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Experience as Artifact: Transformations of the Immaterial

Franz Anton Cramer

> A museum without objects; / a museum that would have renounced all pretention to want to "present" an object; / a museum that will bring to life the traces, the imprints, the possibilities left by the object; / a museum as a kind of cast of its object, which would encircle its object from all sides, in all its forms, the object itself consigned to being the hollow within the cast. // Then draw up the inventory of everything that surrounds, encircles, enrobes, implicates the present or past reality of the object; / to constitute the object by its absence; / constitute the dance by its movement; / to describe movement by the negativity of dance. // November 27, 2008.
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Coupling dance and the museum is a phenomenon of the early twentieth century. The most well-known projects, such as the International Archives of the Dance (*Archives Internationales de la Danse*) in Paris, operating between 1931 and 1952 (Andus L'Hotellier 2012; Rousier et al. 2006), the Derra de Moroda Dance Archives in Salzburg that started in the early 1920s (Dahms and Schroedter 1997, 51–57, 137–142), or the performing arts division of the French National Library (*Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra de Paris*) in existence since 1935 (Auclair 2008), can serve as historic examples to illustrate this trend. Other, more short-lived, projects have been the German Archive for Dance (as part of the *Meisterwerkstätten für Tanz*, founded in 1936), which was completely destroyed before the end of World War II, as well as the *Bauhaus* endeavors at the intersection of dance and the visual arts.[1]

Such projects never drew a clear distinction between the tasks and practices of the library, the archive, and the museum. However they all aimed, in one way or another, to transform dance so as to present and preserve it outside the realm of performance.

At the same time, those endeavors mainly pursued two goals: they either were a result of institutional requirements[2] or they aimed at a strategy of distinction. Only when an art form could give proof of its presence in the museum could it be considered part of high culture.[3]

On the other hand, the investigation of dance beyond choreographic production and training or critical and aesthetic reception is in line with the establishment of, or at least the search for, ways of organizing knowledge that are adapted to the changed times of the modern world.

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Notions relating to the stability of perennial knowledge gave way to ideas of subjectivity, aesthesis, process, and embodiment. (European) modernity in the *entre-deux-guerres* period based its cognitive parameters largely on kinetics and bodily manifestations (Baxmann 2000, 2008; Cramer 2008).

Despite the fact that dance and the museum are not a completely new association of ideas and practices, when one analyzes dance and its strategies to enter the museum, this inevitably leads to ontological debates. These debates relate to "The Dance" on the one hand, while putting into question the order of the museum on the other hand: What can be put on exhibit? What is an artifact? How can movement and process manifest themselves in a permanent frame? What is the relation between the real and the curated? Is there such a thing as The Dance beyond dancing?

In this article, I analyze a contemporary example of an artistic project that is situated on the dividing line between the realm of performance and exhibition. The *Musée de la Danse* in Rennes, France, contests the dichotomies of object and experience and introduces a notion of exhibition-as-performance. In so doing, the "Dancing Museum" suggests new perspectives on, and comprehensions of, the materiality involved in both museal and performance-based modes of presentation.

For a long time, it was accepted beyond doubt that dance is an art form defined by its ephemerality and that it cannot be reproduced. Both historic and contemporary attempts to resist this ontological assignation therefore have been and are still confronted with a twofold challenge: they must reverse the question of substance and transform the way we understand the materiality of the dance work [*das Werkhafte des Tanzes*] into different forms of appearance. Once the visibility of the work no longer relies upon the moment of performance, other media need to take over. It is this "medial transfer" that is at the heart of current debates and strategies to introduce dance into the museum.

Before considering the *Musée de la Danse*'s strategies, I would like to develop the underlying question of the relation between material and immaterial levels of cultural production at a philosophical level. It is in fact an "old" question that has troubled thought throughout history. German philosopher Helmuth Plessner dedicated his 1928 phenomenological anti-thesis[4] to Heidegger's existentialist ontology to the question, "How it is that dimensions of the mind can emerge from bodily facts?" ["Wie aus körperlichen Tatsachen geistige Dimensionen werden können?"] (Plessner [1928] 1975, 5, my translation).

