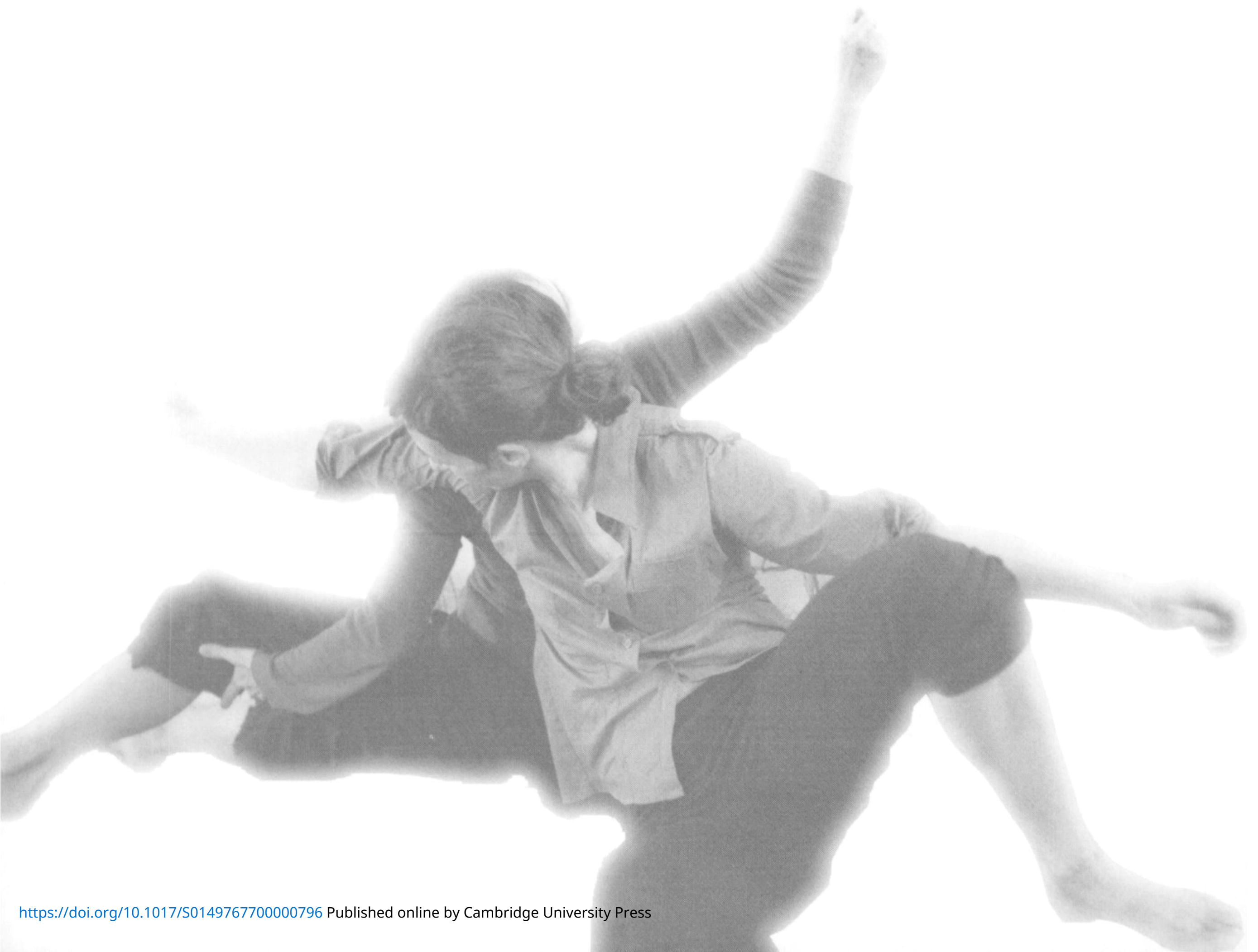

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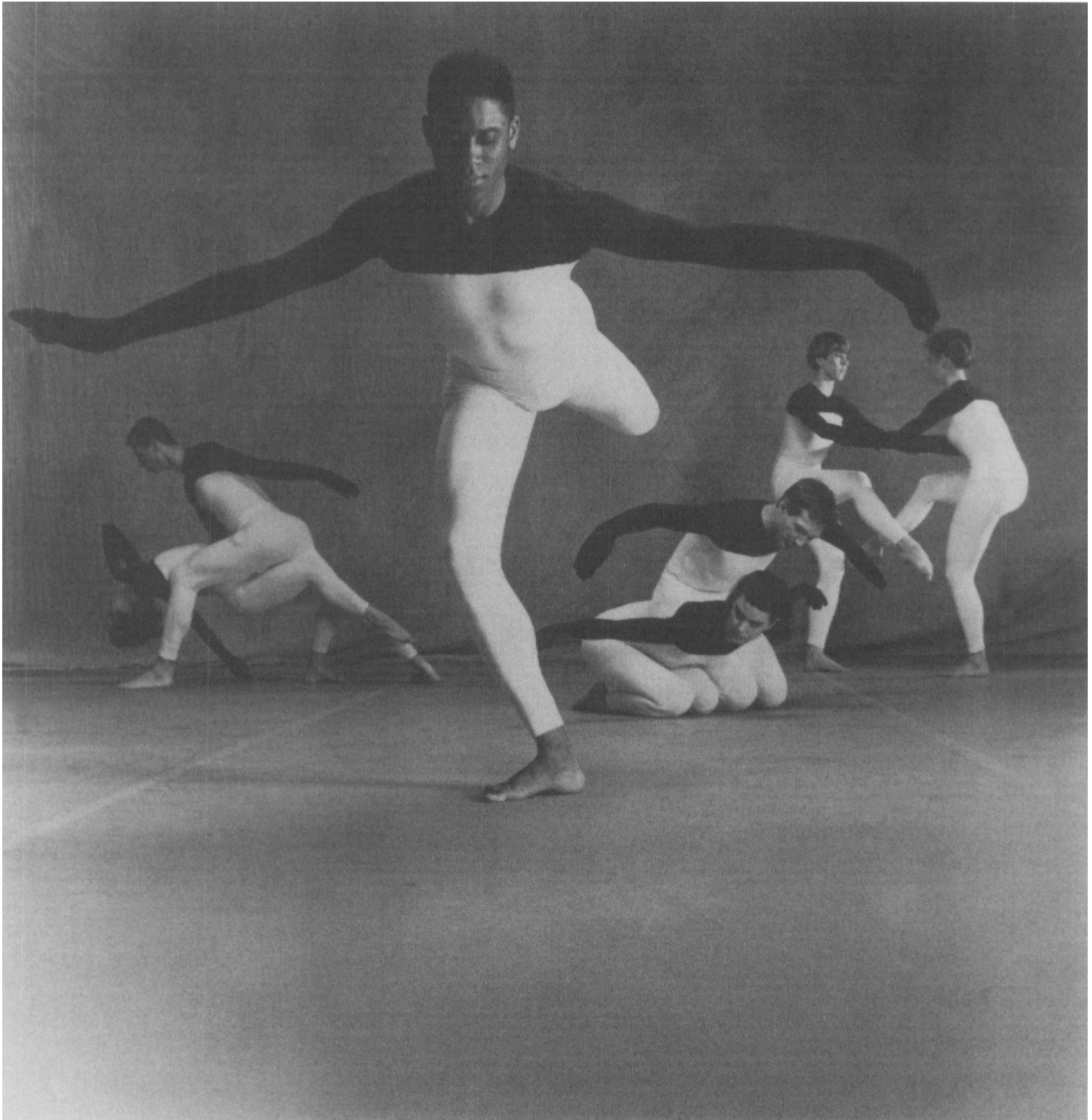

Photo 1. Dancers: Michael Cole (center front) and members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in "Beach Birds" (1991). Photo by Michael O'Neill.

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Dancing the Animal to Open the Human: For a New Poetics of Locomotion

Gabriele Brandstetter

Animals have provided a theme and a model for movements in dance from time immemorial. But what image of man do danced animal portrayals reflect? What questions of human identity and crisis do they reveal? Do the bodies of animals provide symbolic material for the ethical, political, and aesthetic questions raised by man's mastery of nature?

