

# Subversion and the Dancing Body: Autonomy on Display

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The ideas behind this essay sparked my mind some time ago, after seeing a performance by Conrad Drzewiecki, the doyen of Polish dance, at the International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival in Bytom in 1998. It was his work *Waiting for* that struck me. Despite not being featured in the official programme and somewhat bashfully presented by the organizers themselves, *Waiting for* turned out to be one of the highlights of the festival – not due to the relief of chancing upon something ‘contemporary’. It had nothing to do with the laborious search by ‘western’ producers for ‘different’ performances which could be successfully presented in the stage market, fitting the ‘acquired taste’ of dance audiences. Nor was it a result of paternalistic approval, in the sense of ‘well done, but we have seen this already’, which whilst of course is no guarantee to sell, is at least a polite and respectful way of admitting someone’s quality.

Drzewiecki’s performance – a short solo by a dancer wearing a rich gold costume, whose movement and gestures were bent on decorating his body – clearly evoked the Central European dance of the 1930s. Nonetheless, Drzewiecki’s ‘past’ was not that of historical tradition, now only vaguely present as a recognition of the former dance articulation that remains in western scholarly knowledge and its categorizing of dance history; nor was it a past reflecting the impossibility of development – the still innocent state of the dancing body, which, because of its specific historical situation, could not become aware of all the contradictions and aesthetic deconstructions of

its ‘bodiescapes’. It was somewhere in-between: a utilization of the past to stay in the present. It revealed our eternal confrontation with different ways of being present, a basic need for dystopian time. For me, the manner in which the performance disclosed our disillusioned idea of the exclusiveness of the present – of the exclusive and hegemonic ways of forming our present presence, which are often inscribed in the articulated modes of the dancing body – was most surprising. All in all, what was this ‘waiting for’? It was a display of pure *autonomy*: of a deep belief in the autonomy of the body, of an autonomy which was not out of time, an articulation of the past, but about time. Its content had been discreetly embroidered already in its title: fixation and openness, distance and closeness, decoration and subversion, all at the same time. It opened the possibility of disclosing a variety of simultaneous histories.

## AUTONOMY: THE INAUGURATION OF THE PRESENT BODY

Drzewiecki’s case points to the kernel of bodily autonomy, one of the basic aesthetic utopias of early modern dance. It helps us to detect the complexity of this concept which not only obsessed dance creators, but became one of the main metaphors of the body in philosophical thought and artistic innovation throughout the 20th century. Autonomy as the main liberatory concept of the body in the early 20th century is deeply connected to the political concept of autonomy in general, where all the

implications of this problematic, but still very useful concept can be observed. Paradoxically, today the notion of autonomy is again becoming a most important strategic issue – but now with an awareness of its entire ‘negative’ history.

It is well known that the ‘fleshiness’ that characterized the beginnings of modern philosophy was often connected with the dancing body. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, associated the dancing body with a state prior to the emergence of intellect. Dance was thus given the privilege of describing thought, and thought the privilege of being like dance. A thought that is like dance does not know the spirit of weight, Nietzsche suggested, and it is crucial to relax the benumbed body by means of dance (Nietzsche 1988: 234). Consequently, dance may be defined as a ‘self-rotating wheel’, or, as Alain Badiou comments on Nietzsche’s thoughts, ‘dance is like a circumference in space, but a circumference which represents its own principle, a circumference not drawn from the outside, a circumference that is drawing itself’ (Badiou 1993: 22, my translation). The body of dance is the original body – cleared of intellect, separated from discourse, a metaphor for existing in a Dionysian world. Its rotations and movement mirror its original existence. It is autonomous, yet never fixed, non-repetitive, never beheld in its entirety. A similar longing for the autonomous, yet evasive also pervades the poetic writings on dance by Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé. The latter stated that the body of dance could never be a body of someone, but no more than an empty emblem. A dancing body would not depict some other body or person, and was not conditioned by anything outside it: ‘The dancer is not a woman who dances for, the juxtaposed reasons that she is not a woman but a metaphor’ (Mallarmé 1992: 33). Valéry’s perspective in his *Philosophie de la danse* is similar. He, too, was fascinated by the female dancer, comparing the state of dancing to that of sleep: a state where the dancing body is preoccupied with itself, where everything moves, but there is no reason or intention to supplement anything; there is no exterior reference,

