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IN PLACE OF A WORK.

NOTES ON PHOTOGRAPHS OF A DANCE REHEARSAL

by Augusto Corrieri

"Dance is hard to see. It must either be made less fancy, or the fact of that intrinsic difficulty must be emphasised to the point that it becomes almost impossible to see."
Yvonne Rainer

Prologue: by way of the accidental

There is a particular accident that occasionally takes place at the end of a theatre show, and which most of us have experienced, either as spectators or as performers. The lights have faded to black, the last action has been performed, and it is clear to everyone that the show is over; but, for some reason, the applause doesn't start. Sitting in silence, people are slightly unsure as to what to do. Some turn their heads to look at the others, for the first time; some bring their hands together, very slowly, the tips of their fingers barely touching. Everyone anxiously waits for that lone member of the audience who will take it upon him or herself to start clapping, thus bringing the silence to an end.

This brief moment of uncertainty can be easily dismissed as irrelevant, on the basis that it bears no relation to the actual work: it is an accident, an awkward interval in which "nothing is happening".

But it is clear to everyone that, in fact, something is happening. Simply put: there is nothing to see, but a lot is taking place. Authored by no one, a muted crisis unfolds invisibly in the space, implicating both performers and spectators: everybody pays close attention, in the attempt to understand both the situation and their place within it. It becomes painfully (or playfully) obvious that everyone present is caught inside a kind of mechanism: namely, the mechanism of theatre itself.

Accidents, mistakes, and failures stalk the theatre, which, through rehearsal and preparation, works hard at creating the impression of an event in which everything is pre-determined, and nothing is left to chance. An accident such as a dancer losing his or her balance, producing unintentional laughter in the audience, is feared because it opens up onto a field outside of the makers' *intention*. The accident literally upstages the work; and, by falling prey to circumstance, the work is seen to fail (and will probably get a bad review)¹.

It is interesting to consider the language we use when speaking of a "bad" performance; think of expressions such as: "the performers didn't know what they were doing", "it just didn't go anywhere, the whole piece was put together haphazardly", "one thing just randomly followed another". These sentences reveal less about the work and more about our own aversion towards the element of chance: we want performance to be a "well constructed" object that "holds together".

¹ In traditional theatre, actors and dancers must prepare a lot in order to minimise the possibility of things going wrong. In the realm of live art and contemporary performance, with its insistence on failure and unpredictability, there is equally an element of preparation that seeks to reduce the element of chance: it is the infamous 'risk assessment form'. In its endless quest to identify the possibility of an accident or injury, risk assessment effectively trivialises performance, dramatically reducing its potential to be anything other than what we want it, or allow it, to be.

The accidental – this indeterminate “other” of the theatre – reminds us of that irreducible margin of unknown that we cannot account for, no matter how much we hone in on our intentions, ideas, creativity, skills, and bodies.

The accidental has very little to do with mistakes and errors. As in John Cage’s sentence: “There can be no consideration of error... things are always going wrong”.

By attending to accidents, we engage with a different quality of attention altogether, less interested in intentional effects (what is *meant* to happen), absorbed instead by what happens to be happening. We move towards an anonymous choreography of actions and states, which can never be properly traced back to a subject; we engage with a kind of weather event, as in the expression “it is raining”, where the “it” of the sentence refers to no one and nothing in particular².

For the last 3 years, I have tried to approach performance by way of the accidental. Looking for ways of working that fall prey to the indeterminate. So as to have less and less to show, to do, to say. To discretely shove oneself out of the way. To resist the heaviness of ideas, creativity and skills, and to make space for the rain. To get soaked, completely soaked, in an event of a million droplets. To make it impossible to dissociate the weather from the landscape.

I’d like to think that I’ve been moving towards a kind of impossible object, in place of a work: a performance that isn’t “made” (by performers, directors, or spectators), but that is wholly the product of circumstance: a rarefied entanglement, a continuous series of accidents that performers and spectators must constantly navigate and make sense of.

Photographs of a dance rehearsal

Commissioned by Camden Arts Centre, *Photographs of a dance rehearsal* was presented there over three days in May 2008.

The piece rests on a simple rule, or logic.

Five dancers are inside a large room of the gallery for 3 hours. They are “privately” improvising together, playing with movement and voice possibilities. Whenever a visitor opens the door of the room and steps inside to see the work, the dancers stop: they are “paused” by the arrival of the spectator, who can then wander around the space, for as little or as long as they like, watching the frozen bodies of the dancers. When the spectator leaves the room, the dancers resume.

Simply put, the spectator never gets to see the dancers at work: the “show” (the dancing) literally stops each time someone enters the space. You can’t really watch or catch it happening: it’s over, or it hasn’t started yet. Either way, there isn’t anything to see. In place of a performance, we are left with a kind of photograph: a still arrangement of bodies in space, arrived at by chance.

