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THE CHOREOGRAPHIC MOMENT, ARCHIVE AND MODERNISM (2015)

In recent years, in the global artistic context, we can observe a considerable number of visual artists' interest in the use of dance or choreography in their work. This phenomenon appears in the involvement of explicitly formulated dance expression in given works, as well as in the use of choreography in the sense of systematically controlled human movement in general. If the development of the "conceptual" current of contemporary dance in the 1990s[1] brought with it an approach of the positions of contemporary visual art directly in the field of dance, the current trend goes in the opposite direction and involves dance and choreographic moments in the context of gallery art. In the international art context, this phenomenon has already attracted well-deserved attention and has been mapped out in several large-scale curatorial shows.[2] In the Czech environment, on the other hand, it has remained a rather marginal topic until recently.[3] In the last few years, however, it has been approached by several artists; for example, it is sufficient to mention the works of Aleš Čermák or Eva Koťátková.[4] However, I am presenting the issue as a case study on the work of several foreign artists, as I understand this text as an introduction to the topic, and their example allows me to point out a number of aspects related to the issue in greater complexity.

The French choreographer Boris Charmatz noticed this phenomenon as early as 2003. He pointed out the obvious proximity of practices present in contemporary dance and in the visual arts of the last decades, pointing out the overlooked fact that many aspects appearing mainly in performance

1 The field of contemporary dance is represented by the work of such artists as Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy and Boris Charmatz. It is characteristic of their work with the reflection on dance as a mode of representation and with the methods of institutional critique. Here, dance often becomes the subject itself, which is interpreted by other means (text, speech, work with the audience, etc.). See Jeroen Fabius, "The Missing History of (Not)Conceptual Dance", *Danswetenschap in Nederland: Deel 7* (Amsterdam: Vereniging voor Dansonderzoek, 2012); and also Viktor Čech, "Ceci n'est pas une danse", *A2* 15 (2014): 13.

2 Mainly the exhibitions *Dance with Camera*, curator Jenelle Porter (Boston: ICA 2009); *Move: Choreographing You*, curator Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Gallery 2010); and *Danser sa vie*, curator Christine Marcel and Emma Lavigne (Paris: Centre Pompidou 2012).

3 Of the curatorial projects, perhaps the only exceptions are the events and exhibitions curated by the author of this text: *Mysl je sval*, curator Viktor Čech (Prague: Meetfactory 2013); and *Walking, Running, Dancing, Grasping, Fetching or Carrying*, curator Viktor Čech (Prague: NoD 2014).

4 See, for example, the work of Aleš Čermák, *Pro začátek můžeme znovu zformulovat náročný systém podmínek pro kladnou odpověď typu – "Ano! Opravdový život je přítomnost"*, performance and video, 2013, and Eva Koťátková's project *A Storyteller's Inadequacy*, installation and performance, 2013.

art and video have their older roots in modern dance.[5] André Lepecki, probably the most prominent theorist dealing with the relationship between contemporary dance and contemporary visual art in recent years, agrees with him in his introduction to the anthology *Dance*, where he synthesises his views to date.[6] In doing so, he argues for the involvement of dance in the work of artists such as Vito Acconci, Marina Abramović, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Matthew Barney and Kelly Nipper, among others. He sees this influence as a homogeneous element, contributing specific qualities to the work of those mentioned. He identifies its essential features as ephemerality, corporeality, precariousness, scoring and performativity.[7] Lepecki considers all these phenomena at the same time as constitutive components of dance as such.[8] For him, as a theorist primarily focused on contemporary dance, the appearance of the above-mentioned is, above all, evidence of the intersection of two artistic worlds, where contemporary dance and its basic characteristics enter the current of contemporary art and influence it fundamentally. Although my reasoning in this text will further lead to somewhat different conclusions, I will have no choice but to return to Lepecki's fundamental considerations concerning the subject of this text several times in the following pages. I would like to touch upon the given issue by discussing a few concrete examples from contemporary world art and attempt to more precisely differentiate and define the notions of dance, choreography and, ultimately, the choreographic moment in the field of contemporary visual art.

