

What Remains of Dance

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The various dance notation systems invented over the years have never succeeded in becoming part of choreographic practices. Works are almost completely absorbed by the performance and are only handed down by tradition, more gesturally than orally. In dance, the very notion of a work is therefore problematic. This acknowledgement forms the basis of Frédéric Pouillaude’s excellent aesthetic analysis.

Reviewed : Frédéric Pouillaude, *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique, étude sur la notion d’œuvre en danse*, Vrin, coll. « Essais d’art et de philosophie », 2009, 430 pages, 30€.

Over the last twenty-odd years, dance – long forgotten and, indeed, scorned by philosophers and even by some musicians – has won (back) its spurs: a great many books, articles and scholarly papers have been devoted to it. A new public, in love with contemporary dance, has appeared alongside the classical ballet’s traditional public (although the two have not merged). This is both the theoretical and choreographic-dramatic framework for Frédéric Pouillaude’s recent book, *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique, étude sur la notion d’œuvre en danse* (‘Choregraphic Unworking: A Study of the Notion of a Work in Dance’). And yet, this is not just another book in this field; rather, it stands as the promontory in a landscape it both dominates and enables us to understand. For Frédéric Pouillaude’s book is exceptional in many ways. So what is it about? At first glance its subject may appear obscure: “choregraphic unworking” (this idea is given a precise definition on pages 383-384, at the end of a long journey that we shall here try to retrace). In fact, it is a meticulous historical and theoretical investigation into the status of dance; this investigation demonstrates why dance can never “create

work” (in the way that painters or musicians do, leaving behind something lasting); while the apparent powerlessness of dance brings much greater clarity to the notion of a “work”. As well as a book about dance, *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique* is a book about the notion of work, performance, transmission, writing and even, indirectly, about the social situation of art and artists.

An Elusive Work

There is nothing rhapsodic about this work, however! The book is perfectly crafted. The first part (which is, in fact, the introduction, cf. p. 9) analyses the “transcendental absence” of dance in philosophy. This “absence” refers to three different ways in which dance is absent: (1) the fact that dance is completely overlooked by many systematic philosophical aesthetics (as is the case in Hegel); (2) the shunning of real choreographic works by rare, institutionally marginalized thinkers (Erwin Straus, Valéry) in whose aesthetic thought dance took centre stage; (3) the intrinsic fragility of a choreographic work which, in a sense, causes the danced work to become absent from itself. This all becomes clear later.

Dance is not “forgotten” by philosophers out of basic negligence, which could easily be rectified; instead, it is left out or rendered “absent” from classical art systems (the shunning of dance is contemporaneous with the invention of aesthetics). This absence is “transcendental” in that it is the condition for the potential constitution of a stable system for the arts and a philosophical aesthetic. For dance is always too much and too little; always beyond yet below art. When dance is seen as the root or the original condition of all the arts then it ceases to be a particular art – an art in the strictest sense. Valéry conceived of dance as an intimate experience; Erwin Straus saw dance – or, rather, dancing – as an ecstatic way to be present. For these authors, dance meant self-awareness, exertion, auto-affection; as pure self-delight, it is an absent work (p. 76). In a rather Aristotelian gesture, Pouillaude analyses his predecessors’ opinions before tackling the subject directly. He does not merely explore impasses: if the work is absent from these “philosophies of dance”, it is not through simple negligence (and Pouillaude does not hide his admiration for the powerful analyses made by Straus and Valéry) but because

real choreographic works do not correspond to the usual aesthetic canons. So, what is a work? The answer comes on p. 77 and structures the rest of the discussion: a work is “a public object to be shared and presented for others’ judgment” and, at the same time, “a resistant object capable of surviving the death of its early protagonists”. Pouillaude’s possible “sources” (Hannah Arendt and Georges Didi-Huberman, each quoted and discussed) are surpassed in the powerful theoretical gesture that is sustained, with no loss of tension, right to the end of the book. A work needs to be publicised and to survive. Although Pouillaude reproaches philosophers for neglecting the empirical (actual dance performances; dance technique; choreographic notations, when these exist; the real bodies of the men and women who dance), he also shows that the reason for this neglect of the empirical is the empirical object itself. A painting is there, hanging in the museum; a sonata is there, in the score that just needs to be read. Both are public; both stand the test of time. But dance? Where is the choreographic piece, after the doors are locked and the public has left? Parts 2 and 3 are devoted to these questions.

Publicity and Survival of the Choreographic Work

Pages 91-93 give a lucid explanation of the book’s evolution: the absence that is analysed (and criticised) in part 1 will only be overcome on two conditions (analysed in parts 2 and 3): that we are able to envisage the scenic structure and gestural meaning of the danced work; and that the work is able to survive and be handed down through time. The second and third parts, which make up one system, are devoted to the “public” nature (the performance) and the “surviving” nature (the notation) of the work that is danced.