The exploration of the boundary between man and animal—in myths and sagas, in the earliest records of ritual and art, and in the history of knowledge—is part of the great nature-versus-nurture debate. In the Bible the relationship is clear: Adam, made in the image of God, gives the animals in Paradise their names. In this way he rules over them—but Thomas Aquinas's commentary on this biblical text makes clear that the act of naming animals in Paradise is a step toward man's experiential self-discovery. Since then the hierarchy seems to be beyond doubt. *Homo sapien,* as the *animal significans,* is distinguished from other animals by his ability to speak, his upright gait, the use of his hands, and the capacity to use instruments and media—man as what Sigmund Freud called the "prosthetic god" (1966, 44). Philosophers and scientists explore the differences and the similarities between man and animal in order to determine what is specifically human. According to Hegel, man is the animal that knows it is an animal and is consequently able to transcend the animal sphere (1967, 706). Idealist philosophers have used this metaphor to describe man's self-reflection and knowledge of his own finiteness. For their part, scientists and artists are interested in the manifestations of the relationship between animal and man: on the one hand, in the human in the animal—in the countless

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images and myths of anthropomorphic animals and hybrids that are half-animal, half-human; and on the other, in the animal in man—the consequent humbling of human arrogance by Darwin, since whom behavioral research and genetic biology have reduced in equal measure the gulf between man and animal in evolutionary history (99 percent of the genomes of humans and chimpanzees are identical). *Our Inner Ape* is the title of a recent book by behavioral scientist Frans de Waal (2005), who engages in primate research.

The current topical debate on animals and the limits of the human is of importance as much to the theory of knowledge as for its political, ethical, or critical implications. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben sees in it a "fundamental metaphysico-political operation in which alone something like 'man' can be decided upon and produced" (2004, 21), since the decisive conflict in our Western culture is the human-animal divide. It is a conflict that drives the management and utilization of life by means of biopolitical strategies. Through his engagement with Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault, Agamben inquires into the "human element" in view of the caesura between man and animal, between body and soul and *logos* in the tradition of Western thought:

> What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work in these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. (2004, 16)

An opposite perspective is adopted by historians of science who see the boundary between man and animal not as determined by man's arrogance and power over animals but rather, in the terms of Arnold Gehlen's anthropological view of *homo sapiens,* as a *homo inermis* (*inermis* defined as unarmed, defenseless)—that is, a being that makes use of cultural and media techniques to compensate for what nature has denied him. Thus, science looks at man through the eyes of the animal—in other words, at human failings—which is also a form of anthropocentrism, albeit a positive rather than a negative one. The animal, according to Benjamin Bühler and Stefan Rieger (2006), thus becomes a figure of knowledge and science: a "research" figure.

Is the animal not a "research" figure in dance as well? Is it not a figure that promises a different knowledge, a different experience of the body, of movement, as a transitional figure that stands for the transformation and self-transcendence of the human? In order to systematize to some extent the extremely diverse forms of animal portrayal in dance, I shall divide the numerous issues involved into three broad areas of the animal-human relationship in dance:

1. Animal dances and the relation between ritual and (animal) imitation
2. A poetics of the dance based on animal transformation
3. Biopolitics of the animal as dance/performance

What does the animal in dance stand for? Unlike literature (whether fable, allegory, or satire) or the plastic arts, in which animals appear as vehicles for human qualities (and

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often as a moral mirror), the use of "similarities" or resemblances between men and animals in dance rarely consists of such anthropomorphism. For dance and choreography do not focus on the ability to speak, or on other manifestations of cleverness in animals with imaginary human characteristics such as the "cunning fox," for example. Dance shows the distinction between man and animal more in the figuration of the body, in metamorphosis, in specific movements, and in the shaping of space. If the question of the human-animal hierarchy and man's mastery over the animal is always a result of discursive strategies and logocentrism, it seems that the *physical* reflection of the "animal" and "animal locomotion"[1] in dance also implies the possibility of giving movement expression to the fleetingness, the vulnerability, the aliveness of the "Other."

