Is The Body of Dance Sexed?

Randy Martin

Bodies are in motion. They press against each other tenderly, assertively. Sweat collects under the chin, in the curve of the lower back, between breasts. Breathing, inhaling the entire space, exhaling to obtain a closer fit. Knee pushed into thigh, nape of neck under armpit. Tumbling. Spinning. The head swirls while the lower body sinks. Arching off of a hip to dive into the folds of the belly. Patterned but never repeated, accretions of rhythm build, surge, eddy. Gravity acknowledged, resisted. Space compressed, expanded. Still the bodies hurl themselves at one another. Drawn, redrawn, withdrawn, assault. Too playful, too serious to privilege either. Too much concentrated in an instant to return to, too much of a world in the making not to reclaim.

Of what activity is this an account? Why might there be any doubt? To whom could we address this ambiguity? We have become accustomed, by so much intelligent writing of late, to think of the body in terms of sexuality.[1] A body in motion writes the differences which establish gender. This writing, of the body and of texts devoted to it, is indeed seductive. But like any seduction, a road taken appears as a totality of choice.

The Politics of the Real

That I had in mind dance and not sex as I opened this essay by itself resolves nothing. I can hardly invoke some solipsistic priority of interpretation against an entire discursive field that has connected the body to sexuality. Rather, I would like to explore another activity, dance, that is equally contingent upon human relations, to arrive at a bodily practice not contingent upon the representation of difference. Far from residing in a world of nature

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or eternal myth, certain forms of dance have the capacity of pointing to a bodily practice that resists the relations of domination and subordination that suffuse much human activity, including sexuality. In the complex relations of performance these aspects are both concealed and revealed. Sexuality, like dance, is fraught with the language of performance. The value of the activity is reduced to its measurable attributes. Theatrical performances may be measured by their greatness or a moment of climax, but this approach conceals the forces necessary to make a performance in the first place. If judgement assumes pitting the performance against some ideal standard that lies beyond it, then the representation of difference this process demands is wrapped up with power. To withhold that urge to judge is to open up the possibility of accounting for the activity of performance itself, an activity framed by relations of power but not reducible to them. Against these relations lies a different value for performance of bodily activity, one that presents the body in use against the exchange for power demanded by representation.

Ultimately, my aims are political. Without denying the profundities of sexual oppression or the social transformation made available through the project of sexual liberation, I will suggest a distinctive, if not always discrete body politics in what follows. My strategy will be to deploy certain dance practices to locate a non-sexual bodily activity and to isolate in this activity the resources for resisting the divisive demands of certain structures of dominance in the world at large. With contemporary identity and political struggle so intertwined with these demands, the threat of being consumed by the very power one struggles against looms large. Rather than locating the register of alternatives in a mythic past or transcendental future, the bodily activity discussed here will establish this register of alternatives in the present. Specifically, the privileging of certain forms of dance is intended to foreground bodily practices present but not apparent in everyday life to indicate where oppositional politics can turn to renew its will to resist.[2]

Why is it important to locate a body beyond sexuality? Clearly the body is a presence in every domain of human practice: production, reproduction, consumption, reception. If sexuality did determine all bodily activity, if from Wilhelm Reich[3] we accepted that sexual energy both lies at the core of and drives human practice, then it seems that we would be dependent on a fundamentally essentialist account of humanity. Essentialist accounts tend to fetter the range of possible changes in human behavior to a conception of an intractable nature, and, by so doing, limit an appreciation of people's capacity to fashion society or make history. From this essentialist vantage, history itself would be the drive toward the liberation of a particular energy always derivative of sexuality. Yet if history has a primeval source, its ends are likely to be visible in its origins, and its prospects for transformation would seem to be severely compromised. That is to say, the demise of exploitation, domination or suppression would appear as the fulfillment of some ends planted with the origin of the species, and as such, rooted in some biological

or natural human state of being that actual groups of people have no control over. Just as some political theater might aspire to figure possibilities not apparent to its audience, or lift the inexorability of oppression with an uncertain ending,[4] so too are social movements served by a sense of the indeterminacy of their historical future. Essentializing sexuality not only confines history to the realization of some predetermined end or telos, but assures the perpetuation of the very difference supposedly responsible for domination. Monique Wittig has argued that such a position is ultimately an argument for heterosexuality rather than the elimination of a domination based upon gender. "By admitting that there is a 'natural' division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that men and women have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression making change impossible."[5]

