

**Undoing the fantasy of the (dancing) subject:
“still acts” in Jérôme Bel’s *The Last Performance*.**

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Et c'est bien là un acte immobile (il n'a pas été immobilisé, non, il fut immobile par essence, de toujours), c'est un événement discret, mais bouleversant, de la mémoire.

Georges Didi-Huberman

The thoughts on “still acts” presented in this essay are the most recent formulations of an ongoing research on stillness in dance. Before addressing Jérôme Bel’s piece *The Last Performance*, I would like to briefly outline the premises of this research, and retrace some points in my path so far.

In a paper I delivered in 1999, at the Fifth Performance Studies Conference in Wales, I analyzed, briefly, the historical dynamics under which, in western theatrical dance, stillness moved from being dance’s other (as outlined by the ideologies of the Romantic ballet and already announced by Kleist in 1810, in his famous text “On the Puppet Theatre”¹) to gain, with the advent of modernism in dance (Duncan, Nijinski) the role of dance’s primal impulse, a sort of generative force which allowed dance to become present. The quotes are well known -- Isadora Duncan in quest for the “natural spring of dance,”

For hours I would stand quite still; my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus.... I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement.²

Jacques Riviere, reacting to and reviewing Nijinski’s *Sacre*...:

In the body in repose, there are a thousand hidden directions, an entire system of lines that incline it toward dance.³

Later, in a post-Cagean mo(ve)ment, with Steve Paxton’s *Magnesium*, stillness was explicitly claimed as belonging to dance, and even articulated as dance proper. The American innovator invented a dance he called “the stand.” It is worth quoting Paxton extensively on “the stand”:

Well, first of all, it's a fairly easy perception: all you have to do is stand up and then relax -you know- and at a certain point you realize that you've relaxed everything that you can relax but you're still standing and in that standing is quite a lot of minute_movement...the skeleton holding you upright even though you're mentally relaxing... Call it the 'small dance' ...It was a name chosen largely because it's quite

descriptive of the situation and because while you're doing the stand and feeling the 'small dance' you're aware that you're not 'doing' it, so in a way, you're watching yourself perform; watching your body perform its function. And your mind is not figuring anything out and not searching for any answers or being used as an active instrument but is being used as a lens to focus on certain perceptions.⁴

In a more recent essay,⁵ I pursued the path opened by Paxton's observation that "the stand" requires a perceptual shift in the dancer's body. Paxton clarified that, phenomenologically, the stillness in "the stand" was not that of statues but it derived from a redistribution of the amplitude of the signifying motion in dance, as well as a reinvention of the expectations regarding fluidity as definitional characteristic of the dance. For Paxton, the stand engages what José Gil called "the small perception."⁶ Thus, I investigated in which ways a *phenomenology of stillness* (which I termed, after Gil, "microscopy of perception") could be derived from this standing body.

As I searched for examples of this tremulous stillness in dance, one of aspect that caught my attention was the fact that stillness emerged in moments of historical anxiety and could be seen as the body's response to those moments. This formulation was derived from the observation of certain coincidences in the practice of choreographers in the early 1990s: Yochiko Chuma standing at Saint Mark's church in 1992 saying that the state of the world was such that she didn't feel like dancing (Rodney King verdict, Gulf War, Bosnia). And, across the ocean, several choreographers, gathered in Paris for a month-long intensive residency, independently producing the same kind of statement -- both verbally and physically.⁷ Interestingly, this search within arrest was not a denial of the medium of dance, but a moment in which there was a deep formal probing of the expressive and perceptual thresholds of dance as a medium due to social and political circumstances. This claiming of stillness escapes from the fields of composition and kinesthetic concern that used to be its province to become an action, filled with force. It is this force of arrest that I call the "still act" in dance, an act as powerful, "bouleversant," as Didi-Huberman writes, that it can be termed resistant, and to which now I would like to turn.

