

Proliferation and Perfect Disorder:

William Forsythe

and the Architecture of Disappearance

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With *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett warned us that, as spectators, we were all too secure in our expectations of dramatic events. Beckett managed to stage what would not happen and to keep us waiting for it. William Forsythe stages what we don't think happens, but does: he dismembers the operative deceptive unity of movement, explodes it into a space we take for granted, and culls its residual motions to offer new forms. He studies forms of division and moments of invisibility that are the joints of movements. But there is no prescription for discovering any of these forms. Forsythe started with a system of Rudolf von Laban's, a ground-breaking pioneer of movement-analysis, and continues to investigate the manifold options that Laban's theories suggest. He considers the drawings and writings of the deconstructivist architect Daniel Libeskind who exposes the possibilities of spatial inscription. Forsythe's explorations are questions which remain unanswered. In his work, the absence of movement takes on a form whose representation disqualifies invisibility and revalorizes the abstraction of discontinuities.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Rudolf von Laban, one of the forerunners of German "Ausdruckstanz," (along with Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss), devised a system to understand and record the possibilities of human movement. In a work entitled *Choreutics*, he develops his ideas about *Raumlehre* – literally, space instruction – and elaborates the notational system we refer to today as "Labanotation." This system of notation is designed to be able to record, with equal precision, the movements of a dancer, a woman giving birth, or an assembly line worker, using a series of carefully defined geometric symbols.

Although Laban was a proponent of his own form of "free dance," which departed from the tradition and constraints of

classical ballet, the theoretical premises of this systems draw significantly from the essentially axial model of ballet. His notion of Raumlehre rests on a metaphor that likens human movement to architecture:

Movement is, so to speak, living architecture – living in the sense of changing emplacements as well as changing cohesion. The architecture is created by human movements and is made up of pathways tracing shapes in space [which] we may call "trace- forms."

Accordingly, recording movement requires drawing a ground-plan like that of an architect, with at least two elevations in order to convey "to the mind a plastic image of the three-dimensional whole."

The corner stone of Laban's system is the kinesphere – the spherical space around the body delineated by easily extended limbs "without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot." Moving beyond the kinesphere, where the "rest of space" lies, involves transporting the kinesphere to a new place. According to Laban, the kinesphere remains in a fixed relationship to the body, and as a constant always travels with it.

In order to represent the kinesphere, Laban likens it to a cube that surrounds the body to the front and back, right and left, and top and bottom. This model assumes the stability of a single central point in the body from which all movement emanates and through which all axes pass. The model unfolds into a virtually infinite number of possible planes delineated by the axes that transverse the body at that center point. For Laban, "a multilateral description of movement which views it from many angles is the only one which comes close to the complexity of the fluid reality of space."

Laban's model suits the movement vocabulary of classical ballet particularly well, since both employ one central point in the body as their structuring element. But what if a movement does not emanate from the body's center? What if there were

more than one center'? What if the source of a movement were an entire line or plane, and not simply a point?

Choreutics inspires such questions. While acknowledging the promise of Laban's system, William Forsythe explodes it by reassigning its centers infinitely throughout the body. Forsythe assumes a whole array of kinespheres, as it were; each is entirely collapsible and expandable. An infinity of emerging rotating axial divisions may have as their centers the heel of the right foot, the left ear, the right elbow, or an entire limb, for example. In Forsythe's dismantling and suspension of Laban's model, any point or line in the body or in space can become the kinespheric center of a particular movement. A similar model can be engendered at any point inside or outside the kinesphere; and the kinesphere is permeated with an infinite number of points of origin which can appear simultaneously in multiple points in the body.

