

The Museum of Modern Art's vast Marron Atrium is its architectural fulcrum. Ascending through three of the building's floors, its elegant void is less an agora than a place of passage, constantly echoing the shuffle of the crowd, several thousands passing through, seven hours per day, without a break, except for those two holidays in the year when MoMA is closed to the public. It has been reported that each visitor, in his or her circuitous route through the Museum, spends on average only a handful of seconds in front of each of its artworks. Over the recent past, the Atrium has also been used as a site for performances. We can think of the series curated by choreographer Ralph Lemon, *Some Sweet Day* (2012), featuring several guest choreographers; or of the presentation of Boris Charmatz's three-week project *Musée de la Danse: Three Collective Gestures* (2013), or of the Atrium's use as one of the many sites for Maria Hassabi's *PLASTIC* (2016), in which dancers crawled up and down several of the Museum's staircases, including the one in the Atrium. Most iconically, the Atrium staged its full, spectacular dimensions in Marina Abramović's long, durational rendition of her and Ulay's *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–87) during Abramović's 2010 retrospective *The Artist Is Present*. As audience members lined up literally for hours to sit in a single chair facing the artist, never had the Atrium performed its function of being a literal "presence room" (as the room where monarchs receive their subjects is called)—one where a new kind of consumerist exhaustion could be performed for the sake of an artist's glorification. But between the 27th and the 31st of October 2016, twice daily, the Atrium became not just a stage for the social-choreographic spectacle of relentless contemporary circulation, not just a stage for celebrating the auratic presence of an artist, not only an occasion for the Museum's architecture to display itself in its austere minimalist aura, but it became a place for visitors to slow down, gather, and eventually remain—and then spend not a few seconds, but a good half hour captivated by one very particular artwork. On those five days in October, visitors could witness emerging in the Atrium—saturating it with bodies, color, sound, movement, laughter, joy, and dances only to leave behind, after 30 minutes, a mess of scattered multicolored pieces of garment on the floor and a vibrant energy in the air—the 10 performances given by French choreographer Jérôme Bel's *Artist's Choice: MoMA Dance Company*, a commission in MoMA's Artist's Choice series.

Initiated in 1989, Artist's Choice had so far invited only visual artists to create temporary installations based

on the Museum's collection. As the first choreographer ever to be commissioned to contribute to the series, what was this particular artist's choice? Simple: first, Bel shifted his attention (and consequently ours) away from MoMA's artworks (so many of which barely brushed by the visitors' gaze) and focused instead on its *workers* (so many of them, including security coordinators, curatorial assistants, associate curators, educational staff, barely, if at all, visible to the public); and then he created, with these improbable collaborators drawn from different departments of the



October 26, 2016, rehearsal for *Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company*, The Museum of Modern Art, October 27–31, 2016. Pictured, from left: Chet Gold, Melanie Monios, Danielle Hall, Thomas J. Lax, Jérôme Bel, Kendra Isobel Samson, Yasmiil Raymond, Grace Robinson, Mack Cole-Edelsack. © 2017 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

Museum, not a temporary installation, but a dance event. Bel's choice was not to reinstall some of the Museum's artworks; but rather to reinstall our capacity to gaze, to take time, to pace, and to attend to the Museum's workers' capacity to make an artwork. All of this thanks to Bel's very particular, absolutely singular, and always rigorous approach to choreography. It is important to address Bel's choreography's singularity, its logic, in order to understand the 10 presentations of *MoMA Dance Company*.

About a year before the MoMA performances, in the spring of 2015, Bel had premiered an evening-length work titled *Gala*. For his MoMA commission, Bel adapted *Gala*'s main conceptual and choreographic principles. At the conceptual level, *Gala* investigates what it means to work with different types of amateur dancers when making a contemporary choreographic piece. *Gala* embraces the challenges of working with those whose deep passion for dance is quite often much larger than their technique. Bel's *Artist's*

