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Rudi Laermans

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RUDI LAERMANS

1.
The dominant discourse on dance and choreography still testifies of a solid *body humanism*. Notwithstanding the vocabulary used, which may very well stem from one of the branches of poststructuralist thinking, dance critics and theorists routinely presuppose that the human body is the distinctive medium of the art form called dance and, by implication, of choreography as the art of writing, composing or performing dances. As the taken-for-granted medium of dance, the human body appears to be nothing more than a pure potential comparable to, for instance, the medium of language in literature or the medium of sound in music. Every choreography, so the dominant discourse suggests, selectively activates this virtual reality with more or less artistic plausibility. It is not only a question of trying out possible movements or of combining the fixed movements of one or more dancers in time and space, with or without music. If the human body is regarded as the prime medium of dance and choreography, we indeed have to include both the capacity to move and its complementary negation. In a word, the body-as-medium is a paradoxical affair: it is the unity of the difference between possible movements and possible non-movements (or with reference to a particular dance performance: it is the unity of the difference between the enacted movements and the many moments in-between one or more movements during which a body halts, pauses or freezes into a pose).

Since the legendary days of Judson Church, the

bodily vocabulary used in choreographies has been vastly expanded. Dance makers discovered 'democracy's body' (Banes 1993); consequently, choreography entered the era of '*the body in general*' and did away with the slim and sealed-off, narcissistic body of ballet that still dominated the modernist dance art of, for instance, Merce Cunningham. Every kind of physical movement can nowadays acquire a dancing quality, including walking or sitting, playing with one's fingers or shaking one's head. Movement possibilities that were once firmly rejected as abject or deemed unremarkable thus became genuine choreographic cornerstones. Yet, the democratization of the dancing body does not contest the body humanism of the dominant discourse that still informs dance and choreography. That humanism has only become more inclusive, more open also to bodily forms or actions that Western society stigmatizes or forecloses - in a word: more human.

With the body-centredness of the reigning discourse corresponds a choreographic practice, or at least a (self-)understanding of choreography, that unavoidably doubles the dancing body in a real body and a seen body, in a presence that is at once absent in the partly symbolically coded, partly imaginarily invested representation that the spectator enjoys. Precisely this split is the hallmark of the so-called pure dance art of for instance Balanchine or Cunningham and their many off-springs. Within this choreographic tradition, the dancing body is reduced to a tautological representation



deeplue 'closer' (2007)
Photo © Giannina
Urmeneta Ottiker.

of itself. 'I dance that I dance,' thus this body says - but it is a saying, a representation, in which the dancing body does not encounter itself but can, at the furthest, mark or indicate its own absence. If the human body is regarded as the prime medium of dance and choreography, theorizing the latter indeed comes down to a limitation exercise that tries to encircle the real void - the void of the Real - in the proverbial slash that distinguishes presence from absence, the dancing body from its self-representation, the real body from its symbolic and imaginary realness (I am alluding here to the insightful study of Gerald Siegmund (2006), who uses a Lacanian framework in his conceptualization of this void).

Not only the real body but also the body-as-medium is at once present and absent in a dance performance. Like language or sound, this medium can only be alluded to: every movement or non-movement indeed instantiates a non-representable potential, a virtual infinity of possibilities of which only some are actualized during a performance (compare Luhmann [1995:

165-215] on the notion of medium). I leave it open here if we may therefore not invoke the notion of the Body without Organs (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972 and 1980), defined as the virtual materiality 'within' an organized organism, when trying to re-think the nature of the taken-for-granted medium of dance and choreography. For the crucial question is does all contemporary dance still underwrite the central premise of the discourse according to which it is still predominantly mediated and interpreted. And if not, what does the notion of choreography actually refer to in performances that re-choreograph the dominant understanding of that very practice? Is it perhaps possible to discern within the realm of contemporary dance a specific kind of *post-humanist choreography*?

2.

