

# Dance as *L'intervention*: Health and Aesthetics of Experience in French Contemporary Dance

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Contemporary dance is an international phenomenon that achieved critical mass in the US and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s and continues to develop in experimental theatres, studios and choreographic centers across the globe. Sometimes called 'experimental dance', 'postmodern dance' or 'New Dance', contemporary dance is often thought of as dance's counterpart to postmodern movements in literature, cinema, theatre and visual arts. Contemporary dancers challenge traditional and modernist attachments to virtuosity, visuality and representation, and at times they question the boundaries of dance itself (Lepecki, 2004: 173). In the words of dance studies scholar Anne Cooper Albright, the work of contemporary dancers 'takes on the hybridity of contemporary culture, at once deconstructionist and visionary' (1997: 191).

In France, contemporary dance has an especially vibrant history, in part because of unrivalled levels of institutional and financial support from the national and local governments.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary dance in France was strongly influenced by international exchanges of ideas and artists, particularly by American experimentalists such as Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha

Brown<sup>2</sup> and by the German *tanztheater* (dance-theater) movement led by Pina Bausch.<sup>3</sup> By the early 21st century, contemporary dance had become a well-recognized and distinct form of artistic creation in France. This article, through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Aix-en-Provence in 2000–2, focuses specifically on the contemporary dance movement in France.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the transnational and mobile character of contemporary dance communities, specifically 'French' contemporary dance is difficult to locate. Yet, there seems to be a unique way in which, in France, contemporary dancers' lives and works have coexisted with, contributed to, and been influenced by social changes and political movements of the late 20th century. The political upheavals of 1968, and the changes in leadership and legislation at the National Ministry of Culture in the early 1980s, each left important impressions on the development of contemporary dance. These critical historical junctures persist as experiential traces that shape contemporary dance in France in the early 21st century. The contemporary dance that was generated through French cultural history, though perhaps unique to France, is part of a larger shift in artistic production in late modernity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, developing an understanding of contemporary dance in France is relevant to understandings of postmodern art forms in other contexts.

Dancers and dance scholars often find it difficult to position contemporary dance theoretically and stylistically in relation to other dance genres. Susan Foster, a prominent scholar writing on contemporary dance in the US, explains one possible source of this dilemma:

Choreographic experimentation [by contemporary dancers] with eclectic vocabularies and with new interdisciplinary genres of performance has circumvented the distinctiveness of [technically specialized] bodies. . . . These choreographers have not developed new dance techniques to support their choreographic goals, but instead encourage dancers to train in several existing techniques without adopting the aesthetic vision of any. (1997: 253)

The problem that Foster illuminates in this passage is that contemporary dancers develop their work through innovation, hybridization and experimentation and that, as a result, they have not created coherent new movement vocabularies. Because dance forms are usually defined by their movement vocabularies, contemporary dance – being without its own vocabulary – is difficult to define as a genre. Contemporary dance is free, flexible and always changing, but it seems to defy categorization as a new tradition in aesthetic or technical terms. Foster argues that earlier schools of modern dance, such as those led by Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, although they were also devoted to innovation and experimentation, contributed new coherent techniques of movement to replace the ones they superseded. Thus, various schools of modern dance – and modern dance as a whole – could be described in terms of specific vocabularies of

movement. Contemporary dance, in the US at least, does not have the same kind of stylistic consistency. Foster refers to contemporary dancers as 'bodies for hire', versatile and mobile translators who move from one choreographic vocabulary to the next without confining themselves to a single style of movement. Contemporary dance in the US upsets and breaks down the choreographic rules of earlier genres, but to many it is not clear what new tradition it creates in their place.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars studying contemporary dance in France have come across a similar difficulty in their efforts to understand contemporary dance as a new genre. In their essay 'Effervescence and Tradition in French Dance', Gore et al. (2000) argue that French contemporary dance is difficult to define precisely because contemporary dancers in France have consciously attempted to disrupt the old model of choreographic vocabularies. Contemporary dancers in France see themselves as breaking completely away from previous forms of dance, as well as from the restrictions of technique and vocabulary. During my fieldwork in Aix-en-Provence, this notion of historical rupture was apparent in the discourse of the French contemporary dance community. For example, Annette Paulet, an administrator at the Aix-en-Provence contemporary dance organization *Danse-à-Aix*, summarized contemporary dance as follows: 'Classical dance was a cage and contemporary dance broke out of that cage.' A contemporary dancer at the National Center of Contemporary Dance in Aix, Ballet *Preljocaj*, reported,

Contemporary dance is different because it is not rigid like classical ballet. It is free. Classical dance tells me my arm has to be here or here at each moment, in this exact angle, but contemporary dance is not like that.

