

INTERVIEW: BORIS CHARMATZ and ANA JANEVSKI

Edited by Leora Morinis



Musée de la danse. *Flip Book*. 2008. Concept: Boris Charmatz. Performed in 2012 in the Tanks, Tate Modern. Photo: Tate Photography, Gabrielle Fonseca Johnson. © Tate, London, 2013

In 2009, Boris Charmatz became director of the Centre chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne in northwestern France, which he promptly renamed Musée de la danse (the "Dancing Museum"). He made this change in an effort to articulate a notion of dance divested of concepts of choreography and "the center." Through this gesture, as in his broader practice, Charmatz emphasized the museum as a space not just for predetermined, scripted movement and exhibition, but as a *dancing* institution—replete with exuberance, affective response, and shifting margins, all firmly rooted in the present tense and available for critical inquiry and revision.

1. Can you say something about your previous experiences in New York?

My first impulse is to describe the little flat that Mikhail Baryshnikov graciously offered me many years ago, so that I could spend some time experiencing the city. I remember spending days reading "a woman who," by Yvonne Rainer, and spending hot nights in a dance club. I remember Lincoln Center: watching an 8mm film of Ted Shawn dancing—turning the projector's wheel myself to make the film go.

In the early nineties, when I began to work, some great American artists (such as Steve Paxton, William Forsythe, and Baryshnikov) saw what was happening in Europe, and gave me, along with many of my peers, encouragement to continue pursuing what we were already trying to do. I didn't follow the "traditional" course of spending one year in American residency (this was a must for many young French dancers at the time), but I did get the chance to present some of my work from time to time in New York. For instance, I presented *Herses* at The Kitchen in 2001; *A Bras-Le-Corps*, a very early duet, in 2006 at St Mark's Church; and one of the first exhibitions of Musée de la danse, called expo zero, was part of Performa in 2011.

2. Since the beginning of your career, you have tried to evade the label of "the choreographer." Your path has been atypical: in addition to creating works, you've developed and run a school (Bocal 2002–04), you've written two books, and you've collaborated extensively with other choreographers. Would you say that those experiences amounted to the beginnings of Musée de la danse?

For me, dance is a mental space that has taken me in many directions beyond traditional choreography. It's led me to read, speak, write, host political speeches, make movies, meet other artists, and even fall in love. In this regard,

I've never been happy with a fixed hierarchical trajectory: student becoming dancer, becoming choreographer, becoming teacher, etc. So I've done my best to circumvent or ignore these steps. I danced for other choreographers, while concurrently starting my own projects—refusing to wait for some state of absolute maturity. I even tried to remain an art history student while also being a professional dancer. I am still trying to strike similar balances. For instance, I'm currently performing for others, including Tino Sehgal and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, while simultaneously commissioning the exhibition, *Dance War*, in Rennes.

I like the connections between these projects, however chaotic or unrelated they might appear on the surface. The choreographer/author seems to be a highly and widely valued position nowadays, but for me dance has always been about a much larger field of experience. More precisely, the exhibitions and experiments I've organized with Angèle Le Grand, the administrator of Association edna,¹ are deeply connected to the DNA of the project. To start Musée de la danse as an attempt to expand notions of dance felt urgent to us at the time.



Still from *Levée* (2013). Film by Boris Charmatz and César Vayssié. © 2013, Musée de la danse

3. MDLD has expanded beyond its space in Rennes to become a conceptual frame for many aspects of your practice. To quote you, “It’s akin to wearing glasses with corrective lenses, though in this case the glasses enable us not simply to see clearly, but to see dance happening everywhere.” Can you say something more in relation to MDLD projects?

I like to think of Mike Kelley, Aernout Mik, or Francis Alÿs as choreographers of our time. I think we could look at Viennese Actionism as part of the history of dance. I think Pierre Huyghe's film *The Host and the Cloud*, along with some early Mark Leckey films, could be part of the permanent collection for a museum of dance. The reverse (injecting dance into art history) is equally important and true, because to study the history of performance art—or even the development of modern and contemporary art more broadly—without paying attention to dance is a mistake, don't you think?