In his study *Abwesenheit* ('Absence'), subtitled 'A performative aesthetic of dance', Gerald Siegmund (2006) demonstrates at length that contemporary choreographers such as William Forsythe, Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy and Meg

Stuart regularly emphasize in their work the absence of the real dancing body in its doubling self-representation. These and other contemporary dance makers often highlight the constitutive split between the real and the sensory body observed by means of technical devices, such as microphones and video images. Particularly the possibilities offered by video-technology, such as the enlarging of body fragments or the delayed, even refigured representation of an already seen movement, are a favourite means to create a fissure in the spectator's gaze. The fissure not only destabilizes the spectator's panoptical point of view but also makes visible that one doesn't see what one thinks one sees, i.e., the presence of a real body. The series of site-specific performances that, for instance, Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods presented in 2000-2001 in five different European cities under the umbrella title 'Highway 101' comprised many such scenes in which video images were ingeniously played out against the spectator's trust in a strict isomorphism between bodily presences and embodied representations. Yet 'Highway 101' not only tackled with undeniable verve the ideology of liveness that still reigns among the practitioners as well as the amateurs of the different performing arts, it was also an epochal example of that ongoing redefinition of choreography in which the distinction between a dance performance and a live installation becomes quite undecidable.

Let me take by way of example *closer*, the 2003 production of the Brussels-based artistic collective deepblue (see <http://www.deepblue.be>). *closer* was conceived and performed by the artistic trio that started up and still animates deepblue, the performers Yukiko Shinozaki and Heine Avdal plus sound-maker and dramaturge Christoph De Boeck. The show was everything but a regular performance since there was no fourth wall, which is in a common theatre setting co-constitutive of the split between the real body and the represented or enacted bodily realness. Every spectator first received a headphone and

then entered a closed-off, only dimly lit space in which she could freely walk around or sit down. The space consisted of a small open area surrounded by a wood of bamboo rods attached to the ceiling but not reaching the floor. Within this dreamy landscape, which had everything of 'a world in the world' or a monadic island, digital clicks and cuts emerged in the spectator's headphones that sometimes condensed into a massive wave of e-sound. Both the colour and the intensity of the lightning also changed regularly, partly in connection with the sound dramaturgy. Now and then a video image was projected, but the overall focus of the performance was the actions of the two performers.

Yukiko Shinozaki and Heine Avdal came and went, alone or together, and performed quite simple movements amidst the public: crawling around on the floor, moving hands or arms, and so on. They were movements that a member of the public could possibly also enact but would not actually (dare to) perform. In this way, the performers posited themselves as ghost bodies that hosted the spectator's virtual body. They indeed appeared to be the performative body-doubles of the dispersed public body watching the performance. Yet, due to the overall setting, the spectators were not just passive lookers-on but became an integral part of the performance. One not only contemplated Shinozaki's gestures or Avdal's spastic floor movements, one also gazed at the surrounding spectators who were uncomfortably lying or sitting on the floor, who looked absent-minded or were immersed in the sound of their headphones. Thus, the passivity of every spectator acquired an active, even performative quality: one's bodily presence and visible experiencing of the performance were transformed into essential ingredients of that very same performance.

At first sight, *closer* exemplifies the more general trend in contemporary dance to redefine the usual role distribution between performers and public. It was indeed a live installation in the genuine sense, one that actively deconstructed the difference between 'doing' and 'seeing doing'.

closer thus suggests that the spectator's visual and bodily experience of a dance performance is not just a necessary condition for every live event but should rather be regarded as a performative action in its own right that is co-constitutive of the observed performance. It is indeed one of the distinctive qualities of *closer*: the performance literally made visible the spectator's performativity by fully involving her. Can we therefore not speak of a new kind of dance, of *an at once total and open choreography*? Total, because *closer* - other examples may also be mentioned, e.g., performances of Boris Charmatz or Meg Stuart - integrated the performers' movements as well as the public's presence in an enveloping, overall choreography that also comprised sounds, video images, a shifting lighting and dangling bamboo rods. Open, since the choreography did not fix either the performative presence of the spectators or the possible interactions between the performers and the public. How to think through this double, apparently paradoxical character of the ongoing re-choreographing of choreography?