While it is difficult to imagine the grounds for a proof of some ontological sexual difference, it is impossible to establish any "empirical" criteria that could concretely and discretely divide the human population into distinguishable, mutually exclusive sets of men and women. Any line drawn between the two on putatively objective grounds is effaced almost immediately upon inspection. For example, reproduction, which has been historically associated with those called women, could never serve as a minimal definition not simply because it is acquired and lost, but because there are many with the appellation woman who never acquire this capacity. That women do not necessarily have the capacity to bear children is further complicated by recent developments in biomedical technology which render reproduction independent of sex and therefore outside of any human body.[6] We also know from the literature on so-called transsexuals that there exist no genetic, hormonal or physiognomic breaks among many individuals that would concretely identify them as male or female. While most beings cluster around certain characteristics, such as XX or XY chromosomes, in actuality there are a whole range of chromosomal permutations in between (to say nothing of cases where clear XX or XY chromosomes yield unexpected secondary sex characteristics).[7] At a certain point in their development, these individuals are pressed by doctors, family and friends to choose gender preferences ironically turning a condition of choice into a predicament of misplaced identification. Statements such as, "Genital ambiguity in a newborn represents a true medical emergency," seem as representative of the anxiety such "disorders" provoke in the medical profession as they are indicative of the cruel gendered world that "medical and surgical treatment" will protect the improperly differentiated neonate from.[8] Further, those who can "choose" submit their bodies to a manipulation only slightly greater (in the form of surgical moldings of the body, hormonal and other injections and behavior trainings) than those who enter the world with a choice applied to them.[9]

The point in all of this is that real human bodies do not announce their sexual differences, they must be articulated through a set of distinctions and oppositions that are already in place long before a given member of the species is born. The invocation of biological determinants of gender does however serve ideological ends--even in non-western cultures where no "scientific" language of biology exists. As anthropologist Bridget O'Laughlin observes in her work on the Mbum Kpau of southwestern Chad: "That which is arbitrary and contradictory (a reflection of women's subordination to men) is defined as biologically determined. . . ."[10]

If indeed, "one is not born a woman" as Simone de Beauvoir[11] and Monique Wittig suggest, and we can allow no essential difference to assign gender, we must examine the social processes of associating body and gender. As in Saussurean linguistics, this relation of signifier and signified is an arbitrary one. Words are attached to meanings only through the association of sounds with concepts by a community of speakers. Saussure goes to lengths to show that there is no word, even in the case of so-called onomatopoeia, that is intrinsically linked to a meaning.[12] Word sounds or signifiers are not motivated by the concepts they represent. Rather, meaning as a symbolic order is constructed socially by a given community of speakers. A speaking person does not exist prior to language, that is to say, the individual identity rests upon the social. Individual speakers have little latitude in inventing particular signs, they must accept the given authority of the sign (what linguists refer to as the zero degree of language)[13] to attain any fluency or freedom as a speaker. In this regard, the acquisition of language is the means through which acting persons, or subjects, attain consciousness, not only of others, but of themselves as well.

It is upon these linguistic insights that a re-reading of the Freudian theory of sexuality has taken place, notably by the late French analyst Jacques Lacan and especially by the feminists who have critiqued and developed his work. Lacan's work is notoriously dense but extremely suggestive for an appreciation of the construction of sexuality through linguistic operations, and, for what lies outside sexuality but upon which it none the less depends. Lacan's appropriation of Saussure understands not only conscious activity but also the unconscious, to be structured as a language. He replaces what are often read as conflicting dimensions of experience contained within the individual--the Freudian terms superego, ego, and id--with mutually interwoven but non-reducible social registers. These he defines as the symbolic (the authority principle where differences are regulated through language), the imaginary (where the subject tries to unify and make sense with the pre-ordered world of difference) and the real (that which anchors the first two but remains unrepresentable). The body itself lies in the real. It is "irreducible" to language and likewise, "there is nothing in the unconscious which accords with the body."[14] The real is equivalent to what Saussure calls the referent, the actual thing or object a sign stands in for, hence the absence of lack. This is

precisely how Lacan defines the real and against which he discusses sexual difference. In the words of Jacqueline Rose, who has brought a feminist Lacanian view of sexuality to an English-speaking audience:

> Sexual difference is then assigned according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus, which means not that anatomical difference *is* sexual difference (the one as strictly deducible from the other), but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be. It thus covers over the complexity of the child's early sexual life with a crude opposition in which that very complexity is refused or repressed. The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value. . . . What counts is not the perception but its already assigned meaning--the moment therefore belongs in the symbolic.[15]

Here we see how the real (phallus) becomes figured as missing and this figure is assigned an already given meaning in the culturally established order of the symbolic to construct a difference that the real itself could not register. For this reason there is no sexuality outside the symbolic and as Rose says, "there is no feminine outside language."[16] The political consequence Rose and others rightly draw is that the struggle against patriarchal domination must be waged upon the terrain of cultural representation, it cannot be grounded upon a conception of the feminine body and its natural or essential difference or privilege. As she puts it, "If the status of the phallus is to be challenged, it cannot, therefore, be directly from the feminine body but must be by means of a different symbolic term (in which case the relation to the body is immediately thrown into crisis), or else by an entirely different logic altogether (in which case one is no longer in the order of symbolisation at all)."[17] While Rose and others have focused on this "different symbolic term," the "entirely different logic altogether" also demands attention. This is precisely the project I would like to indicate here, for without a politics of the real, the referent for the crisis that Rose invokes would all but disappear.