4. It's almost impossible not to mention the connections, and differences, between dance and the visual arts. After his experience working with MoMA last year, Ralph Lemon remarked: “One of the most stimulating aspects of the recent explosion of performance in museum and gallery spaces has been the frictions that have been exposed between the cultural tendencies and mores of the dance and art worlds; we see ourselves most clearly, often, when we stand in relief against alien environments. And these new vantage points contain within them the possibilities for change and growth.” It seems that the important point is what we share in terms of conceptual concerns in both fields. What is your relation to visual art? How did you approach MoMA's invitation?

¹ Association edna was founded in 1992 by Boris Charmatz and Dimitri Chamblas.

You are very right with this sentence, so I will repeat it for myself: *it seems that the important point is what we share in terms of conceptual concerns in both fields*. Frankly, some people are still thinking that our project is either a ridiculous joke (“You can’t make a museum out of something immaterial!”), or a burial for live art, transforming it into something waxed and contained.

The invitation for the MoMA project came after your department’s symposium How Are We Performing Today? I proposed turning this year’s symposium into an experimental “poster session” in the atrium. I had the desire to make even more visible the theory and reflection that was at the heart of MoMA’s impulse to bring together thinkers and visitors in conversation. And I wanted to make it a collective experiment. We discovered quickly, however, that the atrium was very difficult for this rough idea! After some very long and exciting talks with you, Ana, we opted instead to program three weekends, presenting three formats/works of Musée de la danse.

Though the invitation was exciting, the scale of the atrium was not initially easy to envisage or adapt to, because the majority of the projects we’ve done before have occurred in much smaller venues. As mentioned, we really wanted to have one of the three weekends dedicated to a poster session, a hybrid format we developed where theory and performance meet, but we eventually had to accept that it wasn’t right for the atrium. So the specific physical architecture was as significant in shaping our approach, as MoMA was on an institutional level.



Musée de la danse. *20 Dancers for the XXth Century*. Dancer: Raphaëlle Delaunay. Les Champs Libres Rennes (FR). 2012. Photo: Nyima Leray

5. In its early years, in addition to founding departments devoted to architecture, photography, film, and other visual art mediums, MoMA established a program dedicated to dance and the performing arts. (In 1944, in fact, the Museum founded the short-lived Department of Theater Arts.) So it seems there has historically been a common ground between this museum and dance.

I was thrilled to go in the archive department to read about James Lee Byars’s invisible performances, and to see pictures of this Department of Theater Arts. My impression is that there has always been common ground between these fields, but that economic factors are largely what has kept live art and visual art so separated. But now that the economy is a different kind of battlefield, it seems that we are entering a period where traditional boundaries aren’t as strong as they were in the last decades.

6. Although Musée de la danse challenges our preconceived notions of dance history, it still deals with it. The first project presented at MoMA, 20 Dancers for the XX Century, is about a fascination with the legacy of dance; 20 dancers will be performing seminal solos from this past century. How do you relate to creating a history of dance?

More than legacy, this project deals with a kind of archeology: excavating gestures from the past, to be performed by a dancer's body in the present. Metaphorically and quite literally, the collection for a museum of dance resides within and through dancers' bodies. The body is the most active storage room, educated by gestures, full of memory, ready to be activated for the present and future. This project presents a wild approach to history, where dancers are essentially executing tasks in whatever way they choose—drawing from their memories, their knowledge of historical solo dances, their own habits of movement, their moods, etc. It is less about presenting pristine, unchanged solo dances from the XX century, and more about providing a window through which to see dancers at work reacting to various circumstances—not least being the context of the museum. It is really about investigation a different kind of museological approach. Entering into a close, but possibly oblique, dialogue with the power of MoMA's display and collection.

7. Levée des conflits [LDC] is your choreographic work, and for the first time it will performed as it was originally intended, in a gallery space, during museum hours. It consists of 25 movements performed continuously by 24 dancers. Can you talk about how has the piece evolved over the last three years, and what will be different in this new version?

I'd always wanted to build a long durational piece, but the material that makes up *LDC* is so demanding that it's almost impossible to sustain the performance for more than an hour and a half. When I experimented with these materials in improvised contexts, I realized that they could have another "life" outside of the strictures of the piece, if their timing and execution were more flexible.