The work, then, is the interruption of the dance; it is the way in which spectators negotiate their time in and out of the room, structuring their own experience of a dance that cannot be seen.

Theatre phantoms

Before making this piece, I had always chosen to work inside theatre spaces, and within the formal constraints of “a show”. I have privileged this context because it offers clear and tangible *limits*: there are clear demarcations separating, for example, stage and auditorium, performers and spectators, but also light and darkness, what can and what cannot be shown, pre-show and show time, etc. On the one hand, these limits constrain

² The “it rains” is described by Paul Auster in *White Spaces*, an essay written after watching a friend’s dance rehearsal.

performance; on the other, they are what allow for performance to exist in the first place. I have constantly relied on these limits, treating them as sites of investigation, working on them, reversing them, extending them; never with a desire to “break them”, always wanting instead to see how, *within* these rules, one can produce a new situation for the audience: one which implicates spectators in the work, and therefore invites them to look more closely at what it taking place.³

Although sited in a gallery, *Photographs of a dance rehearsal* still operates within the limits of the theatrical.

Nowhere in the piece is ‘the theatre’ invoked as a space: there is no stage, there are no theatre curtains, lights, chairs, wings, and so on; at best, the large gallery room at Camden Arts Centre vaguely recalled a dance studio, with its wooden floors and tall windows.

Therefore we might say: we are not in a theatre, we are outside of that system of rules. And yet, much in the same way that we do not leave language by remaining silent, we could say that we do not leave the mechanism of theatre by simply being outside of an actual theatre space.

A case in point: the first day we presented this work, a group of about 15 people turned up at the exact start time, despite the piece being advertised as durational and 3 hours long: people were clearly expecting a beginning of some kind, a classical start to the dance performance. I think these spectators were very disappointed when they walked in the space, all at once, to find five still dancers.

No matter how much we have moved away from theatrical conventions (and of course we have), the old fashioned mechanism of theatre is invoked and reproduced each time there is a performance, of whatever kind; like phantoms, the limits of the theatrical endlessly haunt the space, structuring and delimiting our experience of the event.⁴

I would next like to name some of these phantoms, and briefly describe how they operate within *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*.

- Phantom n. 1: beginning and ending

There is a basic rule for staging performance, which has to be respected in order for theatre to work: when the audience arrive, the show begins; and, conversely, when the show ends, the audience leave.

In *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, the rule is reversed, functionally and plainly: when the audience arrive, the show ends; when they leave, it begins again.

The reversal effectively creates a new rule, which once again structures and defines the event, and has to be respected in order for the piece to work; in a sense, it is exactly the same as the traditional theatre convention, except that its terms are swapped round.

There is however a difference: here the rule is clearly exposed, as opposed to being treated as a given and remaining hidden. Spectators are made aware of the mechanism at stake: and this awareness multiplies the ways in which the work is approached.

For example, when presenting this piece some spectators would play a game similar to ‘grandmother’s footsteps’: they would try and catch the performers moving by repeatedly

³ An example, from 2007, is *Solo duet solo*. In this piece, the performer invites a member of the audience to sit on a chair on stage. The performer teaches the spectator a simple tune, a musical accompaniment. Then, the performer executes a dance solo in the space, whilst the spectator watches and sings the musical accompaniment. The performer then teaches the dance to the spectator, going over every move in detail, as in a dance class. In the last scene, the performer sits on the chair, singing the tune, whilst the spectator performs the dance solo from start to finish.

It’s not a piece about breaking the barrier between performer and spectator; the barrier, or limit, is playfully exploited to another end: to invite people to look more closely at the movements of the two bodies, to observe the differences, the “accidents”.

⁴ See Chapter 4 of *Exhausting Dance*, in which Andrè Lepecki describes an instance of a gallery performance by La Ribot, which is “sabotaged” by the awkward appearance of a theatrical proscenium arch.

closing and then immediately opening the door, leaving the dancers an interval of 2 or 3 seconds in which to move before having to pause again. Other spectators revisited the piece several times over the three hour period, returning again and again to be in that still space. And others just peeked inside the room, hesitantly observed the scene for 30 seconds or less, then closed the door, never to return to the work.

- Phantom n. 2: spectacle

By flatly denying the audience the pleasure of watching moving bodies, this piece may seem to take an "anti-spectacular" stance. And yet, despite its indirect or minimal approach, it nevertheless engages a notion of spectacle: once inside the room, without a dance to clearly entertain us, we are forced to look for something else to look at; that is, we have to engage with the act of looking itself. And because the meaning of the word spectacle is rooted in "looking" and "seeing", it seems appropriate to say that this piece is "spectacular".

