

**PERFORMANCE**

**ARTIST'S CHOICE**

**JÉRÔME BEL**

**MoMA DANCE COMPANY**

**MOMA**



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“The nicest is when I’m offered a context that I wouldn’t have sought out myself.”<sup>1</sup>

—Jérôme Bel

The choreographer Jérôme Bel (French, born 1964) probably never imagined that he would participate in an Artist’s Choice project at The Museum of Modern Art, but, then again, Bel often follows the path of most resistance. Inaugurated in 1989, Artist’s Choice is an exhibition series in which contemporary artists are invited to organize installations drawn from MoMA’s collection. When he was asked to be the first choreographer to participate, Bel started to investigate the collection. The more he interacted with MoMA staff in the course of his research, the more aware he became of the community of MoMA employees and their work in maintaining and presenting the collection. He decided to shift his focus to the staff, and he became interested in how they relate to specific artworks, to the institution, and to dance. Eventually, Bel decided to turn his Artist’s Choice exhibition into a performance: *MoMA Dance Company*.

*MoMA Dance Company* brings together staff members from different departments to perform twice a day in The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. Bel invited all interested Museum employees to create a brief solo dance. Although *MoMA Dance Company* is based on conventions such as the soloist and the corps, it subverts traditional notions of what a dance company should be by rejecting uniformity—in terms of costumes, movements, and body types—and virtuosity. Few of *MoMA Dance Company*’s participants have had dance careers; most are amateur dance lovers. Nonetheless, they proposed their own music, costumes, and choreography rather than realizing the vision of the choreographer, as in a typical dance performance. The solos reflect each dancer’s background, experience, and preferences: one used to be a ballet dancer, one practices martial arts, another has decided to tap dance as a reminiscence of his childhood. Each participant shared his or her solo with the rest of the group; this way of experiencing dance collectively

eclipsed the standard model of a single choreographer providing instruction. The piece was inspired by Bel’s recent performance *company company* (2015), which is part of the larger work *Gala* and involves mostly amateur performers of different ages, physiques, and backgrounds, and in which the spectator is confronted with a variety of simply executed “domestic” dances.

Bel emerged in the early 1990s as one of a generation of European choreographers (which also includes Boris Charmatz, Xavier Le Roy, and, in a visual art context, Tino Sehgal) who have been labeled “conceptual.” Even if many of them have not accepted this label, their intentions do overlap with the concerns of the Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s in emphasizing the importance of the artist’s idea over the work’s form, engaging with language and everyday movement, and critiquing authorship, virtuosity, and institutions. Bel’s use of language is particularly relevant in challenging conventional choreography and foregrounding the role of the performer within dance systems and institutions. These themes are evident in *MoMA Dance Company* and in other pieces by Bel that are being shown in New York in conjunction with the French Institute Alliance Française’s Crossing the Line Festival, including *Véronique Doisneau* (2004), presented through an eponymous film, *The show must go on* (2001), and *Jérôme Bel* (1995).



*company company*. 2015. Performed at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, August 15, 2015. Photo: Josefina Tommasi. © Josefina Tommasi

Invited to create a piece for the Paris Opera Ballet in 2004, Bel decided to stage a kind of “theatrical documentary” about and performed by Véronique Doisneau, a dancer in the middle ranks of the company’s corps de ballet, close to the retirement age. Doisneau stands alone on the imposing stage and chronicles her personal and professional story, tracing her career inside the institution. “Good evening. My name

is Véronique Doisneau. I am married and I have two children,” she states in her opening lines. The autobiographical solo not only reveals the story of an individual dancer, but, as the narration continues, opens up the institution from the inside, revealing its backstage, its strict rules, and its constraints. Through this deconstruction, *Véronique Doisneau* parallels institutional critique in contemporary visual art.



