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Interview with Boris Charmatz

DRJ: It has now been five years since your manifesto "For a Dancing Museum" first appeared. As is well known, this manifesto led you to become director of the Centre chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne (2009). Do you believe you have achieved the goals you stated as crucial for a dancing museum, i.e., to displace the idea of "Center" from the institution; to dismantle the "nationalism" always lurking under the adjectival "national"; to move the focus from the noun "Dance" to the actioning of the verb "Dancing" in defining this museum?

Boris Charmatz: Although we originally thought we'd call ourselves by the double name Musée de la danse/dancing museum, we now almost always use "Musée de la danse" (which translates to "Dance Museum") even when abroad. I wouldn't say that our attempt to invent a new type of public space for and via dance has "achieved its goals." The Dance Museum sets ideas in motion, not ruling anything out in principle, except perhaps the idea of finishing things off? [In French "finish off" can also mean belaboring a body that is already dead.] If we made a catalogue of all the things we have done so far, its title would be more "How to Start a Museum" rather than "Goals Achieved 2009–2014."

That said, we have become a very concrete museum, with a base in Rennes, but whose core activities sometimes take place in New York, Utrecht, or Guissény (a little village in Finistère, Brittany). National choreographic centers in France usually have a local presence (performers' residencies, rehearsals, cultural activities, etc.) that is somewhat separate from their national or international activities such as tours. Our project has re-jigged these two areas to modify the DNA of the structure: so a project that starts in a Rennes library becomes the foundation stone of the Dance Museum at MoMA, Tino Seghal comes to prepare and co-produce his piece for the 2012 Documenta in Brittany, and the Dance Museum becomes truly Breton when it storms into the Avignon festival, in the South of France.

To take another example, the first visitors to *Musée de la danse* were kept shut in there for nine hours to learn by heart all the pictures and movements contained in *Fifty Years*, David Vaughan's book on Cunningham: it was they who "made" the art of the museum during their performance, but went home, taking the work with them ... but this project was also the basis of the third collective action at MoMA.... This micro-institution has become a complex organization that certainly gets around. However, Rennes is where we carry out our everyday activities, which currently include *La Permanence*, for example—a whole year of shows put on with the National Center of Visual Arts.

We are "locaglobalrégioeuropéointernationabretotranscontinensud," as it says in our manifesto: European and French, and Breton and Rennais ...

Regarding the fact that the word "dance" has replaced the word "choreography" ... The art of choreography is essential, but we have tried to approach dance with the vision of certain visual artists, with the practice of dancers, and even with the preconceived ideas of visitors ... so we are not, or are not exclusively, a museum of choreographers, or a museum of choreography. In dance, dancers' bodies are one of the main spaces for collecting works ... and some of our projects draw on this active metaphor. Actually it's probably not a metaphor, but a very concrete and meaningful reality.

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DRJ: There seems to be a double provocation in your project. On one hand, it is clearly reclaiming the notion that the center cannot and perhaps should not hold; that what matters in movement, in starting a movement that matters, is to embrace the *puissances* in de-centering. But on the other hand, you have privileged another problematic word: museum. After decades of institutional critique from certain segments of the visual arts world against the very notion of the museum, why do you think this word and what it represents is needed for dance? And, what do you think dance (or actually, dancing) can offer to de-center the museum?

BC: The museum is certainly a point of institutional tension in the history of art, but it must be recognized that for dance it is also a symbolic space that is incongruous, or indeed even absurd or impossible (at first sight). And we are seeking to invent a museum which is a new type of public space through and for dance. While not disputing the power of the institutional critique, we suggest institutional invention, institutional engineering. Because we are at a marvelous point in the invention of a new kind of museum, with the questioning of museology, collecting, and creation that goes with it, I think that this creative urgency can carry the semantic/symbolic/historic weight of the word museum.

