Jérôme Bel

Dance, Theatre and the Subject

Gerald Siegmund

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"I Write for the Black Box of the Stage": Jérôme Bel and Theatre

The stage is empty. It is not merely empty, but it displays its emptiness. Like a glaring void it stares back at us although nothing is happening on stage. I sit in the audience and look at an emptiness that looks at me. The theatre in its spatial divisions and arrangements, its place for action and its place for seeing, the stage and the auditorium, is an active player in the games Jérôme Bel devises for the theatre. Before the show begins, its walls and curtains, galleys and elements of decor frame emptiness. The theatre plays itself by showing itself in all its framing mechanisms, expectations, rules, and traditions. These rules are, of course, nowhere to be seen. They are absent yet manifest in the void and its framing. It is precisely because the void is framed that the unwritten and written rules of theatre make their ghostly appearance, raising their symbolic head like a spectre. They inform the stage, although I cannot locate them from my individual vantage point in the auditorium.

At the beginning of Jérôme Bel's piece *Gala* from 2015, as in his other pieces, such as *Jérôme Bel, Xavier LeRoy* and *The Sow Must Go On*, the stage is empty. While I descend the steep stairs in Halle G at the museum quarter in Vienna, the auditorium is already full. I find a seat at the edge of a long row close to the stage. The back wall of the theatre is covered by a curtain that parts in the middle audibly whizzing open to mark the beginning of the show. The drawn curtain reveals a solid back wall that serves as the screen for a film projection. Indeed, the spatial set-up reminds me of a cinema with the significant difference, however, that in front of the screen this glaringly empty huge plateau of a theatre

stage intervenes. Almost like an orchestra in an Ancient Greek theatre, it separates and links the auditorium and the 'action' projected in the back distancing and connecting the spectators from the actors, dancers or performers on stage.

The film is a montage of individual photographs of empty theatres. I count thirty three. The theatres vary in shapes and sizes. They range from the ruins of the vast Ancient Greek open air theatres to the splendour of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, a renaissance reconstruction of an ideal Roman theatre, to plush baroque theatres with their tiers of circles lining the walls to small puppet theatres up to a multitude of contemporary black boxes in various sizes. The theatres shown are also of different cultural origins. In an open air space, two pillars decorated with masks supporting a roof construction denote a Balinese theatre. The interior of a Japanese Nô theatre with the seats of the spectators characteristically lowered below stage level follows suit. Two semi-circles of plastic chairs, half enclosing a piece of lawn in front of them, or simply a series of logs that demarcate an empty space are instantly recognisable as theatres, too. However different the individual topographical arrangements and cultural specificities of these theatres may be, it is always the split and the framed void that remain as the inalienable topology of theatre. As in the last two examples, the framing of the void as a special place within the space may not be achieved by the architecture of the set-up only. It is achieved by our gaze that triggers our imagination. Although the space is open, the split takes place nonetheless.

The projection of these photographs actually alters the space I am in in Halle G in Vienna. The theatres are photographed from different perspectives. The spatial arrangement includes the actual auditorium in the Viennese theatre and the actual stage as well as the represented stage and auditorium in the photographs. Some photographs are taken from the stage or even from backstage from behind a curtain into the auditorium of the theatres, so that the four spatial components are arranged in such a way that from my actual seat I look across the two stages into the auditorium on the photograph. The back wall becomes the surface of a mirror doubling the space. As a member of the audience I look at myself. The doubled and enlarged stage thus creates an arena stage that may ideally be overlooked from all sides. Some photographs are taken from the auditorium onto the stage, so that I see through the second auditorium onto a second stage. In the far distance of the vanishing point where the gaze of the spectators loses itself at the horizon beyond which lies the
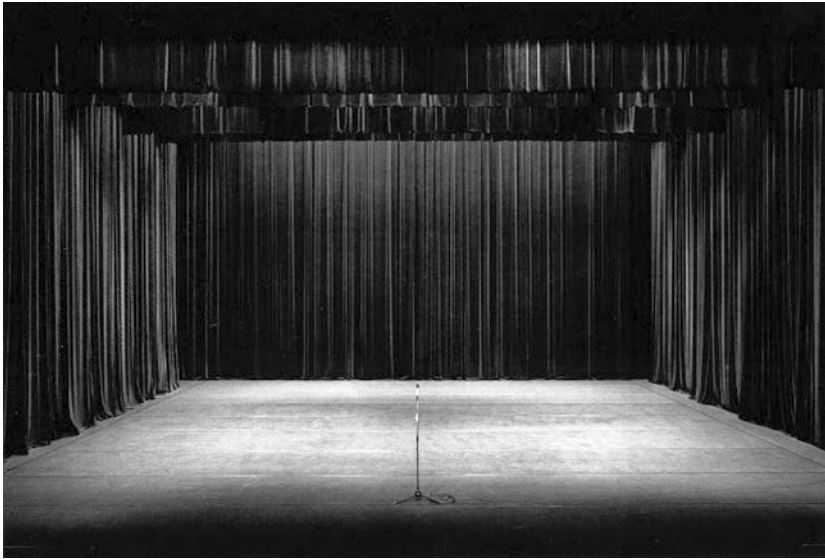
Fig. 1 *The Last Performance*, The empty stage © Herman Sorgeloos

