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A New Perspective on Conceptual Dance: Theorizing the “Flemish Wave”

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Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance

By Rudi Laermans. 432 pp.

Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015. €19,90.

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In a panel at the 2005 conference *INVENTORY: Dance and Performance Congress / Live Act / Intervention / Publication*, Xavier Le Roy spoke with Bojana Cvejić, Gerald Siegmund, Christophe Wavelet, and Mårten Spångberg about the term “conceptual dance” and its problematic usage. Cvejić felt the term “conceptual” dance was inappropriate—neither sufficiently theorized nor specific enough to accurately describe the works and choreographers it has often been used to characterize.¹ Cvejić’s hesitance is illustrative of dance artists’ and scholars’ struggle to define, classify, and discuss choreographers and works associated with contemporary European “conceptual” dance, such as that by Jérôme Bel, Vera Mantero, and Boris Charmatz. Rudi Laermans’s *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance* attempts to allay some of these concerns. Working from both aesthetic and social perspectives, Laermans builds a theory of contemporary European dance that aims to avoid the traditional trappings of the term “conceptual” and to provide insight into specific dance works within this genre.

Taking Belgian contemporary dance as its subject, *Moving Together* traces developments within the “Flemish wave,” beginning in Brussels in the early 1980s, to demonstrate the impact of this movement on current experimental dance as well as to construct frameworks for its understanding. In “Part 1: Theorizing Contemporary Dance,” Laermans examines works by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Meg Stuart, highlighting the ways in which these artists raise and address questions about the medium of dance. Laermans provides meticulous descriptions of works by both artists, followed by in-depth analyses addressing the different ontologies of dance each work proposes. The discussion of De Keersmaeker’s *Rain* (2001) presents the idea of dance as “presentness” (p. 115), both temporal and relational, that highlights dance’s potentiality and the way in which it “continually *becomes*” (pp. 121, emphasis in the original). An investigation of Stuart’s *Disfigure Study* (1991) stresses the medium of dance as the repeated representation of the human body both physically and symbolically (p. 151). Laermans’s approach in this section focuses on questions of dance’s ontology, emphasizing a common thread of the Flemish wave: the desire to explore and propose different notions of what dance is and might be. This desire, he posits, is a crucial characteristic of the Flemish wave; by analyzing the various ontologies proposed by the works of De Keersmaeker, Stuart, and others, he illuminates the myriad metaphysical possibilities of the dance form, the baseline of his theory of “conceptual” dance.

In “Part 2: Making Contemporary Dance,” Laermans traces the trajectory of avant-garde dance, providing a historical review of postmodern and “conceptual” dance in order to propose “reflexive dance” (p. 192) as the most apt descriptor, what the dance world

actually means when it talks about “conceptual” dance. Artists in this tradition, he writes, “share an attitude of reflexivity and research: they do not take the traditional parameters of dance or choreography for granted but performatively question, displace, and re-define these ingredients” (pp. 49–50). “Reflexive” is an apt term because it describes dance that looks back upon itself, dance that considers, foregrounds, and challenges the paradigms of choreography and performance. Choreographers engaged in reflexive dance practices probe notions of dance and choreography, playing with traditional understandings of these practices and proposing new conceptions of them. Laermans cites Vincent Dunoyer’s *Vanity* (1999) and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Jérôme Bel’s *3Abschied* (2010) as strong examples of reflexive dance (pp. 208–10). Theorizing experimental dance in this way, Laermans establishes an ontology of potentiality and “virtuology,” defining reflexive dance by its curiosity about “dance’s potential identities” (p. 223).

In many ways, *Moving Together* picks up where André Lepecki’s 2006 *Exhausting Dance* left off. Lepecki’s work explores what is at stake when classifying a work as dance or not, asserting that “conceptual” works can be powerfully and politically disruptive in their refusal to resemble the modernist view of dance as an ongoing flow of bodily movement.² Laermans continues this thread, examining works such as Etienne Guilloateau’s *La Magnificenza* (2006) and fieldworks’ *closer* (2003) that disrupt the model of dance as constant bodily motion. Taking Lepecki’s proposal one step further, Laermans creates a framework for examining and understanding not only the aesthetic possibilities of works of reflexive dance, but also the metaphysical potentialities of dance as a form. Reflexive dance “shows what dance may also be within the general medium of movement and non-movement. What could also be termed dance? What kind of performance may also live up to the name ‘dance’ thanks to an ideational framing yet to be formulated?” (p. 223). This process of experimenting with “the material and discursive conditions of possibility informing performance” (p. 223) serves as the basis of his theory of reflexive dance and offers a helpful lens through which to view works often described as “conceptual.”