*Choice*: MoMA Dance Company departs from the same principle: it invests in the diverse bodies, ages, abilities, ethnicities, proficiencies, and passions of definitely non-professional dancers drawn from the Museum's staff. At the choreographic level, the MoMA Dance Company's presentations were premised on *Gala*'s final section, "Company, Company." This is a 20-minute-long segment during which a single dancer steps out from the larger ensemble of about 20 performers, stands alone downstage a few feet away from the group, faces the audience, and then starts to dance to a song (often pop, but not always) while the rest of the dancers try to follow as best as they can. *Gala* ends by undoing the premises that structure a dance class. If there is teaching, if there is transmission, it is in a context in which masters and pupils are not at all worried about who holds dance knowledge, since everyone relishes in their shared capacity to simply dance away to the sound of music. There is no hierarchy here, since those who momentarily lead will soon go back to the group and join all the others, and thus become momentary followers of a new "leader" also emerging out of the collective. No hierarchy then, just the courage to dance in public with the joyful disharmony of an engaged, provisional multitude loving dancing. We could witness the same affective joy in MoMA Dance Company.

However, if in *Gala* the main question was that of troubling the very premises that frame choreographic aesthetic judgment through the figure of the dance amateur (whose passion and commitment is sometimes painfully revealed thanks to the minimalist qualities that typify Bel's mise-en-scène), with MoMA Dance Company the question inevitably shifts toward the piece's relation to a whole tradition in the visual arts of using performance as a mode of institutional critique. We can say that, in opposition to artists such as Hans Haacke or Andrea Fraser, Bel is not so much interested in critiquing MoMA as an institution as he is in revealing the modes through which old, hard labor divisions and fixed hierarchies are secured and reproduced by its supposedly fluid neo-liberal work environment. It is not possible to witness this particular piece without considering the institutional context of those highly specialized museum workers exposing their amateurism in their highly competitive workplace as they dance away. It is one thing to have amateur dancers participating in a choreographic work by a renowned choreographer, performed in theatrical venues that usually program dance, and quite another to have museum staff dancing (in different degrees of "non-virtuosism") in their employer's building's main atrium during regular working hours. Here, it is not so much the question of the "artist being present" that matters, but of workers publicly performing their collective and

individual willingness and capacity to gather and enact what they *do not master*—demonstrating, in public, their power to mobilize as a precarious yet courageous collective. We are thus in a very different situation than the one theorized by Claire Bishop with her important notion of "delegated performance." Bishop proposed the concept to address works by artists such as Santiago Sierra, Tania Bruguera, or Tino Seghal, who have often delegated to professional specialists (such as sex workers, mounted policemen, veterans of wars, or university professors) the task of performing the actions required in the artwork as *specialists in those actions or tasks*. With MoMA Dance Company, we find ourselves in the reverse situation than that of delegated performers; the point is that *non-specialists* perform full on, and with absolute commitment, what they barely know. The bursts of laughter that inevitably erupt among the audience, and sometimes among the dancers, from this committed amateurism, from this displacement of specialized work, paradoxically demonstrate that this is not just another "light piece." Those bursts are the very actions through which the prevalent institutionalization of performance and dance within the highly curated and highly securitized walls of the Museum endure a transvaluation. Here we are before a work that performs what the premises of high art forbid works of art to fail to deliver: mastery. In failing at mastery, MoMA Dance Company absolutely succeeds in its own premise: loving dancing.



October 26, 2016, rehearsal for Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company, The Museum of Modern Art, October 27–31, 2016. Pictured in foreground: Talia Kwartler. © 2017 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

In *Gala*, it is the foundational, and highly exclusionary, ethos that informs the art of dance (its ableism, ageism, sexism, racism, nationalism)—an ethos that has sustained dance's autonomy within the aesthetic regime of the arts (whether we are talking about ballet, modern dance, popular dance, or even the vast majority of contemporary dance)—that is totally undone. With MoMA Dance Company, the work is about the overall

capacity of dancing to operate as a gathering force, one able to perform all sorts of joyful disruptions in daily habits, gestures, relations, and postures. By creating a temporary dance company composed of all sorts of museum professionals whose daily labor is to support, enable, activate, frame, curate, preserve, explain, secure, and maintain MoMA's collection, Bel was transforming mostly invisible laborers into highly visible agents, specialized professionals into amateurs, amateurism into "high art." And as the wide, white Atrium filled with awkward moves, bursts of laughter, colorful garments, surprising exotic displays of virtuosic amateurism and choreographic mannerisms, sudden slips of the foot and of memory, the contagious beats of Madonna or New Order, or the stridency of Liza Minelli thundering "New York, New York," we could witness the utterly affective social work of loving dancing: courage as an aesthetic value.