Animal Dances: Ritual and Mimesis

The caesura between man and animal runs *through* man, it bisects his inner being. This knowledge has shaped human attitudes to animals from time immemorial. The oldest animal portrayals, in the cave paintings of the Palaeolithic Age, show this. The hybrids—phantoms of the animal-man—show the animal face as a mask man slips on in which to present himself. The research of palaeographers and anthropologists, however, tell us little about the rituals of the animal dances in nomadic hunter cultures. Reports of cultic practices and animal dance rituals often refer to shamanistic and totemic cults. The "hunting spell" is aimed at gaining power over animal species being hunted—fish, buffalo, bears, turtles—whose ghosts are conjured up by mask and mimicry in the ritual dance movement and symbolically vanquished in anticipation of the hunt. By the same token, the conjuring up of the ghosts of killed animals *after* the hunt is reconciliation through dance, in which the dance serves as a magic spell designed to ward off the slaughtered creature's revenge. It amounts to an appeasement ritual—called a "comedy of innocence" by the classical philologist Walter Burkert—celebrated in dance through the imitation and assimilation of animal nature. The descriptions of anthropologists may give us some idea of these cults, but our vision is always clouded by attributions of meaning to them that can easily blind us to the great gaps in our knowledge.

We should perhaps note a paradox of these animal dances. The dancer dons a mask or adopts the movements of an animal, dissimulating his "human" nature by presenting himself as "animal" for *cultural* reasons. And by so doing, by becoming an animal, he underlines his continuing existence as a man. Something of this paradox may also be seen in modernist choreography influenced by the new discipline of anthropology and its discovery of rites of passage and initiation. Vaslav Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) shows us such a sacrificial ceremony in the form of a fertility ritual taken from a legendary "heathen" Slavdom. Against the mythological backdrop of the stage sets created by Nicholas Roerich the (female) human sacrifice is surrounded by the Elders performing an animal dance dressed in bearskins. Not a few of the countless versions of *Rite* refer—often critically—to this shamanistic staging of a ritual conjuring of nature. Marie Chouinard, for example, created a magic atmosphere of the hybridity of man and nature by having the animal-human chimeras appear in bizarre antler masks.[2] The politically engaged Martin

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Stiefermann choreographs the *Rite* myth as a history of political power, of perpetrator and victim in a history of "homo sacer."[3] We are entitled to ask if the fashion for "eccentric dances" in early twentieth-century dance halls was not a colonial legacy of this history, in that it subjected and dominated the "Other" while at the same time assimilated and appeased its revenge through the ritual of dance. Under such suggestive names as the Turkey Trot, the Fish Tail, the Kangaroo Dip, the Grizzly Bear and—the only one that survives today—the Foxtrot, ballroom dances of Afro-American origin conquered the dance floors of the Roaring Twenties. Parts of the body—pelvis, hips, shoulders, dangling arms, and legs—were moved in isolation from one another with pantomimic elements of the animals from which they took their names. But it was not the animals who provided the masks for the new way of moving; rather, the animals were stand-ins for the other, colonially downtrodden, race of men. The oppression of the black population and the parodic miming and assimilation of this spurned "animal" side of human nature furnished a grotesque situation in which the white population enjoyed its liberation from "inhibitions of movement" while observing itself in the mirror. It showed once again that the boundary between man and animal runs *through* man. This shifting back and forth between coveting and demonizing the "animal" element makes one thing clear: men have always done to one each other as they have done to animals.

