



## Dance and performance

Part of the visual arts genre for several generations, today collected and preserved by contemporary art museums, “performances” are now also part of some dance festivals. In fact they intersect with all the artistic genres (visual arts, music, poetry, theatre and dance) and have contributed significantly to their hybridisation.

An action taken by an artist who *throws his body into the struggle*<sup>1</sup>, performance has seen its forms ceaselessly multiply and renew themselves. It is thus difficult or even impossible to precisely define it or to identify its limits. The borders have thus become increasingly porous between performance and contemporary dance which is, for its part, open to movements from other disciplines or to those from everyday life.

All the same, we can wonder what performance has given to dance or what dance, in certain works, takes from performance.

“They seek new forms of freedom in art, sometimes beyond the aesthetic conventions of the time or the social norms which govern our behaviour. For them, juxtaposing “art and life” means what is found in the resources of the personality, in the exercise of passions or the impulses, in the anonymous beauties that reality presents to us at every moment – experiences ready to transform those who succumb to them. Their joint aim is to go beyond the contemplation of the masterpiece or the object, up to the point suggested as exclusive to artistic activity, and to substitute for it actions, durable or transitory forms likely to explore new states of consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

What François Barré wrote, in 1994, about *performers* practicing their art in the field of the contemporary art, can apply just as well to dancers and choreographers concerned with getting rid of learned gestures and revitalising their experience of dance.

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*Nous marchons, la tête haute,  
Comme de petits soldats,  
Marquant, sans faire de faute,  
Une, deux, marquant le pas.*

*We walk, head high  
Like little soldiers,  
Walking, making no mistakes,  
One, two, walking in place.*

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<sup>1</sup> “Il corpo nella lotta”, said Pier Paolo Pasolini.

<sup>2</sup> François Barré, preface to the catalogue *HORS LIMITES, l'art et la vie 1952-1994*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994, p. 11.



The bugle resounds. On stage, Olga Mesa adjusts the projectors. Then, as we listen to the chorus *Avec la Garde montante* from Bizet's *Carmen*, she undresses behind a projection screen and returns to the front, equipped only with a fan, which naturally is not enough to cover her. With the naughty air of a child who has done something silly but gained the complicity of the audience, she then devotes herself to a pseudo make-up session that consists of nothing but a series of grimaces. This is the image of the seductress seeking to beautify herself turned completely on its head. The scene continues with the same irony: perching on a chair, her back to the audience, Olga Mesa makes great sweeping gestures with the fan and strikes her thighs.

*Avec la garde montante*  
*Nous arrivons, nous voilà!*  
*Sonne, trompette éclatante!*  
*Ta ra ta ta ta ra ta ta.*

*With the changing of the guard*  
*We're coming, here we are !*  
*Sound, resounding trumpet !*  
*Ta ra ta ta ta ra ta ta.*

The striptease takes place to military music! Could the naked seductress be a “little soldier”? This is a plausible interpretation since the first act of *Carmen/Shakespeare*, by **Olga Mesa and Francisco Ruiz de Infante**, deals with seduction and the balance of power in love relationships. But let us re-examine the end of the sequence. We hear a cry, the lights go out. Did the dancer jump off her chair or did she fall?

In contrast to pieces in which little soldier dancers march “la tête haute et sans faire de faute” (head high, making no mistakes), Olga Mesa crawls on all fours, scratches her nose, shows off by posing on a chair, and falls over! And what if playing the fool<sup>3</sup> was the best way of destabilising the established order (of the dance performance and of the world) a little?

Daring to expose yourself in this way, naked before an audience, daring to sing *opera* when you are not a professional singer, daring to simultaneously take on the two behemoths that are the story of *Carmen* and the Shakespeare's *Sonnets* – that really is daring!

Of course a dancer takes risks onstage. But there is one they avoid taking: that of ridicule, even feigned. Dance, traditional or modern, seldom has contact with the

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<sup>3</sup> see Jean-Yves Jouannais, *L'IDIOTIE, art, vie, politique – méthode*, Beaux-Arts magazine / livres, 2003.



burlesque<sup>4</sup>. Performance art, on the other hand, takes it on and often even seeks it out. This “act for art”<sup>5</sup> aims to destabilise: the artist himself, the spectator, and the society around it.

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Let's go back one century. During the then futuristic evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire, hosted by the DADA group, the artists – sometimes decked out in ridiculous costumes – played noise music or recited sound poetry without words. Determined to challenge the traditional idea of the performance and the objet d'art lost to commercialisation, they invented new forms, explored the burlesque and were capable of self-mockery. It was undoubtedly there that performance art was born.