The second part puts forward a philosophy of the stage (on which the dancers appear), a stage that “weakens auto-affection” and brings the “Straus-Valéry” time to a close. Mallarmé and Artaud (who are the subject of a fascinating assessment) open and close the essential analysis carried out in this part. According to Pouillaude, a performance is continually subject to a double ‘fading’: firstly, in the ritual and secondly, in the enjoyment. And yet, in both the ritual and the enjoyment the work is merely an opportunity. The performance can only become a “presentation of the work” if it is free from the symmetrical, though opposed, forms of ritual and enjoyment. Pouillaude shows

how ballet in France gradually transformed from a political ritual into an autonomous form of entertainment. It first became a (non-political) moment in the comedy-ballet of Molière and the opera-ballet of Lully, before freeing itself completely in “ballet of action”, an independent artistic subject (Noverre¹). However, a central theme of the book is the fact that the performance setting for dance is profoundly heterogeneous (music, décor, costumes, lighting, movement) and, therefore, ontologically uncertain. What is the heart or the essence of a dance performance? Philosophers from Aristotle to Goodman have always tended to diminish the performance element of dance for the benefit of... but for the benefit of what, exactly? In theatre, one might say “for the benefit of the text”, but there is no text in dance.

And so we come to the third part (I am forced to omit many excellent points from the second part), which is, in my view, the heart of the book. This part is devoted to what may “survive” of a dance performance once it has taken place and will not take place again. In order to make a performance survive (such as a dance), it is crucial to be able to reproduce it exactly, a factor unique to the so-called (since Goodman) allographic arts². Pouillaude’s articulate, compelling theory is that dance is neither allographic (like music) nor autographic (like painting); for Pouillaude, notation is a “strict condition of allography”, since dance is not written – or rather, if it is written, it is with “a written form that says nothing”.

Of the hundreds of choregraphic notation systems that have been invented, Pouillaude presents (and illustrates, including some invaluable documents displayed at the end of the book) the Feuillet system (1700) and the Laban system (1928). However, the choreographer, despite his title, does not write (it is the notator, if there is one, who writes) and the dancer reads even less. Pouillaude’s fascinating analysis aims to comprehend what should be called the failure of dance notation; the reasons for that

¹ In 1760, Jean-Georges Noverre (1727-1810) published *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets* which profoundly marked the history of dance and of its aesthetic.

² We should recall that Goodman made a distinction between the autographic arts, which produce unique objects that cannot be notated but can give rise to forgeries (painting, stone sculpture), and the allographic arts, which produce notated works that cannot give rise to forgeries (music, novels, theatre). This distinction poses a number of problems, which have been debated at length over the past forty years.

failure are not only historical (factual) but also artistic (essential). The Feuillet system was an exception (from 1700 to 1760) but, adhering too closely to the practices of a particular era in dance, it proved unsuitable when people began to dance differently. Conversely, Laban's two notation systems, both "universal" and detached from the practice of any particular dance, proved to be too far removed from the "steps" and the "figures" of a given dance vocabulary.

Pouillaude clearly gives the reason for this twofold, symmetrical failure on p. 205: "The underlying category divisions of graphic signs have always been external to – and cannot be superimposed upon – the different entities isolated by choregraphic vocabulary". To be sure, these entities of the practical vocabulary of real dance do exist, but in the dancers' bodies: they cannot be transferred onto paper. They form a kind of "archi-writing": "writing" in the sense that they bring together certain significant, expressive divisions of movement (legs, head, arms); and "archi" in the sense that they precede all graphic writing (on paper) that seeks in vain to recapture and transcribe them. As Pouillaude explains, the fact remains that choregraphic notations (which are real nevertheless – some have played a role in the survival of certain works, such as Stepanov notation) have never managed to become part of the real practices of dancers and "choreographers". In dance, the work is in fact handed down orally, even when a notation such as that of Swan Lake choreographed by Petipa and Ivanov is available (p.225).