The symbolic and expressive qualities of stillness clarify the phenomenological nature of this (resistant) act of arrest. It is not synonym with freezing. Rather, what stillness does is to initiate the subject in a different relationship with temporality. Stillness operates at the level of the subject's desire to invert a certain relationship with time, and with certain (prescribed) corporeal rhythms. Which means that to engage in stillness is to engage into different experiences of perceiving one's own presence. This is anthropologist and cultural critic Nadia Seremetakis' insightful notion of the "still act." For Seremetakis "still acts" are those moments of pause and arrest in which the subject -- by physically introducing a disruption in the flow of temporality -- interpellates "historical dust."⁸

Against the flow of the present, -- writes Seremetakis -- there is a stillness in the material culture of historicity; those things, spaces, gestures, and tales that signify the perceptual capacity for elemental historical creation. Stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust.⁹

Seremetakis' use of the expression "historical dust" comes from her readings of Walter Benjamin. In her critical analysis of Benjamin's Arcades Project, Susan Buck-Morss explains how, for Benjamin, "history stands so still it gathers dust."¹⁰ It is under this stillness of history that one can understand Seremetakis' use of the expression "historical dust." For Seremetakis, dust expresses the ways by which the imperceptible layering of historical events anesthetizes the senses, in a quiet collective process of sensorial repression as perceptive layering and sedimentation. One may add,

however, following Benjamin's logic, that history also produces dust in order to perform a busy spectacle of progress, a theatrics of moving forward. It is within these dusty folds of agitation in the name of progress that dance's embracing of still acts can be perceived as resistance. Standing still against the busy background of historical agitation (an agitation that nevertheless, stays put), the dancer does not betray dance, but rather proposes another dance, one under which time expands immensely, awakening discarded memories to flood, allowing sedimented yet necessary gestures, thoughts, feelings, sights, to emerge once again in the social surface. By engaging into stillness, one allows those "disturbing acts of memory" that Didi-Huberman identifies in "*l'act immobile*." In stillness one suspends sensory and historical anesthesia.

I would like to consider now more explicitly on what might surface once dance emerges from its own dusty, historical sedimentation, to challenge our sensorial and cognitive apparatus by the means of stillness. This is the moment when the historical, the phenomenological, and the political converge to create an ontological confrontation. In order to escape metaphysics, I will focus on a piece by French choreographer Jérôme Bel. Bel's overall work so far has been one in which "still acts" abound. In his piece *Jérôme Bel*, created in 1995, stillness, because it is enacted as a gift, mindful that it is standing before viewers, straightforwardly interpellates the audience. The audience is asked to plunge together in this uncharted territory of quiet expressivity, where bodies surrender themselves to the force of their presence. Rather than seeing stillness as dance's negative, *Jérôme Bel* shows how dance can always reinvent embodiment, subjectivity and the sensorial by reclaiming corporeal attitudes otherwise discarded as insignificant.

But it is with *The Last Performance* that stillness blows away the most sedimented layers of dust covering one of dance's most basic ideological precepts – i.e., the irrepressible attachment of dance to (what I call) *the optical fantasy of the subject*. I use the term "optical fantasy of the subject" in the sense Louis Althusser writes on the "spontaneous" form(ul)ation of the subject as "mirror structure," supported by a "Unique or Absolute subject" who renders itself as such by a process of naturalization and reification (whose name is ideology) of the conditions of its perpetual reproduction.¹¹ It is precisely this fantasy that sustains dance's ontology in modernity, and it is this fantasy that *The Last Performance* challenges by the means of a continuous choreographing of "still acts."

A few months after first watching *The Last Performance*, I exchanged a few e-mail messages with Bel over some details in it. Invariably, in all of the e-mails I received from Bel, his signature would destabilize more than affirm his identity: "Je t'embrace. Signed Jérôme Bel/André Agassi." Those who have seen *The Last Performance* know what is in play here, in this double signature, that is also, and very importantly, a joke, but mostly, and even more importantly, not a joke. *The Last Performance* starts with one of the performers, Frédéric Seguet, announcing to the audience: "Je suis Jérôme Bel". After a few seconds, this Jérôme Bel walks off stage, and the person to whom the name Jérôme Bel has been conferred upon by family and rectified by the (French) State enters, dressed up as tennis player André Agassi. He states: "I am André Agassi." This identity play by means of the playful use of the performative speech-act positions *The Last Performance* as a piece that evolves around a continuous pun on the isomorphic relations between body, subject, identity and the ways those are reified and essentialized (in a double sedimentation) as image.