Welcome to the Dance

What can be said for psychoanalysis often holds for performance as well. Performance is temptingly viewed wholly within the purview of the symbolic, as a representation that invites the question, "what does this mean?" While this question clarifies much, it does not explain how a performer survives the authority of author, director, choreographer, composer, to enact a performance, any more than the analysis of the symbolic accounts for the real. Precisely those dance forms that are most abstract, least representational, tend

to resist the question of the symbolic. Some of these also resist aligning dance and gender roles. The significance of the break with gender based presentation and technique is to move this discussion of dance from the realm of the symbolic to that of the real. It points to the capacity denied in the symbolic realm of production, a body capable of constructing its conditions of possibility, that is, a body as agent of history. This it would seem is what is ultimately at stake in posing the question "is the body of dance sexed?" Without pretending anything of the status or closure of an answer, I would like to continue problematizing the field of bodily practice as a politics of the real made available through the analysis of non-representational dance that effaces gendered difference.

Certainly one could not claim that all dance is asexual. Indeed, much dance rests on a symbolic that acknowledges and affirms sexual difference. We could speak of a dance vocabulary that attempts to portray basic energic drives of eros and thanatos, such as Martha Graham's, or more technically of a lexicon grounded upon a sexual division of labor such as the relations of partnering in ballet. The dance of Broadway and Hollywood musicals often synthesizes both these elements into pedagogical tools for archetypal narratives of heterosexuality. Yet much recent dance has turned from these premises and offers a practice of bodily physicality whose difference is internal to the dance itself.

It is worthwhile to distinguish the what and the how of dancing in this context as there are choreographic forms that eliminate the representation of sexual difference without eroding the physical relations upon which it is based. The work of Alwin Nikolais is exemplary here. Nikolais, a disciple of Hanya Holm, herself heir to the tradition of German dance expressionist Mary Wigman, has in over forty years of output, consistently undermined a gendered reading of bodies in motion. He has accomplished this by featuring motion itself as subject. By masking the body as such within a theater of light, sound and objects, the viewer is invited to perceive not persons dancing but purely formal physical and kinetic qualities--much as abstractionists from Malevich to Pollock have achieved with visual form. While gender differences are not represented in many of Nikolais's works, the movements of dancers concealed in bags, bathed in black light, or seemingly suspended on stands and stools invisible to the audience are facilitated by the traditional balletic relations of men lifting women. Clearly this is not the case in every dance or every movement, but it is a technical basis that runs throughout the work. This is particularly emblematic of gender because it physically assumes women as the weaker vessel and because it literally displays women's assent as contingent on male support. Here the technical underpinnings of dance are still being approached through the register of the symbolic despite the absence of a descriptive narrative.

Far from being immune to broader cultural conjunctures, dance can be seen as an embodiment of social contradictions. Without an essence to define

it, the body must be historicized and the development of dance makes this history available. In this development I am reading a capacity for non-gendered practice that emerges and grows through the twentieth century. While some have seen a cultural "break" in the last quarter century and identified it as a turn to the postmodern,[18] the modernist impulse in dance has evidenced a greater degree of continuity than rupture.

The rediscovery of the pedestrian, focused on the Judson Church dancers of the 1960's, is at times associated with postmodernism in dance. Ironically this had nothing to do with the celebration of dead styles that characterizes other postmodernisms nor has the pedestrian impulse and the audience concern that accompanies it ever been absent from modern dance in its brief history. One might suggest that Loie Fuller anticipates Nikolais or Robert Wilson in her use of technics to construct a space of performance that envelops audience in pure motion, and Isadora Duncan prefigures Martha Graham and Twyla Tharp in a turn to "great Western traditions" that feature performer as a myth of self.

If the sixties did not generate a new esthetic in dance,[19] it did see a burst in technical devices that could be the basis for genuinely non-gendered dancing. The use of weight and momentum of bodies rolling against one another, what developed into contact improvisation, had the potential to eliminate gender-based partnering. Size and strength were submerged to release and flow of body motion. The omnipotent potential for domination that the former two might represent were replaced by the kinetics and sentience that the latter two demanded. Yet despite the fact that these techniques could effectively eliminate a practice of dancing that would depict sexual difference, the techniques themselves could not terminate a will to represent such difference. Pilobolus borrowed heavily from this technique to make a series of dances that rely on a gender play that ultimately affirms heterosexuality. Men support women under long dresses, one fused man-woman chasing the other in a lust for what lies within. The interior marriage of male and female bodies becomes the necessary affirmation of any exterior desire.

The development that this new dance technique made available could be compared to other much heralded technological breakthroughs of the fifties and sixties. For example, that automation, cybernetics and computer-based technologies had the capacity to remove direct physical subordination of body to machine that had characterized the industrial revolution is not in doubt. Potentially, continuous flow work processes could enable workers to supervise machines. Ethnographic accounts of advanced technologies tell us otherwise. Continuous flow chemical plants deploy labor in the dirtiest and most menial physical tasks.[20] Service sector work demands a repetition of gesture and speech ("Have a nice day," "Have it your way," "Coffee?") that assumes bodily form is itself a product in an otherwise automated environment that has no productive use for living labor. In short, labor is all the more subordinated to

machines as the latter gain in complexity, rather than that complexity providing greater worker input to the deployment of labor.

