

Something Like a Phenomenon

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The body phenomenon is the most difficult problem.

Martin Heidegger

You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste.

Marcel Duchamp¹

“Think Performance” argues a recent advertisement campaign for Lee Cooper denims, and it fits at least in two senses, like a second skin – “a natural stretch” – and to a significant canon within contemporary European dance.

The skin we can leave behind since that *stretch* of inscriptions has been made redundant by an agenda of cultural research, where *natural* is what we need to turn away from in favour of “translation”. The insistence on marginal narratives, must simply be addressed as a “towards”, adding *what/who/when*, not to arrive at its own aporia, and the incitement must indeed be unconditional².

But what about the second fitness, not of the skin, not even of the body but that of dance. A fitness articulated at a moment when hardly anybody bothers to enter the studio anymore. At least not before a piece, or to use a more contemporary terminology *proposal*, is *thought*, written and verified. *Utilise ta tête*, as Lipton Içetea has it. Why? not in the sense of use your head, has it become suspicious to hang out in a studio? The defiance of the studio must not be understood as a crossing out of the importance of dance or movement but of how “studio” envelopes what a choreography is and through what methods it can be created. A choreographer today needs the studio to the same extent that a visual artists does or does not need a scaffold. Any tool is relevant as long as it can be conceptually verified, which however must not be mistaken for being a piece of art in and through itself, a mistake not uncommon where hightech crosses the body and its movements. The exclusion of the studio as well as the return of the studio are two complementary ways of cancelling out possibilities, in the simple relationship between a social, in the sense of conventions, space and a space of apparatuses, of interpretation³. In other words, not to arrive to the studio proper functions as a means for the possibility to articulate choreography in respect of a radically different or other mode or perception.

Think performance is thus not a deviation away from the body. Paradoxically an interest for language and its conditions in relation to the moving body has put the body, but another body, in the centre of this very inquiry. It is not any longer the body of inscriptions that is being revealed but the discourses of that very revealing. Do we perhaps experience a shift away from analysis towards diagnosis, where “the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our

¹ Pierre Cabanne: *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, (New York, 1971), p. 48.

² See Slavoj Žižek: *On Belief*, (New York, 2001), p. 20 and 148-151.

³ See Jacques Rancière: *Eleven Theses On Politics*, (Paris, 2000).

identity by means of interplay of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourse, our history the difference of time, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is [the] dispersion that we are and make.”⁴

This other body, however, is multiplicit, not only as cliché – what it can be or become - but also concerning its duration – what it possesses⁵. This body is not only a becoming body [Deleuze & Guattari], but also a *mise-en-corps* avoiding, or **a-voiding**, border, *Grenze*, transformed to be ‘with’ and ‘in’ its own splitting, *die Mit-Teilung der Grenze*⁶, becoming an osmotic body functioning not as manifestation (in an architectural sense) but as currency, a fluidity and flooding. It is a body on the move but without direction which continuous translations and inscriptions contracts value, value that in itself is fluid and floating in as far as the body is not a medium, and that it does not designate substance; but that it expresses the relationship between forces⁷. This body is certainly not new or for that matter subversive, recently Lacoste brought it one step further into a global marketing economy, from *think performance* to “Become what you are”, a move that brings to mind the evolution of the computer game heroin Lara Croft, that from having been a digital subject, existing only through the movements and decisions of the player/director, to an analogue – flesh and blood - heroin on the cinema screen, available only as performer/actor.

The resistance, exemplified by not entering the studio, towards a deeply rooted, to generalise slightly, cliché that dance and the dancing body somehow is responsible for an exchange of expressive emotions, from the body of the dancer to the one of the perceiver, does not in any sense exclude emotion. On the contrary as the French choreographer Xavier Le Roy recently said in a post-talk to his performance “Product of Circumstances”, “emotion is always there, whether I want it or not” – the concern is simply not, how can the body represent or provoke this or that particular emotion, but rather what specific emotion(s) emerge from what body in what context, and nowhere else⁸. This slide towards a specificity of (the) body(ies), allows it/them to become not just a carrier of discourse, but to state itself as discourse, as *Mit-Teilung* which maintains its particularity but does not insist on its imagined ‘independence’, referring to gender, ethnicity, identity, economy, violence etc. Perhaps has the body on the moves, already performed its silent uprising to (be)come, as a virulent choreography combining caricature and radicalism in a frontal assault on the reigning hypocritical ethics of the body.

If dance, we again have to generalise, over the last 30 years on the one hand has been occupied with the transformations of techniques into utterances, utilising different loosely organised grammatologies to propose extra-discursive topographies where the danced utterance takes place, thus positions it outside the realm of an archive. In other words as

⁴ Michel Foucault: *The Archeology of Knowledge*, (London, 1995), p. 131.