Poetics of the Dance Epitomized by the Swan

If we look at the Western theatrical dance of the nineteenth century—especially ballet—we may ask which animals are preferred for presentation purposes and which are excluded. Unlike literature or the plastic arts, which are full of apes and dogs, donkeys and cattle, the ballet does not exactly seem to favor these animals. Neither the mirror of anthropomorphism (the monkey) nor the world of domestic and farm animals holds any appeal for classical dance. This might be due to the fact that the cultural effect of domestication—of taming wild animals—cannot be of interest for a dance form like ballet that is defined by the very fact that it "tames" the nature of man, subjecting it to a rigorous discipline by artificially transforming the body into a precise and precious instrument of the dance. Yet surprisingly enough it is animals that dominate the poetics of nineteenth-century ballet. They are admittedly animals that, being untamed, represent the unforeseeable, enjoy freedom of movement, and inhabit a sphere that is closed to earthbound man: the air. Thus, it is the spirits of the air—sylphs and butterflies—and the birds that embody the dream of flying and floating above the earth, whether in fairytale motifs as in *Swan Lake, The Firebird,* and later or in technological utopias, ranging from Icarus-like flying experiments to the futuristic man-machine hybrids in "Aerodanza."[4] The epitome of a romantic poetry based on grace of movement is the swan, which since ancient times has been a symbol of the minstrel and the bard; legend has it that the swan song is the last elegiac song before death. The association between Richard Wagner and Ludwig II made the swan a cult figure both through the royal emblem of Hohenschwangau and Neuschwanstein, which displays the majestic animal, and in the Swan Knight saga in

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Wagner's opera *Lohengrin.* Given this context, it is easy to see why the Tchaikovsky/ Petipa fairytale ballet *Swan Lake* produced the effect it did in an art scene highly charged with symbols. It was also very much in the tradition of nineteenth-century ballet that the aesthetics of the "white act" should attain an apex in the swan décor, and the strict code of the well-organized, clearly geometrized ballet vocabulary experienced a transformation and versatility in those elements that symbolically imitate the animal in soft arm movements and inclinations of the head and shoulders.

Yet it seems paradoxical that the same ballet aesthetics that celebrate the elegance, grace, and weightlessness of the human body should illustrate the autonomy of its ideal movements in and through the impersonation of an animal. It is as if the otherness, the divinity, of the animal were to show itself in the subjection of *human* nature. Michel Fokine's solo *The Dying Swan,* which he created for Anna Pavlova, compresses all these features of the swan myth.[5] This brief piece, set to the music of Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of Animals,* consists primarily of small *pas de bourrées* executed *en pointe,* as the ballerina clad in a swan costume glides across the stage, pausing to perform the wing and neck movements of the animal, only to sink in the final phase of death: elegiac, poetic, and spectacularly free of virtuosity. But does the assimilation, the re-semblance, of the swan really consist in imitations of movements, as the play of arms—interpreted as wing movements—seems to suggest?

Mimesis

In their important study of mimesis, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (1992) make it clear that any concept of mimesis limiting itself to "imitation" is inadequate. This would primarily cover the "Simia" aspect, as illustrated in the English verb "to ape": it has long been known that the "imitation" practiced by primates in the use of tools, for example, is far from being *mere* imitation. Gebauer and Wulf stress that mimesis means not only to imitate but also to make oneself similar to, to make an appearance, express, and invite imitation. In short, mimesis plays a role not only in art and aesthetics but in all fields of human action that involve imagining, speaking, and thinking.

In *Poetics* Aristotle (1961) defined "mimesis" in anthropological terms as a capacity that man shares with others (for example, with animals). Nevertheless "the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation [mimesis] learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt at things imitated" (55).

Pavlova's swan is not an imitation of the animal. It is a second-degree mimesis, a reference to the swan aesthetic in the classical ballet of the nineteenth century; it is a replica, a *poetic condensation* into a solo of the Tchaikovsky-Petipa work. At the end of one dance era and at the beginning of a new aesthetic paradigm in 1909—one hundred years ago—with the Ballets Russes, Fokine's *Dying Swan* for Anna Pavlova is both an imitation of a ballet aesthetic and a foreshadowing. The modernist break with the past is clearly forecast by this solo piece in the split between the *en pointe* steps of classical ballet and the beginnings of the dance of expression as seen in the gestures of the up-

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per body. This break, which seems to have been healed again in the image of the gliding swan since—gliding as opposed to flying—was soon to become an important theme in connection with the "flow of movement" in modern dance.