Inside the paused room, the stillness and silence merely act as echo chambers for small movements and sounds, amplifying them, multiplying them, creating a kind of extravaganza of accidental details. Far from being still, the dancers' bodies are in constant movement; there is always a trembling, a breathing, an eye focusing, an eye-growing-impossibly-watery: a "small dance" of the body subtly shifting weight and adjusting its position so as to avoid discomfort⁵.

The paused room is a "place of seeing", which is the exact definition of the word theatre. In this theatre, however, our gaze isn't directed or straightforwardly given things to see; our attention can drift, moving from one thing to another, leaving then returning. There is the possibility of being equal to whatever is taking place; the possibility of observing something un-intentionally: that is, without the need to satisfy the demands that we normally ask of performance: to be moved, to be inspired, to be entertained, to be angered, to be challenged, to be surprised, etc.

There is the possibility of engaging what André Lepecki calls 'the most urgent choreography': "to sit, to listen, to be, to observe, to breathe, to think, to remember".⁶

- Phantom n 3: the spectator

In a conventional theatre show, aside from isolated moments of laughter and applause, audience members only have their say once the show is over, in an outpour of opinions and ideas gathered whilst sitting in the dark, watching the performance.

In *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, the audience's response is an integral part of the piece: each spectator is continuously (and tenuously) responding to the work, visibly signalling their likes and dislikes, their curiosity and their boredom.

The stillness of the dancers amplifies the movements of the spectator, bringing attention to the way people inhabit the room (sitting, standing), the way they walk around the performers, their facial expressions, their body language, and, generally, the way they cope with being spectators. What people "make of the work" is not reserved for a post-show discussion or late drinks at the bar: it is instantly inscribed in the space, as visibly and clearly as a ballerina's solo on an otherwise empty stage. Spectatorship becomes an observable phenomenon, impacting on the work and determining its (own) duration. And conversely, as in a feedback loop, the work measures the different lengths and qualities of spectatorship.

⁵ On one occasion, a visitor spent half an hour inside the room, to the great discomfort of the dancers. When she eventually walked out, she approached a gallery attendant and described what she'd seen, focusing on one detail in particular: one of the dancers had her arms stretched upwards, towards the ceiling; but over the course of 30 minutes, the dancer proceeded to lower them, almost imperceptibly, down to her sides.

⁶ Quoted in *The Little by Little Suddenly* by David Williams: www.sky-writings.blogspot.com

As a viewer, you become aware of the performative nature of your role. By walking into the room to see the work, you instantly partake in a contract: you are now responsible for the duration of the dancers' stillness, and you decide how long they will have to endure your presence. By being there you literally put and keep the dancers *in position*. Your presence changes the event, dramatically and unavoidably; you can of course leave the room at any time, but you can't go back to being an invisible observer, you can't just stay and watch. Because your presence changes everything.

The means produce the end

When setting out to make a performance piece, we are always already within a series of assumptions as to how to go about working. Usually, this implies rehearsal: for weeks or months on end, we go to a studio, generate and develop choreographies of actions and words, in order to then present our highly edited efforts to an audience. Whilst this process is legitimate, there are age-old assumptions concerning art and performance firmly lodged within it, mapping out in advance the possible routes; and so by working through a rehearsal process, we are bound to embody and reproduce those ideas. In order to invite the accidental into a performance, it may be necessary to change the means of production, so as to allow a different kind of event to emerge.

To make *Photographs of a dance rehearsal* I consciously avoided a standard rehearsal process. It is a kind of ready-made performance, a process-based event that tries to do away with the distinction between process and product.

On a pragmatic note, the performance took a couple of days of "preparation" (visiting the space, talking to the programmer), after which a call out for dancers was sent out: for each showing, we agreed to meet at the space on the day of the performance and chat about the piece just before presenting it.

And so a simple score, executed for three hours over three days, replaced a carefully composed object: we all got to see and be in the work for the first time as it was shown. The role of the artist/choreographer, as well as that of the performer, shifts somewhat in tone and volume. The work is not owned by its' makers; we inhabit it in order to execute it, but otherwise it has little to do with us (it doesn't "express" us). The piece is not a container in which we have supposedly put our developed ideas and themes; the work is flat, it contains nothing: its' task-based quality collapses any transcendental meaning into the immediacy of execution.

And because the spectators' response is immediately written into the piece, it stops being a source of anxiety: no need to pace about nervously, wondering whether people liked it or not.

Epilogue: in place of a work...

1. Send the standard process of devising and rehearsing on a long holiday trip, and spend time looking at what is possible in its absence.
2. Ask, over and over again: what is a work? what does an artist do?
3. Reduce performance to its bare minimum.
4. Take that bare minimum and dissolve it (somehow).
5. Stop making shows.
6. Retire early and practice becoming imperceptible.

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Silent references

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