

'An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed by them'  
Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture' (1996)

In 1885 Gilles de la Tourette first published his clinical profile of what is now commonly known as Tourette's syndrome. The study, writes the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, described 'an amazing proliferation of tics, spasmodic jerks, and mannerisms – a proliferation that cannot be defined in any way other than as a generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures.'

This catastrophe, proposes Agamben, wasn't limited to a handful of individuals, but rather extended to the whole of Western bourgeois society: it seems that 'at some point everybody had lost control of their gestures and was walking and gesticulating frantically'. The 20<sup>th</sup> century thus began by succumbing to interiority and psychology; the epoch could be described as 'the ballet of a human kind that has lost its gestures'.

Curator Catherine Wood referred to Agamben's essay on the loss of gesture to introduce 'Characters, Figures and Signs', two days of talks, presentations and performances at Tate Modern on February 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 2009. Opening the event, Wood proposed to consider the point at which 'dance' and 'art' might overlap, by looking at the ways in which certain values and assumptions of society are embodied, reproduced and performed through gesture; to consider the body, inevitably inscribed upon, as a carrier of signs, a crossroads of thoughts, histories, and negotiations, both personal and social. This is a choreography of the social sphere, always already bound with politics (as analysed by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler).

Over the two days, several national and international artists and researchers used the format of the performance-lecture to address different relations between 'saying' and 'doing', language and gesture.

Taking on the role of chronicler of a European dance scene that has been flourishing since the 90's, Bojana Cjević focused her presentation - *Lay Dances, Manifest Choreographies* - on a handful of dance artists and works that propose an untrained or 'stumbling' body, an approach which offers new emancipatory possibilities to both the audience and the performer.

We are shown a bare theatre stage, plainly lit, and a lone female dancer, dressed casually in jeans, t-shirt and trainers: a 'non-costume' which has, for some years now, typified a certain deconstructive approach to dance. We are watching a video extract from *Giszelle* by Eszter Salomon, made in collaboration with Xavier LeRoy. The solo female dancer cuts between clearly recognisable 'signs'; in a striking sequence, we see a left-to-right evolution of man: an ape on all fours slowly gaining verticality, eventually coming to standing, walking, and finally performing Michael Jackson's moonwalk. Drawing on a culturally shared repertoire of gestures and bodies (Madonna, Michael Jackson, Giselle), the piece is a kind of 'charades' dance performance: the performer's body organises itself to produce acts of recognition in the audience. In doing so, the work also creates a series of gaps in between each recognisable image, and it is in the passage between one cliché and another that we catch a glimpse of the body as not-yet inscribed, recognised, identified.

Similarly subjecting the body to a recognisable repertoire, Cjević described a stage performance by Tino Sehgal. The naked performer executes short dance fragments, each one in the style of an iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century choreographer (Duncan, Graham, Cunningham, etc.); he eventually performs a section from Steve Paxton's *Satisfying lover*, in which he merely walks from one side of the stage to the other, thereby challenging the split between dance and every day movements; the act of walking is divested of any transparency or 'naturalness' (Cjević remarked that towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Germany, walking was a studied bourgeois practice which was thought to emancipate

the individual).

This complex dynamic in which a dancer recycles someone else's dance, revealing its supposed spontaneity to be 'constructed', is used to a different end in Mårten Spångberg's solo performance *Powered by Motion*. We see video documentation of the performer executing a 'pedestrian' but precise copy of a 'virtuoso' dance by Steve Paxton (his improvised dance to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*). Spångberg's poor imitation of Paxton is a kind of karaoke, an amateur version of the original, executed with all the passion of a 'noble dilettante'.

By copying Paxton, Spångberg effectively rids himself from having to make editing choices: he no longer has to compose a choreography, choosing a certain dance move over another. There is a challenge to the subject position of the 'author-maker' in favour of the performer as 'amateur' i.e. someone who loves. As Cjević perceptively points out, through this process Spångberg arrives at approximating not Paxton's dance, but his own: the original dance is not broken or parodied, but rather used as a means to arrive at his own definition of a body in motion.