nothing exists outside the system or movement. Valéry went on to describe dancing as ‘*artificially created lunacy* . . . , a specific manner of inner life that gives this psychological term a new meaning within which physiology is dominant’ (Valéry 1995: 44). These statements on different aspects of the autonomy of the dancing body clearly correspond to Isadora Duncan’s famous opening of the 20th century: ‘1900. For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus . . . I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement’ (Duncan 1927: 75). As an underlying philosophical utopia, all of these statements go along with the *Körperkulturbewegung* and similar dance innovations in the early 20th century, and finally with the aesthetic interventions in movement which John Martin, one of the first American dance critics, described as *metakinesis* in 1933. Their common denominator is a strong awareness of bodily autonomy. Autonomy thus became the key strategy employed by the body to enter the stage of modernity and disclose its own contemporary flow: it is autonomous yet evasive, self-disclosing yet artificial, an eternally wanted but never touched self-rotating wheel. Not only does this bodily departure to modernity reveal itself as a specific aesthetic strategy, but it is a philosophical, aesthetic, political and ideological utopia; a new possibility of articulating subjective embodiment. On one side a reaction to, on the other an upgrade of modern rationalization: an employment of artificial tactics and, at the same time, a return to nature. Summing up, bodily autonomy discloses a modern obsession with presence and being in the present at the same time.

Throughout the recent history of dance, different articulations of bodily autonomy came to the surface. In its return to movement and an autonomous expressive flow, in its modernist transformations of hierarchical relations in the new ideal of the democratic body and minimalist dispersion of structures, in its postmodernist flirting with narrative, the dancing body still corresponded, more or less, to the initial image of the

'self-rotating wheel'. It might be objected that this is a too narrow perspective, but I do not understand this image in a formal and essentialist way. What is important, is the complex utopian moment which underlies the representation of modern dancing bodies and causes the focus on autonomy to return in various disguises. It is interesting, for example, to observe how in American postmodern dance's reaction to early modern bodily autonomy the aspect of autonomy returned. A well-known debate arose when Sally Banes (later criticized by Randy Martin) stated that modernism was not present in American modern dance before 1960 because, till then, one could not talk about absolute dance with no reference to the outside world. Thus, the real autonomy of the body lies in the modernist deconstruction and minimalist dispersion of hierarchical body relations – and not in its connection to the outside, as advocated by emotionalism and essentialism in the early days of modern dance, e.g. by Martha Graham. Interestingly, with the staging of the everyday, democratic body by Trisha Brown, The Judson Church and others, autonomy became a specific privilege. It was not viewed as a utopian tension anymore (a feature strongly present earlier, when it was still possible to observe the variety of links with the outside), but as a political, even educational strategy of the dancing body. The 'self-rotating wheel' enters the field of technique and, thus, that of universality.

The problem of autonomy returned as an underlying utopian moment in the contemporary dance of the 1980s and 1990s, but with a different perspective. In its reaction to the universality and disclosure of different ways of (artistic) subjectivity, bodily autonomy revealed itself as the way of performing the particular; it embodied various forms of subjectivity, individuality, personality, stories, gender, illness, constructions of contemporary identities, etc. Even then, the image of the 'self-rotating wheel' remains, but as if rotating in a different way: with its course shifted not only from aesthetic to political strategies, but also from a universal course to a complex and parallel geography of routes.

## PARADOXES OF THE 'SELF-ROTATING WHEEL'

Numerous authors pointed to the potential of subversion by discussing the autonomous body. Not only was bodily subversion associated with disclosing the authentic, original, natural substance of the body, but also with techniques and strategies of the artificial, especially in the first half of the 20th century. It featured in the de-hierarchization of the body, a result of minimalist dispersion (Michel Bernard), as well as in abstraction of movement. And it is also very strongly connected with the ideal of the democratic body and its everyday movement. All these approaches might be linked to the complex utopia of autonomy, to the images of the 'self-rotating wheel' and 'artificially created lunacy'. This link is somewhat contradictory: it opens the possibility of subversion and, at the same time, is located at the very border, attracted to self-rotating exclusiveness and isolation. Thus, there is something tricky in this display of bodily autonomy.

