Media-Bodies: Choreography as Intermedial Thinking Through in the Work of William Forsythe

Sabine Huschka

Since Ballet Frankfurt was reconstituted as the Forsythe Company in 2004, William Forsythe has increasingly explored formats of installation art practice. Works such as Human Writes (in collaboration with Kendall Thomas, 2005) and You made me a monster (2005) develop within an interactive and intermedial space and experiment with new ways to experience the production and perception of movement. “Performance installation” is the new term for this intertwined process of movement production and movement perception. The choreographic composition itself grows out of procedures of performative sensing by the dancers, which spreads to onlookers. This multiplex awareness of movement for which the dancer’s body is the medium constitutes what I shall call the “media-body” as an essential moment of performance installation as choreographic event. Compared to earlier Forsythe installations—which he called “choreographic objects”—like White Bouncy Castle (1997), City of Abstracts (2000), or Scattered Crowd (2002),1 with their accessible spaces of movement (in White Bouncy Castle the spectator was a visitor moving about freely inside a white inflatable castle, and City of Abstracts featured choreographic projections of movement on large screens in open spaces) performance installations take place squarely in the theatrical context: in theater lobbies, exhibit halls, or accessible public performance spaces where dancers and the audience come together in a mutually shared yet operationally divided space that leads them into an interactive relationship.

The performative structure of the works does not suggest any kind of closed choreographic order geared to the audience. Much more frequently, it evokes poetic spaces with a powerful emotional charge, operating on the borderline of disorder and exalted excess.

Sabine Huschka teaches dance studies at the Institute of Theatre Science in Berlin (FU) and formerly at the Institute of Theatre Science in Bern (IUB) in Switzerland. Her research interests center on the history of theatrical dance from the eighteenth to the twentieth century with an emphasis on cultural theory. She served as dramaturg for TAT/Frankfurt-am-Main and for Ballet Frankfurt. She has published Moderner Tanz: Konzepte—Stile—Utopien (Rowohlt Enzyklopädie, 2002) and Merce Cunningham und der Moderne Tanz (Würzburg, 2000). She is editor of the anthology Wissenskultur Tanz: Historische und zeitgenössische Vermittlungsakte zwischen Praktiken und Diskursen (Bielefeld, 2009.) She lives in Berlin.
At the thematic center of the performance installations *Human Writes* and *You made me a monster* dwells terror and physical horror as well as the inescapable necessity to expose oneself to such experience. The subject disperses through the atmosphere like a wave between performer and audience, without taking on the clear contours of either symbol or allegory. Instead, singular actions, permeated by layered soundscapes, and pictorial composition prevail.

These works pose the question of how the choreographer’s art—that is, the art of ordering bodies and their movements in time and space—is able to make images, stories, and feelings concrete. The productions remain consciously dedicated to the performativity of the event in the way they unfold in the *here and now*—an open space of experienced presence that avoids the representation of emotional states but conveys states of the body. These works purvey a conception of the body as a terrain acted upon by the work as much as an agent of inscribed and remembered forms that become newly actualized: a body that presents itself to view while consciously monitoring its own actualizations. Patterns, behaviors, and moments of tension—both memorized and subject to change through improvisational reaction to others—conduct the dancer’s movements through a great variety of sensual, visual, and spoken information throughout the performance. On this level, these works are characterized by a type of movement-specific intermediality that thinks through interlacing body images, sensual spaces of experience, movement codes, spoken or written story fragments, and embodied memories. This is what I mean by “intermediality,” which I consider to include but also be in excess of the technological interface.

