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Photographs

Selina Willemse

**passages**  
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# Homo Ludens as Houdini

## Dance as escape artistry

Helmut Ploebst

**Living bodies consist of innumerable choreographic processes of whose origins and plans little is yet known |**

Dead and sleeping bodies, too, are what they are only on the basis of a concerted combination of context-generated organizational fields. All the same, the systems in a dead body follow somewhat different rules from those in a sleeping body. The causes of that may be errors or defects in individual organizational units that have a lethal effect on the entire system. The living body, however, maintains its entire spectrum of organization while sleeping, too. It regulates its rest in movement. Heart and circulation remain active; brain and nervous system continue to send stimuli to the locomotor system. In the arms of Morpheus the body breathes and twitches; it twists and turns to avoid cramp. It dreams, starts up in fright and falls into a deep sleep again. It even monitors its position in order not to fall out of bed.

Why can the term “choreography” be used at all in this context? Well, the most useful definition of the term comes from William Forsythe, an American working in Germany, who is a key figure in postmodern ballet. Choreography, he says, is “the organization of things in time”. Thus Forsythe frees the term from its old limits in artistic dance (the Greek *choreia* means “dance” and *graphein* means “to write”). As a consequence of this extension of meaning it also becomes irrelevant whether an organization directs itself “deliberately” or “involuntarily”.

The development of a language – complete with its regulatives – is, for instance, an “involuntary”, self-generating collective process. And it is interesting that Forsythe’s “deliberate” definition finds analogies in the linguistic use of the term “choreography”, which has no connection with dance: for instance in phrases like “the choreography of

violence” (in films, etc.), “the choreography of an election night” (in politics), “the choreography of electrons and protons in protein” (in biophysics), “the choreography of rhythms” (in jazz) or “the choreography of everyday life” (in architecture, etc.). The latter begins with waking up and getting out of bed, when we start to delineate complex patterns of movement in space.

In our private lives we move in accordance with patterns that characterize our personalities. Outside we move within the confines of the accepted code of behaviour; we inscribe our public signs on social space. This assimilates the body of the individual and fits it into its socio-choreographic matrix. Busy streets, transport systems, public-space constructions like shops and stations channel the mobility of city residents, who can easily be supervised by monitoring systems. The organization of the public only permits a relatively limited spectrum of mobility, which is geared to functionality, all the same.

Depending on scale, irritations of the ordinary public choreography cause reactions on the part of the control apparatus. For the regulating movements of the authorities of a community also follow a score, especially the notation of the law. Legislative and executive bodies make the rules of the organization, interpret these and monitor whether they are obeyed or not. That means that the choreography of public life is on its part a product of the official choreographic processes of an administration. Even more than the human body, the structure-giving authority of a community is constantly in motion. In recent years this sleepless administration has turned into a hyper-watchful apparatus, above all in the USA, a society turned hysterical since “9/11”.



The performances of the administration and the economy are presented as media choreographies. Political and economic limelight-seeking in turn influences the movements of the populations, as all election and advertising campaigns demonstrate more or less vividly. The printed media, radio and television form the media space for events, the virtual theatre of politics. The laws of the mass media in turn choreograph this space for events – increasingly according to the criteria of their own economic viability. Via computers and mobile phones the consumer is able to create his own (search-) movement pattern, surfing and “googling” on a virtual level or via text or multimedia messaging. In the video game, film reception techniques amalgamate with those of play.

In his book *Homo Ludens* the culture theorist Johan Huizinga calls dance an “especially perfect form of play”. In dancing as an everyday practice, two contrasting currents can be distinguished: the traditional, pair-based social dance – for example the waltz, the tango or the lambada – with its fixed choreographic structures on the one hand, and free dance with its open concept on the other. The playful “connectedness” and the staged “promiscuity” of these two orientations indicate different social tendencies that are very easily perceived in the rituals of dancing. In artistic dance there is a parallel: basically, fixed and open forms are employed here, too. Elements of the one principle can influence the other.

At present contemporary choreography tends rather towards planned, fixed structures which nevertheless either take the traditional fixed forms from ballet and classical-modern dance to the absurd or merely acknowledge them in passing. In other words, the open form is integrated into the planned choreographic concept. Absolutely contrasting examples of that are the pieces *John Cage. A Project by Jérôme Bel*, by the French

choreographer Jérôme Bel, and *Two-Thousand-And-Three*, by the Swiss Gilles Jobin. Bel puts a series of works by the American composer John Cage into a clear dramatic structure in which it is mainly the audience that is choreographed. Jobin, in contrast, opens up the strictness of the ballet vocabulary that is inculcated in the dancers of the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève to produce an expansive and contractive body composition.

Contemporary dance takes as its starting point the everyday movement matrix, where gestures go beyond the functional utility value of everyday representation. It makes use of the potential of the involuntary and the uncontrollable and raises them to artistic forms and formulations. Dancing bodies are in a “utopian” state because they have left the place of everyday communication without settling in any other particular place. In this “utopos” planned choreographies operate with bodily abandon made sensually tangible. The socio-choreographic strategies of modern societies and their regulatives, on the other hand, point in the opposite direction: all forms of social spectacle in Guy Debord’s sense – in politics, in economics, in the media and so on – are supposed to “spellbind” their consumers. A choreographic work of art is certainly supposed to fascinate, as well: not in order to “spellbind” its audience, but to nudge it beyond the state of being enthralled, to make every spectator turn into a Harry Houdini, who gets a kick out of a feeling of release. That is a further utopian level in contemporary dance, its choreography and performance.

The strategies of commercial spectacle and artistic anti-spectacle infect each other again and again. The reason is that, as predicted by Debord, societies in the age of economic globalization burrow deeper and deeper into the world of spectacle, that the different cultures increasingly

amalgamate to form related variants of pop cultures, against which Islamic culture is at present defending itself, but which it can also only counter with a fundamentalist religious spectacle that at times overshoots the mark: the mullahs versus the media; hystericization of content versus hystericization of form. Choreography counters this agitation and distractedness either with radical reduction or with extreme focusing, with interventionist settings or with alienation from strata-gems of spectacle.

The most consistent reductivists in Europe are probably Viki Berger and Wolfgang Dangl, who appear under the name of “eine:einer” and have been known to leave their audience to get on with things alone in a room for three hours. Anna Huber, a Swiss working in Berlin, works in a strictly focused way: she explores the body as the means of highest concentration. In 2003 the French choreographer Boris Charmatz created a project in Paris in which William Forsythe influenced the “choreography of everyday life” in the street via electronic panels. Together with Steve Paxton, Charmatz also intervened in kindergartens, schools and workplaces. The Italian group Kinkaleri invited passers-by in various cities to pretend to “die” for the camera, in other words to collapse in the street. The French-Austrian collective Superamas have perfected spectacle-stratagem alienation: quotations from soap opera, reality television and commercials are linked by video and film excerpts and put into a repeated pattern to offset their effect.

In the course of her all too short time at the Zurich Schauspielhaus theatre between 2001 and 2004, choreographer Meg Stuart created three pieces that entangled the representational body in alibis or treated it as a mere visitor to a disturbed reality, repositioning it in the “atopos” of the fake. In contemporary choreography – with quite different narrative logic from, say, film –



signs are located and recontextualized behind the signs of the palimpsest-like everyday. The dancers and protagonists force open the surfaces of society that are coloured again and again by spectacle, sweep the pieces inwards and reassemble them in a new constellation. Thus cracks, conflicts and empty spaces become visible that many people perceive only unwillingly. On the choreographic stage, scenic images arise that chafe against the vivid scenes of spectacular sociability. For the spectacle, its politics and its entertainment constantly choreograph according to the principles of appropriation and dominance; in advanced contemporary dance performance, however, the dominant principles are challenge and emancipation.

However, as soon as those involved in dance themselves speculate with the strategies of spectacle, this discourse changes. The attractive characteristics of dance are spotlighted; they enthrall and appropriate the spectator and alter his perception. Like cortisone, this art takes effect on the symptom level: it is supposed to distract, desensitize and have an addictive effect. Here the dancers are often no more than marionettes, exploited and physically ruined. In the ballerinas' forced smile the artificial grin of the advertising model is reflected; their anorexic exterior is exploited by means of tantalizing profit machines, and they are stylized into fetishes which the titillated consumer is supposed to worship in unsated, perhaps even in insatiable, desire. That is the principle of window dressing, election promises, pornography and religion.

If, however, a group like Superamas takes up these elements and relocates them through pathological-seeming dramatic structures in a "utopos" between spectacle and its antagonist, the spectator feels that by perceiving and following the action he has turned into a participant. Even more explicitly, the visitors to Jérôme Bel's con-

ceptual Cage project become active, creative and thus collaborators in it. As soon as the choreography of the everyday itself is changed by artistic choreography, our perception of the everyday also changes – as in the projects of the German group Ligna, in which spectators are both allowed and encouraged to “misbehave” in public places according to exact orchestration. Here social and artistic practice merge. The audience and the performers of a work of art are no longer distinguishable from each other. The functional choreography of the public space is infected by means of a micropolitical intervention. And the visitors-turned-protagonists perform amid questioning glances from the “normal” passers-by and the structure-giving authority. —

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Translated from the German by Joyce Bachmann-Clarke

# Comic Bodies

## Humour on the move

Christina Thurner

**Laughter is once again permitted on the dance stage. After years of serious deconstruction of body images and of choreographic practices that undermined our habitual way of seeing, expanded our senses and stimulated reflection through new parameters, comedy is now returning to Swiss dance I**

We laugh at the parodies, expressed through dance, of the Lausanne choreographers Jean-Marc Heim and the Genevan Foofwa d'Imobilité; we are amused at the wobbly, awkward figures, for example in pieces by the two Zurich collectives Drift and Metzger/Zimmermann/de Perrot, in choreographies by Guilherme Botelho for the Genevan Alias Compagnie, or by Meg Stuart for her group Damaged Goods, which was until recently associated with the Zurich Schauspielhaus. The laughter triggered by their contemporary dance pieces is not the side-splitting kind that expresses a sheer joy of life and runs its course unimpeded, but the sort of laughter that breaks through tears of melancholy or horror and sticks in the spectator's throat. Rather than discarding the questions and doubts of postmodernity, today's body comedy on the stage bears them internally, as it were, as the driving force of its specific humour.

*Comedy Is a Man in Trouble* is the telling title of a book by the American comparatist Alan Dale on the body comedy of slapstick, which, he tells us, is an answer to the frustration of physical existence. This is hardly indicative of carefree, happy, effervescent merriment. In his essay on *Laughter*, Henri Bergson describes "spiritual cold" as the "true element" of comedy. In particular, the French philosopher wrote about physical comedy: human attitudes, gestures and movements are funny when bodies remind us of mere mechanisms. Reflex responses which, according to Bergson, "lie like crusts on living beings" are a constant theme in contemporary choreography. Apparently normal human figures turn into mechanical, doll-like,

poetically comic, tragic or uncanny beings on stage. Again and again, occurrences and everyday experiences take an unexpected turn, and the commonplace is exposed and unmasked as an absurd mechanism.

Tirelessly, the figures search for and miss each other; they are literally jolted out of their physical kilter and driven to distraction. These pieces have to do with individual and super-individual dissociation and heteronomy expressed in automated gestures, or with loss of control proclaimed in physical outbursts – not illustrative, but always distorted or exaggerated. Through the elements of slapstick, physical grotesquery or parody, humour ranging from the melancholy to the astonishing breaks through the critical commentary on topical issues. What is put before the audience is no mere enjoyable expression of comedy, but a reflected exploitation of comedy to create an intensified visualization of disorientation, obsession or the absurdity of everyday life in a form that makes the audience laugh – only to choke on their laughter.

It is, of course, easier in a non-verbal art such as dance to make the audience catch their breath than it is to make them laugh. If the body is to have a comic effect, it must be extremely precisely staged, it must be technically deft and exact, physically supple and dramaturgically subtle enough to defy the pretence of beauty. The dumbly absurd situations are often characterized by supposedly awkward, but in fact physically highly demanding and even acrobatic, perfectly timed movements. The body comedy of slapstick, for example, is defined by an apparent loss of control

of the subject over himself and his body. Thus the subject of an action becomes its object. Apparently uncoordinated movements take hold of the protagonists in a most grotesque fashion, a procedure that is endowed with a comic and at the same time tragic and alarming significance.

This can be seen, for example, when Joseph Trefeli as the barman in *L'odeur du voisin* by the Compagnie Alias contorts and is literally overpowered by his limbs in the parodied busyness of the gastronomy trade. Or when, in the piece called *Hoi*, Martin Zimmermann of Metzger/Zimmermann/de Perrot slides up and down a hill of planks on skis, brilliantly giving the impression that he has lost control over his sliding body and finally disappearing under the false-bottomed stage. This

humour is obscurely cryptic in both the literal and figurative sense. Chasms that may open up at any minute are lurking everywhere behind the façades. But somehow the figures always turn up once more, emerging from a box or reappearing in an unexpected headlong descent.

The moment when the comical changes into the alarming, or the other way round, is crucial to this specific kind of body art. This is the moment of what Friedrich Nietzsche called "the comic element": the transition from momentary fear or disorientation into a short-lived euphoria. Metzger/Zimmermann/de Perrot's latest piece, with the vacillating title *JaNei* (YesNo), features a strapping fighter who quickly becomes a figure of fun and, conversely, a babbling fool who evokes pictures



of an authentic election campaign. The whole thing is expressed in gestures that are both hilariously funny and haunting, poetically joyful and droll.

