



## Dance and visual arts

Dance and the visual arts have often been a source of inspiration for one another and have mutually influenced each other. This Theme cannot address all aspects of their relationship; it confines itself to showing the importance of the visual arts in certain choreographies.

In the past, the artist was invited to design a “scenery”. Today we prefer to speak of “stage design” or “plans” to designate these very varied multimedia presentations, which take over the whole stage and play a decisive role in the choreography and the perception of the audience members. The visual artist is no longer merely a collaborator working with the choreographer. He is sometimes the co-author of the piece and, in certain cases, of the show's plan, which is considered as a work in itself and can also be exhibited as an installation in a suitable venue.

Until the 1870s, the scenery for the theatre or the ballet was generally limited to the traditional painted canvas placed at the back of the stage, created by craftsmen in the tradition of the French Academy. Each studio had its speciality: some painted the sea, others the forests, others the interiors etc. Therefore, there was not always coherence from one act to another, apart from the use of perspective to create an effect of depth. The arrival of electricity was to overturn this practice. When the entire depth of the stage is lit – and no longer just the forestage with its row of candles – the illusion of the painted canvas does not function any more. In addition, more and more theatre and opera directors understood that the show's scenery had to incorporate the great upheavals occurring in the art world. If naturalistic theatre, concerned with authenticity, scrupulously recreated life as it was, symbolist theatre preferred the art of suggestion, stimulating audiences' imaginations. The craftsmen were not able to meet this demand and the directors began to turn to artists. Bonnard, Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Munch and Toulouse-Lautrec all worked with Lugué-Poe, for example.

This collaboration with groundbreaking painters was to be one of the defining features of two of the greatest ballets companies of the modern era: the Ballets russes and the Ballets suédois. Sergei Diaghilev, director of the Ballet russes, anxious to give equal importance to the dance, the music and the scenery, brought together choreographers, musicians and painters of avant-garde for his shows. In Stockholm, Rolf de Maré was doing the same, for example giving Fernand Léger the chance to create immense canvases and to bring them to life (*Skating Rink, La Création du monde*). For the sake of consistency, the artists who designed the scenery also designed the costumes.

This was the case for *Parade*, in 1917. Pablo Picasso joined the team assembled by Diaghilev: Jean Cocteau for the libretto, Erik Satie for the music and Léonide Massine for



the choreography. This was at the height of World War I. The frivolity and nonconformist nature of *Parade* created a scandal.

If the stage curtain with its pastel colours could, in spite of its voluntarily distorted perspective, reassure audiences vaguely familiar with cubism, the style changed completely as the show began. Picasso staged the action in a very modern city, represented in a stylised and lopsided way, and added three *managers* using characters envisaged by Cocteau: two have costumes enhanced by cardboard constructions and the third is a horse inside which two dancers move! These three meter high *managers*, who all dwarfed the other dancers, appeared to be carrying parts of the scenery on their backs, thus making it mobile. According to Cocteau, the scenery “seems to act in the piece instead of restricting itself to simply being there.” Picasso's choices, consistent with Satie's music, his imagination and his mix of popular and highbrow culture, had an impact on the choreography. We know that Massine and Picasso worked together, each modifying his projects on the suggestions of the other.

*Parade* is defined by its rejection of naturalism and psychology and by its references to forms of popular entertainment like the circus or the cabaret. All this is found in Léger's sceneries and costumes, and also in the shows of the Bauhaus painter and teacher Oskar Schlemmer. The costumes for his *Triadisches Ballett* – made notably of metal, plexiglass and wood – constrain the bodies of the dancers. However, their geometrical forms are borrowed from natural movements. “Imagine representing space as filled with a soft mass which would harden once the movement is accomplished. The movements of the body (twists, leaps etc.) then remain, solidified in the mass, like plastic shapes of the body. If, for example, I move an arm or leg parallel to the body's axis, the shape of a disc is produced; if I move my extended arm or leg, it produces the shape of a cone or a funnel. This way of dividing space can also produce shapes like spinning tops, scrolls, spirals or figures similar to technical organisms.”<sup>1</sup>

Oskar Schlemmer's work was to have an extremely significant influence on the next generation of choreographers like Alwin Nikolaïs or Philippe Decouflé. But the heritage of Bauhaus did not stop there. When the Nazis closed the school in 1933, many of the Bauhaus teachers emigrated to the United States. One of them, Joseph Albers, helped to establish one of the important art institutions of the post-war period, Black Mountain College. It was there in 1952 that several artists, including Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, staged their first *event*, each one preparing their contribution individually.