Cjević's talk was followed by a screening of Robert Morris' film *21.3* (in a version re-staged and filmed by Babette Mangolte). We see a male performer re-enacting a lecture by art historian Erwin Panofsky, using the sound recording of the original event. Lip syncing Panofsky's words, the performer executes all the movements of the lecturer on that particular occasion, such as drinking a glass of water or shifting the weight of the body and making the wooden floor boards creak. Many involuntary physical gestures made by Panofsky (coughs, pulling up his sleeves) become amplified simply through their re-enactment; mostly our attention is directed to the way in which the performer's lip movements are repeatedly in and out of synch with the original voice, as if reminding us not to get lost in the realistic effect, and inviting us to dwell in that grey area between the original and the copy.

In different ways the works described above all suggest playful and complex modes of subjectivity: by copying someone else's performance (Michael Jackson's, Steve Paxton's, or Erwin Panofsky's), these pieces open up a different time-zone of identity, in which the idea of the proper self is continuously jet-lagged. If, as Agamben suggests, our age has lost its gestures, these works propose that we may learn to find them again, precisely by copying those of another.

The play on subject positions and the awareness of the self as performance echoed across a conversation between Catherine Wood and artist Tino Sehgal. There is a real pleasure in listening to Sehgal, who has not lost his gesture and who deftly knows how to stage himself in a talk. Tino Sehgal played at being Tino Sehgal, narrating a biographical journey that starts in the German city of Sindelfingen – home to the largest Mercedes-Benz assembly plant in the world – to becoming interested in dance as a means of resisting the notion of production i.e. turning raw material into supply goods (which, for Sehgal, is what an artist traditionally performs), to finally becoming a visual artist who sets up playful and complex encounters between performers and gallery visitors.

The talk brought into sharp focus the specific context of the art museum: referencing the work of UK sociologist Tony Bennett, Sehgal contrasted the theatre – a 2500 year old apparatus designed for holding a unified audience – to the art museum, a 250 year old institution that enforces silent solitary contemplation. In as much as the museum ritually celebrates the production of things and discourages interaction between individuals (who cannot form a collective audience), it is therefore much better than the theatre at mirroring the state of our current atomised society. As Sehgal pointed out, there is no theatre equivalent of Tate Modern in the UK: the domain of art is culturally and economically much better positioned than the performing arts (I wasn't surprised to find out later that his works are sold for thousands of pounds in the art market).

And yet whilst selling his ideas, Sehgal also poses an interesting challenge to the logic of production: his works only exist 'live', they're never documented (no images, no videos, no websites). Their placing within art museums allows them to dialogue with (and sit

within) art discourse and history: Sehgal has made several works in direct response to Yves Klein, Bruce Nauman, and Dan Graham. For example, referencing Yves Klein's notorious "Le vide" (1958), Sehgal exhibited a likewise empty gallery space, except that when the visitor entered, the gallery owner would lean out of his office and say: "Ceci n'est pas le vide" - this is not emptiness (playing on the iconic sentence from Magritte's work).

Artist Ian White focused attention even further on the context of the museum in his hour long presentation *Black Flags*.

Having researched the 'rules' behind the writing and arrangement of captions for the art works at Tate, White proceeded to shout these out in an exhaustive list: 'The reading of the label is not an act and must remain invisible!', 'The text must be like a newspaper, with simple digestible sentences!', and 'The reading allows you to access the work, but also imposes an authority! You are allowed in, but also inscribed upon! A door is opened, a law is written!'

He shouted the words over the sound of loud recorded trumpets and, more importantly, a noisy industrial fan placed in front of him, which also made his shirt and lecture papers flap about incessantly throughout the presentation. The work then suddenly shifted, seemingly without change, to a list of broken-off sentences: 'He is 33 and...', 'He is 40...', spoken alongside a video of a man in an apartment, wearing a balaclava with black gaffer-tape over his eyes, the hidden cameraman attempting several times to steal the man's wallet. White then ended with a simplified recreation of the sign language performance of Gershwin's 'The man I love', as staged by Pina Bausch in her 1982 piece *Nelken*.

I hesitate to call his presentation a performance, or a performance-lecture, for these terms don't seem to do to the work much justice. Perhaps more of a task-based event, White set the scene and stuck to his difficult delivery without hesitation, never yielding to tongue-in-cheek or easy laughter. I found myself working my way through the loud trumpets, through the wind of the fan, through the shouted words, and towards a kind of total acceptance of what was taking place. It felt like a strangely cohesive and open proposition: by not suggesting a particular reading or 'message', it managed to produce a shared sense of understanding in the auditorium.

