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Dance by Artists

Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture. Curated by Tania Willard and Skeena Reece. Organized and circulated by Grunt Gallery, Vancouver, June 26–August 1, 2009. Also shown at SAW Gallery, Ottawa, April 21–June 6, 2009.

Break It Down. Curated by Barbara Hobot. RENDER, University of Waterloo, February 24–March 21, 2009.

Dance with Camera. Curated by Jenelle Porter. Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, September 11, 2009–March 21, 2010. Also shown at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, August 7–October 17, 2010.

Dancing on the Ceiling: Art & Zero Gravity. Curated by Kathleen Forde. Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), Troy, New York, March 18–April 10, 2010.

Funkaesthetics. Curated by Luis Jacob and Pan Wendt. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto, February 12–March 23, 2009.

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Trisha Brown: So That the Audience Does Not Know Whether I Have Stopped Dancing. Curated by Peter Eleey. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, April 18–July 20, 2008.

While Bodies Get Mirrored – An Exhibition about Movement, Formalism and Space. Curated by Raphael Gygax and Heike Munder. migros museum für gegenwartskunst, Zurich, March 6–May 30, 2010.

Jim Drobnick

In the short span of two years, no less than seven exhibitions appeared in North America and Europe exploring the interrelationships between dance, kinesthesia, and art. If the near simultaneity of these shows and their accumulated works are any indicator, the past ten years may qualify as the artworld's "dance decade."[1] While the integration of dance and visual art can be traced throughout the history of modernism and the avant-garde, most notably in the spectacular collaborations between choreographers and artists in Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Rolf de Maré's Ballets suédois, this recent surge defies the customary distinction between the two art forms. In the postmedia era, artists choreograph, choreographers construct artworks, and physical motion of all kinds becomes incorporated into videos, performances and installations. Admittedly, the term "dance" itself requires a more expansive, protean definition in order to encompasses the conventional modern and balletic varieties, as well as the multitude of corporeal practices involving movement, rhythm, comportment, and gesture. Even as dance forms the foundation of these exhibitions' curatorial themes, it undergoes numerous interrogations. Connections to music, popular culture, formalism, cultural heritage, technology, folk traditions, and subcultures demonstrate a fertile moment in which dance, as a bodily discipline, gains wide applicability as both a subject of analysis and a strategy for artistic investigation.

The early twentieth-century avant-garde in many ways initiated a direct incorporation of physical movement into their multimedia art and ideologically oriented productions. For the Futurists and the Russian Constructivists, for instance, a reinvention of society accompanied the revolution in aesthetics, and both groups targeted the body as a site for mobilization. The Italians favored the elements of speed, dynamism, and militarism to overthrow cultural standards and usher in the modern era, while the Russians employed machine dances, May Day parades, and mass spectacles to inculcate values of technological optimism and collective identity. The exhibition "While Bodies Get Mirrored – An Exhibition about Movement, Formalism and Space" revisits this influential era when living persons

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Figure 1
Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkácová, *Manifesto of Futurist Woman (Let's Conclude)*, 2008, video still. Photo: courtesy of the migros museum.

figured prominently in artistic practice. Its theme, examining the body's formalist expressiveness and social meaning, recognizes the intertwining of these dual potentialities (Gygax and Munder 2010).

A work by Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkácová's *Manifesto of Futurist Woman (Let's Conclude)* (2008) (Figure 1) embodies the return to the past and its conflicted utopianism. The artists translate a 1912 manifesto by one of the few female Futurists – the poet/dancer Valentine de Saint-Point – into semaphore performed by marching majorettes. Pro-war, anti-feminist, and full of paeans to virility and heroism, the triumphalist rhetoric of the text is belied by the performers' dreary path along a grey monotonous bridge, youthful smiles and lipstick-red uniforms notwithstanding. Gesture here succinctly captures the contradiction at the heart of avant-garde practice: conveying a (supposedly) liberatory message obscured by a specialized semaphore code, empowering women into a coordinated group only to serve them up to the paternalism and delectation of the male gaze.

