reconnect movement gestures (based on a highly developed physical language shared by the dancers) to a complex animate environment, creating an open field of interpretation and very quick decision-making for the dancers in real time, the overflow of information for the audience is highly challenging but at the same time energetic. The audience’s awareness of the inherent changeability of meaning (thinking/moving and touching/sensing the images while I may lose my breath or sense of gravity) in the present moment is heightened. Such hyperkinetic “flooding” of the audience, which is typical of some contemporary Japanese, Latin American, and African dance, pivots upon total engagement in the immersive experience of corporeal and sensorial dimensions, which on the other end of the spectrum is comparable to the intimate one-on-one interactive scenario described earlier.

Déjà Donné, *there where we were*, 2004. Photo: Courtesy Rocco Dubbini.

Not-dance, I suspect, will not have much of a future with its audiences if it remains as uncommitted to an intensification or transformation of its art of dancing as Xavier Le Roy, whose Project was the last concert of the NOTT Dance festival. Le Roy, trained as a molecular biologist before converting to dance, became known through his solo lecture-performances, most notably Self Unfinished (1998) and Product of Circumstances (1999), in which he scientifically dissected the appearances of his body, manipulating our “reading” of the cellular, transformable body. Since 1999 he has directed a laboratory, entitled E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S., investigating the possibilities of showing rehearsal process as product.

Project, performed in a large black box theatre by fourteen performers of his new research group, was ostensibly a ball game that took place over a period of time, with scores announced after each “quarter” when “players” change colors of jerseys, put pink hats and skirts on to restart the next quarter with a modification of the physical action. Not a simple game, but rather a combinatory of ball games (soccer, handball, and a third game where the ball has to be placed in the corners) played according to idiosyncratic sets of rules that were known to the players or chosen by them. The conceptual propositions, again, were quite charming and astute: why and how do we adhere to the rules of a game, how do we perform the rules, and what happens in a three-games-game if spontaneous modifications were permissible or if indeed this game, which is not taking place in a competitive sports event but in a dance concert, becomes confused? What if players begin to enjoy playing for different reasons (not to score, not to convince or impress us with virtuosity, not to be aggressive, etc.), lose their motivation, or “fake” their part, or leave the field and come back naked, with a cigarette, or in a cocktail dress and other “wrong” outfits? When they did so, we laughed, and of course one recognizes that, in life as in art, we play by certain rules. Rules are also there to be broken, and our social contracts provide other rules for disciplining the breaking of the laws. Interestingly, in this performance, no one really had the nerve to disrupt the game all that much, and no one was punished for anything.

Structurally, just as The Show Must Go On, Le Roy’s Project is well defined: the performance set up its parameters and the performers enacted the various sequences casually; some seemed to get more out of it than others, but there was a general mood of playfulness, not so different from seeing a pick up game at a local park. There was no dancing, but of course plenty of running around. There were moments when the audience actually became engaged or tried to engage the players by cheering them on, taking sides, encouraging them just as we might do in a stadium. Some of us in the audience did it in jest, since the “game” itself was only a process-demonstration, tongue-in-cheek, and there were no stakes. The players were no athletes, and so their “soccer game” (with a soft ball) often looked a bit hilarious, pathetic, or embarrassing, just as a ballet performance might look when a baseball player would do it for fun. Enjoyable moments, for example when one of the women played goal keeper and acted out a save in extravagant slow motion, were far and between. Long stretches looked boring, without poignancy, without point.
The ideas of this Project fell flat on their face since the performers did not have the technique nor the creative courage to take them very far.

What was I looking at, then? Perhaps this experiment wanted to address politics without knowing how to take risks and actually confront the authoritarian or militant regimes built into professional games and other social methods of discipline and organization, reward and punishment, as we find them in any area of our political economy. Le Roy might be interested in emergence, entropy, pattern recognition, or the thermodynamics of rule behavior, but his actors can’t really translate scientific ideas that may have gone into the rehearsal process for the three-games game. Did they remain true to the choreographic process that does not intend to produce a dance performance, a finished work that has been shaped, edited, and developed to a higher level of complexity? If Le Roy wanted to show a not-dance to the public, presenting instead a method of organization as the conditions of his research, then he succeeded. If a performance did not take place, and if we are unaccustomed to treating a laboratory as art, then we are left with the research questions we deduce. This at least might be of interest to other artistic practitioners who explore emergent process and, paradoxically, present their non-work to the public, as we unfortunately notice at festivals or conferences that feature barely-developed interactive prototypes, alpha versions of installations which still need more programming to complete the interface design. Unlike Clis’t’s and h2dance’s attempts to pull us into the process, Le Roy leaves us on the side lines as frustrated onlookers.

