

Revisiting 'No To Spectacle': *Self Unfinished* and *Véronique Doisneau*.

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This paper explores the way two recent solos, one by Jérôme Bel and the other by Xavier Le Roy, use strategies of defamiliarisation to challenge and disrupt conventional expectations about the charismatic presence projected by a solo dancer. Le Roy's 1998 *Self Unfinished* expands institutionally sanctioned ideas about what constitutes dancing, while Bel's solo *Véronique Doisneau*, made in 2004 for the Paris Opéra Ballet, enacts an anarchic intervention within one of the most hierarchical sectors of the dance industry. This kind of institutional critique is characteristic of a number of recent dance works, mostly created in Europe during the last fifteen years by choreographers of Bel and Le Roy's generation. These solos' deconstructive approach to performative presence revisits some of the concerns of the US artists associated with Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s. Writing in 1965, Yvonne Rainer famously summarised her avant-garde concerns in a list of strategies that begins 'No to spectacle' and includes 'no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer'.¹ Bel and Le Roy's solos have, in effect, said no to spectacle and seduction, although, as I will argue, they have done so in a different way. Their works often acknowledge historical precedent and this is particularly significant in a field which has invariably made claims about its new and unprecedented nature. These beliefs about the newness of modern dance, I suggest, have often circulated around solos presented by the choreographer which utilise movement vocabularies that are uniquely her (or occasionally his) own. As Claire Rousier has pointed out, for much of the twentieth century the solo was an emblematic and singular figure of modernity in dance.² This paper explores the critical way *Self Unfinished* and *Véronique Doisneau* use ideas about performative presence and historical reference to pose questions of an ethical nature.

Self Unfinished is a solo created and performed by Le Roy himself that consists of a few extended sequences of slow, abstract movement danced mostly in silence that, though physically demanding, contains nothing that requires any knowledge of mainstream, conventional dance technique to perform. These seem purged of all aesthetic qualities and its dancer turns, with the use of costume and nudity, into a strangely dehumanised figure. The Paris Opéra commissioned *Véronique Doisneau* for and about a retiring 'sujet', someone who dances in the corps de ballet and occasionally performs minor roles. During the piece, Doisneau talks to the audience about her life, career and opinions, and demonstrates extracts from her repertoire. At the end, pointing out that what audiences often find most magical about the ballet can be excruciatingly boring and odious to perform, she shows what, as a member of the corps de ballet, she dances during the second act adagio of *Swan Lake*. This mostly consists of holding a pose for a long, boring wait until the musical cue to change to another position. This final section, in particular, like the dehumanised dancing figure in *Self Unfinished*, critically disrupts the kind of performative presence normally associated with the solo dancer. These disruptions have significant ethical implications. *Self Unfinished*, I shall suggest, investigates ways of moving that seem inhuman in order to remind the beholder of what is needed to become human, while *Véronique Doisneau* prompts the audience to take responsibility for the actions that invisible others have to perform while entertaining them.

Institutional Critique.

The American art historian Thomas Crow, writing in 1996, observed: 'Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs. Consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition of major artistic ambition. For that reason artists have become avid, if unpredictable, consumers of art history'.³ Many recent European dance artists like Bel and Le Roy are avid, if unpredictable consumers of dance history which they have used to make works that challenge some tacit assumptions about dance. To understand the subversive way in which *Self Unfinished* and *Véronique Doisneau* critique dance performance, it is necessary to look a little more closely at the history of modern dance, examining in particular the ways

in which, during the first half of the twentieth century, solos by charismatic artists like Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, and Martha Graham sometimes became a vehicle for affirming and celebrating modern life.

The philosopher Susanne Langer's enthusiasm, in 1953, for Wigman's work typifies a common way of characterising the relationship between modern dance and the social experience of modernity. The substance of Wigman's work, Langer argued:

is the same power that enchanted ancient caves and forests, but today we invoke it with the full knowledge of its illusory status, and therefore with wholly artistic intent. [...]