In the mid-1920s, **Valeska Gert**, an associate of the Dadaists, presented provocative solos in a cabaret in Berlin in which she played marginal characters: “Since I didn't like the bourgeois, I danced the people dismissed by them, whores, procuresses, cast-offs, those who had slipped...”<sup>6</sup> In the ruins of post-war Germany, where inflation, unemployment and prostitution were rife, these subjects touched a nerve. To bring them to life, she used both her talents as a dancer and as an actress. These very short pieces are, in fact, expressive pantomimes where mimicry, highlighted by make-up, is as important as the gestures. To express sexuality, she highlights her eyes, her mouth and the movements of her body: “I wiggle my hips provocatively, hoist the black, very short skirt, and for an instant show white flesh above long, black stockings, and high-heeled shoes (a scandal at a time when dancers, if they weren't dancing ballet, hopped across the stage barefoot). I am an ultra-refined whore. My movements are sleek and voluptuous.”<sup>7</sup>

Valeska Gert used the themes she addressed to confront middle-class moralities and their hypocrisy. She defied both the idealistic values of academic dance and the tradition of the delicate, graceful ballerina. In this respect, she is similar to some of her contemporaries like Mary Wigman (Wigman's *Witch Dance* for example.)

Appearing in a cabaret club allowed Valeska Gert to perform in an intimate venue, close to the audience and to dare to use registers absent from the ballet and considered as vulgar: burlesque and even the grotesque, considered so unacceptable in women. With her began a long series of satirical performances by female artists trying to evoke the stereotypes from which woman tries to free herself.

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<sup>4</sup> In France, under the Ancien Régime and in particular under Louis XIII, there were burlesque ballets, short comical ballets whose comedy came mainly from the dancers' costumes.

<sup>5</sup> Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, *L'Acte pour l'art*, éditions Al Dante, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Valeska Gert, *Je suis une sorcière – Kaléidoscope d'une vie dansée*, Centre national de la danse / éditions Complexe, 2004

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68



From the end of the 1940s, **Anna Halprin**, the American dancer and choreographer who created humorous pieces and was passionate about a teaching of dance based on pleasure, brought together artists from all disciplines in her studio: architects, visual artists, musicians, poets and dancers. Seeking to free movement from imposed techniques, from the search for virtuosity and the theatricality of *modern dance*, Anna Halprin used improvisation and became increasingly interested in ordinary gestures. The artists in her studio were invited to carry out everyday tasks (standing up, walking, carrying things, eating, undressing etc.) and to become aware of the movements which their bodies made to carry them out. For Anna Halprin, being constrained by instructions and having to carry out a task prevented her from resting on her laurels and from surrendering to the supposedly artistic, subjective desire for expression. After working like this on the process of creating movement, scores were developed for performance.

Among the artists and choreographers who worked with Anna Halprin were Simone Forti and Robert Morris, who worked with her early in her career, and later, in 1959, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. These four would be among the most active members of the Judson Dance Theater<sup>8</sup> and would again take up the concept of “tasks”, in order to create pieces based on everyday gestures.

In 1964, **Lucinda Childs**, 24, presented *Carnation* at the Judson Church. With the looks of a fashion model, she embodied, with humour, two stereotypes of the representation of the feminine: the woman anxious to please and the housewife. Many artists at the time, in the United States as well as in Europe, transformed banal objects of consumption into works of art. Lucinda Childs presented the audience with a selection of unusual props: a pressure cooker basket, sponges and pastel-coloured hair curlers. Her gestures were simple but amplified and executed extremely meticulously. Their slowness, the precision and the ceremonial nature of the posture, the surrounding silence, the attention given to the choice of the objects and their placement, all contributed to give this incongruous piece the solemnity of a ritual. It was the contrast between the trivial nature of the objects and the seriousness with which they are handled which gave the burlesque dimension to the performance.