3. This much can be taken for granted: used in a temporal sense, the expression 'contemporary dance' points to an unstable, constantly redefined experimental zone in which artists from various backgrounds cooperate and combine in a seemingly boundless way text, physical movement, video technology, lightning, high and low musical genres. Since the middle of the 1990s, contemporary dance has indeed become the prime laboratory of the performing arts. It has thus vastly contributed to the striking enlargement of the latter notion, which nowadays even comprises the staging of a living picture à la Rothko (the first part of Romeo Castellucci's 'M.#10 Marseille') or of a series of movements made by a machine (the work of Kris Verdonck). How to make sense of this new conjuncture? Thierry de Duve (1996) coined the expression 'art in general' in his in-depth discussion of the situation within the fine arts 'after Duchamp'. In

line with this notion, we may characterize the current situation in the performing arts as tending towards *a performance art in general* that contests the seemingly evident borders between established performance genres and simultaneously explores new forms of performativity, including the 'doings' of non-human actors. What singles out particular forms of contemporary dance within this new field is their focus on the public performativity of various kinds of movements or actions. Thus not only did *closer*, the performance of deepblue discussed above, create a symmetrical relationship between the performativity of the implied human beings, i.e., between the movements of the performers and the bodily presence of the spectators, but the changing light waves, which were broken by the bamboo rods, and particularly the technologically mediated sound waves also were rigorously treated from a dramaturgical point of view. They were taken up as movements in their own right: they were indeed choreographed.

I propose to speak of *dance in general* when a performance choreographs human movements as well as non-human actions or operations in a symmetrical way, so without reducing the latter to proverbial servants of the former. In such a performance, not only the human body but also sound, imagery or light are treated as media of dance, as having the potential to produce a variety of movements and poses. A distinguishing feature of a 'dance performance in general' - a rather uneasy, even awkward expression, indeed - is therefore the way it handles non-human components. 'Dance in general' is a genuine post-humanist art form and greatly differs from the average use of non-human elements in contemporary dance. Video technology, microphones, electronic soundscapes, elaborated lightscapes ...: it has all become so ordinary within the realm of contemporary dance that nowadays the sight of two bodies dancing in a white cube produces quasi-automatically an impression of austerity. Yet, in many - if not in most - instances of

contemporary dance, the non-human materiality of the performance is primarily taken up in an instrumental way: it has to sustain and underline, to frame and highlight the performativity of the involved human bodies. Thus, and in line with the dominant discourse on dance, the medium of the human body remains the primary locus and focus of the performed choreography. That body may be fragmented or made strange or even uncanny by means of video images or by enveloping it in a particular soundscape, but it will in most dance performances still be the choreographic centre of attention. In marked contrast, a 'dance performance in general' treats the performative qualities of human as well as non-human actions as being equal. Besides physical movements also lightning, sounds, props, text fragments or video images are all deliberately deployed as active agents, as components that do something and therefore co-define the overall performativity of a dance piece.

Choreography in general is by implication the

art of making 'dance in general'. Yet, what does it come down to? To *the making and modulation of assemblages*, to the explorative associating or coupling of materially heterogeneous kinds of actions of humans as well as non-human performers. The concept of assemblage has recently gained some notoriety, particularly thanks to some productive re-readings of Deleuze's and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* (1980), in which it replaces the notion of 'desiring machine' that their *L'Anti-Oedipe* had previously made famous (1972). According to Deleuze and Guattari, every assemblage, including non-human ones, extracts a territory from one or more milieus but is simultaneously carried away by various 'lines of deterritorialization'. They also distinguish within every human assemblage a primarily material 'segment of content', consisting of actions and passions, from a predominantly linguistic or semiotic 'segment of expression'. It is without doubt a useful distinction, which Manuel DeLanda (2006) has recently tried to re-articulate, together with the



deepblue 'closer' (2007)
Photo © Giannina
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concepts of coding and (re-)territorialization, in view of 'a new philosophy of society'. Yet, even his more concrete elaborations can not really give flesh and blood to the wilfully abstract conceptual exercises of Deleuze and Guattari. The most stimulating approach to assemblages, not the least because it vastly focuses on the act of actively making associations between humans and non-humans, is therefore probably Bruno Latour's 'Actor-Network-Theory' (ANT).

