



CHANGES, PHOTO BY ALAN VUKELIĆ

Thanks to
Nikolina Pristaš and
10D1U Zagreb

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LATOUR, BRUNO.
(2005)
“From Realpolitik to
Dingpolitik or How to
Make Things Public”.
B. Latour, P. Weibel
(ed.), Karlsruhe/
Cambridge, MA /
London: ZKM &
The MIT Press.
Making Things Public:
Atmospheres of
Democracy, 14-41.

I'll begin with a preliminary remark that entangles two notions that I immediately associate with the agenda of this conference, the notions I would like to use this occasion to think through and test with you here. Forgive me if I aggressively suck all you concerned here into an undifferentiated “we” (first person plural), as if we all shared the same struggle. Maybe this premature aggression pays off a little later, maybe not. As soon as we engage with the political in speculative or empirical experiments — as theorists, dramaturgs, choreographers or performers — we face an aesthetic burden and political challenge. We, in contemporary dance in Europe, ought to concede that we are “politically challenged” in so far as we are “aesthetically burdened”. This rhetoric owes some inspiration to Bruno Latour's take on the crisis of political representation [1], and I will unpack it shortly here.

Admitting to be “politically challenged” is a politically correct way of saying that we are politically “handicapped” and “retarded”, or slow and underdetermined. We accept an inherent limitation that explains ontological attachment of contemporary dance practices to such prostheses as methodological concerns, obsession with procedures, with poetic and *post-hoc* dramaturgies, but also a proliferation of books, films, conceptual tools, analytical categories, delayed appraisals of fancy philosophical concepts. In other words, these discursive efforts aim to dissolve the obstacle behind the challenge: the historical hegemonic arrest of movement in the image, the aesthetic image as well as the image of thought that dance is an object of. At the notion of “aesthetic burden” I arrived by trying to explain myself the choreography and dance in the performances of the Croatian collective, *BADco*. I accounted them as “aesthetically unburdened” from a perspective of many experimental art practices in former Yugoslavia which de-linked from western

modernism. Questions like “why do you dance?” and “why do you dance this” or “like this”, *BADco.* were often addressed, implying that “this” be read in comparison with a style or an idiom, an arrest of image on which to hook a meaning or conceptual determination of any kind. When the answers seem unsatisfactory — because “this is like Forsythe” or “this is conceptual dance” does not reveal the operation of this choreography — the very function of choreography in its mimetic logic is questioned. “My movement adequates an idea” (adequates isn’t the same as translate or exemplify), it poses a problem, I paraphrase Nikolina Pristaš, dancer and choreographer from *BADco.* Does this entail instrumentalizing choreography against its autonomy, rethinking and practicing choreography as an instrument to pose and solve problems, which wouldn’t only be specific to dance, but would exceed the disciplinary?

Instrumentalization here presupposes that choreography be dissociated from a certain modernist notion of dance and its aesthetic burden. This dissociation I have argued elsewhere as a disjunction between the body and movement. In short, I here mean rupture with two ideological operations in the Western legacy by which movement has been bound up with the body, self-expression which ontologizes movement with a natural urge to move and body as “minimal resting place of noncompromisable subjectivity” (Hewitt) and objectivization that reduces movement to a physical articulation, whose meaning lies tautologically in itself. Contemporary dance is still often stitched between these two ideological seams: it either persuades by performing necessity or it displays indifference and self-containment of an object (it says either “believe in the truth of my body that doesn’t lie” or “observe the task”). Nikolina Pristaš would say it more congenially: movement always falls between gesture and noise. In order to instrumentalize choreography beyond dance, should then the self-identity pursued in self-expression and self-referentiality be undermined? And how will that disturb the harmony of faculties by which a performance should bring spectators together in *sensus communis*, namely, in recognition and self-actualization? My answer involves the strategic choice of three choreographies that have earned the reputation of being difficult for exactly posing these problems. Difficulty, as a non-category, similar to barred or unclassified, here implies not only a deficit of public in order for these performances to be shown and seen, but also that they are barely visible, quite literally so, aesthetically challenging, or hard to watch.