Laban's model has proven to be decidedly enabling. It is interesting that, in envisioning the complexity of movement possibilities for the human body, he never articulated his model's potential as a de-stabilizing source of movement. In *Choreutics*, he imagines dream-movements only as far as the boundaries of equilibrium: "Dream-architectures can neglect the laws of balance. So can dream-movements, yet a fundamental sense of balance will always remain with us even in the most fantastic aberrations from reality." Forsythe, however, searches precisely for those superkinespheric moments when the limits are transgressed, when falling is imminent: he offers the failure to maintain balance as an essential project. Laurie Anderson exposes this state:

You're walk ing... and you don't always
realize it but you're always falling. With each
step... you fall. You fall forward a short way
and then catch yourself. Over and over... you
are falling... and then catch yourself. You
keep falling and catching yourself falling.
And this is how you are walking and falling at
the same time.-'

In Forsythe's choreography, the double edged tension of disequilibrium is a state which emerges from the infinite operations that dismantle historically established bodily

configurations. It is a concentrated, almost meditative act of finding those points where the balance is lost and the fall begins. This state reveals what is always in the process of disappearing; the dancing thereby highlights the continuous vanishing moments of movement.

The deconstructivist architect [Daniel Libeskind](#) also focuses on the moment of disequilibrium, in a way that addresses Forsythe's method as well: "This space of non equilibrium – from which freedom eternally departs and towards which it moves without homecoming – constitutes a place in which architecture comes upon itself as beginning at the end."-' Libeskind turns to the concept of the disappearance of presence when he describes his three machines (The Reading Machine, The Memory Machine, and The Writing Machine) devised for the Third International Biennale of Architecture in 1985:

What reveals itself in different points in different ways is really the gap between the moments of time. The parts which really make it continue are the parts which cannot be shown because they are missing... I think one should go back in depth – to experience itself, not just to its symbols but to the experiences which engendered those symbols. One would then find the engendering event as belonging to the gap in the depth.'

In order to maintain a vertiginous state, Forsythe works with various operations, exploring the rules and limits of **games** of expression (mimicry), games of competition (agon), **games** of chance (alea), and **games** of vertigo (ilynix), among others.' After suspending and dispersing Laban's model, Forsythe permeates the resulting structure with a network of terminology. Terms of quantity, order, change, form, dimension, and motion, among many others culled from his constant work with a thesaurus, are the basis for "universal writing," the driving operation behind the deployment of virtually all the other operations Forsythe and the dancers perform on movement.

Universal writing is "a continual reassignment of effort and shape; a loss of strict categorization in which desired randomness, with residual aesthetic logic, allows any form – like

the linear components of a letter of the alphabet, for example – to be written prepositionally, in, on, with any part of the body." Forsythe describes universal writing as having "a refractory quality; the object is to scatter the material, in proliferation and perfect disorder." Comparable operations currently include: "arc and axis," "cross and pass," "tubing," and "video scratch." Many are descriptive, mimetic acts which employ the reassignment of movement and blur the borders between instrument and inscription. Operations are constructed not so that the results of a specific task have visible priority, but to generate the unavoidable and unforeseeable residual movement. As Forsythe argues: "I don't want to know what's going to happen. I want to be ambushed by the results." In the end, Forsythe creates a system of ever-multiplying systems of working which in turn regenerate themselves in variation. Libeskind is evidently conscious of similar issues, for he too reflects on some of the issues we recognize as essential to Forsythe's work in describing his own: "In fact the outcome of this process more often than not, is the generation of forms produced by the apparatus of "research" itself, rather than authentic apprehension of phenomena."

Libeskind has written at length about the merits of perceiving the shape of space of the world "which on a permanent basis produces a destabilized, let's say an eternal, movement of imperfection and difference." Both Libeskind and Forsythe are (perhaps surprisingly to some) more concerned with exposing the intricacies of process, rather than offering the public a fetishizable and final product. For Libeskind, products are uninteresting residues of the "participatory experience," which he defines as the "emblem of reality which goes into their making." For Forsythe, the participatory experience involves uncovering forms by working through the complex operational systems with the dancers, as described above.

The critique of product fetishization has, of course, found currency in cultural debates as well. Libeskind and Forsythe, like other artists, are also questioning the eagerness and ease with which we categorize, classify and label processes. Such codification fixes the process as a product, rather than opening it up to further possibilities. What is paramount to both Libeskind and Forsythe is, in Libeskind's words, that "as language falls and falters the open is opened."

