



Body and conflicts

“Now I will dance you the war”

When the Russian dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky uttered these words on the stage of the Hôtel Suvretta in Saint-Moritz, on the evening of 19 January 1919, the audience gathered for a Red Cross gala were aghast. The audience at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées on 29 May 1913 were just as stupefied by the premiere of Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du Printemps*), with music composed by Igor Stravinsky.

The Rite of Spring (*Le Sacre du Printemps*) really was a harbinger of war, as it foresaw a conflict which, from 1914 to 1918, was to inflame Europe and the world with an intensity of unprecedented magnitude. The audience watching the *Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du Printemps*) reflected this world: split in two, belligerent, teetering on the brink between enthusiasm and fury. The instructions given to the dancers playing a tribe of archaic slaves (in the “old” sense of the term) was simple: move forward with feet turning inwards, tilting the head to one side, bending the torso by folding from the lower abdomen. All of this expressed tension, vulnerability and suffering, until the final solo of the Chosen One, whose energies are released in death.

In an intuitive way, Nijinsky described the tumult which was troubling mankind by questioning the anatomy and the distribution of the body as it had been conceived by the theoreticians of the “belle danse”, or as it's more commonly known, classical ballet. He reinvented movement as if he was taking the pulse of a history as fragmented as his art, and paved the way for the pioneers of modern dance, who wanted to escape from all the different genres of dance by trying to express the world they were living in, a world which, in the twentieth century, was profoundly marked by conflicts with repercussions which were global and therefore universal.

The Thema presented here is not an exhaustive account of all the various dance trends which have been shaped and fed by the many troubles at the heart of our societies. It touches on several key moments in contemporary history: the First and Second World Wars, the conflict in Vietnam and the Gulf War.

1. The body, a new intellectual space in defeated Germany

On 28 June 1919, a peace treaty was signed at the Palace of Versailles. No representatives from the defeated Germany were present. General Clémenceau wanted to impose heavy reparations on Germany in order to limit its economic and political power, which was in part responsible for the conflict which had just ended. The war reparations amounted to 132 billion gold marks, a considerable sum for the time.



Germany also saw its territory reduced by 15% of its surface area and 10% of its population in favour of France, while its colonial empire was reduced to nothing.

The same year, **Mary Wigman**, a young German choreographer, opened a school in Dresden to teach the techniques of free dance. Her art, like that of her compatriots Kurt Jooss and Valeska Gert, clearly reflected the upheavals and profound economic, social and cultural transformations of a Europe just emerging from a conflict which killed ten million people and left more than twenty million injured or gassed. Mary Wigman described her own body as that of “someone possessed, savage and lewd, repulsive, fascinating. [...] Here is the witch, a creature of the earth with unbridled instincts [...] both woman and beast”. This is the contradiction artists have within themselves: in the midst of the chaos that reigned in Germany, especially during the Weimar Republic, paralysed by hyperinflation and political scandals, an autonomous, strange and macabre art form appeared to flourish. Mary Wigman's dance form explored new paths where the only story told is that of the body, in search of newfound harmony with the cosmos. This utopia sat alongside the sensation of suffocation or imprisonment found in most of the works of the period and which was reinforced by the first failed putsch by Hitler in Munich in November 1923. A new danger was becoming apparent too: the rise of Nazism, which would devastate the world on an even larger scale than before.

The dances of Mary Wigman, Valeska Gert and Kurt Jooss quickly became known as “expressionist dance”, expressing in their own way the hope and despair being felt during this period of European history. Yet, unlike Valeska Gert who incurred the wrath of Nazis for everything communist and Jewish as of 1933, Mary Wigman was invited to take part in the 1936 Olympic Games' opening ceremony in Berlin. Like Rudolf Laban, under whom she had studied, her sense of movement would lend itself to the propaganda of the regime.