unknown, the apparatus of the theatre re-appears as a mediatised spectre. The theatre meets the theatre in the theatre. The emptiness is doubled and folded back on to the stage. Thus, the theatre appears as the topic of theatre (Fig. 1).

I take these two spatial set ups and the trajectories they open as typical of Jérôme Bel's work. The first spatial construction is based on a circle creating a space in the middle where we watch ourselves. The chorus of Ancient Greek theatre no longer mediates between the action of kings and queens in front of the *skena*, the house that covers the back of the stage. No more dancing queens and princes with Jérôme Bel, but people that are transformed by their dancing. The dancing chorus mediates the public with the public on either side of the platform. The platform encloses people dancing, acting, and performing for the audience and with the audience. It carries the promise of communality. The second trajectory is linear in character, a mise-en-abyme of stages that carries us into the distance where all we meet are the theatre and its laws. It excludes people dancing, acting, and performing. And yet its emptiness is the pre-condition for the dancing, acting and performing to appear.

The line, symbolised in the proscenium, cuts across the circle once again separating what the circle has brought together. In the work of Jérôme Bel, as in *Gala*, dance has the function of bringing people of all backgrounds and capacities together. This reunion takes place in the theatre, which again divides the people who have come together by separating performers from spectators. This book aims to understand the strategies of staging, dancing, performing, and looking that Jérôme Bel devises to explore and bridge this gap.

After about ten minutes the curtain closes again. For a few precious seconds nothing happens until a figure emerges from behind a curtain on the left side of the stage and places a calendar upright on the floor. It is a DIN A2 art calendar whose pages, however, do not display the colourful reproductions of paintings but their white backside. On the white page addressing the audience a handwritten instruction reads "Ballett/ Ballet". The words, the first one in German, the second underneath in English, are both an inscription and an instruction for the scene that follows. A female dancer enters from the left side of the stage and walks up to the middle of the proscenium. Already from the way she walks, her arms loosely dangling and her posture slightly couched and bent forward, it becomes apparent that she is not a trained dancer. Smiling she turns and faces the audience like a ballerina. She raises her arms and puts her feet in position to perform a pirouette turning to the right. Once done, she repeats her preparation and pirouettes to the left before exiting to the right. A gala is a festive evening where international stars of ballet companies perform excerpts and highlights from their repertoire. Their performance is based on virtuosity and representation rather than on other artistic merits such as storytelling, interpretation, expression, or the exploration of the subtleties of a movement style or technique. In a way a gala is also a bastard genre, an evening of mixed matter where bits and pieces are strung together to entertain. Galas, on the other hand, are also given in dance schools at the end of each year. The name designates a festive activity where parents and friends come to see the students making dances (Bel 2016). In fact, Bel's piece *Gala* hovers in-between these two definitions of the genre, introducing the informal into the formal presentation of a theatre situation.

Keeping these implications in mind, the dancer in *Gala* performs a feast of virtuosity, the pirouette being a figure that describes a full circle as an emblem of perfection and harmony demanding focus and perfect balance from the upright dancing body. Yet, her pirouettes are far

from perfect. She cannot keep her body upright, so that the pirouette looks rather lopsided. On this night in Vienna 18 dancers follow the first one. One by one they perform their pirouettes, entering from the left and exiting on the right. The 19 performers possess different technical skills. Some pirouettes are actually very good. The performers differ in age, sex, gender, height and physique, and are of different ethnic backgrounds. In the Viennese performance one dancer sits in a wheelchair and one is mentally challenged. Regardless of these differences, they all are allowed to dance pirouettes. And they all manage to dance pirouettes. Since there is no commentary or narrative that grades or interprets the performances, one pirouette is as valid as the next one. Every one is allotted the same amount of time to show his or her skills. In a *Gala* everyone is a star.