Contemporary dance was frequently described as liberation from the restrictions of earlier dance forms – for example classical ballet – because it allowed dancers to be free to do something completely new. And in some ways, Gore et al. concede, the rupture seems real. The early innovators of the 1980s often refused training in classical and modern dance and insisted on experimentation as their means of developing technical virtuosity. They sought cultural reference points outside dance, in other artistic genres, such as literature and cinema, and they attempted to invent alternatives to the traditional choreographic rules of narrative and representation.

But Gore et al. insist that without a consistent movement vocabulary, contemporary dancers have not established a new dance genre. Thus, their supposed rupture from the history of dance traditions cannot be considered complete. The contemporary dancers may have rejected their heritage in classical and modern dance, but they did not break from it, Gore et al. argue, because they did not

produce a new form of dance. The dancers were operating under what Gore et al. call an 'illusion of a spontaneous birth' (2000: 37). They were claiming to break from previous modes of dance but failing to produce something new to replace them.

Performance studies scholar André Lepecki offers one possible solution to the problem of how to situate contemporary dance in a historical trajectory of dance development and how to understand it as a new aesthetically unique genre. In a short analysis of European contemporary dance entitled 'Concept and Presence', Lepecki argues that contemporary dance enacts an ontological shift for dance. Contemporary dance does indeed have a distinct genre, he argues, but it is fundamentally different from other dance forms in its approach and technique. He calls it a 'radical recasting of dance' (2004: 172). In the 1980s and 1990s, European contemporary dancers, Lepecki explains, made a shift away from 'theatrical dance' and began to produce 'performative dance'. Lepecki likens this shift to the advent of conceptual art and minimalism in the visual arts. Whereas classical ballet and modern dance are theatrical, he explains, contemporary dance is performative. 'Something changed . . .', Lepecki writes, 'when, sometime between 1976 and 1977 [Pina Bausch] decided to ask her dancers questions, rather than to propose movement as the compositional point of departure for her pieces' (2004: 173). When choreographers began to experiment with representation, virtuosity and visuality, they were moving into a new realm of dance creation. This realm was characterized by a departure from creation based on techniques of movement and an adoption of new methods of choreography that were based on what he calls 'emphasis on the material conditions of presence' (2004: 175). In other words, contemporary dancers reinvented dance, taking it from an art about theatrical effects to an art about bodies in space.

The relationship of contemporary dance to other dance forms is still problematic for Lepecki. While he does, unlike Gore et al., attribute to European contemporary dance the status of a new and unique artistic genre, he questions whether this genre rightfully belongs to the realm of dance. In theatrical dance, Lepecki argues, dancers typically create visual effects through the development of particular techniques of movement. Because contemporary dance focuses on performativity and presence, he argues, rather than on styles of movement, it is not really creating new techniques of movement and thus may not be 'dance' in the traditional sense. The aesthetic of contemporary dance, he argues, is not based on techniques of movement in the way that other dance forms are. Rather, contemporary dance is a conceptual art that deals with the meaningful problematization of presence and absence.

The argument presented in this article is similar to Lepecki's in that I agree

that contemporary dance enacts an ontological shift for dance. However, I differ on the point that contemporary dance's emphasis on presence makes it less focused on the production of new bodily techniques and styles of movement. What I argue instead is that contemporary dance (in France) operates under a different set of aesthetic principles than the earlier theatrical dance forms of classical and modern dance; I argue that French contemporary dance is based on an aesthetic of experience rather than an aesthetic of form. Thus, the new techniques that contemporary dancers have developed can only be identified when this aesthetic of experience is understood. I suggest that new bodily techniques are central to contemporary dance in France but that to understand the technical virtuosity of contemporary dance, one must understand the experiential modes that contemporary dancers use to create and evaluate their work. I examine in detail the aesthetic of experience of contemporary dance in France and offer theoretical concepts from medical anthropology to help explain the ways in which this aesthetic may have developed in the context of the cultural history of late 20th-century France.

From the perspective of medical anthropology and the anthropology of embodiment, the rupture posed by contemporary dance might be seen as a shift between two kinds of aesthetic, from an aesthetic of form to one of experience. I argue that the aesthetic of contemporary dance enacts a break from previous dance genres because its basic components are feeling and experience, rather than form and shape. Contemporary dancers have indeed developed bodily techniques, and their work requires a supreme level of technical virtuosity. However, the technical virtuosity of contemporary dance is difficult to identify and to describe when it is understood in terms of form. Only through attention to the experiential realm of contemporary dance, I argue, can the unique innovations and particular genre of contemporary dance be recognized and appreciated.