The performative potential of biographical retelling lay at the heart of Xavier Le Roy's performance-lecture *Product of circumstances* (1999). Oddly situated in an ad hoc theatre on the Turbine Hall Bridge, the evening performance unfolded inside Tate Modern's cold industrial expanse, punctuated by noises from other parts of the building as well as the amplified footsteps of audience members getting up to leave half-way through the piece. Whilst watching the piece I couldn't help noticing that the whole event at Tate had been publicised - on the website and posters around the building - using a photograph of Le Roy wearing a blue shirt and practising dance steps next to a lectern; uncannily, that photograph now seemed to come alive in front of us: it was as if his performance was reproducing the advertising photograph, as opposed to the photograph reproducing the live performance.

Despite these incongruencies, which were no doubt amplified by the high expectation surrounding the piece, *Product of Circumstances* astonishes in its plain delivery and the complexity of relations between parts.

It begins with Le Roy straightforwardly describing his past as a student of molecular biology, complete with numerous slides and scientific explanations from his doctoral thesis on breast cancer. This section, difficult for many to follow due its technical language, lasted more than 20 minutes, in which time most expectations of entertainment were carefully eroded (hence the audience members leaving). But Le Roy's pace and delivery casually brushes off any anxiety about attention spans or boredom; he never winks at us, never reassures us, never even seems to play a game with our expectations. And it's precisely by ridding his performance of that kind of self-awareness that, as viewers, we're able to attune ourselves to a different and altogether more rewarding frame of mind.

In this respect, it is hard to understand why his work is always placed alongside that of Jérôme Bel, whose critical strategy towards the audience is built entirely on a playful self-

awareness of the codes of theatrical entertainment.

Describing the science lab as a hierarchical institution governed by an expansionist agenda - more interested in 'the production of science than in the actual research' - Le Roy proceeds to explain how his interest slowly shifted towards dance: first attending dance classes, then realising that his body didn't fit within the conventional requirements of dance, and eventually developing a critical and personal approach towards movement and the body. All of this was punctuated by silent demonstrations of early dance exercises as well as extracts from his first pieces. We see Le Roy now as a dance artist, studying the body as a site of performative transformations and no longer through the reductive lens of biology: by executing seemingly easy 'tricks' or half-deceptions, we are shown a body that doesn't necessarily end at the finger tips, and whose arms seem to move independently of the person.

Le Roy narrates that as he began his artistic career he once again had to realise that, just like science, dance is heavily inscribed by an economic late-capitalist agenda. Choosing this time not to leave his chosen field, he decided instead to try and develop a critical awareness of its means of production, over and above the 'content' of a particular piece. Perhaps Xavier Le Roy's greatest contribution to the current field of dance performance lies precisely in radically re-thinking the means of production, an activity which he tirelessly and generously pursues across different European institutions.

*Veronique Doisneau* is a show made by Jérôme Bel in 2004, commissioned by The Paris National Opera. It's the first in a series of theatrical documentaries focusing on a particular dancer, a compelling format which Bel has since used to make *Pichet Klunchun & myself*, *Isabel Torres*, and two new works due to premier this year in Utrecht and Paris: *Lutz Förster* and *Cédric Andrieux*.

If Jérôme Bel's earlier works consisted of methodically emptying the stage of dance movements, he is now using that empty space to platform the lives and works of other dancers.

The show *Veronique Doisneau* was staged and filmed at The Paris Opera; this theatre is the venerated temple of ballet, a 'sacred' institution whose architecture alone inspires awe in the tourists that visit it every day, but that likewise infuriates with its ultra conservative and traditionalist approach. The fact that an institution like this would commission a piece by Jérôme Bel - a choreographic artist who specialises in critiquing theatrical codes often to humorous effect - is an index of the complexities at play in the work.

On screen at Tate Modern, we see the theatre curtains of the Paris Opera go up, revealing an empty stage. Veronique Doisneau, a ballet dancer, walks on and speaks directly to the audience; she tells us about herself - that she is 42, married, has two kids, and earns 3500 Euros per month. She tells us that in a week's time she will have to retire from the stage, and that in her career she never made it to being promoted to *étoile*: within the strict hierarchy of the Opera's *corps de ballet*, Doisneau occupies the lower position of *sujet*. She proceeds to perform fragments of various choreographies, privately singing the musical soundtrack to herself whilst dancing, so that we get to hear the exertions of the balletic body.