A second example that I would like to present here also seems to establish a balletic relation to "birds," even if the aesthetic is a quite different one. Merce Cunningham's *Beach Birds* is a piece for eleven dancers set to *FOUR* by John Cage; it premiered in Zurich in 1991 (Vaughan 1997, 258). Shortly thereafter, Cunningham produced a slightly altered film version of this piece designed by Elliot Caplan—*Beach Birds for Camera*—and it is to this version I shall refer here (Vaughan 1997, 302). The dancers, clad in full-length unisex leotards divided at the level of the arms (upper part black, lower part white), are spread out across the room in different lines of vision. Out of slightly vibrating movements of the outstretched arms accompanied by *demi-pliés*, various more complex spatial relations crystallize into new steps and arm combinations, alternately performed individually and in group unison, becoming turns and small leaps. At the same time the hands, which are covered in black gloves, are never relaxed; they maintain the conduct of the arm as associated with the image of the tips of wings.

There is no narration. Decisions on the forms and directions of movement were made by means of aleatory procedures. It is not meaning, expression, or narrative that determines Cunningham's choreographic program but the thing itself—in accordance with Cunningham's famous statement: "When I dance, it means: this is what I am doing. A thing is just that thing" (1978, 310). Nevertheless, a visual and kinaesthetic impression is created for the spectator that translates this formalistic and/or minimalistic choreographic approach into images. Since neither the music nor a narrative structure coordinates the movements, the impression is created of a self-regulating system of movements on the flocking model (Brandstetter 2007, 65–69). John Cage said of Merce Cunningham's choreography that it required "the ability of kinaesthetic perception. That is the ability that we use when watching a flock of birds we identify with them to the point where we ourselves have the feeling of soaring, swooping and gliding" (qtd. in Kostelanetz 1983, 110).

Where are the resemblances between animals and man? And where have the clear dividing lines become blurred? These questions require a detailed investigation of the choreography of *Beach Birds* in terms of its spatial constellation and of the poses that trigger, in what one might call a base-tilt structure, resemblances to the bird image. Following Walter Benjamin, one could understand this kind of figuration—between mimesis and abstraction—as animal *ornament*. In a study for his essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1978), Benjamin said: "Ornament is close to dance. It is a course of instruction on the creation of resemblance."[6] So are we concerned here with creating resemblance? Are we dealing with a mode of reproduction in the sense of mimesis? Or does such a relationship between model and reproduction only arise retrospectively (in the eye of the observer and his/her interpretation)?

On the question of the extent to which the spectator turns the movements of choreographies into images and associates them with models, William Forsythe has told the following anecdote. One evening after the show he was approached by an enthusiastic member of the audience who assured him he had now understood what this play/chore-

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ography was about; and in response to Forsythe's expectant glance he said conspiratorially: "Seagulls!" Forsythe's comment on this interpretation was "Of course I nodded." In Cunningham's *Beach Birds* such a "resemblance" is created—and yet it is not. "Seagulls"? The image is flawed. The very term "beach bird" is *not* a generic term for "dove" or sandpiper . . . and could not the black and white colors of the leotards suggest a magpie equally well? It seems here that the moving images are more in search of a model of "animal locomotion" than the other way round. In terms of language, optics, and gesture, the relation to a bird image is *suggested* by the title, but the tension of the choreography arises from a structural *difference* from this suggestion. The movement and the *relationships* between the movements of the dancers evade explicitness, thus cancelling out the title and the expectations associated with the terms "animal" and "dance" by relegating decision and interpretation to the realm of aesthetic experience. One could therefore understand the constellational aspect of choreography and its relation to the spectator in terms of Walter Benjamin's idea of the "flash" of nonsensuous similarity (Benjamin 1978, 335). Not expression (in the sense of mimesis) but a "showing" in which there is always a suggestion of a "showing of oneself" in the physical-gesticulatory-material sense (Boehm 2007) is at the core of Cunningham's concept of an aesthetics of motion.