On one side, bodily autonomy serves as a philosophical metaphor that reveals the unstable relation between the object and the subject. It seems that, within this relation, the body regains its forgotten power. But the dancing body does not serve as a metaphor to philosophers and poets just because such a contact with its essence would shine through it, but because its autonomous streak reveals a different (perhaps imaginary and artificial) *history*, covered in hierarchical systems of the rational, of language, and other accepted webs of representation; a history of evasiveness and instability, where representation is inefficient due to a freedom lurking in stitches and cracks; a place where the body is allowed to glitter without form, freely generating a playful tension between its presence and disappearance. It is not a history of representation any longer, of taking the place of the Other – it is an artificial, playful process of performing, where different potentialities of embodiments are disclosed.

On the other side, the liberating and democratic impulse arising from the concept of an autonomous

body is not so obvious as it may seem. An autonomous body is extremely fragile; the disclosure of its colourful history forever threatened by power, exclusiveness, institutionalization, organization, by privileges of style, form and the normative. Autonomy could quickly get trapped in its own enthusiasm over self-sufficiency, which basically regards the autonomous body as transparent, predictable and exclusive. Such 'autonomizing' then resulted in the achievement of a perfectly manipulated, predictable and controlled body. This might be exemplified through the complex relationship between the libertarian and nationalist concepts of the body in the 1930s: the body's autonomy was transformed into a style of authenticity, privileging presence in the name of a single history. Autonomy became a privilege of style in American dance. With its expansion in Europe, Russia and other parts of the world, dance became an important export product of a contemporary 'free' American culture. Carefully planned by the NEA and the American government, (post)modern dance was presented abroad as a democratic and cultural body of capitalism (Pervots 1998: 88).

The problematic fragility of autonomy is furthermore addressed in political philosophy, which is quite aware of the paradox inherent in this concept. The oscillation between aesthetics and politics is always at work, due to an important common denominator: the issue of representation. Autonomy is deeply intertwined with processes of representation; one might even say that autonomy is *the* way of performing the modern subject. Interestingly, autonomy is constructed as a constant paradox, traceable as far back as Hegel's mediating concept of self-actualization. The subject always possesses a process or capacity to let himself go, to deliver himself to that what is not himself, to remain by himself only in relation to the Other. Accordingly, autonomy is not a static, essentialist concept. It has nothing to do with originality, but is more of an artificial process where links of representation and necessity to the modern subject can be disclosed. The biggest problem of the representational process is that, paradoxically, autonomy

is also a self-rotating process: the Other is represented only when the self is able to be autonomously performed. Otherness is thus always perceived in its negativity, so that the self is able to step into the moment. Even Adorno, the great philosopher specializing in the dismantling of modern rational concepts, could not answer this paradox. He concluded that talking about autonomy and the Other was ultimately a mere aesthetic experience, not a social, moral or political one: the self-rotating process of modern representation procedures. But in this trajectory, a hierarchical shift has been inscribed: the outside is a necessary link for the self to be represented, but when the representation does take place, Otherness will inevitably be performed as negativity (cf. Žižek 1993).

It is especially interesting to observe the issue of autonomy from a local perspective. Coming from Slovenia, where modern dance did not emerge before the middle of the 1980s, and knowing the situation in other former eastern European countries, it is particularly useful for me to observe and compare two different histories of bodily articulation. On the one side, bodily articulation has been acknowledged by institutions and academic history for quite a few decades, developing institutional, educational and production networks. On the other side, it has been forced to the margin for decades, condemned to a continuous struggle to survive, without a basic structure that would nurture its development, devoid of dialogue with institutions and criticism, rising only in the past decade to fight at least for a basic infrastructure. At first sight, the opening of the East to the West and vice versa might be understood as a somehow natural need for professionalism and institutionalization, for exchanging models and knowledge, as an urgent need for overcoming differences. It is interesting, however, to observe that this need discloses the privilege of western contemporary dance, its *a priori* participation in the autonomy of the body. The representation of the body of the West/East reunion reveals a variety of embodiments, but in this variety a hierarchical shift