October 26, 2016, rehearsal for *Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company*, The Museum of Modern Art, October 27–31, 2016. Pictured in foreground: Grace Robinson. © 2017 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

How did we get here, to this sheer affirmation of dancing, of loving dancing, and of loving to watch a serious surrender to one's passion? Between 1994 and 1998 Bel had created three evening-length pieces that, in hindsight, can be seen as a carefully built triptych, slowly unfolding over time: *Nom donné par l'auteur* (Name given by the author, 1994), *Jérôme Bel* (1995), and *Le Dernier Spectacle* (The last performance, 1998). The sequence of titles already indicates how those three early pieces articulate a meticulous critique of the conditions that enable, but also constrict, choreographic composition, choreographic visibility, and choreographic performance. *Nom donné par l'auteur*, performed by two dancers quietly manipulating several daily objects, revealed language deeply embedded in objects. *Jérôme Bel* considered an author's name as never being a neutral noun or identity marker, but ultimately every work's implicit meta-title, a title as synonymous with the author's signature. *Le Dernier Spectacle* proposed that every dance iteration affirms its constitutively precarious existence. In their quiet

minimalism, in their conceptual interdependency, Bel's first three group works identified and explored, with utmost rigor and originality, the basic conditions for the emergence of the choreographic: a title, an authorial signature, and ephemerality as dance's provisional horizon until its future return. However, in between these three works, in 1997, an often-neglected yet crucial piece was created: a solo titled *Shirtologie* (Shirtology), in which the figure of the dancer, its subjectivity and subjection, its agency and force, assumes a central role.

*Shirtologie* investigated what would eventually become a crucial theme and central figure in several of Bel's most important works over the past decade (including the extraordinary *Véronique Doisneau* [2004], the sober *Cédric Andrieux* [2009], the controversial *Disabled Theater* [2012], and *Gala*): the figure and labor of the dancer. *Shirtologie* directly addressed how the *dancer's labor*, the *dancer's agency*, and the *dancer's passion* are constrained, but also mobilized, by choreography's imperatives and regimes of visibility. In *Shirtologie*, a male dancer would appear onstage three times during the intermissions of dance programs shared with other choreographers. Each time the dancer appeared, he would don dozens of t-shirts, one over the other, covering his torso in very thick layers. Every t-shirt bore sentences, logos, order words and drawings, as t-shirts often do, and all had been purchased by Bel in discount stores and street markets. What the male dancer did throughout each segment of *Shirtologie* was to silently read the writings and gaze at the drawings on his t-shirts, and then perform what they suggested, to the letter—as if those often neglected signs, marks, and glyphs were nothing but highly commanding choreographic scores. After each action, he would take off the t-shirt that had prompted him, drop it on the floor, and proceed with the next layer. Here, the dancer's labor is singular: to express, physically and vocally—there is a moment when the dancer hums a little Mozart melody whose musical score is imprinted at the front of one of his t-shirts—how those apparently innocent marks or signs that cover his body (and also, at least once in while, our bodies) operate as instructions that must be followed.

What is interesting in the trajectory from *Shirtologie* to the series of pieces centered on the lived experience of professional dancers (*Véronique Doisneau*, *Isabel Torres* [2005], *Pichet Clunchun* and *Myself* [2005], *Cédric Andrieux* [2009], *Lutz Förster* [2009]) to the more recent group works, such as *Disabled Theater* or *Gala*, is precisely the ways in which the dancer's task has been carefully, methodically redefined by Bel: from a figure of subjection in *Shirtologie* to an ambivalent figure in relation to power and agency in *Véronique Doisneau* to a figure of agential joy in *Gala* or *MoMA Dance Company*.

If in the 1990s Bel's quest was a diagnostic one, that of mapping the choreographic conditions under which dancers perform what choreographers compose, in the 2000s, with works such as *Véronique Doisneau*, or *Cédric Andrieux*, Bel's quest started to shift by emphasizing the dancer's testimonial voice. Indeed, in these pieces, but also in the duo *Pichet Clunchun and Myself* (one of the rare works in which Bel appears onstage performing), or in *Isabel Torres and Lutz Förster*, dancers share with the public, verbally and kinetically, their lived experiences as dancers. These series of works reveal the dancer not as mere executer of commands, following instructions that precede and condition their presence on stage (as in *Shirtologie*), but as a worker whose job is to constantly negotiate agency within the choreographic. In the pieces created throughout the 2000s, all significantly titled after their dancers' names, the dancer gains a fundamental critical agency vis-à-vis what it means to dance under the particular social-aesthetic contract of choreography.