The piece unfolds by thriving on this constant destabilization of the proprietary relationships between body, self, identity, body-image, and name. Staring at the audience a man states: "I am Hamlet." Then, after a pause, the expected citation, less from Shakespeare, than from the archives of collective memory: "To be..."

He stops.

Then, he walks out of the stage, and into the wings. After a brief pause we hear, as if from afar, "... or not to be..."

Pause.

The man walks back into the stage again. He arrives at the microphone standing dead center downstage and utters: "...that is the question."

After André Agassi, Hamlet -- delivering the famous line in Act I, scene II, of Shakespeare's classic. It is important to notice the function of the cliché, of re-collection, of citation as mnemonic device for the operation of the performative.¹² The cliché sinks deep. What is it that Hamlet/Carallo performs when he is delivering his line? He announces presence as distillation of memory. And he announces the question of being as the historical ballast of a discourse that invents the fantasy of the monadic subject as self-contained entity trapped within one singular body always perceived as image.

By underlying his speech with a literal emptying of the stage, the heavy question Hamlet drags around -- the question of being -- becomes saturated with mnemonic and optical implications of presence. This saturation of presence is very important contextually -- for it precedes not only the moment in which dance finally erupts in *The Last Performance* but it precedes the first eruption of dance in the entirety of Bel's choreographic work.¹³ Hamlet/Antonio Carallo performs a double function in the piece. Francis Barker noted how Shakespeare's "Hamlet" first articulated, in a clear manner, the conflicts surrounding the emergence of the modern subject -- a subject that will launch the problematic of being as a powerful force reshaping the whole of the social continuum. For Barker, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* announces the invention of the monadic subject, a subject centered around a self, contained by the limits of the body, isomorphic to that body perceived as private property, bearer of a biography, container of private secrets and unique ghosts, autonomous before the State, strictly binomial in terms of gender, and tamed in the channeling of desire.¹⁴ This monadic subject, that casts our Western experience of subjectivity in modernity, is as familiar as Hamlet, whose character then transcends the history of theatre only to become fulfilled in us all. Hamlet/Carallo utters the question of being, as a cliché that reminds us of our own subjectivity. It is this familiarity both with Hamlet and with his (cliché) question of being that reinforces the necessity of Hamlet's presence in Bel's piece. The moment when Hamlet walks in in *The Last Performance* is not an innocent one. He enters between a first scene on the indeterminacies of the name of the subject (that is also the name of the choreographer) and a scene of dance. But isn't the emergence of this subject-in-imagistic-self-containment, this subject as monadic person within a body, that allows the very advent of modern Western theatrical dance? A dance, as we know, born out of a regal dancer embodying the choreographed State, manifesting itself as totalitarian expression of a mysteriously autonomous and moving body. One may even say that, without the monadic subject trapped in a body-image lived as an essence, and carrying around the question of being as presence and absence, that is to say, without Hamlet, *there would have been no dance*.

Thus, when Hamlet/Carallo walks onto the stage in *The Last Performance*, his deliverance and presence are not statements on/from theatre, but are extremely provocative *statements on/towards dance*. And it is not by chance that, as Hamlet/Carallo leaves the stage after so effectively peeling off being from presence, dance walks in -- embodied by dancer Claire Haine. Haine will dance a fragment of Linke's choreography "Wandlung" (1978) to Franz Schubert's "Death and the Maiden." It is only after Bel's invocation of hamlet that dance, as we recognize it under its current definition of harmonious movement of body to the sound of music, can happen for

the first time ever in his choreographic work. As I now turn to the particularities and peculiarities of this dance, let us not forget the immediate context of its appearance.

There is a huge release of tension in the Theatre am Hallescher Ufer, in Berlin, in August of 1999, where I first, and last, saw *The Last Performance*, and where the audience, until Haine's dance, had been close to riotous. Motion at last! Finally, someone follows music in the recognizable patterns of what we call "dancing"! Flow, music, body, presence, woman, femininity, ongoing motion, pretty white dress -- one finally enters into the zone of recognition and relaxes with the familiar. Then, the short fragment ends, and Susanne/Claire leaves the stage. And familiarity is soon slapped on the face.

