Dance and the Museum: More than Incidental Choreographies by Danielle Goldman

On September 28, 2013, Danspace Project hosted its latest Conversations Without Walls, a series of panel discussions co-curated by Danspace Scholar-in-Residence Jenn Joy and Executive Director Judy Hussie-Taylor. This particular conversation provided an opportunity to reflect on Ralph Lemon’s Some sweet day—a recent three-week performance series at MoMA—as well as the broader convergences between dance and the visual arts. In the first hour of discussion, Ana Janevski, Associate Curator in the Department of Media and Performance Art at MoMA, discussed the challenges of presenting performance in the MoMA’s atrium and described her recent conversations with the French choreographer Boris Charmatz, who would be the next dance artist to come to the museum. Shortly afterwards, when the discussion opened up to include comments from the audience, the choreographer Tere O’Connor offered some cautionary remarks: “The works in these performance series are totally trumped by the idea.” According to O’Connor, museums are presenting minor works by choreographers who have made great work during their careers. There also, O’Connor said, seldom seems to be talk about the actual choreography. Scholars and curators talk about dance's capacity to enable experimentation and to perform a kind of institutional critique that museums cannot enact on their own. They talk about curatorial concepts, which are usually articulated in the museums’ advance publicity. But what would it mean to rigorously attend to what it is that dance and dancers are doing?

MoMA’s latest venture in curating dance—three weeks of performance conceived by Boris Charmatz and titled Musée de la danse: Three Collective Gestures—offered an opportunity to keep thinking about these questions. In 2009, Charmatz was appointed Director of the Centre chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne in Northwestern France, one of several state-funded choreographic centers in the country. But in an effort to distance dance from notions of choreography, centrality, and nationhood, Charmatz renamed the choreographic center Musée de la danse. In a recent conversation at MoMA, Charmatz explained that after several years of institutional critique in the arts, he wanted to experiment with institution building. What might a museum of dance become? Keeping this an open question, Charmatz has transformed the choreographic center from a place where choreographers would retreat to make works into a public space for viewing and making and thinking about dance. With a great deal of optimism and energy, he has challenged outmoded understandings of museums as static houses for dead art. “We are at a time in history,” he wrote in his Manifesto for a Dancing Museum, “where a museum can modify BOTH preconceived ideas about museums AND one’s ideas about dance…”

So it was with great excitement that I attended the opening day of 20 Dancers for the XX Century, the first event of the three-week series at MoMA. My initial enthusiasm, however, quickly turned into frustration as I navigated the noisy chaos of the museum on a Friday afternoon. Without a map to guide me (none were provided), I kept stumbling haphazardly upon important dancers and dances. I found Trajal Harrell, but only just as he finished performing a version of Jérôme Bel’s Shirtology (1997). I heard that Shelley Senter was somewhere performing works by Trisha Brown, but I never found out where she was dancing. I also heard that Meg Stuart had performed an arresting solo earlier in the afternoon. As I walked through MoMA’s many galleries, I kept hearing applause, indicating that another unknown performance was finishing up elsewhere in the museum.

Dancers, choreographers, and presenters already work incredibly hard to make and perform dances. In New York, this entails incessant labor, interwoven with complicated lifestyle choices. Why gather such a
diverse and accomplished group of dancers within MoMA, only to withhold information about where and when and what they would be performing? According to Charmatz, 20 Dancers for the XX Century constitutes a living archive: “In dance, we don’t have museums usually because it’s in our bodies that we store things. So, we thought, Okay, the main museum is the body of the dancer. Could they just invade MoMA?”3 Aiming to create a dialogue between museums, Charmatz gave the dancers a great deal of authority. He let them choose spontaneously what they would perform, and to decide for themselves where they would go and how they would interact with their audience.