Once more human beings dance with high seriousness and fervour; the temple dance and the rain dance were never more reverent than the work of our devout artists.⁴

Langer betrays the unfortunate influence here of Curt Sachs's now discredited account of the primitive origins of dance.⁵ Her argument is, however, that knowledge of scientific and philosophical thought separates modern dancers from their supposedly primitive forebears. So, if soloists like Graham and Wigman 'once more' dance with high seriousness and fervour, the inference is that they do so despite the impingements of modernity. It is generally acknowledged that industrial efficiency drives processes of rationalisation that use fragmentation to break down problems and make them manageable. This allows them to be dealt with more easily and profitably, regardless of the social disruption this invariably causes. The radical modernist aesthetic qualities exemplified by the work of choreographers like Graham and Wigman, to some extent, replicated these modernist processes. By breaking down the residue of traditional aesthetic values and cultural traditions, they sought to articulate new ways of thinking and feeling. The intensity of their solo works, and their charismatic presence as they performed them, seduced their audiences; they gave the beholder the feeling that, as artists, they were facing up to the challenges of modern times rather than escaping them.

Film theorist Richard Dyer has suggested reading the charismatic appeal of the Hollywood film star against the grain in order to reveal the underlying contradictions within society at the time when they were popular. He argues that 'charismatic appeal is effective especially when the social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous, and when the charismatic figure or group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoise this'.⁶ Where modern dance was concerned, a seductive projection of charismatic presence was bound up with existential romanticism and with a claim of authenticity. The solo thus offered a fantasy of coherence and mastery at a time of fragmentation and alienation. The process of modern dance's institutionalisation, particularly in the United States, turned this expressive ideology into an emblem of an ahistorical artistic modernism, and perpetuated it beyond the moment when it had been socially and culturally relevant.

Bel and many of his generation of dancers, who started to make their own work in the 1990s, had begun their careers dancing in companies during the previous decade. While Le Roy was carrying out the research for his PhD in biochemistry, he was inspired to take up dancing by seeing the work of these dance companies. The promotional rhetoric surrounding much contemporary dance at this time invariably emphasised its pursuit of progress for its own sake, sometimes almost seeming to imply that last year's repertoire was already obsolete. These young dancers' recognition that the work which they had been performing was not in fact new and unprecedented, was an incentive for their own investigations of dance history. In Judson Dance Theater they found an example of an earlier generation whose avant-garde experiments grew out of disappointment and disillusionment with the seductive heroism underlying much of the work of Graham and Wigman's generation. Saying no to spectacle and no to seduction implied rejection of the fantasies of mastery and coherence evoked by these earlier modern dancers. It was a shift from dance works that exemplified an individualistic liberal idealism towards ones that exemplified a more socially-oriented libertarianism.

In the mid 1990s, Le Roy was a member of the group *Quattuor Albrecht Knust* who used existing notation and documentation to reconstruct a series of dances from earlier in the twentieth century. In 1996 they performed Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967) and Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Process Altered Daily* (1970). Le Roy's *Self Unfinished* resembles many aspects of the new American dance of the 1960s, in its use of everyday objects and ordinary, task-like or everyday movement material, and in its nudity. In Bel's piece, *Doisneau's*

performance of some of the more static material created for the corps de ballet in canonical nineteenth-century works resembles the use of stillness in pedestrian works from the 1960s like Paxton's 1968 piece *State*. In this a large number of people walk on stage and freeze for two and a half minutes. There is then a short black out, during which they move to another position in which they appear when the lights return. During a second black out they move to a third position which they then hold until the piece finishes. I saw a revival of this which Paxton supervised in the early 1980s. My experience was initially one of boredom, but after a while I found myself becoming interested in the singularity of the performers as they stood in ordinary, everyday poses all facing in a variety of different directions. Paxton's piece exemplified a libertarian attempt to break down the difference between the creative potential of professional dancers and untrained ones. By showing that everyone can be interesting on stage, the piece inferred that everyone has creative potential. This is not, however, what I believe happens in Bel and Le Roy's pieces. To explain the difference, I turn to recent discussions about relational aesthetics.