Traditional means and forms of knowledge production fail in the face of life: "It [knowledge] is directly opposed to the form of being [*Dasein*], which is irretrievable and can never be reconstituted, to approach human works as though they were things of nature" ["Es geht direkt gegen die Form ihres (der Menschen und menschlichen Werke) Daseins, das vergangen ist und so wie es war sich nicht mehr hervorbringen lässt, an sie wie an Dinge der Natur heranzutreten"] (Plessner [1928] 1975, 15, my translation). It is only through contact with the sensual that World is created: "The *res extensa* as such, in all of its nudity, never exists, but is only 'shrouded' by its appearance" ["Als solche in ihrer Nacktheit ist also die *res extensa* nie vorhanden, sondern nur in dem, Mantel' ihrer Erscheinung"] (Plessner [1928] 1975, 44, my translation). And this is the very potential for a new, more complex understanding of and "a power to transform the material world" ["eine Macht der Veränderung an der physischen Welt"] (Plessner [1928] 1975, 46, my translation). It is the body informed by culture that serves to materialize the immaterial and thus turns into a privileged medium for visualizing the conceptual and the internal; it delivers itself to *Anschauung* (sensuous appearance). "That which lacks sensual appearance [*Anschauung*] may well have a functional value for *Anschauung*; a functional value that only can unfold in the field of *Anschauung*" ["Was aber der sinnlichen Anschauung mangelt, kann darum doch einen Funktionswert für die Anschauung haben; einen Funktionswert, der sich nur im Gebiete der Anschauung entfaltet"] (Plessner [1928] 1975, 78; my translation). So something exists that is able to define without itself being definable. The thing, any thing, is produced only in the continuous acting out of this paradoxical relation of cognition and perception Plessner calls *Anschauung*.

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In line with this thinking, immateriality would not be a particular quality able to distinguish a given phenomenon as opposed to another one that would be materially constituted. Both the "bodily fact" and the "dimension of mind" are connected via alterations and transformations. The immaterial, according to this analysis, would be at the very heart of any cultural process rather than a privilege of dance/performance with their supposedly "ephemeral nature," or of museal interaction for that matter. The decisive question remains how the material medium weds the immaterial effect and establishes a coherent context of signification.

Historic analyses, for instance that of Marcel Mauss (1950), have defined the body via the forms of its (culturally informed) use of techniques. Foucault (1994) looked at the ways in which subjectivity was staged in and by the body. Boyan Manchev (2008, 2009) suggests that we consider the body solely as an agent of change, as that which constitutes the (technical, cognitive) potential for transformation rather than the realm of (organic) identity and stability. Therefore the mere presence of bodies in no way determines the material or immaterial status of an artifact. Only the relational textures of medial and signifying functions give clues. Beholding "works" of performance via the medial functions assigned to the bodies acting in them, that is: as conveying something that they are not themselves part of (unfolding perceptions without itself offering perception), opens up larger possibilities for "exhibiting" these textures.

The Dancing Museum in Rennes

Since 2009, French choreographer Boris Charmatz has been head of the National Choreographic Center of Brittany in France. Questioning the traditional meaning of such an artistic workplace, he decided to transform the *Centre chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne* (CCNRB) into a museum.[5] This thrust is in line with several other large-scale projects that he launched or participated in that have revisited dance education,[6] dance history,[7] or presentational modes.[8]

Before its actual opening in 2009, several initiatives and publications had been organized, among them the "Manifesto,"[5] which includes "Ten Commandments" that claim the Dancing Museum conceives of itself in the first place as an "artistic project" (commandment #2, "a museum of artists"). Accordingly, the concepts for a revisiting of dance, museum, and object are an invitation to create: "Artistic creation and the visitor's experience are at the core of its action. Being a place of life, . . . it is not only a space for accumulation and representation" (Commandment #6: "a transgressive museum").

The levels on which the Dancing Museum addresses, or sometimes contradicts, the parameters of museum structures can be identified as follows[9]:

(a) Space
(b) Man power
(c) Content
(d) The choreographic
(e) Temporality

Space

The CCNRB makes use of two sites within the City of Rennes: a new, spacious building in the outskirts close to one of the university campuses, and a site downtown that is used for administrative purposes as well as for "temporary exhibitions." The former, named "Garage," has two big studios, one smaller venue, a generous entrance hall, and several multipurpose rooms in the first floor. The entire site is used by the Dancing Museum in addition to other local dance companies and artists. None of the two sites fulfills the classical requirement of museal space. They are basically adapted for (performing arts) production and presentation of work.