⁵ The body in and as itself can not be owned, it can be ascribed to and inscribed in, but this *is* not the body but instead that of the body that can be understood as, so to say, under the law, or in other words the token body inscribed in the archive. The body however possesses time, equivalent to Jacques Derridas position of time as itself withdrawal, “Time... gives nothing to see. It is at the very least the element of invisibility itself. It withdraws whatever could be given to be seen. It itself withdraws from visibility. One can only be blind to time, to the essential *disappearance* of time even as, nevertheless, in a certain manner, nothing *appears* that does not require and take time.” (Jacques Derrida: *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, p. 6, quoted in “Becomings, Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures” ed. Elizabeth Grosz, (New York, 1999), p. 1.

⁶ The concept *Mit-teilung* has been adopted from Werner Hamacher, see Werner Hamacher: *Amphora*, in Triptyk, ed. S-O Wallenstein, (Stockholm, 1992).

⁷ See Dorothea Olkowski: *Flows of Desire and The Body-Becoming*, in “Becomings, Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures” ed. Elizabeth Grosz, (New York, 1999), p. 98-103.

⁸ See Michel Foucault: *Archeology of Knowledge*, (London, 1995), p. 28.

presentation, not representation. What we can see emerge over the last five years within European dance is an aspiration not to seek below what manifests the half silent murmur of another, which might or might not be an extra-discourse, but exactly the very body that Gilles Deleuze proposes in his book on Nietzsche:

... the body is always the fruit of chance /.../ and appears as the most “astonishing” thing much more astonishing, in fact, than consciousness and spirit. But chance, the relation of force with force, is also the essence of force. The birth of a living is not therefore surprising since every body is living, being the “arbitrary” product of the force of which it is composed.⁹ A number of choreographers have instead taken as their point of departure to show why choreography could not be other than it is, in what respect it is exclusive of any other and how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy. The question proper to such an analysis is not, following Michel Foucault’s proposal in “The Archaeology of Knowledge” (1972), “what was being said in what was said”, but “what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else”¹⁰, where we naturally understand ‘said’ also as a choreographic utterance.

A consequence of this shift towards a critical posture in relation to representations of the body is furthermore a shift from statement and its complexity (a shift one must not read as a shift towards didactics) to the function of an utterance operating in a discursive field and its complexity. This, according to Foucault, is a radical break with paradigms of fundamentally dialectical type, and also with logical and pragmatic paradigms, entering what he calls the paradigm of **enunciative** function. Foucault postulates a discursive unit that can be distinguished from the sign, from the sentence, and from the proposition. With “unit” Foucault mean a basic element that one or other methodological mode would reveal. This unit Foucault insists does not exist, but this very non-existence brings to life a mode of existence of signs **insofar** as they are stated and not insofar as they signify, of sentences insofar as they are stated and not insofar as they are grammatical, of propositions insofar as they are stated and not insofar as they are logical. It is this function of existence of the **statement**, recognised by the simple fact of having been uttered, that he calls **enunciative** function. It operates in the discursive field, or should we even say it operates *as* the discursive field.¹¹

Within visual art the **enunciative** function is closely connected to Marcel Duchamp and the **appearance** of the readymade. The capacity of the readymade, within the discourse of Thierry De Duve over Michel Foucault, is exactly this slide from signifying/grammatical/logical to **stated**, or less aggressive uttered. The readymade emerges out of the transposition into statements of the type “here is...” or “this is...”, and it is in this very transposition that the readymade functions, once it is admitted as art. The readymade is an object, e.g. a bottle rack that does nothing else but show itself without further questions. This statement configures not an analysis of thought as always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs, but it poses a motivation to state “This is art”, and what it says for itself in its particularity, it says for the work of art in general.¹²

⁹ Gilles Deleuze: *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, (London, 1986), p. 40.

¹⁰ See Michel Foucault: *Archeology of Knowledge*, (London, 1995), p. 26-30.

¹¹ See Thierry de Duve: *Echoes of Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism*, in “The Duchamp Effect” ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, (New York, 1986), p. 97.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 99-100.

