

Danser sa vie - Dance and the Visual Arts in the 20th Century Exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, Paris

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This major exhibition charts the history of the early modern dance pioneers and their influence on the visual arts. Intertwined with a wealth of fascinating archival material - sketches, drawings, diagrams, paintings and film - are videos of more recent contemporary dance works which have drawn inspiration from specific pioneering choreographies. With around 450 exhibits, the exposition demands stamina - and good walking shoes! It is well structured along three thematic axes: 1) dance as self expression; 2) the history of the abstraction of bodily movement; and 3) performance - from the outrages of the Dadaists in Zurich, 1916, to their influence on performance from the 1960's onward.

The exhibition heralds 'Dance as Self Expression' with a wonderful quotation: "Divided between the desire for ecstasy and the search for harmony, dance was a pivotal part of the Modernist revolution". Isadora Duncan, of course, lights the way into the first galleries. There is a fragment of film - Isadora dancing in a Garden - a delicate series of pen and ink drawings by Antoine Bourdelle and a showcase full of small Rodin masterpieces, illustrating works which were inspired by Duncan and the dancers of the time.



Drawing of Isadora Duncan by Antoine Bourdelle

We are liable today to forget the cultural bombshells effected by the early pioneers. The outrage engendered by Isadora's near-naked free dance is underlined early in the exhibition by a video reconstruction of Nijinsky's erotic choreography, *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912). Though hardly within the category of 'free dance', Nijinsky's iconoclastic works for the Ballets Russes liberated the Classical Form from its formal conventions and were similarly received as shocking and scandalous.

The notion of the dancer as instrument of sensuality, ecstasy and joy, cultural provocateur aligned to the Dionysian myth, takes us on towards Laban at Ascona and the forging of the new Central European Modern Dance. Laban - referred to throughout the exhibition as 'Rudolf von Laban' - becomes established as a central figure in the rise of the Expressionist Movement and the innovation of the new dance form. It is refreshing to view his place in the context of other movement and dance pioneers of the period, and interesting too to speculate on the artistic and intellectual influences that gave rise to his revolutionary ideas and to the birth of *Ausdruckstanz*.

Together with analytical drawings, expositions and photographs, there are several sections of the exhibition which represent the pioneering works of Francois Delsarte, Emil Jaques-Dalcroze, Fritz Winther and Rudolf Bode. Delsarte (1811 -1871) formulated a set of aesthetic principles from his investigations into the lineaments of expression and the import of gesture, highlighting the significance of movement observation as a necessary and essential tool for the actor. His influence, via his pupil, Steele MacKay, can be seen in the early American Modern Dance works of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Jaques-Dalcroze, Fritz Winther and Rudolf Bode were predominantly educators. Jaques-Dalcroze, innovative music teacher, saw the human body as the primary musical instrument. His educative method - 'Gymnastique Rhythmique' resonates closely with Winther's and Bode's publications of the time, *Body Art and Education* (Winther) and *Expressive Gymnastics. Body Culture.* (Bode).



Dalcroze-Hellerau - 'Four Girls Dancing in a Garden'



Drawings of his dancers at Ascona by Rudolf Laban

Laban's reticence in acknowledging his sources of inspiration has, to some degree, resulted in the placement of his work in a cultural vacuum. Though he cites Plato and Noverre as prominent influences on his seminal ideas, here he is seen to be one of a number of artistic revolutionaries of the period for whom the investigation of the role and significance of the body in movement constituted the heart of a lifetime's work. Laban is, however, strongly represented as a major figure in the exemplification of entirely new practices and theories emergent from his work at Monte Verita. Indeed, he is the only dance innovator in the exhibition to appear to travel the bridge between the section on 'Dance as Self Expression' and the second thematic axis 'Dance as Abstraction'.

Exciting new material, rarely seen in the UK, from the archives of the Bibliothek Kunsthau, Zurich, the TanzArchiv Leipzig and the Theater-wissenschaftliche archives in Cologne, relates to Laban's period in Ascona and the subsequent appearance of his choreutic theories and practice in Germany. The photographs, paintings and drawings of the Ascona period evoke the freedom and joy of dance in a glorious natural landscape. From Laban, there are two beautiful drawings of his dancers and a series of four Ascona landscapes in crayon and coloured pencil. What was missing here was a sense of the intensity and seriousness of the work which engendered and constituted the core of Laban's theories and practice the forging of dance analysis, of concepts of Eukinetics, Choreutics and Kinetography - and of the philosophical and educative perspective which permeated his life's project. It falls to Mary Wigman to represent Laban's work in performance.