is already inscribed. On one side there is the western dancing body, completely equipped for the present; and on the other side, a body almost without contemporariness, that of the other unarticulated body with a dark, closed and incomprehensible attraction to the past. If articulated, the latter cannot communicate with the western gaze without having a strong political, or local meaning. The development of western modern and contemporary dance has turned the autonomy of the body into a specific and exclusive privilege.

The problem is rooted in the ruthless dictation of the present: we feel uncomfortable whenever we are faced with something different, a 'subversion of the Other'. The western gaze is still hesitant when bodily autonomy and potentiality should be bestowed upon the Other. It would rather perceive the Other as unarticulated, 'still not there', confused, clumsy, too bodily, romantic, narrative, as an attempted or a delayed physicality, always reduced to a special context: political, traditional, ethnical, local. Western dance in the 20th century institutionalized an exclusive right to universal contemporaneity, urbanity, autonomy. 'Other' forms of contemporary dance which are not part of this institutionalization of autonomy are not recognized as a legitimate quest for modes in-between, for the potentiality and presence of the body.

According to André Lepecki, they are viewed as something 'not being of the moment', 'doubly late' – culturally, aesthetically, technologically (Lepecki 2000: 11). As Lepecki well observed, the West behaved as if synchronicity were the exclusive matter of western dramaturgy, and chronology the exclusive matter of geography (13). Western contemporary dance has twisted the potentiality and autonomy of the body, as well as the discovery of the body in-between – making it a specific and exclusive privilege. We could even say that, somehow perversely, the West perceived in the Other its own autonomous beginnings and articulation of the present body. Of course, this attitude might be viewed as resulting in the inability of the East to introduce an articulation other than those established and prescribed for decades: any attempt

towards a different history, autonomy, representation was ostracized in advance. Where an original democratic impulse was nipped in the bud, where there was no possibility of discovering another, hidden history, with everybody having to bear the weight of its official version, modern dance could not develop. But at this point it should not be forgotten that there could be many ways of discovering different, hidden histories. They are coexisting mostly as simultaneous marginalities, with their own performing of autonomy. All of them are trying to undermine predominant networks of representation with their autonomous strategies and positioning. So the yardstick for judging these ways should not be a hierarchical time line, or geographical ideals by the expansion of universality. Instead, we should allow different possibilities of presence and being in the present, as this is the only way that the history of forgotten, ignored and forbidden bodies will shine through.

### 'IF I CANNOT DANCE, I WILL NOT BE A PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION'

How can we then connect our initial image of the dancing body, the 'self-rotating wheel', with that 'waiting for a different history'? What potential is there for subversion when the body enters the concept of autonomy and its entire range of evasiveness, tricks, mimicry, movements, and fluids? A well-known interview with Jacques Derrida comes to mind, one dealing with dance and various aspects of feminism. It begins with a sentence by Emma Goldman, a 19th-century feminist castaway, with which she refused the invitation to join her fellow suffragettes: 'If I cannot dance, I will not take part in your revolution' (Derrida 1982: 66). This sentence, of course, echoes the democratic impulse entailed in the autonomous body of dance. Unlike the established and recognizable history of the body (as shown by the figurative-rhetorical context of ballet), the autonomous dancing body introduces a 'history of paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities, a history of absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard-of

and incalculable sexual differences . . .’ (68). But even Derrida himself hastens to add that he is only speculating on what Emma Goldmann really wants to say. The initial ‘power’ of the autonomous dancing body reveals itself as fragile, oscillating between the beliefs and the actual tactics of acting and performing. To dance otherwise, said Derrida, is presented just in a form of most unforeseeable and most innocent of chances, ‘the most innocent of dances would thwart the *assignation à résidence*, escape those residencies under surveillance; the dance changes place and above all changes places. In its wake they can no longer be recognized’ (68). It is thus important to understand that – as a result of the ‘artificially created lunacy’ (Valéry), the madness of dance (Derrida) – this is a strategy to avoid organized, patient, laborious struggles and every exclusiveness (even certain subversive feminist struggles in Goldmann’s case), and enter another impossible and necessary compromise: ‘an incessant, daily negotiation – individual or not – sometimes microscopic, sometimes punctuated by a poker-like gamble, always deprived of insurance, whether it be in private life or within institutions’ (68).