What is the movement that can be sensed and experienced without seeing how it is being done? The departure of *Nvsbl*, a choreography by Eszter Salamon made in 2006, is the false dilemma between belief in what is seen and tautological vision, or what I see is what I see. The problem the choreographer poses here is how to entirely shift the perceptibility of movement — from vision to kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensibility. The solution was to obscure movement’s visibility by making it excessively slow — an eighty minute long journey of five and a half meters from periphery to the center stage, where the departure and the end point are just instants like great many other instants between these ends — different and not identical to each other. This wish could have been addressed as a negative, “fascistic” task of eliminating space, form and size of movement, the fundamental parameters that measure movement’s fluency as corporal freedom. Instead, the choreographer sought to affirm slowness in a range of qualities, of in her own words, how to dee-jay the thousand movements and rhythms in the body. To do that, she had to “create a positive project” for the performers and resource a body system that would reorient them towards their own body. The choice of Body–Mind Centering was less new-age than purely pragmatic. To invoke a sensation from which to initiate a movement in those places in the body the awareness of which we don’t have requires lengthy labor of imagination. Sensation is thus product of a will to imagine, engage metaphors in order to construct a relation with the imaginary place in the body. One could say that the dancers are fumbling in the dark, in a form of inadequate knowledge, feigning sensations

for voluntary action. They produce an attachment which is scientifically dubious, irrational but empowering, as it helps them to develop a relentless division and *partitioning* of the body for an ever more precise and specific quality.

This technique breaks the mimetic regime for it shifts focus from the image of the movement–effect to the imaginary cause of it. This striving is what takes time and heterogenizes duration so as to hinder the image of movement, or everything from being given all at once. The motion expresses itself as a tendency, before being the effect of a cause, and the cause being the process of invoking sensation remains inaccessible for the spectator. Indeed, what happens to the spectator, when her gaze is deprived of the control of the body’s source of movement? Disbelief might have led you to a test of looking away and looking back to verify change. At first, you can’t see movement in the course of its production, but you register change once it has occurred, in retrospect. To attend duration can only be a decision of attunement, of making your glance long and coextensive with the time–image of the duration–bodies. Your choice is either to yield to absorption in the slow perception of change, or leave.

The reason why I dwelled on the process the performers engage here is because of its inaccessibility. Inaccessibility brings into question the sense of community and communication in gathering. The thing that gathers us necessarily divides us, not only between the two mirroring sides of performing and attending, but along a multiplicity of different attachments, and divisive concerns. *Nvsbl* might be just an extreme case that posits performance as virtual, whose making, performing and attending are modes of actualization with differential ideas and temporalities. I will now pass to the other end of asymmetry, or what happens when a choreography gives rise to a community that will override it. The performance is called *Untitled*, and dates from 2005, when the author deliberately remained anonymous. The decision to not-sign and not-title was an unprecedented intervention into the representational logic of performance. It was meant to disable its major register, that is, judgment in the nominal framework that allows audiences to attribute their reception to an author. Now they were confronted with a void, both a symbolical and a literal one. Although this act of resistance might resemble yet another form of institutional critique, Xavier Le Roy’s refusal to ‘sign’ and title the piece was meant to reinforce the work’s facticity: performance being all there is. A short description will clarify why.

As they entered the auditorium, spectators were given small battery–powered torches to find their seats, just as latecomers, ushered into a performance or a film that had already begun. However, it soon became clear that the stage itself would remain dark. From their seats, spectators began to inspect the stage, searching for the action. As they adjusted their vision to diminished visibility, they began to see indiscernible objects emerging from obscurity, but they could barely determine whether these shapes were puppets or live (human) bodies. While the spectators shone their lights on the void of the stage, a white fog slowly covered the space, reflecting the light rays of the lamps. There was little to observe unless the spectator was prepared to search for it, and to try and discern movement from stillness and figure from background. The act of not-seeing was just as significant as the action that was occurring on stage, and performance dismantled its object into a situation with changing stakes. It was easier for the spectators to see each other than to watch the performers. As a consequence, the power was redirected from the stage to the audience.