A former pupil of Jaques-Dalcroze, Wigman was encouraged to join Laban in Ascona by her friend, the painter Emil Nolde.



There is a series of superb paintings by Nolde which embody Wigman's dynamism and fire and film of her extraordinary Ascona solo, *Hexentanz* (Witch Dance). Her description is worth quoting:

"One evening, as I entered my bedroom completely wild-eyed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. It reflected the image of someone possessed, feral and lewd, repulsive, fascinating. Unkempt, with eyes sunk into their orbits her nightdress awry and her body shapeless: there she was, the witch - a creature of the earth, with bare, unbridled instincts and an insatiable appetite for life, woman and beast in one."



Mary Wigman's Hexentanz - photo by Charlotte Rudolph

Painting of Mary Wigman by Emil Nolde



Harald Kreutzberg

Laban and Wigman left Monte Verita in 1919 and went their separate ways. Wigman's subsequent success as performer, choreographer and teacher is well recorded here with photographs and film of her works and of her pupil, the German dancer, Harald Kreutzberg. It is unfortunate that we are led towards the end of this section of the exhibition to view Laban's dramatic downfall in Germany. To the uninitiated spectator the material indicates that Laban's career and influence at this point, came to an end.

There is a line up of eight large black and white photographs which relate to the events around his choreography, *Vom Tauwind und der neuen Freude* ('The Spring Wind and the New Joy') created for the opening of the 1936 Olympic Games. Captions record that Laban's work, viewed by Hitler and Goebbals at the dress rehearsal was met with disapproval and Wigman was commissioned to take over his role.

We know from Goebbal's diary that *Tauwind* was seen to be inadequate and antithetical to the promotion of the Third Reich. Interestingly, the photographs tell the story. The first three images



Laban's *Tauwind*



Laban's *Tauwind*

of *Tauwind* give indications of a work which has no political agenda. The following five images of Wigman's choreography, give impressions of a military nature, and the final representation - hundreds of dancers grouped into the formation of the German Eagle - could not be more politically explicit.

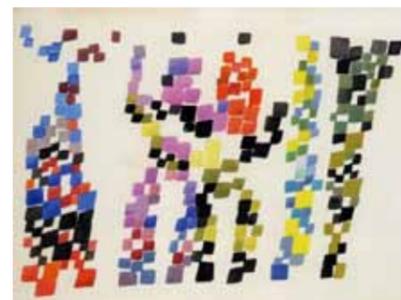


Wigman's 'German Eagle'

The section ends, however, with a lift of spirits. The lineage from Laban to Jooss to Pina Bausch is clearly foregrounded with the showing of two full-length films:- the Joffrey Ballet's performance of *The Green Table* and Bausch's *Rite of Spring*. (This gallery was so packed with visitors, it was impossible to wriggle in.)

With the second theme 'The History of Abstraction' we move on to the impact of technological innovation and the rise of industrialisation on the thinking and practices of artists and dancers. There is rare 1900's film footage of Lois Fuller's *Danse Serpentine*. Arms extended by sticks, swathed in the novelty of electric light and vast quantities of chiffon, she swirls and circles like some alien butterfly. The influence of the new dance forms on the works of visual artists is strongly reflected in this gallery by the chromatic, rhythmic paintings of Sonia Delaunay, Sophie Tauber-Arp and Theo van Doesburg. A quote from Tauber-Arp leads us onwards towards both the notion of the body as machine - exemplified by the Italian Futurists and the Bauhaus's *Triadic Ballet* - and a gallery which features Laban's choreutic models and a number of unexpected and beautiful drawings by Nijinsky.