1. New theatricality

Most of the works I mention below have one common feature that goes beyond the scope of the topic of this chapter yet is closely related to it. It is the apparent shift from the unrepeatable performative event towards a scenic presentation, whether this takes place in a gallery space, in the visual field of a video or in a direct overlap with the theatre, on the theatre stage. One of the reasons for this "new theatricality", or, as we could also call it, "scenicity", could be the tendency to structurally underline what has

5 Boris Charmatz and Isabelle Launay, *Entretenir. À propos d'une danse contemporaine, Parcours d'artistes* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2003), 163.

6 André Lepecki, "Dance as a Practice of Contemporaneity", in *Dance*, ed. A. Lepecki (London: Whitechapel Gallery 2012), 14–23.

7 Ibid., 15 – "ephemerality, corporeality, precariousness, scoring and performativity". Lepecki uses the English word "scoring" to refer to working according to a syllabus or directly to dance notation.

8 Ibid.

always remained hidden in "authentic" performance, precisely for the sake of the impression of the uniqueness of its realisation – that is, those theatre--related aspects of production preparation, staging and repriseability.[9] From this point of view, the abandonment of the genre purity and uniqueness of the performance act required by convention can also be seen as a release from the burden of masking the production. For this shift, which is in itself a complex phenomenon, encompassing a wide range of issues related to contemporary art, such as questions of intermediality, performativity or the duration of the artwork, I will focus here on work in which working with the controlled movement of the human body plays a fundamental role. Here, the most obvious and frequently occurring aspect of the aforementioned shift – from classically understood "authentic" performance, which we know well in the Czech environment, where the art of action has long kept its distance from scenic forms,[10] towards "scenicity" – could be considered to be the shift of the artist's position from the role of the bearer of expression, the performer, towards the director, or, here more precisely, the choreographer of a given realisation. If we take into account, for example, the work of Tino Sehgal, Pablo Bronstein or Kelly Nipper, this position of the artist is characteristic of them.

2. Dance

Although this scenic or "theatrical" aspect plays a crucial role here, it is also important to stress the ontological difference between dance and theatre, as has been discussed many times. From an aesthetic point of view, it was perhaps most succinctly summed up most recently by Alain Badiou in his short text "Dance as a Metaphor for Thought".[11] Drawing on the ideas of Nietzsche and Mallarmé, Badiou defines, among other things, the elementary antithesis of theatre and dance as an immediate bodily expression, taking place in a real space and establishing a bond with the spectator in which the presence of the human body in movement becomes a fundamental moment. In the same way that Mallarmé sees the dancer as a metaphor, in the example of

9 See the understanding of this phenomenon in Betti Sue Hertz, "Tableaux Vivants in the New Theatrality", *Flash Art International* 275 (November–December 2010): 78–82.

10 This definition can never be understood absolutely, but if we look at the canonical work reflected in most key publications, this difference becomes especially clear in the Czech environment with the work represented by Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera. See Pavlína Morganová, *Akční umění* (Olomouc: J. Vancl Publishing House, 2009).

11 Alain Badiou, "Dance as a Metaphor for Thought", in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 57–71.

classical dance, deprived of their personality in the moment of dance,[12] we can understand dance as the "making present" or materialisation of thought movement. This is very different from "theatre", as Badiou also defines it, where the body performs a role that is part of a wider assemblage of expressive means aimed at expressing theatre as an idea.[13] Similarly, against the hard-to-define intermedial field of action art, a fundamental difference can be found here in the emphasis on the embodiment of movement itself, devoid of conceptual and contextual aspects.[14] From this understanding of dance as a purely movement activity, it is no longer a reach to think of choreography, but this must be understood not only as a method of describing and realising dance, but also as a process of recording the presence of movement itself.