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At the same time, many events initiated and produced by the CCNRB do not take place in Rennes but implant themselves in other cities, sites, and contexts both in and outside of France. Exhibition projects such as *Expo Zéro* (2009) were presented not only in Rennes but also in Saint Nazaire, France (2009), Singapore (2010), Utrecht, The Netherlands (2010), New York City (2011), and Berlin (2014). The joint exhibition *Moments: A History of Performance in 10 Acts* (2012)[10] was organized and shown at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. During the Festival of Avignon 2011 (Charmatz was associated artist for that edition), the Dancing Museum organized an *Art School for Avignon* in various institutions within the city in the South of France (Festival d'Avignon 2011). Thus, the Dancing Museum is indeed "a viral museum which can be grafted onto other places," as the Eighth Commandment ("a museum of complex temporalities") tells us.

Man Power

Apart from the management and the production office, there is no steady "cast" that would continuously work on "pieces." Rather, the Dancing Museum unites artists, scientists, curators, and experts and their artistic and intellectual universe according to the nature of the exhibitions or related projects. It is a fluidity of man power as opposed to the perennial status of a collection and its varying curators dedicated to enhance, complete, and transcend this collection or its specific exhibit according to historic truth and curatorial discourse with its productions of meaning (Dankl et al. 2013).

Content

The Dancing Museum's principal mission is not to investigate diverse and innovative formats of performance, performance making, or spectacle. Nor is the (self-) evidence of any kind of object at the center of the Museum's activities. Rather, it aims at documenting and presenting the opaque realities of dance in formats such as dialogue, encounter, installation, and immersion and highlighting the participatory process related to the development of ideas and experiences. For the exhibition project "*brouillon*" (in English: draft), which was organized for the first time in June 2010, participants of the educational program "Le pavillon. Laboratoire de création du Palais de Tokyo"[11] were invited to investigate works of art and transform them in such a way that, according to their interpretation, they would fit into a museum of dance: "Continuing to muddle relations between exhibition space and performance, the Dancing Museum adds new parameters to its equation. Savage pose, unstable assembling, superposition, gentle touch: performers will change the hanging into a continuous event!" (Musée de la danse 2010). Another edition of "*brouillon*" was part of the Performatik festival in Brussels, February 23–24, 2013. Seven performers were interacting during the entire duration of the exhibition with sixteen works of art by fourteen artists. The idea was to re-enact the works of art—to give them a temporal interpretation—rather than to highlight their "aura" of an "original" with all of its "identity." Everything was happening in radical simultaneity, which created an overload of temporalities and interpretations, leaving open the question of what performance can and the artworks cannot. The difference between performance, exhibition, and work is perturbed (in French: "*brouillé*") by the set-up of "*brouillon*."

The Choreographic

Contesting a conception that starts from the aura of an art work and its staging according to a conceptual framework so as to enhance the objects' pre-existing significance, the Dancing Museum's quest is to inform the encounter between that which is exhibited and the recipient, and to make this encounter the actual element of signification (*Gegenstand der Sinngebung*). These processual exhibitions do not present themselves as spatial or embodied figurations of sense but as an array of possibilities. The museum thereby "defends the principle according to which an openness to a broader concept of dance means allowing other movements to influence us, to leave behind a fixed identity. To open up to difference" (Commandment #7, "a permeable museum").[12]