Once everybody has finished, a second section of ballet virtuosity is shown. One by one all of the 19 dancers perform a *grand jeté* across the diagonal from the right corner at the back of the stage to front left. For this, the order of the dances has been reshuffled. The 19 dancers perform typical figures of ballet, as the inscription on the calendar says. They do as the words tell them. The direction of their entrances and exits from left to right follows the direction of reading and writing in Western cultures. Their bodies and movement tied up with language, everyone writes in their own way. Each one of them has his or her own handwriting, an individual bodily tracing that moves across the lines of the stage. The scenes are neatly separated into chapters. In *Gala* there are eight chapters. After the introduction of empty theatres projected on the back wall and the "ballet" section, a chapter with a "Walzer/waltz" follows with eight couples turning and swirling across the stage to the music of Johann Strauss' *The Blue Danube*. The remaining sections are "Improvisation" (for three minutes the entire company spreads across the stage to improvise in silence), "Michael Jackson" (a string of 19 moonwalks to Jackson's *Billy Jean*), "Verbeugung/Bow" (a series of 36 bows, two for each performer), "Solo" and, finally, "Kompanie Kompanie/Company Company", in which one dancer at a time performs a small solo to their own liking that all the others have to copy. The series of tasks *Gala* consists of references four iconic figures of various types of dance: the pirouette in ballet, the waltz in ballroom dance, the improvisation as a technique in modern and contemporary styles, the moonwalk for dance in popular culture, before finally passing the dance over to the performer's individual choices and practices. Like ordinary

people, the dancers learn by copying. And what is copied is already exist-ing movement material from popular culture and social or artistic dance practices. For Jérôme Bel the dancing body is a cultural as opposed to a natural body. Cultural forms, norms, and rules subject the body and bring it about as a dancing body in the process. By negotiating body and cultural practices the dancers are turned into subjects. The question of the subject lies at the heart of Jérôme Bel's work. Rather than working with already disciplined subjects to create new movement phrases and dance pieces, he turns his attention towards the very formation of the subject itself.

What is most striking about Jérôme Bel's work is the clarity of its structure. As becomes apparent in this brief introductory description of *Gala*, this clarity is brought about by stripping away all unnecessary adornments that would illustrate a world created and presented on stage. With the gesture of the minimalist, Bel reduces the theatre to its bare necessities: an empty stage, a feature that has become emblematic of Bel's work, simple actions, very few costumes and props. Nothing is accidental. Everything that appears on stage is essential to the action unfolding. It is arranged in a logical way where one thing follows the other developing like an argument or a train of thought. Bel's dramaturgy could be called, as British director and head of the theatre group Forced Entertainment Tim Etchells has done, a dramaturgy of lists. "In Bel's work one thing does not lead to another; instead one thing follows another" (Etchells 2004, 11). Its organising principle is the series: a series of ballet moves, a series of waltzes, a series of moonwalks. In between the actions, ges-tures, and movements that follow one another without transitions or fluid and organic-looking developments that would blur the individual clear-cut imagery, the things presented fall back on themselves. They also visibly disappear into the emptiness between the actions succeed-ing one another. In this reduced environment the spectator's attention is geared towards perceiving very little, almost nothing in all its glorious richness of minute details. Bel's pieces always walk a thin line between being there, remorselessly presenting everything and everybody taking place, and not being there, absorbing everything and everybody in the darkness or the emptiness between the individual actions, gestures or movements. While Bel firmly believes in the here and now of the theatre situation, he also challenges it, dealing as French critic Laurant Goumarre once wrote "with absence, disappearance and even death" in the process (Goumarre 2001, 17). At close inspection, Bel finds very simple images

for very complex thoughts and processes. This is what makes his work so intriguing. Witty and entertaining, his work balances on the brink of the banal and the extraordinary, between non-art and art, the popular and the philosophical.