Quietly, Susanne Linke re-enters in the body named Jérôme Bel. He/she says: "Ich bin Susanne Linke." And the dance and the music start again, the same notes and the same steps performed with delicate precision. Delicacy is of crucial importance here. The music, the pace, the gestures, all under the dancer's tight control operate as intensifiers of presence -- a presence made hyperbolic by repetition and by the inversion of gender under the white dress. What is being proposed in this accumulating quotation, as Bel/Linke leaves, and Carallo/Linke step in now, to perform again the same dance under the same white dress, only for Frédéric/Linke to replace him and start the process all over again, "Ich bin Susanne Linke"/ to position / music / dance? What is being claimed under the repetitious prefacing of each new dancing by the performative speech act uttered by each new dancer "Ich bin Susanne Linke"? What is at stake in this dance stuck in its continuous repetition, as if reconfiguring the linear teleological motions of time? We are in the presence of one of those moments Seremetakis designated as "still acts", a suspension of the continuous flow of temporality by the insertion of a "gesture (...) that signifies the perceptual capacity for elemental historical creation." And what is being created in this moment are the conditions for removing from our beclouded eyes trapped within the visual regime of the fantasy of being, all the dusty layers of historical sedimentation, under which the choreographic version of the fantasy of the subject found its place of rest and fossilization. What is the fossilized version of the fantasy of the subject in the narratives of dance in modernity? The version that fixates dance's being as isomorphic to the dancer's always moving presence. This is where the still acts in *The Last Performance* -- by screwing up the logic of the eye and of time, of movement and of identity, as well as of performative speech-acts -- offer us a dance beyond the ballast of Hamlet and of an exhausted, movement-obsessed modernity.

Nothing fixed the relationship between embodiment and dance (dance as privileged manifestation of a monadic, embodied subject) as vividly and as rigidly as the so much quoted lines by W. B. Yeats that close his poem "Among School Children." Let me refresh your memory with my own cliché quotation:

*O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?*

These two lines have held so much weight in capturing the isomorphism between dance and body, movement and subject that Peggy Phelan qualified their effect as "intractable."¹⁵ I believe one of the reasons those lines are intractable is because they self-contain dance within the axiomatic foundation of the fantasy of the subject. The lines reify the boundaries of the body-subject isomorphism, to render dance in our most deeply embedded ontological believes -- dance is a moving body being glanced upon under the sound of music; the dancer is a subject who moves in the scopical field as she inhabits a body. Let me quote Phelan's whole commentary on Yeats' lines, from her essay "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Choreographing History." She writes:

The fact that modern Western dance is *always* indexed back to the dancer is more than the logical proof of the *intractability* of Yeats's echoing question, and more a symptom of the desire to see the body of the other as a mirror *and* as a screen for one's own g/lancing body.¹⁶

