

**ART  
&  
PERFORMANCE  
NOTES**



Noëmi Lakmaeir. March 2011. Photo: © Manuel Vason. Courtesy Live Art Development Agency.

# DANCING IN THE MUSEUM

**Johannes Birringer**

*Move: Choreographing You*, an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London, October 13, 2010–January 9, 2011; *Dance with Camera*, an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas, August 7–October 17, 2010.

For the longest time, museums have found it unnecessary or inappropriate to curate performance as part of their exhibition programs. Thus the history of performance and its connection to the visual arts remained a lacuna in the Western fine arts archive. Video art and time-based media (often presented in installations if not in separate film/video programming) gradually changed the perception of what is collectible in the museum, and video installations have become a regular feature in exhibition contexts. But as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, dance and live art seem to have arrived on the scene in full force. A range of shows testifies to this belated acknowledgement of the significance of performance for the discourse on art.

MoMA offered its first retrospective of a performance artist last year (Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*). The Guggenheim has, on occasion—e.g., *Seven Easy Pieces* in 2005—followed the

example of the Walker Art Center and the Wexner Center, two contemporary art museums that have always included theatre and dance in their programming. The Centre Pompidou now has regular programs in dance, theatre, and performance, while the Tate Modern and other European museums have also staged live events and appointed performance curators. The Whitney Museum presented the two-part *Off the Wall* (July–October 2010), with *Part 1* displaying an installation of actions using the body in live performance, in front of the camera, or in relation to photography and drawing. *Part 2* featured seven works by the Trisha Brown Dance Company from the sixties and seventies, the historical era that initially witnessed the vibrant crossover avant-garde context for the works exhibited in *Off the Wall: Part 1*.

The two shows under review therefore fall into a trend and shouldn't come as a surprise, especially if one recalls that "actions" and live interventions were

not unheard of in earlier days, when the generation of Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, or Alison Knowles and her Fluxus comrades would perform their presence in the work. Likewise, the conceptual and video art pioneers of the day created their often uncategorizable installations mixing performance with video, sculptures, drawings, and objects. Sculptural installations, many of them created by visual artists, formed the backbone of the Hayward Gallery's *Move: Choreographing You*, a populist undertaking addressing the visitor-as-interactor directly through its arrangements of participatory "scenes" involving physical reactions, explorations of materials and objects, and sensory experiences. The physical behavior required from the visitor ranged from the moderately banal or playful—walking through a long narrow corridor by Bruce Nauman or balancing on Robert Morris's plain plywood see-saw, picking up a hula hoop and twirling it around your waist—to the more complex and exerting, for example in William Forsythe's *The Fact of Matter*, a large installation of gymnastic rings suspended at varying heights from the ceiling that invited you to climb into and clamber through them.

Entering the exhibition, one first encountered Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* (1970), which forced you to walk sideways through a very narrow space, a constraining task that is then followed by waiting in line for your solo entrance into Lygia Clark's *The House is the Body*. A small dark cabin awaits you; you are suddenly alone, realizing the intimacy of the tunnel-like space and the manner in which the subsequent cells (filled with balloons, air, long strips of hair, and

small colorful balls) activate your different senses, especially tactile perceptions. The sections of Clark's tunnel, originally built in 1968, are named "Penetration," "Ovulation," "Germination," and "Expulsion," their psychological effect intended to reconnect us with birth and childhood. Nearby, several foldable chairs (La Ribot's *Walk the Chair*), inscribed with different messages, waited to be moved around.