While recognising similarities between the work of Judson Dance Theater and that of Bel and Le Roy's generation, it is also important to acknowledge what saying 'no to spectacle' meant in the 1960s and the different effect that saying it has had over the last few years. In the 1960s, dancers like Rainer, along with the minimal sculptors and conceptual artists with whom they associated, were engaged in what Art Historian Lucy Lippard called the dematerialisation of the art object.⁷ In retrospect, this took the form of a strategic attack on the conditions of possibility of art making as a means of critiquing art as an institution. Since the early 1990s, artists have engaged in a kind of critique that problematises the role which institutions themselves play in bringing together artworks, art practitioners, art theory, and members of the public in relational situations. Such relations generate opportunities for interactivity and collaboration that can often dematerialise creative outputs, resulting in the development of what Nicolas Bourriaud has called a relational aesthetic. Bourriaud, who is himself an exhibition curator, suggests that: 'Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be look at as such'.⁸ As Claire Bishop points out, Bourriaud has in effect proposed one of the most useful frameworks for discussing the art practices of the 1990s and early 2000s. She is, however, one of a number of scholars who have criticised Bourriaud's propositions from theoretical or socio-political points of view.⁹ The kinds of activities that Bourriaud lists can, in general terms, be identified in some recent European dance works: the collaborative processes which Thomas Lehman initiates and the places of conviviality and encounter that Felix Ruckert creates might be seen as instances of the kinds of encounter and relational invention Bourriaud discusses. In a very different way, the interactive question and answer section at the end of Xavier Le Roy's *Product of Circumstances*, and the kinds of activities generated as part of his *E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S.* projects (1999 - 2001) exemplify the use of critical tactics that bring about the new kinds of aesthetic relations that Bourriaud identifies. The game-like structures of Le Roy's *Project* (2003) might be seen as a performative representation of such strategies. I shall show that it is these kinds of performative representations which *Self Unfinished* and *Véronique Doisneau* use to stage a meeting or encounter between a solo dancer and his or her audience.

While acknowledging the pertinence of Bourriaud's insights into the recent emergence of these kinds of artistic activities, Bojana Kunst suggests that the institutional positioning of this relational work requires further interrogation. Many of the projects Bourriaud writes about, she argues, 'belong to an institutional community of work that fetishises mobility, participation and communication'.¹⁰ In Kunst's view, Bourriaud's analysis is in danger of affirming and celebrating a particular stage of globalised capitalism. Any critical potential that these recent artistic practices may have, Kunst warns, becomes lost in Bourriaud's account of 'the fluid multiplicity of ways of doing things together'.¹¹ Although subjectivities may dynamically interact in such work, they seem to do so as empty circulating signs. Kunst reminds us of another form of contemporary mobility experienced by the "non-belonging" people or groups of people [who] move in the invisible and deadly channels of illegality, poverty, invisibility, and escape'.¹² Rather than celebrating new artistic forms of mobility and participation in an uncritical way, it is necessary to interrogate the critical potential of the new

kinds of artistic projects Bourriaud has identified: to what extent can they resist recuperation by the processes of institutionalisation and globalisation? The kind of performative presences projected within *Véronique Doisneau* and *Self Unfinished* offer two such sites of resistance. Rather than seducing the audience with the kind of charismatic presence popular in the first half of the twentieth century, Le Roy presents a figure that challenges ideas about what it is to be human. Similarly, Doisneau presents a performance of powerlessness and vulnerability that, I suggest, prompts beholders to reflect on their own responsibility for those who don't count or don't belong. Both solos therefore stage a relational aesthetic that is grounded in ethics.

What the body can do

Self Unfinished was made in 1998 and has been performed many times since then in theatres and during dance festivals around the world. It was Le Roy's breakthrough piece and has become, in effect, a modern classic. It was set in a cold, almost clinical, white box -- the negative of the classic black box studio theatre. Towards the back of this was a square table with black metal legs and white top, with beside it a black, plastic, stackable, metal-framed chair. Downstage left was a portable radio cassette player which was not actually used until right at the end when Le Roy switched it on to play Diana Ross's *Upside Down* before leaving the stage. By then the beholder had indeed seen Le Roy upside down a few times, and the song's lyrics seemed to offer an ironic commentary on the rest of the movement material he has just presented: 'Upside down, Boy, you turn me/ Inside out/ And round and round'.

