

OCCUPY MoMA: The (Risks and) Potentials of a *Musée de la danse*!

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Capitalism makes networks. It doesn't make communities. *Imagination* makes communities.¹

—Robert Hass

I am always delighted when my resistances dwindle and crumble, and when my ideas are reinvigorated by new doubts—reminding me that *the mind is a muscle*. In this instance, I am beholden to French choreographer/dancer/writer Boris Charmatz's project of *le musée de la danse*/dancing museum. When I first read Charmatz's manifesto (2009), I found it naïve and bombastic—too simplistic and unconvincing. Then there is my allergic and unforeseeable reaction to be accounted for when “ten commandments” are proposed as organizing tools of a world, in this case, of dance.

Yet by the end of *Three Collective Gestures* (October 18–November 3, 2013) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, I was more persuaded and excited about the possibilities that *les musées*—oui, au pluriel!—*de la danse* could open up. Although each of the individual gestures, organized and choreographed by Charmatz at MoMA, were in some regard, and for different reasons, not very successful *per se* (I will return to this later), the more ambitious idea behind them is galvanizing. Some of the participants in the events and the reactions of accidental visitors at MoMA stimulated many of my new reflections.

In 2009, Boris Charmatz became the director of the National Choreographic Center of Rennes and Bretagne, in France, and decided to rename it *le musée de la danse*, explaining in his manifesto why words such as “National,” “Choreographic,” and “Center” are obsolete, and should be eliminated. His contradictory explanations sound both too literal and too vague. What, of course, is always compelling about manifestos, more than the blustering tone that belongs to their specific genre, is their vision of the future, as “[M]anifestos tend to present themselves as mere means to an end, demanding to be judged not by their rhetorical or literary merits—their poetry—but by their ability to change the world” (Puchner 2006, 2).

The questions that I want to pose in order to better understand Charmatz's project of *le musée de la danse* are more theoretical than analytical: how might the appropriation, or semantic restyling, of the word museum impact the world of dance? Where and when is choreography located? Who is dancing? Who is watching? What has been collected, and by whom? Who is sponsoring? And how are all these agents, engaged in the making of the museum, ethically operating? More rhetorically: how does Charmatz intend to change the world?

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Museums and Manifestos

Gustave Courbert, who, after founding a *Fédération des Artistes de Paris*, was described as an “arch-radical and rejecter of the past,” issued a manifesto where he declared that the government of the museum should be by artists, and should have “the triple mission of conservation of the treasures of the past, the ordering and revelation of all elements of the present, and the regeneration of the future through teaching” (Nochlin 1972, 18). The manifesto was written in 1871, when the Commune occupied Paris. Museums have a long tradition of being accompanied by manifestos, moved by an urgency to make clear their institutional mission. I mention Courbert’s manifesto simply because identifying the museum as a transitional place, and one that is interested in preserving the past and transmitting knowledge to future generations through educational programs, has always been part of the role of the institution.

I found it compelling to read and compare the manifestos of two contemporary, strikingly different, micro-museums; their insights on the power of imagination; and their relation to history: Charmatz’s *musée de la danse* and Orhan Pamuk’s *Museum of Innocence*. They were created around the same time, one in France in 2009 and the other in Istanbul in 2012. The former was, as we know, a National Choreographic Center simply renamed as a museum. A different operation is involved in the creation of the latter: a decrepit building, bought in the 1980s (in Çukurcuma, a neighborhood in Istanbul, not yet gentrified) and transformed by the author into his own museum.

The writer, and Nobel Prize in Literature recipient, Orhan Pamuk, at a certain point, while he was writing his Proustian novel, *The Museum of Innocence*, started collecting objects that he would study, and describe in detail in his book. The opposite process took place as well: imagined objects, instrumental for the economy of the plot, would send the author on expeditions throughout the city: “trolling the shops for objects that the novel required, or having them made to order by artists and craftsmen” (Pamuk 2010, 122). Although the idea to create a museum of collected objects was born many years earlier, the two operations—turning the imaginary world of a novel into a written, publishable book, and collecting material objects in order to sustain the imaginary world of the novel, and to be eventually exhibited in a museum—became interdependent. Pamuk writes: “I wanted to collect and exhibit the ‘real’ objects of a fictional story in a museum and to write a novel based on these objects” (2012, 15).