The Witch Dance (Hexentanz – La Danse de la sorcière) by Wigman dates from 1914 and has echoes of Nijinsky's work in *The Rite of Spring* (Le Sacre du Printemps) insofar as she too appeared to want to revive the cathartic function of dance in archaic societies, as if only this form could help the choreographer to exorcise the forces of evil she felt increasing. Non-Western percussion and masks underline the ritual aspect that she gave to her art.

Valeska Gert, chose a radically different domain to that of Wigman. Like her predecessor, she performed mainly as a solo artist; and like her, she indulged in extravagant pantomimes; the difference being that she did not portray characters that abounded in humanity but characters who were grotesque, marginalized, deprived, prostitutes in a decaying bourgeois world. Her solo *Canaille* (1930), a pure product of 1920s Berlin cabarets, toured throughout Europe. The intellectual avant-garde would break into thunderous applause until the moment when, in 1933, she was banned from entering the Catacombes cabaret where she performed on the grounds that she was



Jewish and that she sympathized with Bolshevik militants. In 1937, photos of her solos were displayed as “Degenerate Art” in the Munich exhibition “The Eternal Jew”. In 1938, she headed off for New York.

Kurt Jooss meanwhile, owed his celebrity to the creation of a piece which entered the repertoire of many companies: *The Green Table* (Der Grüne Tisch – La Table verte) (1932), the first piece of dance choreography to deal openly with a political theme. The Green Table (La Table verte) is an indictment of the absurdity of wars and their recurrence. As in Wigman's works, the fascination with the macabre and the pantomime can also be seen in Jooss' dance. This is evidenced by the ten masked protagonists, trapped in their morbid gestures, as well as the presence of skeletons and the omnipotent Death, who constantly lurks around the dancers until he embraces them completely. However, Kurt Jooss frequently stressed that the creative adventure of expressionism was behind him, and that his work was primarily aimed at merging the ordered form of ballet with that of the new dance, a more intuitive and more personal form. A supporter of synthesis and compromise, he was forced to leave the newly Nazi Germany because he allowed Jewish dancers in his company.

2. Rising from the ashes in post-Hiroshima Japan

When Hitler's Germany surrendered (on 8 May 1945), imperialist Japan was not far behind. On 2 September, the Minister for Foreign Affairs signed his country's act of capitulation on behalf of the Emperor Hirohito, thus consolidating the end of the Second World War.

In 1945, Germany and Japan experienced a defeat which cost the lives of more than sixty million people. Sixty million deaths caused by fighting, civilian bombings, extermination in the concentration camps and the advent of a method of destruction far superior to anything that had come before: the atomic bomb.

To date, Japan is the only country in the world to have been attacked by a nuclear weapon. On 6 August at 7.09am, the American bomber Enola Gay dropped its weapon over the city of Hiroshima, generating a mushroom cloud that rose more than 10,000 metres in the air and whose explosion 600m from the ground killed more than 200,000 people. Three days later, another, slightly less powerful, bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki, killing 75,000 people.

The force of the blast and the thermal radiation it caused produced injuries in the victims never seen before: hypodermis burns, blindness, burst eardrums, sinuses and lungs, internal bleeding, carbonisation of the body ... completely unfamiliar medical symptoms, including many long-term effects that were not discovered until much later.

There was total censorship of photos taken at the sites of Hiroshima and Nagasaki until



the 1960s and the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, led by General MacArthur, prevented any information about the two bombings appearing in the press. The United States also promised to help rebuild the nation in accordance with US criteria, with many Japanese even going as far as reshaping their eyelids with the help of various different tricks.

The memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed to have been buried under piles of radioactive ash and the whole country appeared to want to put the past behind them, not just the one relating to the bomb, because Hirohito, by accepting to terminate his mandate, initiated the manslaughter of himself and his country. By merely existing, the Divine emperor served as framework for the Japanese society as a whole. When he capitulated, he declared that he was a man among men and left the Japanese to their own devices and to those of the occupying forces. Facility led the great majority to submission and to mimetic behaviour whilst a minority made the choice to become radical.