The choreography consisted of three sections, each of which started with Le Roy sitting at the table in a particular position in profile. Hands, palm down, on the table in front of him, he slowly bowed forward until his forehead touched the table between them. Just as slowly he then returned to an upright position. This provided a prelude for a series of abstract movement sequences that all contained roughly the same kinds of actions along a fairly similar track through the space: up from the table, along the back to a point where he sometimes lay down full length with his back to the audience, then moving on diagonally across the floor to a position down stage from the table, then back to it. Throughout *Self Unfinished*, Le Roy proceeded at a slow pace performing similar kinds of unusual but unimpressive and inexpressive movement sequences. The floor of the studio where I recently saw *Self Unfinished* creaked at one particular point just by the table, and this creak became for me a minor staging post in the piece, which was in effect a series of linear sequences. Sometimes he crawled under the table, sometimes leaned upside down against the back wall in a handstand, his back to the audience. Indeed, like the dancers in Yvonne Rainer's canonical 1966 piece *Trio A*, he never faced them or made any eye contact. The first sequence was made up of robotic isolated movements of the arms, head and torso each of which Le Roy accompanied with a distinct mechanical noise such as a child might make while playing with toys. The second sequence was performed wearing a black stretch cotton tube that hid his head and almost seemed to turn his body into two pairs of legs connected with a bare midriff. This looked particularly strange when he did a handstand against the back wall. The third sequence began with Le Roy moving while curled up in a foetus-like position. Then, having undressed, he progressed in a crab-like posture around the floor, slowly and with difficulty coordinating his limbs to kick over the table and then did another handstand against the back wall.

How Le Roy moved is, of course, the crux, because he didn't show any obvious signs of conventional training. In his autobiographical lecture demonstration *Product of Circumstances* (1999), he explained that he had taken a lot of dance classes, many in Cunningham technique. With his long, gangling body he found his back lacked flexibility, and he had never been able to achieve the kind of polished mode of performing that is generally looked for during an audition for a mainstream dance company. At the same time, recently watching Le Roy present the dry, abstract, task-like movements that make up the material for *Self Unfinished*, I couldn't but be aware that he had performed it so many times. He had the kind of focused bodily awareness about what he was disclosing to the beholder that I find compelling to watch. *Self Unfinished* was thus very low tech, both in terms of the technical demands made on theatrical resources and in terms of conventional dance technique. At the same time, however, it was extremely rigorous in its exploration of what bodies can do and surprising in

its range of new ways of moving. I do not mean by this that he extended our experience of aesthetically pleasing kinds of contemporary dance movement; merely that we generally don't see people as social beings moving like this. The effect here is markedly different from that of Steve Paxton's *State* which I described earlier. Whereas I argued Paxton's piece suggests that everyone can be interesting on stage and has creative potential, Le Roy has found movement possibilities whose blankness suggests an emptying out of those rhetorical elements that conventionally signify the kind of human values underpinning ideas about creativity.

The choreography of *Self Unfinished* offered a kind of unconventional expressiveness that cannot be recuperated within the institutionalised discourses of artistic modernism. This is exemplified in the section where he disguised his body in a stretch cotton tube. Bending over so that his head was near the ground, Le Roy reached up his back to take off his shirt while at the same time unfurling a black stretch cotton tube that was underneath it. This covered his torso, head and arms so that his body now resembled two pairs of legs, each clad in black, connected by a bare midriff. While his 'real' legs were in trousers, his arms seemed to be in a narrow, black skirt that reached down to the floor. At times it reminded me of the purple tube in which the dancer bends and stretches during Graham's *Lamentation*. In this costume, Le Roy walked around with the palms of his hands flat against the floor, his fingers pointing towards his toes, so that his body resembled two pairs of legs performing a couple dance. When he did a handstand with his feet against the wall, the stretched black triangle of his skirt made his hands at the bottom look like feet and his legs and feet at the top like arms and hands. If one read his body in this inverted way, the implication was that he had no head.¹³

Le Roy's object-like treatment of his body, here and elsewhere in the piece, seemed emptied out of the rhetorical signs of humanity that I suggested earlier act as emblems of an ahistorical artistic modernism. Read in the context of the institutionalized tradition of the charismatic soloist in modern dance that I discussed earlier, *Self Unfinished* refused to supply a reassuring aesthetic experience that offers a fantasy of coherence and mastery at a time of fragmentation and alienation. Indeed *Self Unfinished* might be taken as a symptom of these modern ills rather than a means to alleviate them. What, I suggest, it performs is an explicit repudiation of normative modernist ideologies by articulating affective qualities that are enduringly resistant to the institutionalisation of such ideologies.¹⁴