What's striking about all this is that we are being told exactly what is at stake in the institutional production of ballet *whilst* watching an amazing dancer at work: it's both a production and a deconstruction, a work that allows us to actually understand and appreciate ballet exactly for what it is, without the mystifications that usually accompany it. Although Bel is certainly not the first to unpack this dance tradition, the novelty lies in the approach, which is never antagonistic: the show is ultimately a moving portrait of a dancer, a worker, a person, of her yearnings, dreams, struggles and failures within a theatrical institution; it is the story of a life on stage.

Far from being "anti-dance" (a label that should have finally faded by now), Bel's *Veronique Doisneau* revitalises a dance practice that suffers under the weight of its own tradition and the hierarchies set in place to maintain it: a practice within which Doisneau is equally a victim, an agent, and, in Bel's show, a witness.

There were two occasions during the event in which I was at a complete loss as to how to

'properly' interpret a work, taking presentations at face value and failing to recognise their potential to 'mean' anything other than what they seemed to be saying.

This happened first with *Signs and Wonders*, a lecture-presentation by the critic Guillaume Désanges.

What I saw and heard was a researcher earnestly proposing that the visual signs used in early minimalist art (squares, lines, spirals, triangles) are actually symbols pointing towards a secret archetypal world of references: art is a coded and mysterious language of universal meanings, all carefully guarded by a sectarian brotherhood of male artists such as Le Witt, Mondrian, Newman, and Buren, and extending across time to include alchemists, free masons, and mystics. The fact that this presentation was accompanied by a back lit screen, on which artist **Alexandra Delage** demonstrated many of the ideas through surprising tricks and playful drawings, only served to reinforce, to my mind, the lecture's earnest intent. And so where I saw a presentation that indulged heavily in modernist conspiratorial theories of art, other spectators' saw a work that was astutely commenting on the very ideas it seemed to be proposing.

I was similarly baffled by artist Pablo Bronstein's *Intermezzo*; this fairly well researched and straight-forward lecture-demonstration on 16<sup>th</sup> century French ballets was later revealed by Bronstein himself to be an art work exploring ideas of the queer body and historical accuracy.

Delivering his research inside the auditorium, like all other speakers, Bronstein introduced the notion of *sprezzatura*, as developed in the 1528 courtesan manual by Castiglione: this is a study on how to conduct one's body, so as to be able to perform elaborate gestures whilst making them appear natural and effortless; the art of concealing the art.

In an informal but inquisitive tone Bronstein discussed the ways in which a series of paintings by the French 16<sup>th</sup> century artist Antoine Caron might shine a light on issues of theatre space, power, and representation. He brought attention to the king's gestures and his sitting place in the theatre, and discussed the politically charged qualities of Western dance performances: he made an interesting parallel with today's political speeches, for these too are choreographic assertions of power in themselves, artfully concealing the work that underlies their production.

As Bronstein commented in the panel discussion that followed, his interest lay more in the way we construct historically accurate scenarios: all the material of his presentation had in fact been fabricated or assembled through quick Google searches. His presentation also frequently alluded to the queer body, for example by insisting on the fact that the king often displayed his bare legs in dances and paintings.

A final panel discussion, chaired by Ian White, faced the more than impossible task of discussing the issues raised by the works.

The discussion took its cue largely from Jennifer Lacey's and Florian Hecker's *Robin Hood: The tour*, a work presented earlier that day in which participants were guided through movement sequences, recreating a dance workshop experience in an art gallery context. Speaker Mårten Spångberg pointed out how he felt this work addressed him as an individual rather than as a generic audience member in a theatre, whilst speaker Martin Hargreaves noted that its placing in the context of the art museum allowed the work to tap into wider artistic discourses, multiplying questions and ideas around an otherwise simple proposition; a dance work lasts when it is able to produce discourse.

A red thread that emerged in the discussion, and that indeed ran through the two days as a whole, was the emancipatory potential of artistic practice. It would seem that the notion of emancipation, haunted by the legacy of 1960's protest movements, is now being readdressed by works that foreground the spectator as an active agent. No longer the consumer of a product, I the viewer am now being asked to make a decision, to cross a boundary, and engage with a process. The work only works if I give it a chance to do so. And it is this choice I make that enables me, for the duration of the experience, to access something other than myself.

In his essay *The Emancipated Spectator*, philosopher Jacques Rancière puts it this way:

*'Emancipation starts from [...] the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting [...]. It starts when we realise that looking is also an action [...] and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming it or reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: he observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him.'*

## **References**

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Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995)

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (London: Penguin, 1967)

Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (due to be published). A video recording of the lecture can be found on line at: <http://v2v.cc>