3. Choreography

However, we cannot quite simply draw an equation between the concepts of choreography and dance. As the famous contemporary choreographer William Forsythe suggested in an essay,[15] choreography as a system could be taken beyond the human body and understood within the framework of a "choreography of objects". The choreography of objects is something that has not only been touched upon by visionaries such as Oskar Schlemmer but can also be tied directly to how some more contemporary artists operate with artefacts as an assemblage of objects in a given space.[16] Forsythe himself addresses the question of whether a choreographer necessarily needs the human body to work. While he is inclined to say that the body as a physical presence is still needed, one cannot help but feel the difference between this understanding of choreography as an operation with spatial relations and dance as a bodily expression linked to the presence of the dancer. It is significant that Forsythe himself often works with object installations in his work, standing on the verge of fine art. For example, his realisation *Nowhere*

12 Ibid., 64: "No role enrolls the dancing body, which is an emblem of pure emergence."

13 Alain Badiou, "Theses on Theatre", in *Handbook*, 72–77. See in particular: "Contrary to dance, whose sole rule is that a body be capable of exchanging the earth with the air (and for which even music is not essential), theatre is an assemblage."

14 See also Badiou, "Dance", 64.

15 William Forsythe, "Choreographic Objects", in Lepecki (ed)., *Dance*, 201–203.

16 The above-mentioned London exhibition *Move. Choreographing You* offered a number of examples of this approach (e.g. the works of Robert Morris, Mike Kelley or Bruce Nauman). See Stephanie Rosenthal (ed.), *Move. Choreographing You. Art and Dance Since the 1960s* (Exh. cat.) (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2011).

and Everywhere at the Same Time, No. 2 (2013)[17] is made up of 400 weights swinging on steel cables. Their programmed variable rhythm determines the movement of the visitor, who must "dance" between them. It is therefore in fact an environment where the choreography is determined and embodied by mechanisms without the presence of the dancer, but the human body is still necessary as a result, and the dancer is replaced by the spectator himself, who is directed by external physical stimuli to move in a somewhat controlled manner.

Choreography as a system originated in the West in the early modern period in the social milieu of the ruling classes,[18] and whether or not we accept the thesis of the abstraction of folk dance into a controlled system of movement representing the power of the elites,[19] we certainly cannot help but feel the difference between the relaxed indulgence of dancing at a disco, and the puppet-like control of the movement order of social dance in, say, ballroom dancing. Choreography controls and directs bodies, whether it is the body of a courtier taking part in a ritual at the court of Louis XIV, or of an exerciser at a Sokol rally.[20]

In André Lepecki's texts, the notion of choreography plays a crucial role precisely in the context of his understanding of artistic dance as a political project. It becomes an apparatus of capture and control.[21] Some

17 *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, No. 2*, 2013, choreographic object, realised at the Folkwang Museum, Essen. In its first version from 2005, this work was part of a dance performance on a more intimate scale of 40 weights. Here, however, despite the presence of professional dancers, the choreographic principle was still determined by the circumstances of the movement of the weights.

18 By this I mean working with articulated dance movement, as evidenced by surviving writings or textbooks from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The very notion of choreography as a designation of a system of recording and describing dance dates back to the French courtly milieu of 1700 by the dance master Raoul-Auger Feuillet and was used in his writing "Chorégraphie, ou l'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs", in Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), 99–121.

19 "[A]t a certain point in the history of Western subjectivity, a certain social (and socializing) activity called dance fell prey to a stately (and theological) apparatus of capture called choreography." André Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture", *TDR: The Drama Review* 51(2) (Summer 2007): 122.