If we were to assume a utopian dimension in Greenfield’s programming philosophy for NOTT Dance and in Le Roy’s laboratory research on choreographic process, it would reside in their stubborn refusal to succumb to the market and the rules that govern the terrain upon which dance is produced and consumed as spectacle. There is a desire for the social in Project that can be intuited from its interest in creating a non-hierarchical, non-commercial environment in which “rules” for behavior and action can be playfully exchanged, where the fine lines of consensus can be tested and a better way of living together searched. Such a view of the social in dance would include processes of self-evaluation, or the rehearsal of new “techniques” which can achieve non-competitive creative behavior (beyond the existentialist drama danced by Déjà Donné) and at the same time involve the audience interactively and mobilize their self-evaluation as participants. Le Roy seems to be asking: what is choreography? How can it direct itself within a participatory system that involves a set of rules, or an emerging complex structure of contradictory rules that interfere with each other and dynamically transform the original condition?

While the social behaviors in such situations (e.g., Choreographus Interruptus) are always psychologically instructive and can yield political insights along the lines of Augusto Boal’s theatre pedagogy, the aesthetic operations in conceptual dance do not reflect the same rigor and complexity we find, for example, in Forsythe’s Improvisation Technologies and the Frankfurt Ballet company’s consistently chal-
lenging reevaluation of the formal aspects of movement—a process, incidentally, which was not hierarchical but involved company members over a long period of time in all aspects of creative production research. The collaborative dimensions in contemporary performance have increased considerably, and so has the urge to cross boundaries and extend the physical, sensory, and mediated expressions of the body, and to draw on diverse systems of information in which dance is embedded and out of which dance can formulate distinct philosophical, technical, and poetic modalities. Dance, like any other art form, can question and negotiate these systems of information, but in order to affect the social and to create a “third body,” as the African priest and choreographer Koffi Kôkô suggests, it will need to integrate outer layers (form, the plastic dimensions) with the inner (spirit) to make something concrete, something distinctly manifest in the dancing to touch others, in “moments of clear-sightedness.” The spiritual dimensions of dance, its rhythms of transformative power, and the social interaction residing in call and response, are rarely ever mentioned in the context of European conceptual, dance-defying dance, and the reasons for this, I think, are obvious.

The perceived desire to question the matrix of choreographic process, as I noted in reference to the NOTT Dance festival, sometimes looks like bad faith, like a lack of interest in the craft through which the inner movement of an idea can be more powerfully communicated. As a critical analysis of the display mechanisms or the apparatus of performance, such questioning comes late in the game of postmodern critiques of the museum and its strategies of collecting, colonizing, and staging privileged objects. The deconstruction of the medium in the laboratory reveals a resignation in the critical and creative power of dance as public form and expressive culture, unless the current conceptualism, with both its embrace of new media and its deprivileging of expertise in movement technique, were understood as an inclusionary method of expanded participation. The rhetoric of “Come Together” and of participatory performance (e.g., Agamben’s “Coming Community”) ought to be questioned as well, especially in times such as ours when mobility, access to technological know-how, and the right to perform are by no means universal. Furthermore, interactivity as a method of democratization involving the audience, not only perceptively but expressively, is still a young and underdeveloped artistic practice which could learn from the failures of the happenings and participatory theatre events of the 60s. It needs to become more clear-sighted about its own motives, its presumptions of audience involvement, and the expectations that such audiences bring to contemporary cultural display.

NOTES

of current theoretical reflections on dance is reflected in Gabriele Klein/Christa Zipprich, eds.: *Tanz Theorie Text* (Jahrbuch Tanzforschung, Bd. 12), Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002.


4. It is possible that if it becomes a key feature of contemporary cultural display in environments designed for visiting (museums, galleries, discovery centers, etc.), interactivity will gradually inform the behavior of audiences who go to performance events to be more actively involved. Cf. Bella Dicks, *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability*, Maidenhead: Open Univ. Press, 2003.

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