That the capacity to emancipate the body as living labor is not realized under capitalism speaks to the very dialectic of technology that Marx made plain. Capitalism, that most progressive and barbaric of historical forms socializes as it denies the collective import of that socialization.[21] Dance relies on no such progressivistic a history. The modernist demands for innovation appear in dance in myriad forms which may intensify or dissipate the socialization of the body. The convergence we find in the sixties between dance and society is of productive techniques which incorporate ever higher degrees of surveillance of output while commanding but a part of the body (e.g. fingers for the whole in word processing, eyes in chemical manufacture) and dance techniques that speak to the body that would, under different conditions be freed by these technologies. The dance techniques however, do not depend upon a subordination of subject to object in order to produce an artifact. It is the exceptional dance that subordinates person to stage prop and even here the prop is often an extension of the body. Rather, dance techniques allow a sensual being to act upon material space in ways that feature the body as subject. While these techniques do not always free the body from some subjugation to gender, they are pre-eminently labor intensive.

The Figuration of Dance in Society

Without forgetting that a technical break cannot by itself overcome the relations into which it is inserted, we can explore some concrete practices of dance that develop without gender difference. It is not that they never succumb to the symbolic, or the technics of gender difference, rather, that they provide a ground for resistance to these. There are also methodological problems that emerge when one attempts to privilege a particular form or instance of art. Clearly there is no simple reflection of society in art.[22] But it is possible to use art as a lens with which to examine society. Here, one wants to invest the work of art with something it could not possibly bear as a single instance of practice, that is, the totality of relations that would make possible a history. Fredric Jameson has encouraged us to identify this utopian moment in the text, and to show how that moment corresponds to and is situated within multiple levels of social significance from its particularity to a "master narrative" of history (the four levels Jameson borrows from medieval Christian allegory via Northrop Frye are literal, formal, mythical and anagogical.)[23]

Jameson's model seems to presume a paradigm of culture as representation. That paradigm may fit the novel and even film (Jameson's preferred objects of analysis), but it is far from clear that the dance which emerges from the sixties is fruitfully viewed through the prism of representation. Indeed, this dance which produces movement that does not stand for anything but the activity of the body itself, cannot accurately be considered a sign.[24] If the body

is not formed into a set of signifiers which are associated with an array of signifieds, (as is most strongly apparent in symbolically narrative forms such as Balinese dance) then it is difficult to identify it as a socially symbolic act, the way Jameson does for the texts he studies. When dance eludes the register of the symbolic, it falls into that "entirely different logic" that Jacqueline Rose alluded to, the real. For much choreography, a concept cannot be fit to any specific movement image; its effects are viscerally kinetic. It is even less clear that the body follows other linguistic conventions of syntax, semantics, rhetoric and so forth. Where movement does not correspond to an idea, where dance does not rest on an already given hierarchy of meaning (such as that ordered by the phallus), the use of linguistic or semiotic analysis can lead to a misrecognition. It is precisely this misrecognition that makes the real so elusive and purely abstract dance disconcerting for many.

Perhaps for this reason the appellation of postmodernism so weakly applies to dance. In a brief essay reminiscent of Lacan's intensity, Jameson names two aspects of postmodernism, pastiche and schizophrenia.[25] Pastiche, the blank parody of now dead styles, refers to the shattering of the myth of the modernist genius whose profound experience of individualism produces artistic innovation. Schizophrenia, indicates the split, or disarticulation of image and meaning such that signifier and signified lose their association in a seamless surface of images. Here, the body's resistance to the entire register of the symbolic (that is when the real of the body is in motion) makes it difficult to speak of pastiche (though the work of critically exalted Mark Morris certainly fits the rubric of reviving dead styles) and the absence of an appeal to meaning renders problematic the surface of signifiers split from their signifieds that defines schizophrenia.

Here dance, among all the arts, presents a rather distinctive puzzle. If tools as powerful as the ones Jameson provides somehow cannot account for dance, and accounts of dance have so successfully resisted contemporary theory such as Jameson's, then the gap between theory and practice that appears so exceptional in dance must itself be taken seriously as a conceptual problem.[26] Left at this apparent impasse, what analytic devices can be employed to appreciate the social and political dimensions of the real practices of the body?