'An actor is what is *made* to act by many others', thus Latour argues (2005: 46, his italics). The hyphenated expression 'actor-network' precisely tries to designate this state of affairs. The notion implies that the eventual agency or, more generally, the possible performativity of an actor, viz., a performer of whatever kind, is a relational quality and depends on the specific network in which that actor or performer functions. Yet, not only does a networked actor or performer, in the broad sense, acquire an always particular performativity thanks to a network, but within the context of that very same network, the performed action is also constantly overtaken by other network components, who use the action as an input for their own performativity. The overall performativity of a group of networked actors therefore always involves mutual translations or modifications of their singular doings or operations. It can not be reduced to the individual actions of the associated actors but emerges from their many interactions, in which the networked actors constantly overtake each others' actions in order to be active themselves. In a word: an actor-network configuration, or *an assemblage is a constantly shifting force-field producing an emergent total performativity*.¹

4. In a 'dance performance in general', the assemblage or force-field consists of the shifting associations between light rays, sounds, bodily movements and non-movements, images, objects and the operations of technical artifacts. The elements are actualized possibilities of action or

non-action, or singularities generated within different material potentials that have a here-and-now or event-quality. Or to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari (1980): the produced singularities are 'haecceities'. A light ray, a gesturing arm, a series of sound particles ... is a singularity because it is an always particular actualization out of a virtual range of possibilities, resulting in a line or movement - an actual happening: a 'haecceity' or 'thisness' - that marks abstract time and space. Every singularity is also an intensity, since it acts as a force that affects other singularities but is simultaneously affected by them (and partly derives from this being-affected its own capacity to affect). Thus, during a performance, a sound wave interferes with an image or a movement and is at once captured by that very same visual representation or bodily gesture. The produced singularities constantly act upon each other, thus generating an overall performativity that the public usually experiences and speaks of in atmospheric terms (as 'dark' or 'uncanny', 'bright').

Given the interactive nature of the created force-field, 'choreography in general' is not simply a question of linking heterogeneous kinds of actions or various sorts of performativity of human as well as non-human performers. Every momentary association of the used components also constructs a complex force-field that has to be modulated or *governed* from the point of view of its internal consistency or a tenable distribution of the different forces and their interactions. I deliberately use the word 'governing' in this context. Choreographing always was and still is synonymous with exercising power in a Foucaultian sense: not a forbidding of statements or a repression of movements but a strategic acting on possible actions and interactions, 'a 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities' (Foucault 2002 [1982]: 341). In 'choreography in general', the governing may be a single or a collective responsibility of the involved human beings. Yet, its distinctive quality is first and foremost the governed association of human and non-human

¹ According to a different theoretical tradition, one could of course also argue that an assemblage is a complex system. With my preference for the notion of assemblage and an ANT-inspired interpretation, I for sure do not want to veto a systems theoretical approach of contemporary dance or 'choreography in general'. Yet, employing a systems theoretical framework implies a level of conceptual abstraction that I deliberately try to avoid here.

actions in view of an overall, emergent performativity that cannot be reduced to the sheer summation of the singular movements (or non-movements) of the assembled actors or performers.