All the while, the dancers, disguised in and enmeshed with puppets were busy in their investigation, fumbling in the dark. As Le Roy explained to me, their interest was in exploring a prosthetic relationship of the body with an inanimate human–like object, an adjunct that would give the body a different weight, elasticity, and fluency. They worked with eyes closed so that their actions would be done in dark and what the spectators

could see wouldn't be what the stage illuminated but what the audience themselves illuminated. Hence, the problem of dispensing with the form of movement, which, no matter how unfixed, transformative and evanescent, still enables us to recognize a subject or object, was solved by indiscernability. Choreography was an instrument for disorientating the sensorium of the event, in which the indiscernability of bodies, objects and movements interfered with the capacity to feel, understand and judge. In the course of the evening, the behaviour of the audience, now louder and more visible than the onstage action, hijacked the event and became the focus of the spectacle. The event was of a community becoming-fascist. In the ending part in which one of the performers stepped out of his puppet costume, and took on the role of spokesperson talking to the audience, the audience repeatedly protested as if they had been hoaxed. Their outrage about the anonymity and lack of title, prevented them to engage with the situation. They refused to attend it.

My third and last story continues somewhere in between the closure of the visible and the exposure of the invisible. The choreography is called *Changes* (2006) by Nikolina Pristaš and *BADco.*, and entails a transformation of environments of limited visibility that the audience is part of. Being physically part of it — like in this homogeneous purple light block — means being implicated in the problem that this performance poses: being in the relationship between parasites and environment. According to Michel Serres, for a parasite to seize control, it has to clear the space from other parasites; it needs to eradicate noise for the message to pass through silence. Serres's "parasite" is a trope for Pristaš to first pose a specifically choreographic problem, but in such a way that it then immediately transmutes a political concern. The problem addresses the double articulation of noise and message, or more specifically to dance, noise and gesture in movement. Dancing in this choreography develops in constant fluctuation between gestures and noise, or those other movements that tend to obscure the channel of communication. As Pristaš describes, at one point dance is just humming in the space (the word "noise" in Serbo-Croatian isn't just the antonym of "sound", the way Cage puts it, but it also means "humming"). Figures merge with the environment, constituting a shimmering background in magenta light. Dancers spin in pirouettes for 4 minutes 33 seconds and longer. Movements as noise don't produce cognitive meaning, but have intensity and effect.

Parallel to dancing, a voice-over delivers a stream of text, a verbal channel through which various anecdotes and observations spin around the fable about the ant and the grasshopper, labor and leisure, work and laziness. These stories diagrammatically expand as the fable-parasite devours them, one of which is the anti-May 1968 speech by the leader of French ants (clearly, Sarkozy). While the voice-over runs as a smooth message, dance physically labors in the space. At a certain moment, a dancer speaks out the following text: "I am not a charismatic person. I am a hard worker, a pragmatic and a good ant. I beat all my competitors with work, love and kindness. My message to my rivals is that they can fight against me only with more work, love and kindness. All those poor fellows cannot knock down what I can build. The ant tried to persuade the grasshopper: I am the humblest ant in the world. There are not many like that. You show me another one in the ant hill who works as much as I do and who is willing to sacrifice 16 hours a day and 363 days a year like me. I don't think there are many like that. You tell me if you know one if you are claiming that there is such an ant. Inside me emotions are not dead, I am not crude pragmatic and a politician, sterile and castrated. I am still an ant."