Filmmakers such as Akira Kurosawa wanted to revive the numbed collective imaginary world of spectators who were, from that moment on, nourished with music and images from the West. And, they were not the only ones. Dancers were part of this too, insofar as one of the characteristics of their art is to question the body, its integrity and its relationship to the world; skin was the point of permeability between self and the outside world. Who then better than these artists to engage in an autopsy of the collective body?

Because that really was the question: between the ultra-codified traditions of Kabuki and the forced march towards modernity, was there a place in Japan for a new form of expression? Tatsumi Hijikata provided the answer in 1959 with a daring piece entitled *Kinjiki*, based on a novel by Yukio Mishima (*Forbidden Colours – Les Amours Interdites*). It shows a young man mating with a hen which he then strangles between his thighs. Death wishes and eroticism: *butoh*, the dance of darkness, was born and caused an immediate scandal. The expressiveness of this profoundly amoral dance was very quickly refined. The body of the dancer is like that of a medium. Emptied of all its history, nude or almost nude, it seems to evoke archaic urges on the stage, its own as well as those of the collective memory. Mouth open, limbs often retracted in a foetal position, the dancer is open to all kinds of transformations, as if he slowly approaching life, his decay and then his destruction.

The collapse of a nation and the resulting loss for a whole community, are obviously crucial in the discovery of a new form of exploration of the body which is also full of the cult of the new Japanese identity.

The experience of the German “expressionists” after the First World War was similarly extreme to that of the Japanese *butoh* artists at the end of the 1950s. In the same way



that Kurt Jooss quickly felt that the adventure of expressionist dance as being behind him, the second generation of butoh dancers quickly abandoned the painful repertoire to offer the international audience works that were often dazzling.

Ushio Amagatsu was one of the most iconic of these artists and his group, Sankai Juku, has been representing butoh dance worldwide for more than thirty years. He made his name in Europe in 1980 with a work entitled *Kinkan Shonen*, A Young Boy's Dream of the Origins of Life and Death (Le rêve d'un jeune garçon sur les origines de la vie et de la mort).

Amagatsu's universe is based on the principles of introversion and of metamorphosis, which bring Hijikata's choreography to life, but he very quickly opted for a refined aesthetic, as confirmed by the epigraph of *Shijima*, one of the company's flagship pieces: "the darkness calms down in space". Amagatsu, although he denies it, wants to please and his work has very little to do with his predecessor's *The Revolt of the Body* (La Rébellion de la Chair) for example. However, his works always deal with life and death and this "dance theatre" is a ghostly conflict, a magnificent, sumptuous conflict which leaves its mark in the minds of the audience.

3. The rebellious body of postmodernity

Conflict is an issue for a victorious nation too, this time: the United States of America, the country of settlers, of intrepid conquerors attracted by this new world in which anything seems possible.

Postwar America is a country of profound contradictions. The democracy it promotes implies equality, solidarity for the common good, while its liberal economic organisation promotes selfishness and the pursuit of profit. Xenophobia and racism haunt the society as a whole, particularly with regard to the black minority and communists, as if looking for scapegoats was necessary for the consolidation of national unity.

"To hate is part of being human. To define us and to mobilise us, we need enemies." This quote, taken from *The Clash of Civilizations*, published in 1995 by Samuel Huntington, could well reflect the state of mind that drove the American nation as a whole on the cusp of the 60s. The institution rode a wave of fear of "Bolsheviks" and a nuclear holocaust, helped in this by the USSR itself. The missile crisis in the autumn of 1962, during which Russian missiles were set up in Cuba and aimed at American territory, lent a considerable amount of credibility to the propaganda from Washington. America, standard bearer for liberty, progress and modernity in the West and beyond, was oddly stuck in its organisation of social models. It was carrying a time bomb which wasn't long in being called a "counterculture". This movement was essentially an Anglo-Saxon one, and it was in England that the first large-scale protests against nuclear



weapons were organised from 1958 onwards. Pacifists, anti-racists and feminists met at these gatherings that continued to grow with the rise of the conflict in Vietnam, the spreading of riots in the black ghettos of American cities and the ongoing threat posed by the Cold War between the two nuclear superpowers. Land of plenty or of overabundance and of undisputed supremacy, the United States frightened others and was afraid ... afraid of itself, above all, its intellectuals, its students, and its artists, including its dancers, because how can a practice that puts the body at the heart of its thinking remains absent from a debate in which key terms are protests, riots and war? In all three cases, it's about being for or against, in terms of the physical experience that this involves. It's no coincidence that these movements integrate the issues of sexual liberation, shared nudity and the return to a single body.