The play of physicality and abstraction can be found as frequently in music as in dance (although in music the physicality of the body is transformed into sound). Music theory is therefore a likely ally in the effort to grasp the sociality of dance. Closer perhaps to providing a lived utopia for the body is Jacques Attali's analysis of music, *Noise*, which fits particular musical forms into the conditions of their production and reproduction through the elaboration of codes.[27] The codes have a synchronic and diachronic dimension, they exist simultaneously yet one is always hegemonic. In the emerging code one can identify evidence of social structures in anticipation. Because contradictions that will play themselves out over long periods of time are easily condensed in music, it can be used to read the future. It strikes me that music

may not be alone in this capacity. Attali, like Jameson, is giving us another utopian model for art. Attali takes seriously the physical, non-symbolic contours of art at the same time that he grounds utopia as but a partiality of the present. Unlike Jameson's texts which contain the future, Attali's codes announce or point toward it. His four codes more or less trace the rise and fall of capitalism. Anterior to the capitalist mode is sacrifice, akin to what Walter Benjamin might call art as ritual.[28] Here, music simulates the violence that gives authority to power. As artists are cast out from the courts and the instrumentality of performance and power is disrupted, the prospect of the professional spectacle is generated. The professional concert, which commodifies music, anticipates the more generalized exchange of the market. To preserve the authenticity of the great performance, the technology of recording is applied to music. The repetition that recording makes available, structures musical form as epitomized in the fragmented and reconstructed Muzak. The centralization of the means of musical reproduction excludes certain emergent forms. Further, it is precisely those forms most resistant to fragmentation that establish an opposition to the reification of music found in the repetitive code. Free jazz is Attali's archetype of the new code. Because this music is both self-produced on the musicians' own record labels and it is made under conditions of live improvisation with each musician contributing to the conception and execution of the product, this emergent code is named composition.

The decade since *Noise* was published has seen the waning of free jazz. The labels and venues of the music have succumbed to the same forces that have bankrupted other small businesses. There are other forms that fit the rubric of composition. In music, one thinks of punk in San Francisco and Los Angeles in the late seventies when it was still self-produced music. The loft or downtown dance scene in New York that blossomed in the wake of Judson Church also fits. Like free jazz, performances were self-produced and grounded in improvisational techniques. Improvisation here is not simply random or unstructured behavior but rather kinetic responses to choreographic problems or predicaments. Examples of such problems might be: move on all fours, dance without use of arms, maintain bodily contact with other dancers, or, in so called free improvisation, the shared history of these problems weighing against the dancers' present. Because the response exceeds the boundaries of the problem the resultant movement appears as a surprise or as something spontaneous. For the dancer, this sequence of surprises is a renewal of physical predicaments that continue to generate movement.

For the viewers, the accretion of kinetic choices is patterned into their own bodies as a totalizing physical experience or sentience. Dance drawn from improvisation is vulnerable to the same market vagaries as free jazz, yet it has persisted nonetheless perhaps because it rests on the earlier representative code and can never be fully assimilated as repetition. Loft dancing has not yielded to mechanical reproduction where the copy eclipses the original as a

jazz performance might be elided by compact disc. While the dancing on MTV signals the body as sex precisely by fragmenting the image of moving dancers and broadcasting to the viewer where to look, improvisational performance is not nearly so helpful in assisting viewers with their reception. From the other side of the divide of repetition, it is a familiar complaint to be heard from dancers, that learning movement from a video is frustrating because the reproduced image tends to flatten the qualitative dynamics of the motion and keeps the way the movement could actually be produced a secret.

Dance, like revolution follows no ontological linearity of development. It too, can "skip" codes as "stages" of development in part because it can maintain its marginality. The esotericism of compositional dance protects it from fragmentation (SONY does not seem to be terribly interested in producing loft dance concerts) and frees it to maintain a play of popular and quotidian pedestrian forms with the technical operations we associate in the West with art. Ultimately then, dance like any other art form is ambivalent. The very conditions that might make it resistant to repetition also remove it from mass or popular consumption. This is the predicament Marcuse identifies for the avant-garde.[29] What makes compositional dance different is that it is grounded in the quotidian practices of the body freed from their pedestrian functionality. Hence dance serves not as a simulacrum of revolution but as a condensation of social relations that would be necessary for certain liberations, specifically of gender and of labor.

Rechristened compositional dance, downtown, loft dancing (I resist the term postmodern because it assumes a unity of something other than conditions of production for these dancers and it pronounces a set of esthetic criteria--pastiche and schizophrenia--that are particularly ill-fitted to dance) displays certain features of a non-gendered or otherwise dominated bodily practice. While the tendency to reduplicate an esthetic unity through the construction of an artistic mode of production is a real danger that makes my own comments suffer from the problems of those analyses I have critiqued, the gain of prefiguring the possibility of an undominated bodily practice seems worth the price. Further, in attempting to define a domain of ungendered practice I am not arguing against sex but against those particular orders of difference that render sex always the subjugation of one body to another. This maneuver rests not simply upon a reordering of the symbolic, but on a fuller incorporation of the possibilities which emanate from the real into the practices of pleasure.

