

Dance and the Museum: Noemie Lafrance Responds

1) What are the most potent questions prompted by the recent coming together of dance and the visual arts?

Dance artists and visual artists collaborate everyday based on affinity and need, just like artists of all disciplines also collaborate. Cinema for example, is a purely collaborative form, much like the performing arts, which generally imply that a choreographer or director collaborates with set designers (visual artists), costume designers, lighting designers, music composers etc. Well-known collaborations such as Brown-Rauschenberg, Graham-Noguchi, or Cunningham-Cage illustrate this aspect of dance and visual arts coming together, but this sort of collaboration is not reflective of the kind of coming together we are experiencing today, which is happening on a disciplinary and market level, and concerns the institution's relationship to artists and content, rather than artistic collaboration between artists. This coming together has been described as the visual art's interest in dance by many historians, curators, and art institutions, i.e. Performa hosted a talk in 2011 entitled "Why dance in the art world?"

Dance artists have somewhat been dragged into this timely subject of reflection, as they were not the originators of the interest in question. The so-called interest is the point of contention here. What it means is that the visual arts, as a discipline, as a market, and as the institutions that benefit from the commerce of visual art commodities are interested in dance as a commodity, as a discipline, as content and knowledge, and as works made by certain dance artists today. Would it excite the art world if the dance world were interested in visual arts? The novelty of this interest should also remind us that the art world has disregarded dance in all its forms in the past, and it is still looking down on theater.

Like being courted by the opposite sex, dance artists and the dance community have taken interest in this phenomenon of which they are the objects. In this discussion the interests diverge depending on who is looking. The interest of the visual arts in dance is different from the interest of dance in the visual art's interest in her. It is also different from dance being interested in him. Further, that the interested (the haves) will extend opportunities to its interestees (the haves not) is a condescending idea. When I think of a coming together, a meeting, or an encounter of two art forms, it implies the ideal of an even ground on which to meet.

We can think of free trade agreements between countries of the Global North and the Global South that appear to benefit the two parties, but don't. We can think of corporations who do "good" to appear to be helping the poor, while they created the conditions of poverty in the first place. We cannot begin this conversation by jumping over the extreme economic differences that exists between the world of visual arts and the world of dance, which defines their scope and capacity of interaction with the world at large, because they are instrumental to the actual coming together we are discussing here.

The reality is that the two parties are coming to the meeting with very different needs, interests and

expectations. One might be experiencing a deep internal revolution in the realm of relational aesthetics, and be interested in moving beyond objecthood and into a more impermanent state of immediacy, humanity, interaction, and experiences. Not to mention the museum's need for more life inside their sterile spaces to attract the amount of visitors they need to meet their extravagant budgets. The other may be looking to access much needed resources, gigs, money, status and recognition, and perhaps another context or even a place in history. Not only are those needs different, they operate on different levels; one is content-driven and the other is a practical concern with material survival. This is not surprising given the contrasting elements the two forms represent: mastering material versus mastering movement. Perhaps if content could be traded for material security in an objective and fair manner it could resolve in a mutually beneficial trade. However, our capitalist system dictates that the ones who have the economic and material advantage are poised to get the goods for a very small price or a buyout deal. Until we dare to look at the essential motives that have brought us to the table in the first place, we will not be able to embark on a genuine and productive conversation around the potential real exchanges that could emerge between the two art forms at this juncture, be it around content, methods, practices, politics or economics.

2) What are the responsibilities and/ or challenges that accompany this interaction? For artists? Curators? Critics or scholars? Institutions?

Clarifying the above misrepresentation of interests and benefits is our first and foremost responsibility and challenge. In addition, there are immanent concerns that this coming together is asking us to re-examine, including the preservation of dance and performance-based art, the support systems to host people performing in the white box vs. the black box, the economic infrastructure of selling objects vs. time-based art, and the commercial vs. non-profit models.

The most immediate concern is labor, as several situations have already emerged regarding labor in this unbalanced coming together that have proven to be problematic. Labor is central and integral to dance's practice and its organization; dance is the poetry of physical labor and it represents an area of our work that needs to be considered sensibly and equitably. Especially when handled by an outside party who does not have the built-in sensibility that dance, in effect, brings to the social relations of labor beyond the interests of capitalistic values. At the very least, humans will have to be treated better than objects, and at best, large art institutions and museums that are planning performance-based programs will have to be unionized and need to hire experienced and effective performance producers that have knowledge of labor laws.

The visual arts (discipline) is culturally challenged by the element of human labor as art work, because the body of the artist is generally divorced from the work, objectified outside of herself as a human being. But this also applies to performance-based visual artists who objectify their own bodies and who are not

necessarily familiar with the implications of using other people's bodies through which to express themselves in a collaborative structure, which has complex relational implications particularly when it demands certain physical sacrifices or a deep commitment of self through one's body. Figuratively sacrificing or even literally objectifying other people's bodies questions the boundaries of abuse in relationships. What is the process and practice that justifies or illuminates such gestures? Has it been thought about or should dancers just move into the objectification of their bodies to replicate an artist's vision as if they were being reproduced in a factory. This has been unclear in the work of many visual artists who have recently attempted to use dancers or performers to make work in a live format, at least from the viewer's point of view – one can smell the atmosphere of exploitation in the room – perhaps an unintentional part of the work based on a lack of understanding and experience with the media used; bodies, people, humans, living organism that have a past and future and are worlds of their own.

3) As artists, audiences, and institutions with varied artistic backgrounds come together, on what grounds is it or is it not important to consider disciplinary/ generic boundaries?