Anna Halprin was a pioneer in this field. She deviated from the path taken by her peers Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, with their points of reference which already belonged to the past.

From 1957, she developed the concept of “task movements”, everyday tasks transposed into the world of dance. The instructions given to the dancers were far from easy to carry out. They could involve walking slowly, very slowly, while feeling all the points of contact with the ground and in the space, or carrying heavy objects, dragging bodies behind you, or even weighing yourself down, overloading yourself and developing your movement no matter what the circumstance. In the same way that, for the musicians of the period like John Cage, every sound was music, for Anna Halprin all movement is dance and calls upon “democratic bodies”, simple bodies which break loose from virtuosity and appear to be there, simply there, unconditionally engaged in the movement.

While protests were growing and, on the streets of American cities, young activists and the non-violent movement of Martin Luther King were proclaiming their anger, the members of the Judson Church Theater, a collective of artists based in New York, refine the concept of the “happening” in public spaces. The term “performance” was banned from their vocabulary. In 1965, after the riots in Watts (a deprived black neighbourhood of Los Angeles) which left 34 dead, 1100 injured, and destroyed more than 900 buildings, Anna Halprin moved there with her group to work with the rioters, transforming their bodies, the initial material of the conflict, into choreographic material. Dance was clearly colliding with reality and it didn't let go for a long time.

In Stockholm in 1965 Halprin created one of her most striking pieces, partially because it was initially conceived in a classical format to be performed on a stage: *Parades and Changes* in which a startling passage reveals naked men and women, almost perfectly indistinguishable in terms of gender, who grab rolls of flesh-coloured paper. Gradually, as the rolls of paper are folded, torn and wrapped around the dancers' bodies, they become both sculptural and sonorous materials. A group sculpture takes shape before



being swallowed by an open hatch in the floor. The disappearance of the sculpture establishes the disappearance of the dancer as a subject, in the manner in which dance interpreted it for a long time.

With the series of *Accumulations*, the choreographer Trisha Brown followed her predecessor's lead. *Accumulations* is also about performances in public spaces and a real “deconstruction” of the body. What do we see? Four dancers lying down: on park benches, then on the steps of the McGraw-Hill building... This is about ordinary bodies, without dramaturgy, “democratic” bodies, in the sense that no hierarchical relationship subjects them to any particular interaction. One sole rule guides them: start with gesture no. 1, follow it with gesture no. 2, then gesture no. 3 etc., and return to no. 1 at the end of the series, then start the whole sequence again. The bodies are simply there, freed from all tension. The challenge for Trisha Brown, for Anna Halprin or for the members of the Judson Church Theater, lay in being together, in reinventing the basic components of a “common” body, a quest that clearly resonated with that of a youth whose slogans, on this side of the Atlantic, are anchored in our collective memory:

- Make love, not war
- Il est interdit d'interdire (To ban is forbidden, May 1968 events)
- Sous les pavés la plage (Under the paving stones, the beach, May 1968 events)
- Jouissez sans entraves (Free love, May 1968 events)

Etc.

4. Political body, conflict body

Further east, in the Middle East, which was engaged in latent or actual conflicts since the creation of Israel in 1948, another way of being together has flourished, especially since the First Gulf War in 1990.

The collective is one of the founding elements of the Hebrew state, and it is the ideology of the commune which has dominated since the creation of the first kibbutz in 1912. The word kibbutz itself means “together”, a group conceived as a basic unit that would forge the nation some thirty years later. In these rural communities, decisions are taken in general meetings and everyone dances in a circle at parties and celebrations. Everything is a group affair and harmony prevails.