Where dance is concerned, action is always connected with gestures. Bergson also discusses this connection when he writes that comedy directs our attention to gestures rather than to action. He interprets gestures as attitudes or movements *“that proclaim a spiritual condition, which, entirely without aim or purpose, issues from a kind of inner itch. Such a gesture is basically different from an action. Action is intentional, and always conscious, whereas the gesture just slips out automatically. In action, the whole human being is expressed; in the gesture, an isolated part of the personality manifests itself with-*

*out the knowledge, or at least without the participation, of the whole person.”*

In Meg Stuart’s *Visitors Only*, this “inner itch”, which rises to the body’s surface in physical comedy, is not an expression of action but is in itself senseless – i.e. meaningless –, although it is probably an expression of a condition, namely derangement, or chaos. In this piece, which was given its first performance at the Zurich Schauspielhaus in 2003, a number of figures – inhabitants of a desolate, open, multi-storey doll’s-house – meet in a brilliant slapstick scene in the best of party moods in one of the rooms. But already getting inside is a problem: they barely fit through the door, bump into each other, stumble, fall over and fail to find each other in impetuous-



ly gesticulating mutual attempts to make contact. The gesture has an explosive element, says Bergson, and prevents us from taking things too seriously.

Repetition, intensification, displacement and contortion are the theatrical means that give physical comedy its impact. Similarly, in *La vie heureuse* by the Compagnie Drift, a harmless whispering game develops into an absurd battle of insinuation. One character confides something, inaudible to the audience, to another, something that at first causes mere surprise, but that soon gives rise to terrible, trembling fear. The recipient of the confidence is literally whispered into the ground, and his tormentor continues whispering to him when he is in his death throes. This scene, says Peter Schelling of Drift, is an allusion to the saying "Rumours can kill": "*We simply took it literally and translated it into movement.*" Thus the familiar quotation, articulated in dance, acquires a terrifyingly comical significance in the physically expressed absurdity.

In a different but equally comical way, the Genevan performance artist, dancer and choreographer Foofwa d'Imobilité takes the art of physical movement at its word. In his duo *Le Show*, he and Thomas Lebrun are concerned with showing, grotesquely, what distinguishes the dancer from a mere lump of flesh. Almost completely naked, he pontificates about artistic practices and in particular about the material of dance, the body, by allowing his muscles to speak, i.e. by flexing the muscles of his buttocks and rolling his shoulders. Obviousness and discrepancy emerge almost simultaneously from verbal speech and physical expression, causing the audience to laugh.

The body is comic when it rises above and against reason and annuls its rules and regulations. In place of presence of mind, the comic figure is endowed with a pronounced presence of body. This can be intellectually stimulating and have a strong impact on the audience when it uses its means cleverly. Thus in his piece *Va et vient*, Jean-Marc Heim parodies the western dance and theatre tradition, as well as forms of physical training, through simple contortions, rhythmizations and exaggerations. His dancers quote various physical practices – from ballet training to free dance to sport – and use them in unexpected constellations.

In this piece, the commonplace elements of dance and dance training, basic technical devices such as lifts and group formations, are put into a new context and exaggerated to the point of absurdity. Accompanied by amusing facial expressions and unconventional costumes, a priceless kind of comedy results from the special staging

of the dancers' physical presence. This reaches its climax in a gradually escalating round dance, until finally everything genuinely disappears into thin air: wind machines blow the entire stage set into the audience, literally taking the laughing spectators' breath away.

Thus a new delight in comedy is currently perceptible in contemporary (Swiss) dance. But when the spectators laugh at the turbulent happenings on the stage, they also recognize and experience the reason for their laughter – the mechanical aspects and obsessions of the comic figures – as a distorting mirror of life. So, although laughter is once again permitted, the problems of our time always resonate in the fleeting euphoria and disturb the complacency of both the performers and the audience. ┘

Translated from the German by Maureen Oberli-Turner

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# Metamorphosis in the Source Code

## Computer choreographies

Beat Mazenauer

What happens to dance at the interface between digital stage and analog space? Media philosopher Beat Mazenauer

visited a studio to find out |

“*The body is obsolete,*” declares performance artist Stelarc, relegating it to a mere shell housing a totally independent psychological and intellectual identity. By seeing the body as a biotechnologically perfectible object, Stelarc dreams the utopian dream of immortality. His notion of “bionic”

ture in Elicottero Prodotti. Vidach’s productions integrate dance into an interactive system that “*translates movements into a visual and audible language*”. This necessitates elaborate technical facilities enabling dance choreography to become live performance art. The dancers are, for exam-



metamorphosis pushes media guru Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that the media are essentially extensions of human functions to its extreme.

The search for the New always transcends the familiar.

It is in this electric field of metamorphosis and transformation, myth and machine, that dance, too, operates today. Yet its relationship to technological progress remains contradictory. As a mute, gestural form of expression, dance would seem predestined for aesthetic interaction with the new aural and visual media. At the same time, it is still considered a remnant of authentic physicality, unwilling to be forced into a rigid mould by technology. This discrepancy has been the source of two innovative trends in the post-modern dance scene.

**Technical infrastructure.** One of them is typified by Ariella Vidach’s Ticinese-Italian troupe, Avven-

ple, recorded on video and projected onto on-stage screens as shadows (so-called “motion capturing”). Or the dance floor is studded with sensors via which the dancers set off sound effects as they move (interactive systems). The internet also allows dance performances put on in totally different places to be brought together virtually (telepresence). In AiEP’s words, the interactive system “*allows a codification of the expressive values of dance movements by emphasizing them during the performance and developing them further in real time.*” This generates sculptures in space that expand dance expression, but could as easily overwhelm it.

Choreographer Pablo Ventura, who works in Zurich, takes a different experimental approach. Wanting the “free body” to remain the central element of dance, he allows it to be neither imposed upon nor hindered. Although he, too, works with sound and video installations, the dancers retain their freedom of movement at all

times. Ventura does not bring digital technology into play at the end – during the actual performance – but at the beginning – during the choreography phase. Thus his interest is less in multimedia stage sets than in the expansion of the basic dance vocabulary. In his work, the computer replaces the choreographer – at least in part.

**Work that goes on in the mind.** Dance is an extension of the body by natural means. This can remain the case under new technological condi-

About ten years ago, a computer program called Life Forms offered him a potential solution to the dilemma. It offers an avatar, a plastic muscle man, who can be programmed to execute all sorts of dance figures, possible and impossible. These figures are stored in a library, where they are freely accessible and can be recombined – for instance, at random – to produce surprising, unconventional figures. In recent years, Ventura has choreographed his “mathematical dances” with the help of this program.



tions, but at the cost of dance becoming a nostalgic retreat for natural beauty. But if dance is also an expression of contemporary body-consciousness, it must transform itself artistically by opening up to the new technological possibilities. And it possesses a particularly sensitive means of responding to them: movement.

Nonetheless, after years of experience as a dancer and choreographer, Pablo Ventura admits that he himself finds it difficult to transcend the conventions of dance. His brain is programmed to think in terms of a traditional repertoire of dance figures and patterns of movement, and his body automatically tends to fall into pleasing, organically beautiful poses. He notes that doing a figure the other way round already causes him enormous problems. So – to use the language of *The Matrix* – how can the chip implanted in people’s heads be exchanged? How can ingrained patterns be overcome?

**Life Forms.** Life Forms was developed in the 1980s for Merce Cunningham, the master of post-modern dance. Originally devised to translate dance pedagogue Rudolf von Laban’s system of dance notation into computer software, it ultimately exceeded its objective.

But Ventura’s work bears a further, surprising affinity to this pioneer of modern dance. Von Laban’s dance academy, which attracted such dancers as Mary Wigman, Suzanne Perrottet and Sophie Taeuber, was part of a dance revolution that took place in Zurich in 1916. The Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire liberated themselves from conventions of any kind, including those of dance. “No tradition or law is valid” went the motto promulgated by Hugo Ball and fulfilled particularly well in the “abstract dances” performed by Sophie Taeuber at the first Dada Soirée on 29 March 1916. As Ball noted in his diary: “Abstract dance: a stroke of the gong is enough to stimulate the dancer’s body

into fantastic configurations. Dance has become an end in itself. The nervous system registers all the vibrations of the sound, perhaps even the hidden emotions of the gong player, and gives them visual form.“ Even if the Dadaist dance intervention remained an isolated episode, it lives on subliminally. Dada turned “Cubism into dance on the stage”, and Ventura stages the operational logic of the computer.

**Working systematically with chance.** While the parallelism of the two experiments should not be overestimated, they are definitely rooted in similar motivations: the wish to find new, contemporary dance figures that, rather than ennobling human beings as beautiful creatures of nature, show them in conflict with their technological environment. The point is to question traditional aesthetic norms and expand the formal vocabulary. The resulting creative choreographic process is both formally and thematically at the interface of the relationship between human being and machine.

At his studio, Ventura demonstrates how choreographies come about, using the example of his

from the other, and putting them together “at random”. Deconstruction manifests itself here as practical work generating a new vocabulary of contemporary patterns of movement. Giving them physical form makes the highest possible demands on both technique and mental freedom of movement. The unaccustomed patterns must manage to hold their own mentally and physically against ingrained, organic movements.

Ventura writes: “Because the computer program tries to imitate human movement, this working method turns a process upside-down. The frontiers and relationships between human being and machine get muddled.” This expansion of the dance vocabulary and the continual development of a harmonious aesthetic take place independent of taste, emotion and “right-handed preference”. The “mathematical dance” does not tell a story, it inhabits the field of pure abstraction and is the result of “working systematically with chance.”

On stage, embedded in an impressive visual and sonic ambiance, Ventura’s choreographies are designed, not to imitate but to irritate. The difference between them and traditional expressive



most recent work, *Corporis* (2003). Going out from a brief genetic sequence, he generated a seemingly arbitrary sequence of movements by allocating a figure to each of the DNS molecules A, C, G, T. This produced a rigorous dance score that, at first glance, looked undanceable because the computer program took little account of physical and psychological strain. The second step was therefore to translate the abstract sequence of movements back into the physical realm. In collaboration with the choreographer, the dancers tried to get a mental grasp of the virtual figures and to translate them physically in space.

This process is an integral part of every work by Ventura. It poses particular difficulties when the figures are mixed by the software itself. Ventura will, for example, choose two dance sequences from his steadily growing archive, taking the movements of the torso from one and the legs

dance is that here perfect body control is used to demonstrate an “awkward” aesthetic. In this regard, Ventura is influenced by Deleuze and his reflections on space. In transposing movement to the stage, Ventura is interested in the “colonization of space”, whereas his choreographic work at the computer focuses on the rhizomatic combination of patterns of movement.

**The choreographer as dance jockey.** Pablo Ventura is a dance jockey, sampling and remixing dance figures. He regards the software he uses as digital doping which enhances aesthetic performance. The price he pays takes the form of relinquishing choreographic authorship, in line with Roland Barthes’ theses regarding the “death of the author”. Perhaps that is why so few choreographers make consistent use of this choreographic aid, which, at first glance, robs them of their creative authority.

But Ventura does not totally divest himself of it either. That the staged results continue to bear his handwriting is proven by the very development of his works. *MadGod 2.001* (2000) and *Zone* (2001), the enchanting *pas de deux* of an assembly-line robot and the dance ensemble, even mirrored the subject formally, both pieces affording glimpses of their abstract origins. On the other hand, in *De Humani* (2002) and *Corporis* (2003) – the first two parts of a trilogy completed by *Fabrica*, which is currently in development – digital technology keeps modestly to the background. Here, Ventura no longer showcases abstraction, instead giving it implicit form by allowing “unnatural” dance figures to be executed with harmonious perfection.

This “apotheosis of the body” in technological surroundings harbours a contradiction: it is both subjection to the machine and self-assertion against it. And in the end the body is not tamed, as with Stelarc, but retains its aesthetic freedom, though no longer in the attempt to replicate some sort of illusory natural beauty.

Beat Mazenauer studied German and history. A freelance author, literary critic and web practitioner, he lives and works in Lucerne and Zurich. His books include two translations of Peter Weiss (*Die Besiegten*, *Avantgardefilm*) and a volume of essays (*Wie Dornröschen seine Unschuld gewann. Archäologie der Märchen*, with S. Perrig, Leipzig 1995 / Munich 1998). He is currently sharing responsibility for an exhibition (with accompanying book) entitled *Reality Show* (to be mounted in Aarau in spring), and two internet projects: the web encyclopaedia [www.encyclopaedizer.net](http://www.encyclopaedizer.net) and the EU-supported Virtual Library, which is currently being developed ([www.readme.cc](http://www.readme.cc)).

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Pablo Ventura’s choreographies have no message to convey. “*Dance cannot be critical without sacrificing its own language,*” of that he is certain. Which is why his prime concern is to “move” and render a phenomenon visible. Concealed behind this inconspicuous mask, his concept remains timely and exciting, because the process it reflects on stage is one that shapes our daily lives. Technology is more than mere illustration; as discreet as digital authorship may be, this does not diminish its impact. Technology directly affects the vocabulary, thereby changing the figurative source code behind the visible form. The freedom of the (dancing) body now stands on altered foundations. Pablo Ventura’s works offer it a language with which to express itself – a language that gives palpable form to the dilemma of the body typical of our time. ─



# Shopping Trolleys and Tracksuits Staging everyday life

Anna Hohler

**Nowadays, we are used to seeing all sorts of everyday objects on dance stages. Shopping trolleys<sup>1</sup> are as commonplace there as tracksuits or sneakers **I****

It comes as no surprise to anyone for the curtain to go up on a dancer turning on the radio or cooking noodles.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, for quite some time now the dance realm has incorporated our everyday gestures: the way we walk, run or lie down, or the way we dress and undress, have all become major elements in contemporary choreography.

Those who pioneered all this are of secondary interest to us for our present purposes. The intention here is not to develop the history of everyday objects and gestures in dance, nor even to trace their growing influence on today's stage. More simply, we offer readers some thumbnail sketches born of conversations with four choreographers: Anna Huber, Gilles Jobin, La Ribot and Alexandra Bachzetsis. Sketches inspired by their

productions and work, and equally by a tapestry of questionings and intuitions.

