

What remains when you take it all apart?

Considering Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Work/Travail/Arbeid*

by Nick Mauss

"Between a museum and a marketplace," is how Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker described The Museum of Modern Art's Marron Atrium, where her *Work/Travail/Arbeid* was performed for five entire days in spring 2017. The choreographer's take on the centerpiece of the Museum's 2004 expansion was intended, without irony, to embrace the idealistic potential of a space in which the classical functions of the museum and the marketplace as storehouses of public memory, culture, and exchange could overlap and be tested. On the evening of the premiere of *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, De Keersmaeker dedicated the upcoming five days of work to the memory of Trisha Brown, and acknowledged with barbed humor that it's not easy to work in a *fabrik* (factory) such as The Museum of Modern Art, reminding the audience that "dancers are not objects." Firm and self-evident, De Keersmaeker's statements laid out some of the tensions at play in this work: the disparate economies of art and dance, the oscillations of private and social memory, and the challenges of presenting dance in what Paul Valéry called a "house of incoherence."

Work/Travail/Arbeid is De Keersmaeker's response to a two-way question: Can choreography be performed as an exhibition? Both the question and its complex answer apply brilliant pressure, cracking open along the lines that define what constitutes choreography and exhibition practices at a moment when these forms—and the institutions that frame and validate them—have come into consistent, exploitative contact. De Keersmaeker refers to this period as the "second wave" of dance in the museum, after the "first wave" of the 1960s and 1970s. While notions of dance and the museum have certainly changed over the course of these decades, one of the most striking differences of this most recent re-introduction of dance to art hinges on how museums define and address their audiences at this moment—a relation that quantifies through "programming" and is distorted by a deep anxiety about fulfilling audiences' imagined expectations. De Keersmaeker observes the alienation that is often inimical to the way museums instrumentalize dance, and she implicates this strained relationship in a danced exhibition that demands a constant renegotiation of the terms of its viewing.

I saw the first iteration of this piece in Brussels, at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, in 2015, for a few hours in the morning and a few more hours in the afternoon. In two bare, adjoining galleries flooded with daylight from high windows, I observed two dancers separate out from the meander of museum visitors to traverse overlapping circles traced with chalk on the floor. Within an instant, the room recalibrated, bodies organized themselves in relation to the dancers' conduct, and we observed each other and the two dancers walking, circling, uncoiling. I tried to read the laconic movements for traces of other dances—any accents, echoes, inflections, lifted phrases—but found none. The dancers and musicians had the stripped-down mien of Robert Bresson's "models" (the term he used for actors in his films). For lack of a better word (or feeling), the coherence was classical.

Abandoning origins, I began to sense a patterned vocabulary, and a precisely determined system of permeable rules that produced no experiential repetitions. I could sense it on the level of a floating pulse when the dancers performed noiselessly the memory of the voice of the instrument that had been played in the immediate past, the movements becoming the music's future memory of the dance. In this sense, the musicians' movements—before, after, and during their "work"—came into relief with a kind of pathos, as choreography of another kind. I saw a dancer "being" the voice of the piano, or another dancer "being," in silence, the just-past voice of the clarinet already eroding in my memory. This protracted space of pleasure in the not-yet-knowing, or of memory making contact again, resonates with what Gerard Grisey (the composer of *Vortex Temporum*, the musical work that catalyzes, structures, and permeates *Work/Travail/Arbeid*) calls, in musical terms, "pre-audibility." As a witness, one had the sense of being suspended between the dance and its music, observing their function as separate objects in the life-world, imposed on one another in the self as a private act of memory.

"We are going to the fields," the choreographer says when she describes working in the studio with her dance company, Rosas, as if the work they do is cyclical, innate,



Fig. 1

necessary. “The work is the rehearsal and the rehearsal is the work.” In this way, *Work/Travail/Arbeid* can be read as De Keersmaeker’s reflection on the lives of performers, a monument to their work, a meditation on the lengths of days, weeks, years, and seconds they spend together developing new work or rehearsing the old, as if the process had no goal other than the work of doing it. Each section lasts an hour. The entire cycle takes up nine hours. Its first performance took place on every consecutive workday for nine weeks. “How do you divide your time?” De Keersmaeker asks.

