



## Poetics of Contemporary Dance

Poetics of Contemporary Dance by Laurence Louppe. Translated by Sally Gardner. 2010. Alton, UK: Dance Books. 265 pp. including notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.  
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Sally Gardner's translation of Laurence Louppe's *Poétique de la Danse Contemporaine* (Louppe 1997) is a welcome addition to Louppe's papers (also translated by Gardner) in the Australian journal, *Writings on Dance*.<sup>1</sup> This book adds an important new voice to the modest list of works on contemporary dance composition in English.

Louppe is quick to acknowledge "an immense foundation of work (*travail*)," citing (as well as recuperating and critiquing) texts by Laban and his followers, Humphrey, Horst, Shawn, Martin, and Foster, along with the writings of other choreographer-theorists such as Wigman, Graham, Hawkins, Nikolais, Cunningham (and dancers), and Rainer, and French artists such as Odile Duboc, Dominique Dupuy, and Dominique Bagouet. The work of Trisha Brown is an important benchmark across the book. This field of past research provides both the historical context and conceptual frameworks for Louppe's monograph, which draws French dance of the 1980s and 1990s rather belatedly into English discourse on the subject. And with its generous references to major players in French dance theory (Isabelle Ginot, Michèle Fevre, Daniel Dobbels, Bernard Rémy, and Odile Roquet, particularly in the journals *Marsyas* and *Nouvelles de Danse*), it is a treasure trove for non-French speakers.

The dazzling terms of reference Louppe sets up as she proceeds go a long way toward repositioning the creative practice of contemporary dance within the humanities, providing evidence that "its originality and autonomy are profound" (9). Louppe's use of *contemporary* as an umbrella for the still debatable use of the terms *modern* and *postmodern* in dance is strategic in placing the art form within the broader and interdisciplinary field of contemporary arts: "For me, contemporary dance

only exists from the moment that the idea of a 'non-transmitted' movement language first appeared at the beginning of the century" (17). The art form is pitched as "one of the major artistic phenomena of the twentieth century," which "in the space of several decades . . . has become an exemplary force for integrating and expressing the consciousness of our time" (xx–xxi). And this is not empty rhetoric; Louppe goes on to demonstrate the ways in which dance "reveals the powerful source of the imaginary" (55), how the "corporeal signature" demonstrates ideology and history through its unfolding in movement (92), and how contemporary dance challenged narrative and central conflict as structuring models by refusing "perspective and linear logic" (168). Along with voices directly related to the field of modern and contemporary dance, which Louppe deftly scatters across the book in support of her major themes, is a refreshingly eclectic approach to theory that ranges across philosophers of the twentieth century—Deleuze, Valéry, Foucault, Kristeva, and Agamben—among many others. Her field of reference also ranges much further, to biomechanics, gestural theory, and aesthetic theory, particularly from the visual arts and cinema. This is the network of phenomena, activities, and ideas within which Louppe positions contemporary dance as a major force.

In support of this disciplinary assertion, across the book Louppe pitches a convincing case regarding the characteristics and accompanying compositional processes specific to the discipline of dance, jettisoning terms from other art forms that dominate the majority of dance composition texts from Horst and Humphrey through Smith-Autard. She even shrugs off ballet as a major precedent with liberating swagger, citing the imagined but not-yet-existent dances pined for by Dalcroze, Nietzsche, and Wagner: "At the beginning there was no relation, no conflict: simply another place... [Modern dance] did not grow out of dance but from an absence of dance" (25–6). At the center of her understanding of the project of contemporary dance is the assertion that "action is the consciousness of a subject in the world" (23), which is echoed by

Vivian Sobchack: “Intentionality (in life as in dance) is motility” (Sobchack 2005, 57). The central characteristic of dance then, for Louppe, is the explicit rejection of the mind/body divide—a rejection realized through other characteristics: a focus on original movement, work on the materiality of the body, “the non-anticipation of form” (17), then more specifically, the importance of the torso and spine as opposed to bodily extremities associated with the gestures of communication, what the spine offers for successive movement, and the central function of the effect of gravity on weight (31–2).

As Gardner clarifies in her introduction, *expérience* in French means both experience/experiment (xiv). Louppe’s definition of the choreographic journey as *an experimental experience* sets the specific parameters for her study; her book is peopled by radical figures in dance whose research propelled them toward “heterogeneous and profoundly individual vision[s]” (45). From this general characteristic of singular experimentation, Louppe then defines the process of contemporary dance composition as a setting of limitations among the plethora of possible movements; a simple but important statement, given that any movement whatever describes the broad field of contemporary dance practices, according to Louppe (and evoking Deleuze).