Duchamp didn't turn down the work of art through its **enunciative** function and its interpretation has not been done out methodological artifice. The **enunciative** condition is valid for the work of art in general. "This is a work of art" is scribbled on everything that is called art and a readymade is nothing but a work of art reduced to this very label and would not have been there if on the one hand it was not valid for every work of art and were not retroactively authorised by all other works of art, may it be what it wants. "To produce a ready made is to show it; to **transmit** a readymade is to make it change context; to enjoy a readymade is to wonder what it is doing in the museum."¹³

Not to put an -ism on a heterogeneity, is it perhaps possible to, not by family resemblance, style or context but rather on methodology and a certain ascetic, or necessarily sober operational mode, emphasise a shift from a **statemental** practice where "signify" is everything **towards**, what I would call, a "simple **enunciative**" practice in today's choreographic landscape. And can one see the necessity of this turn as a final departure away from a romantic gaze haunting dance and the understanding of choreography. Within the field of choreographic art we have seen more or less attractive revolutions take place: away from ballet, away from narrative and allegory, away from structure and form, away from emotion and allegory again, and you can probably name a few others, but choreography never **cleaned out** the house, and now here is where we start paying, in sweat, oh no... in thought and in an utterance "This is choreography".

With a bit of blunt humour one could perhaps say that this is the Duchamp effect in dance, towards the readymade (or *no longer*), and most of all a slight obsession with linguistic ambiguities and authorship (as well as authorisation). A turn most exquisitely shown, and over-done, in Jérôme Bel's "Xavier Le Roy", where a tendentially empty signifier is produced, which while **maintaining** the incommensurability between universal and particular, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.

An empty sign is of course a paradox, a concept introduced by Roland Barthes. An empty sign is simply not anymore, or has not yet become, a sign, and even if there were we would not allow it to be sustained as empty, but **would** continuously invest meaning, thus value, in the sign. Never the less, to reach for an empty sign, or invest in its failure, which is not synonymous with void which implies a collapse, or implosion, of meaning and value, either through an endless chain of intra referentiality, or through an unconditional indifference, is the possibility of a conceptual critique in at least four respects, both on what choreography is, or can be, and on the body, and its position in language.

First, to reject choreography/body as material (stable) object, a kind of dematerialisation that is obviously an important parameter in Xavier Le Roy's "Self-Unfinished", second, to reject choreography/body as an operation (*opus* in the sense of commodity) of an author or authorisational capacity, this is the whole notion in Jérôme Bel's "Le Dernier Spectacle" closely following Roland Barthes essay "The Death of the Author", thirdly, to reject choreography/body as visual phenomena, this is the counterpoint body of cyberspace, or even simply an internet body, which is, or can be, a freefloating body but not in the sense of disembodiment but as being in possession of "another" – not yet *incarnated* once more. This is a kind of "spiritualised materiality"¹⁴ which gives the user/spectator (remember Lara Croft) a free-ride to the object petit a, an open passage to unrestrained projection of desire, or simpler to hardcore pornography, and I mean h.a.r.d.c.o.r.e.

¹³ Ibid. p. 122.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek: *On Belief*, (New York, 2001), p. 55.

But as Žižek argues there is an ultimate lesson in relation to cyberspace, “not only do we lose our immediate material body, but we learn that there *never was* such a body – our bodily self-experience was always-already that of an imaginary constituted entity.”¹⁵ And forthly, to reject choreography/body as institutionalised value, which in the field of choreography best can be exemplified through Xavier Le Roy’s project “E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S.” which not only deconstructs the theatre and the market (especially in E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S 2.7, Berlin), but also the body and its discipline, even more clearly addressed by Christine de Smedt in the project “9x9”, re-created for and performed by 81 different participants in each new venue (commonly amateurs).

However, the maintained incommensurability in e.g. “Xavier Le Roy”, where even measure based on relations to the human being is deconstructed (I am here thinking particularly of the part where a distance is measured according to the length of a foot), remains inscribed in a discourse that still maintains a contractual condition at least to the extent of formulating a dichotomy between transmitter and receiver (this discourse can naturally not be escaped), in respect of not problematising the ontological difference – *what we do up here is not the same as you guys down there* – between stage and auditorium, at least as event in and as itself. To insist on adequate interpretation adequate to the utterance exactly contemporaneous equals utopia.

This dichotomy is the very centrefold of performance today, we find ourselves at a crossroad where what “emerges from what is said and nowhere else” needs to expand into a terrain where the particular is allowed to bring about the generalisation of the relations of representation as condition of the constitution of social order. The social here, as could also be said about the quality of the sign (non/empty) of “Xavier Le Roy”, and I would here add Boris Charmatz’s “Con Fort Fleuve”, does not only designate sets of relations, but also the lack of words for an adequate designation of them. Social designates a non-relation, the gap between words and things (actions/events) or between *nominations* and *classifications*. As long as this expansion is not articulated choreography, and performance, will find itself at the heart of anachronism pursued to its limits, which is an affirmation of the nonplace of the event that bears the name revisionism¹⁶. This would be “Xavier Le Roy”, not showing Micheal Jackson but being disguised as him.