We could add that this is not only a question of *atopia*, a question of non-place, as Derrida suggests, but also a *dystopian* proposition of time, of not being ‘in the moment’, but of connecting and disclosing different ways of presence and being in the present. At a certain point, the dilemma of the autonomous body comes close to the internal paradox governing the autonomy of the subject. If its performing has become a strategy of exclusiveness – a disintegration of authority where a different authority has been reproduced – the body loses its sensibility of time, and its autonomy becomes that of the moment. This autonomous being in the moment, then, is a privilege of decoration and style – with differences perceived through respect and polite affection. To perform in relation to the present, however, is not about being in a certain moment, but about using that moment to reveal a different history, about bringing to light the history of forgotten, overlooked and forbidden

bodies. Autonomy is not about the *exclusiveness* of the moment, but about *different possibilities of presence and being in the present*. It is not about the rotation to self-sufficiency, but has been put onto the stage of modern bodies primarily as an image of disappearance, absence, negativity, hysteria, simulation, decadence, womanliness. Its course is governed by the disoriented, evasive, fragile, connected but not organized, opened and deeply dubious self.

The ‘self-rotating wheel’ has another dimension of subversion, which was beautifully described by Valéry as ‘artificially created lunacy’: it is a form of self-reflection, a tactic of performed ‘lunatic’ embodiment, opening the possibility of in-between. In this sense, it could also be defined as a specific strategy. Thus, the true question about the body’s potential for subversion is: how can we escape the exclusiveness of our moment, how can we risk and disclose the networks through which that moment is given to us? Are we able to accept the radical disconnecting tactic of the Other, and still allow the possibility of catching the *entre-voir*, the glimpse in-between?

## CONNECTING HISTORIES

Doubtless, a difficult question. Of course it is hard to talk about radical disconnection tactics of the Other at a time where everything has become a spectacular commodity. This commodity container swallows and ‘refines’ (in the manner of a supreme laundry softener, of course) literally everything. As a consequence, everything viewed as ‘other’ or ‘different’ (the ethnic, the new, the radical, the political even) comes across as a commodity. Let me remind you of the popular ‘framing festivals’, where there is a strong geographical frame, which is not really about different territory, but about difference in time. Contemporary dance from the East entered the western production market as such a spectacular commodity, and was expected to produce Otherness: it has to stay exotic and different, with no right to the universality and exclusivity of western contemporariness. Paradoxically, this ‘other’ could not gain its visibility



or even political recognizability if not displayed as spectacular commodity. So how might contemporary performance and dance – unable to avoid the fact that itself, too, is a spectacular commodity – develop parallel, digressive ways of performing? How can it develop resistance models? How can it be disclosed as a radical disconnection tactic?

The disturbances found in some of the dance performances of the 1990s, in works by Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel or Vera Mantero, opened this glimpse into procedures. They unfold processes of performing where there is a possibility to stage all these contradictory and complex links of contemporary performance. Their performances no longer form a caesura between a performing situation and other social and everyday situations. At the same time, they are far from the utopian belief in the demolition of the border between the stage and the spectator, which used to characterize many modernist performing practices. With contemporary society and media taking the privilege of ‘performing’ away from performing arts, performing arts themselves no longer function in a clear oppositional way: The utopian moment of autonomy seems today to be in ruins, together with its emancipatory effects and self-rotating exclusiveness. I propose to consider these danced disturbances as a very display of autonomy, but this time with a strong awareness of our illusionary idea about the privilege of presence, as an opening of different multiple and parallel histories (which is particularly true for the work of Vera Mantero, cf. André Lepecki’s contribution to this issue), as a fragile network of relations which is very deeply conscious about time. It seems that they wanted to step out of the privilege of their own moment and connect us to different histories and different ways of being present. All this overturning and occupation, along with the alternative, tactical, sometimes nearly guerrilla usage of different performing strategies, could be reflected in this way: as an awareness of this exclusiveness of presence, which features extensively in contemporary spectacular and economic procedures, through an aesthetic cultivation of ‘contemporary’ taste,