The grounds on which it is important to consider disciplinary boundaries are history, research, preservation, practice, knowledge and so on. Just like any other situation of potential cultural assimilation, the unevenness of the grounds here indicates this is dangerous terrain. We are witnessing the entire world being assimilated by American culture and the impact it is having on the preservation of language, customs, arts, and many other attributes of culture, which can easily accelerate out of control. This coming together could reveal itself to be no different. We should be asking ourselves: Are we simply going through the rebranding of dance (and theater) by the art world, whose marketing power and ability to define image is more competent and solvent such that entire disciplines could eventually be eradicated from the market? Furthermore, will visual arts historians and curators simply contribute to a silent erasing of dance and theater's history by defaulting to their own history (performance art or visual art) as the through line and the only worthy reference when engaging in a critical discourse that contextualizes dance or any other performance-based practices?

When speaking of the influences on the visual art and performance-art history, the only assured historical dance reference one can find in the writings of forward thinking and very knowledgeable and respected curators and arts historians such as Claire Bishop, Nato Thompson, Nicolas Bourriaud, or Tom Finkelpearl (and the list goes on) is the Judson Church movement of the 1960s. Finding any other reference or mention of a dance artists or collective is rare, if existent. Is that because it is the only dance work they approve of, or is it the only dance history they are aware of? As if dance stopped evolving in the 70's, and as if dance works that were made on an international scale over the last 40 years haven't influenced the visual arts and performance art dramatically. As if there were no dance works made in public spaces that have influenced public art practices. As if dance did not have an influence on the "social turn". As if dance isn't itself the expression and embodiment of "relational aesthetics". If the interest of

the visual arts (world) in dance isn't one-sided, if it is actually interested and curious about dance, it has the responsibility to acknowledge dance history and invest itself in making such connections as to trace the influence of dance on the evolution of visual arts (discipline), one which has gradually led to this potential coming together. Otherwise we run into the danger of the visual arts (world) assimilating dance as if its practice and knowledge was always part of its own constitution, whereby they can feel free to interpret it as their own current innovation.

Visual art expresses itself through a variety of medias, whose list seems endless: paint, clay, video, cinema, sound, music, dance etc. Visual artists do hire dancers or non-dancers as their media and make arrangements of bodies in space, putting on choreographer's shoes, i.e. Marina Abramovic, Phil Collins, Santiago Sierra. Choreographers then, should be able to do the same without having to change their names, i.e. Tino Sehgal, or it should be made clear that we are all contemporary artists, visual artists and choreographers alike. Our practices may come from a research of movement, colors, photography, or found sounds, regardless the source of the inspiration or the motivation of the research. We should all be considered equally for curatorial initiatives as contemporary artists operating in our respective disciplines or realm of media with the same status and level of support in contemporary arts museums. What is contemporary art anyway? Does it limit itself to the "visual" sense? And what makes it contemporary? Writer and curator Andre Lepecki sums it up, "The inclusion of dance in an art project today is that necessary gesture which allows it to affirm about itself: this is so contemporary!"

In which case, choreographers should not be made part of entertainment programs on the sidelines that have mini-budgets that are no match for real exhibitions in scope. Similarly, dancers should not be paid lower rates than security guards and security guards should not be paid those low rates either. If anything, security guards should be asked to take part in the museum environment and in the art that they "protect." They should be educated in it so their presence can participate in visitor's experience, instead of emanating an erased blackness that should be made invisible in a precious white space. This kind of observation may very well reflect the genuine social, political and economic insights the knowledge that dance as a discipline has to offer visual arts institution in response to its need for more life.

4) What might the meeting of dance and visual art at this time herald or reflect? Or, why is this happening now? What possibilities might it open for the future?

The visual arts (discipline, world) is interested in certain aspects of dance. It is not taking on dance. It will reject what it doesn't need or isn't interested in, and it will use what it needs. It may very well discard it all after it is done with it. But where there is interest, there is value. As dance artists, we are contributing important and needed content and knowledge to the "art market" which has once again reached its momentary conceptual limit, and with our creativity, we are providing new streams of financial revenues for art institutions that are significant, particularly when it comes to the overall concept of reviving

museums with performance as a marketing strategy. As dancers and choreographers, we must be able to see the scope of this externalized value. The demand for live content and various attributes of dance is growing and the landscape is changing at a faster rate than we might perceive it now, but dance's knowledge will be used to build a lot of aggregate value for the future of marketing, visual arts, education, health, technology, and many other industries. This is the time to demand our share of that value to reinvest it in our practice, community and infrastructures. We are the ones who LOVE dance, and are prepared to nurture it and develop it through research and practice, not only use it.

Immaterial experiences, unlike the material world, aren't finite. Experiential and physical knowledge is real, it can't be put on paper, erected, or traded in the same way as material; it can only be actualized, or realized through a practice, and it is a fundamental part of human culture. Protecting and supporting this aspect of culture in the context of a capitalist economy, which contradicts these values, is a great challenge and the most important responsibility of all involved in this discussion, whatever the ramifications may be.

***Noemie Lafrance** is an Earth citizen. Creatively, she expresses herself through the medium of live interactions; using medias such as performance, film, literature, diagrams, social gatherings, research and interventions. She is currently working as a "world choreographer," exploring complex systems in the context of a global reclaiming of the political and the economic space, the public space - choreographing a worldview beyond the anthropocentric and materialist views that define our political economy and our relation to ecology and life as humans today. In the past Lafrance has been known to work as a "site-specific choreographer" exploring the relationships of people and object's past, present, and future life in places, and reclaiming the public space as our common terrain for live exchanges. Lafrance also lends her creativity to the private sector as a mean of survival.*