Let's start with the gestures. Anna Huber, for instance, is attentive to people's bearing and behaviour in the street as an unending source of inspiration. Her daily rides on the underground in Berlin, where she has been living and working since 1989, enable her to study the poses people strike and their eccentricities; when she joins the flow of people outside, it is the group patterns and movements that appeal to her. "Sometimes," she admits, "*the many impressions gleaned on the way to the studio end up weighing me down. It's frightening to see to what extent people are conditioned by their social role in the way they move. After filling up on ideas in the street, I have to do some pruning, remove some layers or add some others. How*

*can I put it? I have to let the everyday coating peel off to reveal the movement needed on stage.”*

The choreographer Gilles Jobin focuses more explicitly on movements in the rough, drawn from everyday life. His pieces have to do with walking, running and (rough) handling – especially *Braindance* (1999), where lifeless bodies are dragged to the ground, as if being assaulted by soldiers. Is this an everyday fact of life? Of course. As Jobin puts it, “*War, too, has its everyday life. Prison wardens do not use the same gestures as office workers. Yet they are both just as involved in daily life. One person’s everyday fare is not necessarily the other person’s, and the usual for a classical dancer will be far different for a contemporary dancer. During a rehearsal, I once said to the members of the Geneva Ballet du Grand Théâtre: ‘Your dancing? It’s not life!’ If the floor is cluttered, you have to watch out where you put your feet! At first, they all moved across the stage with the same bearing: the bearing of a classical dancer. Little by little, their movements became more individualized.*”

Jobin’s next show, in March 2005 at Lausanne’s Arsenic Theatre, featured, for the first time, a concrete stage setting in the form of an ordinary room with a table, chairs and usual furnishings. It was in this closed space of several square metres that six dancers moved about. Jobin sees this as a way of infusing his work with new energy, after working so long with abstract contexts. During the first few rehearsals for this production, three girls and three boys had to seek their way between sundry objects cluttering up the space: they would lean on things, let themselves drop to the floor, and try out different ways of climbing over the obstacles. Jobin explains: “*You have to hunt for and then develop an idea. I can’t relate to showing hundreds of ways of handling an object – there’s nothing interesting about giving a dancer a chair and then telling him or her to improvise. Actually, using everyday objects on stage is harder than you think.*”

The Spanish artist La Ribot is a master in the art. Everyday objects are essential to almost all her pieces. Especially chairs – the sort of wooden folding chairs that she buys from a Madrid merchant who normally only sells them for weddings or outdoor movies. “*This is the kind of chair I used for the first time twenty years ago in Carita de ángel, my first choreography. Ever since, I’ve never been without it. It’s a very docile chair,*” she jokes. “*I slip it on and it becomes a very lovely dress, or else it changes into a torture machine... In my pieces, you’ll always find everyday life. Everyday life is something I never leave behind. I was born into it. Then, too, Pina Bausch’s Kontakthof made a big impression on me – to me, it’s one of the most important pieces to do with staging everyday life.*”

*Kontakthof*, which was created in 1978, openly reveals artistic reality and everyday life. Set up as a dance room, the stage features a platform, a piano and a row of chairs. Men and women are supposedly auditioning for a part; a lot of teasing goes on between the various couples. In his review of the show, Norbert Servos wrote: “*In this piece, life and drama are alienated in like manner.*”<sup>4</sup> Here, instead of being carried off to new horizons, viewers are confronted with their own daily habits.

This sort of confrontation is often the very effect choreographers are seeking to achieve. As Jobin puts it: “*I try to create images or atmospheres that ring a bell with each spectator.*” In describing certain mechanisms or processes of transformation, Alexandra Bachzetsis – a young choreographer and performer from Zurich – says much the same thing: “*For example, in Murder Mysteries, a series of reconstructions of famous murder scenes, created in collaboration with Danai Anesiadou, everyday objects play a central role. They encompass their share of connotations and can remind viewers of other worlds – a film by Hitchcock, for instance. Then, as the action unfolds, such objects take on meanings that they lack off-stage. In this way, their semantic scope changes. The relationship between the spectator and the object changes. The relationship with the act being carried out using the object in question changes.*”

In November 2004, Bachzetsis put on *Show Dance* at Zurich’s Fabriktheater. Her creation featured fourteen women’s solos within a cabaret atmosphere, replete with stiletto heels and champagne glasses. Each dancer was entitled to his or her moment in the limelight, each in their own way seeking favour with the audience. The choreographer draws a thin line indeed between real life and staging, as if delighting in this subtle play on the slight disjunction between the two. “*I try to go beyond simply relating everyday life to dance,*” she explains. “*My goal is for the form of my production to challenge its own content and, vice versa, for the content to prompt questions about the form. However, it’s not easy to talk about such processes without reference to precise examples. I feel that any general discussion on the subject is bound to be beside the point.*”

When it comes to building up a piece around a theme, authors of course draw at least partly on their own experience, meaning their everyday life as well. In her upcoming show, a two-part evening to be shared with the Czech artist Kristyna Lhotáková, Anna Huber will be focusing on the overall theme of inner conflict, on contradictions. Her piece will touch upon solitude, hesitation and agonizing decisions. “*Naturally I take my inspiration from real life,*” she comments. “*But then, even classical dance productions do as much: love, death, illness... Those are universal subjects but, undeniably,*

they have to do with our everyday life! In the last analysis, I wonder if it's even possible to divorce creation from everyday life. I don't think so. And even if it were possible, the audience itself always introduces an everyday dimension: viewers can never leave their own lives behind. As the saying goes, you can't check your everyday life at the door. So daily life is present at every performance, even if it's only at the receiving end."

Nevertheless, real life never gets confused with on-stage reality: even if they are brought into contact, it remains impossible for the two worlds to converge for long. Each day's performance is by definition inaccessible to the viewer, since it brings into play a unique temporal state – the time that passes in our everyday life, on the one hand, and, on the other, the timeframe of the performance. Geisha Fontaine even terms the dance world's present time as "a break with any temporal dimension."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, every production also has its own set of rules. La Ribot's *40 espontáneos*, created in the spring of last year, presents forty amateur dancers with no stage experience.<sup>6</sup> The work is governed by a set of fixed rules that do not immediately stand out. "However," the choreographer specifies, "an attentive spectator could quite conceivably decode the whole thing and come join us on the stage. Although so far, this has never happened..." The title derives from the bullfighting term "espontáneo", meaning he who infringes on the rules, who challenges death by jumping into the arena to take the bull unawares. Fascinated by this figure, La Ribot also delves into the mechanisms underlying performances. What is a work of art? Who is entitled to be cast in the role of an "espontáneo" during a show or performance? One aspect of the answer might be taken from

Georges Bataille, who, in his *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*,<sup>7</sup> contrasts art, play and transgression with the world of work, hence with everyday life. Could any contemporary work of art, any production linking the stage world with the everyday world, therefore be said to merely question, again and forever again, all that at once unites and separates the two realms – at once so dissimilar yet so close to each other – of art and of life? ─

Translated from the French by Margie Mounier

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<sup>1</sup> In *XL, because size does matter*, for example, created by Maria Clara Villa-Lobos in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Like Cinzia Scordia in *Cadò*, a performance under the auspices of Lausanne's street festival "Les Urbaines", 3-4 December 2004.

<sup>3</sup> In September 2003, Gilles Jobin created his first choreography for a classical dance company: *Two thousand and three*, a piece for twenty dancers from Geneva's Ballet du Grand Théâtre dance company.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Servos, *Pina Bausch ou l'Art de dresser un poisson rouge*, Paris, L'Arche, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Geisha Fontaine, *Les danses du temps*, Centre national de la danse, Pantin 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also the review of this show by Alexandra Baudelot at [www.mouvement.net](http://www.mouvement.net).

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, Lausanne, Skira, 1955.

# Dance in the City – the City in Dance

## A tour through urban spaces

Gabriele Klein

Whether the Viennese waltz, tango from Buenos Aires, samba from Rio de Janeiro, London punk, Detroit techno, Chicago house, Berlin's Love Parade or hip hop from New York – popular dance culture seldom has its origins in rural areas |

The majority of popular dances began life in the urban surroundings of the aspiring bourgeoisie, the inner-city neighbourhoods of the social underclasses, or in pop-culture scenes, from where they spread across the globe. Even today they continue to reflect specifically urban life experiences, extending from the moral values and customs of the white middle classes to black youth's practice of resistance. Dance and the city are involved in a secret liaison: dance mirrors the experience of urban living, representing a metropolitan attitude to life that becomes tangible in the act of performance, i.e. through the experience of dance itself. Cities, with all their dynamics, social density and cultural variety, are in turn a breeding ground for the development of new dances. As a result, the popular dances of the modern era constantly reveal the changing history of cities between restoration and revolution, the mainstream and resistance, social inclusion and exclusion, globalism and localism. Popular dances tell this story as performative practice, turning it into a sensual tale of body control versus physical release, of the traditional gender hierarchy versus gender reassignment, of social differences versus cultural heterogeneity, of the suppression of desire versus total frenzy, of the longing for synthesis and of loneliness.

**Dance palaces and nightclubs: the modern city dweller's attitude to life.** The city has always been one of the main sites of trade, traffic and social communication. In the nineteenth century, in the western world at least, it became the principal gauge of the seismic developments affecting

industrial society. For many, the modern-day city represents a place where social and economic problems crystallize, but also a sensory setting for culture and avant-garde art. As the newborn discipline of sociology realized at the start of the twentieth century, the social impact of capitalist trade and industry, of Fordism and migration, of overcrowding and neglect was most clearly evident in the cities. It was here that cultural and social criticism took root, here that the concepts of modern architecture and urbanism took on material form.

The historical avant-garde did not come from the countryside either: modern art and culture derive their nourishment from urban experience, that is to say from the experience of disruption, while their artifacts in turn shape and model urban spaces. The city is more than just an economic, political, cultural and social meeting point in modern society, it is also *the* place (and point of origin) for modern art and popular culture.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modern dance as an art form and popular dance culture chose to follow very different paths: unlike the avant-garde in the visual arts, the modern art of expressive dance, borrowing from the philosophy of vitalism and the "life reform" movement, viewed itself as an alternative to technology and civilization, to enmassment and depersonalization, the very processes that were becoming conspicuous especially in the cities. Accordingly, free dance espoused the idea of inherent rhythm and the organic movement potential of the individualized subject, which it believed was most readily to be found in external nature. The new urban

middle classes thought otherwise: “City air sets you free” was their motto, an attitude they lived out in the new dance palaces and through their preference for those dances which had been imported from far-away continents in the wake of colonialism and imperialism, of migration and transatlantic integration, particularly with the USA and Latin America.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Boston (a kind of American waltz), the one-step and the two-step (a part-chassée, part-glide danced in 2/4 time), and the cakewalk (a dance invented by black slaves in the USA as a parody of the way white farmers typically moved) gave European dance culture its first taste of Americanization. No less revolutionary, but with far greater exotic and erotic appeal, was the Argentinian tango, originating in the poorest suburbs of Buenos Aires and, via the European metropolis of Paris, gaining a foothold in the exclusive nightclubs frequented by cosmopolitan dancers throughout Europe as early as 1910. The body language of the tango, considered somewhat obscene by “civilized” Europeans, and the louche eroticism of this couple dance were just as much to blame for its popularity as the smoky bars patronized by the smart set and the *demi-monde*, where tango fever broke out, spreading like wildfire on the eve of the First World War.

The transatlantic dances that became fashionable in Europe after the hiatus of the First World War also broke with the tradition of bourgeois dance culture, as symbolized by the waltz. The shimmy and the Charleston, with their jerky, shaking movements and wild side-kicks, became all the rage in no time at all once the war had ended. Driven by the syncopated, jazzy, ragtime rhythms, the traumatized Europeans seemed to want to literally shake off all memory of the war with this dance.

In the days before the rumba and the rock’n’roll of Elvis Presley, the shimmy and the Charleston were the first “pelvic dances” to revolutionize European dance movement traditions, in which only the bodily extremities had thus far moved, while the upper torso remained rigid. Whereas in the 1920s the avant-garde of artistic dance had declared that the origin of movement lay in the solar plexus, the new Latin American social dances favored the polycentric and polymetric nature of jazz.

But the way individual dance cultures spread out across continents as a result of migration was not the only factor to have an impact on the globalization of dance culture as a whole. Technology now also made it possible to market and distribute dance commercially. Radio, the gramophone

and long-playing records meant dance music could be reproduced at will and was no longer reliant on live musicians. The new technical medium of film, in contrast to photography, allowed dance to be preserved for the first time in moving pictures. The technical ability to reproduce dance and dance music led to dance spaces being moved into the private sphere; dancing was given a new qualitative push towards becoming more private and intimate and increasingly began to disappear from public life. From now on, dancing in public venues was to become more and more the preserve of the young. Thus many dance halls disappeared from the face of the city, together with their dance bands and taxi-dancers, leaving only the odd lonely-hearts’ ball. It wasn’t until the disco boom of the 1970s, followed by the burgeoning club scene and the tango, salsa and samba revivals in the 1980s, that a new buzz surrounding discos, clubs and dance halls was to emerge in the cities.

If the First World War had already made a deep impact on the cultural scene in Europe, the American way of life was to establish itself in the years after the Second World War as the only model worth imitating for any fashionable dance that wanted to be considered modern and chic. The swing sound of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller arrived on European soil ahead of the American troops, bringing with it swing dances such as the boogie woogie, jitterbug and jive, which were to set the pulses of dance lovers racing and cause a stir among moral guardians until well into the 1950s.

But it was the arrival of rock’n’roll at the end of the decade that was to usher in the heyday of the “wild” dances in the immediate post-war era of restoration. Artistic, daring and breathtakingly exciting, rock’n’roll threw all the conventions of European dance tradition overboard to become a physical expression of protest against a conservative world order, the first time the young had revolted against the old in the history of dance. From now on, the new trends in urban dance culture were to originate mainly in the youth and pop scenes.