Parts of *Self Unfinished* were funny, but I felt that some of the audience also laughed at things that were, perhaps, so strange that they were potentially disturbing. Such laughter was, perhaps, a defensive mechanism, an avoidance of considering the consequences of what these movements were proposing. There was something inhuman about the unfinished self or fragmentary subjectivity that Le Roy was performing. In referring to the inhuman, I am thinking here of a discussion of it that Judith Butler has recently excavated from Theodore Adorno's writings on morality. When Adorno was invited to join the Humanist Union, he replied: 'I might be willing to join if your club had been called an inhuman union, but I couldn't join one that calls itself "humanist"'.¹⁵ Butler suggests that Adorno thought the inhuman at least identified a starting point for critically interrogating how the human is defined and investigating the factors that determine the limits of any such definition. The inhuman, she argues:

becomes a way of surviving the current organisation of 'human' society, an animated living on of what has largely been devastated; in this sense, 'the inhuman' facilitates an immanent critique of the human and becomes the trace or ruin through which the human lives on.¹⁶

Adorno was, of course, deeply pessimistic in his view of the difficulties surrounding subject formation under the condition of modernity. His pessimism was rooted in disappointment and disillusionment with the devastation of contemporary life, but one should not, however, make the mistake of reducing this to nihilism.

This, I suggest, is also true of *Self Unfinished*. It is a piece in which Le Roy has critically interrogated the way dance is defined by exploring the limits of what is generally considered to be dance. If we do not laugh away our discomfort when we see someone moving in a way that seems to be right at the edge between human and inhuman, we may become aware of a trace of something that somehow resists the dehumanisation of contemporary life and lives on despite it. Le Roy is not as pessimistic as Adorno. There is humour in the piece and much of the audience's laughter is by no means just defensive. In an extract from an email to Le Roy

reproduced in the programme and on Le Roy's website, Yvonne Rainer writes: 'By the time you're into the contortions with the dress, we're given this extraordinary hybrid creature that confronts us with a multiplicity of interpretations'.¹⁷ In a practical, deliberate way, Le Roy has used *Self Unfinished* to expand our conception of what dance might be in ways that propose a multiplicity of previously unconsidered possibilities. The fact that these have not yet been considered is surely linked with the way they threaten the kind of existential romanticism endemic in the genre of institutionalised contemporary dance to which some audiences have become habituated.

Ethics and powerlessness.

The programme for *Véronique Doisneau* credits Bel for the conception and direction of the piece but avoids using the term choreographer. In the work, choreography borrowed from Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, Merce Cunningham, Mats Ek, and Rudolf Nureyev (after Petipa and Ivanov) is contextualised and framed by Doisneau's introductions and commentary. Ostensibly the piece takes the form of a lecture demonstration in which the dancer introduces a few of her favourite extracts from the repertoire of the Ballet of the Paris Opéra. In the process however, the piece engages in a critical reflection on the nature of performance and its institutional context. By including extracts borrowed from *La Bayadère*, *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and Cunningham's *Points in Space*, Bel was, in Thomas Crow's terms, ambitiously recapitulating the sequence of works to which his piece belonged. As I noted earlier, Doisneau was not one of the 'étoiles' (principal soloists) at the Paris Opéra but a 'sujet' who, as she explains, dances in the corps de ballet but sometimes performs minor roles. The piece was made just before she retired from the company. Audiences never hear a ballet dancer speak on stage during a ballet performance; off-stage it is only ever the best known and most popular prima ballerinas who are interviewed, never ordinary dancers like Doisneau. When she therefore told the audience that she didn't like dancing in the choreography of Roland Petit or Maurice Béjart, she was expressing opinions that, as a relatively junior member of the company, she would not ordinarily be expected to have. When performed at the Paris Opéra, Bel's piece gave Doisneau an opportunity to be heard by an audience most of whom had perhaps not noticed her until then, especially when she was one of the corps in the background behind a classical pas de deux. The piece made the audience notice someone who would not ordinarily count and who they would normally therefore ignore.