"She danced and dreamed a triangle, a rectangle, a rectangle in a circle, a circle in a circle, a circle that shines, a circle that rings, a motionless rectangle with lots of little ringing circles, she dreamed night and day of living circles." Tauber-Arp (1920)

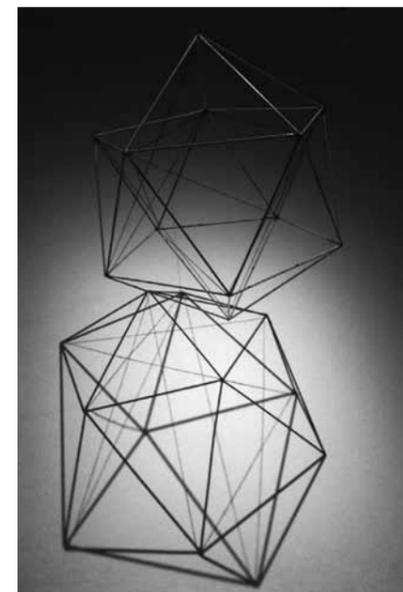


With the 'DANCE AND GEOMETRY' theme we see Nijinsky's five large drawings *Arcs and Segments* (1919) accompanied by a quote which sits in identical alignment with Laban's vision of the architectonics of the dynamic body in space: "The circle is the complete, perfect movement. Everything stems from that: life, art and without a doubt, our art. It is the perfect line." The illustrations of Laban's work amplify and develop Nijinsky's notion of the line.



Nijinsky's *Arcs and Segments*

There is a wealth of material in this gallery. 22 coloured drawings *Space and the Body* run the length of one wall. There is a large display case exhibiting around 20 3-dimensional models (the cube, the icosahedron and so on) from the archive of Albrecht Knust and two fragments of film, *Dance Training at the Rudolf von Laban School in Berlin* (1928). Hanging from the ceiling is an exquisite model of the icosahedron. One wonders what the visitor with little dance knowledge might make of all this. Laban's quote may go some way towards understanding:



Icosahedron

"Movement is more or less living architecture, living through changes of position but also through cohesion. This architecture created by human movement is formed by pathways tracing forms in space, and we call those forms 'trace forms'."

But to the rescue is a video exposition: *Lectures from Improvisation Technologies* (2011) Here William Forsythe demonstrates the ways in which he has assimilated the inspiration of Laban's spatial ideas into his

own teaching and choreography. With the assistance of technological advances we see laser beams trace the geometric forms he inscribes in space as he moves - the line, the arc, the circle, the spiral, the plane. This is a brilliant visual realisation of spatial geometries and clearly an excellent teaching tool. (One of my dance students who saw the exhibition at Christmas, telephoned to tell me she can now SEE what I mean when I speak of the geometry of movement in space.)

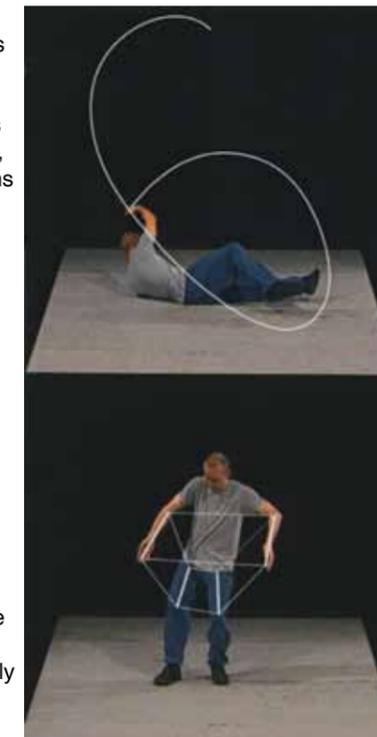


Laban's *Trace Forms*

There was much more to see. I had covered about 60% of the exhibition but at this point both my stamina and my walking shoes gave out. It was time for a stroll in the outside world - and a Parisienne drink. As I descended the endless escalators from the top to the bottom of the Pompidou, Pina's voice from the Wim Wenders film floated in the air: "Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost"