What we are trying in the MoMA iteration is to roughly follow or reflect the flow of visitors, starting with one dancer performing, and then letting the materials and movements build for a while before performing the "real piece," in the middle of the day, and then slowly decelerating thereafter. There will be no break or demarcated difference between these parts. The whole piece is aiming for infinity and continuation, and there is pointed tension between trance-like, incessant movement and something closer to the constancy or immobility of a sculpture. Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* is in MoMA's Sculpture Garden right now, and the way it hovers between complete stillness and this threat of imposing movement is important to me.

8. Flip Book, the third project at MoMA, revisits David Vaughan's book Fifty Years, which charts Merce Cunningham's choreography through half a century. You have invited different dancers to learn and perform Vaughan's images. You're dealing with this archival material in a way that makes the dancers into embodied readers. Can you talk more about the process of working on this project?

For this project, the notion of the "short-circuit" or the "shortcut" made available a very compelling framework. The project stems from one basic idea, which came to me while I was flipping through the pages of Vaughan's book. In it, 50 years of dance have been translated, or compressed, into 300 photographs. If you flip through fast enough, the images become a kind of animation. So, in *Flip Book*, a team of dancers spends five days learning and performing these 300 images in consecutive order, amounting to a 50-minute choreographic flipbook. It is a rather conceptual approach, though it is simultaneously the most physical I have ever tried.

With the first group of students, in Berlin, we didn't have much time to discuss the heritage of Merce Cunningham. It was really a "do-it" project—and a do-it yourself one—since Cunningham was still actively working at the time. We enjoyed working "in the absence" of the master, and we took pleasure in having this physical book as our dogmatic score. The whimsical-seeming, gestural sketch of choreography that came out of this process feels related to the chance and aleatory procedures that Cunningham himself used.

9. This will be the first time that Flip Book is performed in New York, and it seems especially appropriate to perform this Cunningham-inspired piece here. At the same time as this performance of Flip Book, MoMA will also be presenting an exhibition entitled There Will Never Be Silence, which focuses on John Cage's scores—of course 4'33"—and also features some Merce Cunningham notes. What does Cunningham's work represent for you?

It represents the possibility of getting in touch with dance through music, visual art, writing, technical lessons and workshops, and, of course, amazing performances. I initially entered his work through his book *The Dancer and the Dance*. Only later was I really blown away by the performances. I think it is a real gift to be able to read the writing of people like Cunningham, or Hijikata, Rainer, Paxton, Gert, Nijinsky, Duncan, and so on. Without the writing, dance wouldn't be so addictive to me.



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10. In many discussions about dance and art institutions, one of the most interesting questions seems to be about the value of the ephemeral, and how (or if) museums ought to acquire dance. What is your position on this in relation to your work?

The simplest answer—in terms of MDLD’s stance on collecting or acquisitions—would be to stake a position of pure ephemerality and dematerialization. In other words, to insist on the absence of a formal collection. But after several years of operation, we do in fact have something of a collection, including past installations, props, photography, videos, correspondence, etc. But it’s important to note that we are not interested in collecting for the sake of hoarding or having something of a comprehensive or encyclopedic backlog. Instead, our desire stems from wanting to see how certain artists think through this notion of the “collection,” and how they might interpret it in terms of a museum of dance. It’s less about safeguarding the past, and more about inventing it.

11. Building an institution from scratch is a particular challenge. The first years are usually a construction period—building a site, experimenting with new institutional models, etc. How do you perceive MDLD after five years? Would you still use the word museum?

We’ll be celebrating the five year anniversary of our existence while we’re in New York! The idea of creating a new public space for—and by—dancing has led us on a long and unforgettable adventure. At this point, we are definitely a bona fide museum (open to the public, replete with facilities for research, etc.), albeit a strange one. I don’t regret choosing a loaded word, because I like confrontations. Plus, if we look back at etymologies, the original *Mouseion* in ancient Greece translates roughly to mean an “institution for the muses,” less about objects and more about creating a site of inspiration. I think dance and dancers can make available a similar space.

The museum world seems always to be in a state of perpetual evolution. And so too with MDLD: it’s a living and experimental format. This project felt, and continues to feel, urgent to me—at its core it provides a vehicle for thinking about art and contemporary issues in new ways, through the prism of dance and performance. To my mind, it is absolutely necessary to invent new conceptual frameworks if we want something suited for a wild, expanded, and shifting notion of art.