Jérôme Bel's work is also a body of work that actively engages with popular culture. Michael Jackson's iconic moonwalk is placed side by side with Chopin's music for *Les sylphides*. *The Show Must Go On*, arguably his most successful and popular piece that is still performed 17 years after its premiere in 2000, consists entirely of 19 popular songs, from David Bowie's *Let's Dance*, John Lennon's *Imagine,* Celine Dion's classic from the movie *Titanic*, *My Heart Will Go On*, to Queen's eponymous *The Show Must Go On*. Even more rigidly than with the instructions used in *Gala*, the dancers here also perform as the lyrics of the songs tell them to do. Bel's singular project casts itself as a project of writing exploring the faultlines between the body and language. In seventeenth century France it was customary to notate and write down dances and to submit these scores for inspection to the Académie Royale de danse. Once approved by the authorities, the dances would then be sent back to the dancing masters for performance (Laurenti 1994). Choreography, from the Greek *choros*, the dancing place and space for dance, and *graphein*, the drawing or writing of both the dance and its place, thus existed independently of a physical practice in the studio. It certainly existed without an improvisational practice that would explore the possibilities of the body to move and to relate to others and their environments. While the historical writing of choreography was directly linked to the absolutist power of Louis XIV, Jérôme Bel's writing project towards the end of the twentieth century, on the other hand, can know no such power. Where Louis XIV tried to control both the social and political activities of the dancing masters in the regions of France by controlling the bodies of the dancers, inscribing them with the right order, Bel's power is much more diffuse. Instead of controlling the bodies, the dancers' bodies are inscribed with and written by popular culture that nobody may own, posses or embody in its absolutist totality. Bel thus stages the body's *relation* to the cultural as an impersonal pervasive principle that gives the dancers agency in playing with its signifiers. He addresses the question of power relations in dance by working through the questions of authorship and the subjectivities dance produces. Bel explores the implications of the cultural body for dance as an art form that since the heyday of modernism has based its guiding principles on the laws of physics and biology, thereby inventing the body as

physiologically and organically natural. Contraray to the modernist doctrine, Jérôme Bel looks for other ways to make the body speak to its audiences. "I write the shows before I meet the actors", Bel says in an interview.

> Without a doubt this is due to laziness because I don't like rehearsing at all. Besides, I find these rehearsals more and more pointless. It seems to me that there is only one type of theatrical practice possible for me, that is to say the public performance. Writing the piece, alone or with a circle of a few loyal and understanding assistants around me, and rehearsing with the performers are only risky speculations because theatre cannot be done without the presence of the public, which changes everything. The comparison to a writer is pertinent only in as much as the writer writes for the 'white page' and I do for the 'black box' of the stage (Bel and Siegmund 2002, 26, transl. Lydia White).[1]

The writing for the black box of the theatre infuses dance with a certain maturity that is reflexive of its history and its modes of production and reception. But it also confuses established modes of understanding and interpreting dance. Writing for the stage implies a different responsiveness from audiences that is intellectual rather than kinaesthetic or even emotional. Yet Bel's work is anything but dry and theoretical. In 1999, choreographer and dancer Xavier Le Roy drew attention to the duplicity in Bel's work:

> The four pieces by Jérôme Bel [*Nom donné par l'auteur*, *Jérôme Bel*, *Shirtology*, and *The Last Performance*, G.S.] are amongst the very few pieces that radically change the possibilities of choreography by suggesting a different perspective. They propose a look at the dancing body as vested in a semiotic thinking that includes their presentation as well as their perception. […] The choreographies of Jérôme Bel provide rare moments during which I could see a thought developing on a theatre stage. In the process of their performance they do not only allow for moments of reflexion and intellectual stimulation but they also create poetic spaces and humour […] (Buffard and Le Roy 1999, 29).

The development of a thought that Xavier LeRoy consideres to be the exemplary strength of Jérôme Bel's work, however, at the time ran counter to established views on dance. Towards the end of the 1990s when Bel's work gained more and more prominence on the international dance circuit, critics found very little dance in Bel's dance pieces, sometimes even commenting on

the lack of choreography. In his self-titled piece *Jérôme Bel*, an elderly female dancer lies naked on the floor at the front of the stage holding up a single light bulb. Another naked female dancer stands against the back wall singing Igor Strawinsky's score to *Le Sacre du printemps*, while a male and female dancer, also naked, explore their bodies drawing images on their skin with a bright red lipstick. Movement that could be considered dancerly because of its rhythmical structure and expenditure of energy is nowhere to be seen. Neither is there a choreography that would order the perfunctory movements of the performers into recognisable patterns. Dance, indeed, was absent from *Jérôme Bel*. Yet it was conceived of and programmed as a dance piece.