In a matter of fact way, Doisneau described her work as anyone might talk about their job. Wearing practice clothes, with a small radio microphone by her mouth, and carrying a plastic bottle of mineral water, she told the audience how old she was, about her children, the amount she was paid each month, and how long she had been in the company. She also mentioned a severe injury which may have stopped her progressing beyond 'sujet'. It is almost more embarrassing to hear someone admit how much or how little they earn than it is to see them undress in public. Similarly the physical risks and dangers of dancing are ordinarily a taboo subject. Doisneau was not sharing intimate confidences with her audience, merely stating factual information. The piece therefore established her socio-economic status and physical vulnerability in order to ground her performance in an extensive network of relations between ballet and the social, and thus deflate the transcendental fantasies that performances of *La Bayadère*, *Giselle*, and *Swan Lake* normally attempt to evoke.

After this uncomfortable introduction, Doisneau went on to say how inspiring she had found it working for Rudolf Nureyev. As an example of part of the repertoire that she enjoyed performing, she danced, on her own, a third of a pas de trois in Nureyev's restaged version of *La Bayadère*. As she performed, she made her own musical accompaniment out of a series of 'tum-ti-tums' like someone rehearsing dancers in a studio. One could tell from a strain in her voice which movements were the most demanding, and one could hear her becoming increasingly out of breath as the extract progressed. At the end, she took her time to get her breath back, sipping water, her heavy breathing broadcast throughout the auditorium. Her exhaustion was perhaps surprising. Not only had the stately quality of the material she performed not seemed especially strenuous, but ballet dancers conventionally strive to create an illusion of effortlessness. Doisneau's exhaustion in real time effectively deflated the ballet extract's ethereal connotations. Furthermore, watching her get her breath back was boring,

making the beholder uncomfortably aware of the mundane reality of their own embodied experience of inactivity in contrast to the escapism normally offered by Romantic ballets.

Doisneau's performance was entirely lacking in the customary deferential formality that characterises self-presentation by members of ballet companies, although everything she said and did was carefully calculated and by no means casual. Clarity and precise execution are characteristic of ballet as an art form, but had the particular effect, in this instance, of keeping Doisneau's narrative from becoming sentimental. Towards the end, having expressed her admiration for her fellow 'sujet' Céline Talon, Doisneau sat at the front of the stage, her back to the audience, and watched Talon dance one of Giselle's solos from Mats Ek's modern version. Following this, she carefully ensured that her own clapping outlasted the audience's applause, maintaining an ironic distance that inferred her own capacity for self-reflection. Doisneau then explained some home truths about dancing in the corps de ballet. Some of the most beautiful moments to watch, she said, are horrible to perform. The thirty two swans in *Swan Lake* have long, still moments when, as she put it, they become human decor to make the stars seem special ('a fin de metre en valeur des étoiles'). Doisneau confessed that moments like these made her want to howl or leave the stage. Then, asking the sound technician to switch on the recording of her music, Doisneau performed alone her part of the corps's material from the second act of *Swan Lake* with all its excruciating, held poses. By showing the audience what she had just been talking about, Doisneau brought their attention to the vulnerability of those who do not count and whose suffering, in this kind of spectacle, is the price paid for the audience's gratification. This is what I am calling a performance of powerlessness.

Thus far I have emphasised the way Bel's piece is grounded in an ethical, relational aesthetic that critiques the conventions and traditions of ballet. I claimed earlier, however, that it intervenes within the modern dance tradition. Modern dance artists and their chroniclers have often identified the merits of modern dance by criticising supposed deficiencies within ballet. Thus, for example Isadora Duncan attacked the 'unnaturalness' of ballet movement. Hence also Marcia Siegal valorised the supposedly rugged vigour of American modern dance in contrast with what she characterised as the effete decorativeness of the European ballet tradition.¹⁸ In *Véronique Doisneau*, Bel's use of ballet repertoire to critique ballet can therefore be seen as one more skirmish in a long running conflict between rival constituencies.

Since Bel is one of a generation of dancer artists who have absorbed the practical implications of recent dance theory, he may well know Sally Banes's discussion of reflexive modernist choreography. Banes defines this as work that is not merely about unadorned movement for its own sake but choreography whose formal elements are so foregrounded that they can be seen as revealing essential characteristics of the medium. In addition to this, Banes requires that the work should not merely be itself but should be about being the kind of thing it is.¹⁹ While the extract that Talon performed from Ek's *Giselle* could be read in conventional narrative terms, all the extracts that Doisneau herself performed divested ballet movement of these narrative and expressive properties. The way Doisneau sang her own basic accompaniment, or performed half a duet in isolation, or danced a large unison group's movements on her own, emphasized her singular presence, in what is normally a collective activity. This stripped the dance material of the qualities and associations it might otherwise have carried. It was no longer even about interesting movement design for its own sake but just about movement itself. By default it thus fulfilled the conditions Banes has laid down for a modernist work.