**Human Writes: A Procedural Space of Empty Exchange**

The goal of performance installation is, therefore, to uncover spaces of experience and transformations of bodily states that raise questions about physical and mental conditions. Clearly, performance installation is marginal to the category “dance,” particularly with respect to ballet. Forsythe is driven through this work to transgress the conventions of dance even more than he did in his earlier choreography, which was engaged with an art form so typically burdened by tradition: ballet. In a 2006 interview, Forsythe expressed his interest in working within the art context (in collaborations with Peter Welz) since it allows him to question the body as a figure and a gestalt in new ways. In so doing, he gives greater definition to the processes of production and perception of movement that undergird these installations:

Right now I am working with the idea of a figure, which skin is sort of stretched into an ecstasy of sensation. What did [Francis] Bacon say, “a stenography of sensation”? I’m working with degrees of awareness of sensation. I am certainly not concerned with form from an objective point of view, but rather what is the sensation of formation as the body continuously moves from one state to another. The body is interesting as a perceiving mechanism and probably for me right now, because of the way the body has been presented in our culture so far: it has been exhibited. I think that it is very difficult to exhibit real states of perceptions
so I’m trying to find out where these states have a place. And I think my work tries to make them metaphoric. (Lista 2006, 35)

The term Gerald Siegmund uses for Forsythe’s work—“performative act”—captures the necessity for the Forsythe dancer to both process information quickly while moving and to make snap decisions (2006, 264). This stage of his work has since been radicalized, in part through a transition from the choreographic to the visual art context. Indeed, the “aesthetic of installation,” as Juliane Rebentisch emphasizes in her study of the same title, works with “theoretical questions of the properties of a possible new genre” (2003, 81) and is in line with Forsythe’s concern with the transgression of the dance art. In accordance with the hybrid nature of installation art, Forsythe places things, materials, and preposterously structured activities in a vast space where time seems open-ended (the evening lasts around three or four hours). The perceptive and receptive repositioning of the former spectator into a visitor changes the latter’s function from a beholder to a participant in an uncertain relationship with the performative order.

In Human Writes guests enter a large exhibition hall and encounter a high-walled space lined with banners of overlapping drawings. Drawn, blurred, and smeared with black chalk, they show images of a “something.” They show a “somehow”: traces, drawings, traces of drawings. That the paper banners carry the memories of former performances and refer to what will actually happen in the installation performance is made clear to the audience only later.

The drawings are, indeed, the residue of a performance installation that brought over 30 dancers and almost 150 visitors together into one space at one time. One should note that this specific time and space was characterized by the imperceptibly increasing duress of rewriting the forty-nine Articles of Human Rights, as penned in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly. Human Writes continues, with an intensified interactivity, what Forsythe began in the second half of his Endless House (1999), which had its premier in the Bockenheimer Depot (Frankfurt-am-Main), where he invited the audience to spatially and perceptively create a performance space with the dancers. In Human Writes the visitors were directly invited to participate—under the unspoken assumption that they were to work with the dancers, even help them.

“Without knowing what my efforts were supposed to be working towards, the chalk that I was straining to hold in the air so that the performer could slide a table across it moved back and forth, leaving traces behind. The performer, meanwhile, lay under the upside-down table. To my surprise, the performer and I had drawn an “A,” whose lovely contours were made visible later, once the table had been righted. The performer appeared from under the table. An A from Article 7 of the human rights, “All are equal before the law.” When I went by the same table later, the A had become an M. (personal account)

Human Writes does not exhibit a virtuosic art of bodily movement; rather it challenges the visitors into clear contact with the event: “Would you please hold this leg on the rope and guide it?” In this way, one finds oneself integrated into the performance. The guest does
what he or she is told and further discussion is out of the question. One visitor, clearly making an effort to somehow “do it right,” received this feedback from a dancer: “That was too easy—it should have been a little more complicated.”

The visitors find themselves in a hall set up with rows of large aluminum tables on which most of the performers are standing, lying, hanging, kneeling, or in some other posture trying to reproduce the required textual characters. The tools used—held in elbows, tied to heads, gripped between toes, etc.—were either pencils or black chalk, traces of which were everywhere. The imposed framework of action was meant to impede the writing. Under these constraints the act of writing turned into the manic rubbing of chalk, the blowing off of graphite dust, and the excessive demands of coordination required to write with closed eyes and all the limbs at once. The reproduced letters were scrawled and hacked, in hatches and strokes, redrawn and re-outlined repeatedly. This was a performance at the level of an exalted struggle.