The case against Jérôme Bel was officially brought forward by audience member and patron of the festival Raymond Whitehead, who in 2002 sued the International Dance Festival Ireland after attending a performance of *Jérôme Bel*.[2] Not finding any dance in it, which he defined as "people moving rhythmically, jumping up and down, usually to music", this particular spectator felt traumatised by the performance (Roy 2011). He was shocked to see four naked dancers playing with their skin, manipulating body parts, and urinating on stage. Although Whitehead's case was ultimately dismissed, his criticism rightly articulated a popular understanding of what dance is and what audiences would expect from a contemporary dance performance. Bel counters these expectations. Since Bel's dancers neither performed steps to music that structured space and time, nor displayed inner motivations that led to movement or gesture, to connect their activity to dance seemed an almost absurd proposition. Indeed, it seems as if thinking and dancing do not go together. Instead of linking and unfolding steps and phrases, Bel unfolds thinking. Instead of jumping up and down to music, the dancers engage in banal actions that to some come across as cheap acts of provocation. Considered to be theatrical at best, a fact that could hardly be denied since the pieces were performed in theatres and in front of an audience, Bel's work fell under the verdict of 'stop dance', 'anti dance', or 'non dance'.[3] In an article in *The Guardian* in 2011, in his "step-by-step guide" to the work of Jérôme Bel, Sanjoy Roy still uses these terms to characterise Bel's work. With his "anti-dance" this "naughty French *philosophe* of contemporary dance" engages the mind rather than the body (Roy 2011).

Bel shared what was originally meant as a derogative label with a wide range of European dance artists emerging in the mid 1990s: Xavier Le Roy, Raimund Hoghe, Jonathan Burrows, Boris Charmatz, Meg Stuart, Maria La Ribot, Vera Mantero, and Thomas Lehmen, whose

work, Bel writes, he discovered at European dance festivals to which they were invited to perform their work (Bel and Charmatz 2013, 75). In the early 2000th choreographers and dancers Thomas Plischke, Martin Nachbar, Alice Chauchat, Antonia Baehr, Eszter Salamon and Juan Dominguez followed suit. The list is not exhaustive. Despite the heterogeneity of their approaches, their different aesthetics, and the different aims they pursued in their artistic trajectories, their work was considered conceptual rather than dancerly. It provoked heated debates amongst critics, scholars, audiences, and dancers about what exactly the conceptual nature of these pieces is. From Baroque court ballet in the seventeenth century to Isadora Duncan's impressionist dances at the beginning of the twentieth century, dance has always put forward a specific idea about the body and its relation to power and the social. Every dance technique is based on a whole philosophy of the body, its relation to life and death, to concepts such as beauty, to physical components like breath and gravity that structure the dance, up to the relation of movement to the psyche. If dance can hardly ever be considered to be without concept, the pieces by Jérôme Bel caused a stir because they did not hide the concept behind a phantasmagoria of imaginary bodies, which with each movement creates a fictional world that belongs to the stage. Instead, the pieces are stripped down and minimalist, only stating what is necessary for the thought to develop.

Although there always is movement in Bel's pieces, the concept took precedent over dance. It was made visible and staged— as a thought or development of a thought *about* dance that did not necessarily entail any dancing. And yet, as *Jérôme Bel* shows, a thought about dance may do without stylised movements, but it cannot do without bodies that unfold the process of thinking. At least it does not do so in the work of Jérôme Bel. Hence there is always a physical, almost visceral, side to his performances that exceeds the realisation of a concept. What these concepts are in the case of Jérôme Bel's work will be the topic of this book. Right through to his most recent production *Tombe* in 2016, his work is remarkably consistent. There is a coherent line of development and argumentation in the sequence of his pieces that this volume seeks to extrapolate. In all the different phases of his career Jérôme Bel is concerned with the notion of subjectivity in dance. By focusing on the different conceptions of the dancing subject, I will combine an analysis of his pieces with a theoretical reflection on their relation to dance.