The two installations at the entrance, as unremarkable as they appear at first, spell out Rachel Rosenthal's curatorial vision for this exhibition, installed on two floors and given a visual rhythm through a sequence of beautiful white concertina screens (designed by Amanda Levet Architects) that float like sails in the space and divide or connect the disparate installations. Ostensibly examining the interaction of art and dance since the 1960s, Rosenthal's selection of works draws largely on sculpture and installation art, sets, and objects that can be played with or that "theatrically" emphasize their materiality in the manner that Michael Fried abhorred when writing on "art and objecthood" in 1967, bemoaning that minimalism denied the viewer a proper aesthetic experience. The artists selected share an interest in physical experience and the relationship between bodies and space, even if their connection with choreography is quite tenuous or non-existent. The exhibition plays with us and wants us to play with it, as if stepping into the footsteps of artists who "began exploring the world through their bodies as well as through their eyes," as Rosenthal said.

What this curatorial approach cannot quite deliver is a more detailed, in-depth



Top: Christian Jankowski, *Rooftop Routine*, 2007. Installation view of *Move: Choreographing You*. Bottom: Mike Kelley, *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses*, 1999. Photos: Alastair Muir. Courtesy of Hayward Gallery.



re-framing of choreographic processes in dance or of choreographic thinking (composition) as it evolved from, and superseded, the Judson Dance Theater era. The exhibition does try to suggest that the encounter between visual artists and dancers in the sixties redefined what one considered “dance,” connecting minimalism and task-based performance with the notion of the “choreographic object” recently introduced into the discourse by William Forsythe. As one of the few choreographers exhibited, however, Forsythe is represented by a peripheral installation and not by his main body of ensemble work and current research (as seen at <http://synchronousobjects.osu.edu/>). The latter, tellingly, could have revealed a great deal about how visual and digital artists today might converge imaginatively with movement composers; *Synchronous Objects* uncovers the interlocking systems of organization in Forsythe’s *One Flat Thing, reproduced* through a whole series of “objects” that work in harmony to explore choreographic structures and re-imagine what else they might look like.

I suspect that the Hayward Gallery opted to present installations as a go-between—“propositions” in the sense in which Lygia Clark’s *Elastic Net* (1973) functions as a curious “transitional object” for the spectators who get entangled in it, or Franz Erhard Walther’s fabric elements (reproductions of *I. Werksatz*, 1967) allow two visitors to hold each other’s balance as they lean backward with the stretched canvas wrapped around them. These simple objects become instruments for action, much as Mike Kelley’s *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses* (1999–2010) displays spectacularly vulgar toy-like sculptural

elements, apparently derived from the playroom objects used in experiments with primate affection conducted in the 1960s, here handed over nonchalantly to the public. This peculiar set was accompanied by a video projection showing the original display enclosed in a metal cage where some “dancers” pop up wearing monkey costumes and moving as if in a Martha Graham mythodrama. At the Hayward, some visitors lustily hacked away with baseball bats at the rubber punching balls, apparently enjoying the exercise of emotional abreaction or probing into their own exhibitionism. Some younger local dancers, sans monkey costume, pop up to start a conversation; when I inquired, they told me they followed a “choreographic task” by Mårten Spångberg, namely to engage visitors in a verbal or physical dialogue, “sculpting” a thought process.

Here, as so often in this exhibition, one couldn’t help but worry about the literal-mindedness of the playgrounds and soft-play areas, quite familiar to parents who take their children to ball pools and inflatables so that the varying tactile qualities stimulate the motor and cognitive development of inquisitive infants. Rather than interrogating the aesthetic outcomes of the different imaginations at play in collaborations between the Judson or Fluxus artists, or in later productions generated, for example, by Merce Cunningham, Bob Rauschenberg, Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Saburo Teshigawara, Jan Fabre, Robert Wilson, Romeo Castellucci, and other visual choreographers (not to mention the sound artists so influential in this collaborative arena), *Move* seems content to cater to sensibilities too easily seduced by the interactive.

