

# Choreography As a Cenotaph: The Memory of Movement

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One has to dig up the dead, over and over again [...] the future only arises out of a dialogue with the dead. – Heiner Müller

Movement is a factory of the fact that you are actually evaporating. – William Forsythe

Rainer Maria Rilke published his collection of poems *Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1923 with a dedication of a special kind. He constructed the text as a cenotaph, “written as a monument for Vera Ouckama Knoop”<sup>1</sup>. The memorial commemorates a young dancer who died of a mysterious disease in 1919 at the age of nineteen. She stopped dancing, her body changed, and she sought movement in other forms – in music and in drawing. It was “as though the dance denied her were still finding its expression, ever more quietly and discreetly”, wrote Rilke to Margot Sizzo on 12 April 1923. But this cenotaph which the texts represent is not only meant for the deceased dancer. Much more, the sonnets – in the name of the mythical singer capable of moving even the dead with his song – refer as an epitaph to the death of dance itself. They put writing, as memory and as a lament on evanescence, in place of the moving body. The poetry invokes that empty space which has divested itself of dance – a vacuity which, for this very reason, is called “the unheard-of centre”:

You still knew the place where the lyre  
lifted sounding – : the unheard-of centre.<sup>2</sup>

Under the sign of the mythical invoker of the dead, Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* demonstrate what choreography intends: the description of that space which has

always been in the process of expelling the body's movement. Seen in this way, choreography is a form of writing along the boundary between presence and no longer being there: an inscription of the memory of that moving body whose presence cannot otherwise be maintained. Choreography is an attempt to retain as a graph that which cannot be held: movement. On the one hand, 'choreography' means the writing of movement as notation; on the other hand, it also refers to the text of a composition of movement. Choreography, as the writing *of* and *about* movement, as preserved memory, thus always includes something of a requiem. It is precisely this memory which designates the Orphic: as a space between life and death. This space between the material and the immaterial world opens and closes by means of the gesture of turning, by the torsion of the body which "holds open the door to the grave"<sup>3</sup>. The fact that working with movement – the placing of steps and their transition in placement – also includes entering these interspaces and that choreography places and erases traces of memory has deeply engraved itself on the modern consciousness. Rilke's poetic phenomenology of these processes gives an idea of this.

The works of contemporary choreographers such as Meg Stuart, Xavier Le Roy, and William Forsythe are also particularly imbued with a reflection on the fleeting quality of dance and of the fragmented traces of memory which, at the very most, allow themselves to be gathered up as vestiges and translated into another text.

William Forsythe – vestiges of whose dance pieces I shall present, from my own memory, over and over in what follows as a leading thread in my argument – has been engaged by these questions more, perhaps, than any other contemporary choreographer. In *Limb's Theorem* (1990), a fragmented interspace is opened up as a theatre of the memory of movement. The dancers move on a stage kept so dark that the audience can only partially perceive the bodies. The contours and three-dimensionality of the forms are further blurred by the precise handling of the lights. The lighting conditions influence perception in such a way that the imagination adds the invisible, whose absence we feel in the forms and movement. In these borderline areas of the perceptible, seeing becomes insecure; the corporeality of the forms is porous and the line of the figures of movement is interrupted. Light and shadow cause anamorphic distortions.

As the title suggests, the choreography postulates a theorem on limbs. Not a complete theory, but rather something like a hypothesis on the body and its parts. The human figure cannot be grasped as a whole. Instead, it constantly eludes its stable form – in movement and through movement. The body thus appears divided into parts, or dis-membered, to then become reassembled, or re-membered in the

viewer's reconstructive perception. The entire text of the piece constantly formulates and then refutes other versions of this theorem on the organisation and disorganisation of the limbs. The programme booklet is part of this choreographic theorem as well. It contains text fragments by Aldo Rossi and Ludwig Wittgenstein: philosophical reflections on the subject of perception and imagination, and on the idea of the fragment. Printed on rough, recycled paper, the typefaces are set in justified blocks of text printed as a negative image – white on black (the play of light and shadow on the stage translated onto paper), paler on every successive page, and with headings skewed in such a way that the layers of print gradually overlap. There is hardly any differentiation between (back)ground and (typographic) figure, and the body of writing slips into an indistinctness which is analogous to the figures of the dancers themselves. The blocks of text which embody the memory of writing – a memorial to the perception of movement – themselves move within a (scriptorial) space in which they fade and are superimposed to the point of illegibility, whereby a process of overwriting is set in motion: It is a kind of choreography on paper as a palimpsest. The justified blocks of text in the programme booklet are interspersed with empty pages – that is, with paper surfaces that are not inscribed, but rather incised (the verb 'to write', like the Greek word *graph*, originally meant 'to cover with writing' as well as 'to scratch' or 'to incise'). Geometric figures, lines, circles, acute angles, and curves are punched into the paper like the floor plan of choreographic notation. They jump up as the page is turned, suddenly taking on a spatial form.

The programme booklet keeps posing a set of basic questions in choreography, the same questions as those addressed on the stage: the continuity of movement and the identity of bodily form. Choreography – as a sketching of paths, as cartography – is "folded" into these pages. In this way, the programme booklet brings to view a virtual *mise en scène* of the shifting of letters: the emancipation of writing from the principle *scripta manent* into the fleetingness of movement in space. "Fragment," reads the text fragment by the architect Aldo Rossi, "*frammento* means a small chip which has broken out of a larger body", and he goes on to ask whether an accumulation of fragments, rather than being termed a mere "rubbish heap", should not actually be called the "city of the future".

What William Forsythe's choreography takes up on and makes tangible in different forms and frameworks – on paper and on stage – are highly abstract questions concerning the space and time of movement and the never more than fragmentary traces which survive as its memory. And this investigation itself, like the framework provided by the title, takes place in an interspace: in a form of the concept of Orphic, stemming from Rilke's mythical poetics and translated into late 20th-century