Consequently, Merce Cunningham would always adopt the same process of creation: the music and the dance, created separately, are only brought together on the stage the day before the first performance. Of course, there are some shared instructions like the

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<sup>1</sup> Oskar Schlemmer, in “Eléments scéniques”, 1929, quoted by Éric Michaud in *Le Théâtre au Bauhaus*.



duration of each sequence but, within this structure, the musician and the choreographer have total freedom. As for the visual artist charged with the scenery, he receives only very vague instructions: for *Minutiae*, Cunningham asks Robert Rauschenberg to create “something which would have been placed in the middle of the stage and around which we could move”. For *Winterbranch*, he suggests to him “to think of the light as if it were the night, in spite of the day”. Indeed Cunningham rejects the idea that the dance must follow the music and that the scenery is an illustration. “Conventional ballets are built around a central idea to which everything adheres: often a libretto, the music in conjunction with the libretto, the scenery to enhance it or to match it... Whereas what we do is to weave two or three threads in the space-time, the music, the dance, the visual arts, but none of them comes from a central idea. On the contrary, their domains are as autonomous as possible. The work is not born from a single idea that the dance shows, the music supports and the scenery illustrates, on the contrary these three elements remain distinct, each one central to itself”<sup>2</sup>. This recognition, this autonomy granted by Cunningham to other creators undoubtedly enabled him to be surrounded by the best artists of his time. It is also in keeping with the desire to break down hierarchies which characterises his choreographies: there is no more hierarchy between the arts than there is between the dancers, the points of space or the parts of the body.

Created by Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser, the scenery for *Biped* (1999) is a projection of virtual figures onto which the movements of the dancers, recorded beforehand using sensors, have been transmitted. Ghostly silhouettes, they emerge at certain points in the show, like giant, disembodied doubles of the dancers on the stage.

Like Merce Cunningham, *post-modern dancers* reject narrative dance and the expression of subjectivity and work with the composers and visual artists of their generation. But they work on a more everyday style, without aiming for virtuosity. Like minimalist artists, they are interested in the variations of simple forms and the spaces between them and they attach an essential importance to the transformation of the point of view, with its influence on perception. In 1979, for *Dance*, Lucinda Childs used a choreography created for a musical score by Philip Glass and the work of the artist Sol LeWitt, whose drawings and structures are combinations of geometric units. “Why do you want a scenery?” he asked her. “I don't want a scenery, I want something which transforms the space and gives us another way of seeing the dance” she answered<sup>3</sup>. She suggested that he makes a film using 35 mm and project it onto a transparent screen placed on the forestage. What you see in the image is exactly what is being danced at the same time. But it is in black and white and, most importantly, the point of view is not the same. Sol LeWitt used multiple camera angles, sometimes juxtaposing two shots, varying

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<sup>2</sup> Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, In conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, p.151

<sup>3</sup> This conversation is recounted by Patricia Kuypers in her article “Réinventer l'espace. Un entretien avec Lucinda Childs” and quoted by Corinne Rondeau in *Lucinda Childs, Temps/Danse*, p.65



the compositions and the rhythm of the montage. Looking simultaneously at the live and pre-recorded footage, placed in front of images of body on multiple levels, the spectator is caught up in a ceaseless flow of repetitions and variations which redouble those of the music and choreography itself.<sup>4</sup>

Today, choreographic works are sometimes jointly designed by the choreographer and the visual artist, who is thus given the status of co-author.