Furthermore, we do not see a museum as having water-tight boundaries: between the Greek definition of a museum ["a space welcoming the muses"] and artists' museums—from Schwitters to Broodthaers to Thomas Hirschhorn—there is a potential space which, without repudiating the usual prerogatives of museums—the construction of a heritage, conservation, exhibitions of works, public access and the sharing of knowledge, publications—provides an opportunity for thinking freely. We are, above all, not making a museum of modern art, but a museum of dance, which must define its own working rules, whether economic, aesthetic, or symbolic. The project of *Musée de la danse* has opened this area of questioning without seeking to close it down too quickly, and in many ways we have so far been a "dance museum" with a question mark. We could certainly do with more institutions in the world, including the most ancient and august institutions, considering themselves interrogatively: we maybe need a *Centre Georges Pompidou with a question mark* in Paris.

The creation of *Musée de la danse* is part of a pressing need to change the apparently rigid separation between history and improvisation, visual art and living art, institutions and experimentation, and what are called conceptual art and popular art. Our project is only the beginning of a much wider venture, whose outlines the present publication, in your charge, is seeking to trace.

A museum makes it possible to put into perspective the supposed impermanence, immateriality, and non-collectability of dance.

A museum makes it possible for dance to get away from the historically oppressive control of the theater and the school, which are the two main institutions dance has been landed with.

A museum makes it possible for dance to be in contact both with the wealth of the Internet, and with the bodies of dancers as a space for the memory and invention of art.

A museum also makes it possible for dance to ask for more than the framework of traditional museums. We are seeking to lay down the conditions for the existence of something capable of being a place designed to experiment with a dance that has been "extended" in all its dimensions, practical, intellectual, historical, temporal, and spatial.

To go on, I'd also say that, for dance, a museum makes it possible to confront death: I have noticed that museums immediately make many people involved in the field of dance feel *frightened* ... as if museum, as far as living art was concerned, was another word for mausoleum, hospital, graveyard. We began by insisting that the museum would, of course, be a living museum, before deciding to meet these fears head on, in particular in an early "happening" called *étrangler le temps* (strangling time), which drew a kind of perverse parallel with *Musée Grévin*, the wax museum in Paris, in which

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the dancers would be made of wax. In this happening, which involved about one hundred performers, we staged a "slow-motion" night, with long drawn out shows: jazz dance lessons, but in slow motion, a dance floor with only slow dances.... I will never forget how *Pâquerette* and *Sylphides*, by François Chaignaud and Cecilia Bengolea, respectively, were performed in a three-hour version.

What dance can do for museums ... is that the other part of the iceberg? To an extent, museums missed the great moment of performance in the 1960s and 1970s, which is now being compensated for by the large-scale acquisition of performance archives. (The dance "world" in many ways also missed that moment, otherwise the Viennese actionists, whether or not one likes them, would be part of the history of dance, alongside Butoh!) They do not want to miss contemporary performance, in the broad sense, now that there is so much intellectual free flow between what's called living art and what's called visual art. In addition, some museums have thrown themselves into the attempt to change the supposedly-unchangeable-storehouse-of-artworks-museum into a museum of ideas, movement, and experience. And now hardly any museums continue to have a permanent collection displayed in a permanent manner.

It remains to be proved that dance, as far as museums are concerned, is not an animated equivalent of neo-realist or neo-expressionist painting, or "life" exhibited in museums—and to be proved too that it is a potentially dangerous conceptual tool, something that means taking risks, and is rough. Dancers are not just people-who-skillfully-perform-the-movements-the-artist-has-given-them, the star pupils of an art that at last has come to life. Aren't they also disruptive forces, who must be able to find in museums the ground on which they can be transformed?

DRJ: We could say that your gesture, if looked at objectively—almost sociologically—is one additive gesture within a larger cultural landscape that has relaunched, more or less globally, the centrality of the museum and the gallery (i.e., the visual arts circuit, with its thematic exhibitions, biennials, art fairs, etc.) for performance and live art. Given the number of exhibitions on dance, more or less contemporary to your Manifesto, how do you read this convergence between visual arts curators regarding programming dance in their venues, and your own ideals regarding the dancing museum?