This touching portrait of the dancer as a hardworking ant echoes what Andrew Hewitt pointed out in his brilliant theory of "social choreography" — the dark side of the ideology of freedom in early modern dance, or how the modern dance subject who experiences her truth in her own body becomes the best workforce always ready for exploita-

tion under the banner of experience. But something else, more specific to the conundrum of political handicap and aesthetic labor in contemporary dance, struck me here. I will lay out my reasoning step by step. What was referred to as “conceptual dance”, accused of being “non-dance” a decade ago, in fact should be better explained by a technical redistribution of labor: a wish to minimize dancing as physical in favor of mental labor, or thought. Eventually, the Jérôme Bel effect was not quite as conceptual as the Duchamp effect, though. Its mistake was to repeat the same aesthetic ideal of dance — effortlessness — and just to transfer it to thought. Those, then argued as, “think-performances” are so smart, so eloquent and fluent, that they are thinking for you, reducing spectators’ thought to a confirmation of understanding and opinion. Effortlessness in thought here means efficiency of conceptual operation, message cleared from noise. This clarifies the difficulty of choreographies such as *Nvsbl*, *Untitled* and *Changes*, why it appears difficult for us to deal with the question as to what dance does when it doesn’t explain and doesn’t express? The strategies of invisibility and indiscernability in *Nvsbl* and *Untitled* are directed against the aesthetic mimetic logic, and through reaching the limit of sensibility they seek to force thought, as well as to encourage spectators to construct a position in the situation of the performance. Symptomatically, the opacity of *Changes* earned labels of being conceptual with too much dancing as yet, or the contrary, of being “under-rehearsed”, paying too little attention to the body. This criticism fails to understand that this messy, nervous and hurried movement without idiomatic unity or signature, is indifferent to the aesthetic demands. The choreography of *Changes* is simply aesthetically unburdened.

Now, with the arguments above, I would like to conclude by reframing the status of choreography and its political concerns in contemporary dance. I will argue for a post-aesthetic dance, where choreography is an instrument for posing and solving problems that aren’t specifically reducible or strictly limited to dance.

— 1 —

It must be possible, for choreography, when it operates within dance or theatrical performance, to unburden itself aesthetically. By the aesthetic I specifically mean a legitimized mimetic repertoire of registers, from the form, style, representational meaning to signature. This implies that the function of choreography shifts from producing an aesthetic object to a problem. The production of a problem doesn’t begin with possibilities — they are a matter of knowledge that we account for as the limits to be pushed. Stating a problem isn’t about uncovering an already existing question or concern, something that was certain to emerge sooner or later. A problem is neither a rhetorical question that can’t be answered. On the contrary, to raise a problem implies constructing terms in which it will be stated, and conditions it will be solved in. Problems can’t be, to borrow Latour’s terms, aesthetic matters-of-fact, as that would be unfair even to the experience of their politicity. They rather belong to matters of concern.

— 2 —

What do I mean by the “post-aesthetic” or “unburdening from the aesthetic” concern? Indeed, the very term “post-aesthetic” hides analogy with Lehmann’s “post-dramatic”, and in the sense that the aesthetic here could be the principle of Western dance as drama has been in the Western theater, the analogy holds. Unburdening from the principle of the aesthetic in Western dance demands the right of dance to denaturalize. This calls for many points of resistance, resistance to the natural, free&creative, to fluency and effortlessness, to entertaining a necessary relation to form, to the self-actualization of the dancer, but also the self-actualization of her community of spectators. All these could perhaps be subsumed under the mimetic logic of image, vision and visibility, as well as clarity, understanding, and judgment. Perhaps, choreographing com-

munity ought to be rethought as choreographing an assembly, where the theater dispositif equals the parliamentary, representational procedures for assembling. There are many ways of gathering, and choreography must explore conditions for spectators to construct their positions and perspectives in the situation. As little or as much it may seem, this begins with the conditions of viewing, that the three choreographies attempt to produce.

— 3 —

Lastly, choreography could risk its aesthetic autonomy, and admit that all those approaches to choreography dissociated from the art of dance, such as the mentioned social choreography, make the politicity of its workings outside dance more graspable and powerful. It's time to test whether choreography can be an instrument for thinking, rather than showing and reflecting thought. This requires that movement be granted a double articulation, as gesture and noise at the same time. It means that we are prepared to take the moment of the impossibility of thinking, when movement begins to saturate, like noise, as a beginning of thought.

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