For this to be possible it must be made plain that not all bodily practices are organized by some singular symbolic order (centered by and on the phallus) and that the body retains a reality that is more multiple than a totalizing notion of domination would allow. A last caveat. If the body resists the symbolic it need not be because it contains some transcendental essence that cannot be represented. In rejecting the absolute and resolute character of the symbolic, we do not necessarily arrive back at the biological (though this

is a turn that could be taken). Rather, compositional dance reveals what is often misrecognized in other forms. It is a practice that is always constructed, willfully, patiently, often against some commonsensical corporeal knowledge to locate a realm of the senses. While available in everyday life (because the dancer's body shares with the pedestrian's a history of repression of love and labor, desire and demand) such dance privileges that practice of opposition that would render the body a subject whose agency is conjuncturally defined. Dance constructs a body that moves without a myth of nature. It moves by and for an encounter with another in a space that equally is artificially bounded. The improvisational basis for compositional dance presents the body fashioning history out of the socially given performance space.

Bodies in Composition

The work of the compositional dancers opposes gendered difference in at least three important aspects. First, it is an exploration of motion that resists the symbolic. With many exceptions, (I am exploring a tendency not imposing an empirical absolute) these dances do not tell stories, let alone fables of difference between men and women. If there is a narrative, it is kinetic and not meaningful. This is difficult to assert on paper. Writing implicates its object in a process of signification. All that is available to me is to point out the limits of the signifiable. Any proof must be found where the page is not. Perhaps this can be problematized by moving your arm up and down as you read this. Beyond this motion emanating from a verbal directive it is an activity that represents nothing other than its motional value. In compositional dance, it is the verbal directive itself that is absented. Clearly someone may stand outside an improvisation and direct it. But these verbal commands are reactive to the ongoing condition of bodies in motion, they may set parameters for physical interaction but they do not generate movement. Remember that the problems and predicaments that constitute improvisation are themselves physical in nature. What these non-symbolic narratives present is a physical history, in this case, the body as agent of social activity. This activity is social because a dance performance is a collective and collaborative artifice, it presents a history because the kinetic narrative makes sense of a possibility implicit in the pedestrian body, the possibility of intentionally constructing time and space.

Second, compositional dance undermines the sexual division of labor that yields a technique of gendered difference. Drawing from contact improvisation and its discontents, ways of movement are found that undermine and redefine bodily co-manipulations. Women lift, throw, trip, roll, tumble, stop, push, other men and women. They fit snugly and loosely, chase and are pursued, generate intimacies and distances among those others that otherwise share a relation to the symbolic. What is to keep a viewer from reading these actions in terms of the symbolic? One can offer no guarantees. It is often clear that

these bodily relations do not result in anything that might be mistaken for sex. That is why some critics have labeled some dance composers "playful" and "childlike," testimony that the movement has successfully resisted the symbolic. For the dancers, who display possibilities for our own practice, it can be said that their flesh is not presented as an object for the gaze (modern dance especially has been accused of being anti-erotic), but rather, their practice subjectivizes the body as motion, which can be grasped only as a relation.

Third, the dancers, like the musicians in free jazz, all compose, collaboratively and collectively. This is true not only in improvised performances which depend on a shared responsibility for crafting the event. It is also the case where improvisation is used to generate movement that will then be set into a particular dance. Gone is the choreographer who conceives in advance what the dancers will do and tries to mold them to an idea. If there is a choreographer, she is more editor than director, responsible for assemblage and distribution and not production. Such a division of labor would make many workers happy.

Much dance performed in downtown Manhattan is composed through non-symbolic, non-gendered and collective performance. One group of dancers, Eccentric Motions, organized by Pooh Kaye, that I have tracked consistently since 1983, closely realizes these three resistances. If you will permit me to exchange my partisanship for your interest, I can perhaps make this clearer and conclude with what they might offer to a bodily practice beyond the dance. Eccentric Motions explores a kinetic narrative based on the appropriation of pedestrian movement to an elaborated technique. The other to this technique is the built environment itself. More properly, the basis for their movement might be considered meta-pedestrian, for it utilizes physical actions such as crawling or springing onto the tops of feet that might be abandoned locomotions, roads not taken, in the kinetics of everyday life. Rather than having roots in the history of dance, these movements and movement devices are rooted in a negation of the upright, work-world orientation of the body. Sitting and standing as postures of labor are opposed to perversions and corruptions of the static subordination to an object that these postures might entail. Added to this extension of the pedestrian is a means of partnering focused only on available bodies. Proximity does not discriminate by sex. Women lift women, snap at each other's toes, trip men, who are entitled to respond in kind. There is no physical marking of their bodies which delimits or separates dancerly activity.

While the pedestrian is utilized as a grounds for movement, it is decontextualized to the point where the viewer is drawn into the kinetic context generated by the unfolding dance rather than some symbolic referent to what lies outside it. While this break is never total, it tends to undermine the symbolic by denying it a logic in difference. Movements and proximities that might be sanctioned in everyday life are rendered acceptable to the viewer through the improvisational or compositional quality that remains in the work.