What the museum becomes for the writer is clearly an extension of his imagination—an architectural site to reactivate his own experiences of the process of writing the novel (selecting and organizing words into sentences, chapters), then collecting the objects, and meticulously arranging them in cabinets of curiosities. The museum has its own catalogue as well: *The Innocence of Objects*. The author of the catalogue, organized in chapters—with mysterious titles such as “Love, Courage, Modernity,” “On Being Able to Stand Up and Leave,” or “A Few Unpalatable Anthropological Truths,” etc.—is still Pamuk. The contents include exhaustive captions to the photographs (historical snapshots of the city, details of the objects, a portrait of the author as a young painter, and much more) and commentaries written sometimes by the author, at other times by some of the characters of the *Museum of Innocence*. His project of blurring the real and the fictional is quite astonishing, and obsessive. The catalogue is a singular memoir, a love letter to Istanbul, a cultural study, and a traveling time-machine. It provides a theory of the novel, and an analysis of the writing process that consistently plays both the role of the writer and the reader, expressing desires and urgencies from their specific points of view. Influenced by Calvino’s essay “The Novel as Spectacle,”² Pamuk envisions the relationship between the writer and the reader as an imaginary game of chess, where “to write a novel is to create a center we cannot find in life or in the world, and to hide it within the landscape... To read a novel is to perform the same gesture in reverse” (Pamuk 2010, 171–2). The museum has the potential of becoming for visitors a performative stage where they can re-envision not simply the story of Pamuk’s novel, but other histories as well.

The catalogue contains a “Modest Manifesto for Museums.” As I continue to reread the eleven “outlined thoughts” by Pamuk, I keep wondering if in addition to the important statements,

and reference to a tradition of museums' manifestos, Pamuk's intention is also a subtle, ironic meta-commentary on the recent proliferation of museums. In the brilliant catalogue co-authored by the character of a novel, the mirror of disguises could be bottomless.

The need to create smaller museums, for instance, as an alternative to the dominant narrative imposed by the big, state-sponsored ones, is an important and more explicit point in Pamuk's manifesto, which claims that "the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful" (2012, 55). The concept is repeated now and then, where distinctions between Western and non-Western countries are made, also regarding different approaches and expectations that people have regarding museums. I find his fictional project absorbing, and I am transported by the argument of the poetic and evocative power of objects as animated storytellers.

In Charmatz's manifesto the creation of a dancing museum presumes a fusion of the two different institutions involved, starting with an erasure of the idea of museum as a static place of preservation. He makes it clear that it will not look like a dusty place where objects are preserved and displayed. Just to restate the obvious: for historians, as well as for choreographers, dancers, and archive lovers/frequenters, all documents and artifacts—photos, letters, faded costumes, set designs, recordings etc.—dismissed in Charmatz's idea of old-fashioned museums, are crucial in the reactivation of their imagination to understand and interpret histories/stories and dances. Charmatz's museum seems to be located in the imaginary—a ghostlike entity that finds temporary actualizations and meanings in present gestures: ideas in search of bodies. Will that imply an inevitable return to the abstract, absent concrete remains of any sorts or choreography to trace back to?

The conclusive statement in Pamuk's manifesto: "the future of museums is inside our own homes," if one reads it literally, is more questionable—besides being economically unsustainable—claustrophobic, and as concerning as Charmatz's statement that "our bodies are our own museums."

MuseuMania

The shifts and patterns of changes in terms of art production in the last few decades have been synthesized by two important exhibitions at the New Museum, followed by the publication of two anthologies of critical writings: *Out There* and *Over Here*. *Out There*³ focuses on the idea of "marginalization," and resistance to it, based on the geographical distances of other cultures from the Western metropolitan areas, where big museums are located, and where economical and cultural decisions were made and mattered. Writers in the anthology speak from their specific standpoints and reject the idea of defining their work only in relation to what Russell Ferguson, in the Introduction to *Out There*, calls "the invisible center"—that elusive, blurred place from which power is exercised. Their major concerns are related to identity, migration, and displacement.

In *Over Here*, the attention is on the effect of globalization, and the risk of oversimplifying a quite complex phenomenon. The essays in *Over Here* show, among other things, that the acceleration in the communication system and the sense of collapsed distances need not inexorably lead to a homogenization in terms of art production. One of the mistaken beliefs of modernity was to identify signs of tradition as necessarily conservative and antiprogressive. It may be worth noticing that Charmatz's ambivalence and resistance to choreography recalls the modernist attitude relative to the past. The recent re-evaluation of traditions' ability to transform, and to adapt, while preserving values under the changing circumstances of globalization, has created a "multiplicity of diverse systems of thought" (Fisher and Mosquera 2004, 5). Although there has been a notable increase in the number of artists and art circulation, the impact seems to have been minimal on the "institutional structures of power" still in control of financial, intellectual, and artistic decisions. The editors of *Over Here*, Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera, bring awareness to the antiglobalization movement's ability to revitalize the possibility of "subjective agency" (2004, 7):

This is neither the modernist self-identical subject nor the postmodernist decentered subject (both a source of suspicion in postcolonial discourse), but a neutral subject capable of responding independently and spontaneously outside of established political positions and therefore capable of opening up a new ethical and collective space of action.