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Temporality

One of the major qualities that marks the Dancing Museum's activity is to avoid the habitual distinction between presence, duration, and permanence. What is present need not necessarily be fixed, and the duration of the experience is not considered consubstantial with the permanence of its sense or potentiality. During the preview *Préfiguration* in April 2009 (before the actual opening of the new CCNRB in September 2009), several pieces by contemporary dance artists, including works by Boris Charmatz, were presented, but in extreme slow motion—resulting in the fact that the actual work was next to unrecognizable in its temporal existence. This part of the pre-opening program was called "*étrangler le temps*" (to strangle time), which supposedly alludes to a phrase by Tatsumi Hijikata (around whose work Charmatz had created a major piece together with French actress Jeanne Balibar in 2008, *La Danseuse malade*)[13] (Musée de la Danse 2009a). On the museum's web site, Gilles Amalvi (2009), author in residence at the Dancing Museum notes, "Maybe at another scale, seen from above, the museum would be a sculpture, a work in perpetual change; volumes getting thicker or more fluid. And the unique archive of that museum, a drawing showing the whole of the circuits that were performed." One of the key questions the Dancing Museum seems to negotiate is in what way temporal structures of dance's being can be transformed into visual arrangements that take into consideration the spectators'—or else the visitors'—own regimes without pretending to alter the signifying essence of the work. This question, I hold, is intricately linked to a specific ontological interpretation of dance's being. It confronts what has been subsumed as "the negativity of dance."

Negativity

In the way Charmatz and his team shape the foundational encounter between the act of performance and its representations of sense in what might be called the moment of fusion, the paradox stands forth clearly. The affirmation is no longer that what is presented would, in its very materialization, connect back to the pre-existing essence that allows for gaining any objectivity. At the same time, to dissolve strategies of visibility into experiential encounters and/or discursive materializations presents a contradiction for dance contained in the positivity of its actions.[14]

When preparing the application for the directorship of the CCNRB, the team around Boris Charmatz contacted many people in the dance milieu, including the author of these lines, and asked them for statements and comments around the idea of a Dancing Museum. My statement, written in 2008, still lingered completely in the dissociative thinking according to which "dance" and "object" can meet at best via a negative relation:

> A museum without objects; / a museum that would have renounced all pretention to want to "present" an object; / a museum that will bring to life the traces, the imprints, the possibilities left by the object; / a museum as a kind of cast of its object, which would encircle its object from all sides, in all its forms, the object itself consigned to being the hollow within the cast. // Then draw up the inventory of everything that surrounds, encircles, enrobes, implicates the present or past reality of the object; / to constitute the object by its absence; / constitute the dance by its movement; / to describe movement by the negativity of dance. // November 27, 2008. (unpublished manuscript)

If the negativity predicated of dance as a condition of its performative presence (Siegmund 2006) were indeed unresolvable, dance would never be able to promote its own experience beyond its own action (Pouillaude 2009), which eventually would mean that not only is there no possible presence, but also no original. Dance would conceptually be non-existent. On the other hand, as "the performative" or even "the performance" mean to collapse the dichotomies described, they would not be able to "function" and to create if one of their foundational elements were systematically absent. So negativity alone fails to satisfy the immediate intuition of evidence[15]; also, it misses

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the point in that the interconnectedness of both, the physical and the mental, the abstract and the concrete, the present and the absent, are modes of being that are *not mutually exclusive*.

The Dancing Museum seems to sidestep the common incompatibilities between the knowledge *of* dance, *in* dance, and *about* dance that would never meet in historic truth. The intimating presence of performance (the "Immaterial") is not opposed to historic evidence and the factuality of that which has come to be [*das Faktische des Gewordenen*] (the "Material"). Transforming "bodily facts" of performance into media other than performance creates the ontological opacity of the exhibit. This opacity points much more to the potential to conceal than to the exteriorization of reality. The experiential intimacy sought by the Dancing Museum neutralizes the dialectics of negativity as absent and positivity as visible. In its place, experience becomes the central parameter: the issue in the paradigm of the museum is not to fixate dance to its promise as a metaphysical resource of organicity and singularity. Quite to the contrary, it is the body's potential to radically experience its own outside and thereby transform experience into artifact.

Notes

1. The *Bauhausbühne* (the Bauhaus Stage), although not really with museal intentions, brought choreography and exhibition together in realizations of festive events (the *Bauhausfeste*), stage productions, and visual research (Blume and Duhm 2008; Scheper 1988). However, no specific collection of the *Bauhausbühne* has ever been assembled.