My instinct to ultimately capture the dance as I observed it was repeatedly frustrated by the radical austerity of the dramaturgy, and by the fact that I knew the dance would go on beyond my time as a spectator. Who dances all day? I noticed a clock on the wall, a piece of chalk hanging from a string, each dancer, each musician, each visitor, every piece of clothing, haircut, bracelet, decision trembling. Not even the sunlight was incidental. The slice down the wall and onto the floor seemed to hum in correspondence with dancer Igor Shyshko’s carving of the space with his arm, the slowly jagged movements closely following liquid passages of running, suddenly at full speed, around the room along the chalk circles on the floor.

Remembering a passage from Wiels: The traveling sun burned into my mind forever through milk glass windows Balázs Busa’s solo, which may have actually been a duet, but memory isolates around this sole figure. I had tracked this dancer all day, back and forth through the two rooms, until he performed what I understood to be the most devastating dance I will ever have witnessed, and I can’t say why. Turning around his own axis with immaculate control of an almost plant-like slowness, unfurling, cleaving the space around his body repeatedly, caressing the millimeters above the floor where glinting sweat gathered in a puddle running from his wrist after a long passage of high-velocity running in circles, truncated by violent stops and shifts in direction, stopping short of an indifferent child lying on the ground staring up at an iPhone. This moment of distance was simply sustained, hanging there. Invisible, agreed-upon thresholds could become distinct and razor-like, or suddenly wobbly, liquiform. Though it is by now common to find oneself “among” dancers and musicians in a performance, rather than at a remove in front of them—both in theaters and museums—the simple porosity of *Work/Travail/Arbeid* felt like an enduring risk. Something very moving appeared in the vision of performers and spectators seen together as an image, as different ways of being. On the one hand, the dancers and musicians were making their work in real time, and on the other, something

Fig. 1 Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, performed at WIELS Contemporary art centre, Brussels, May 2015. Photo: Anne Van Aerschot. © Anne Van Aerschot



Fig. 2

else was being made between each distinct body in the room—a kind of modeling of new forms of courtesies and awareness.

As an “experience of dance,” rather than an “evening of dances,” *Work/Travail/Arbeid* has a family resemblance to Merce Cunningham’s *Events* (1964–2011), a collection of works that were also born of the demand for performance in non-proscenium spaces and could be performed anywhere, from a museum in Vienna to Piazza San Marco in Venice. *Work/Travail/Arbeid* is, by design, a scalable work—the vortex of overlapping circles can be scaled up (or down) to fill (or even exceed) spaces. Its elegance and authority derive from an ability to be fastidiously transposed from one space onto another, allowing the work to expand to the gigantic conditions that have become the norm of contemporary art museums, while also suggesting that the work could be happening on a microscopic scale. Deformations of scale are also enacted through Grisey’s score for *Vortex Temporum*, the three movements of which manifest distinct perceptions of time-scales: the human time of respiration, the glacial time of the whales, and the infinitesimally trembling time of insects and birds. The materials of the piece—chalk, dancers, clock, musicians, and instruments—suggest that the work could pack up and leave at any moment. There can be no props, no exoticism,

no glamour in this surgical disarticulation of dance, presence, and audience: only the “workers” and whatever else is “found” or given. Each iteration is a reconsideration of the work through the architectural volumes, visitor traffic and behavior, and light conditions of a museum venue, taking on the notion of “composing around space,” likened by Grisey to the work of sculptors, “whose hollows are not holes bored into the material, but forms in negative around which the volumes are articulated.” At MoMA, the monumental verticality of the Marron Atrium allowed for multiple layers of proximity and optics—from incredibly intimate contact with dancers flying by, or coming to rest between visitors up against a wall after the diminution of a jubilant moment of “tutti,” to the bird’s-eye views afforded by the gangplanks connecting the museum’s upper floors, or the windows cut out of some of the higher galleries. The work felt like an unlocking of the Yoshio Taniguchi-designed building, or a full realization of its architectural transparency, maximizing the potential of this pierced, multivalent space as a volume of air and light through which the circulation of the museum moves in spirals. From a higher vantage point, one could observe the dancers and musicians nested in the shifting frame of an attentive or quizzical audience, surrounded, in turn, by the faster traffic of visitors with an urgent itinerary, the crowded line at the coat check, solitary

Fig. 2 Installation view of the exhibition *Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker: Work/Travail/Arbeid*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 29–April 2, 2017. Photo: Julieta Cervantes



Fig. 3

figures browsing in the museum bookstore, or museumgoers standing at the windows in the painting galleries facing back down into the atrium. At times, sounds of Grisey's *Vortex Temporum* bled into even the furthest galleries, connecting every part of the building with the intense demonstration at its core, and piercing our unquestioned consent to silence in the museum.