I will return to “subjective agency” after assessing briefly what seems to be an almost inexplicable paradox with the increased number, in the last decade, of new micro-museums—the category to which Charmatz’s *musée de la danse* would belong. The museum as a stable institution, as symbol of permanence, authenticity, grand-narrative, and history no longer exists. Its sense of identity as an institution and its role continue to be questioned by the numerous and variegated activities in which museums are engaged. And while the number of visitors keeps decreasing, the attention in newspaper articles and scholarly literature on museums keeps growing (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996, 3–5).

What is a museum, and whom should it be for? Beth Lord (2007) adopts the Foucaultian concept of *performing archeology* to envision the ideal museum of the twenty-first century after investigating recurrent philosophical approaches in the past. Lord (2007) questions the tendency to de-historicize museums in order to reduce the potential didacticism of an overly interpretative curatorial approach, the alternative being to lean toward a more aesthetic *modus operandi*, which would count on the powerful eloquence of objects and objects’ arrangements. The latter often considered a way to ensure more freedom to the visitors’ imagination in creating personal connections. Lord proposes to overcome the dichotomy between the two dominant philosophical models of the past in museum theory: the Platonic that uses “recognition” as a strategy to move from the particular to the universal, and the hermeneutic that employs the replay mode to activate the relationship between the present and the past. Both models rely heavily on memory as the cognitive agency that creates the movement toward the past.

By employing Foucault’s idea of general history (vs. total history in the *Archeology of Knowledge*) and effective history (vs. traditional history in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History”) Lord (2007) suggests a new way of reading documents, which, when translated into museal practice, avoids assigning to objects the role of tracing a single historical trajectory aimed at illustrating universal concepts. Lord’s conclusion on how the museum can empower both objects and visitors, avoiding didacticism and aestheticism, is to arrange objects into discontinuous series in order to encourage visitors to practice general history:

Rather than the visitor starting with his or her subjectivity to understand the past, the visitor starts with the puzzling objects and discovers new ways of thinking about what has made the self and its present relations to society and power possible. Instead of the work of memory, the visitor engages in the work of history. What this means is perhaps that the museum experience is much less personal, but much more productive for thoughts. (2007, 365)

The museum Lord describes is quite self-consciously a bodiless environment. By eliding memory, all it makes room for is the abstracted thought of depersonalized visitors. In this regard, it is not simply ironic that Lord’s vision of the museum is restricted to exhibitions of material objects. That is, of course, not the museum imagined by Charmatz—a museum that depends on the interactivity of presences—although it is closer to Pamuk’s project.

In the past, Douglas Crimp (1993)⁴ also drawing on Foucault, suggested that the museum should be considered an “institution of confinement” in need of archeological analysis with its related discipline: art history. The essays I am referring to were written decades ago, when Crimp was still

identifying and discerning modernist from postmodernist practices in the visual arts, which were challenged and transformed by photography in paintings, and as independent medium in the museum. Since then *archeological analyses* of the institution have taken place from different perspectives and disciplines, but the issues raised by Crimp are still relevant today, as is the need to keep questioning the relationship between the arts and artists' practices to the institution that they are in dialogue with, in order for those practices to avoid "accommodating themselves to the desires of the institutional discourse" (Crimp 1993, 135).

Andreas Huyssen (1995) has brilliantly traced the changing role of the museum—from one of the elected sites for historical conservation to museum as mass medium—and located it within a more cumbersome "museal sensibility" that occupies our everyday culture and life experience. In concomitance with other phenomena and nostalgic trends, he mentions the "obsessive self-musealization per video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature" (Huyssen 1995, 14) long before the more viral attitude of recording-posting-sharing actions and opinions in our era of social media domination. The museum seems to respond accordingly to the changing expectations of visitors, who are more and more interested in "emphatic experiences, instant illuminations, stellar events, and blockbuster shows, rather than serious and meticulous appropriation of cultural knowledge" (17).

The experience at the museum these days besides being partly transportable in glossy catalogues and other sort of commercial products, can happen from a distance via virtual tours or live streaming of events, and can be revisited through videos that are often posted in online archives. But this leaves open the question: how does the contemporary museum work when the "exhibited objects" are bodies—breathing, moving, dancing, empathically interactive bodies—bodies that make their own connection with histories using their memory devices?

There is a long tradition of dances and live performances in museums, and a history of fruitful collaborations between the visual and movement-based arts, although that presence has been more consistent, and described as more consciously under curatorial scrutiny in recent years than in the more distant past. MoMA, for instance, created a Department of Media in 2006, and renamed it the Department of Media and Performance in 2009.⁵ Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence of what Claire Bishop has called participatory art (2012, 1).⁶ How are the different disciplines involved going to read and understand the movement-based, live-arts events in a museum? And how are movement-based art practices behaving, responding, and negotiating their relationships with the institution?