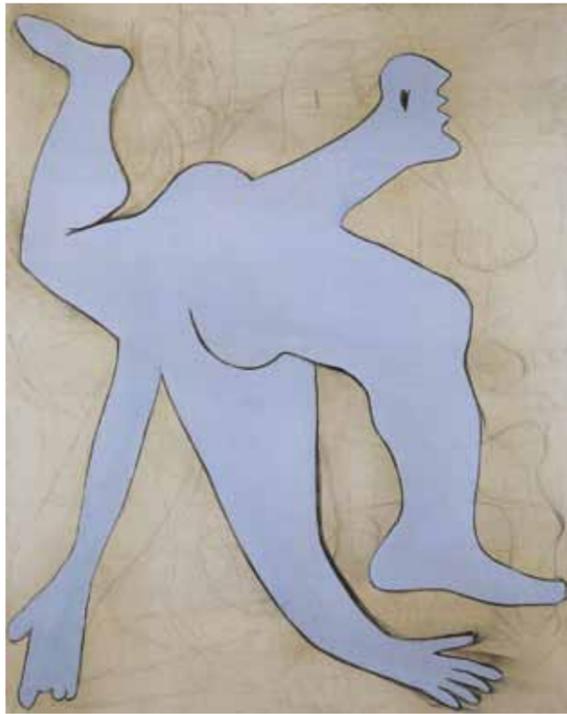
Cathy Washbrooke also attended the exhibition - she takes up from where Anna's feet gave out

After spending four hours in the modernist section of the exhibition, I was keen to track the evolution of dance from the Dada movement through to the current day. In having



Forsythe's *laser beams*

the totality of experience from the early forays into modernism through post modernism into the dance du jour, I could appreciate how post modernism had eclectically borrowed from modernism, whilst professing to reject it - post-modernism questioned and re-contextualised many of the liberating modernist themes; nudity (Anna Halprin), 2-d and 3-d movement (Lucinda Childs), inscription (Trisha Brown, Jackson Pollack) and expression (Fabre) were a few of the fragments of modernism that emerged. In moving through the exhibition, the final section was 'Dance and Performance'. This section of the exhibition examined the link between dance and performance art as well as the visual arts. It is at this point in the exhibition that the definitions of each of the art forms is blurred, epitomised by Allan Kaprow's statement "Young artist of today need no longer say 'I am a painter' or 'a poet' or 'a dancer.' They are simply 'artists'."



Upon entering this section of the exhibition Picasso's *L'acrobate bleu* (1929) presents a new view on the human body and Andre Kertesz presents *Distortion no 128*, (1933)



Distortion no 128 by Andre Kertesz

which uses photographic techniques to present an abstraction of a female body, a grotesque image. This was reflected in the film of Valeska Gert in *Tänzerische Pantomimen* (1925), which captured the grotesque style of her work, presenting contortions of the human face. Had the curators of the exhibition sought a more contemporary version of this famous dancer, they could have looked no further than Liz Aggiss' portrayal of Valeska Gert in *Grotesque Dancer* from 1986. Inclusion of this work would have expanded the meagre exhibits from European performance. I was

particularly disappointed that there were no exhibits of Laban's performance works, which would have exemplified aspects of the grotesque in *Die Grünen Clowns* (1928). Whilst his geometric theories were well represented, a full tribute to his choreographic and performance career was lacking. Indeed part of the exhibition, which runs until April 2012 includes performances, talks and lectures; a fitting inclusion to this programme would be Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Alison Curtis Jones' choreological recreation of Laban's seminal works, the most recent *The Night* 2010 (after Laban's *Die Nacht* 1927).

It was at this point in the exhibition that European dance was obliterated by the American invasion and came to an abrupt end. What did happen in Europe at this time and where is it documented? The dance explosion in the USA deconstructed the total work of art in favour of experimentation, different presentations and representations of the body and dance and performance in conjunction with other art forms. Anna Halprin wrote "That was a time when there were all these interdisciplinary connections; we were breaking down the narrow role of the dancer."



Martha Graham's *Herodiade*

The first of these experiments could be seen in Jackson Pollack's physicalised method of painting. The paint as it hits the canvas traces the pathway of his movement and gives into gravity as it falls onto the canvas, creating arcs, lines, splatters and dots, the paint like a submissive dancer. The result is a painting full of energy and vibrancy and movement. Pollack recalls "It as a great drama ... the flame of explosions when the paint hit the canvas, the dance-like movement". It is in the work *Up to and including her limits* (1973 - 1976) that Pollack epitomises the energy and trace forms of the body in motion. A nude dancer is suspended in a harness above the ground within a white canvas proscenium arch, she draws with crayons as her body is raised and lowered on the harness. In her words "My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestige of the body's energy in motion". I was struck and mesmerised by Jan Fabre's film *When the leading man is a woman* (2004), in which a naked woman moves on the floor working through slippery oil. The oil facilitates sliding, rolling, turning, but the dancer longs to defy gravity and lift up from the floor and stabilise herself, always at the mercy of the slippery substance and its ability to pull her downward. However there was a fabulous dynamic energy that is often not seen in post-modern works that reminded me of the intensity of Wigman's performances. In Anna Halprin's *Paper Dance* (1965), displayed as a film in the exhibition, nude bodies combine with large sheets