20 Translator's note: Sokol is the Czech National Exercise Association

21 Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus", 122. In this respect, it is certainly necessary to take into account the origins of this thinking

choreographers of recent decades (in particular, Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy), whose work is sometimes described as "conceptual", have taken choreography, understood as a system of power control over the human body, as the target of their deconstructive strategies. In both classical and modernist dance, the dancer's body is subordinated to the clear ideas of the choreographer. Especially in classical ballet, the dancer does not enter into a mere role as in theatre but embodies a bodily instrument in the hands of the author, subject to discipline, just as in Foucault's conception the body is subject to political power. In the work of the above-mentioned authors, then, the traditional understanding of the choreographic order as a system controlling subordinate bodies is disrupted, often by relativising or shifting the positions of the author or performers themselves. Lepecki's understanding of the contemporary role of choreography also moves in the direction of this Foucauldian discourse.[22]

4. Choreographed movement

An interesting layer of recent work deals with human movement as an everyday, working or socially programmed form. That is, a register of civilian movements that obviously does not fall under dance, although it can be its source material. At the same time, however, there is often an interest in the structure of movement, its rhythm and its expressive and mechanical qualities, aspects that are strongly touched upon by choreography in its attempt to describe and subsequently control the performance of movement. This orientation has manifested itself especially in the media of video art, performance and video performance.

This interest in everyday movement has a history and plays a role in the history of modernist dance, particularly in the thinking of Rudolf von Laban, and especially in the field of American postmodern dance of the 1960s and 1970s. The overlap between the two fields of dance and visual art in working

in Foucault. In relation to the aforementioned question of bodily discipline and control associated with the period of the emergence of ballet and the modern state, see, for example: "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 60. In Lepecki's texts, this thinking is often associated with the term "choreopolitics". For him, choreopolitics is the viewing of a given choreographic theme as a topic of politically oriented investigation. It is no coincidence that the adjective "choreopolitical" appears in his texts.

22 See, in particular, André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge 2006).

with civilian movements has occurred, for example, in the performative and choreographic work of Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris and Trisha Brown, emerging from the Judson Dance Theater circuit.[23] Bruce Nauman's contemporaneous work on the West Coast has an indirectly documented connection to these activities.[24] Nevertheless, by the 1990s, when the work discussed below appears, these activities were history.

In 1997, the American artist and documentary filmmaker Sharon Lockhart made an hour-long film, divided into six ten-minute parts, called *Goshogaoka*[25] after its location, a Japanese high school. The film records a view of the gymnasium from a static camera position, the curtained back of the building suggesting its occasional use as a theatre. A uniformly dressed group of Japanese high-school girls, members of the basketball team, enter this precisely defined scene. They begin with a warm-up and continue with a series of stretches and movement games. The girls perform these activities in a uniform synchronised rhythm. This gives the whole scene, together with its framing by the camera, an almost scenic character. Here we observe an activity controlled by a uniform movement order, which could certainly be described as choreography. The length of the film and its cinematic format could refer more to documentary work, but the static nature of the shot gives it the appearance of a live image through which the viewer peers into the scene, making it a format that fits more into a gallery setting.

While the synchronised execution of the practitioners' actions may resemble dance, some parts of the exercises are authentic training, while others are already choreographed variations composed of given movements. We could also look for certain aspects of "theatricality" in the colours of the clothes that change in the different parts. In fact, the combinatorics of these

23 See Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). The circle of artists moving around the Judson Dance Theater, and later the Grand Union group in New York City from the early 1960s well into the 1970s, was a meeting and collaborative site for choreographers, dancers and visual artists whose activities in many cases interpenetrated each other's creative fields. Examples include the choreographic work of Robert Morris or the film work of Yvonne Rainer and the artistic activities of Simone Forti.

24 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 22–33. Bruce Nauman, in his video performances realised in his studio in the late 1960s, worked with movement activities set in a loop of repetition. These made use of everyday movements presented in a movement system close to the contemporary work of American postmodern dance artists. See, especially, his work *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968).

25 *Goshogaoka*, 1997, 16 mm colour film, 63 minutes.

components creates a series of scenes that could be compared to an abstract movement composition such as Samuel Beckett's *Quad* (1981).[26] However, the movement activities that the girls perform are in fact quite concrete, from the initial warm-up to the game play to the collective massage and the final dissolution of the movement unity of the collective into an aimless walk. The movements used remain connected to their original sporting purpose. Their embedding in a choreographic system still does not make them dance. Here, the artist has entered the field of choreography from a different direction: in this film, there is an aestheticisation of everyday activity on the border between documentary and performative forms.