This brings us to Louppe’s definition of “poetics,” which frames the entire thesis of the book. For Louppe, a study of the poetics of an art form throws light on its operations and practices: “[it] invites us to focus upon the resources that the practice itself has chosen” (12). This apparent focus on discipline-specific processes and strategies is partnered by another aspect of poetics: “[It] places the work of art at the heart of a shared work,” involving both the ordinary artistic gesture and the “*aesthesis*” it produces, *aesthesis* being a “sensing which acts before any conceptualisation” (which bears some resemblance to Deleuzian *affect*) (4). Like Lyotard’s gestural exchange provoked by the work of art (Lyotard 1993, 37–48), Louppe’s understanding of poetics allows for rigorous attention to the characteristic elements, terms of production and mode of circulation particular to a given art work or, in this case, art form. This attention to the work of *the work* sits squarely with Louppe’s aims to assert the discipline of dance within its

twentieth-century milieu, and her bower-bird approach to theory, which never overwhelms her subject but provides the right support.

Two key references, besides Laban, around whose ideas the book is structured are François Delsarte and Hubert Godard, who have much in common. Louppe asserts the “epistemological rupture” (xxii) enacted by dance early in the twentieth century and builds a case for Delsarte as the instigator who marked a shift from the mimetic to the symbolic function of human movement. As an example of Louppe’s reference points that originate beyond dance, the work of this French singer and actor, who developed an original training system for voice and gesture (referred to as a “system of expression”), is recuperated from his associations with histrionic acting modes through attention to his original writings—texts that have been overshadowed by the writings of his American disciples. These reveal his belief in a natural correspondence between mind and body, and his faith in corporeal knowledge and the expressive potential of the body beyond the spoken word. For this reason Louppe can declare that “François Delsarte was out of time” (28), breaking as he did with the mimetic models that had dominated the science of movement as defined by Abbé Dinard, Johann Jacob Engels, John Weaver, and others. Louppe demonstrates how Delsarte unhinged human movement from “enunciative organisation” (29) allowing for the birth of contemporary dance through what Godard calls “untoward movement,” “owing its conditions of existence only to itself” (31). Godard brings Delsarte up to date with a current and more physiologically (rather than spiritually) grounded perspective on the connections between corporeal movement and expression (Brannigan 2011, 91). Working across the fields of dance studies, movement analysis or kinesiology, rehabilitation, and biomechanics, his ideas about the source of human movement and the corporeal conditions of movement production appear to inform Louppe’s approach as a whole.

Within the field of dance theory, it is rare to find a writer who will take on the task of speaking for an entire field of practice characterized by “singularity.” And while Louppe states that “[t]his study does not propose a new methodology for understanding the dancing body” (18), she manages to proffer some parameters of the form that remain true to the project of

contemporary dance as she understands it, as a process of “becoming a body which is not given in advance” (50). Louppe is not interested in an approach focused on interpretation and decoding meaning, but rather “the implicit prerequisites out of which the realm of appearances opens up” (46). This is a book in the Labanian tradition of movement analysis, and the large middle section titled “The Tools” covers the body, breath, weight, movement, style, time, flow, space, and composition. I cannot do justice to the depth and detail with which Louppe treats each topic, but will attempt to give a sense of the scope of her project.

Louppe emphasizes the multifunctioning of the body in the choreographic context—its relational, intellectual, expressive, and sensual functions. Regarding “the poetic body,” she describes processes resisting the scopic and grounded in sensations, intensities, and imagination, “where the body-subject goes looking for itself” (39): Pilates, ideokinesis, Feldenkrais, Alexander, contact improvisation, and Butoh. These are methodologies where the good/bad paradigm is suspended, and the work of movement discovery can begin. She describes a focus in these techniques on body zones “which have not yet mastered a discourse . . . (the chest, the thorax, back, and shoulders)” (41), tracing back to Nijinsky a reformulation of the geography of the body to open up movement possibilities, and citing other historical examples of object-like heads and unsupportive feet. Another important facet of the poetic body of contemporary dance is, for Louppe, the transsubjectivity that it enables—a concept developed more recently in Foster’s *Choreographing Empathy* (2011).<sup>2</sup>