of paper which is torn, wrapped around dancers' bodies as they rise and fall to and from the ground, creating a mass of distorted bodies and movement. The effect is that of a mass of movement with sometimes the body and paper unidentifiable from one another.

Other exhibits of note were Allan Kapprow's art installation, complete with a dance score of instructions of what movement to perform in front of each of the panels, a black and white film of Martha Graham's *Herodiade* (1944), together with Isamu Noguchi's sculptures designed for the performance. This is where the curation of the exhibition came into its own, offering an experience just one step away from the live performance experience.



Martha Graham's *Herodiade*

A whole section of the exhibition was dedicated to the iconic Merce Cunningham and the artists of Judson Church and Black Mountain College. One of the most mesmerising exhibits is Andy Warhol's painting of Merce Cunningham in motion, entitled *Merce Cunningham* (1963). The painting epitomises Cunningham's words "You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no painting to show on walls and maybe hung in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but the single fleeting moment when you feel alive". It is this vivacity and energy that can be seen in the painting.

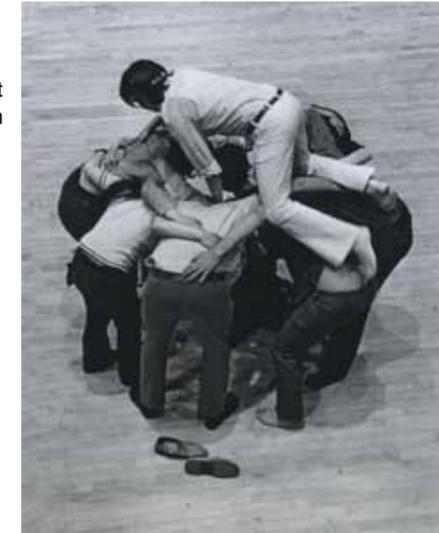
Trisha Brown's *it's a draw* (2002) is a series of untitled drawings which use the 3-d body to create a 2-d record of movement, like a movement notation, created at various galleries around the world. It is full of movement.

"Positioned above a white sheet of paper, with charcoal in hands and feet, Brown falls toward the paper, dragging dusty black marks along with her. *It's a draw* records her movements, but also engages the audience in a historical debate about how dance is archived ... The most famous notation systems are Laban and Benesh, all of which Brown appears to be referencing in a more personal and archaic way".



Photos of the exhibits were taken by Cathy Washbrooke

It crystallises Trisha Brown's forays into the visual arts as well dance, dancers as artists and dancers; as she says "I move the body as I would a pencil".



Huddle by Simone Forti

Further developments and experiments by people such as Lucinda Childs, in presenting the mathematics of dance, in *Dance* (1979), Simone Forti's *Huddle* (1969), in presenting a huddle of bodies as sculpture and Babette Mangolte's photographs of Yvonne Rainer's *Boxes* (1973), tested the 2-d and 3-d forms of movement and dance and visual art, often blurring the boundaries.

Yvonne Rainer's *Boxes* - Babette Mangolte



This is where my journey ended, having spent seven hours in the exhibition and still more to see. I had fully neglected Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ange Leccia's experiments with dance as entertainment in the artistic world.

As I was about to leave I heard the song *I like to Move it, Move it!* made famous by the children's film *Madagascar*. Intrigued by it I managed to nudge my way in to a film of Jérôme Bel's *The Show must go on* (2001) to see how about twenty dancers could indeed "move it" in their own unique way. The exhibition had presented diverse and unique manifestations of movement and dance in 2- and 3-d, sometimes challenging, sometimes mediocre, but always thought provoking and a delight.

The exhibition at the Pompidou Centre runs until April 2, 2012. For further details see www.centrepompidou.fr