**The dramatization of public space in the post-industrial city.** This new impetus in dance cultural history coincided with the crisis of the large modern city in the post-industrial era. In the 1970s, a new urban dance culture was established in the course of post-colonialism and globalization through disco, techno and hip hop – dances that were to become symbols of the radical changes taking place as cities became post-industrial.



It was not by chance that the birthplace of the new urban dance culture should be in North America. The USA was the first industrial nation to experience a series of transformations: the de-industrialization of cities, global economic competition, technological innovation, the growing importance of global telecom systems, the heightened relevance of international cash flows for the economy and new waves of labour migrants and refugees not only provoked a worldwide restructuring of economic, social and political units, but brought the general crisis to a head, especially in urban agglomerations. In 1970s' New York City, postmodern dance established itself as a new performing art, one which not only broke completely with the organic-holistic physical approach of modern dance but which also reflected the media of dance itself: the body, movement and space. It also picked the city out as a central theme by dramatizing public space and turning it

into dance space. Trisha Brown's studies in public spaces at the start of the decade were to point the way forward for a new deconstructive attitude to dance performance.

It was no coincidence either that the avant-garde of postmodern dance established itself in New York City, the same city in which the new pop dance cultures had also originated. Here, too, budget cuts in the education sector accelerated unemployment rates among the young. Ethnic minorities were hit the hardest, especially blacks and Hispanics, and particularly teenagers. In the 1970s, when more and more young people were falling under the spell of cocaine and crack, black youths found a way to express the hopelessness of their lives with its endless cycle of unemployment, criminality and drug dependence: in the ghettos of Detroit and Chicago and in the New York Bronx, subcultures sprang up which gave aesthetic voice to social experience in a number



of different ways – hip hop in the Bronx, house in Chicago, techno in Detroit. Each of these scenes grew to become a microcosm of the city in the late modern era. And they tended to emerge at those urban sites already abandoned by industrial society but not yet claimed by the new event culture: in warehouses and empty residential buildings, in parks and gym halls, on sports fields and at rubbish dumps.

Hip hop was the first of the street cultures to develop in the 1970s, in the South Bronx, the poorest ghetto in the whole United States. Hip hop is a synthesis of rap, graffiti, breakdance and DJing techniques. The origins of hip hop lie in the rapping of improvised rhyming lyrics. The breakdancer came along and joined in the informal, spontaneous, public offerings of the rappers, transferring the wordplay of the rapper and his dissection of the text onto the body and turning the dance into an acrobatic, high-energy game

with the body's axes. If breaking is reminiscent of kung fu und karate, this is because martial arts films were very helpful when it came to learning the legendary basic moves of *uprocks* und *spins*. But it also contains echoes of the capoeira, the Brazilian martial art dating back to the sixteenth/seventeenth century. Alongside breaking, popping and locking came into being as early as the 1960s on the US West Coast. Michael Jackson was to go on to make these techniques famous throughout the world as the *moonwalk*.

What began on the streets of the New York Bronx at the end of the 1970s evolved into a party culture, representing a subcultural alternative to the disco boom that was in full swing at the time. Right from the start the disco wave was not only apolitical and unabashedly commercial, it also cultivated the idea of the city dweller as an autonomous individual who existed in a social vacuum. The mirror-walled city discotheques provid-

ed a spatial equivalent to the narcissistic dances that John Travolta had performed so inimitably as film hero Tony Manero. The mechanical rhythms underlying disco music may well speak to the individual, but the dancing itself remained devoid of social commitment.

In 1978, the glory year of disco, when, in the United States alone, thirty-six million dance addicts strutted their stuff like their idol John Travolta in twenty thousand discotheques, black youths who were refused entry to white dance clubs held *block parties*, where breakdancing became a battle between individual gangs. The formerly spontaneous *urban dance parties* became commercialized; more and more parties were held in schools, community centres and rented dance halls. In 1979, with its first mega hit, "Rappers Delight", by the Sugar Hill Gang – a band of occasional rappers and backing B-boys that was itself a synthetic product of the music industry – hip hop left its local ghetto in New York and began to obey the market laws of a cultural industry which was in the process of becoming global. The globalization and commercialization of hip hop thus not only led to the homogenization of what was previously a socially and ethnically isolated subculture, but also to differentiation – and these heterogeneous structures within the scene were to manifest themselves primarily in individual urban centres. Since that time globalism and localism, homogeneity and difference, mainstream and subculture, overground and underground have been the stimulating poles of this pop culture.

When the initial wave of hip hop began to subside in the mid-1980s, a new style of music and a new dance movement sprang up in Detroit and Chicago, from where it spread, making much more radical use of the new technologies than hip hop ever had: techno/house. At the hugely popular *garage parties* of the time, DJs raised the techniques of *sampling*, *scratching*, *cutting*, *mixing*, *looping* and *phasing*, which had already been applied in hip hop, to previously unknown heights of perfection. The role of the DJ changed from one of disc-spinner to that of artist.

From the outset, techno/house was pure dance music; like the avant-garde of postmodern dance before it, the techno scene declared public space to be dance space. In Detroit, home to the automobile industry and a city in economic decline, the power-driven techno sound was the beat of an urban industrial wasteland. Techno is life experience in no way intended to embellish everyday life: it is the musical representation of urban experience. In techno there are no lyrics that sing of misery, hatred, terror, shock and violence as in rap, but penetrating sound collages, in whose dis-

sonances the social gulfs are given aesthetic voice. This is a music that forces its listeners to live out their emotions, aggressions and anxieties collectively in the act of dance. The repetitive, never-ending tracks offer dancers the chance to lose themselves, to work things off rather than work things out, in what is above all an act of physical exertion. The goal is no longer to air social grievances, as it was with hip hop: like disco in the 1970s, the focus is more on maintaining an alternative world of sensual pleasure and enjoyment in which you can immerse yourself.

Unlike disco, dance in rave culture is about enjoying an awareness of one's body at a time when the outsourcing of production sites means that post-industrial work processes place fewer and fewer demands on physical performance, while at the same time body image is becoming increasingly important. Dancing allows the awareness of bodily presence to become a major event. Techno additionally involves an appetite for overcoming your own bodily limits, the pleasure in abandoning ego controls and body controls – and this is celebrated as a community happening. Techno is not primarily about self-dramatization, as disco was, it is not about exhibitionism and voyeurism, but about a community experience of the body, right here, right now, and one which doesn't foreground sex, as disco did.

In the meantime, rave culture has entered the annals of history as a youth culture that gave voice to the attitude to life of young people in the 1990s like no other cultural experience. As with all other dance cultures that, interestingly enough, went through a revival in the 1990s, such as the Latin American dances, the urban appetite for dance is never just about amusement. In each case, dance is also a physical and sensory expression of social and historical experience, providing an alternative world to that of profane everyday life. ▽

Translated from the German by bmp translations

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# An Avant-Garde Balancing Act

## Styles and trends on the (inter)national dance scene

Esther Sutter

In September 2003, Gilles Jobin from Lausanne gave his first public performance with an established ballet company and presented his magical body installation entitled *2003* to an astonished audience come to see the ballet at Geneva's Grand Théâtre. Jobin's leitmotif, the body as a political stage, is shared by a whole group of younger choreographers in French-speaking Switzerland, including Estelle Héritier, Cindy van Acker, the French dancer Miriam Gourfink – and by the performer Yann Marussich. All their work, which is largely installative, revolves around the problem of subject and object and identity and heteronomy.

In collaboration with the Spanish performance artist La Ribot, Gilles Jobin began to analyze the body in the mid-1990s. As a soloist he concentrated on the interface between instinct and intellect, between intimacy and the public. With *Braindance* (1999), for his company of five, he subsequently extended his studies into a dark topography filled

with the premonition of death: the piece features naked bodies and overstrained limbs in a landscape fragmented by glistening strips of light as a sign of vulnerability. Logically enough, two years later, *The Moebius Strip* was based on the abstraction and dematerialization of the body, and *2003* represented a reflection of academic dance. But whereas classical dance organized the body into fluent movement patterns, Jobin broke it up and exposed the mechanism of the technique in ritual slowness. *2003* draws attention to the bondage of the dancer to the ideals of virtuosity and beauty.

Philippe Cohen, artistic director of the ballet of the Grand Théâtre in Geneva, realized that his ballet company needed the spirit of these explorations as an artistic spark for a new self-awareness. In collaboration with the freelance choreographer Jobin, Cohen brought the Geneva Ballet back onto the international scene. Networking is the order of the day.





William Forsythe put his finger on the new self-image of the free scene and the established theatre when he noted that the avant-garde had ceased to exist and that companies of all types were part of the same network and had been for some time. At the end of the 2003/04 season, his much-sought-after Ballet Frankfurt was blue-pencilled. Forsythe did not hesitate for long. He had not forgotten his market value, and he founded the Forsythe Company. With a repertoire of over a hundred choreographies constantly establishing new connections with architecture and language and time *per se*, he created an international network of potential partners for co-productions to provide support for the new company. The Forsythe Company starts in 2005 and can count on two permanent production venues: the Bockenheimer Depot in Frankfurt and the Festspielhaus in Dresden-Hellerau. From autumn on, the Forsythe Company will also be collaborating on a regular basis with the Zurich Schauspielhaus.

The Forsythe Company plans on the one hand to build up its repertoire, and on the other to devise performances, installations, interactive projects and films, thereby basically changing the public perception of dance. William Forsythe is not the only one on the (inter)national dance scene who recognizes new possibilities in performance art and in sounding out reality by means of the body. He also has a new educational concept up his sleeve and plans the foundation of an academy for young dancers of all nationalities, where he will teach not only dancing techniques but, and above all, methods and notions of improvisation. Forsythe thinks in terms of movement rather than concepts. He aims to reinforce a heightening of awareness of the present moment, of networking as a basis of choreography, with a curriculum of subjects from the realms of science and philosophy.

Ever since *Steptext*, a piece that dates from 1985 and has meanwhile become a classic of the history of ballet, Forsythe has taken the liberty of reformulating questions in connection with form and content in academic dance. His CD-ROM *Improvisation Technologies* (Hatje Cantz 1999) has provided many young choreographers with a methodologically precise instrument for dealing with the creative process. Forsythe is regarded as a deconstructivist of neo-classicism, but he does not permit himself to be labelled as such. To him – “*I am not where you think I am*” – the future of dance began some time ago. It belongs to the dancers who take part in thinking about the choreograph-

ic process and thus become co-authors. The hierarchy between choreography and its interpretation is abolished. This serves not only the compaction of the choreographic art, but also – irony of the moment – the dictates of the market, which favours smaller formations.

Swiss dancers and choreographers who have settled in European (dance) metropolises are particularly aware of this, not only because these places provide better production conditions than Switzerland, but also because dancers need, as Anna Huber says: “...the discontinuities, the ugliness, the anonymity of a metropolis to be able to reflect upon and be creative in dance.” Anna Huber’s work constantly circles around new intermediate spaces, crevasses and breaks such as she finds in Berlin. In her solo choreographies she builds the bridges and connections that the soul needs in the controversies of everyday life in a language of movement that is as angular as it is gentle.

Thomas Hauert also makes use of this special sensitivity. During the course of his career as choreographer of his Brussels-based Cie ZOO, Hauert developed a complex set of rules for improvisation. He uses them brilliantly as a soloist and travels round the world with them to try them out in other cultural realms and with new dancers.

New contents are constantly emerging in the dialogue between cultures. Choreographers and dancers often intuit them more rapidly than they can be recorded by language. Improvisation techniques are an instrument that produces surprising results in the intercultural dialogue because they abolish dyed-in-the-wool hierarchies and provide a dynamic impetus in dealing with traditions. Thomas Hauert’s piece *Há Mais* (Never) is a wonderful example of this: in Maputo in Mozambique, Hauert put his improvisation system at the disposal of young dancers, young people to whom dance is a means of orientation in the chaos of everyday life rather than professionals in the European sense.

In the tough environment of urban Africa, Hauert created a dialogue that confronts the rap rhymes of hip hop and the narrative content of the African dance tradition with abstract movement concepts, thereby giving rise to a new self-awareness. *Há Mais* gives the five dancers exactly the right amount of choreographic texture to permit their personality, their individual voice in dance, to shine through – reflected, structured and transparent.

To construct bridges from the self to the alien, and to transform the alien into the self – this is

also the aspiration of Fabienne Berger, a choreographer from Fribourg, and her company. Berger belongs to the founder generation of the independent dance scene in Switzerland. She is a quiet, thoughtful, persistent choreographer who seeks her path in paradoxes between established choreography and improvisation. The contemplative aspect of her work is more strongly expressed in *Avril en mai* than in any of her other pieces. It is a living organism, a macro-and microcosmos slotted into one another, and pure delight in permanent risk creation. As the driving force of a choreographic work in progress, the opposites of solitude and dialogue, encounter and retreat, the nomadic and the sedentary life make every performance a unique act.

Ever since he left Merce Cunningham in New York, thereby abandoning his existence as an interpreter once and for all in order, as a jovial multi-media figure, to analyze the world of dance in movement and words, with the eloquence of a stand-up comedian, Foofwa d'Imobilité, dancer and choreographer from Geneva, has been exploring the abyss between uniqueness and reproduction, always walking that fine line between fiction and reality. As a talented performer, his terrain is the present. But as his own company's choreographer, he also zeroes in on a variety of controversial topics. His latest cause is the copyrighting of choreography, an issue that has appeared on the horizon at just the right moment since the performative element in dance is by no means immune to imitation, and even the most efficient set of rules is no guarantee of authenticity and truthfulness – particularly when the market beckons and labels are more popular than ever. Dancers and choreographers know from experience what it is like to risk their reputations.

Consequently, reflection by choreographers and dancers on their own work is gaining in importance. Philippe Saire from Lausanne has turned to it after twenty years of experience on the independent dance scene in his solo *Jour de fuite* and demonstrates that directness can be great art. The apocalyptic experience as cultivated in recent years by, among others, the Zurich Drift company with *Heidenspass und Höllenangst* and *Les Finalistes* is never far away.