2. As was the case for the Paris Opera collection; see Auclair (2008).

3. Rolf de Maré, founder and patron of the International Archives of the Dance in Paris, wrote in his foundational manifesto: "Amazement will never cease that one of the oldest arts to be practiced by humanity, that of movement, has until now no institutional identity . . . where the multiple traces of its evolution and development over time could be preserved just as it happens with the other arts which make up the eternal patrimony of humanity ...: painting, sculpture, literature, music. It has never had this cathedral" ["Ce sera un éternel sujet d'étonnement de se dire que l'un des arts les plus anciennement pratiqués par l'humanité, celui du mouvement, n'était jusqu'à ce jour doté d'aucune institution [. . .] où puissent se retrouver les traces des multiples étapes de son évolution et de son développement au même titre que les autres arts qui constituent le patrimoine impérissable de l'humanité [. . .] : la peinture, la sculpture, la littérature, la musique. [. . .] Il lui fallait une cathédrale."] (de Maré 1932, 3).

4. *Being and Time* was published in 1927, and Plessner's *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (*The Steps Of The Organic and Man*) came out in 1928 (Plessner [1928] 1975). In the foreword, Plessner claims: "We cannot accept the principle that an existential analysis of man must of necessity precede any investigation of extra-human being" (Plessner 1975: V, my translation). ["Wir können den Grundsatz nicht anerkennen, daß der Untersuchung außermenschlichen Seins eine Existentialanalytik des Menschen notwendig vorhergehen müsse."]

5. The first phrase of the "Manifesto for a National Choreographic Centre" (2008) reads: "I simply wish to propose removing the word 'Centre,' then the word 'Choreographic,' then the word 'National'!" (Charmatz 2008).

6. In 2003 and 2004, Charmatz had devised a new, non-institutional dance education. "Bocal" [Jar] united 15 students of different origins and professional backgrounds to form a nomadic project of (self-) education following artistic and idiosyncratic preferences, without curriculum, campus, or diploma (Association Edna 2006; Charmatz 2009).

7. As a temporary member of the collective *Le Quatuor Albrecht Knust* (1993–2002), Charmatz took part in a new, performative access to dance history and contemporary re-appropriations of dance repertoire without being concerned about "truthfulness to the original." Some of the pieces reconstituted in this way were *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* by Yvonne Rainer, *L'après-midi d'un faune* by Nijinsky/Debussy, and *Märzlied* by Kurt Jooss. Founding members of the collective were Anne Collod, Simon Hecquet, Christophe Wavelet, and Dominique Brun (Chapuis 2002; Launay 2012).

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8. See for instance the landscape choreography *Ouvrée, artistes en alpage*, 2000, and the film made about it, *Horace Bénédict (17 observations d'artistes dans les alpages)* (Charmatz 2001).

9. Also see Cramer (2013) and Büscher et al. (2013).

10. A catalogue was published only in 2013, see Gareis et al. (2013).

11. The "Palais de Tokyo" is a Center for Contemporary Art and Creation in the heart of Paris, the "pavillon" its residency program.

12. It would be worthwhile to contrast some contemporary museal work based on performative acts, e.g., by Tino Sehgal, and their exaggerated ontologies, to the Dancing Museum's as well as other projects', e.g., by Xavier Le Roy.

13. This is just one example for the many ways in which aspects of dance history are integrated into projects of the Dancing Museum; see also "Jérôme Bel en 3 sec, 30 sec, 3 min, 30 min, 3 h—une exposition Musée de la danse" (Musée de la danse 2011), "Re-butoh version 2009" (Musée de la danse 2009b), and "Re-butoh version 2012" (Musée de la danse 2012), with, among others, *Product of Other Circumstances* by Xavier Le Roy.

14. It would be of great interest to compare the Dancing Museum's trials of reversing the traditional roles (including artistic and curatorial authorship) with the ongoing museal choreographic project *"Retrospective" by Xavier Le Roy*, which has developed a quite specific amalgamation of exhibition, action, dissemination, and performance.

15. I am tackling a terminological problem here. It concerns the proper translation of the German "Anschauung" or "unmittelbare [unmediated] Anschauung." This term combines aspects of visual, intuitive, and intellectual perception on a "basic," perhaps spontaneous, level. Kant calls space and time basic categories, or parameters, of "Anschauung"—the limits within which humans can perceive. "Weltanschauung" is the "personal" view of the world, as opposed to ideology as a "constructed" view of the world, whereas the adjective "anschaulich" means immediately comprehensible, coherent, striking.

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