Situated among the events of the piece, the medium of writing became blurred into its performative traces. In this way, writing loses its culturally meaningful function as the primary and dominant cultural technique of passing down social contracts. The writing comes across much more as a performative act that is created situationally by

---

persons and bodies. Performers and visitors become operators who, together, go through the motions of recreating the law as text. All of these conceptually determined movement sequences are carried out via a performative structure in which the symbolic order of body and script, act and law is disrupted at the deepest level of their congruence. The dancers create, under great duress and with choreographically constructed actions, a relationship with viewers, tables, and materials. This relationship, guided by the overall plan, works to reproduce the law as something whose existence the body can assure. With their actions, the performing bodies become transformed into the medium of writing itself. The contribution of the visitors, paradoxically, is simultaneously to enable and restrict. After two or three hours of walking, observing, and participating as a visitor in this field of increasingly exhausted actions, one begins to see oneself inside a *chamber of horrors.*

The strength to act and create while still falling away from the symbolic order of writing reflects the instability of these precarious actions as well as the perceived conviction that one is somehow doing the right thing.

The traces that remain in the wake of these activities bear the imprint of every attempted action in which bodies were brought into contact. With every performative art installation that “positions itself against an objectivist perception of art and its experience” (Rebentisch 2003, 81), Forsythe uncovers a composition in which bodies, movement, writing, sounds, images (new media), objects, and materials enter into a relationship of re-acting to and with each other within a realm of capability and incapacity.

**You made me a monster:**

*Memories of Slow Disintegration*

Intermediality is also at work in *You made me a monster,* which unfolds as a choreographic art of interrelatedness and resonates with the praxis of beholding. Here, in contrast to *Human Writes,* dancers are integrated into a larger event in which their movement becomes the medium through which their own experience is destroyed. *You made me a monster* commemorates,
with the persona of “my wife,” Forsythe’s life partner, the Ballet Frankfurt dancer Tracy Kai Maier (1989–1994), who died on February 13, 1994. As all visitors learn by reading a displayed text, she succumbed to complications of cancer. At the same time, the story of her suffering and illness run along a ticker projected upon a stretched canvas screen that covers one side of the open performance space.

Upon entering the darkened space, one’s attention is drawn to large tables covered with sheets of beige-colored construction paper, out of which models of the human anatomy are cut. The visitors are invited to hang the cut-outs on skeletons set up on the tables. This activity is accompanied by sounds of humming, shrill buzzing, and hammering. Three performers move improvisationally around the tables and, in doing so, set off ear-splitting wails produced by sensors attached to their bodies that react to the microphones placed in the skeletons. Amidst these electronically amplified screams, wheezes, and raspings, one imagines the pitiful suffering of the terminally ill body, a suffering that emerges from deep within, robbing that interior of its feeling, hollowing it, flexing it against itself and turning it inside out, until it reaches a monstrous distortion: You made me a monster.

The evening showed visitors the unfolding of an illness as it runs its course. The materials of the construction paper monsters, the gradual building up of their structural forms by
the audience-participants, the images of text, the sounds—both voices and electronically-amplified shrieks—converge at the site of moving bodies and exchanged looks, without being defined as a pathetic representation of grief. In contrast, an atmosphere of terror hung over the scenery, absorbed into the actions of the visitors and the movements of the performers. An intertwined network of anxiety spread through the darkness, though always allowing the visitors the freedom to observe the dancers, follow the storyline of the video screen, or continue hanging the anatomical paper cutouts on the skeleton.