The youngest generation favours an entirely pragmatic view, and here, too, new forms are emerging: the Genevan Compagnie 7273, for example, gave an insight into everyday work in the dance studio in 2004 that was both light-spirited and didactically charged; and Alexandra Bachzetsis, who is already internationally networked from

her base in Zurich, turns to the crime thriller and celebrates a pleasure in corpses in *Murder Mysteries: Same Difference* – a tightrope walk between a trivia-pervaded *Zeitgeist* and harsh contemporary commentary.

The fact that everything has its proper place, and above all the awareness of the dangers of established systems of values, is eloquently demonstrated by Metzger/Zimmermann/de Perrot. The trio is an ambassador of the Swiss/all-too-Swiss and is correspondingly sought after abroad.

But let us return to Switzerland itself: when the mechanics of the market and the methods of artistic creativity begin to interpenetrate under the keyword of “networking”, then structures will be in demand. Switzerland is decades behind European countries such as Holland, Belgium and France, as well as Germany and England, in terms of the promotion of dance. In an attempt to remedy this state of affairs, Pro Helvetia and the Federal Office of Culture are collaborating with the cantons, cities, associations and representatives of the dance scene on a promotion concept comprising all the aspects of professional work, from training and professional recognition to production/dissemination, mediation, documentation and preservation right up to retraining and re-education. As long as the dance scene survives through its own energy, we can talk about styles and trends and success on the national stage. But time is short; the urgency of the implementation of *Project Dance* (see insert, p. 53) is pressing. And work on the promotion concept for the joint cause between the institutional authorities and the dance scene is existentially crucial for the future of the immaterial and fleeting art of dance in Switzerland. ▢

Translated from the German by Maureen Oberli-Turner

After a career as a dancer and training as a journalist, Esther Sutter Straub turned to freelance dance journalism and project management. She teaches contemporary dance and Taiji Quan in her studio in Basel. She is a member of the Pro Helvetia Board of Trustees.

# Independent or Established

## Backstage trepidations

Agathe Blaser

As a rule dancers are proud of their flexibility and their polyglot lifestyle. It wouldn't necessarily occur to us that they secretly suffer doubts if it weren't for a dance event usually presented annually at the Stadttheater in Berne. This national event, once ceremoniously called a "gala" and known today as *akzeptanzTanz* (a play on "accept dance" and "acceptance"), is organized by independent dance professionals in cooperation with municipal ballet ensembles. It aims to improve the public image of dance and to counteract the strained relations between independent and established dance in Switzerland. The event is characterized by a mutual appreciation that can hardly be said to prevail on a day-to-day basis, where relations are troubled not only by indifference and disinterest but also by prejudice, misunderstanding and animosity.

Inquiry into the matter is initially confronted with disparaging clichés. Independent dance professionals? They're those poorly trained dancers in pyjamas who have a penchant for rolling around on the floor and who are always moaning about inadequate funding. Their productions, which grow out of long-winded discussions, often fail to show a clean-cut aesthetic and generally promote pompous principles incomprehensible to the average public.

A devastating view – and the other side is no less implacable. Established ballet ensembles? They just garner most of the subsidies and cultivate the cool perfectionism of sterile toe dancing, which not only ruins the body but is also a totally outmoded aesthetic. Ballet offers a conservative audience a phoney, cloying kitsch world that hypocritically obscures what goes on behind the scenes, where dancers rehearse to exhaustion and have to bow to a rigid hierarchy.

Interestingly enough, these overwrought negative views are often entangled with idealized self-images that are equally unrelated to reality. Profes-

sionals employed in subsidized theatres will claim, for instance, that their classical technique is the non plus ultra, the basis and the alphabet of all dance. If you have studied classical ballet, your body can do anything. Only those trained in ballet are really professional. Independent dancers comfort themselves with the idealized image of the misunderstood genius starving in a garret for the sake of true art, which is equated with bold experimentation and the charting of new territories. Enough caricature. Obviously, for a more adequate image of dance in Switzerland, one can take neither the mutual prejudice nor the exaggerated conceit at face value, but these clichés undoubtedly demonstrate the precarious situation faced by both independent and established dance professionals. The *Project Dance* study (see insert, p. 53) shows that, in comparison with other arts professionals in Switzerland, dancers are disadvantaged at every stage of their careers. Serious deficiencies exist in training opportunities, in working conditions, in the research and preservation of the terpsichorean art, as well as its social recognition.

On reading the carefully researched report, I found myself thinking how remarkable it is that anyone should voluntarily choose to embark on such an arduous career. Presumably, the above-mentioned clichés enable dance professionals in Switzerland to keep their minds off a disheartening reality. Their idealized self-images are a means of defence against circumstances that are hurtful in almost every respect, and by disparaging the exponents from the "other camp", they serve to exonerate themselves: they accuse each other of failings which they themselves have luckily avoided.

How permeable are the borders between the independent and established dance scenes? And just how independent or established are the two camps? A few months ago, a ballet dancer from



the Opera House showed up at the Tanzhaus Wasserwerk in Zurich. The dancer described the Opera House as an island. When her contract was not renewed, the need to continue practising had motivated her to venture into the independent dance scene for the first time by contacting the Tanzhaus. She had never before given any thought to whether there were other dance professionals in Zurich.

The subsidized company – a self-contained world. Other insiders show the same response. Their daily life in the subsidized companies consists of constant work according to a precisely defined, tight schedule, in which they are one cog in the collective wheel and are often weighed down with the pressure to perform. Personal egos must be subordinated to the interests of the whole, which means living for the theatre alone, concentrating exclusively on the work at hand, respecting the established structures and taking seriously the task of always doing one's best for the audience. It is an all-absorbing job that offers precious little time to pursue any other interests. It does, however, advance a dancer's career and has increasingly begun to attract independent choreographers. For example: Gilles Jobin, a guest choreographer, who experimented with the Geneva Ballet's ability to change, or Foofwa d'Imobilité, who taught the ballet company in Berne the art of performance, or Philipp Egli, who now successfully heads the ballet in St. Gall.

The gulf between independent and established dance has diminished over the past few years, which is only partially due to the fresh wind blowing into established institutions thanks to independent dance. Budget cutbacks have played an incisive role as well, so that even the most prestigious companies such as the Geneva Ballet and Basel Ballet fear for their survival and face an uncertain future, much like the fate of the independent dance groups. Dance accounts for only a small part of the budget in the subsidized theatres, which is not necessarily advantageous in times of crisis. When publicly funded institutions are forced to save money, their response is not much different from that of private industry. Theatre directors announce that it is time to focus on their core business, which means cutting back on the most inexpensive sectors rather than the priciest ones. The costly opera, the costly theatre company remain intact, while eliminating the small sector of dance is supposed to restore economic health.

The so-called established dance professionals are able to feel established only as long as they enjoy the support of their theatre directors, who are generally not dance specialists. With reliable back-

ing, subsidized dance ensembles can obviously also take an avant-garde approach, as demonstrated by the stylistically trailblazing achievements of Pina Bausch in Wuppertal and William Forsythe in Frankfurt. Similarly, independent dancers in Switzerland do not have a monopoly on experimentation and artistic renewal although radical, relatively uncompromising ballet directors do have to show considerable perseverance. Just think of the brilliant choreographer Joachim Schlömer, who did not manage to extend his stay as director of ballet at the theatre in Basel.

But what about the so-called freedom of independent dance? It is not even necessary to resort to the debate on artistic freedom in order to recognize its limitations. A look at the statistics is quite enough: very few dance professionals in Switzerland can make a living from their trade, and almost 40 per cent do not even earn half of their income by dancing. The average monthly wage for the generally limited engagements of independent dancers comes to a mere 2500 Swiss francs.

Independent dancers are free inasmuch as they rely on themselves alone. They do not need to fulfil a mission, they can define their own framework, and they are free to choose their own subject matter, style, working hours and colleagues. Most importantly, however, they must be impassioned and committed enough to brave the difficulties of pushing through a project from A to Z. For independent choreographers, freelancing means they do not enjoy continuity and are unable to build up a repertoire. They are constantly under pressure to produce in order to get funding. They have to be well versed not only in dance but also in administration, management and stage technology. Freedom may easily turn into loneliness. Independent professionals often feel they've been abandoned; established dancers suffer from isolation. Personal isolation within the cultural network is actually shared by all dance professionals. This could set the stage for a concerted commitment to improve their lot if only they could overcome their mutual reservations. ─

Translated from the German by Catherine Schelbert

Agathe Blaser, born in 1958, is a historian. She has worked as a translator in Brazil and as a journalist and editor at Swiss Radio International in Berne, and has written for *Der Bund* and the *Berner Zeitung*. Since 2002, she has been the dance correspondent for the Swiss daily newspaper the *Tages-Anzeiger*, to which she also contributes film reviews.

# Figures Alone Are Not Enough!

## Promoting dance in the UK and Switzerland

Lilo Weber

**Dance policy is only as good as its weakest offspring.** How can dance policy be judged? Dance professionals, organizers, politicians, the audience, may all have their own criteria, each giving weight to different aspects, but the critic will always measure policy in terms of what she sees. And she will place what she sees in a context comprising all manner of information about the political and economic situation of that particular dance scene, its working conditions and job requirements, etc. In Switzerland I see a lot of good and exciting work presented on stage while hearing about the wrangling behind the scenes: the independent dance movement locked in trench warfare with the so-called institutional one, disputes between professional associations (which will hopefully be set aside now there is a new umbrella organization), fragmentation, marginalization – all of which stands in the way of efficient political lobbying and detracts from the most important issue: that of creating good dance. And of campaigning for a policy that promotes good dance.

### **In Switzerland they talk, in England they dance.**

Dance in the UK is not better than in Switzerland. But it is different – very different. In London you are struck by the extremely high technical level of the performers, the stable quality of the companies, the great variety of venues where dance is regularly staged, the lively interest shown by audiences. Overall, the UK dance scene gives the impression of being more settled, more deeply rooted in public life, more consistent in its aesthetic direction, highly professional. The majority of innovative works, however, tend to come from abroad; conceptual art and dance theatre don't have an easy time of it here – in England, they like to dance, but they like to dance beautifully. And many here excel at doing just that. With its Royal Ballet School, the UK can not only boast one of the most famous schools of its kind in the world; training facilities such as the London School of Contemporary Dance, set up in 1966, also enabled contemporary dance to establish itself on a professional footing here very early on. Several more institutions were to follow and dance training is currently available at university level. Over the past thirty years the UK dance scene has achieved much of what is now being demanded in Switzerland by the dance promotion project entitled *Project Dance* (see insert, p. 53), especially in terms of establishing professional working conditions and higher levels of recognition.

**Are too many cooks promoting the broth?** Nevertheless, the British scene has to fight every bit as hard as its Swiss counterpart for funding. In England, around 37 to 39 million pounds of national tax revenues and lottery money are invested in dance each year. This figure is equivalent to 90 million Swiss francs or 10 per cent of overall cultural spending, and is distributed in the form of grants awarded by the Arts Council England in consultation with its regional offices. On top of this come contributions from local authorities – although these are limited in scope, since the vast majority of taxes are levied directly by the state – plus financial support for international touring from the British Council. The situation in Switzerland is more complicated because cultural promotion is pursued mainly at cantonal and local level. It is difficult to extrapolate figures: cultural spending varies greatly from canton to canton and from commune to commune, not nearly all of which have budgets explicitly for dance, and the institutional companies are funded from the state subsidies received by the theatres. For 2005 Pro Helvetia has a regular dance budget of 1.2 million francs, to which 900,000 francs of priority funding will be added annually until 2007 – equivalent to almost 10 per cent of cultural funding. The city of Zurich, for instance, spends 1.29 million francs in funding, or 1.6 per cent of its cultural budget, on dance. Each promotional agency has its own rules and dance companies receive money from here, there and everywhere. It all mounts up and in the meantime one agency has no idea what another agency is doing. And so countless companies and dance creators gather round the trough – which may well encourage diversity, but does it also enhance quality (meaning those groups that really deserve to be promoted and sent abroad as ambassadors for their country)? It is for this very reason that the concerted efforts made under the heading of *Project Dance*, to coordinate the promotion of dance across many different levels, are of the utmost importance when it comes to establishing a more efficient policy of dance promotion. At best, they will create a self-perpetuating dance establishment, at worst, they will prevent tax revenues from being squandered.

**There's a political side to dance policy.** The fact that the cantons and communes bear the main thrust of cultural promotion in Switzerland is due to the way the structures of state have developed historically – and any form of centralization would shake federal democracy right down



to its very foundations. In a consensual democracy, national cultural policy is hardly likely to experience any great shockwaves. If a member of a conservative party is succeeded in the office of mayor by a Social Democrat, this has little impact on the way funds are distributed. Whereas – despite the independence of the Arts Council – New Labour has definitely made its mark on dance policy in Britain. You see, those canny economists surrounding Tony Blair have discovered the economic value of culture and have lost no time in putting a name to it: “creative industry” is its *nom de guerre*, and it’s the country’s fifth-largest industrial sector. Consequently, the government and the Arts Council no longer talk in terms of a dance scene, but of a dance industry, in other words, a branch of employment with jobs and turnover – that’s what is “New” about New Labour. A report published by a Select Committee of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the summer of 2004 sets out three objectives for a national dance strategy: excellence, access, and a contribution to healthy living. It is clear – dance is not just seen as an art form, but also as a form of physical activity that will keep young people off the streets (and thus away from crime) and that is good for their health into the bargain – that’s the “Labour” rump in New Labour.