A Closer Reading of Charmatz's Project

Charmatz is clearly an acute witness of the pulses and currents in the world of cultural production. All the points alluded to in his manifesto demonstrate his awareness of the contemporary debates on globalization, historicity, reenactment, archiving, and the reconceptualization of the functions of museums. Although the nonexistent-yet-mental space of the *dancing museum* sketched by Charmatz can be powerfully evocative (and it is provocative enough), there is too much confusion and ambiguity in his Manifesto's statements, as well as a tendency to oversimplify issues in dance's histories, pedagogies, and practices.

Even keeping in mind the rhetoric of the genre, some of the statements in Charmatz's manifesto are disputable, starting with: "I propose erasing 'Choreographic' because a National Choreographic Centre is much more than a space that enables a choreographer's art to flourish" (Charmatz 2009). This limited assumption of what choreography, and the choreographic field is, still located in an antagonistic position with dance, remains to me a major issue.

Charmatz's Manifesto echoes the clearly inflected voice of a whole generation of choreographers who, in France, have redefined the aesthetics and poetics of contemporary dance in the last two decades, which have been highly influenced by the desacralization of spectacle by Antonin Artaud, conceptual contemporary art, and the democratization of the creative process by the Judson Church Theater of the Grand Union (Roux 2006, 112). After questioning the authority of the choreographer, the creative process has become more and more an open-ended collaborative project (Louppe 2007, 23). The "dissolution of fixed companies" (Pouillaude 2007, 131) in France, partly driven by economic changes and recent legislation, has restructured the nature of labor for performers. In this new, more fragile market for dance, some artists, who no longer belonged to single companies, saw an opportunity to free themselves and become more available and open to participating in different kinds of collaborations. The "mutation" described by Pouillaude, as a consequence of the dissolution of fixed companies, seems to have had a domino effect in weakening other dance constitutive elements, such as authorship, composition, the essence of dance as medium and the nature of *spectacle*, as previously understood in modern times.

One of Charmatz's major aims in his project became more transparent to me after his conversations at MoMA.⁷ The *dancing museum* attempts to transform French dance institutions by re-inventing the traditional pedagogical attitude/curricula rigidly oriented toward the transmission of practices and techniques, thereby lacking an informed and multidisciplinary approach to dance histories and theories. He is interested in training dancers with eloquent and imaginative minds as well as skilled bodies, collaborating with artists, and engaging in performative projects. The description of his three-year experience at the Paris Opera Ballet School is of dancers training in multiple dance techniques and studying the history of dance—from the Renaissance to Béjart—from a single book. In the United States, programs in universities and liberal arts colleges offer courses in cultural studies, both in histories and theories, alongside a conservatory format in which diverse, movement-based dance techniques are taught. Therefore, performers, choreographers, and theatrical practitioners in the U.S. are probably more familiar, and in a more interactive dialogue with academia, than in France.⁸ This element of Charmatz's project is respectable and easy to agree with.

The most puzzling questions for me were when Charmatz, reclaiming the dancers' rights to movement ownership, wondered (paraphrasing here): "Who owns the movements? When does the dancer, who has repeated movements, performance after performance, start owning those movements? When do those movements stop belonging uniquely to the choreographer?" No musician, of course, would claim that after repeatedly performing Bach's *Chaconne* partita in D minor for violin, that s/he automatically acquires the right to own the score. Or that Martha Graham, evocatively channeled by Richard Move, could be recognized one day as the *post mortem* author of *Trio A*.⁹

Often Charmatz's questions seem to arise from an unbalanced misreading of phenomenology, and a radicalization of Laurence Louppe's statement that "in contemporary dance there is only one true dance: the dance of each individual" under the contentious assumption that "contemporary techniques, no matter how scientific, no matter how long it takes to acquire them, are before anything else the instruments of a knowledge leading the dancer to this singularity" (Louppe 2007, 23).

Trying to explore and throw light on the choreography/performance relationship by articulating a constructive multivocal, multicultural discourse that does not dichotomize (aesthetics vs. politics, historiography vs. phenomenology, etc.), but integrates disciplines has been the major mission of dance and performance studies in the last few decades. As for performers, the complex relationship between choreography and dance has also been explored through the political relationship between choreographers and dancers who are continuing to challenge their practices, bringing fruitful insights that are visible and transformative on stage. William Forsythe, for instance, has proposed "chorography as an enabling practice that can promote the dancer's autonomy" (Franko 2007, 16).¹⁰

Gestures and Temporalities

The museum's ontology, even in its constantly changing and adaptive role within new cultural trends and in spite of visitors' expectations, still relies—and I believe it should—on engaging the public with histories and temporalities. One of the ten commandments in Charmatz's manifesto addresses this issue:

A Museum of Complex Temporalities

It deals with both the ephemeral and the perennial, the experimental and the patrimonial. Active, reactive, mobile, it is a viral museum which can be grafted onto other places, can spread dance in places where it was not expected. It is also a museum with a program evolving with the rhythm of the seasons, able to relocate to beaches in the summer period or the propose a winter University... (Charmatz 2009)

When the imaginary *dancing museum* encounters reality at MoMA, the results are quite different, and location “understood both as a place where the gesture is executed and the support upon which the gesture signifies” (Noland 2008, xv) becomes extremely relevant. I will focus on the first and third gestures in their attempt to challenge a sense, and a narrative of time imposed by the museum.