In *The Last Performance* the mirror/screen does make an explicit appearance – the mirror literally dances in the piece. However, it is a joking mirror, a mirror that does not reflect, a screen that is black, sucking in light, a mirror that operates by refusing to return the gaze that falls upon it and by erasing the easy identification of presence with vision. If the mirror is a mimetic machine, and one that, along with the invention of the monadic subject, is central in locating and creating the body of the dancer in the history of Western dance, then in *The Last Performance*, the mirror makes its appearance as absurd parody. A square black cloth is held by two of the dancers. And, behind it, we know another dancer performs, once again, Susanne Linke's choreographed steps. By withdrawing the dancer from the viewer's gaze, this mirror erases as well as defaces. It undermines the optical attachment of dance with the dancer's physical presentation. Dance-as-dancer is no longer a "brightening glance." Dancer and dance happen beyond and behind the scopic field. But, while the dancer is kept unseen, dance unobtrusively remains in our perceptive field – we can hear it, feel its rustling presence beyond the screen, follow its indexical counter-part in the motions of the black cloth, witness its kinespheric influences by the motions the two visible dancers holding the screen have to perform in order to keep the dance hidden. Most importantly: the relative stillness of the black square forces our remembering, we can re-constitute the dancing body within our selves (which is the process of rehearsing). This is "a discreet event, but disturbing, of the memory" to quote again Didi-Huberman's lines at the beginning of this essay -- the moment in which, by remembering, and by not seeing, we become/dance Susanne Linke. The dancing body, in its absence, is introjected. But the erasure of the figure of the dancer, his or hers "not to be", does not at all erase the dance as Yeats' identification would require. The use of this negative mirror/screen undoes mimesis by intensifying memory. Every time "Wandlung" is danced, in its looping obsession, in its circular temporality of repetition, we witness a moment in which the "intractable" identification of dancer and dance are subverted forever. Dance is cast as dis-embodied, ready to be occupied by any-body as a site, rather than "expressed" as an inner impulse of a hermetically sealed subject trapped within a body projecting its image within the mirroring field of the gaze. Dance and dancer are no longer one swayed, autonomous, integral, self-contained, single entity, subjected forever to the "fleeting glance" and the sound of music. By peeling off dance from the dancer, the dancer can be inhabited by other non-pre/formed steps. No longer a fleeting glance, the dancer can claim other ways to deal with the visible. No longer subjected to music, she can probe deep for undertones. No longer subject to continuous motion she can embrace the still act as movement of resistance.

NOTES:

¹ See, Lepecki, André. "Stillness and the Microscopy of Perception", paper delivered at the 5th International Performance Studies Conference, Aberystwyth, Wales, 1999. The most significant quote from Kleist's parable may well be the following: "Puppets, like elves, need the ground only so that they can touch it lightly and renew the momentum of their limbs through this momentary delay. We [humans] need it to rest on, to recover from the exertions of dance, a moment which is clearly not part of the dance." See Kleist, Heinrich von, "On Puppet Theatre." In. *An abyss deep enough: letters of Heinrich von Kleist, with a selection of essays and anecdotes*. 1st ed. New York: Dutton, 1982, p. 241.

² Duncan, Isadora.. *My life*. New York,: Boni and Liveright, 1927, p.75.

³ Rivière, Jacques. "Le Sacre du printemps." *Nijinsky Dancing*; New York, Alfred Knopf, 1975, p.165.

⁴ Paxton, Steve and Elizabeth Zimmer. "The Small Dance (an interview with Steve Paxton). *Contact Quarterly*, Vol.3, n.1, Fall 1977, p.11.

⁵ See Lepecki, André. "Still: On the vibratile microscopy of dance," in *ReMembering the Body*, Gabrielle Brandstetter and Hortensia Völckers, eds., Hatje Cantz, 2000.

⁶ See Gil, José A *Imagem Nua e as Pequenas Percepções*, Lisboa: Relógio d'Água, 1996.

⁷ I am referring to the first edition of SKITE, organized by French critic and programmer Jean-Marc Adolphe. Vera Mantero, Meg Stuart, Paul Gazzola, Santiago Sempere are some of the choreographers present that produced work around immobility, slowness, arrest.

⁸ See Seremetakis, Nadia. "The Memory of the Senses." (Parts I-III). In *The Senses Still. Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, edited by N. Sermetakis. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹⁰ See Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass. And London: The MIT Press, 1995, p.95.

¹¹ See Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)." In *Mapping Ideology*, edited by S. Zizek. London and New York: Verso, 1994.

¹² *The Last Performance* proposes a tension between performative speech-acts in its relation to the citationality and the Law, and performance as space of subversion. Particularly important in this tension is the question of "who gives name."

¹³ I realize that the unspoken premise of this paper (and that informs my work in general) is that I make a clear distinction between dance and choreography. One is not the other, and just by historical contingencies were they attached together. I believe we are in a moment when the tensions and conflicts between these two artistic entities are most pressingly present within a certain avant-garde. This is an entirely different discussion, and I'll leave it for a future essay.

¹⁴ See Barker, Francis. *The Tremulous Private Body*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1995.

¹⁵ See Phelan, Peggy. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Choreographing Writing." In *Choreographing History*, edited by S. L. Foster. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.206. Emphasis added.