*Le Saut de l'ange* by Dominique Bagouet was created in 1987 in the Cour Jacques Coeur in Montpellier. Christian Boltanski, who was responsible for the stage design and the costumes but also the “conception” of the piece, divided the stage into two parts: one is left empty, the performers dancing on the floor itself, the other is occupied by a red and yellow podium which evokes the circus, while also creating a kind of small theatre within the theatre. The show is performed at nightfall and, as soon as it gets dark, light bulbs are switched on and recall popular festivals or Christmas decorations. They highlight the architecture of the palace and transform it into deliberately “fake” scenery<sup>5</sup> to create what Boltanski calls the “humble magic” of the theatre. As for the very odd costumes, they were selected to distance themselves from “typical modern dance”. Boltanski's deceptively innocent stage design and his mistrust of the ballet tradition helped Dominique Bagouet to “loosen up”<sup>6</sup> his dance, to make it more spontaneous, to “rediscover a certain taste for playfulness, a certain imaginativeness planned down to the last detail, like a circus act”<sup>7</sup>. The performers enjoy dancing as if they are in a village square, imitating animals or part of the cast of a melodrama. But the playful nature of the piece sometimes yields to a certain melancholy. The title proposed by Boltanski alludes to a gymnastic move (the angel's dive) but also to the fall of an angel and to death. Beyond “the work's acrobatic aspect”<sup>8</sup>, *Le Saut de l'ange* is a “reflection on the precariousness of things [11]”.

For many years Mathilde Monnier has enjoyed collaborating with musicians, authors, visual artists and other choreographers. In 2010 she created *Soapera* with the painter Dominique Figarella. The title of the piece is a humorous reference to the soap opera, the sentimental television series aimed at housewives and sponsored by manufacturers of hygiene and cleaning products. But the soap in question here is an enormous mass of white foam on the stage. It is initially inanimate, and is then gradually transformed and dissolved by the movements of the dancers. Hidden inside this foam, they confront the thick, wet material, pick it up, move it, carve it and, every now and then, emerge from it.

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<sup>4</sup> Reference must be made here to Corinne Rondeau's superb analysis of this piece and of all of Lucinda Childs' work.

<sup>5</sup> *Interview with Christian Boltanski and Alain Neddam, Montpellier, March 5, 1987.*

Source: [www.lescarnetsbagouet.org](http://www.lescarnetsbagouet.org)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.lescarnetsbagouet.org/fr/textes/064\\_texte\\_bagouet.pdf](http://www.lescarnetsbagouet.org/fr/textes/064_texte_bagouet.pdf) p.11

<sup>7</sup> Dominique Bagouet,

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lescarnetsbagouet.org/fr/textes/064\\_texte\\_bagouet.pdf](http://www.lescarnetsbagouet.org/fr/textes/064_texte_bagouet.pdf) p.12



The slowness of their gestures allows the foam to retain its volume and to preserve its mystery for a long time.

*Soopera* exist in two forms: it is an hour long performance, viewed from the front. After the foam dissolves, leaving traces on the stage, a large white canvas is revealed, referring directly to this piece's relationship with painting. *Soopera* is also a performance installation. In this case, the transformation of the foam, from its emergence to its liquefaction, is repeated for 2 hours. Spectators can enter and leave as they please; there is no beginning or end, the element of theatre has been removed. The event is the transformation of the material by the dancers, whom the public, placed all around the foam, can observe closely.

***Carmen/Shakespeare*** is a project in several acts by Olga Mesa and Francisco Ruiz de Infante. In 2013, for *Act I (The Fog)*, they created an audio-visual plan mixing recorded and real-time video and sound. The music includes several extracts from Bizet's opera, looped, like an endless throbbing repetition. Tables and chairs on various levels, projectors on tripods, speakers, computers, microphones, mixing desks, electric lamps and smoke machines all invade the stage. The cables, visually very present, highlight the multiple connections and complexes between the parts of the set. Are we on a film shoot? At the rehearsal or the performance of a show? We lose a sense of time; the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred.