Since *Disabled Theater*, Bel has taken this premise (the dancer as agent and critical voice) onto yet another plateau. *Disabled Theater*, commissioned by Theater Hora, a company based in Switzerland, was composed by actors with mental disabilities. Throughout the piece, the actors present themselves in their individuality by sharing their own understanding of their "disabilities," their own lived experiences as marked bodies and subjectivities, and by dancing to their favorite songs. But in some of their speeches the actors also critique, from within the work, some of the very aspects of *Disabled Theater* they enact and represent. I would say that, since this piece, what becomes crucial is probing and investigating the affirmative power of dancing *in company*. Thus, the title *MoMA Dance Company* once again clarifies the work's fundamental premise: what matters is this particular instantiation of a dance company—MoMA's. In this propositional, positive approach to choreography, it becomes crucial to acknowledge, accept, and embrace the consequences of the simple fact that dance contains the potential to be a gathering force that animates collectives into otherwise unthinkable mobilizations. Politically, this potential is the precondition for renewed performances of sociability. Hence, the task of the choreographer working for the affirmative powers of dancing becomes something else: not the diagnosis of conditions of subjection, but the bursting open of potentialities for assembling (in) collective joy. In this sense, the work is not necessarily one of making a work of art, but of un-working the parameters of art making to allow individuals to assemble in a collective in which no one is master, yet all retain a certain degree of knowledge, daring, and the total capacity to give (oneself). Thus dance escapes its alignment with



October 26, 2016, rehearsal for *Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company*, The Museum of Modern Art, October 27–31, 2016. © 2017 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

models of post-Fordist labor exploitation (the dancer as aesthetic avatar of neoliberalism's creative/service/affective worker) to become a mode for enacting the affective-assembly politics of horizontal, collective singularities. This is a collective whose energy—as MoMA's functionaries moved and shook and followed and initiated their dances in the Museum's iconic Atrium—the public could also partake in, by enthusiastically cheering and applauding each dance. *MoMA Dance Company's* motions and vibes cut across the preordained choreographic pathways of the Museum, disrupting, even if momentarily, its kinetic pedagogy of well-behaved sociability and fast-paced aesthetic consumption.

---

André Lepecki is a New York-based writer and independent curator working on the intersections between dance, performance art, and visual arts. He is an associate professor of Performance Studies at New York University, editor of several anthologies on dance and performance theory, including *Dance* (2012), and author of *Exhausting Dance: performance and the politics of movement* (2006) and *Singularities: dance in the age of performance* (2016).

Edited by Jason Persse, Ana Janevski, and Martha Joseph.

Special thanks to Jill and Peter Kraus.

Published in conjunction with Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company, October 27–31, 2016

Artist's Choice: Jérôme Bel/MoMA Dance Company is 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.

The Artist's Choice exhibition series is made possible through The Agnes Gund Artist's Choice Fund endowed by Lara Lee and George Gund III, Lulie and Gordon Gund, Ann and Graham Gund, and Sarah and Geoffrey Gund.

Additional support is provided by the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund.

- 1 Much has been written about this performance and curatorial experiment. For a particularly sharp analysis, see Jones, Amelia. 2011. "‘The Artist Is Present.’ Artistic reenactments and the impossibility of presence," in *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 55, no. 1, (T209), Spring 2011, 16-45.
- 2 See Lepecki, André. 2013. "From Partaking to Initiating: Leadingfollowing as dance's (a-personal) political singularity," in *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity*. Stefan Hölscher and Philipp Schulte, eds. (Zürich and Berlin: Diaphanes), 23-40.
- 3 See Bishop, Claire. 2012. "Delegated performance: outsourcing authenticity," in *October*, no. 140, Spring 2012, 91-112.
- 4 For an in-depth discussion see *Disabled Theater*. Umathum, Sandra, and Wihstutz, Benjamin, eds. (Zürich and Berlin: Diaphanes), 2015.