Left: *Jérôme Bel*. 1995. Performed at Kaaitheater, Brussels, June 25, 2002. Photo: Herman Sorgeloos. © Herman Sorgeloos; Right: Still from *Véronique Doisneau*. 2004. Video (color, sound), 37 min. © Icare

In Bel’s signature piece *Jérôme Bel*, which has its United States premiere at The Kitchen this month, four naked performers appear on an empty stage, lit by a single bare bulb. One of them breathily sings a melody from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. In this work, Bel reduces a dance performance to its constitutive elements—bodies, light, and music—while rejecting conventional choreography and virtuosity and abolishing any theatrical illusion. The title, *Jérôme Bel*, emphasizes the subjective view of the author/choreographer.

One of the few times that Bel has been asked to present a piece outside a theater context was for *Some sweet day*, a dance series organized by the artist and choreographer Ralph Lemon at MoMA in 2012. Bel opted for a shorter version of *The show must go on*, originally staged in theaters, in which a group of amateurs and professional performers interpret the lyrics of pop songs through their movements. The first few bars of The Beatles’ “Come Together” play as the group forms. This work exemplifies Bel’s attempts to move dance away from expertise and elitism by engaging amateurs, by employing ordinary forms of movement, and by “de-skilling” professional dancers of their knowledge,

prompting a similar question to the one raised in art by Marcel Duchamp’s readymade: is it dance? Lemon matched six artists to make intergenerational presentations, and Bel was paired with the American choreographer Steve Paxton, who, as a founding member of the radical Judson Dance Theater in New York in the early 1960s, pioneered the use of commonplace gestures borrowed from everyday life. Paxton’s piece *Satisfyin Lover* (1967) was performed in the Marron Atrium together with *The show must go on*. In *Satisfyin Lover* a group of amateurs followed a very simple score: they walked across the Atrium, stopped, then started walking again or sat for a moment in one of the three chairs that were the only set elements.

“When I saw *Satisfyin Lover* for the first time in 1996 at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, I thought I should have done this, I should have thought about this. It should have been mine,” Bel said in a 2012 conversation with Paxton. “*Satisfyin Lover* minimizes the movement to simply walk[ing], but nobody walks in the same way. There is something irreducible to every human being, a simple thing we do every day. This is very moving. The readymade in dance is never the same, because the performers will never repeat the movement in the same exact way.”<sup>2</sup> Bel pushed this claim even further with *company company* and, eventually, with *MoMA Dance Company*. By working mainly with amateurs in both pieces, Bel stresses the Latin roots of the word *amateur* in *amare*—“to love.” He explores the love for dance and the democratic potential in valorizing the unconscious and intuitive absorption of knowledge and movement.

Like other museums internationally, MoMA has organized many exhibitions and commissions with dance artists, thereby participating in a larger discussion about the relationship between art and dance in the postwar



*The show must go on*. 2001. Performed at the Auditorium Parco della Musica, Rome, June 3, 2004, as part of the festival *La Francia si muove*. Photo: Mussacchio Laniello. © Mussacchio Laniello

period. Questions have been raised regarding conventional conceptions about art institutions and contemporary dance, museological or theatrical codes of representation, the white cube versus the black box, and the different durations of performances and exhibitions. Bel's invitation to MoMA staff is an invitation to the institution to embody these issues: it alters the time-space coordinates of the exhibition apparatus, shifts the Museum's relationship with the public, brings another idea of authorship, challenges the established economy, and exposes the Museum's human infrastructure. *MoMA Dance Company* reveals MoMA's large, but usually less publicly visible, community of employees, whose labor is intimately tied to the functioning of the Museum and to the care and presentation of the collection.

By creating *MoMA Dance Company* through an open invitation, Bel emphasizes that the desire to dance is democratic, one that has brought together senior and junior staff from different departments across the Museum, temporarily questioning and changing workplace hierarchies, fostering connections between people who might not typically interact, and creating a new, albeit ephemeral, dance community. The staff who answered the call embody the tension between work, play, and performance, suspending their usual professional relationships and working time through joint movement. "Theater is the art of time. . . . I make time visible,"<sup>3</sup> Bel has stated. Remaining faithful to the conventions of theater time rather than to the opening hours of the Museum, *MoMA Dance Company's* performances last around thirty minutes. For the rest of the day, Bel leaves the Atrium empty, but visitors can still stop and walk around the space, even when nothing is happening, when the performers are back to being behind the scenes of the Museum.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jérôme Bel, interview with Bel and Daniel Buren by Jean-Max Colard, *Jérôme Bel*, February 2008, <http://www.jeromebel.fr/textsandinterviews/detail/?textInter=miscellaneous%20-%20daniel%20buren>.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Bel, in a conversation with Steve Paxton, Ralph Lemon, and Sabine Breitwieser at MoMA, October 20, 2012, presented as part of the dance series *Some sweet day*.