This formalist reading, however, can not account for the ethical discourse I am suggesting the solo puts into circulation. Bel flattened and decontextualised the material he cited. I noted earlier Susanne Langer's admiration for the high seriousness and fervour of Mary Wigman's dancing. In contrast with this, the carefully unsentimental and inexpressive way Doisneau executed her dance material suggests an emptying out of what it means to be human.

Resisting dehumanisation

Both Le Roy's *Self Unfinished* and Bel's *Véronique Doisneau* used an aesthetic of emptiness to show what is required to survive the dehumanising effects of institutional structures. Just as it is women who create human decor behind the stars in nineteenth-century ballets, so it is predominantly women from poor countries who, as Kunst puts it, 'move in the

invisible and deadly channels of illegality' that produce an unending supply of cheap goods and services for affluent western consumers. By dancing alone one half of a solo or the corps' material from the nineteenth-century repertoire, because of the frame put in place by Doisneau's spoken commentary and the piece's conceptual premises, Doisneau foregrounded the uncharismatic presence of one of these women who do not count, replicating precisely their dehumanised, object-like status.

Just as I argued earlier that Le Roy's subtly humorous pessimism prevented *Self Unfinished* from lapsing into nihilism, I am not suggesting that we read Doisneau's performance of powerlessness as a nihilistic gesture. Instead, I am proposing that the kind of contemporary disappointment which both these pieces articulate can become an incentive for resisting dehumanisation. Le Roy's investigation of what seems inhuman reminds the beholder of what is needed to become human, while Bel's piece prompts the audience to take responsibility for the excruciating actions that invisible others have to perform to service the audience's requirements as privileged consumers. The consistency and clarity of Le Roy's choreography and Bel's artistic direction, the validity and relevance of their critiques, and the rigour and economy with which this is followed through, propose positive aesthetic values commensurate with the moral challenges of contemporary life.

¹endnotes

Part of this essay was originally presented at the conference *Solo? in Contemporary Dance*, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 6-7 October, 2007, as part of the *idans Festival*.

- 2 Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, Halifax, N.S.: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. 1974, p.51.
- 2 Claire Rousier, (ed.) *La danse en solo: Une figure singulière de la modernité*. Pantin: Centre national de la danse. 2002, p. 8.
- 3 Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1996, p. 212.
- 4 Susanne Langer, *Feeling and form : a theory of art developed from 'Philosophy in a new key'*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1953, p. 206-07.
- 5 Curt Sach, *World history of the dance*, New York : Norton, 1937. [*Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1933]
- 6 Richard Dyer, *Stars*. London: British Film Institute. 1979 p. 35
- 7 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six years : the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. London : Studio Vista, 1973.
- 8 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du Réel. 2002. p. 28.
- 9 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics'. *October* 110, Fall 2004, pp 51-79. See also Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen and Tony O'Conner 'Editorial introduction: aesthetics and its objects - challenges from art and experience'. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(3) 123-6; Toni Ross, 'Aesthetic autonomy and interdisciplinarity: a response to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics"' *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(3) 167-81; and Bojana Kunst, 'Sodelovanje in proctor / The collaboration and space'. *Maska* 21(101-102), 2006, pp. 80-87.
- 10 Kunst 2006: 83.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*: 82.
- 13 One might also read this image in relation to Georges Bataille's use of the idea of an 'acéphale' or headless man.
- 14 In *Product of Circumstances*, Le Roy points out that Western European dance companies benefit from supportive arts policies and funding, but a side effect of the way these systems work has been the creation of a format which have: Influenced and sometimes to a large degree also determined how a dance piece should be. Most of the time, producers and programmers have to significantly follow the rules of global economy' (Quoted in Helmut Ploebst *No Wind No Word: New Choreography in the Society of the Spectacle*, Munich: K. Kieser, 2001, p. 65.)
- 15 Theodore Adorno, *Problems in Moral Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 169.
- 16 Judith Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press 2005, pp. 05-06.
- 17 www.insituproductions.com
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