Exceeding the limits of a problem effects the surprise which can begin to build a history within the actual time in which the dance takes place. Finally, composition is given a unique take with the Eccentrics through the structure of the "wild field" (also the name of a signature piece). The wild field is a rupture from the internal order generated by the dance. It is a moment of collective improvisation so densely laced with movement as to efface the singularity of a dancer's body into a kinetic wash. The illusion for the viewer is the shift from individual dancers in coordinated motion to a totalizing motion of a social body. The dancers do not fuse through repetition or number but rather by exceeding the boundaries of their additive individual outputs. The field then extends beyond the performing area to spill with the audience, onto the street.

While dance generates a utopia for the body, it is a utopia always grounded in the real. As impossible as the Eccentric Motions may be to mimic, the sensation of motion overflowing boundaries as a collective product is itself what is suffused through the public. To insert the utopian as a lived connection to the real is to link two mutually unrepresentable forces into a single practice. The gendered body is always subordinated to the symbolic that would give it meaning. The body of dance imposes on the pedestrian the conditions for the latter's rupture of the symbolic. Yet dance does not invent this possibility. If we think of the body always in sexual terms, this reveals something of our mechanisms of thought and not necessarily of bodily practice. If dance makes this practice available under conditions which are social (sentience of the dependence of bodies) and historical (structuring future predicaments by acting on those in the present) then we need not become dancers to realize its possibility.

Conclusion: Incorporating the Real

Compositional dance presents the logic of the real in its production and reception. As performance, it reveals bodies acting not under the demand of symbolization or the urge to create meaningful representations, but in pursuit of their possibilities as bodies. If the distinctiveness of this performance form is to retain any resonance beyond this essay, then the gain of moving from a politics of the symbolic to that of the real must be indicated.

The real body does not move outside of or prior to culture but through it, by presenting the physical conditions it acts upon as the conditions of its own possibility. This is the body in composition that moves without a myth of nature. The denaturalization of the body separates out what appears as necessity, the absolute authority of an established order of gender. From this it is possible to historicize what was previously taken as given and thereby expand the horizon of what can be grist for social change. When what had been considered natural is refigured as social, the emphasis is placed on a world susceptible to human agency, rather than human agency fettered to

something inert. As such, the real acts to expand the sense of possibility for social change. This sense of possibility is particularly critical in a conjuncture where claims have been made that we have already reached the zenith of the historical horizon. Rather than representing history as having reached its conclusion, we would experience the historical as that expansion of our own sense of possibility.

More than expanding the sense of the possible, the politics of the real continually places symbolic politics into activity and rest. This placement delivers a residence for the symbolic and a space unencumbered by the demands of the linguistic laws of the symbolic which threaten to exhaust all resistance. Hence in Lacanian terms, the real phallus only stands in the symbolic when called upon to represent difference, otherwise, it dissolves back into the real. This movement in and out of the symbolic relieves the subject of the constant demands of sexuality. The subject is re-engaged with a world more complex than that pre-figured by the symbolic and may thereby draw upon alternative relations. Sexuality aside, while symbols provide templates for knowing the world, they are deeply enmeshed in repression and domination. Refiguring the symbolic is critical to virtually all projects of human emancipation if we are to identify ourselves in terms that do not reproduce the very categories by which we are divided. Yet without featuring the real as a domain of the absence of lack, a new set of distinctions ordered in the symbolic can easily introduce other scarcities that depend on all too familiar dynamics of power. The discussion of compositional dance offered here, featured the real analytically. It remains for actual social movements to incorporate the real into the ways they conceptualize their practices in order to facilitate their performance of politics.

This turns the discussion to the question of performance itself. If oppositional politics must *real-ize* its performative moment in order to transform its conditions of struggle, so must performance theory *real-ize* what lies beyond the symbolic in order to account for actual activity on stage. It is the realization of the body's possibility that might most fruitfully account for theatrical presence on stage. If the participants in performance conceive of their activity exclusively as a symbolic one, than the invisible underpinnings that support the flow of signification on stage will go unappreciated. By viewing performance only as representation, that which anchors performance is lost to the analysis.

The body is all too often conceived of as a sign. This symbolic maneuver intended to illuminate the social significance of the body, also conceals its presence as a referent. While performers act as a medium of exchange for the performance text, be it script, score, or choreographic steps (such that, by the end of a show, an audience can feel that it got its money's worth), those same performers retain what they produced in use, the real of their bodies. The capacity to enact with others upon a stage is preserved by the performers for another night. What the critic, the scholar, the audience, may have perceived during the performance might be accounted for wholly within the register of

the symbolic. An appreciation of the real in compositional dance would perhaps tell them otherwise.

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Notes

1. This literature has blossomed in the 1980s, much of it inspired by the work of Michel Foucault: *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980); *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (New York: Vintage, 1986); *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3* (New York: Vintage, 1988). Representative volumes include *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986); and *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987). Judith Lynne Hanna has made a contribution to the literature on dance with *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

2. A fuller exposition of the conditions for a politics of the body can be found in my *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990).