**Prestige doesn’t come from dance (performance) alone.** Everyone is a dancer – the philosophy of dance theoretician Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) has been put into practice in the UK. At least for children up to the age of eleven. Dance is a subject taught at primary school; the Arts Council of England is now campaigning for this to be extended to secondary-school level so that dance talents from various social and ethnic backgrounds can be discovered and a young audience made more appreciative of dance. Moreover, greater emphasis is to be placed on dance as a means of promoting health. These are smart demands that will create jobs for dancers – as well as releasing funds from the Department of Education and the Home Office. They could also lead to new discoveries and relationships that will feed back into what we see on stage. For there is a great deal of potential for innovation to be found in a multicultural society such as the UK, potential which is not yet being fully exploited. But, above all, such measures will advance the most important goal of any dance strategy: they will make dance more prestigious by popularizing and professionalizing the scene, or, should I say, “industry”. And, alongside training and the recognition of the spe-

cial skills and experience required for a career in dance, professionalization will mean that other occupations related to the dance economy – dance-event organizer, manager, critic, promoter, theorist – are also taken seriously.

**Flexibility encourages innovation, but innovation must have room for growth.** Dance promotion in Switzerland concentrates on dance as an art form. There is nothing wrong with that. Dance promotion in Switzerland is flexible. There is nothing wrong with that, either. But there should be more to it than that. The Swiss dance scene is in a state of constant upheaval, in part because of the funding policies applied in the independent scene. The ensembles of subsidized houses receive incomparably more funding than the independent scene. Institutional ensembles are a fixed item in the budget and have a more or less fixed allocation of jobs – but for that their fate depends substantially on the theatre or opera house to which they are attached, and on its management. Outside the subsidized sector, very few companies have the backing of long-term contracts. With support being earmarked for specific projects, they cannot plan long term, have problems keeping dancers together for tours and are not really able to thrive. While this may keep the scene in motion, it also fosters fear. And, as we all know, fear is not conducive to creativity. Dance promotion in the UK is not overly flexible. Of the 37 to 39 million pounds handed out by the Arts Council of England, 30 million go into fixed investments in organizations, i.e., theatres, festivals, agencies and some forty companies of varying size; 2 to 3 million are spent on touring and 5 to 6 million on projects. New endeavours have to be funded from the project budget – which leaves little money for innovation. By far the greater part of the funding (two-thirds) goes towards classical dance (the Royal Ballet is not included in any of these figures as it is the only company funded out of the budget of the Royal Opera House). Jeanette Siddall, Director of Dance at the Arts Council of England, points out, however, that the classical ballet companies – like the English National Ballet or the Birmingham Ballet – bring in revenues far in excess of the amounts invested in them by the state, either through ticket sales or sponsorship – moreover, they also provide the largest number of jobs for dancers.

**Being conservative in the truest sense of the word.** I am not going to present arguments at this juncture in favour of conservative tastes. But we

must remember that the idea of conservation, or preservation, is at the root of the word “conservative”, the idea of nurturing what has already been developed. In the UK this happens at a variety of levels. About forty companies are supported through long-term contracts, as are theatres and opera houses that programme dance, and the National Dance Agencies responsible for coordinating and programming. In Switzerland such matters are largely left up to the venues themselves and their artistic directors. A theatre can put dance on the programme – or not; maintain its own dance ensemble – or not. In Lucerne, Barbara Mundel was able to do away with the dance troupe, in Basel Michael Schindhelm replaced the ballet with a modern dance-theatre company, in Berne Eike Gramss felt able to dispense with the services of someone of the calibre of Martin Schlöpfer, etc. Such things would be unthinkable in England. With the exception of the Royal Ballet, all dance companies are directly subsidized by the Arts Council, whether they are attached to an institutional theatre or not. No matter who becomes Artistic Director of the Birmingham Hippodrome Theatre, the existence of the Birmingham Royal Ballet will not be called into question.

**Dance is not master in its own home.** And yet Jeanette Siddall says that she casts an envious eye towards Switzerland and its system of permanent companies attached to the theatres. In England only the Royal Ballet has a permanent roof over its head, the Birmingham Ballet partly so. Dance companies are constantly on tour throughout the country, which uses up excessive amounts of energy and resources and makes it difficult to build up a regular audience. This is why the Arts Council wants to look into the different options for setting up links between dance companies and theatres, without, however, placing the dancers under the same artistic direction as the actors. Theatres and opera houses in Switzerland guarantee their dance ensembles a certain number of performances per year and provide them with an infrastructure where they can feel at home. But home can be a fragile construction. The demand for spaces devoted solely to dance has been doing the rounds for years – on both sides of the English Channel. In the UK several venues have been built or adapted for dance since the National Lottery was launched in 1994. The Laban Centre in Deptford (East London), designed by Herzog & de Meuron, is a famous example, a facility that offers space for training, research, rehearsal, performance, youth work and

amateur dance classes. No such thing exists in Switzerland as yet. Rehearsal space is scarce, as are performance venues.

**Dance policy isn't just about lots of money, but it helps.** If things are to change, we need courageous cultural policy-makers, who are prepared to handle a large budget. But also a scene that is prepared to find itself – under a single umbrella. We need courageous dance commissions ready to set priorities and to regard funding as an investment in the future – in the long term. We need dance promoters with vision and commissions with the authority to monitor the success of their investments on a regular basis. In a federal system with many different bodies responsible for promotion and with a host of committees and rules, an exceptionally lively and vibrant dance scene has emerged with a real variety of companies that would easily stand an international comparison. If this dynamism is to be preserved, then stability and continuity will need to be promoted as well. And this calls not only for more money, but also for a strategy to be pursued and a consensus to be reached – you would think that should be no problem in a country like Switzerland. ┘

Translated from the German by bmp translations

Lilo Weber was dance editor with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from 1995 to 2002 and now lives in London as a freelance dance publicist.

# The Sound of the Fridge

## Anorexia as a way of life

Sylvie Zaech

It's my empty stomach that wakes me up. Or, rather, the sound of the fridge humming away in the kitchen. Last night I had an apple, a plain yoghurt and a cup of unsweetened herbal tea |

Three more kilos to lose before tryouts. I'll be wearing a leotard, so any bulges will show. Yesterday under the shower I noticed I still have a bit of a belly. And in first position with my feet turned out, my thighs rub against each other. It's embarrassing. No one ever says anything in dance class, but I can feel them noticing. They'll be surprised.

I can have as perfect a body as they do, a flat stomach and thin legs three kilometres long.

*Romano Torriani, MD: In the twenty-two years I've been in practice, I've handled about 160 cases of anorexia. It's less the patient that I treat than a (family) system, where the person sacrifices him- or herself*

in order to draw attention to a flaw within that system. Anorexia is on the rise and new forms keep cropping up. In its classic form, anorexia hits teenage girls of about fourteen or fifteen: they'll be losing weight, skipping their period, and living in what appears to be a harmonious family. Nowadays, anorexia even occurs at the age of eleven or twelve. It can also happen to athletes who manipulate their bodies and follow special diets. Statistically, the ratio for the classic form of anorexia is 1 boy to 50 girls; among athletes, 1 boy to 6 girls.

The fridge is humming in the kitchen and I'm hungry. Inside it there's jam, butter, chocolate spread, cold meats, cheese, boiled potatoes, left-over spaghetti with meat sauce... I know its contents by heart and there's nothing I'd rather do than gobble it all down. But I'll hold out. The audition is in three weeks; I have to lose one kilo a week. Afterwards, I'll have to keep on watching my weight – they'll have hired me thin and they'll want me to stay that way.

*Martin Schläpfer: If a dancer who is already a member of my company becomes anorexic, I can imagine keeping that person on. It would be too easy to distance myself from his or her problems without checking out whether the illness has anything to do with our work relationship. Of course, that person would need medical help. HOWEVER, I would never actually hire someone who is anorexic – no matter how fantastic a dancer.*

Too bad my breasts have shrunk to almost nothing. They were nice-looking. One of these days, I must make an appointment with my gynaecologist. My periods have stopped and I'm sure I'm not pregnant. Mother's worried, but that's silly. I'm fine and perfectly on top of the situation. True enough, I'm tired and I have trouble getting all the way through the training sessions. I cheat a bit, marking the beat for the steps instead of doing them, and I avoid the jumps by sneaking off to the lavatory.

*Romano Torriani, MD: Anorexia is not an illness but a painful sign that something in the system needs changing.*

What if I just had a little nibble of something out of the fridge? A spoonful of jam or chocolate spread? It's weeks since I've had anything sweet and sugar attracts me like a magnet. If I get going, I know I won't be able to stop. I can down a whole chocolate bar at a time, but afterwards I feel so sick that I disgust myself. No, no: I must keep thinking of the audition, must stay beautiful. I'm sure I'll succeed.

*Martin Schläpfer: Outside appearance is important only to dancers who are nothing more than dancers. Once they turn into artists, it's no longer crucial, so long as they stay within limits. The audience doesn't waste time over a dancer's looks when it's a real artist who's on stage. My current approach is to insist my dancers push themselves less physically. Interestingly, this seems to improve their technique and coordination. And, of course, their art gains in content and spatial impact, which proves that it is the right flow of energy that gives them a stronger presence, rather than pressure or will-power.*

I'm going to try to go back to sleep and, as usual, I'll have visions of food. I'll be standing in front of a magnificent buffet, totally panicked. Then I'll cave in and eat everything I want, till it makes me feel sick. And then I'll hate myself. My mind will be flooded with dark and obsessive thoughts. I'll awaken with my hip bones sticking out and my chest steeped in anxiety.

*Romano Torriani, MD: If things improve fairly soon, the consequences of anorexia can be positive in the sense of providing valuable insight. If, on the other hand, it sets in for any length of time, the consequences tend to be dramatic: the patient ends up in bad shape physically and psychologically, subject to chronic illnesses and a weakening of his/her immune defence system, with the risk of committing suicide three or four times greater than the norm and a higher death rate. For instance, an athlete with a body mass index below say 14 or 13 risks having a heart attack or dying of an overdose from some commonplace medication.*

I'd like to be able to say that I'm fed up with carrying around all this pressure. That the mountain is too high. That maybe I'm not made for this career, this family, this world. But my words get smothered inside me, I've locked myself in and lost the key to the door. Mornings, I get up like some sad-faced robot; at night I go to bed like a little old woman of fifteen.

*Carlo Bagutti, MD: As consulting physician for the Prix de Lausanne, my job is above all educational and preventive. I often come across young people with eating disorders, sometimes even with declared cases of anorexia and bulimia. Even if the aesthetic norms of classical dance demand slim dancers, the young artists, their families and their teachers have to make sure that this aspect is not given undue emphasis and the dancers' health is not impaired. If they eat the wrong things or too little for the energy they use up, they are at significant risk of suffering hormonal imbalances. They will be slower to reach puberty and will have little chance*

of achieving optimal bone density, which reaches its peak between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. After that bone mass does not increase, raising the risk of brittle bones and stress fractures, which can occur at a very early age. And that can have a negative effect on a career and even put an end to it.

*Martin Schlöpfer: If I feel there's a health problem, I try to talk things over with the dancer. But I have my limits. One of my favourite artists suffered from acute alcoholism and I had to get rid of him. Being so powerless against his illness was a humbling experience.*

The dance school director called me into his office. The teachers had told him that I was skipping classes or else botching them up. He thinks I'm too thin for my own good. I myself think I'm too fat. I told him everything was going very well, thank you, and that I had everything under control. He gave me a smile and made an appointment for me with the school doctor. What if I get expelled? Worst-case scenario. Have to get some sleep. At least, try to get some sleep. There goes the fridge again.

*Carlo Bagutti, MD: The average age of the Prix de Lausanne candidates is seventeen – an age when they understand the dangers of bad eating habits but are not yet altogether capable of taking their lives in their own hands. We need to increase awareness in the dance world as a whole; schools should be offering more classes on diet geared specifically to people subject to physical strain.*

*Martin Schlöpfer: Dancers in training should listen to and study everything on health and diet. Education is the only way to bring about change.*

*Romano Torriani, MD: When it comes to anorexia, I don't like to talk about a cure because, as far as I'm concerned, it's not an illness but a detour in someone's*

*development, a sort of temporary frozen state that can be unthawed. But, of course, "there's no cure for life".*

Translated from the French by Margie Mounier

#### Biographical notes

The narrating "I" is a former victim of anorexia who kindly agreed to testify by means of a fictional account.

Romano Torriani, MD, is Head of the Children's Psychiatric Division of the Children's Hospital of Bienne; he also has a private psychotherapeutic practice for children, youth and adults.

Martin Schlöpfer was born in St. Gall. Ballet director and choreographer at the Staatstheater Mainz (Germany) since 1999, he was formerly an internationally renowned solo dancer and served as director of the ballet of the Stadttheater in Berne from 1994 to 1999. He was the recipient of the Rhineland-Palatinate Culture Prize 2002 and the Heinz Spoerli Foundation Dance Prize 2003.

Carlo Bagutti, MD, is a specialist in sports medicine and consulting physician for the Prix de Lausanne. Dr. Bagutti draws up the medical files for the Prix de Lausanne candidates, decides on their medical eligibility, gets in touch with their doctor in case there is a problem and, if necessary, conducts a follow-up.

Sylvie Zaech, who is a dual citizen by birth (Swiss and French), lives and works in Bienne. After studying literature at the University of Berne, she took up journalism. She began specializing in dance during a stay in New York (1992-1993). She was in charge of <http://www.tanz-danse.ch> and is currently responsible for the Swiss information platform <http://www.dansesuisse.ch>. Her publications include: *Pierre ou l'absence* (chroniques poétiques, 2002-2004), *Monologue pour une forêt d'avril* (Expo.02), *Dialogue avec le Chat* (Berner Almanach, Berne).

# Marching to a Different Tune

## Social and political aspects of performance art

Jean-Yves Pidoux and Muriel Jost

**Megalomania.** When a famous composer compared a work of art to the attack of 11 September 2001 in New York, he not only uttered an irresponsible political analysis. He also displayed a presumptuousness beyond measure, putting a politely discomfiting artistic performance on a level with an act that terrorized the entire world. According to him, “[such an act] leaps outside safety, outside evidence, something that also sometimes happens, poco a poco, in art. Otherwise it’s nothing.”