Participation is a strange current fetish, however, and immersion in interactive environments can be quite challenging when the rules of the game or the emergent behaviors of a computational system are not known and visitors need to examine their assumptions. On an ideological level, this was the case in Tania Bruguera's *Untitled* (2002) installation, where anxiety moves you to feel like a political prisoner in dark isolation, with floodlights suddenly flashing on to blind you as invisible guards goose step on metal scaffolding above you, methodically cocking their guns. The aggressive political overtones of this piece were lost upon leaving the darkroom, as I stumbled across the hula hoops outside, then bumped into Boris Charmatz's self-indulgent *héâtre-télévision* (2002), another dark room where one person at a time can lie down on an elevated sofa to watch a small TV monitor showing an absurd mock performance of dance in a hall of mirrors.

There was a regrettable imbalance in this exhibit: one looked for ideas and could not find them displayed in ways that might illuminate why visual artists began to perform in their studios or Judson dancers embarked on their collaborations and what these new crossovers between dance and art meant for later generations of performance artists. The Judson's task-based performance credo is positioned into the history of visual art without any reference to major theatre artists who used choreography to very different ends (cf. Tadeusz Kantor, Pina Bausch, Meredith Monk, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, Elizabeth LeCompte). If Charmatz belongs to the current European wave of *Konzeptanz*, which subverts conventions of cho-

reography and resists movement, one would not have found out in this exhibition, even though today's conceptual choreographers—e.g. Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy—clearly echo the performance anti-aesthetic of the Judson era and interrogate the theatrical apparatus and the role of spectatorship. Fascinating critical, historical comparisons may have opened up if the Hayward had questioned its own participatory cliché and subjected the current fashion of relational aesthetics to some pressure, for example, by examining its politics while exposing the shallow notion of Spångberg's "living sculpture," and comparing it to the utopian political energies released by Beuys's enactments of *social sculpture* projects as catalyst for the transformation of society through the release of popular creativity.

It was even less evident why Isaac Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) was given such prominent gallery space in *Move*, unless its nine-screen video installation was meant to illuminate dispersed, fragmenting, and non-linear image-projections, here thematically tied to a haunting elaboration of stories about migration shot on location in China. Visitors to this room did not move around but quickly settled down on the floor, mesmerized by the stunning cinematography and overlapping perspectives (and some "making-of" scenes shot on the blue-screen stage). In contrast, OpenEnded Group delivered an on-site piece commissioned for the show, filmed in 3-D and projected as a triptych onto different wall levels of the stairwell. A collaboration with choreographer Wayne McGregor, *Stairwell*, was far out, a futuristic computational artwork of cascading, floating imagery that traces McGregor's

