

Choreographic Objects by William Forsythe

"An object is not so possessed by its own name that one could not find another or better therefore."
- Rene Magritte

Choreography is a curious and deceptive term. The word itself, like the processes it describes, is elusive, agile, and maddeningly unmanageable. To reduce choreography to a single definition is not to understand the most crucial of its mechanisms: to resist and reform previous conceptions of its definition.

There is no choreography, at least not as to be understood as a particular instance representing a universal or standard for the term. Each epoch, each instance of choreography, is ideally at odds with its previous defining incarnations as it strives to testify to the plasticity and wealth of our ability to re-conceive and detach ourselves from positions of certainty.

Choreography is the term that presides over a class of ideas: an idea is perhaps in this case a thought or suggestion as to a possible course of action. To prohibit or constrain the substitution or mobilization of terms within this domain is counterintuitive. The introduction and examination of the effect of terminological substitutions that reveal previously invisible facets of the practice is key to the development of procedural strategies.

Choreography elicits action upon action: an environment of grammatical rule governed by exception, the contradiction of absolute proof visibly in agreement with the demonstration of its own failure. Choreography's manifold incarnations are a perfect ecology of idea-logics; they do not insist on a single path to form-of-thought and persist in the hope of being without enduring.

Choreography and dancing are two distinct and very different practices.

In the case that choreography and dance coincide, choreography often serves as a channel for the desire to dance. One could easily assume that the substance of choreographic thought resided exclusively in the body. But is it possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, a choreographic object, without the body?

The force of this question arises from the real experience of the position of physical practices, specifically dance, in western culture. Denigrated by centuries of ideological assault, the body in motion, the obvious miracle of existence, is still subtly relegated to the domain of raw sense: precognitive, illiterate. Fortunately, choreographic thinking being what it is, proves useful in mobilizing language to dismantle the constraints of this degraded station by imagining other physical models of thought that circumvent this misconception. What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like?

The blind French resistance fighter Jacques Lusseyran, writing about the inner sense of vision which enabled him to see and manipulate forms and thoughts, famously described it as being like a boundless mental canvas or screen which existed "nowhere and everywhere at the same time." The blind mathematician Bernard Morin described his envisioning of the process of everting a sphere in a similar manner. And so it is with the choreographic object: it is a model of potential transition from one state to another in any space imaginable. An example of a similar transition already exists in another time based art practice: the musical score. A score represents the potential of perceptual phenomena to instigate action, the result of which can be perceived by a sense of a different order: a transition via the body from the visual to the aural. A choreographic object, or score, is by nature open to a full palette of phenomenological instigations because it acknowledges the body as wholly designed to persistently read every signal from its environment.

I make this comment in relationship to Lusseyran and Morin to introduce the manifold possibility of our practice. Lusseyran's inner vision enabled him to see topographies and project strategic movements of groups of people. Morin saw an event in the space of his mind that he then translated with haptic skill into sculptures and subsequently into the universal yet somewhat hermetic language of mathematics. Their quite substantial bodies, put into action by the force of their ideas left very discernable trace of those ideas in the real world; from nowhere to somewhere, not everywhere, and no longer exclusively within their bodies.

But what if we, for a moment, look at the situation of the choreographic act. Historically choreography has been indivisible from the human body in action. The choreographic idea traditionally materializes in a chain of bodily action with the moments of its performance being the first, last and only instances of a particular interpretation. The idea's enactment is not sustained and cannot be repeated in the totality of its dimensions by any other means. As poignant as the ephemerality of the act might be, its transient nature does not allow for sustained examination or even the possibility of objective, distinct readings from the position that language offers the sciences and other branches of arts that leave up synchronic artifacts for detailed inspection. This lack of persistence through time, like the body itself, is natural and suspect at the same time. The irretrievability of the choreographic enactment, though possibly engendering a nostalgic thrill perhaps also reminds the viewer of the morbid foundations of that same sentiment.

Are we perhaps at the point in the evolution of choreography where a distinction between the establishment of its ideas and its traditional forms of enactment must be made? Not out of any dissatisfaction with the tradition, but rather in an effort to alter the temporal condition of the ideas incumbent in the acts, to make the organizing principles visibly persist. Could it be conceivable that the ideas now seen as bound to a sentient expression are indeed able to exist in another durable, intelligible state?

A choreographic object is not a substitute for the body, but rather an alternative site for the understanding of potential instigation and organization of action to reside. Ideally, choreographic ideas in this form would draw an attentive, diverse readership that would eventually understand and, hopefully, champion the innumerable manifestations, old and new, of choreographic thinking.