To compare such a historical tragedy to a work of art, declaring that what happens in the sphere of art should resemble what happens in so cataclysmic an event, is to give evidence of an extraordinary vanity. If you’re going to compare art to history in this way, then, to take up the composer’s own words, it would perhaps be desirable that art really is nothing.

The dilemma of art, expressed in the crudest possible way by Stockhausen’s assertion, is this: if art links itself with major historical events, then it manifests its futility; in the face of such a cataclysm (as 9/11), whatever can an activity centred on fiction and transposition mean? And if it does not form a link with history, art is no less futile; isn’t it downright scandalous to distract and console people with beauty or fiction, while darkness, violence and infamy reign on the earth?

There is not only the matter of Stockhausen’s vanity. Another phenomenon invoked by some critics is making an artistic performance out of one’s own life of misery. “It’s art,” one of these critics asserted, referring to the bodily protest made by prisoners in the far north of Siberia who

drank their own blood, swallowed spoons, inserted objects in their sexual organs, etc. Quite apart from the fact that it is uncertain whether this is true or not, it does not suffice to perform art in black despair in order to absolve the former in the name of the latter. A “romantic instrumentalization” such as this, making sublime the distress of fallen souls on the icy lands of a totalitarian system, leaves the observer perplexed.

A similar perplexity already shows through in many older commentaries whose object was not to discuss making art out of horror but rather the coexistence of the two. Brecht writes a famous poem where he asks whether, in these dark times, a conversation on trees is not a crime (“An die Nachgeborenen”: “What sort of times are these, when / A conversation about trees is almost a crime”). And Adorno, pushing this kind of unease to its limit by reducing the possibility of art, and even of thought, to nothingness, says: “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbarous, and this fact even affects the knowledge that explains why it has become impossible to write poems today” (“Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft”, *Prismen*). An atrocious barbarity is responded to by a futile one; establishing a critical relation between the two barbarities is subjected to the verdict of futility, here applied to the poem: it is vain and culpably innocent to say that art is vain and culpably innocent, and so on to an infinity of aporia and reflexiveness.

Of course, an intransigent defender of art like Adorno later referred to this formula, declaring (in “Ist die Kunst heiter?”, *Noten zu Literature*): “The declaration that after Auschwitz one can no longer write a poem is not to be taken as it stands, but it is





certain that after it, because it was possible and because it remains possible indefinitely, one can no longer present art as something happy.” This is a manner of defending an “ideal of black despair” (*Aesthetische Theorie*) that makes art a witness of suffering, even when it does not speak of it explicitly.

**Insularity.** How does one not avoid art, then, at least artistically? This modality of paradoxical existence is chosen by performances that attempt to avoid the very framework that gives them their meaning. The manifesto of the adherents of body art beginning in the 1960s proclaims that the border between art and life has been destroyed. In the very midst of art, one must now proclaim the precariousness, i.e. the mortality, of art, or at least of the difference between art and life – all in order to weld together critical propositions uttered about art as well as about life. Art consists in putting art into a crisis, in the name of what it’s not about.

What is necessary is to recognize all the same that, even for body art, the very propositions that subvert art as an institution remain contained in its own necessarily “sublime” frontiers. In art, what is outside the frame is within the frame. It is only for a moment that transgressions are perceived as overwhelming; very soon, the performances that shake the frame enclosing the artistic event are repatriated in the bosom of art and thereafter become a moment in its history. The duration of the non-recognition is brief and is, even under the form of negation, always linked to the realm of art; even shorter is the fugitive mo-

ment where the transgressing work is simultaneously recognized as a work, as a transgression of the works that preceded it and as a paradoxical form outside the world of art. Artistically to deny the border between art and life, to try and subvert the world of real life, amounts to no less than fully reintegrating this enchanted or bewitched island, this golden prison of fiction and transposition. The idea of performance refers simultaneously to the history of art as an institution and to a conflict between the creation and the institution of art. It is opposed to that of a show (in the sense of a musical/dramatic entertainment) because it aims at uniqueness (in the sense of being less often “repeated” than a show and less capable of being reproduced), but it fails in its aim of immediacy. It turns out to be representation and not pure action.

The subversion of the world of art and artistic iconoclasm have become an essential element of contemporary creation. Art depends on its negation. As a result, it is in line with the analysis of Lévi-Strauss, who wanted to see modern art (and contemporary art is even more committed to this path) as an “academicism of the significant”, a frantic game with artistic codes (*Entretiens avec G. Charbonnier*). The perpetual calling into question of aesthetic means and levels has turned out to function like a perpetual confirmation of the field of art from the standpoint of where it is autonomous and where subordinated. Ever since the modern rupture, where successive disfigurations of the canonical principles raised the transgression into a code, the artist who transgresses obeys the rule of transgression – and

therefore does not transgress. Or at least, like what has been seen in the succession of modern and post-modern elements in the contemporary dance, for the spectators to realize that there is a transgression, they must possess the “code of codes”, i.e. be sufficiently aware of the traditions bound up with this mode of expression to realize the conflict that is instituted by opposition to them. If not, they run a good risk of seeing no more than dance performances that rebel against meaning, and therefore of thinking they have no meaning. To have the sovereign overview allowing one to see, as Merce Cunningham did, that dance becomes what it is at every moment, to perceive a body that is no longer the carrier of a message but of its own immediacy, one needs simultaneously to know and deny the history of the dance. Artists must run the double risk of offering a work that may mean anything and simultaneously be seen as elitists enclosed in an anti-academic academicism.

**Inoffensiveness.** A work of art, however close it may be to life and its miseries, remains irrevocably sublime and figurative. The artistic innovations that call into question the very fact of innovation, as well as the transmission or the articulation between a form and a content, are captives of their inevitable belonging to a “world”, a “realm” or a “stage”. Paradoxically, they can then appear even more academic than those they had striven to downgrade.

Going even further, here one could take up again the motif proposed by Marcuse in his analysis of the “affirmative culture” and suggest that the more a work of art is critical, implacable, shocking, intransigent or innovative, the better it can be placed in the orbit of the simulacrum and thus, in the final analysis, of the status quo.

In art, the venom of criticism as well as the capacity of suspending beliefs and obvious facts are expressed and yet at the same time sweetened, because their emergence takes place in a realm of enjoyment or momentary reflection. After admiring the intransigence of Antigone, don't we spectators return, pacified, to our Creon-like lives? After seeing a performance where Ron Athey is pierced with arrows, testifying to the martyrdom of HIV-positive men by associating them with St. Sebastian, don't we go back to acting like archers, devoid of compassion? Freud noted that the consumption of art is in the category of using drugs, recalling what the Marxist analyses said about the function of religion. Art and religion open up an area of intransigence and therefore denunci-

ation. But they also encourage resignation by deflecting and sublimating destructive energies, thus keeping believers from effectively counteracting the hell that life has become.

The fact that the contemporary dance now thematizes gravity and downfall, exploring movement that is rough, ugly, disorganized or hypnotic, does not in the least prevent choreographies from functioning as artistic and social research, sublimating the drives of the spectators as well as the performers – on the contrary. The barrier between the stage and the hall, the fact that some people are there to see and others to be seen, irrevocably encloses some of them in contemplation, some of them in demonstration and all of them in fiction.

This is why the political aim of a performance or a work is quite often perceived as a substitute for action, both by the artists as well as by the militants of an espoused cause. This political action that is not one, that claims not to be one and yet places itself in a whirlwind of actions, turns out to be even more symbolic and innocuous than the usual symbolic actions of marching, petitioning, speaking out in public, etc., all of them irreplaceable ways of making opinions impact on others, but whose direct effectiveness is also uncertain. Catharsis and consolation are not reserved to the sole domain of the production and consumption of art; they also affect political commitment, whose fictitious and consoling dimension cannot be denied. But art confronts the danger of imposition with more lucidity and more risks. In the face of the self-inflicted horrors of the forced labourers of the Siberian steppes, allegedly “direct” performances seem gruesome. Gina Pane barefoot, climbing a ladder studded with sharp objects that cut her feet and entitling her performance in a manner recalling the American escalation in Viet Nam, runs the risk of having her performance regarded as a piteously egocentric denunciation – that is, if one does not see it in association with the means employed to intensify a war and with the victims of the bombings.

Subversion does not get on well with this institutionalized transposition of transgression that is inherent in the modern – and especially the contemporary – project of art. Although the frontier between art and life has broken down, many performances sink into indigestible mannerism or worn-out pastiche, far from the initial sociohistorical audacity of some past products that themselves have now become shelved in the storehouse of inoffensive celebrities. Red subversion,

once it passes through the ineluctable emollient of art, gets transformed into a pink pastel. Whether explicitly or implicitly critical, art turns out to be a too-conciliatory irreconciliation.

**And yet...** So there is nothing left but to vituperate art, whose venom is so sweet that it no longer irritates. The glosses and performances that count on the subversive character of broken, ravaged or soiled bodies today belong more to a genre of high-flown camp than to iconoclasm. And anyway, who now believes that subversion of politics or history is the ultimate criterion of artistic action?

And yet, artists, commentators and consumers still hold in esteem the idea of an art that is engaged, or at least tuned in to social and historical reality. Even the posture of favouring art for art's sake gives an interpretation of this ideal expressed in terms of the necessity for art to disengage itself from society – once again a way of thematizing its relations with society, even if it does so by way of negation. And here again the insistence on beauty gets lost in intriguing labyrinths. According to Adorno, a work of art brazenly asks the spectator: “Aren’t I beautiful?” This implicit question is then also declined as: “Aren’t I ugly?” “Aren’t I beautiful in being ugly?” “Aren’t I beautiful in refusing the opposition between beauty and ugliness?” “Aren’t I beautiful in not aiming at beauty but shock?” And so on and on, to an infinity of modulations on this endless impasse that makes up artistic modernity and contemporaneity.

From all that has been said, can the conclusion be drawn that once the question of the relations between art and society is raised, it will elicit any response imaginable, because the two realms are too vast, amorphous, vague or heterogeneous to permit an analysis – of however little seriousness – that would retain them as pertinent realities? Certainly it can, but also so as to reassert certain evident facts. Art is here to stay – whether it's happy and diverting or black and despairing. It accompanies and will continue to accompany the tragedies of our times, whether in revealing or omitting them. Useful, futile or useless, it neither kills nor rescues anybody. But it is well possible that some tiny social subversion may undergo an intense personal upheaval when experienced by certain individual spectators. Even though individual, even though fragile, this consciousness of the fragility of consciousness attests to the social and political responsibility of art. And this is what is here to stay, subtle though it may be,

whatever destiny political feats may have: a salutary but often obfuscating scan of the debate on the function of art. ─

Translated from the French by John O'Brien

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# The Tensions of Terpsichore

## The relationship between dance and music

Martina Wohlthat

Among man's favourite occupations, Homer listed sleep, love, sweet song and "dance delectable". Because it is practised by all primitive peoples, the philosopher Adam Smith considered dance the most important of the arts and held it to be inseparable from music. The relationship between dance and music is almost as old as the human race but it has undergone countless changes.

In the Baroque period, the two arts joined in familial harmony to glorify the Lord. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810) and Gasparo Angiolini (1731-1803) reformed ballet by promoting what they called *ballet d'action*. In his *Letters on Dancing*, Noverre made substantial demands on the musical side of the enterprise. "The maitre de ballet who ignores the study of music will ill-phrase the melodies... If the playing of the airs be expressionless and devoid of taste, the ballet, like its model, will be dull and uninteresting... If, on the contrary, [the music] be mute, it will tell the dancer nothing and he cannot respond to it: thence all feeling, all expression, is banished from the performance."

Tchaikovsky's ballet music in the nineteenth century and Stravinsky's rhythms in the early twentieth represent highlights in the relationship of music to dance. Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel and Debussy all composed important ballet music for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, by which time the connection between dance and music had become considerably more complex. After *The Rite of Spring* premiered in Paris in 1913, Stravinsky berated the performance, declaring that he had not intended to compose music which would cause the dancers to count in the curious fashion necessitated by Nijinsky's choreography.

The twentieth century saw a number of fruitful partnerships between choreographers and composers, among them Georges Balanchine/Igor Stravinsky, Merce Cunningham/John Cage, Frederick Ashton/Hans Werner Henze and William

Forsythe/Thom Willems. But the century was also characterized by the emancipation of dance from music. Dancers were no longer content to be mere servants of music, obediently translating sound into movement. Modern dance wanted to become a genuinely self-contained and independent medium. Casual and even careless treatment of musical forms has, in fact, become standard practice among many choreographers. With the exception of modern adaptations of classical ballets, original ballet scores play a negligible role and are rarely treated as an artistic whole. Dance professionals will use all kinds of music, sounds and rhythms; they choreograph to musical fragments, electronic carpets of sound and, most frequently, collages of their own making. Today music primarily generates a particular atmosphere and mood.

Having acquired this freedom, choreographers are once again seeking the friction, the resistance, of the composed musical form, as demonstrated by the growing number of operas that have been choreographed for the stage in recent years. Joachim Schlömer, dance director at the Basel Theatre from 1996 to 2001, ranks among those who have pioneered the renewal of opera aesthetics through dance. Schlömer describes his work as a "remusicalization" of dance theatre. To him music is an important partner but also a rival. "My work chafes against the musical context." The choreographer finds little merit in conventional ballet scores. In an interview with dance critic Hartmut Regitz, recently published in the journal *ballet-tanz*, Schlömer observes, "If you take a critical look at the repertoire of ballet music, you will find only a handful of scores that are worth an evening's entertainment, musically interesting and with tolerably attractive content."