Victor Tupitsyn has drawn attention to two controversial trends in contemporary arts that seem relevant in the reading of both Charmatz's and Pamuk's museum projects. One is a “vertical sense of temporality,” where simultaneity operates in order to synchronize histories, locating concepts and visions in an aura of timelessness: “Hence, vertical is synonymous with ahistorical, which partially explains why our eagerness to verticalize history culminates in erecting museums” (Tupitsyn 2004, 384). The second is the increasingly common tendency for artists to co-curate their work and co-sponsor publications about themselves, so that they can have more control over the production, exhibition, and interpretation of their work. Tupitsyn explains how the museological function operates as a communicative device, creating the illusion that every creative act is common property, therefore what he calls the “egocentric speech of the signified” implies a new position of the author, previously rejected by Barthes and Derrida (Tupitsyn 2004, 385).

Vertical time comes to mind when I think of the first of Charmatz's *Collective Gestures* at MoMA's *20 Dancers for the XXth Century*: a chaotic, endless present.¹¹ Similar in its concept to that of *Musée de la danse: Expo Zéro*, where 10 performers occupied empty classrooms and corridors of a former school on Mott Street during *Performa 2011*, this time the 20 dancers involved (from Valda Setterfield to Trajal Harrell, from Gus Solomons Jr. to Richard Move, etc.), instead of performing in a more neutral space of empty rooms, roamed the visually overstimulating environment of the museum, performing solos, and interacting with public attendees—tourists, visitors, among the dance aficionados—answering their questions, telling stories about themselves or about their work. Acting as “a living archive”—one reads in the museum's program—the performers who took part in the event were later described by Charmatz as “their own museums within a museum.”

The concept of the “living archive” has been overexposed in our collective consciousness. Bruce Springsteen is quoted in the recent obituary of American folk singer Pete Seeger, describing him as “a living archive of America's music and conscience, a testament of the power of the song and culture to nudge history along” (Pareles 2014). Living does not necessarily refer to the organically alive body, but to the constant, always present possibility to access information. The *John Cage Unbound: A Living Archive* is, for instance, an online record of Cage's works. The list of examples would be endless, and predictably “-living archive” has been transformed into a phrase suffix for commercial products.

What does “living archive” really mean in the interaction of the *dancing museum* and MoMA, aside from speaking the slang of the *now*? Is it a living (as dancing bodies’ “will to) archive”¹² or a living (as never ending access to) archive (collection of data)? In an interview with curator of contemporary art and performance Catherine Wood,¹³ Charmatz, describing a similar project—*Moments: A History of Performance in 10 Acts*, where performance artists, as well as philosophers and architects, revisit their own work, reorganizing and presenting documents, including photos and videos of previous performances, as a way to reorganize and gain control over their own archives—remarks: “One important thing is that we aren’t just intending to ‘animate’ the museum and the history of dance but we want to produce our own archive” (Wood 2012). The urgency and concern to project present gestures into a time to come, an archive-to-be, expressed by Charmatz, risks producing a monolithic imaginary future, which can be as daunting as a *total, traditional history* of the past.

The sense of temporality embraced by the first gesture, unlike the generally more constrained performances in theatrical settings with a beginning and an end, was structured around more traditional museums’ strategies of dislocating and displaying objects under some unifying curatorial frame—in this case *20 Dancers for the XXth Century*. The kinesthetic engagement of visitors tended to be the one expected in a museum: to approach, to get closer, to observe, to maybe ignore passing by, to eventually leave, to possibly return, to observe more, to leave again. Relational possibilities were added: one could interact with the performers by asking questions or simply listening to them speaking. The visitors navigated the museum at their own pace, and on their own time. The pressure of the liminal, and because of the lack of a program, turned the gesture into a more unpredictable experience that reproduced a compressed and intensified present. Dance devotees in New York, where everything seems to be happening simultaneously during busy seasons—generating frustration at not being ubiquitous—could easily relate to the experience of anxiety engendered by the first gesture.