Biopolitics of the Animal

The transition to the twenty-first century once again raises the question of the boundary between human and animal, which is aggravated by changed technological and mediatic conditions. Working animals and working men have long been replaced by machines. Animals now appear in *virtual* form, cute and anthropomorphic in science fiction, advertising, and films, or as grotesque hybrids like Miss Piggy or Spiderman. The animal appears not as a symbol of a coveted body but as a symptom of a political situation. "*Man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*," writes Agamben (2004, 26; emphasis in the original). The specifically human is (also) the inhuman; and the use of those strategies that Agamben, like Foucault, describes as biopolitics generally conceals what one is excluding by drawing and redrawing the boundary between human and animal as the effect of what Agamben calls the "anthropological machine" (2004, 26). Dance performances expose these awkward questions to close scrutiny. The view of the animal is no longer determined by imitation or a poetics of transcending the human but rather by the encounter with the concrete materiality of the body and the idea of hybrids—cyborg figurations made up of human, animal, and electronic machines. Choreographer Jan Fabre is constantly exploring such boundaries between the human and the animal, which, once placed *inside* the performative framework, end up by bursting out of it. Animals appear on stage, but they are not performing for a trainer. On the contrary, the twenty cats that share the stage with Els Deceukelier in *Vervalsing zoals ze is, onvervalst* (1992) appear to be the exact opposite of a stage appearance. The "animal" is in the freedom of unforeseeable movement; the crying of the cats in their envelope-bursting physicality is an open-ended process. In this work, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui performed his first solo, which Wim Vandekeybus choreographed for him, under the heading of *It*. Otherness is designated by

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the neuter pronoun. At the premiere in Avignon the dancer had a donkey on stage with him; later the donkey reappeared in a video projection. This media hybridization shifts the boundaries between the material body and its representation. It is not the animal body but the video as a media construction of the animal-man relationship that drives the relationship with the Other.

The question arises as to whether we—in the relationship between human culture and animal nature—have now arrived at the other side of the story of creation mentioned at the outset, at a point of "decreation." It is no longer the relationship between man and animal that scientists and artists must examine but the insoluble life- and species-threatening strategies of biopolitical power: "[i]f at the center of the open lies the undisconcealedness of the animal, then at this point we must ask: what becomes of this relationship? In what way can man let the animal, upon whose suspension the world is held open, be?" (2004, 91). Following this formulation of Agamben's, we may ask where dance comes in.

It seems to me that this is a direct challenge to the critical engagement of artists who work with body and movement. Take, for example, William Forsythe's recent works, in which he raises subversive objections to human creative optimism: in *Decreation* (2003), with body and voice in the second part of *Three Atmospheric Studies* (2005/2006), in *Heterotopia* (2006), and in *Defenders* (2007). These works feature not just body movements but electronically amplified, defamiliarized sounds indistinguishable as human or animal. It is no longer a question of "imitation" but of dissimilarity. And a formulation like "the cry of the tormented creature" would be far too histrionic for these loud bodies. But we must persist in our efforts to meet the ethical challenge of discovering whether that which is "human" in our world—despite the human urge to dominate the Other—might re-emerge within the injured, the spurned, and the ungovernable. "Decreation" means de-creation. As Agamben puts it: "*Man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*" (2004, 26). To do this, he must begin to decreate himself.

Translated from the German by Iain W. M. Taylor

Notes

1. The term "animal locomotion" includes here—even if not extensively analyzed—the connection between dance and kinematic media as perception matrix. See Eadweard Muybridge's cinematographic studies (1887; 1901/1955).

2. Chouinard, *The Rite of Spring,* National Arts Centre, Ottowa, Canada, 1993.

3. Stiefermann's *Rite of Spring,* premiered at the Oldenburgisches Staatstheater in 2005, makes reference to Georgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1998).

4. This was the title of Fedele Azari's aerial theater. For more on this, and on Marinetti's "Danse de l'Aviateur," see Brandstetter (1995, 392–407).

5. It should be mentioned here that the Russian word for swan, *lebed,* is feminine, an additional indication of gender politics in the aesthetics of nineteenth-century ballet.

6. Benjamin adds that one would have to consult Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* on this. See Benjamin (1991, 2.3:957).

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