De Keersmaecker often speaks about the “writing of the dance,” by which she means the composition of dance and the writing that the action of dance itself creates. The writing of the dance is always impermanent and only experiential. In 2011, De Keersmaecker performed *Violin Phase* on a layer of sand in the Marron Atrium, revealing the writing of the dance—the accumulation of traces produced by her movement—as she was dancing. In *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, the writing of the dance is always written and rewritten and continually re-remembered, misremembered, and on the verge of dissipating, inciting a cycle of needing to be there, again and again, with the live work, to keep the channels of memory active. This ability to return, over and over, is singular to *Work/Travail/Arbeid*—no other dance work creates a viewer that can give in so readily to this extended space of work at attention. Grisey's treatise “*Tempus ex Machina*,” the scaffolding on which De Keersmaecker's work is constructed, analyzes the perception of temporality in order to show that, “It is in fact the listener who selects, who creates the changing angle of perception which will endlessly remodel, perfect, sometimes destroy musical form as the composer dreamed

it. In turn, the listener's sense of time is in correlation with the multiple times of his native language, social group, culture, and civilization.” De Keersmaecker stresses the need to make the work *abordable* (approachable), and her dancers speak about the importance of legibility. The dance is abstract and the music is “spectral,” but the crystalline clarity of the dancer's training and technique holds you for hours in an experience of multiple swelling, subsiding, distinctly perceptible temporalities. When the choreographer asks, “How do you divide your time?” she is also asking how you divide—or bring together—your attention.

The conceptual and spatial plasticity of *Work/Travail/Arbeid* seems to derive from a trust in instinct, or certain atavisms. At a discussion about *Work/Travail/Arbeid* at the Graduate Center, De Keersmaecker mentioned being inspired by the flocking of birds to use peripheral vision to maintain formations flexibly. Explaining the use of the circle in *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, De Keersmaecker suggested that it's “as if somebody starts to make a fire in an open space and people gather around in a democratic way.” The circular structure of *Work/Travail/Arbeid* is an orchestral structure. It is a shape that distributes energy and power evenly. It is the form that is assumed when rehearsing parts of a dance in the studio. It is utterly matter-of-fact, yet enigmatic, like the deliriously willful whorl of hair at the top of a child's head. It returns to the word “choreography” through its Greek roots in *khoros* (a round dance; dancing-place; band of dancers; choir) and *graphein* (to write). The circle lends itself to the spiral, which brings vertical movement and velocity. “But when the movement is counter-clockwise,” De Keersmaecker reflected, “you get this *opposite* feeling.” At MoMA, I could understand how much the dance itself shaped the dynamics and positions of the audience in the atrium, the circular movements constantly reorienting and unsettling the assumption of a fixed position, shaping large swaths of bodies into new forms that contrasted with the socially inflicted obedience to forms like queues or clustering around furniture.

Work/Travail/Arbeid is a beautifully observed piece, not only on the level of the dance language, but on the level of internalized behavior: how people move, hesitate, risk, confront, and create a public. There is a deep understanding of gestures of invitation and blockade, of opening and closing, and a play with permission and refusal, vulnerability and violence—all of the boundaries left rigorously porous. Observing from one of the gallery windows as the piano swept across the floor below and gently coerced the seated audience out of its path like a giant broom, I thought of Temple Grandin's observations about fear and habit in herding animals:

Fig. 3 Installation view of the exhibition *Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker: Work/Travail/Arbeid*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 29–April 2, 2017. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

“Novelty is paradoxical. New things are both attractive and frightening. They are attractive when the animal is allowed to voluntarily approach and frightening when suddenly forced upon the animal.... Notice that the sheep are circling around the handlers while maintaining a safe distance and keeping the people in sight. Note that the sheep tend to move in the opposite direction of handler movement. Walking in the opposite direction of the direction of desired movement can be used to move groups of animals. Walking in the opposite direction tends to speed up movement and walking in the same direction tends to slow down movements. These principles work with all herding animals.”