Often balancing between the format of moving film and still photographic images, but also between film documentary and gallery art, Sharon Lockhart's work has more than once shown an interest in the process of everyday activity and work. References to their social context can also be found here, but these are represented in her work primarily by the very presence or absence of activity and the atmosphere of the images.[27] The frequent static, or at least fixed, axis of the camera shot actually becomes an active tool for the artist, where the movement elements entering the frame, i.e. mainly human actors, create their own choreographic space of mutual movement relations by their relation to the given frame. These can be generated by everyday work or sport movement, but, as we will see later, dance itself can also form a special relationship with the film or video format.

Kelly Nipper, another American artist, in her 1999 work *Norma – Practice for Sucking Face*,[28] also used everyday human movement and actions as her creative material. Over a ten-day process, five committed dancers created a 90-minute act in which they worked primarily with a "task-based"[29] gait,

[26] See Graley Herren, "Samuel Beckett's *Quad*: Pacing to Byzantium", *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XV(1) (Autumn 2000): 43–59.

[27] See her work *Lunch Break* (2008), depicting workers resting in a long corridor during their lunch break. Here, the work activity has ceased, and the camera takes over, seemingly endlessly moving slowly forward. See Michael Ned Holte, "A Few Questions About Place and Time: Sharon Lockhart and Michael Ned Holte in Conversation", *Newspaper Jan Mot* 73 (August 2010): 1–5.

[28] *Norma – Practice for Sucking Face*, 1999, installation and performance with video documentation.

[29] In the English original, the term "task-oriented", based on the common practice of postmodern dance, consists of movement defined by specified tasks rather than precise choreography. See Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 43.

coupled with the use of several auxiliary objects and a set of grey cushions. This work, in working with the process of walking and 'working' acts with minimized proxy objects, is in many ways reminiscent of analogous work in postmodern dance of the 1960s. As in the works of Yvonne Rainer, here, too, there is work with movement analogous to the everyday but devoid of direct purpose. The choreographic aspect of movement itself, as structured rhythm and physical relationships, gains the upper hand here. In a similarly sober spirit, the artist approaches movement in her more intimate works *Interval* (2000) and *Circle, Circle* (2007),[30] where the repetitive, simple structure of the dancer's movements is confronted with a scenic element in the first case, and with the format of the cropped video footage itself in the second. Here, choreography becomes a tool for capturing the body in interaction with the compositional situation framing it.

Similar to Sharon Lockhart's work mentioned above, the result is a choreographic structure. Although this time it is realised by professional dancers and there is the obvious influence of postmodern dance, we still cannot speak of dance itself. In the case of *Norma – Practice for Sucking Face* the artist adopts a borderline experimental form of dance art without fully embracing its grounding alongside it, which in the works of postmodern dance makers has linked it to dance itself. In her other two works mentioned above, the simplification of the adopted dance movements and their fragmentation also nullify the experience of the activity as dance. The interest in the aesthetics of movement on the level of the individual and the collective is here rather in a position analogous to that represented by Sharon Lockhart. Despite this distance – from the understanding of dance as a given – this influence of the experimental positions of modern dance cannot be completely underestimated, and, as we will soon see, in the subsequent work of both artists this trend soon acquires new qualities, linking it much more closely to the phenomenon of dance art itself.

5. Archive of movement

I have chosen the work of the two mentioned American artists because their more recent works show the relationship of the phenomenon of *choreographication* to two other key phenomena in recent artistic production. These are the so-called *archival impulse* and the work with the heritage of classical modernism and the avant-garde. The aforementioned Kelly Nipper has begun to make more intensive use of collaborations with dancers and

[30] *Interval*, 2000, 4 photographs, and *Circle, Circle*, 2007, two-channel video, 10 minutes, loop.