The composer, singer, dancer and choreographer, director of films, installations and operas, **Meredith Monk** today defines her work as “*visual and oral performance*”

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<sup>8</sup> The Judson Memorial Church is a progressive church in New York dedicated to the social welfare of the community, which, from the 1950s, welcomed many artists from the New York scene: painters, musicians, dancers and actors. From 1962 to 1964 the Judson Dance Theater brought together dancers who explored the possibilities of improvisation and everyday gestures, and who were the founders of what is now recognised as post-modern dance.



poetry”<sup>9</sup>. For her, the fundamental element is the voice, with which she seeks to “rediscover the essential, primal power”.<sup>10</sup>

She created *Break* in 1964 when she was also a member of the Judson Dance Theater. Fifty years later, the piece has lost nothing of its radicalism. *Break* makes us see and understand silence: feet and hands strike the ground, then the roar of the machines gives way to silent screams where the face shows the scream without anything being heard, like a film in which the sound has been cut. *Break* is made up of interruptions, pauses, resumptions and shifts: what you see does not always correspond to what you hear and, moreover, each perceived element appears to be the fragment of something vaster which you cannot access. Sometimes the body itself, partly hidden behind a partition, seems to be cut up. A musical, visual composition, *Break* is also a subtle work of cutting and assembling.

In contrast to Lucinda Childs, who has been compared to Buster Keaton, as she remains impassive throughout the entire duration of *Carnation*, Meredith Monk plays with facial expressions. Although mimicry and grimaces were prohibited in traditional dance performances, many choreographic artists use them today. This is the case, as we have seen, with Olga Mesa. It is also true of Latifa Laâbissi, Loïc Touzé, La Ribot, Mathilde Monnier and many others. Like Meredith Monk, these artists also integrate work on the voice and text utterances, with varying degrees of improvisation, into their performances.

*Gustavia* (2008) is a burlesque duet, the result of the collaboration between **Mathilde Monnier** and **La Ribot**. Wearing identical costumes and hairstyles, they look like fraternal twins and act out a comedy of repetition and accidents. Here too, the cabaret is not far away. Composed as a series of sketches, the piece links whining, fake stripteases, physical combat and verbal jousting, more or less failed acrobatics and thus falls. The work therefore illustrates what Patrice Blouin says: burlesque contains “an ancient principle which consists of turning incompetence into competence – expertly transforming the fall, proof of human fallibility, into the art of falling.”<sup>11</sup>

The piece leaves room for improvisation. Playing rivalry as complicity, the two dancers sometimes surprise themselves, introduce discrepancies and destabilise one another. The perfectly oiled mechanics of this staging of failure gives way, for a brief moment, to a real fragility.

Does *Gustavia* evoke a multifaceted woman or a multitude of different women? In any case, it raises the question of the game we play, for ourselves or for others, in life or onstage. Satirising the theatrical performance (the piece deliberately misuses entrances and exits) *Gustavia* is also a reflection of the way society portrays women and the way

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted by Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, *L'Acte pour l'art*, p.118

<sup>10</sup>Quoted by David Sanson in his article “Magie ancienne” devoted to Meredith Monk, *Mouvement*, number 58, January-March 2011

<sup>11</sup> This quotation by Patrice Blouin refers to *Gustavia* on Mathilde Monnier's website: [http://www.mathildemonnier.com/upload/editor/files/A3presse\\_.pdf](http://www.mathildemonnier.com/upload/editor/files/A3presse_.pdf)



they portray themselves. It “offers a complex feminist critique of the demands made on women to “play” their gender in a satisfactory way.”<sup>12</sup>

This “reversal of incompetence and competence” also characterises Ondine Cloez's solo in *La Chance* by **Loïc Touzé**: contrasting with the speed, virtuosity and ethereal vocalisations of Maria Callas' singing, the dancer moves heavily to the front of the stage, her head sinking into her shoulders, her face powdered; she squints, looks confused, falls backwards... This version of the burlesque unsettles more than it amuses, because of the animality and the fear we see in the gestures and the face of the dancer in front of us.

Since he resigned from the Opéra de Paris, **Loïc Touzé** has contemplated how to “dance outside the choreography, to create gestures which are not learned.”<sup>13</sup> He seeks to create the conditions that produce these gestures, “so that there will be new adventures for the dancer”, who creates “an uneasiness in those who watch.”<sup>14</sup> In order to “disconnect from their education”<sup>15</sup> the dancers of *La Chance* practised telepathy and hypnosis, described by Loïc Touzé as “a kind of Western trance”<sup>16</sup>.

To unlearn, to accept not being able to master everything, to be vulnerable, to expose themselves to the risk of appearing inefficient and in doing that, even more importantly, to discover unexplored territories within yourself... By making these choices, choreographers like Loïc Touzé know that they are creating performance art.

