

DANCERS INSTEAD OF SOLDIERS OR: GESTURES AGAINST FEAR

On new spaces of experience for dance

Excerpts from the interview that the author, dramaturg and curator Margarita Tsomou conducted prior to the Dance Congress 2016 with the choreographer Boris Charmatz in January 2016.

MT

You will be part of the upcoming Dance Congress 2016 in Hannover. How do you plan to intervene in this context?

BC

Recently I started something that – for lack of a better name – I call “transformative choreographies” or “protocols” – a kind of method of bringing projects together. Not as a line-up of pieces, but as the creation of an interconnected set, where the space and the people participating go through different stages and change through time.

We start with a collective warm-up. You can watch, but you can also take part and become a performer. Then the audience will enter the congress venue, the opera house in Hannover, and visit the live exhibition of “20 dancers for the XX century”. This is an exhibition of solo gestures of the 20th century that we’ve already shown in many places, including Berlin. And as a third step, we will all gather on the opera stage for the dance piece “manger”. Here the audience members will be in the middle of the performance action on stage, while the performers are eating, moving and singing among them.

MT

You show three projects, but you claim that it’s not a simple line-up. The act of bringing them together sounds characteristic for your work to me: you experiment with various mediatic logics, combine distinct spaces and thus challenge given modes of producing and perceiving art.

BC

Yes, the idea is to create a structure where one will move through three projects, three spaces and three experiences, as if they were connected to each other. What I like is that the public changes positions from 1) participating in a warm-up, where you almost perform yourself, to 2) visiting an exhibition, where one is free to walk without instructions and constraints, to 3) watching an art piece like “manger”, immersed on a horizontal level to the performers.

MT

You constantly move the audience around which makes me think of the manifesto of Musée de la danse, where you said you wanted to “transform or rethink the relationship between the audience and its physical and imaginative territories ...”

BC

When Sandra Neuveut, Martina Hochmuth and I started Musée de la danse, we thought that the spaces for dance are too split. Firstly, you have the dance class, where dance is something you do. Then dance is taking place on stage, here it is something you look at. But dance enables a much wider range of modes of experiences – it can evoke discussions and texts, it can be watched on video, experienced on the Internet. With Musée de la danse we wanted to open a door to create a new space for experiencing dance. We try to thin down the walls between amateurs and professionals, pedagogy and art, research and improvisation. How this attitude is being actualised each time we cannot say, it depends on the project and the participants. We like the shift of postures from participating in a dance class, to being a visitor, from being a passerby, to be a real dancer. What we are doing now at the Dance Congress is connected to that line of thought.

MT

So you apply the logics of Musée de la danse to Hannover through these three projects, which in combination enlarge the way dance is produced and experienced. Still the question remains how you present pieces that were made for other contexts. "Manger" is an easier case since it takes place in a black box, but how do you proceed with "20 dancers for the XX century"?

BC

We always start with a protocol or – to say it differently – a structure: these are 20 dancers who we choose specifically for each context. There is no technical equipment, no lighting, no costumes, maybe a little music box. They develop their solos and all together it creates an exhibition or a 'forest' of dancers and gestures. But this structure does not say what you will have in the performance at the end. Some parts are fixed, some more ephemeral, some we adapt. (...) So we open up, we follow the performers but also give some directions ourselves.

We are looking for artists from the city, such as Kurt Schwitters, whom I adore, and studying the dance history of the city. We would also like to address the history of the Dance Congress itself which was founded in the 1920s and was re-established recently. Of course we also want to refer to the space itself which is an opera house.

MT

I read "20 dancers for XX history" as a suggestion for a method to historicise dance movement. For me, it is no coincidence that you are an associated artist for this year's Dance Congress which aims to explore the term "contemporaneity" – a term that one associates with historicity and time. What is your take on the term?

BC

How would you define it?

MT

I can try. First of all, it is regarded as a dimension of temporality, meaning what is considered as the "new", the "current", taking place in the "now". But who decides what is "new" in the "now"? There are specific things that are regarded as "contemporary" today. We say "contemporary dance" and mean something different than "modern dance". Thus one could also consider "contemporaneity" as referring to certain genres of art. Historically they might have taken place in very different times – from the 1960s to today – but they all apply a "contemporary style" mostly bound to aesthetic methods like concept-based art, site-specificity, de-materialisation, participation, the post-dramatic etc. Here contemporaneity would be a genre and less a category of time.

BC

Yes, and a third way would be to think of it as a space. A horizontal space of people who share history or genres and practices.

MT

So, let me think: could it be a space for producing contemporaneity, where a constant "making-contemporary" occurs through a process of "commoning", or finding common ground through mutual engagement?

BC

It is also a matter of my own position. I am not the one to say "20th century – this is it" or to define "contemporaneity". As we do with projects like Musée de la danse, instead of giving an answer, we put a question mark and develop a platform, a horizontal realm, where artists and participants do something together in order to try to think about what is the "now". Following each other might change how we look, touch, think about, for example, contemporaneity. But for that to happen, you have to open up the space to drift together. This horizontal attitude is inherent to the Dance Congress project. The warm-up takes place in the streets without a stage or infrastructure. Anybody passing by to go shopping, to go to work or to the cinema, becomes part of what we're doing. Then, in "20 dancers" there is no clear position for the audience, one has the freedom to move and approach any dancer one chooses, talk to him after his solo. And in "manger" we turn the stage into a table, because we eat from the floor. A floor that we share with the visitors, asking: can we walk and eat from the same floor or table? So the Dance Congress project is also about the creation of these shared, horizontal spaces.

MT

OK, if we think contemporaneity as something we do, as a horizontal space to produce communality, the question of the politics of invitation comes up. Who is invited to "contemporaneity", to spend time in common? Who decides which solo represents the 20th century? I wonder if bringing artists together makes you inevitably part of the production of a sort of "canon of the contemporaneous" in current dance history. Post-colonial critics, for example, would say that we Europeans universalise our practices as

“contemporary dance” and consider other dance genres as backwards or traditional.

BC

I am not interested in forming a canon at all. In “20 dancers” we avoid universal claims, the 20th century is created differently by the participants each time. And it is also about sharing the position of the curator. For example, Martina Hochmuth and I, as the curators of “expo zéro”, invite Faustin Linyekula, but we invite him to become a curator himself, he decides how to fill the space. I provide the frame, but at the same time the exhibition is created by ten participants who develop it. Concerning the post-colonial: since we started with Dimitri Chamblas many years ago, instead of “working with the ‘other’”, we invested in an archaeology of our own practices, trying to be conscious of the way we are constructed by specific dance techniques, for example. In the spaces we create, we open up in order to shift our horizons. Though it is not about melting into one harmonious body, but about negotiating differences, pointing out the specificities why “Faustin is not Boris” and using the tension between the individual and the collective.

The entire interview is published in Magazine No. 26 of the German Federal Cultural Foundation (spring/summer issue 2016).