In 1990 however, Israel was a nation which felt more threatened than ever by Saddam Hussein's missiles, the famous Scuds, around 40 of which were fired on Israeli territory, although there were no deaths. However, the population saw thousands of gas masks being distributed and the old fears of destruction raised their heads; it was a country on edge, isolated in its dogmas, that approached the last decade of the century. There was no question of peace with its neighbours, all of whom were considered as potential or proven enemies.



Ohad Naharin took over the Batsheva Dance Company in 1990. The company was founded in 1964 by Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild and the American choreographer Martha Graham, who recruited numerous collaborators, hence the very “modern dance”-like character which emerged from the creations suggested for its repertoire. In taking over this company, whose performers were all familiar with ballet technique, Ohad Naharin, who had mainly exercised his talents abroad, gave a new direction to the company's work, which took on a unique identity quite simply because, as Naharin himself said, he lived and used his talents in a country permanently disrupted by conflicts. The key words of the language which he developed to describe his dance technique, known as “Gaga Dance”, are: animality, explosive energy, contradictory tensions, relaxation. As he still says, dance is an interactive, group affair, but one that is worlds away from the utopian commune imagined by the first settlers or the commune of an Israel still trapped in its limitations, incapable of being open to new ideas or of considering new solutions with its neighbours. Ohad Naharin's dance and the sense of togetherness that is his *raison d'être* are in complete contradiction with the Israel of today. However, it is not harmony which he produces for us, quite on the contrary, what he presents is the animal that we are and the understanding that we must acquire. The result is enthralling.

Equally enthralling is the work of one of his most brilliant pupils, **Hofesh Shechter**, now based in London, whose dance, bursting with energy, is like a world in itself in which conflicts and reunions emerge, and which lets its performers roam about on a usually bare stage, in search of the unifying movement, the spark which brings harmony. *Uprising*, the creation which gained him fame worldwide, is a kind of choreographic raid. Hofesh Shechter is always at pains to point out that, in Tel Aviv, they know how to party; however, it is not possible to forget that at 18 years of age, you have to complete 30 months of compulsory military service, and that the chances of ending up at the front are quite high. Shechter choreographs the contradictory pleasure that bodies discover while first at play and then at war, because, as he says himself, “it's really exciting to be part of a war”, a latent or declared war like the ones the state of Israel has experienced since it was created.

Excitement and employment inspire the universe of another choreographer based in Europe, **Robyn Orlin**, who was introduced to dance in South Africa during the era of Apartheid.

In the same way that Naharin and Shechter denounced the fundamental group nature of Israeli identity, Robyn Orlin caused a scandal very early on by including black people from the townships in the workshops she directed, something which was even more unusual because she was part of the white Afrikaaner minority.

In her “dance theatre”, she explores the traces of racism, the clear conscience and hypocritical compromises between communities, one of her most outstanding scenes



undoubtedly being that of Swan Lake (Lac des Cygnes) revisited in her cult piece ***Daddy...*** where a black dancer in a tutu dances Odette, the White Swan's solo, equipped with a strainer filled with flour which powders her whole body and her feet, leaving behind her the trace of her steps, like a black and white negative of her appearance on the world's stage.

This image, simultaneously hilarious and heartrending, of a white culture leaving its mark everywhere, is swept away in an instant when the dancer finally shakes herself in a cloud, clearly evoking the idea of the voodoo ritual. Africa appears to awaken, to awaken to its culture finally freed from the weight of oppression, and Robyn Orlin affirms, like many choreographers before her, that the body is the place in which conflicts are resolved, that it can endure them, escape them or sublimate them and that, yes, we can be certain of this, it tells the story of the world, our world, its tensions and its possible achievements.



To go further:

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Credits:

Excerpts selection

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Text and bibliography selection

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Production

Maison de la Danse

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The "Body and conflicts" Course was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.