BC: Strangely, at the beginning of our project there was strong resistance to museums and galleries, resistance in particular to the fact that dance, to be recognized in these spaces, would be obliged to adopt their temporal, economic, and spatial codes. But far from it, the integration and invention of a museum enables it to define "for itself" the framework, context, and implicit and explicit rules of artistic experimentation.

Ana Janevski, a curator at MoMA, did not ask a choreographer to imagine how his work could take place in the museum, but provided the conditions for a dialogue between two institutions, theirs and ours, despite the differences in their respective sizes, ages, and power. We didn't set up *Musée de la danse* to content ourselves with accepting invitations, no matter how alluring, but to work for a political future for dance.

That said, when Angèle Le Grand, who directed the Edna Association with me, suggested in 2006 that we should think about a dance museum, it didn't occur to us that this project would find itself in such turmoil regarding these questions. I understand this turmoil in terms of institutional dynamics; I believe that this re-centering of museums and galleries, what you call the "relaunching of the centrality of the museum and the gallery," is the sign of a shift. One imagines one is dealing with a re-centering, but is it not paradoxically the sign of a radical modification of museums and galleries as we have imagined them? Are genetically modified museums the future, or will the future be outside them, after a spell spent passing through their galleries? Dancers and dance are empty figures that anyone can seize on to re-consider contemporary questions, which fortunately also go beyond the museum world as such . . .

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DRJ: There is something quite distinct in your approach to the whole question of dance in contemporaneity. Your manifesto comes at a moment when the word choreography had gained extreme visibility as concept and focus of a certain critique of representation, and it was central in the elaboration of a critique of dance's relation to its own visibility, to its modes of presentation and circulation. In a way, we could say that "choreography" circa 2008/2009 had gained the same critical currency (thanks to the words and works of Mårten Spångberg, Xavier Le Roy, Bojana Cveijć, Jérôme Bel, Gabriele Brandstetter, Bojana Kunst, Gerald Siegmund, and yourself among many others—ourselves included!) as the word "sculpture" had gained in the late 1970s with Rosalind Krauss's notion of "expanded field." However, you do not propose a "choreographing museum." Your emphasis falls on dancing—even in your manifesto, you say that the "choreographic" is obsolete. This position, in many ways, counters and relaunches the whole question of execution, labor, performance, and embodiment (even liveness!) that somehow the concept of "choreography" (as a kind of *dispositif*) had captured away from dancing. Can you comment on this emphasis on "dance and dancing" at this moment? Why is this important to you right now?

BC: I like chorographers. I like choreographies. I am one; I do some. But dancers are not just works by an author. They are multiple and complex hybrids, who move to themselves the notion of the work's delimitation, its demonstration, its duration, its identification: a body can "be" several works belonging to it alone. It carries and changes forever a memory and history that are inseparable from its ability to live the present and to create. And it can even be dangerous! As Ruti Sela's film "The Witness," made at ZKM, shows in its own way . . .

Does not the real disruptive power of dance in museums reside in the fact that a dancer in a museum is an agent in the service of art, but not just in the service of a particular work by a particular artist? And in this sense, after the Trojan horse of the minority that Tino Sehgal's coup brought into the world and organization of contemporary art, the time has come to see that artistic life in museums is maybe only just beginning. One could also say that this is a healthy rediscovery: were nineteenth-century museums not the workplaces of artists who did their painting in contact with the masters? The museums of 2014 are becoming once more desirable places for artistic work that is in the process of being made, and not just a place for displaying what already exists. On a personal level, I would like to add that dance is what got me involved with contemporary art; enabled me to roll with a Kenyan; led me to speak, write, and read; and allowed me to become a rather different person from the sum total of the elements that had been part of my education. It's also through being a dancer that I have met Sung Hwan Kim and Pierre Huyghe. And I have a feeling that it is at once wide-ranging and precise that the physical and conceptual tools dance has developed in recent years can permanently modify art in the broad sense—if one considers dance, choreography, and performance in the broad sense.

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