The dancers in You made me a monster never establish the kind of contact, physical or otherwise, with visitors so present in Human Writes. Physical disintegration becomes the choreographic point of fixation. The dancer's movements make suffering itself the medium of the dance, here metaphorically sketched out: dance, in the sense of passionate movement energetically embodied, does not take place. The dancer's body gets in the way of what it wants to do, works against itself, moves against its own will, to land the dancer in an unexpected place, with unexpected times and rhythms. Amidst constant perceptual shifts, the bodies grasp an alien otherness, move toward a foreign terrain, and engender the unknown.

The Choreographed Body as Medium of Perception

Human Writes and You made me a monster align themselves seamlessly with the fundamental ideas of Forsythe's choreography: a thought in movement constructed through the body and performatively generated by intermedial processes. So, performative sequences of choreographed movement fold projected, imagined, constructed, and physically remembered images of the body into processes of generating and forming movement-actions (Huschka 2004). The dancers fall back upon the knowledge of their technique in order to reorganize themselves into unusual new choreographic structures and operations. Their focus is neither virtuosity nor grace. Instead, they seek the gaps in their own movement knowledge: “re-siduals,” as dancers Nicole Peisl and David Kern called it in a discussion with me in 2006. This art of counter-intentionality, of attending retroactively to one’s own body, is based on the performative execution of perceptions deriving from layered perceptive processes: voices, the dancers’ reactions, spoken or seen information imparted from different sources during the performance, and their own imagination. The body becomes the medium of a kind of perceptual work in which various mental and physical circumstances converge with remembered, filmed, projected, or imagined bodies (Caspersen 2006).

In this sense, one can speak of an intermedial choreographic and bodily understanding in Forsythe. Accordingly, the choreographic reference to the body as a medium highlights the body’s function as intermediary, through which its performativity consequently comes to the fore. This performativity, in turn, draws about itself an acknowledgment of its own materiality. Taking the word “medium” as meaning “middle and mediator, intermediation and intermediary,” the intermedial body appeals to “the question of how, exactly, the role, the action and the material of this ‘in between’ can be grasped” (Vogl and Engell 1999, 9).

It would be insufficient to describe the presence of new media (live video feed, digitally re-engineered sound, etc.) in Forsythe’s installation work (as well as in his collaborations
with new media artists) as a process of exploration of the borders and options of bodily movement. In contrast to the intermedia work of Nick Haffner and Thomas McManus—both former Ballet Frankfurt dancers—Forsythe’s choreographic work is not about the sensuous and aesthetic juxtaposition of the live body with the virtual movement image. Forsythe’s interest is in a type of movement drawing, in making the connection between states of the body and compositional processes.

He asks how bodily movement can be perceived as a knowledge inscribed in and through the body as thinking. Forsythe employs computer-generated recording modes because they allow for both analytic and visual points of entry that play back a pool of information for generating improvisational movement. For instance, the mapped-out examples of movement in the CD-ROM Improvisation Technologies (2000) serve as choreographic material while also imparting visible organizational aids for the dancers. It is a technical learning apparatus, Here again, the intermedial perception of moving bodies produces an aesthetic technology of perception.9

Improvisation Technologies, with its superimposition of graphic traces onto moving images of dancers, works with a visualization of these transitory levels of perception. “I’m certainly not concerned with form from an objective point of view, but rather what is the sensation of formation as the body continuously moves from one state to another” (Lista 2006, 35). The sense of the lines indicating paths of movement for the body to follow is to simulate mental images of the movement to be performed and the physical organization necessary to perform them. They not only induce the proprioceptive process required by action, they actually produce it. Similar to Etienne-Jules Marey’s illustrations of movement in stop-action photography at the end of the nineteenth century, the execution of movement is experienced through a technology whose realization is only possible through a visual apparatus (see Snyder 2002, 148). But Forsythe is not Marey. In the latter we have movement represented as a set of visual images, whereas with Forsythe the visual medium itself provides the movement method.