Chisa and Tkácová's work exemplifies a key aspect in the practice of dance by artists. A kinaesthetic phenomenon, mostly from everyday life or popular culture, is isolated and transposed into the realm of art. In the process, the original gesture or physical movement may be tweaked or transformed so that extra significance is elaborated. Rather than choreographing long sequences or rendering complex narratives, artists tend to utilize improvisation or conceptual schemes to structure the movements. While the movements may seem relatively simple, their social resonances are complex, for the resulting works generally examine moments of enculturation, when ideology, history, or social imperatives become

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inscribed upon individual bodies and their behavior. The most relevant precedent for this method harks back to the Judson Dance Theater of the early 1960s. Even though nearly fifty years have elapsed since the loose group of choreographers and performers first coalesced, their innovations still resound in contemporary practice. Vernacular and found movement, raw physicality, political themes, and task or game-oriented choreographies anchored their philosophy, along with the radical dismissals of virtuosity, theatricality, illusionism, stylization, and expressionism. In short, every movement could be dance, and every person a dancer. It is with a sense of justice, then, that one of the originators of the Judson aesthetic – Trisha Brown – be influential both to the artists creating dance-specific works and the institutions sponsoring dance-themed exhibitions. For it is Brown who early on brought her minimalist, conceptually-infused dances into the realm of the gallery and museum. *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970) (Figure 2), enacted on the side of a SoHo artists' loft building, and reprised for the Whitney Museum of American Art a year later as *Walking on the Wall*, prefigures several of the qualities of recent dance by artists: site-specificity, reliance upon a simple activity (such as walking) that is made compelling by a shift in context, appropriation of readymade activity more likely to be found in other cultural milieux (such as, in this case, circuses or mountain climbing), and focus upon a movement almost as if it were an object. Shows including Brown's videos, drawings and performances, interestingly enough, nearly parenthesize the past decade (see Teicher 2002 and Eleey 2008).[2] As much as her work breached the confines of the theater and expanded dance into streets, parks, plazas, rooftops, and the whole urban environment, it also disrupted categorical

Figure 2
Trisha Brown, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*, 1970, video still, 2:47. Photo: courtesy of the artist and the Walker Art Center.

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Figure 3
Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1983, performance still. Photo: courtesy of the artist, ©Adrian Piper Research Archive, Berlin.

confines, provoking the consideration of movement as a method for phenomenological and epistemological inquiry.

Such a form of inquiry is never just abstract, but inherently engages one's cultural formation. Adrian Piper's seminal work in the dance by artists genre, *Funk Lessons* (1983), compellingly illustrates the connection between kinaesthetic awareness and intercultural understanding, or what the artist terms "sensory knowledge" (Piper 1996: 196). Funk originated, as Luis Jacob and Pam Wendt (curators of the exhibition "Funkaesthetics") elaborate, during the civil rights and black consciousness movement in the 1960s and merged a number of musical traditions in order to "manifest … a utopian dimension in its emphasis on spiritual togetherness, collective pleasure and shameless bodily expression" (Jacob and Wendt 2009). Such empowerment for the African American community, however, often generated fearful derision and dismissal by dominant white culture, notes Piper in her video. *Funk Lessons* (Figure 3) sought to intervene into this situation by offering exactly what its title suggests: training in Funk's characteristics of polyrhythmic syncopation, improvisation, sensuality, and self-transcendence. Through the performance, participants that before may have only been able to exoticize the dance form and its habitus could make a step towards overcoming cultural difference, even xenophobia, on a somatic level. If self-transformation is the essence of Funk, as Jacob and Wendt assert, then *Funk Lessons* epitomizes the process of cultural incorporation and the possibilities of embodied knowledge and communication.

Cultural difference, however, is not only manifested between groups, but can also emerge dialectically from within. Nicholas Galanin's *Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan*, Parts 1 and 2 (2006), included in the exhibition "Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture,"

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Figure 4
Nicholas Galanin, *Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan*, 2006, Parts 1 and 2, video stills. Photos: courtesy of the artist, SAW Gallery, Ottawa, and Grunt Gallery, Vancouver.