The idea of creating a unifying frame à la museum to then have performers challenge and resist it with their personal histories and dance backgrounds, with their theories of performance and dancing presences, is better in theory than practice. Although all of the performers may have succeeded in connecting with a few people (individually or in small groups), they were generally too disrupted and overwhelmed by the cacophonous and powerful frame of the institutional museum. Simultaneity does not necessarily create complex temporalities in an e(a)ffective way. The subjective agency of the performers was flattened by the overwhelming museal objectifying culture.¹⁴

The reason I found *Flip Book* the most compelling of the *Three Collective Gestures* was its capacity to create a fissure in the overpowering frame of the museum’s atrium, a crack in MoMA’s “forever modern” ideology. Allan Walloch (1998), in a sharp analysis of the architectonic restorations of the museum over time, makes explicit how architecture has been instrumentally adopted to reinforce the museum’s ideology into the three different historical phases: utopia, nostalgia, and forever modern. The history of the museum then could be better understood as a history of body mutation, where all the institutional changes manifest as architectural scars and wrinkles (or façade-lifting and augmentations), as well as the art that the museum displays. The most recent restoration conducted, in the 1980s by Cesar Pelli (and we know that it will not be the last one to dismantle and reconstruct), has especially contributed in changing the perception and experience of public space:

MoMA’s garden hall or atrium is representative of an increasingly familiar form of public space, a space that is at once grandiose and overwhelming, and yet barely legible. It is a space that tends to suppress older forms of subjectivity and to produce, in their place, an experience that is at once impersonal and fragmented, and yet tinged with a sense of euphoria. . . . But isn’t precisely the function of such a space—a space that has been deliberately spectacularized (more or less in the manner of a thousand “postmodern” shopping malls)—a space that radiates a sort of free-floating intensity destined to overwhelm any object placed within it? (Wallach 1998, 83–6)

The MoMA's tendency to nostalgically enclose everything in retrospective mode, or in "purchased" mode, had, because of *Flip Book*, partially faded. Mostly the event was an e(a)ffective reminder of the ontology of both, museum and dance. The role of a *dancing museum* became more transparent in engaging the visitors/audience with histories, in this case with the history of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC), the history of Western modern dance, its perception and understanding in a different European context, as well as the specific recent history of artists' community in the city.¹⁵

Flip Book's inception, as the story has been told, began when the book, *Merce Cunningham, Fifty Years*, was given as a Christmas present to Charmatz by his father. The encyclopedic volume, with the iconic portrait of Merce Cunningham by Annie Leibovitz on the cover, is meticulously and chronologically organized by David Vaughan, the historian and the "archivist *extraordinaire*" of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The book, in addition to containing a detailed list of facts, succinct descriptions of the choreographic works, quotes from articles, and memories, includes stage photos of the company's performances throughout fifty years, portraits of the dancers in different other contexts, and collaborators of the company. As for the mini-books of illustrated pages that, by flipping through at a certain speed, create the illusion of movement, Charmatz's idea behind *Flip Book* is that simple: adding movement to still photos to create a choreography. In his words: the photos organized by Vaughan were used as the "score" for the choreographic work. Initially created in 2009, commissioned by Tate Museum in London, it comes in three different versions: *50 ans de danse* with the participation of seven former dancers of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, from different generations; *Flip Book* as performed by professional dancers; and *Roman Photo*, a collaboration with students and volunteers.

Devotees of Cunningham's work, and former dancers and collaborators of the choreographer, apparently were less offended by *Flip Book* than the diligent critics who were hoping or expecting to see a reincarnation of the choreographer's aura in a more formalist, rigorous execution of Cunningham's signature technique. Yet Charmatz's recounting of Cunningham's composition method equated chance operation with the idea of putting movements together at random. This is an obvious departure from Cunningham's project.

The third gesture at MoMA was structured in three different phases. For the first hour, while the dancers warmed-up, a video of *Flip Book*—previously performed elsewhere—was projected on the back wall of the atrium, where a stage with bleachers had been set up. Valda Setterfield, walking back and forth in between the stage and the audience, answered questions raised by visitors, or talked more freely about her work as one of the first members of the company. Setterfield had been involved from the very beginning of the *Flip Book* project, when Merce Cunningham was still alive. As described in his post-performance conversation with Claire Bishop, Charmatz first invited former dancers of the MCDC to better understand Cunningham's work and the relationship his dancers had with him while dancing with the company, over the course of fifty years.

The transformative encounter between Charmatz and his dancers with the former members of the MCDC has left more imperceptible traces in the performance of *Flip Book* per se, than the engaging recounting of Setterfield on stage suggested, proving that "oral history contributes to an ethics of historical imagination" (Franko 2002, 11). Indeed the cultural exchange for *Flip Book* conveyed by Setterfield was instrumental in clarifying the essence of the project, and the obvious departure and independence from Cunningham's aesthetics.

The second phase asked for audience participations, guided by Charmatz, to share the creative process of *Flip Book*. On November 2, 2013, the choreographer/filmmaker/writer Yvonne Rainer was there, who took her sneakers off, and entered the stage as a "civilian" (she later reported to a friend) among the audience. The fierce dancer and choreographer David Thomson was selected by Charmatz, in addition to eight other occasional spectators.