Modalities of Perceiving Bodily Motion

As much as these perceptual implementations appear as mediated by movement, Forsythe’s improvisational sequences are also elucidated in the installations of visual artist Peter Welz. Two recent collaborations with Welz—whenever on on on nohow on / airdrawing (Louvre, Paris, 2004) and Retranslation / Final Unfinished Portrait (Francis Bacon) figure inscribing figure _ [take 02] (2006)—explore filmed movement material for its figural and sculptural ramifications.10 Welz calls them video-sculpture. In this regard, they transform the recorded and, to some extent, traced movements into an intermedial composition that deals with the body as, itself, a performative act of transformed figures. The improvisational sequences that Forsythe dances are projected, life-size, onto numerous large screens that line the entire exhibition space.

As foundational material for the installation whenever on on on nohow on / airdrawing (2004), Forsythe seeks to create a movement event through an intermedial process that brings his body knowledge into a dialogue with a thematically central phrase from
Samuel Beckett’s text *Worstward Ho*. Made up of numerous fixed camera shots—from above, from the side, and from the front—and two moving camera perspectives—attached to Forsythe’s hands—Welz creates contrary and complimentary perspectives of the same movement sequence and arranges them in space. Welz’s installation projects different perspectives of improvisational movement in a loop on large-scale screens that, themselves, are so distanced from each other that the projected surfaces can never all be viewed simultaneously from one angle. In his large-scale video installations, Welz treats the freestanding walls as self-contained objects within the installation space. The work applies the Beckett quote “whenever on on on nohow on” structurally to the installation in the sense that the words themselves suggest a repeating cycle or loop. As yet another break from choreographic structure, the movement sequences don’t adhere to any closed form. Forsythe’s improvisation is more akin to a bodily process, one that exhibits a state of restraint and collapse without setting a structure with which to find repeatable forms.

In another video installation by Welz, *Retranslation / Final Unfinished Portrait (Francis Bacon)*, Forsythe sketches with his body an incomplete self-portrait by Francis Bacon projected onto the ground. Forsythe’s movements approximate Bacon’s unfinished drawing. There arises an intermedial connection between sketch, body, and movement. As
with the other performance installations, improvisatory movement thinks through referenced but visually intermittent text images. Forsythe asserts the importance of the body as a volumetric presence rather than a sign. Forsythe described the process as follows: “[W]hen I draw I think sculpture: I am trying to use my body as an invisible sculpture template, and the drawing is in the end just what ‘got in the way’” (Lista 2006, 31). The aesthetic goal is to use the body as a mold—to empty it out without dematerializing it. For Forsythe, any situation means finding where choreography simultaneously begins and ends—the space of a practice molded by a body. For Forsythe this choreographic practice means, in the words of Michel Foucault, that “merciless place, . . . from which there is no escape, to which I am damned” (2005, 25).

The Choreographed Body as Media-Aware Movement Drawing

These recent pieces pose the question of the body’s status as a generating, remembering, and retraceing organ of movement. Their trace-making notwithstanding, they bear references to a remembered bodily knowledge, which is dispersed through intermedial processes. In this sense, choreography does not appear as a creative symbolic order that prevails in the dancing body but as a performative act in which the body has to rewrite its habitualized movement knowledge. To produce these kinds of performances, the dancing body is confronted by external manifestations and informational signals, in which it transforms itself into a medium of movement traces. These aesthetic processes lead not to a specific movement language or formation of an identifiable codex but rather appear atmospherically to the visitors as a noticeable complex of body and movement actions: a poetic space of the performance.

The notion of the movement drawing defines more precisely the intermedia interface between the different perceptual processes of the dancer and the visitor. At the same time, it reveals the relationship between movement and perception as an art-media process. When we consider the collaborative works with Welz alongside You made me a monster and Human Writes, the intermedial body-in-motion that appears in the former is both illuminating and problematic. The collaborations with Welz work with filmed movement structures, whereas the performance installations stage bodies to develop the setting live. These distinct installation formats, however, both engage with bodily movement drawing, understood literally as traced or drawn movement located in space, and figuratively as learned and remembered movement knowledge inscribed in bodies. Both types of movement drawing appear in Forsythe’s work as a process informed by the possibilities of new media (video and computer software).