(Figure 4) differs from Piper's in that it internalizes such cultural difference. The two-part video projection features an incongruous mash-up of music and movement: in part 1, a breakdancer pops, locks, slides, and waves to Northwest Coast drumming and vocals; in part 2, a traditional Tlingit Raven Dance is accompanied by synthesized electrobeats. The juxtaposition is less of a contrast, however, than an updated translation of indigenous experience and cultural expression into contemporary idioms. Like other works in the exhibition, Galanin hybridizes the ancestral with the urban to demonstrate the adaptability and vitality of First Nations culture. Rather than remaining static and existing only in the past, Aboriginal narratives, aesthetics and identity can inflect mainstream popular culture. For the curators, Tania Willard and Skeena Reece, indigenous hip hop affirms the "fusion and birth of a new generation of Native youth communities and lifestyle" in which commonalities of spoken word, rebellious attitude, and dance phrases "echo the realities of Aboriginal people" (Willard 2009; Reece 2009; Willard and Reece 2010). Such a cross-over is not without controversy, as purists decry the changes to traditional forms. For First Nations artists and youth, by contrast, participating in the contemporary realm of politics and culture necessitates evolving the language and stylistics of expression; indeed, it is an essential tool for relevance and empowerment.

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Not all elements of popular culture lend themselves so easily for progressive political and artistic purposes. “Break It Down” examines the culture of celebrity, bravado, and cool that runs through MTV dance videos and mass entertainment – via what these notions neglect or repress. Despite the inundation in glamour, an underside lingers that often goes unrecognized in the glitzy images of hipness and fashionability: those awkward moments in everyday life of banality, chagrin and bewilderment that, in essence, create the desire for escapist culture. As much as dance in popular culture symbolizes vitality, sexiness, and a plenitude of energy, reality often disappoints. For the curator, Barbara Hobot (2009), vulnerability and pathos have become artists’ vehicles for addressing the unremarkable moments of everyday life. Manuel Saiz adopts a strategy of estrangement in *Parallel Paradises: Japan* (2007) (Figure 5). Two young women, dressed inappropriately in sandals and tunics, perform synchronized motions in a dense forest. Referencing the popular Japanese dance fad Para Para, the women go through the motions without the usual techno or eurobeat music, far afield from the nightclubs and crowds that perform these movements in unison. Transplanted to the unlikely scene of the forest, the memorized and stylized gestures are shorn of their communal rationale. Odd and seemingly futile, the exercise in parallel group cadence runs counter to the “paradise” of the title, demonstrating how dependent movement is on the appropriate social context.

In the works discussed so far, video serves as the pre-eminent means of gallery exhibition for dance by artists. The camera not only preserves the transient motions of dancers, as one would expect of performance documentation, it also recreates those motions so they can be repeated, virtually endlessly, almost as if they were an artifact or an object. As the catalogue for “Dance with Camera” so well describes, film’s connection to dance dates back to the earliest stages of its invention when Annabelle Moore, a follower of Loie

Figure 5
Manuel Saiz, *Parallel Paradises: Japan*, 2007, digital video, 4:19 minutes. Photo: courtesy of Vtape and Barbara Hobot.

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Fuller, danced on the screen in the first commercial presentation of cinema in the United States (Porter 2009: 10). Subsequent developments in recording technology in analog and digital media have only increased the ability and versatility of artists seeking to choreograph for the camera. In the past thirty years, video has risen from marginality to ubiquity in the artworld, so much so that video projection is the de rigueur choice for artists and curators alike seeking easily transportable and presentable artworks.

The exhibition "Dance with Camera" certainly takes advantage of the expediency of film and video, as most of the shows discussed here do, but it also scrutinizes how these media dialogue with dance to address a nexus of issues related to movement, aesthetics, representation, and the cultural meanings of the body. Exemplary in this regard is Luis Jacob's *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth* (2007) (Figure 6). The video features a nearly nude male dancer performing in a wooded snowscape. Paying tribute to the marginalized women artists of the title, Jacob revisits their mid-century contributions and the links between them, despite their differences in nationality and choice of medium. Their main inspiration for the artist lay in the melding of formalism and liberation: the spontaneous creativity of Sullivan presaged Quebec's "Quiet Revolution," and Hepworth's abstract sculptures symbolized an organic model of social relations (Antliff 2007). Dance here becomes the means by which to meditate upon notions of instinct, feeling, vitality, and freedom – as an artistic act, an embodied experience, and an ideal of communality.

