



Artifact, Choreography: William Forsythe; Photo: Dominik Mentzos

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The Space We Carry With Us.

New Theatrical Forms Need New Performance Sites

An art-event needs a different space than that required by an artificial event. The one seems launched from below, the other staged from above. Artists and audiences who feel as though they belong to the vanguard have long since preferred to present and view performances in unheated factory halls or subway tunnels rather than in artificially heated or air-conditioned civic theaters.

Sometimes it almost seems like unintentional self-parody: whoever and whatever claims to be aesthetically advanced dwells in a garage. Only established theatrical forms, which are oriented towards the past, still feel comfortable on traditional stages. The social contrast of yesteryear no longer exists.

In Shakespeare's day, no roof covered the heads of the „groundlings“ as they stood, by rain or shine, watching the performances; French and Italian opera fans in the 18th century compensated for the large distance between them and the singers on the distant Mount Olympus of the stage by jeering and heckling in loud voices, whence the admonition to „Keep quiet over there in the cheap seats!“ In today's democratic society, access to the theater is potentially

available to all classes. Commoners occupy expensive seats in theaters, many of which were originally built under feudal social systems. The binary division of society has become an ideological decision or simply a question of taste. This bifurcation no doubt derives from new and different aesthetic requirements. A site which has not been predefined and delimited as a theatrical space provides seemingly unlimited freedom for the imagination. Its only boundaries are the bodies of the performers themselves. This is why a choreographer like William Forsythe can, without contradiction, present his works equally well in a garage or in Vienna's opulent Burgtheater.

The symmetry of classical ballet, which achieves its optimal effects when viewed from the front and performed on a slightly raked proscenium stage, appears only as an allusion, as it were within quotation marks, in early pieces like Artifact or Impressing the Czar. Each dancer represents a self-contained unity and functions as the generator of an infinitely variable diversity of movements whose center and origin can be practically any part or any joint of the body. Following in Laban's footsteps, Forsythe's dancers each carry their own sphere of activity along with them, and they define the limits of those spheres only by the extension of their limbs and the extent of their own auras. The organization of several dancers within the space is no longer subservient to geometrical demands, but is now solely determined by the specific requirements of each desired atmosphere and by the relationships intended between the figures on stage.

Forsythe's research into ballet and the dancer's body is also intended to deconstruct the ideology of dance itself. What budgetary constraints originally compelled Balanchine to do, i. e. to dispense with opulent stage sets in favor of the famous blue cyclorama upstage, is now the result of a conscious decision on Forsythe's part. A few sculptures may be hung from the flies above the stage (as in Limb's Theorem) or several graphic panels may be used to divide the space (as in Artifact), but these objects are never mere décor; instead, they are always closely related to the content of the particular piece whose performance space they share. Stage lighting, however, is of far greater importance than any stage set. The light creates the space. It brightens or fades, interposes itself between spectator and dancer like a veil of aloofness, emphasizes the relative rather than absolute character of the events on stage, or even creates illusions. And it demarcates visual focal points. In Enemy in the Figure, the dancers themselves manipulate the sources of light by wheeling the spotlights across the stage. Real-time video projections in Forsythe's Sleepers Guts appear as a pure lie, as fiction. Early in the 1990s, and as a result of his interest in the work of the deconstructivist Daniel Libeskind, Forsythe defined the stage as a field of architectonic experimentation where he presented the results of his research into a shifted, deformed and dismembered geometry. At the same time, he also continued to work on the deconstruction of movement itself. The computer is an important component in his work: dancers use a computer to print out the variable sequences within their movement series, and they take their cues to enter the performance space from the time-code numbers on a computer monitor. Dancing bodies, light, new media: these three elements are the raw materials of which contemporary choreographers assemble their pieces. In every respect, William Forsythe's pieces are the most spectacular ones, partly but not solely be-

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cause he still works at a large civic theater and with a large company of some forty dancers. Within his oeuvre of the past fifteen years can be found all of the building blocks and characteristics which are likewise present in more or less the same forms in works by other, freelance choreographers. VA Wölfel and Wanda Golonka gave the programmatic title *Räumen* (the German word can mean „spaces“ and „to clear a space“) to one of their pieces. The implications of this title are twofold: on the one hand, it suggests that something must be cleared up here or that ballast must be cleared away; on the other hand, it alludes to an alternative spatial concept. Wölfel, whose roots lie in the visual arts and photography, also works in dance as a sculptor of light. In which light a thing, a person or a movement is to be observed, and the many ways in which various types of lighting can influence and transform a spectator's perception of an event are two essential aspects in Wölfel's work. (Both of these aspects, of course, can also be encountered in Forsythe's choreography.)