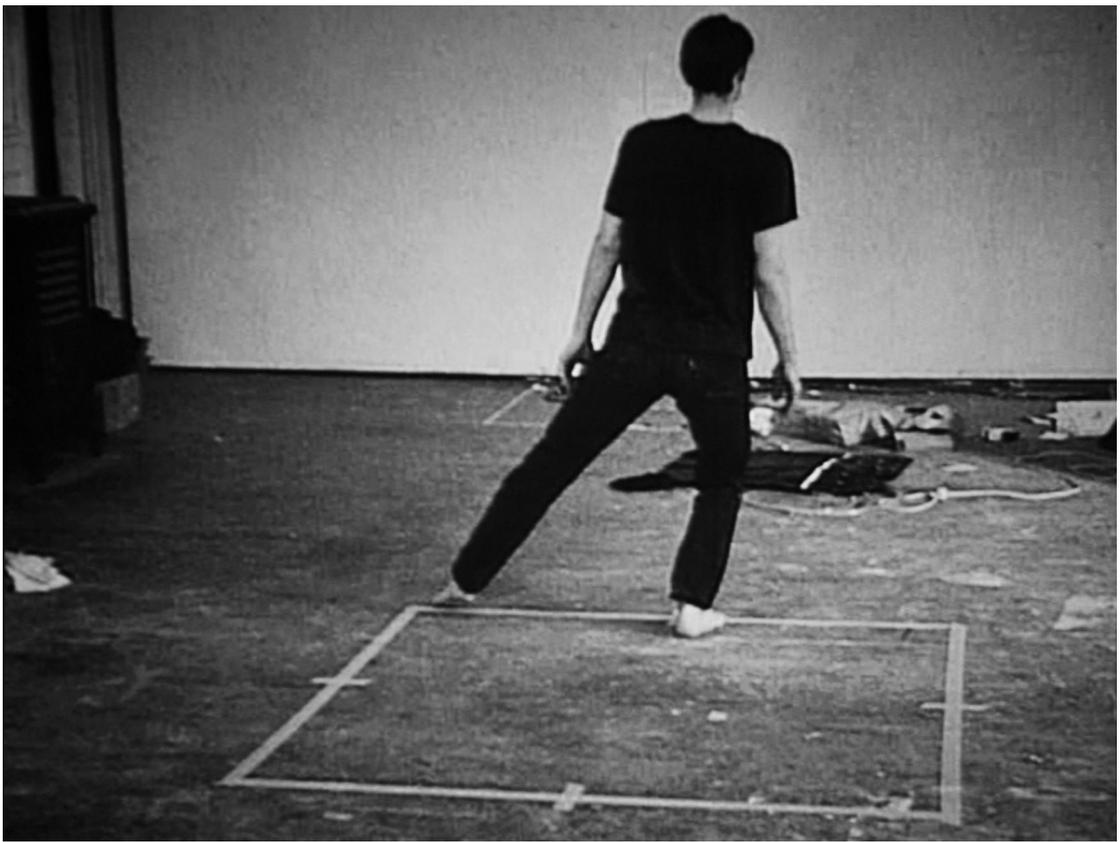
movements but nearly dissolves the human form into perplexing galaxies of light pixels, lava streams of a body without body, and sinewy grids whirling through a holographic cosmos. No explanation was given why this particular (non-interactive) piece was chosen from amongst the contemporary interactive choreographers and digital artists.

What the exhibition lacked, it tried to make up for by presenting live performances by several choreographers who turned up in November (Rosemary Butcher reinterpreting Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, alongside UK premieres of *Schrottplatz* by Thomas Lehmen, *Llamame Mariachi* by La Ribot, Anne Collod's reinterpretation of Anna Halprin's *Parades & Changes, Replays*, and a new work by Xavier Le Roy) and also participated in a three-day symposium at Southbank Centre (November 26–28). Further historical contexture was delegated to the touch-screen video archive that accompanied the exhibition, containing works spanning the last six decades by nearly 150 artists, including Jackson Pollock, Vito Acconci, Yoko Ono, Yvonne Rainer, Rebecca Horn, Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, Dan Graham, Eiko & Koma, and Bill T. Jones—a wondrous, wide-ranging collection of slides and short movie clips.

This archive corresponded, in some sense, to the visual media exhibition organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where curator Jenelle Porter had assembled an eclectic palette of videos, films, and photographs showing the close collaboration—she calls it *pas de deux*—between dancer and camera over the past half century (the

show originated at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania). While a longer historical record is acknowledged in the excellent catalogue, tracing filmic obsession with movement back to Edison, Méliès, Muybridge, the silent movie era, and the Hollywood musicals of the thirties and forties, *Dance with Camera* features Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) as the beginning proper of independent cinema framing and editing movement in ways that could not be done on stage. The new hybrid media, encompassing cinedance, video dance, music video, Web dance, and installation, has seen a remarkable evolution ever since, and the exhibition is elegantly designed as a dark showroom to make the most of its highly kinetic cinematic ambience. The contrasts between moving images and still photography work to their advantage, and the exhibit energizes the viewer physically and aurally, with the overlapping sound barely distracting from the overall richness of the different camera styles.