The second half of *Moving Together* focuses on the production of dance works and performances in the contemporary Belgian dance world. Emphasizing the social aspects of collaborative artistic processes, Laermans offers an illuminating view of the nuanced and sometimes paradoxical collaborative process of dance making. His assertions are supported by observation of De Keersmaeker’s company, Rosas, and interviews with dance artists currently working in Belgium, who remain anonymous, but who represent a full range of experience levels, ages, genders, and nationalities (p. 311). One of Laermans’s salient points is his identification of the “semi-directive mode” of collaboration in which performers, led and prompted by a choreographer, contribute material that the choreographer shapes and edits into a finalized work (p. 295). This collaborative, semi-directive mode of creation is prevalent within contemporary dance, and Laermans’s insights into the dynamics of power and agency, grounded in social theory, are astute. For example, observing Rosas during the creation of *Verklärte Nacht* (1995), he describes the tacit hierarchies within the collaborative process. Through the movement material they create, dancers compete for De Keersmaeker’s attention and esteem to improve their symbolic artistic status (p. 301). The dancers hope De Keersmaeker will select their material to be in the finished work, sometimes refusing to fully invest in and deepen their material until they feel there is a relative certainty that it will be included. To combat this reluctance, De Keersmaeker avoids making binding decisions early in the process. Instead, she continues to revise the material and the dancers assigned to perform it, keeping all dancers motivated, as they are not quite certain when they or their work might be selected (p. 299).

Laermans’s insights into the collaborative process become particularly clear in his discussions of the mutual trust needed to collaborate artistically and the modes of

communication among artists working together. For example, he points out that dancers must trust the choreographer's artistic vision while the choreographer must trust the dancers' abilities to successfully execute that vision (p. 339). Underscoring one of the major themes of the book, Laermans also links the collaborative nature of producing reflexive dance to questions of dance ontology: the group must arrive at a collective sense of what is and is not legitimately considered dance for a particular project (p. 373). This common space of experimentation, agreement, and collaboration is full of potentialities, uniting the production and aesthetic result of dance through an ontology of becoming.

Moving Together is ultimately about artists shaping, reshaping, questioning, and asserting possibilities of dance's medium through largely collaborative processes. The book's significance lies in the frameworks it builds for understanding and contextualizing works of reflexive dance, emphasizing the open-endedness of continual becoming. Laermans's "reflexive" dance provides an alternate nomenclature to replace the problematic "conceptual" dance, building a theory about works of art and artists interested in dance's metaphysics and medium. The term "reflexive" improves upon "conceptual" dance because the dance makers working within the "conceptual" realm have not self-identified with or claimed that name; some, like Xavier Le Roy, openly reject that classification. Additionally, the word "conceptual" is misleading, as all choreographies have at least one concept guiding their creation (p. 206). "Reflexivity" more accurately describes the ideas in which this group of artists is interested: an open definition of choreography in which the conditions and possibilities of dance and performance are investigated, challenged, and highlighted, often becoming the object of the work. This new category avoids the problems implicit in the term "conceptual," offering an appropriate alternative classification for a specific group of primarily European dance artists addressing similar concerns.

As the ways in which dance is created and practiced continue to expand, Laerman's theory is useful in addressing evolving current practices. Perhaps *Moving Together's* greatest contribution is its theoretical grounding, which situates current dance practices within the larger field of contemporary dance. As choreographers of reflexive dance continue to explore the possibilities of what dance might be, Laermans's book offers ways that dance can be discussed in terms reflecting current practices and trends within the field. *Moving Together* highlights the need and opportunity for more in-depth ontological and philosophical study of dance's medium, particularly within the realm of experimental and reflexive dance.

Notes

1. Bojana Cvejić, Xavier le Roy, and Gerald Siegmund, "To End with Judgment by Way of Clarification..." in *It Takes Place when It Doesn't: On Dance and Performance since 1989*, ed. Martina Hochmuth, Krassimira Kruschkova, and Georg Schöllhammer (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006) 48–57.
2. André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

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