Is that a man or a woman? Why is it acting like a ghost? Is it possessed? Watching *Adieu et merci* (2013), the spectator asks themselves many questions. In particular, they wonder what kind of performance they are watching, what they should *make of it*. **Latifa Laâbissi**, who worked with Loïc Touzé for many years, blurs the boundaries between dance and performance art, show and installation<sup>17</sup>. She also blurs the boundaries of the portrayal of gender: in *Self Portrait Camouflage*, she wears a feather headdress reminiscent of Native American chiefs on her head; in *Adieu et merci*, she wears a beard. Reflecting on sexual or “national” identity, her work often creates embarrassment in the spectator. Is this because she dares to be grotesque by grimacing and contorting herself, because she seems to take a perverse pleasure in making herself ugly? That could make us laugh, but it makes us ill at ease because we feel the violence in the way Latifa Laâbissi goes about “disfiguring the figure”<sup>18</sup>. We have the feeling, watching her

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<sup>12</sup> La Ribot's website: <http://www.laribot.com/work/7>

<sup>13</sup> Loïc Touzé, interview given on France Culture on 3 December, 2012, in “Le Rendez-vous” with Laurent Goumarre.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> In *Adieu et merci*, the moving stage curtain is not merely a prop, it is a real partner for Latifa Laâbissi. The show was created in collaboration with the visual artist Nadia Lauro.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuelle Chérel, “Défigurer la figure, À propos de Self Camouflage de Latifa Laâbissi”, in *Le Journal des Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers*, cahier D, 2013-2014.



performances, that something is being reflected back onto us. The fact that she deals with issues of colonial heritage is surely not irrelevant here...

As a woman of colour, she has seen the contempt in some people's eyes. Mightn't the ostracism of immigrants resemble the fate formerly reserved for witches? In 2001, in *Phasmes*, Latifa Laâbissi reinterpreted pieces by Valeska Gert and Mary Wigman, interested in their use of the grimace, their manner of transforming themselves into alarming figures, to invoke "possession as a form of social protest"<sup>19</sup>. Mary Wigman was persecuted by the Nazis. In 1942, she bade farewell to the stage. Her last work is entitled *Abschied und danke* (*Adieu et merci - Good-bye and thank you*).

The influence of the avant-garde of the 1920s, and of the 1960s, the coming together of the world of dance and of visual arts, the need for experimentation and the irreverence felt by many artists for the increasingly restrictive influence of the commercialisation of art, all undoubtedly explains why dance and performance art are so closely intertwined today. At a time when real powers were hidden and when traditional political engagement lost its credibility, the artistic act in general and performance art in particular were perceived as a space of freedom, an advantageous means of personal or collective expression.

We cannot conclude this Thema without paying homage to the splendid choreographer-performer **Alain Buffard**, who was taken from us too soon at the end of 2013. Able at several times in his life to become a pupil again, he had gone to work with Anna Halprin, playing a large role in raising her profile in France, and taking part in the recreation of *Parades & Changes*<sup>20</sup> and making the film *My Lunch with Anna*.

In his own works, he was insolent, often disturbing. How could anyone emerge unscathed after watching his solo *Good boy?* Alone on the stage, lit by glacial fluorescent light, naked or wearing layers of underpants which give him the ridiculous appearance of a child wearing a nappy, he exposes himself like this to our gaze, moving or motionless, endowed with an incredible presence. He is seen lying on the ground, legs folded, simply making his shoulder

move; it then appears as if his shoulder blade has been dislocated, that the flesh is moving, becoming autonomous in a body in which the human being is no longer identifiable. Later, with Band-Aids and boxes of medicine, he patches together some *drag queen* heels on which he then sways and staggers. It is done without pathos but with great emotion. Alain Buffard knew: to be burlesque is to be elegantly tragic.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Parades & Changes*, created in 1965 by Anna Halprin, was performed again in 2008 by a group of performers and dancers, directed by Anne Collod.



## To go further :

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Cie Fuera de Campo/Olga Mesa : <http://www.olgamesa.eu>

Anna Halprin: <http://www.annahalprin.org>

Lucinda Childs Dance : <http://www.lucindachilds.com/>

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La Ribot : <http://www.laribot.com/>

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Loïc Touzé : <http://www.loictouze.com>

Figure Project/Latifa Laâbissi: <http://figureproject.com>

Alain Buffard/Association PI : ES : <http://www.alainbuffard.eu/fr/>

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### **Credits :**

Marie-Thérèse Champesme teaches the history of art and dance at the University of Littoral in Dunkerque. At the same time, she collaborates with contemporary artists (exhibition curators, project support, texts and interviews ...) such as Christian Rizzo or Peter Downsborough.

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