Throughout, attention is drawn less to choreography and the principles of movement organization in space and time, but to the recording medium's ability to transform them, to use its own kinetic potentials of the lens, camera angles, camera motion, light, optical techniques, and the pacing of editing and montage or any number of currently available digital post-production effects. One of the early pioneers, Amy Greenfield—whose video *Transport* (1971) is shown alongside Hilary Harris (*Nine Variations on a Dance Theme*, 1966), Ed Emshwiller (*Thanatopsis*, 1962), and Charles Atlas (*Fractions I*, 1977)—had always pointed out that film dance is the



Top: Bruce Nauman, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967–68. 16mm film, black-and-white, sound, 10 minutes. Photo: Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York. Bottom: Installation view of *Dance with Camera* at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: © Rick Gardner Photography.



opposite of the documentation of live dance, but it is also revealing to observe how approaches by choreographers who work with the camera differ from visual artists or music video directors and the new wave of Internet artists uploading vernacular performance imagery to YouTube (an example of the latter is Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*, 2009). As in *Move*, we are treated to Bruce Nauman and Mike Kelley; Andy Warhol's campy *Paul Swan* (1965, complete with lengthy costume changes) aligns well with Eleanor Antin's *Caught in the Act* (1973), a series of photographs in which the artist poses as a ballerina having learned attitudes from reading a book.

The more recent work tends to be less captivating, as video dance using outdoor locations or veering into sports, game culture, and the business world (e.g. A.L. Steiner and Robbinschild, Sharon Lockhart, Uri Tzaig, Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom) tends to descend too quickly into the kind of viral clichés that have become standardized in music video, with its quick, frenetic cuts, and now in the slower low-res YouTube universe of narcissistic video amateurs pointing their webcams at themselves. *Dance with Camera* obviously wants to be ecumenical, presenting us with a broad spectrum of independent and folk camera work, yet I found myself drawn to the brilliance of the dancing in William Forsythe's *Solo* (1997), and thus to the camera's effort to capture complex and exacting dance ideas of this most fleeting and ephemeral art, which in some cases may not even be visible to the naked eye or may elude our rational consciousness and our assumptions about what constitutes transcendence or the sublime.

Striking examples in the exhibit were Norman McLaren's *Pas de Deux* (1968), which uses special optical printing techniques to "choreograph" nearly abstracted motions of bodies; Bruce Conner's similarly abstract and experimental *Breakaway* (1966); and Joachim Koester's powerfully disturbing *Tarantism* (2007), a 16mm black and white film installation exploring the tarantella ritual or dancing cure of frenzied, trance-like dancing: bodies are flailing with uncontrolled spasms and convulsions as if insanely beside themselves. Then we realize the cathartic "ritual" is not real but staged.

Tacita Dean contributed a moving salute to stillness and the late Merce Cunningham, whom she shot sitting silently on a chair in a dance studio in 2007 (interpreting John Cage's legendary "4'33")—a poignant memorial to two artists who influenced much of the history of crossover art, here in *Dance with Camera* again knotted to the sixties Judson era and its significance as a "bridge" between visual arts, music, and performance (Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* from 1966 is given a prominent place alongside Trisha Brown dancing her *Water Motor* in Babette Mangolte's slow-motion treatment). *Dance with Camera* is nothing but eye-opening in many respects, and the contemporary museum here offers a possibility of showing movement (unlike the screenings at dance film festivals) through installations that let viewers experience dance in many transformations, repeatedly and insistently through the long duration of its display and sedimentations in the movement-image archive of performance culture. More chapters need to be curated to write this history

of the ideological complexity of the apparatuses of filmic/digital reconfigurations of movement and the mutable body, especially if exhibitions like the Hayward's *Move* proclaim the museum's

intention to "choreograph" the viewer's (re)enactment/imitation of the repertoire of physical tasks and kinesthetic experiences.

---

JOHANNES BIRRINGER is a contributing editor to *PAJ* and director of the Design and Performance Lab at Brunel University, London. His recent *Performance, Technology, and Science* is a PAJ Publications title.