Figure 6
Luis Jacob, *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth*, 2007, Two T-shirts in custom built case, and video, sound, 8:35 minutes. Photo: courtesy of the artist, Birch Libralato, Toronto, and ICA, Philadelphia.

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The issue of freedom also concerns the final exhibition in this review – "Dancing on the Ceiling: Art & Zero Gravity" – with a special emphasis on the literal and symbolic aspects of weightlessness (see Forde 2010). The title may refer to Fred Astaire's famous sequence in *Royal Wedding* (1951) when a rotating stage provides the basis for his "dance around the room," but the exhibition takes a refreshingly broad view by examining levitation in art, dance, and science. Deception is one angle of approach, demonstrated by Xu Zhen's ingenious metal armatures that freeze individuals in impossible states of falling, defying both gravity and notions of instantaneity. Technology offers another means to transcend the forces of gravity. The group Arts Catalyst, for example, utilized parabolic airplane flights normally used to train astronauts in order to provide zero-gravity conditions so performers could float, spin, and hover. The third means involves pure virtuosity, where liberation from gravity is achieved through training and skill. Denis Darzacq's photographic series *La Chute* ("The Fall," 2006) (Figure 7), captures French hip-hop dancers hovering in mid-air during exhilarating leaps and body revolutions. Suspended at unnatural angles to the ground, one admires the dancers' dexterity and verve as much as concerns are raised about their precarious free-fall position. For a brief moment, they are free from the weight of living, a fact that becomes more poignant when it is known that the photographs were taken soon after the 2005 youth riots, and the subsequent backlash against hip-hop artists and North African immigrants. The photographs show a paradoxical stasis that alludes to the dancer's conflicted relationship to mainstream French society: they may momentarily transcend the force of gravity (and the pressures of national conformity), yet a fall downwards is inevitable,

Figure 7
Denis Darzacq, *La Chute 16*, 2006, C-print. Photo: courtesy of the artist, De Soto Gallery, Los Angeles, and EMPAC.

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and with it a reckoning of the hard pavement of xenophobia and disenfranchisement.

If it is true that dance by artists has reached a critical mass, why is that the case, and why now? The momentum has certainly been building for a long time, with notable precedents in the early twentieth century, the 1960s and the 1980s.[3] In the postmodern era, performance and video share an intertwined significance for investigations into the body and kinaesthetics. Dance, however, has often been consigned to a supporting role rather than the main attraction in this cross-over performative practice. The ascendency of the technology of video as an artistic medium permits a fuller, more compelling manner of presentation of dance-oriented artworks, even as other technologies serve to decorporealize everyday experience and seemingly render the body superfluous. As sophisticated as the current generation of media consumers are at decoding visual representations and their meanings, the riddles of embodiment resist easy resolution. The body remains an estranged, enigmatic entity, especially in its kinaesthetic dimension when personal ability, cultural sensibility, and socializing ideology intersect and pull in different directions. Dance, for artists, sums up the contradictory nature of the body and its vexed position between the individual and the collective, the aesthetic and the political, the corporeal and the symbolic. Not that dancers or choreographers do not also recognize or foreground these aspects – the difference is that artists are, pardon the pun, one step removed from dance's disciplinary preoccupations with technique, movement philosophy, and the weighty history of the medium itself. For artists dealing with the corporeal aspects of identity, culture, normativity, or liberation, it is not enough to just represent visually; to make the stakes fully apparent, there needs to be embodiment.

Notes

1. As this text was going to press, another dance exhibition opened. See "Move: Choreographing You" at the Hayward Gallery, London, curated by Stephanie Rosenthal. Interestingly, it bucks the trend of the reliance upon video that characterizes the shows discussed in this review. By foregrounding the visitor's own participation, it manifests the Judson's democratizing maxim that everyone is a dancer.
2. Trisha Brown's importance is confirmed by two more recent museum presentations of her early work – at the Whitney Museum of American Art in "Off the Wall" (2010), and at the Museum of Modern Art in its "Performance Exhibition" (2011) series.
3. With the surplus of reality dance shows on television since 2005, when *Dancing With the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*? first aired and paved the way for a number of others, one could argue that dance has permeated popular consciousness. This would be facile, however, since many of the artists working

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with dance began prior to the appearance of these shows and generally produce work that is critical of these shows' emphasis on glamor and entertainment.

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