In this way, movement drawing relies on a double inner structure. The modes of drawing manifest and generate a perceptual carrying out of movement that is “written” by the body-in-motion but also foregrounds a choreographic and architectural investment of space with motion. The deployed medias of movement drawing, be they the technically or artistically reworked video images or the retraced memorization of bodily movement itself, reveal, in contrast to stop-motion photography, video documentation, and other notational methods, the difference between bodily movement and its documentation in
writing and images and refer to the twofold process of their generated performativity. They remember themselves as original acts.

In the works I have discussed, Forsythe distrusts and resists the aesthetic articulation of dance as moving bodies situated in an antiquated and inherited movement vocabulary, as well as the articulation of choreography as a codified movement space for the body. For him, both articulations are merely expressions of culturally and individually established scripts of dance. Forsythe’s manner of transgression lies in the injection of a new technical process that interrupts both articulations, through which he intertwines the production and perception of movement with image fragments whose cultural and textual memory is actualized through movement drawing. In the Peter Welz collaborations, movement is trans-formed into written traces of a visually manifested bodily memory in motion. On the other hand, performance installations convey this type of trans-formation in a differently conceived intermedial setting. In You made me a monster the dancers deal with their own bodily and movement memory to recall the foreign traces of a departed body, or, as in Human Writes, to emerge as agents within the symbolic order of law. As much as this fundamental idea cannot be described as closed choreography, the viewers cannot be deemed as situated in a stable or secure place—for example, their seats in the theater. The provocative moment of these works lies in the radical and medial broadening of the notion of “body,” which now begins to encompass traces of the remembered, imagined, visual, and acoustic, in order to expand itself, in a sense, as a apparition of space-time. And the audience participates in the construction of that apparition.

Translated from the German by Leslie Allison and Mark Franko

Notes

1. White Bouncey Castle premiered on March 26, 1997, at the Roundhouse, Chalk Farm, London; City of Abstracts premiered on October 24, 2000, at the Opernplatz/Hauptwache in Frankfurt am Main; Scattered Crowd premiered on March 15, 2002, at Halle 7, Messe Frankfurt, in Frankfurt am Main.
2. Human Writes premiered on October 23, 2005, at the Schauspielhaus, Schiffbauhalle 1, Zurich.
3. For a video clip, see <http://www.art-tv.ch/human_writes.html>.
5. You made me a monster premiered on May 8, 2005, in the small theater of the Arsenale in Venice.
6. The narrator describes the inconceivability of terminal illness in short, succinct sentences. We hear of false and biased diagnoses from doctors, a bout of interminable bleeding during a rehearsal for ALIE/N A(C)TION (1992), a purportedly successful operation, and each imperceptible flexing of the body that eventually led to death. We are also told of Ridley Scott’s science fiction film Alien, in which a foreign body invades the body of another and inhabits it.
7. This conversation took place in Dresden-Hellerau on August 9, 2006.
8. The concept of new media put forth by Engell and Vogl has certain critical advantages. They define it as knowledge, and therefore as a systematic object precisely in that it reworks and transmits information rather than merely storing it. Hence, it creates its own conditions of pro-
duction and reproduction. On this basis, one can see the connection of new media theory from an anthropological standpoint, in the formulation of Sibylle Krämer: “In the act of transmitting new media also brings about and forms what it transmits. It is the idea of ‘embodiment’ that new media invokes as a foundational cultural activity” (2008, 84).

9. In contrast to a proprioceptive self-perceiving or movement technique stands that of technology with its goal-oriented use of the body, which puts into play a higher-level perspective on the teachings of this technique. A movement technology generates an interest in movement processes and develops a teaching tool for the transmission of this knowledge (Hüser and Grauer 2005, 194). See also Huschka (2005).

10. These installations, along with the latest addition, Architectural Device for Forsythe Movement (2006) are pure installations in that no live movement is performed (see <http://www.peterwelz.com>).

Works Cited