One might then consider 20 Dancers in relation to the “archival turn” that has taken place in critical theory and arts practice since the early nineties, which has challenged traditional understandings of archives as official institutions dedicated to the preservation of documents.4 Theoreticians have underscored the extent to which power plays out in archival projects, and they have urged us to consider what is absent from archives rather than just what is present. They have asked us to think of archives as sites for complex processes of remembering as well as imagining future possibilities, both of which are bound with the production of social knowledge. Recognizing that rich information about the past often eludes written texts and static objects, we also have been asked to think about archives of feeling and affect.5 Charmatz is not alone in describing the body as a particular kind of archive.6

Viewing 20 Dancers in relation to the proliferation of archival theory in recent years, one could argue that 20 Dancers resists rigid, linear presentations of history that limit how a dance might exist as it moves through time and space. It allows the viewer to be surprised by juxtapositions between works. One might see a sequence of technical exercises developed by Ted Shawn, and then just happen to see Leiomy Maldonado voguing in a nearby gallery. In between, one might glimpse a sculpture by Sol LeWitt or a painting by Gerhard Richter. Perhaps one could also say that emphasizing the importance of dancers rather than merely fetishizing choreographers liberates the work. In future years, any given dance might do far more than the choreographer imagined. Watching Ashley Chen perform solos from Merce Cunningham’s Biped or Rainforest as part of 20 Dancers, for example, invites one to consider the various ways in which dances continue to live even after the death of the work’s creator, or after the time of a dance’s “official” performance.

This theoretical consideration of 20 Dancers matters a great deal. But it doesn’t change the fact that it was difficult to locate or attend to the actual dancing at MoMA. So, I returned on Sunday with a different viewing strategy. Rather than purposefully walking through galleries in search of work, I sat for two hours in the atrium. Resigning myself to the fact that I would not see all 20 dancers, and that I would probably never know all that was danced that day, I witnessed an interesting juxtaposition of styles, approaches to performance, technical histories, affects, and ideas about preservation. Christopher Roman entered the atrium, just as Meg Stuart was wrapping up her solo. Roman, who has been a principal dancer and collaborator with the Frankfurt Ballet and the Forsythe Company for the past 12 years, introduced himself and explained that he would be improvising based on thematic material from Enemy in the Figure (1989), The Room as it Was (2002), You Made Me a Monster (2005), and Decreation (2003). When an audience member asked how his improvisations were structured, Roman demonstrated the themes choreographed by William Forsythe. Then he set out to alter them, seeming to account for the architecture of the room, points and lines within his own kinesphere, and even engaging playfully with a toddler who stumbled repeatedly through the atrium. At various points during Roman’s improvisations, Richard Move could be seen, performing as Martha Graham in the contemporary gallery to the right of the atrium. After Roman
concluded his improvisations, Trajal Harrell performed Bel’s Shirtology while Michael Jackson’s Bad reverberated from elsewhere in the museum. Following Harrell, Ashley Chen performed works by Cunningham, Phillippe Decouflé, and John Scott. Chen then handed the atrium over to yet another dancer who performed in the Cunningham Company much earlier in its history, Valda Setterfield. She elected to perform The Matter, a dance scored by her husband, David Gordon, in the seventies.

As the title 20 Dancers for the XX Century suggests, it was a performance that invited a consideration of dancers and the complex accumulation of memories, knowledge, and techniques that they house. Still, if one is really going to think about these dancers as a museum within a museum, and if one is going to consider 20 Dancers as a work that frames dancing and posits bodies as archives, then yet another set of questions emerges, with relevance beyond any particular choices that Charmatz has made. The precariousness of dance—both at the level of physical practice and in terms of its lowly position in the broader economy—has been offered in recent conversations as one reason why dance has captured the art world’s attention during the past decade. In other words, dance seems uniquely able to reflect this period of global economic crisis, when life seems frightfully precarious. Perhaps it even has something to teach us. But it is ethically fraught – complex, at the very least, and worthy of consideration – to invite dancers into high-art spaces in order to perform, again and again, their precarious positions. With this, three details from 20 Dancers stand out: Charmatz, with hands cupped to mouth, shouting in a futile attempt to be heard above MoMA’s roar that he would be performing Isadora Duncan’s Revolutionary Study from 1922; Valda Setterfield, 79 years old, who wore a sweater around her torso, explaining that because of the cold temperature in the atrium she would need to engage in some Qi Gong practices in order to “wake up” her body; and Ashley Chen, after dancing a solo from Cunningham’s Biped on the atrium’s slate floor, quietly acknowledging that he had “thrown his neck out a bit.” These moments might be relegated to incidental choreographies were they not so poignant and undeniably familiar.


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