Rather than retrieving and reproducing classical balletic

forms that are fixed entries in the roster of movement, Forsythe bursts open these forms so that previously hidden moments in balletic movements are made plainly visible. In doing so, not only are movement and form given a new life and a new set of possibilities, but so is ballet in general. Failure and falling, for example, are retrieved and revalorized as intrinsically necessary and equally valid structural components of classical dance. As one of Ballett Frankfurt's dancers, Dana Caspersen, has put it: "the validity of a movement is not determined by its correlation to a historically established system, but by whether it has significance in itself." What both Forsythe and Libeskind move towards is an opening of the apparently immutable, because historically sanctioned, assumptions of their respective disciplines. In Libeskind's hands, linearity is lost when the architectural model is exploded: "The rational, orderly grid actually turns out to be made up of a series of decentered spaces..." Similarly, Forsythe shows that the unity of the dancing body is fallacious and deceptive.

In order to sustain in their works the vibrations of disequilibrium and disappearance, Forsythe and Libeskind are forever throwing the question of impermanence into play. Their works contain traces of impermanence within the very processes they choose to explore. For Libeskind, architecture is neither intended nor experienced as a goal-oriented activity. As we suggested earlier, what matters to Libeskind is experiencing the process: "the act is the experience. The Machine is not about the object, the object is just documented here – it's about the experience one has in participating in it."

Instability permeates Forsythe's pieces. When he asks the dancers to "sustain the reinscription of forms," he is trying to maintain a state of vibration, a moment of trembling devoid of stability, devoid of permanence. He also uses improvisation to display impermanence: "the whole point of improvisation is to stage disappearance." And finally, Forsythe constantly plays with details, changes sections and even entire structures, as was the case with *The Vile Parody of Address*, six radically different versions of which have already been created. At the Paris Opera premiere of *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, Forsythe reset the order of the sequences and informed the dancers just before the beginning of the performance. During his 1989 America Tour, Forsythe "let the linear formations disintegrate" only hours before the performance of *Behind the China Dogs*. He purposely keeps everyone - the dancers, the audience, and himself - on an edge, always geared to expect the unexpected.

Reproducibility is anathema in all of its manifestations. Neither Forsythe nor Libeskind is interested in the "survival" of his work as an object; that would be to fetishize the work as a finished, categorizable, reproducible object. Unflustered by the disappearance of one of the unique books of his Reading Machine, for example, Libeskind included several blank pages in the accompanying publication "to mark the disappearance - thereby reinscribing the presence of absence. Forsythe is similarly adamant about the fact that his choreographies, unlike classical ballets, cannot be recorded using Labanotation. A labanotation expert has confirmed that the operations performed on movement could be recorded generally, but that sequences of movements themselves were impossible to notate.

The "explosion" models both Forsythe and Libeskind use encourage their audiences to confront assumptions about linearity, space, and ultimately, the linearity of history. Libeskind describes his three Machines as "three episodes" that "are not movements in history, space, or any other linearity..." Libeskind and Forsythe focus on moments of rupture and discontinuity and participate in the sort of history that Michel Foucault writes about: "Discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian's task to remove from history. It has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis."

To be sure, William Forsythe's work betrays a measure of indebtedness to balletic traditions. Yet Forsythe is also immersed in a current effort to interrupt the mechanics of classical balletic syntax. Ultimately, the question of representation is at stake: Can the obscured layers that engender movement be represented in performance? Can we apprehend and perform the invisible strata that we take for granted in even our most prosaic gestures? What formal coordinations will not resist vertigo? Forsythe's work offers forms and residual displacements generated by operations on movements. He represents the interstices of forms that are multiply inscribed by and in the body. The forgotten elements of deceptively unified and coherent sequences are reassembled spatially. The performer becomes an agent; at once an inscriber and a transcriber, the dancer performs operations that dismantle an assumed, logical structure. Performances fail where they forget their own histories of discontinuity and disappearance. In this way choreography - the memorized, fixed, fetishized object - disappears.

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