*Carmen/Shakespeare* is a piece about seduction, desire, the tensions and the power plays within a relationship. The scene is a "battle field"<sup>9</sup>, a metaphor for the chaos of love, where the two protagonists, who are directors, performers and characters simultaneously, are sometimes accomplices and sometimes rivals. Imprisoned in this "technological trap" that they themselves created, they appear to be fighting for control and no longer know who is manipulating whom. At every moment, the body must reaffirm its uniqueness, its freedom, its refusal to be an object, and the dance space must be regained from that of the machines.

*Carmen/Shakespeare*, created initially as a show, could also be presented in the form of installation, in a suitable venue.

Some choreographers are also visual artists. They draw, make films, create installations and do the stage design for their own shows.

Since 1991, La Ribot has deliberately situated her work between dance, performance and visual arts. In order to change the relationship with the audience, to free herself from the formats imposed by the institutions and to work differently with the body in space, she usually presents her "*Piezas distinguidas*" ("Distinguished Pieces") (1993-2000) in museums or galleries. She also sells them to collectors like works of art. These

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<sup>9</sup> The show's programme notes.



very short pieces are living tableaux, designed initially in the form of drawings. In them, she raises the question of *representation* (visual or stage), notably that of the body and in particular that of the female body. She often performs naked, saying that this nudity protects her, allows her “to be untouchable”. She uses everyday objects, taking a malicious pleasure in giving them unexpected, playful or violent functions. Some can be even transformed into instruments of sadistic pleasure or torture (*Pieza n°14*). Sometimes she uses objects in theory insignificant in a precise way, as in an installation. Exploiting their dimensions, their material and their colour, she makes them into signs, gives them a story which can sometimes be dramatic (*Another Bloody Mary*).

Absurd rituals, the *Distinguished Pieces* oscillate between comedy and tragedy: the body is often brutalised, reified, a coveted commodity, measured, or mistreated. Standing or sitting on the ground near the dancer, the spectator is ill at ease, a reluctant voyeur of the violence he is witnessing.

**100% polyester, objet dansant n° (à définir)**, the first piece created by Christian Rizzo and *l'association fragile*, was a piece without dancers, where ventilators blowing on clothing created the movement. It was either an installation or a show dealing with absence, a recurring topic for Christian Rizzo. Since then, he has written his pieces for the dancers' bodies, paying the greatest of attention to the spaces their gestures open up and to the design formed by the gap which separates them. When he writes a solo, he cannot imagine a body alone on the stage: there must at least be a prop in order for the body to resound. Stage design is the first thing he develops when he creates a show, because “if there isn't a concrete space to inhabit, nothing can happen.”<sup>10</sup> *b.c., January 1545, fontainebleau* is performed in a box, inside which all the distances have been very precisely calculated. It is used as framework for this tableau in black and white, which the vibration of the light animates<sup>11</sup> and which the finely honed movements of the dancer<sup>12</sup> slowly transform. One thinks of penmanship but also of sculpture: B.C. are the initials of Benvenuto Cellini who, at the court of François 1st, presented one of his sculptures using movement and light. In Christian Rizzo's uncompromising plan, under the watchful eye of the choreographer himself (the man in the rabbit mask), a strange ritual unfolds, where the geometrical and the organic, the living and the inanimate meet.

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Rizzo, *Quelque chose suit son cours*, p.94

<sup>11</sup> As in almost all of Christian Rizzo's shows, the lighting is designed by Caty Olive.

<sup>12</sup> The dancer is Julie Guibert, for whom Christian Rizzo created the piece.



## To go further :

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## **DVD**

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*La Ribot. Treintaycuatropiècésdistinguíes&onestriptease* [DVD]. Madrid : La Casa Encendida de la obra social de caja, 2007, 149 min.

PETER, Luc. *La Ribot distinguida : Images de la culture : Danses* [DVD]. Paris : CNC, 2004, 63 mn. (Images de la culture).

## **Websites**

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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 Downsbrough.

### Excerpts selection

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### Text and bibliography selection

Marie-Thérèse Champesme

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