In developing dance specific frameworks for thinking dance, Louppe’s discussion of breath and weight are pivotal. In a beautiful description, Louppe evokes breath as that which “connects outside and inside” the body, and marks the body as a place of passage. Breath also forms the foundations of phrasing (after Humphrey), expression (after Graham), and the fuel for flight (55–6). Breath, along with weight, constitutes for Louppe the main connections to “the body’s memory [of] fundamental movements” (57), one-half of a two-way pull that orients contemporary dance always toward the unknown, while maintaining an anchor in archaic continuities. Weight is also “the least objectifiable and least figurative element,” and thus is integral to the capacity

for dance to escape mimesis and representation (77). Flow involving weight, tension, tone, accent, force, rhythm, and energy is directly related to the physiological operations of the muscles, and via Dalcroze, is discovered to be the original model for sound—“*sforzando, crescendo, decrescendo*” (112–3). It is this kind of intervention into the established evolution of the arts that is so exciting in this book—the proposition that embodied sensation was the originator of sonic production. Of course this was how Dalcroze formulated a new relationship between musicality and movement. For Louppe, it is this set of elements that mobilizes the transsubjective aspect of the contemporary dancer, and connects us all to the duration that flows.

Louppe’s accounts of space and time are exhaustive regarding the manner in which both are produced by the body. Space as a partner, a force, within the body and without, something to move through and that which moves through us, is produced by us and produces our dance. But space is not place, and there is room for Louppe to elaborate on site-specific works and the tyranny of the proscenium architecture on “our own mental and imaginative spaces” (129). Time is discussed as a vector for “an act,” the “objective” of work (Cunningham), created through movement (Dalcroze), emerging as a poetic force and produced through phrasing (from the breath) as the *moment*, the *interval*, and the *present*. But it is also something to be suspicious of—it is the immaterial element within a physical toolbox, but can run like a railroad across the sensibilities, “devour[ing] bodies” (109).

The last third of the book in which Louppe telescopes out to consider theme, intention (*propos*), composition, and *écriture* is as interesting as her reconsideration of movement fundamentals. Louppe’s unpacking and clarification of the stages of creative process in dance revolutionizes the tired approach to “intention” espoused in current literature, and I will quote at length:

At the beginning of any piece there are two things or at least one: the intention (*propos*) and theme. The theme is what is given first, and is the basis upon which an understanding can be shared. The “propos” is more an objective or intentionality. . . . The intention

only reveals itself during the workshoping process. But it may also be inscribed before this process: if only to be eliminated. In certain practices the intention is not to have one. One wants to begin naked . . . and to wait for a diffuse and unanticipated poetic matter to be elaborated between the dancers. (187)

So theme or *reference* could constitute the translatable initiator of a work, and intention is a set of temporary and anticipatory ideas and positions that ebb, flow, and dissolve as the work emerges. Louppe states: “The gap which can exist between the reference and the intention is one of the most beautiful conquests of contemporary dance” (188). Composition is then associated with the *travail* or work carried out in process “(*componere*: to put together)” (150), and perhaps is the most analyzable aspect of dance despite the endless options offered by dance composition, including the many strategies detailed in the book including “collision, ellipses or condensation” (193); accumulation and displacement (164); and interleaving, superimposition, rounds, and retrogrades (165). So composition, and the improvisatory mode so essential to it, are different again from what Louppe refers to as the *écriture* of the work: how it is perceived, which, one presumes, may be independent of the *intention* and *theme* and more connected with *style* which shapes “the whole message of the dance” (95). It is the result of the “work” of the composition, “which is a kind of laboratory for the *écriture*” (151). And it is this laboratory that haunts Louppe’s discussion of the art of choreography, lingering in the shadows as a place she has visited, taken part in, and accessed through discussions and texts. For a dance theorist, an interest in composition seems to demand an encounter with the studio.

Louppe’s *Poetics of Contemporary Dance* is an informed, rigorous, idiosyncratic, “singular,” and original contribution to the discourse on contemporary dance in keeping with her understanding of its broader project. What is also exciting for a writer in Australia is the possibility of writing one’s local/national community of artists into a book dealing with universal

concerns for the discipline, rather than perpetually looking to international case studies for many reasons beyond the quality of the work itself and what it offers to discourse.

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## Notes

1. See also Gardner’s “Translating Laurence Louppe” (2010), which she wrote after translating *Poetics of Contemporary Dance* and which makes a good companion to the book in terms of issues relating to language. Gardner also offers some insights into Louppe’s project in the book.

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## Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet

*Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet by Jennifer Homans. 2010. New York: Random House. 643 pp., illustrations, index. \$35.00 hard cover.*

*Mirrors & Scrim: The Life and Afterlife of Ballet by Marcia B. Siegel. 2010. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 398 pp., illustrations, index. \$27.95 paper.*

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