Dances therefore survive their performance on stage through what Pouillaude calls "the passing" of dance. To "pass" a dance means to separate it from the body (real and alive) that has appropriated it so that another body can then reappropriate it. Frédéric Pouillaude, himself a former dancer (he worked, in particular, with Mathilde Monnier in Montpellier) before becoming a lecturer in aesthetics and philosophy of art at Paris IV-Sorbonne, gives a remarkable demonstration of the way in which the trainee dancer treats the master "like a score that does not exist" (p. 266). The choregraphic score exists and does not exist: it does not exist because it cannot be written, copied or photocopied; yet it exists because it lives within the dancer's body and can be "passed" to another dancer through gestural transmission. Pouillaude draws an ontological conclusion from this

situation (see pages 272 et seq.). “It is at the moment of passing from one body to another that the work achieves recognition as a work” (p. 278). He shows that this transmission from body to body requires a common framework of experience, which no longer exists in contemporary dance. Each dance company has its own framework (its choregraphic vocabulary, its practices, etc.) and his thorough examination of the “Carnets Bagouet” (see the excellent descriptions on pages 277-285 of the work carried out in order to keep Dominique Bagouet’s creations alive after the choreographer’s death in 1992) reveals the complexity of such a transmission – that is, of the survival of the choregraphic work. The technological processes (video recording, for example) are also taken into account.

Does Dance Have a Purpose?

The fourth and final part of the book, “A Technique without Purpose”, is the shortest but not the least dense. It takes up and develops the Maussian concept of a “technique of the body” but here we are almost referring to a “collective body”, or a shared corporeity (that of the Company: “a Cunningham corporeity”). This choregraphic technique is “without purpose” in three different ways: the absence of a finality pertaining to instrumental rationality; the absence of a stable finished product; and the absence of equipment (except, perhaps, ballet pointes, fans and, in some rare cases, the costume). It “wishes for the involuntary” (reflection on improvisation as the abandoning of any intentional project; on the refusal of a code in contemporary dance as the intensification of contingency; and on the availability of collective improvisation); it “repeats the unrepeatable”. Such paradoxical expressions – fairly common in this book – are not there for amusement but because of the actual need of the object in question. The density of this fourth part allows me to give only a very brief outline of the content.

The conclusion, presented in four parts, is a veritable firework display of concepts and ideas or, should I say, the crowning piece that brings the fireworks to a close. It is as if the author, limited by editorial constraints, had to condense an idea that was already stretched to the limit. He analyses the stage as a “structure of contemporaneity” (p. 357); the five features of the performing arts as they are today (closure of companies, integration of works into their economic context, open systems, etc.); and the way in

which the work is a tool for remembering (a present work becomes the first memorial interpretation of a work from the past, supporting examples p. 369 et seq.). Unfortunately I am only able to briefly touch on these highly evocative points. Frédéric Pouillaude concludes his conclusion (for the conclusion is a treatise in itself) with a suggestion as sparkling as it is intriguing concerning the arts of gesture and the arts of ‘tracing’ – I shall return to this later.

The overview given above does not reflect the length of the various sections of the book and only highlights its main structure and central themes, to the detriment of the “detailed” analyses (if we can thus describe analyses that last for 20 or 30 pages). Before making any criticisms, I should first mention how admirable this work is. It is a book of surprisingly consistent density (no loss of tension, no extraneous comments, no repetition) and one that is perfectly crafted (although it requires concentration). It is ambitious, both achieving its ambition yet remaining modest. When Pouillaude criticises Stiegler, Badiou, Valéry or Aristotle he does so calmly, concisely, evenly and convincingly, with none of the wretched excitement of those who wish to tear down their heroes nor the obsequiousness of those who apologise one hundred times for refuting someone. This book is written with great precision and clarity (once again, it requires concentration) and it is not lacking in humour. It is entirely au fait with the different trends in classical aesthetics and contemporary philosophy (phenomenology, analytical aesthetics, etc.). It discusses theories without eclecticism or exclusivity and, more importantly, different authors’ ways of thinking; it continually supports its arguments with examples from real works and practices without idolising empiricism. I believe that this book is an example of the very best that can be produced in the philosophy of art. This means that *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique* is not only of interest to dance specialists, as this review will try to demonstrate.

Gesture and Trace

I shall now present four points in ascending order of importance – just a few of the many contained within this rich work.

1) Is all dance devoid of finality?

Frédéric Pouillaude identifies three ways in which dance is “without purpose”. The second and third ways are clear: dance does not produce “things”; dance does not make use of any tools (see pages 309-320). The first sense is more problematic: “we should understand absence of purpose [in the first sense], to mean the absence of any strict, definite finality [...]. We are hard pressed to assign to the danced movement a specific end enabling us to judge the methods used. [...] It would seem that there is no reason to dance” (p. 317-318). There then follows a fine reflection on the essential contingency of the danced movement. It appears to me that this contingency is only relevant to artistic dance (as opposed to the practical dances Pouillaude mentions: invoking the rains, attracting the opposite sex, etc.) and, within artistic dance, to one part alone (certain forms of contemporary dance, although not all). Are the dancers’ movements in *Swan Lake* contingent? Are they not teleologically guided by the ballet’s story? In order to understand this objection, a stronger theory must first be accepted: the theory stating that the most “contingent” forms of contemporary dance contain the essence and truth of dance. And yet, if this is so, how can this contingency dance (once again, Pouillaude presents some very strong arguments) constitute the truth of forms of non-contingent dance (practical or artistic) that are, in reality, driven by specific forms of instrumental rationality?