The process was simple, and fast. The volunteers were invited to carefully observe the photos in Vaughan's book, before Charmatz assigned different poses to each of the participants, and asked them to bring the images, in their three-dimensional version, to the center of the stage, creating temporary *tableaux vivants* that would last for a few seconds and then dissolve, leaving the stage empty for a moment, to then recompose again into the next one. A sequence of poses was repeated and repeated again, and new ones were added until the longer sequence was rehearsed a few times, and it became ready to be performed with music. Although we cannot consider this participatory event, in any meaningful way, an educational one, it did provide, even if overly simplified, a visualization of dance transmission for those visitors in the museum who may have been unfamiliar with dance pedagogy and practices. Time and context may have been limiting, yet the creative approach was precisely—alas, instructions from the choreographer to be executed by the dancers—that which Charmatz seems to strongly reject in his manifesto.

The presence of Yvonne Rainer and David Thomson extended my imagination, transforming the atrium into a more interactive public space, less fragmented and impersonal than in past performances, confirming once again that “politics are not located directly ‘in’ dance, but in the way dance manages to occupy (cultural) space” (Franko 2007, 5). Their body of knowledge required different tasks of their dancers' bodies. I noticed and valued Thomson's resistance to the speed proposed by the experiment. As Charmatz asked authoritatively to move faster, to leave and re-enter the stage with expansive steps, Thomson, by faintly slowing down the process as he searched for his satisfying poses, weighting his balance, arching the spine with control, landing with grace and trust into the casual partner's arms, resisted the false assumption, for instance, that “improvisation does not reflect or exemplify the understanding of freedom as a desired endpoint devoid of constraint” (Goldman 2010, 3).

Yvonne Rainer seemed to have trouble with, and questioned the directions of the mirrored poses from the photos reproduction. Seeing her running off stage holding hands with Thomson was moving. The playful presence of Rainer evoked a complex connection to the *general history* of American dance, not in a genealogical way, but rather by the passionate and innovative spirit of her artistic statements. In *Revisiting the Question of Transgression*, in the late 1980s, Rainer called for a use of our cultural past, suggesting the need to address “gestures of refusal and dissent not to previous art, but rather to point to—to protest—existing social inequities” (Rainer 1999, 105).¹⁶

The third gesture was completed by Boris Charmatz with five professional dancers, performing *Flip Book* as the complete set of photos from Vaughan's book, while someone on the perimeter of the stage flipped through the pages, to the dancers' time, and with Olivier Renouf's randomly selected music.

Conclusion

The iconic cover of *Adbusters* magazine from 2011, which featured a dancer in an arabesque atop of the bronze sculpture of the *Charging Bull* that became the symbol of the Occupy Wall Street movement, motivated my decision to use, albeit with a certain naïveté, the overcharged “Occupy MoMA” in the title to this article. “Occupy” is intended in its double meaning to literally inhabit a space, as well as to engage and enthrall. I see the existence of dancing museums as a chance to open up a more interactive dialogue with art institutions—a chance to have more equality over the negotiations and aesthetic decisions involved in performing dance in museums, a protection even for performers to experience less a sense of being “visitors,” as Ralph Lemon described his experience of performing at MoMA in the past (Ralph Lemon, October 21, 2013, at MOMA, in conversation with Charmatz, Forti). How can that chance turn into real change? Can a vague idea become a real project? Is it possible, echoing Crimp (1993), to have a dialogue without accommodating dance practices to the desires of the institutional discourse?

Orhan Pamuk used his skills as a writer to support creating a museum to partner with his novel. His pages, in their shifting formats, create such a complex imaginary map for revisiting histories and places—more abstractly: time and space—that they turn the reader’s experience into an exciting treasure hunt of our inner reasons for reading and for loving novels. Writing and reading are often solitary practices, and connections with others, even if powerful, occur only in an imaginary realm. The real/physical/commercial experience of the museum seems less captivating. I have heard that the path through the galleries leads visitors inevitably into the museum shop, where the author’s books are for sale, in addition to all sort of paraphernalia—reproductions of objects, posters, etc.—related to the *Museum of Innocence*. Perhaps it is not such an innocent enterprise after all.

If museums claim to be a creative laboratory of the present, where one ventures to investigate our cultural pasts, and to envision possible futures, then Charmatz’s *Musée de la danse* may have more potential for transformative, interdisciplinary changes in the real than Pamuk’s. If Charmatz’s idea of a *dancing museum*, and the necessity for its existence is spot on, then his idea of choreography may need to be broadened and not relegated to an antagonistic position with performance. In his manifesto, the choreographic field is limited, and is often confused with styles and techniques; the role of the choreographer likewise is limited to a role that has no longer existed uniquely in those terms since the advent of postmodern dance’s aesthetics and collaborative practices.

Choreography should be welcomed instead as the imaginative “apparatus that simultaneously distributes and organizes dance’s relationship to perception and signification” (Lepecki 2007, 120), and it can help us to understand the “specific experience of the physical in the ways that it records or documents movement, and also in the ways that it sets forth principles upon which movement is to be learned and crafted” (Foster 2011, 175).

