Opening up Dance

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Mémoires et histoire en danse : mobiles n° 2, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2010, (Arts 8) Sous la dir. d'Isabelle Launay, Sylviane Pages
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- 1 Is dance in the process of becoming the new hub of a theoretical and artistic dynamism? The simultaneous publication of several books, each dealing with the subject in its own way, attests, in any event, to the significance of this area of research, which, when all is said and done, is quite new. Recent publishing activity confirms a perceptible trend in France since the 1990s, gathering sway in the 2000s with, especially in the last few years, major works devoted to this issue, with which, incidentally, the books here discussed are in partial dialogue¹. What does dance involve? What upheavals does it create in the field of Human Sciences and elsewhere? What are its resistances and its openings? These publications invite us to appraise the way dance is spreading, and broadening the horizons of both thought and praxis. Of the four books, *Mémoires et histoire en danse* strictly sticks to the domain of dance. Starting with a chronological introduction in the form of an apologia-like activity report of the Paris 8 Dance Department (from when it was created in the early 1990s to the present day), this volume brings together studies by experienced researchers and students. Its goal is to present the state of dance research and establish the specific position (if not hegemony) of Paris 8 in this respect. Made up of both articles and documents (whence the somewhat heterogeneous and very academic character of the whole thing), the book has five chapters: "Memories of Choreographic Works" (pp.21-152); "Analysis of a

Choreographic Gesture” (pp. 153-203); “Writing and Reading Praxes” (pp. 205-265); “Portrait of the Artist as a Dancer: Construction of a figure” (pp. 267-370); “Historiographical Issues” (pp. 371-454). As a recent discipline still awaiting acknowledgement, the history of dance, with its own aesthetic challenges, deserves to be championed as a territory in its own right. In so doing, are we not still risking a form of disciplinary sclerosis? (the closure of art history might act here as a foil). This is the major criticism that might be levelled at the book which, undeniably, contains very rich material and involves many-layered lines of thought (as in the case of Isabelle Launay’s opening article). So why, in a postmodern spirit alert to issues of borrowing, quotation and memory (in the plural, let it be noted, in the title), cling to just memories of dance? Why not open up the field of investigation?² Furthermore, if the experience of the performing dancer, movement analysis, and the transmission and notation of this living (and thus ephemeral) art called dance are crucial questions, they do not rule out a broadening process encompassing the political and the social barely broached in these pages, except in the last part devoted to historiography, and in Marina Nordera’s stimulating analysis of the “Guimard myth”. Thus it is that we can here and there lament the absence of real critical and interpretative stances.

- 2 *Philosophie de la danse*, for its part, considers dance (over and above the simple metaphor of thought to which it is often reduced in discussions about dance) as a philosophical object questioning the artistic act in its many different challenges involving creation and reception. What is dancing? What does dance teach us? What is a choreographic work? These are typical questions which lend structure to this collective book resulting from a conference organized by the Laboratoire d’Histoire des Sciences et de Philosophie-Archives Poincaré. This direction opens up the field of dance to that of thinking and, in particular, critiques the presupposition whereby the dancer (male or female) incarnates something inexpressible and/or is alone capable of delivering some truth about the danced gesture. The emotion/rationality dichotomy is thus healthily denounced as a myth propping up a narrow western vision of dance as philosophy (notably by Julia Beauquel). And the interest of this book is, indeed, the fact that it considers the work that these two disciplines exercise on one another. Any reservations we might have involve the area from which these approaches stem, that of analytical philosophy, concerned with logical demonstrations, classifications and objectivity, offering, to be sure, certain reading keys, but at the risk of pigeonholing and at times regardless of the complex layering of works and interpretation.
- 3 *Danse et art contemporain*, whose somewhat short brief and rough-and-ready issues are regrettable (its aim probably being to access an unspecialized readership), has the merit of focusing on a plastic quality at work in the choreographic field, and drawing up an overview (clearly too swiftly, and made up of its most expected players) of shifts from one field to the next. It is actually quite rare for dance and visual arts to be broached together, proof that interdisciplinarity, when practiced, has trouble seeing itself in a theoretical and institutional light.³
- 4 In its experimental character (this is a report of a workshop with young students of different nationalities, mainly coming from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture in Montpellier), *Danse et architecture* plunges us at once more modestly and more directly into all the stimulation issuing from comparisons between the arts. Enjoying the experience of Palladio’s architecture (the Villa Rotonda in particular) through the body: such might be the project engaged in by Frédérique Villemur,

accompanied by Patrice Barthès (choreographer) and Johana Baticle (architect). And not the least interesting thing about it is to conceive of dance as something that creates space, and see architecture as a possible space in motion. Through these detours and confrontations, it is the issue of the body's inclusion in space, and the effect body and space have on each other, which is thus particularly rekindled here.

NOTES

1. Among them : *Approche philosophique du geste dansé : de l'improvisation à la performance*, Anne Boissière, Catherine Kintzler (eds.), Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2006 ; Hecquet, Simon, Prokhoris, Sabine. *Fabriques de la danse*, Paris : Puf, 2007 ; « Ce qui fait danse : de la plasticité à la performance », *La Part de l'œil*, n°24, 2009.
2. By relying, for example, on the Warburgian notion of survival. On this point, see in particular : Didi-Huberman, Georges. *L'Image survivante : histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris : Minuit, 2002.
3. Let us note that on the links between dance and visual arts, from 1900 to the present day, an exhibition titled « Danser sa vie » will be held this autumn at the Centre Pompidou. *Danser sa vie : danse et arts visuels aux 20e et 21e siècles*, 23 November 2011-2 April 2012, Gallery 1, level 6 (exhibition curators : Christine Macel, Emma Lavigne).