It is however possible to turn not only the disguised Michael Jackson around but also to create a kind of meta-critique of the four steps of conceptual critique exemplified above. This would be to address the surface of the sign, as surface and nothing else, to invest in a, at least seeming, denial of any other meaning than first hand illustration, to create a plethora of interpretation, in the sense of giving over the utterance as indifference with an endless need for interpretation.

Interpretation, conventionally, has to do with an excess of words of and on a certain event, e.g. a performance, but interpretation has always already tried to substitute things for words and has let itself, in this very operation which is endless, be trapped by words. To propose a transparency of this endless chain of interpretations, to present a sign which emerges *not* from what is said but from nowhere else?¹⁷, is to lay bare the arbitrariness of the process of interpretation and to show how it gives significance and effect to an event or utterance, and how this process is continuously surpassed by another, a following. In Jérôme Bel’s “The

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 55.

¹⁶ See Jacques Rancière: *The Names of History*, (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 24-36.

¹⁷ See See Michel Foucault: *Archeology of Knowledge*, (London, 1995), p. 28, and especially “What is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?”.

Show Must Go On”, which to a large extent is a tragedy not only through its topic but also in its dramaturgical form (it follows a perfect artistotelian model), interpretation becomes painfully visible as the foreground, the surface, it is of events and words that must always be extracted from the lies of their appearance¹⁸ ..

However, the use of sign as sign and nothing but the sign, creating indifference through multiplicity, does not offer a derived critique but maintains its force only and just as spectacle. “The Show Must Go On” is social, at its most, but carries no wish to be critical, but with its “Just do it”-pathos it offers itself to the threat of homonymy, as a critique.

What neither of both capacities can offer is a cancelling out of ontological difference, and as long as this difference is maintained choreography is living under the threat of anachronism, which it already experiences. This step has been taken by among others Tom Plischke, both in his first group project “Event For Television (again)”, but thematically more stringent in “Resort” where the audience are invited to co-create the spectacle, both as explicit performers but more important as transported to an other level of self-inspection. It is within this sphere of blurred boundaries that the sign, as occupation, can lose its significance and instead formulate a direction of a possible political or ethical re-staging of lieu (place/scene) in and as itself. Where the empty sign, creating a kind of social necessity, and the surface of the surface of the sign as interpretation can fold in on itself. Social, thus, designates the distance of words and events from their truth, which is nonverbal and does not pertain to events. Interpretation poses, here, a certain geography (cartography) of lieu(x), where there are facts that do not belong to the performative order but require a performative act, non other than interpretation¹⁹ and this “interpretation” is synonymous to the equation between the performative and the archive. The archive is the extension of a memory which demands visible or material traceable remains. The archive is both the determining capacity of the creation of language and memory and the architecture of the law, or the power over memory. The “performative act, non other than interpretation” is giving access to relations between the archive’s *demand that performance disappear* and its need to be constantly reperformed, to be kept alive. Its endless struggle to grasp, to place performance, as the appearance of material, as “authentic”, and its dependance of repetition, necessarily embodied, and arguably always performative. “This body, given to performance, is arguably not disappeared but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance /.../ as indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining²⁰ .

Finally with a held back wish to proceed into a political without stumbling on quality of expression – the simple enunciative utterance reaching for the universal creates a tendentially empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular. It is in a matter of a-voiding and simultaneously of *Mit-Teilung*, through which very emptiness, a series of crucial effects in the structuralisation of social relations is produced.

An episode from the past interests us only inasmuch as it becomes an episode of the present wherein our thoughts, actions, and strategies are decided... What interests us is that ideas be

¹⁸ See Jacques Rancière: *The Names of History*, (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 32-34.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Rebecca Schneider: *Things Seen Once, Seen Again*, non-published paper delivered at the Univeristy of Gie_en, Germany, 14 April 2000, p. 3-4.

events, that history be at all times a break, a rupture, to be interrogated only from the perspective of the here and now, and only politically.²¹

That universality is not a speakable language, and its articulation does not imply that an adequate language is available. It means only that when we speak its name, we do not escape our language, although we can - and must – push its limits.

In der flucht werden Leeren Mitgeteilt, it is a kind of rendezvous.

²¹ *Révoltes logiques* collective, “Deux ou trois choses que l’historien ne veut pas savoir,” *Le Mouvement social*, 100 (July-Sept. 1977), quoted in Jacques Rancière: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, (Sanford, 1991), p. xxi.