Work/Travail/Arbeid should not be confused with tendencies toward immersion or interactivity. The spaces shaped by and with the audience are not necessarily inclusive. In reference to an earlier iteration of the piece, De Keersmaecker described chalk circles drawn on the ground “that invited people *not* to enter into that space.” The uncountable minutiae of silent negotiations produced by *Work/Travail/Arbeid* pose the concept of democracy as a question, and De Keersmaecker seems to welcome the possibility that freedom might flicker into tyranny.

Ritual is often circular. Encoded structures become indistinguishable from the performer. In order to function, ritual communicates a set of terms and relies on the absorption of those terms. Watching the work accumulate in the time-space of the exhibition, and trying impossibly to construct its totality of voices and layers in the mind, produces a kind of intensified erotics, in which the ethics of *Work/Travail/Arbeid* are also located. If dance is a modeling of society, of how we live (together), how do we apprehend the bearing of the dancer Gabriel Schenker in his “Bernie” shirt, profoundly self-possessed, moving among us and subdividing the luxuries of air above him into angles and curves, slicing through planes with radial intentions: marking, specifying, articulating the dizzying variability of a deliberate sequence? In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, his essay on the “impossible temporalities” of the neoliberal timeframe, Jonathan Crary writes:

“The frameworks through which the world can be understood continue to be depleted of complexity, drained of whatever is unplanned or unforeseen. So many long-standing and multivalent forms of social exchange have been remade into habitual sequences of solicitation and response. At the same time, the range of what constitutes response becomes formulaic and, in most instances, is reduced to a small inventory of possible gestures or choices.”

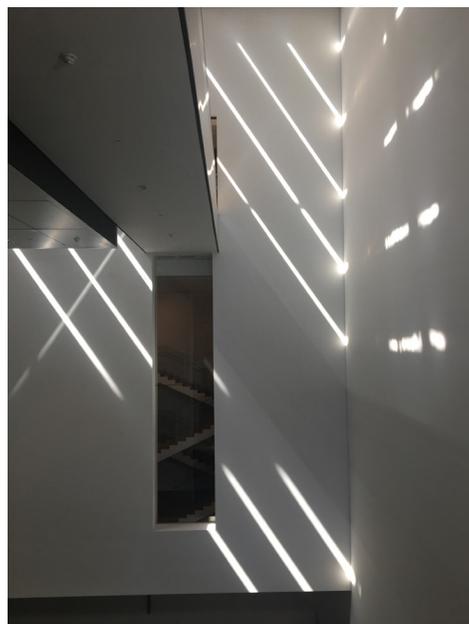


Fig. 4

Work/Travail/Arbeid generates a ritual that counteracts this immobilizing embodiment. We participate—in varying degrees of closeness and remove—in how work is made, how it is perceived, how it is remembered, felt, and enacted.

—Nick Mauss, May 2017

Fig. 4 Walls of the Marron Atrium, photographed during *Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker: Work/Travail/Arbeid*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 29–April 2, 2017. Photo: Nick Mauss

Nick Mauss (American, b. 1980) is an artist based in New York. His exhibition *Transmissions* is currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art (March 16–May 14, 2018). Mauss's work develops new modes of encounter with historical and contemporary material, disrupting conventional narratives and categorization. In the 2012 Whitney Biennial, Mauss's architectural intervention of cotton brushstrokes appliquéd to velvet walls (transposed from a memory of an encounter with a work by Christian Bérard in the foyer of L'Institut Gerlain in Paris) became a filter for inciting new genealogies of European and American modern art. In 2014, as part of Frieze Projects, Mauss exploded an art fair booth into a multi-tiered stage on which ballet dancers, musicians, and artists performed and rehearsed continuously among spectators for five days. From 2014 to 2016, Mauss conceived an elaborately detailed *mise-en-scène* that drew upon historical textiles, drawings, maquettes, and texts for an exhibition on Leon Bakst at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco. And in 2017 Mauss exhibited his own sculptures, paintings, and drawings in an empty art deco villa at the Fundacao Serralves, in Porto, choreographing the viewer's passage through a historic and once-domestic space. Mauss has written on the work of Jochen Klein, Lorraine O'Grady, Madame Gres, Florine Stettheimer, Susan Cianciolo, Ian White, and Hanne Darboven. He was a guest professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg, from 2011 to 2012, was a 2016 fellow at the Center for Ballet and the Arts, and is on the faculty of the MFA program at Bard College. Mauss received his BFA from the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

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