3. See, for example, *Sex-Pol: Essays of Wilhelm Reich* (New York: Random House, 1972).

4. One thinks of the work of Augusto Boal (*Theater of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books, 1979) but other variants of these forms of political theater are apparent elsewhere in Latin America as well. See, for example, Randy Martin, "Town and Country in Nicaraguan Theater," *The Drama Review* T116 (Fall 1987), and Randy Martin, "Cuban Theater Under Rectification," *The Drama Review* T125 (Spring 1990).

5. Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born Woman," *Feminist Issues* 1:2 (Winter 1981): 47-54 page 48.

6. See, for example, Linda Whiteford and Marilyn Poland, editors, *New Approaches to Human Reproduction: Social and Ethical Dimensions* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989) 4.

7. The complexities of the sex chromosome issue are discussed in standard genetic texts like David Suzuki, et al. *An Introduction to Genetic Analysis*, Third Edition (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1986). See, for example, pp. 48 and 489. For a feminist critique of the way information on genetics is deployed see, Anne Fausto-Sterling *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Men and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories of Women* (New York: Pergammon Press, 1984) especially pp. 61-89 and 40-43 in the respective monographs.

8. This quote was found in a recent search of the literature on "sex differentiation disorders," by Ginger Gillespie and is taken from the abstract of R. H. Reindollar, et. al., "Abnormalities of sexual differentiation: Evaluation and Management," *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* 30 (September 1987): 697-713.

9. A rich account of how one person in this situation passed the regimen of expertise can be found in Harold Garfinkel's study of "Agnes," in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 116-185 and 285-288.

10. "Mediation of Contradiction: Why Mbum Women Do Not Eat Chicken" 301, in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1974).

11. See, for example *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1974), especially Part One.

12. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 67-70.

13. See, for example Roman Jakobson, "On Aphasia" in Janet Dolgin, et al eds., *Symbolic Anthropology* (New York: Columbia UP, 1977).

14. Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, translated by Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985) 165.

15. 42.

16. 55.

17. 56.

18. The various conceptions of postmodernism have been quite heterogeneous, some viewing it as a certain mode of representation always contingent on modernism and others as a cultural formation that can be periodized in relation to certain social transformations, particularly the development of a consumer culture that erodes the distinctions between avant-garde and kitsch, and the emergence of social movements that challenge the singular voice of judgement and truth. Useful discussions of this relation between the social and the cultural can be found in: Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986); Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986); Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988).

19. Here Susan Manning quite pointedly calls into question Sally Banes' characterization of Judson Church and the sixties, but then tries to load the postmodern turn onto a single dance season (1979/80), where the collapse of ballet and modern (her definition) are most visible. The urge to such precise periodization is complicated by other moments that are equally precise (one thinks of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*) but also by explicating historical turns through formal criteria that cloud an account of how or why that turn took place. While both author's interventions are critical to joining dance with theoretical discussions occurring around other media, they underscore what may well be distinctive about dance. See Manning's "Modernist Dogma and Post-modern Rhetoric," in *The Drama Review* T120 (Winter 1988): 37 or Banes's *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, 2nd edition (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1987).

20. See, for example, Huw Beynon and Theo Nichols, *Living With Capitalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and Randy Martin, "Sowing the Threads of Resistance: Managerial Control and Worker Resistance in a Paint and Garment Factory," *Humanity and Society* 10:3, 1986.

21. The socialization of labor that had been fragmented under feudalism is the significance of the tribute to capitalism at the beginning of the Communist Manifesto (in Robert Tucker ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* [New York: Norton, 1978], especially 474-483).

22. The critique of reflection or correspondence theories of art and society is treated quite rigorously in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).

23. See, Fredric Jameson *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).

24. This problem, it seems to me, haunts the most ambitious theoretical project on dance, Susan Foster's *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986). Foster's study is modeled on Hayden White's analysis of the literary tropes of 19th century historiography (*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973]), a framework she adopts in its entirety. Philip Auslander, in his review of the book, also questions whether dance can be contained within the domain of representation. He cites the work of Wilfried Passow "who argues that semiosis is not simply a given of the performance context, that in some cases the spectator does respond to the performer's body as a "real" body, not an iconic sign for a body ("Embodiment: The Politics of Postmodern Dance," *The Drama Review* T120 [Winter 1988]: 21). The collection of essays edited by Marianne Goldberg for *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (*The Body as Discourse*, Volume 3, Number 2 1987/88), generate similar methodological questions for the study of dance insofar as they posit "a body that is 'always a function of discourse'" (5).

25. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster 11-125.

26. Marcia Siegel illuminates this gap quite clearly and yet seems suspicious of methodologies that might account for it, leaving the critic to appreciate what divides words and dance and assess the latter as a matter of "taste." Her comments were also occasioned by the Foster book. See, "The Truth About Apples and Oranges," in *The Drama Review* T120 (Winter 1988): 24-31.

27. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985).

28. See, for example, his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1989) 223-24.

29. See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic-Dimension* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).