through political interventions and a multiculturalist logic of respect, and so forth. These strategies expose contemporary subjectivity as a process of performing, always confined within a complex network of potentiality and relations. They ‘open the question of performing operation as a continuous process of negotiations and dealing with social reactions . . . and this is what makes them an important way of addressing the audience’ (Le Roy 2002: 13).

## STRATEGIES OF MASQUERADE

In conclusion, I embark upon a slightly daring parallel to connect different histories presented in this essay. For Drzewiecki, Emma Goldmann and the contemporary dance choreographers, autonomy is about presence and being present at the same time. This moment of presence has nothing to do with authenticity, originality, with geography or territory, but with an always artificial construction of autonomy – which itself is nothing more than a *masquerade*, an artificial tactic of presence and being present at the same time, a strategy that potentially discloses a different moment. I draw here on a notion developed by Joan Riviere back in 1929. Riviere argues in her psychoanalytical analysis that homosexual women use the mask of womanliness to cover up the imaginary intervention of manliness in order to avoid anxiety as well as the revenge they fear from men. She goes on to establish a parallel between masquerade and womanliness in general: ‘The reader may now ask how I define womanliness, or where I draw the line between true womanliness and masquerade. In my opinion, however, this kind of difference does not exist at all; radical or superficial, they are both the same’ (Riviere 1958: 20). Judith Butler excellently points out the equivalence which is drawn between performing (in the form of masquerade) and womanliness in Riviere’s statement (cf. Butler 1999). The most interesting point about masquerade, Butler suggests, is the problem of demonstrating, of performativity. She asks whether masquerade conceals femininity that might otherwise be understood as

genuine and authentic, or whether it is rather the means by which femininity is produced. There are many parallels between femininity, masquerade, performing arts, and strategies of subjectivity/performing. Thus, transferred to our discussion, it becomes a question whether performing strategies cover up the privilege of the performing situation (otherwise understood as authentic/genuine), or whether they are but a means to generate this privilege, along with the controversy over its autonomy. Precisely in generating and overemphasizing femininity in terms of closeness, presence and the imaginary, masquerade will come across as subversive. Due to the production of this closeness, femininity itself will paradoxically be kept at a distance. The representation is multiplied constantly, and thus the very structure of the gaze is shattered. Femininity as masquerade can then be read as a specific strategy which establishes identity as complex potentiality and relationality. The identity of the original, its authenticity and its shattered norm are continuously put into question – in a way that the traces of its authenticity paradoxically multiply. The identity of the first is constantly undermined by the negativity of the other. This ‘game of inappropriateness’, in Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s term, is a crucial relation here: autonomy is disclosed as an open positioning which is always shifted by its own negativity. This becomes clear in Emma Goldmann’s statement in her daily activist dancing negotiation with procedures of difference and exclusivity. This could be also said for Drzewiecki who is disclosing masquerade as the necessity for survival – this ever flowing masquerade of time, which could be presented in many guises. And it could be said for these contemporary resistances of dancing bodies which attempt to step out of the moment and disclose their fluid, masked and relational histories and ways of presence. Or, to put it differently: asking questions, such as ‘*what is a woman/man before he/she changes her clothes?*’ we will inevitably end up in a deadlock. In every performing, every costume, we presuppose an Otherness that has been veiled, an authenticity and originality which are not at our disposal. This

makes us even more obsessive in the fixation of our fantasmic differences. It might be more important to think about *how our masquerade masks*. It is thus that we can gain insight into the process, the connections, the manner of relationality – and this, I argue, is the real chance to touch the ‘in-betweens’. Autonomy is here understood as that special positioning: it is a strategy for coming out of the exclusivity of your own moment and returning the gaze to the radical disconnection tactics of the Other.

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