This interruption of the flow of movement that Jérôme Bel stages has been theorised in various ways. André Lepecki reads it as an exhaustion of modernity's drive to motion, a running out of energy that propelled mankind forward with all the colonial implications this forward motion holds (Lepecki 2006). Helmut Ploebst interprets Bel's productions as resistant strategies against the commodification of bodies within our contemporary societies of the spectacle (Ploebst 2001). Laurance Louppe sees them as rebellious acts against the rule and aesthetic conventions of dance (Louppe 2007). As Jérôme Bel himself argues, what takes the place of dance in his pieces are the rules of choreography that are exposed as language and "words that cover the body and substitute for dance" (Goumarre 2001, 17). The symbolic (language, concept) takes precedence over the imaginary (the wholeness of potential bodies). Staging the codes and conventions of dance, reflecting on its modes of production and presentation, takes the upper hand. Instead of producing an imaginary surplus of movement that dazzles, impresses, interests, moves or affects the spectator, spectators here are asked to assume a different attitude. Spectatorship is cast differently. This change in the definition of spectatorship will be one guiding line for my argument in what is to follow. Rather than conceiving of the dancing body as a natural phenomenon that gets worked on and through by dance and its techniques to be articulated in an objective way, Bel conceives the body as a primarily cultural phenomenon. To come to an understanding of theatre, dance as a cultural and not as a 'natural' activity and experience means to be able to read the bodies on stage and the codes that inform them in order to understand the "words that cover the body".

Drawing out some of the faultlines between modernist kinaesthesia and post-modernist movement objectification in relation to Jérôme Bel's work will be the task of the subsequent chapter, "Modern Subjects". The aim of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it will outline the historical background against which Jérôme Bel's work takes shape. It will side Bel with the idea of spectatorship that post-modern choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and Pina Bausch put forward, namely that movement on stage is also movement being seen, mediatised and read, regardless of the intention of the artist. Secondly, it also draws attention to the institutional framework that was created in France during the 1980s to further the development of contemporary dance. Bel's work can also be considered as a break with the institutionalisation of the new dance in France during the 1980s.

If the central topic, as Bel claims himself, of his work is subjectivity, then at least four different types of subjects can be distinguished. As the chapter "Subjects of Discourse" argues, in Bel's universe dancers and choreographers are effects of a discourse on dance; they are subjects of the discourse 'Jérôme Bel'. Referring to Bel's very first piece, *Nom donné par l'auteur*, and the piece *Xavier Le Roy*, I will look into Bel's idea of writing, notions of authorship and the conceptual heritage his notion of dance as a proposition on dance is entangled with. Building on the basic definition of dance as discourse, the chapter "Subjects of Knowledge", will cast both dancers and spectators as subjects of cultural production. Dealing with the remaining five pieces from the first phase of his work from 1994 to 2004, *Jérôme Bel*, *Shirtology*, *The Last Performance*, The Show Must Go On, and finally, *The Show Must Go On 2*, this chapter shows how notions of absence are crucial in staging Bel's discourse on dance that oscillates theatrically between the materiality of the body and its significations.

"Critical Subjects" shifts the focus away from the production of knowledge to aspects of power inherent in contemporary dance practices and its institutions. From 2004 to 2009 in pieces like *Véronique Doisneau*, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Cédric Andrieux, and *Lutz Förster*, Jérôme Bel allows dancers to take centre stage and speak about their working experiences in their respective dance companies. "Subjects at Risk" finally, deals with dancers and performers taking risks with their own skills, thereby risking the form of the pieces they perform in. From 2010 onwards pieces such as *3Abschied*, *Cour d'honneur*, *Disabled Theater*, and *Tombe* deal with subjects at risk. Making dance risky again is argued to be a political strategy under contemporary conditions of dance production and reception. Coming back to the piece *Gala*, the conclusion points out some of the defining features of Bel's contemporaneity. In the process of engaging with the unknown, performers unleash a transformative power that carries them away as subjects. Being carried away they experience a basic human freedom from what they are as members of a social group: the freedom to become other. It is not last of all this basic freedom that Jérôme Bel's work is about.

My first encounter with Jérôme Bel was in January of 1998 in Frankfurt am Main for an article commissioned by the German dance magazine *Ballet International/Tanz Aktu*ell, which is now simply known as *Tanz*. Bel was presenting his piece *Jérôme Bel* at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm and I was to interview him. Towards the end of 1997 the magazine featured a series of portraits on a then new generation of