This probably explains why Schlömer goes his own way in pursuing the "remusicalization" of his dance theatre. Towards the end of the Nine-

ties, he began to break down the distinction between music, dance and drama. In *La guerra d'amore*, using madrigals by Claudio Monteverdi, Schlömer developed an experimental, intensely emotional piece with no plot, which crosses and blurs the boundaries of song, dance and poetry. In *Bernarda Albas Haus*, he and composer Helmut Oehring created a tightly woven network of song, sign language, live music, recorded sounds, dance and theatrical action. In two dance pieces created at the theatre in Lucerne, *Les larmes du ciel* and *About Kings, Queens and Witches*, Schlömer's flowing transitions, choreographed to Baroque music, fostered a new sensibility between dancers and singers. The basis of his innovative unification of movement and sound involves a "skeleton of musical and scenic processes, in recurring motifs, which complement and support each other in the course of the evening." Under his tutelage, singers discovered the potential of movement while dancers learned to exploit their own musicality.

Like Schlömer, Swiss-born Martin Schläpfer, who has been the ballet director in Mainz since 1999, is also an explicitly musical choreographer, as demonstrated in his ballets *Kunst der Fuge* and *Diabelli-Variationen*. In his relationship to music, Schläpfer feels that he continues to be guided by his ideals as a dancer: "I am still deeply affected by the fact that I can't dismember a piece of music." Schläpfer notes that he treats music with a certain respect and even humility, an attitude that he took for granted when he was still dancing. Among young choreographers, Schläpfer is one of the few who does not shun working with exacting pieces of music and integral classical scores. "I still take a piece of music as a whole. Today that's almost a conservative approach," Schläpfer says modestly. It may be conservative, but in view of the currently rampant arbitrary treatment of music, it is almost innovative again. Schläpfer wants his ballets to be able to communicate what he envi-

sions "with a minimum of froufrou". That also means using "the musical structure to create a different layer. In other words, not just to follow the music and not just to run counter to it either, but rather to confront the rhythmic structure of the muscles with something totally different." The outcome of such reflections is an exceptionally close and versatile relationship between dance and music in Schläpfer's ballets.

When Heinz Spoerli, director of the Zurich Ballet, choreographs Bach, he persuasively links masterful music with a modern neoclassical idiom (*Goldberg Variations, ...and evaded the wind, In the Wind into Nothing*). "Bach is so richly inventive that I consider him absolutely contemporary," says Spoerli. "He draws out your emotions. You go in a direction that makes you forget everything around you." Music offers Spoerli a challenge. His ballet *Allem nah, allem fern* (Close to everything, far from everything), which premieres in May 2005, is inspired by Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

Since 2001, Philipp Egli has successfully managed the dance company at the theatre in St. Gall. "Music plays a great role in my work and it's one that keeps changing," says Egli. "I am not interested in only one particular kind of music. Sometimes I'm even interested in music that I don't really like." As a rule, however, Egli selects music with meaningful points of contact. For his new piece, *The Weight of Things* (premiered in April 2005), Egli asked St. Gall composer Charles Uzor to write a quintet for clarinet and string quartet. A string quartet in combination with one solo instrument is the ideal ensemble for Egli. "I'm especially fond of music for string quartet. It's a formation that has an affinity with an orchestra but you can still hear each instrument. The score is manageable but it can also be very complex. That's great for dance, I can convert it into dance."

Collaborating with a composer is, in Egli's opinion, the "most extreme and most inspiring way to



work with music". The choreography and the score develop in dialogue. "We asked ourselves: what do we want to do? How should it be structured? We spoke about form and length and about the subject of Heimat [home, native country], which plays an explicit role in this case. We gave each other ideas. The piece is called *The Weight of Things*. The idea of how things are weighed is extremely fruitful for dance and music," Philipp Egli explains.

Music directly inspires the body to move, but Egli does not want to rely on that alone in his choreography. "Even when I know which music will be played to my piece, I don't want to hear any music when I first choreograph an idea. Otherwise I will probably do something that has less to do with what the music expresses than if I first find the corresponding movement. I start by designing single phrases within the movement. Then when you dance the movement to music, you may notice, for example, that it's not the beginning but in the middle of something. Things may shift or the end of a phrase may be placed at the beginning. Or a sequence will be repeated three times because something is repeated in the music and you follow a parallel course. And I don't mind admitting that a lot of it is unconscious." ─

Translated from the German by Catherine Schelbert

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# Dancing Outside the Walls

## Public space as artistic venue

Dominique Martinoli

*Bring the dances with you to the lab and the a&p  
Bring'em on to the bus, into the garden, and upstairs.  
Take them out walking and take them to the bed.*

Deborah Hay

### **What exactly does “dancing outside the walls” mean?**

Let's take three examples. Using video projections, light effects, everyday gestures and music, Annas Kollektiv plays upon the viewer's perception of Lucerne's Culture and Convention Centre. The front face of this building by Jean Nouvel becomes a huge screen that reflects the lake, the city lights, passers-by and the scenes projected by the dancers. These myriad reflections blend in with the movements of the actual performers enacting a piece inside the building, upsetting the building's perspective effects, much like in a drawing by Escher.<sup>1</sup> (*Choreographic performance*)

The Lyon Biennial Dance Festival draws upon the region's professional and amateur dance companies to create a dancing parade based on a given theme. In this mass gathering, some 4500 participants (dancers, choreographers, musicians, visual artists, designers) take to the streets, following a predefined course, fusing together a variety of dance styles – contemporary, butoh, Indian, hip-hop, Oriental, and more. (*Dancing parade*)

An encounter between a dancer/choreographer and a dancer/juggler/acrobat spawned the Compagnie Banc Public, a duo that puts on a twenty-minute dance and juggling act. Adaptable and stripped down to a minimum of stage effects, their street act offers strollers a moment's entertainment. (*Street dance*)

These three forms have something more in common than dance: all three have strayed from the theatre stage in order to measure themselves against space, architecture and the street. Why so? Is this some new artistic form?

These dancers are in search of freedom, immediacy and even intimacy, such as – in their opinion

– can only be found through closeness to the audience and the free choice of a venue. Avant-gardists such as Isadora Duncan already fled the theatre stage to distance themselves from classical dance norms. Their goal: to free their bodies from a corset, to dance by themselves without a stage setting or lighting effects, be it in the living rooms of the well-to-do or the meadows of Monte Verità.

**The audience.** The construction offered by a stage setting, its technical effects and the way it is set apart from outside activities are all artificially contrived elements for the creation of a perfect illusion. Outside-the-walls events destroy this illusion. As early as the 1920s, the surrealists felt free to transgress the boundaries between performers and viewers, inviting the dancers to take over the orchestra seats. Unlike in a theatre, where viewers are comfortably seated and rarely leave the show before the curtain falls, on the street they remain standing. Out of curiosity, they will move about, straining to get a better line of sight or, if the piece fails to appeal to them, simply continuing on their way. This is the challenge that outside-the-walls dancers seek to take up: to capture an audience of passers-by, confront their feelings “live” and maybe even become party to them.

In her piece *Vols d'oiseaux* (1981), Odile Duboc rejected the static performance where viewers stand around in a circle. Seeking an effect of surprise, she had a swarm of twenty dancers cross a square cluttered with urbanites sitting in front of cafés: to the sound of bells, they moved alternately slowly and rapidly. (*Captive audience*)

Christine Quoiraud took her audience on a choreographic walk (2000) across the city, inviting them to (re)discover the joys of children's games – like walking arm-in-arm, one person going in the right direction and the other going backwards. It



didn't take the walkers long to realize that in the eyes of the passers-by, they were the ones putting on the show. (*Viewer-dancer*)

**The space.** Whether a square, a street or a park, there are countless venues for performances. For instance, in the 1970s, Deborah Hay's dancers rolled down from the top of a real hill (*Hill* 1974); or then a choreography by Trisha Brown featured fifteen performers spread out across nine Manhattan roofs (*Roof* 1970). More recently, Angels Margrit presented *Solo für einen Hotelbewohner* (2000) in Room 308 of Lucerne's Hotel Montana: an audience of barely ten watched Margrit swirl between bed and floor with, as a backdrop, the lake and Pre-Alps seen through the window. Broaching gravity and weightlessness, Daniel Larriou thrust eight dancers into a swimming pool for his *Waterproof* (1986) piece. (*Private space / public space*)

Sasha Waltz created *insideout* (2003) as a work for the members of the audience themselves to compose: visitors to the Berliner Schaubühne were invited to walk around as if at an exhibition. In this fashion, they constantly crossed the boundary between reality and fiction, between stage and public space, in effect becoming the directors of the performance. (*Inside space / outside space*)

Of course, a performance venue need not necessarily remain the same throughout the show. Instead of seating viewers in theatre seats, Renatus Hoogenrad chose to avail himself of the unusual spaces of the Théâtre de la Coupole in St-Louis (France): he invited his itinerant visitors to take a guided tour of the theatre's every nook and cranny – including the dressing rooms and stage – while at the same time discovering one dance piece or another. (*Pathway show*)

Meanwhile, Philippe Decouflé came up with a colourful and playful dance ceremony for the opening of the Olympic Games in Albertville. (*Parade show*)

The *urbanthropus* is a silvery, half-alien- and half-reptile-like figure invented by the Da Motus! company. Adopting the halting gait of lizards, these performers blend into urban space as if they belong to it. They remain as inconspicuous as possible, climbing walls, crawling along the ground or scaling low partitions and, at times, even freezing into statues. By cancelling the separation between stage and audience, they throw into question the role of passers-by as urbanites. (*Infiltration performance*)

Silvia Buol's *Performance im Rohbau* (1999) depended on the choice of a specific venue: this experiment in spatial relationships took place in Basel, at the construction site for the Ecole Volta,

a building designed by the architectural firm of Miller & Maranta. Carried out amidst the scaffolding and still exposed electric wiring, the movements, sounds and light effects of the piece responded as if by resonance with the building shell. Buol's structural and improvisational research into the mixture of different languages gave rise to an interdisciplinary dialogue and influenced the manner in which the space was perceived. (*In situ performance*)

In the last analysis, it makes little difference whether a fixed site is involved, whether it serves to inspire a piece or changes during the performance. What matters is the distinction between site and decor. At face value, the framework is a concrete space, a chosen location, but it can also represent a world, a stage setting. Obviously, some productions use the cityscape as a venue, while others underscore it as a decor. In any case, on occasions when the two notions meet and condense into a single "image/time", the resulting public-space dance events can be among the finest of their kind.

**The performance.** In addition to experimenting with the public and with space, the performance in itself makes an impact as a technique of interdisciplinary artistic expression. One tends to forget that, during the 1970s, visual artists were just as concerned with the search for authenticity as the members of the Judson Dance Theater – a group Marvin Carlson<sup>2</sup> held to be the driving force behind the performance stage. Visual artists and dancers alike sought to escape the rigid confines of museums and theatres, to erase the boundaries between art and life. Artworks as marketable end products came to be replaced by events boasting immediacy and ephemerality. Artists flocked to real spaces instead of building them up, and allowed their pieces to take place in real time. Staging themselves rather than a separate group of performers, the authors felt free to resort to a diversity of materials, including literature, poetry, drama, music, dance, architecture and painting as well as video, film, and so forth. The way John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg joined forces to produce a single "event" comes to mind, or the body installations created by the dancer and performer Yann Marussich. Annas Kollektiv can also be said to belong to this trend, in its way of bringing together the authors of its pieces – dancers, architects, a video maker and a musician – and intermingling the various media.

**Street arts.** In the attempt to define "dancing outside the walls", interventions in public spaces

also explore the relationship between art and the city. Subjected to the influence of generations of musicians and jugglers, together with all sorts of performance and dance innovations, end-twentieth-century street artists enlarged their scope of considerations to encompass urbanism, inducing ever greater involvement in daily life. In this spirit, the city context became less of an aesthetic venue and more of a public space devoted to social and political issues. Alain Michard developed a project that had the participants collecting visual and choreographic material from the surrounding space and those living there. The “everyday gestures” that they collected in various cities became the stuff of his *Virvoucher* piece (2001). Originally devoted to pure entertainment, public space has been transformed by the street arts into a source of deliberation on life space. Because dancing implies moving about in space, it is well suited to reflecting on the flow of pedestrians, to analyzing the invisible choreographies of their wanderings and other social rites of city life. As such, too, dancing interferes with people’s physical routines; in either entertaining or subversive fashion, it upsets the street’s rhythm. öff öff productions presents an aerial show that targets the relationship between the city’s residents and its buildings, in an entertaining combination of dance and circus. On and under Berne’s Kirchenfeld Bridge (2001), the imp-like performers applied themselves to bringing the old metal structure back to life.

**Interdisciplinarity.** Dancing outside the walls represents a heterogeneous and ever evolving field whose outlines remain ill-defined. It is a field ill-suited to meet the strict criteria of an artistic discipline, which will explain why it has been so variously labelled: *Ciudades que Dansan* (cities that dance), *dance in open space*, *parcours de danse et d’architecture* (dance and architecture path), *site-specific performance*, *raumspezifische Tanzperformance* (site-specific dance performance), and so on. Illustrating the point, the French review *Mouvement* bears the subtitle *l’indisciplinaire des arts vivants* – the indiscipline of the lively arts. Nowadays, choreographers are interested in lifelike art. Their traditional concern with the interaction between dancer and spectator has shifted to an interest in the residents of an area and their everyday life, which they seek to integrate into their work. In so doing, they challenge the very notion of a staged performance and social event. Likewise, by demonstrating that performances can be put on at any site, and that experimenting with space offers a wide range of possibilities, they unsettle the theatrical institution. This is

not all that they do: crossing yet another boundary, and disregarding any artistic partitions, they combine text, movement, image and sound to produce an interdisciplinary art merging gestures and materials. Not that all these transgressions are unmotivated: on the contrary, they enable choreographers to address the many questions of the day, not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also socially and politically, with respect to the human body, to urbanism and to society as a whole.

Dancing outside the walls is no new artistic form but an intermingling of disciplines. Its definition requires knowledge well beyond the field of dance alone – knowledge that in itself is interdisciplinary. ▢

Translated from the French by Margie Mounier

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<sup>1</sup> *ein und haus*, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004.