Paul Virilio (2010), who has been talking about “presentism” as a new brand of anecdotal historicity, has pointed out that the recent obsession with immediacy, simultaneity, and instantaneity is an ineffective strategy to “escape the historic condition of humanity” (74). Choreography is what can give recognition and identity to a dance museum, even a nomadic one. Otherwise globalization and cultural nomadism, at their most rudimentary, pseudo-democratic levels, create consumers as common denominators, and dance in museums would be simply part of the most recent museum’s culture of *mise en scène*, a spectacular attraction for visitors that museums are still figuring out in what format to sell and/or collect.

Notes

1. These are the words of Poet Laureate Robert Hass, in an interview after the symposium *Museums for the New Millennium*, quoted in the Introduction by Stephen E. Weil to the published version (Weil 1997, 15).

2. Calvino’s *The Novel as Spectacle* (1982), by the way, begins with a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, for the centenary of Dickens. Written in the early 1980s, Calvino identifies one of the most recognizable rules of the postmodern novel: not “to rely on a story (or a world) outside its own pages, and the reader is called upon only to follow the process of writing the text in the act of being written” (Calvino 1982, 190). The creative process described by Calvino sounds familiar to the analytic post-modern dances in the 1970s, described by Sally Banes in her *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1987).

3. Most of the essays in the catalogue have become “classics” in post-colonial discourse, from Homi K. Bhabha’s “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” to Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory,” from Edward Said’s “Reflection on Exile” to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Explanation and Culture: Marginalia.”

4. I am referring to two essays in the volume: “On the Museum’s Ruins” (pp. 44–64) and “Appropriating Appropriation” (pp. 126–36).

5. The new department, besides being responsible for live-arts events and assigning some of the curatorial aspects to outsiders (choreographer/artist/writer Ralph Lemon has been artist-in-residence at MoMA, and the curator of a series of dance events in the recent past), has also opened up a more interdisciplinary dialogue by creating symposia and conversations open to the public.

6. Claire Bishop (2012) defines “participatory art” as no longer object-oriented but relational (artists in relation with a larger group of people). Although her book is enormously instructive in understanding trends in contemporary arts, within the historical and theoretical frames, passionately argued, her vision of pedagogy gives away more clearly her lacunas in understanding education and transmission in the performing arts and dance. See for instance her statement: “When artistic practice claims to be pedagogical, it immediately creates conflicting criteria in my mind: art is given to be seen by others, while education has no image” (241).

7. I am referring to the two conversations that took place at MoMA during the *Three Collective Gestures* period: the first on October 21, Boris Charmatz in conversation with Simone Forti and Ralph Lemon, moderated by the associate curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art, Ana Janevski; then, on November 2nd in a conversation with art scholar Claire Bishop, still moderated by Ana Janevski, after performing *Flip Book* and after sharing with the audience its creative process.

8. The more complex relationship between the “manual labor of training and the intellectual labor of theorization/historization” has been explored in more detail, and by comparing different universities’ programs in dance studies in Europe and the U.S., by Jens Richard Gierdsorf (2009, 27).

9. See Move (2009) for an excerpt of *Rainer Variations*, a video montage by Charles Atlas, produced as part of the retrospective *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961–2002*, in which Rainer attempts to teach Martha Graham, impersonated by Richard Move, her solo work *Trio A*.

10. Forsythe in a public forum and the “BAMdialoge”, Brooklyn Academy of Music, on October 2, 2003, mentioned in Franko (2007), p. 16.

11. Some problematic logistics of the event were raised during the discussions, such as the lack of a program (therefore frustration from missing out of parts of the event), imperfect conditions for the performers, their presence competing against the cumbersome works of art in the museum, and the more serious issue of labor and exploitation of the performers that I will not take into consideration here.

12. André Lepecki (2010) in his analysis of contemporary dance reenactments has proposed the evocative “will to archive” as an inventive operation that, by revisiting a work from the past, *unlocks, releases, and actualizes* (emphasis is mine) a work’s non-exhausted, yet creative, possibilities.

13. See Charmatz’s interview and description of *Moments: A History of Performance in 10 Acts* in collaboration with the artist Johannes Forsch, in Wood (2012).

14. *Levée des conflits extended*, although the most choreographically powerful of the three, was hosted in the atrium on the second floor as other movement-based events of the past, where the performers, surrounded by spectators on all four walls, could also be viewed from other museums’ windows.

15. The exhibit *There Will Never Be Silent: Scoring John Cage 4’:33”* was, not accidentally, located in a gallery next to the atrium on the second floor.

16. A lecture delivered on April, 14, 1989, as part of the symposium, *Strategies of Performance Art 1960–1989*, at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore. See Rainer (1999), pp. 102–6.

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