choreographers called "Dialogue with the Body" addressing new forms of corporealities and research on the body, its presentation and representation on stage. The series focused on dance artists that chose to expand traditional notions of dance and choreography working with their more often than not naked bodies as if they were performance artists. At the dawning of the age of the internet towards the end of the 1990s critics and artists alike were preoccupied with images of the body. Our first encounter resulted in my essay "Im Reich der Zeichen" (Siegmund 1998) quoting the title of one of Roland Barthes' famous books, *Empire of Signs*. Bel and I shared a mutual fascination for Barthes' work, which, although we had never met before, made our conversation easy. Over the course of now almost twenty years Jérôme Bel and I have held several conversations, some of them were published as interviews or became parts of articles I wrote about Bel's work, while still others remained email conversations. Since then I have followed Bel's work with a genuine enthusiasm and a general trust in his artistic approach. The following book tries to remain faithful to my engagement with Bel's work and the discourse it has generated since. Perhaps not surprisingly Roland Barthes's thoughts on the theatre and theatricality will, next to Michel Foucault's work, be one of the theoretical backbones of this book. This book will follow Bel's own artistic trajectory from the beginning to his most recent piece in 2016. Since our fist encounter, Jérôme Bel's work has been widely discussed; undoubtedly he is one of the most prominent artists working in the field of dance and choreography today. His pieces have met with great praise and with severe criticism, which this book, I hope, will not pass over lightly. Whichever arguments one follows, Bel's approach to dance and theatre hardly leaves you cold or disinterested.

Notes

1. The interview was republished in an abridged version in 2012 in André Lepecki (ed.) (2012).
2. Una Bauer takes this incident as the starting point of her essay on Jérôme Bel's piece *Jérôme Bel*, providing details of the law suit and the Whitehead's argumentation (Bauer 2008).
3. The late German dance critic and author Jochen Schmidt in his book on twentieth century dance uses the label of 'Stop Dance' to characterise the work of Jérôme Bel and his contemporaries (Schmidt 2002, 428–436).

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Modern Subjects

THE MEDIUM SPECIFICITY OF DANCE: OBJECTIFYING DANCE MODERNISM

From the very outset of his career in 1994, labels such as anti-dance or stop dance have characterised Jérôme Bel's work as deficient. His productions have been described as lacking dance, with the definition of dance by implication described within the parameters of modern and contemporary dance. Bel's dance pieces lack what other modern or contemporary dance productions possess: a work on the body's energy to move and the pleasure to be gained from this movement. Conceptual dance appears to be a type of dance that deprives the spectators of their aesthetic pleasure. It is dance minus the aesthetic and the sensual experience it provides when watching dance, which, in turn, implies that so-called non-conceptual dance is equal to its aesthetic dimension minus the conceptual.

It is perhaps helpful to note the general distinction in the field of phenomenological philosophy between *aisthesis* and *aesthetics* as two or even three modes of perception. While *aisthesis* here denotes the most general mode of perception of things or phenomena, aesthetics describes a special mode that focuses on the phenomena themselves, singling them out from their environment and giving them full attention. By doing so, the person perceiving is also affected by the phenomena: soliciting perceptual nuances and atmospheric details as well as sensual responses when looking at the object or the work. A person in an aesthetic mode of perception

will perceive more and other things than in an everyday context defined by pragmatic decisions and actions towards the world. It is obvious that most works of art possess an aesthetic dimension because they bracket our everyday responses to our environment by singling out a time-space for actually looking at things and changing our perceptions. However, while the aesthetic is much wider than its specific function within works of art (I may also look at an everyday phenomenon in an aesthetic way), when applied to works of art the aesthetic mode of perception develops a slightly more complex dimension. Art can not be reduced to its aesthetic, that is to say its sensual and sensible dimension, alone. For it is precisely through art's capacity to draw attention to its own modes of operation that works of art gain a self-reflexive and reflective dimension. Works of art do not appeal to the senses alone, but to the understanding of their rules of production, protocols, and critical impulses. They show and draw attention to how we perceive things while we perceive them. Conceptual art that rose to prominence during the 1960s and 1970s seems to provide little opportunity for sensual and aesthetic engagement, while it foregrounds art's dimension of (intellectual) reflecivity. Thus, conceptual art that Jérôme Bel has been critically aligned with, must still be considered art. It is, however, as British philosopher Peter Osborne argues, art that strives to separate art from its aesthetic dimension by analysing art's modernist conflation with the aesthetic, which here is understood as the work of art's sensual and emotional qualities (Osborne 2013, 37–70).[1]