<sup>3</sup> "An Eloquent Dance," interview with Jérôme Bel by Elisabeth Lebovici, *Mousse*, no. 35 (October 2012), <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=886>.

## Performers

**Sean Anderson** Associate Curator, Department of Architecture and Design  
**Mack Cole-Edelsack** Design and Production Manager, Department of Exhibition Design and Production  
**Alexandra Diczok** Assistant to the Chief Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints  
**Francis Estrada** Assistant Educator, School Programs, Department of Education  
**Chet Gold** Supervisor, Department of Security  
**Leticia Gutierrez** Associate Educator, Gallery and Learning Programs, Department of Education  
**Danielle Hall** Senior Graphic Designer, Department of Advertising and Graphic Design  
**Erin Elise Holland** Image Production Manager, Retail Division  
**Yannyck Kao-SY** Security Officer, Department of Security  
**Talia Kwartler** Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture  
**Thomas J. Lax** Associate Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art  
**Melanie Monios** Assistant Director, Special Programming, Department of Special Programming and Events

**Pete Morales** Mechanic, Building Operations  
**Isabela Muci** Curatorial Intern, Department of Photography  
**Diana Pan** Chief Technology Officer, Information Technology  
**Pamela Popeson** Preparator, Department of Architecture and Design  
**Yasmil Raymond** Associate Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture  
**Grace Robinson** Development Assistant, Membership Marketing, Department of Membership  
**Alethea Rockwell** Assistant Educator, Exhibition, Gallery, and Artist Programs, Department of Education  
**Rajendra Roy** The Celeste Bartos Chief Curator of Film  
**Kendra Isobel Samson** Senior Guest Assistant, Visitor Services  
**Jenny Schlenzka** Associate Curator, MoMA PS1  
**Alex Sloane** Curatorial Assistant, MoMA PS1  
**Sandra Teitge** Director's Office, MoMA PS1  
**Wendy Woon** The Edward John Noble Foundation Deputy Director for Education

Executive director and artistic advisor, R.B. Jérôme Bel: Rebecca Lee  
Artist's assistant: Frédéric Seguette

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## ARTIST'S CHOICE

### JÉRÔME BEL

#### MoMA DANCE COMPANY

The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium

Thursday, October 27–Monday, October 31

12:30 and 3:00 p.m. daily

#### Related Programs

##### At The Museum of Modern Art:

Conversation with Jérôme Bel,  
Ana Janevski, and members of  
*MoMA Dance Company*

October 30, 4:00 p.m.

Marron Atrium

11 West 53 Street, New York

##### Other locations:

Screening of Jérôme Bel's film  
*Véronique Doisneau*, followed  
by a conversation with Bel and  
Ana Janevski

October 17, 7:30 p.m.

FIAF Florence Gould Hall

55 East 59 Street, New York

##### The show must go on

October 20–21, 8:00 p.m.

October 22, 2:00 and 8:00 p.m.

The Joyce Theater

175 Eighth Avenue, New York

##### Jérôme Bel

October 27–29, 8:00 p.m.

The Kitchen

512 West 19 Street, New York

Presented on the occasion of FIAF's  
Crossing the Line 2016, in  
conjunction with related programming  
at The Joyce and The Kitchen.

Organized by Ana Janevski, Associate  
Curator, with Martha Joseph,  
Curatorial Assistant, Department  
of Media and Performance Art,  
and produced by Lizzie Gorfaine,  
Performance Producer.

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Theater Liechtenstein (Schaan),  
TanzPlan Ost, Fondazione La  
Biennale di Venezia, Théâtre de la  
Ville (Paris), HAU Hebbel am Ufer  
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For more information, visit  
[moma.org/jeromebel](http://moma.org/jeromebel).