This is why the dancers in the *NEUER TANZ* group often dance in the dark. To a certain extent, the all-pervading gloom on stage and in the auditorium rescinds the separation between the spectator and the performer. The audience strives to discern outlines and movements in an almost completely darkened space, while the dancers are compelled to find their way and find a new equilibrium. In the dark, the dancers are thrown back upon their own resources; they must resort to a kind of introspection in order to adapt themselves and their bodies to the darkness. This is also a psychological process, since fear of the dark is a primal fear which the dancers must strive to overcome with their every step. A dancer's radius of movement is limited to what can be seen after his or her eyes have become accustomed to the dimness; it's a radius which, at times, may be no larger than the length of the dancer's outstretched limbs. This radius grows correspondingly larger if the dancer carries his or her own source of light, e. g. a 60-watt bulb attached to a staff (as in *RCA*).

The stage as a cinema in which everyone is free to project his or her own film (and this is not solely the case in a piece like *xyz* during which Wölfel turns on a film projector): this would be one way to describe the scenery in pieces by *NEUER TANZ*. The total absence or carefully planned use of light creates the space. The fixed walls of the proscenium stage are obsolete, and thus also the apron or forestage and the invisible „fourth wall“ which formerly separated the audience from the dancers. Others have already torn down that wall entirely. For example, Munich-based theater director Alexej Sagerer



Splayed Mind Out, Choreography: Gary Hill & Meg Stuart; Photo: Chris van der Burght

allowed his audience to stroll between video towers and individual performances in one portion of his *Nibelungen* project. For Munich-based choreographer Micha Purucker too, the stage is a room which everyone is free to enter. The spectator selects what he or she wants to see, and also chooses when, where and for how long he or she wants to see it. The youthful members of the *Gob Squad* group lead their audience into a subway station or bid them to congregate around a mirror-lined glass box which allows the spectators to observe the actors inside, but prevents the actors from seeing the audience outside the box. Choreographer Felix Ruckert sends his dancers one at a time into a private room where each dancer is all alone, one-on-one with a sole spectator. *Gob Squad* and Ruckert, who both belong to the youngest generation of choreographers, are helping to articulate a new definition of choreography: the dancer's movement now scarcely extends into space at all, but remains as the dancer's own self-inspection.

The fears prompted by the threat that the body might be lost entirely and that the digitalization of the arts might lead the artist to lose the relationship to his or her own body are reflected in pieces choreographed by the American Meg Stuart, most recently and most penetratingly in *Splayed Mind Out*. As in Forsythe's works, Stuart's pieces also make use of the „deceitful“ video object as it confronts the body of a physically present dancer. The step towards the „sampled“ dancer as one component

among many other computer-generated elements would now appear to be only a short way off.

In this context, the investigation of one's own body seems like a conscious and deliberate demonstration. The physical presence of the body and its functions forms the contrast to the immaterial world of appearances as presented by the new media. Research of this sort needs the nearness and intimate presence of a live audience. It makes the spectators into its accomplices. A piece of this sort simply wouldn't work if it were presented on the proscenium stage of a conventional theater. These new, intimate contents, which are most often manifest in the work of smaller companies, demand new and different spaces. The theater building and its specially constructed stage no longer create the pre-conditions needed for this genre of dance or theatrical event. It is the artists themselves who, by installing the appropriate, transportable equipment (computers, video monitors, spotlights, projectors, etc.) and by virtue of their own artistry, make a space (irregardless of which space it may be) into a theatrical space. Not unlike a „virtual office“, the theater of the future can be everywhere — wherever artists, equipped with the appropriate technology, meet their audiences.

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