‘Choreography in general’ is indeed the art of constructing a multi-medial performance machine consisting of mutually interacting forces or movements of a various nature that affect each other within a governed plane of consistency. Some forces have a bodily or material character, others such as light or sound or the saying of words possess an immaterial nature (at least for a human observer). The constructed force-field is a genuine form of sociality, *a common* – I prefer this word above expressions such as ‘community’ or the more fashionable ‘multitude’ – inhabited by both human and non-human movements that (inter) act as intensities or singularities. During a ‘dance performance in general’, this choreographed ‘common’ is the actual locus of the performance’s total performativity. One will try in vain to dissect that performativity or to attribute it to one or more particular actors or performers. As said, ‘choreography in general’ is the art of making and modulating – of governing – heterogeneous assemblages. If the assembling is successful, the outcome is a non-hierarchical performative network that is the actual medium of the performance, even its main performer. This performer has neither a name nor a face: *it is because it happens – ‘it’ performs.*

‘Choreography in general’ is the pragmatic art of constructing such an anonymous ‘it’.² The crucial question when observing a ‘dance performance in general’ is therefore not ‘what does it mean?’ but ‘how does it work?’ What are the logics or rationalities that govern the governing of the observed force-field? Precisely because it is choreographed, the observed force-field is indeed always ‘*an intelligible field*’ with specifiable limits and particular characteristics, and whose component parts are attractions and coexistences’, *dixit* Nikolas Rose in a book on power and modern governmentality

(1999: 33, my italics). The intelligibility of a particular ‘choreography in general’ refers to the discovery of, and the experimentation with, one or more rationalities that refer to a general thoughtfulness as well as to deliberately, even tactically selected means/ends relations. In a ‘dance performance in general’, the connections between the assembled material and immaterial movements have usually not only been tested out in view of the creation of a particular artistic plane of consistency. They are also enacted ‘for’ the spectators, in view of the capacity of their bodies and their brains to be affected in a particular way. ‘Choreography in general’ is indeed also the art of *capturing and modulating, of governing the public’s sensory attention* (which, as my discussion of *closer* suggested, may be considered as a genuine mode of performativity).

From the public’s point of view, every ‘dance performance in general’ is a capturing machine. In the French language, the verb ‘capter’ possesses a double meaning: ‘to catch’ (to collect, to intercept, to absorb) and ‘to take by stratagem’. Choreographing the public’s attention via the choreographed assemblage is a strategic game with per definition uncertain outcomes. That may be one of the reasons why countless contemporary dance performers fall back, overall or in particular scenes, on the attention strategies of ‘the spectacular’ – read: of mainstream cultural production, including news shows. Yet, there are also many examples of performances in which the deployed strategy to capture the spectator’s sensory attention or body testifies to an ingeniousness that bets on the effectiveness of rather weak means such as the dislocating repetition of movements. However that may be, ‘choreography in general’ also takes up the relation between the constructed assemblage and the observing public as a governable force-field. Perhaps I found deepblue’s *closer* such an insightful performance because it fully involved the spectators’ bodies and attention in the created assemblage, thus making visible during every moment of the

² I refrain from the temptation to give a psychoanalytical twist to this ‘it’ and interpret it as the Freudian ‘id’ or an unconscious ‘desiring machine’ à la Deleuze and Guattari (1972).

performance its quality of (also) being a capturing machine. The net result was an enjoyable subjection to an anonymous 'it' - to a choreographed performativity that was at once total and open.

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Over the last year (2007) Performance Research has been in the process of transferring its administrative and production base from Dartington College of Arts in Devon to the Centre for Performance Research at Aberystwyth University in Wales. Our long and productive relationship with Dartington (since the beginnings of the journal in 1996) has finally come to an end, and Dartington College itself, with its outward-looking, radical educational and arts ethos and ways of doing things, which has given rise to so much challenging, absorbing and uplifting work over the last 40 years - work that will continue to define and disturb and resonate with contemporary arts practice - is in the process of moving to become a part of University College Falmouth in Cornwall.

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We would now like to extend our welcome to our new administrator Sandra Laureri at the Centre for Performance Research in Aberystwyth, who has been gradually taking over from Linden Elmhirst over the last year, and also to Steve Allison at Design Stage in Cardiff who has taken over design and typesetting.

Ric Allsopp & Richard Gough (Journal Editors)