Following the logic of this argument borrowed from the visual arts, Bel's works of art are still dance pieces, albeit dance pieces that work through dance's modernist and postmodernist definitions. In order to understand Jérôme Bel's particular take on dance and its aesthetic traditions, it is helpful to go back to the foundation of movement as a kinaesthetic experience in dance modernism. In his survey of conceptual art, Peter Osborne singles out four categories with which conceptual art is critically engaged. They represent the modernist definition of art that conceptualism tried to reject: the material objectivity of the art work, its medium specificity, visuality as its source of aesthetic pleasure, and its autonomy (Osborne 2002, 18). Osborne's categories are also convenient analytical tools for tracing and understanding the changes the art of dance undergoes from its modernist and postmodernist to its conceptual incarnation in the work of Jérôme Bel. Therefore, I base my argument on these four categories that need, however, certain adjustments when it comes to dance. When applied to the field of dance, the four categries

translate as follows: The material objectivity of dance is its embodied character. The body and its capacities guarantee dance's material objectivity. Its medium specificity is its work on and with movement, while its aesthetic pleasure derives from the kinaesthetic experience dance provides for dancers and spectators alike. All three make up dance's autonomy as a specific from of art, based on the morphology of its structure working on its formal elements through choreography. I add a fifth category that is more pertinent in relation to the performing arts and dance, namely time. How does Jérôme Bel's work critically engage with these categories geared towards establishing dance's autonomy as a form of art? If his work is considered to be conceptual, what is the proposition on dance as a form of art that it makes? My take on Jérôme Bel's conceptualism is divided into two parts. In the following sections, I will recapitulate the modernist and postmodernist frame within which Bel's pieces gain significance, while the next chapter outlines the conceptual parameters of Bel's work, which cast dance as a discourse. While this chapter is primarily historical in nature, the next chapter is conceptual.

My understanding of dance modernism is informed by Susan Manning's alternative description of dance modernism as a movement that aimed at expressing movement by reflexively rationalizing it (Manning 1988, 35). Objectifying movement through dance was modernism's the central rationale, and it remained so for many postmodern dancers in the 1960s. While they replaced expression of movement with movement articulation, there is a continuation between modern and postmodern dance in the objectifying tendencies in their respective dance practices. In the continuation between modern and postmodern dance that Manning postulates, however, another rift appears that I consider the more serious, as it moves dance away from its medium-specific definition and practice. The rift that appeared during the 1960s produced a shift away from kinaesthesia as dance's medium-specific source of aesthetic pleasure (embodied feeling and/or articulated movement acquiring an objective form through choreography and/or score work). Modes of perception that were conscious of other media—film, television, photography—became prominent, framing and altering the viewer's perception of the dancing body. This view holds true for forms of dance on both sides of the Atlantic: for both the postmodern practices in the United States and the emerging Tanztheater in Germany. My argument therefore also produces a subtle rift in the perception of Pina Bausch's work, which I take as an example for the crucial shift to seeing movement, as primarily dealing with emotions. While Bausch's work undoubtedly develops

resonant emotional qualities, it achieves this by working on the outside (cultural, medial, and social) framing and production of the dancing bodies and their emotions. Pina Bausch's bodies are bodies twice seen. I place Jérôme Bel's work in this tradition of bodies and movement not primarily felt, but seen. By being seen, dance and the dancing body become explicitly culturally informed, which forms the basis of Bel's work.

Moving from the Inside Out: The Creation of an Inner Scene

Drawing on physiological research from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dance scholar and critic John Martin in the 1930s theorised how the modern dances by choreographers and dancers like Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, or Martha Graham could communicate with their audiences. Since none of these artists choreographed dances that depicted narrative scenes with pantomimic gestures to be read by audiences, the question arose how their abstract dances composed of pure movement could be understood by the spectator. Martin's answer, in short, is by kinaesthetic experience that relies on empathy. His theory of dance as kinaesthetic communication has since become paradigmatic even for a more contemporary understanding of dance. Give or take a few modifications on how kinaesthesia operates and what its aims are, the fallout of Martin's theory persists until today.

Dramaturgue and dance scholar Bojana Cvejić characterises this fallout as a 'body-movement bind,' that is, as the establishment of an intrinsic connection between the physiological constitution of the body, the movements that result from it, and their communicative potential (Cvejić 2015, 18–22). Body, movement, and the kinaesthetic experience gained from the moving body are inextricably linked and respectively stipulate what dance and movement are. It has since become the new norm of dance production and reception. Together they make up dance's medial objectivity, its medium specificity and its mode of communication that I call the 'inner scene.' The body-movement bind constitutive of a modernist understanding of dance entailed an entirely different conception of dance spectatorship as a special form of communication between the dancer and the spectator. How, then, does Martin conceptualise dance spectatorship and in what way does his conception differ from that of Jérôme Bel?

As Susan Leigh Foster's research has shown, John Martin's thinking about dance as kinaesthetic communication is built on changes in the