2) Linguistic model and musical model for choreographic notation

Attempts at choreographic notation seem to always have been considered (in both the classical age and the twentieth century) in terms of the linguistic model (words and letters). And yet, as Pouillaude comments, “The application of the linguistic model to notation cannot keep its promises” because dance vocabulary is not doubly articulated (p. 241). I can only mention one surprising element: why did the linguistic paradigm resonate so much when a writing model without double articulation was available in standard musical notation? This system was powerful and supple enough to notate Purcell and Monteverdi just as well as Berg and Messiaen. Why have choreographers not looked at it? Perhaps they would have found nothing, but still the question remains. Other questions should be asked regarding the nature of choreographic vocabulary, but these

cannot be dealt with here.

3) Choreographic performance: essence or accident?

Dance is a performance art; in other words, “an action carried out in the present before a public and open to immediate aesthetic effects” (p. 251, note). It is such in a more radical way than music, since the choreographic work cannot “free itself into an external, indiscriminately available ideality [the score]” that would ensure that it could be reproduced (p. 263), and the performance appears to be essential to it (the performance is not only the interpretation of a written text but the work itself). However, at the end of the book, Frédéric Pouillaude states – rather inexplicably – that a performance “is not a peculiarity but an accident” of dance (p. 368), and that the various notation systems have not been incorporated into the practices of dance for contingent (and therefore accidental) reasons. In another version of history, in another potential world of dance, dance might have been transformed into an allographic art in its own right (like music or theatre). The author seems to be suggesting a counterfactual history here, but the reader is left somewhat unsatisfied, even more so given that the trilemma³ presented on pages 211-212 appears to place the failure of choreographic notations (their non-incorporation into practices) within the very essence of dance and not within the contingencies of history (see also p. 242).

4) The arts of gesture and the arts of ‘tracing’

A philosophy of the (real) history of the arts is outlined in the final pages of the book. As if to echo the Kantian distinction between the figural arts and the arts of play (analysed on pages 17-19), Pouillaude distinguishes between the arts of gesture (theatre, music, dance) and the arts of ‘tracing’ (painting, cinema and so on) but straightaway points out that the trace itself results from a gesture (p. 380). One must therefore make a distinction between “the arts (of the gesture) of tracing and the arts of gesture (without tracing)”. He

³ “The impossibility of the practical integration of writing takes the form of a trilemma: 1) In order for the activity of reading and writing to become indissociable from choreographic practices, the category divisions made by notation must be sufficiently close to the entities implemented by the practices. 2) However, in order for a true written tradition to be established, the system must be sufficiently wide and open so that it withstands the mutation of styles and genres and maintains relative stability over time. 3) This “opening” of the system – a word weakened by overuse – is only possible if local categories in use are abandoned, which would seem to conflict with the first condition”.

mentions in passing that Goodman only classifies types of tracing (allographic: ideal and conceptual traces; autographic: singular and material). Pouillaude thus tries to get below the traces, into the gestures that led to them, by dismantling the axiological primacy of the trace. An historical logic emerges: music and theatre “have progressively aligned themselves [...] with the arts of tracing” (p. 382). “There is no art but that of gesture” (p. 380). Yet, if the truth of all art lies in the gesture that constitutes its close or distant origin, should we not fear that dance, the non-aligned art of gesture, might eventually take on the function of an “art of the arts” or an art par excellence, which the author had appeared to be challenging? The fact is that these dense pages demand further development and expansion, which the reader expects.

A work of dance remains and does not remain. Human memory is fragile; videos are partial and notation is separate from its object. However, it is not true that nothing is left. Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham are no longer here, but those who saw them dance and those who danced with them are left with a discernible mark that goes deeper than memory. The a posteriori forms of that sensitivity are also produced by the experience on stage (practical or observed), and those forms are alive because they enable other works to flourish in turn. They also nurture thoughts and give birth to concepts. *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique*, in everything it makes us see, understand and feel is, too, an effect of the gesture of dance, or rather a response to that gesture. This remarkable book is, as a text, a lasting trace in which something of dance can remain, in other words, survive and live, when the gestures it consists of are stopped or, perhaps, simply interrupted.

Translated from French by **Susannah Dale**

Translator’s note: all quotes from *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique* are the translator’s own English translation.

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