This article makes use of medical anthropologist Robert Desjarlais' concept of 'aesthetic of experience' to analyze the technical innovations made in contemporary dance in France between 1980 and 2002. It chronicles the development of an experiential aesthetic in France. According to this aesthetic, dance became associated with healing and became experienced as a healing '*intervention*' that could produce well-being in the individual and the social body. I trace this development historically from the Situationist art movement of 1968 to the leftist reforms of the Ministry of Culture in the 1980s, and I explain how the notion of dance as *intervention* continues to drive the creation of contemporary dance in France in the early 21st century. Drawing on a combination of ethnographic material and historical and literary texts, I offer a history of contemporary dance in France, which, instead of focusing on visual aesthetics of form, connects dance

innovation with socio-cultural and political events and changing experiences of health and healing.

### Aesthetics of Experience: *Le Blocage* and *le Déblocage*

Ethnographic research suggests that contemporary dance in Aix-en-Provence is ordered aesthetically according to what medical anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (1992) has termed an 'aesthetic of experience'. According to Desjarlais, who developed the concept of the aesthetic of experience in his book *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas* (1992), humans interpret everyday life through an embodied sensibility of lived aesthetic value. Aesthetics of experience are the tacit and learned sensibilities by which people embody and interpret the phenomenological compositions of everyday existence. The notion of an aesthetic of experience reverses traditional anthropological notions of aesthetics, in which local styles and forms were thought to be shaped by abstract cultural values (Geertz, 1973). In Desjarlais' analysis, local styles and forms arise out of qualities of everyday experience, not out of overarching cultural ideologies. The aesthetics of experience are simply the dispositions of the body developed through patterns in everyday life, shifted into aesthetic systems of value and meaning (1992: 63–89).

In the Nepali example, the Yolmo wa people associated illness with bodily fragmentation and pollution. These aesthetic associations arose from an everyday world in which healthy bodies were experienced as pure and whole (Desjarlais, 1992). The contemporary dancers of Aix-en-Provence also had particular aesthetic associations with illness, which they developed from everyday experience. The dancers experienced illness as stagnation and inhibition of movement. Their everyday lives as dancers associated health with the capacity for self-movement, and this association helped produce an aesthetic of experience in which illness was experienced and understood as an inhibition of the capacity of movement. Embodying and understanding health as self-movement shaped the way that artists created contemporary dance. Because of historical events I will explain below, the dancers learned to see dance as a form of healing and to associate good dance with health and well-being. The dancers' aesthetic of experience made self-initiated movement central to dancers' experiences of health and to their notions of good dance. The aesthetic project of contemporary dance in Aix-en-Provence thus became the project of producing well-being through enhanced capacity for self-movement.

The prevailing cultural idiom for disease among the community of contemporary dance enthusiasts in Aix-en-Provence was '*blocage*'.<sup>7</sup> Individuals in the

contemporary dance community often exclaimed, 'I had to visit the doctor yesterday because I was *complètement bloqué(e)*!' When someone felt well, the process of healing would often be called a '*déblocage*'. In the literal sense, *bloqué(e)* means jammed, blocked or frozen. A highway jammed with slow-moving cars is *bloqué(e)* and frozen prices on the stock exchange are *prix bloqués*. Someone who is *bloqué(e)* has a *blocage* – a blockage, barrier or immobility. *Blocage* also has a figurative meaning in common parlance; when confronted with a stressful or unfamiliar situation, a person find himself in a state of psychological inhibition which would also be described as a *blocage*. The person 'freezes up' and feels that he cannot respond or act. The experience of *blocage* may range from pain or injury to social inhibition; it could mean difficulty with interacting socially, initiating activity or communicating. In all of these situations, the idiom of *blocage* wedded the feeling of paralysis to a state of poor health. When a person was described as *bloqué(e)*, the feeling of illness was associated with that of being stuck, trapped and unable to move.

The contemporary dancers and enthusiasts whom I encountered in Aix believed that contemporary dance, when done well, could provoke a *déblocage* and therefore produce well-being, or *bien-être*. Several dancers described detailed experiences of *déblocage* that they believed had been produced by dance. A close examination of these narratives offers clarification on the nuanced ways in which the aesthetic of experience that associated illness with *blocage* came to guide the practice of contemporary dance. The example presented here offers a vivid demonstration of the types of experiences that my informants associated with contemporary dance; each dancer described the healing potential of dance in a slightly different way.

Miriam Auden<sup>8</sup> grew up in Aix-en-Provence, and as a child she participated in contemporary dance youth programs. She said that she experienced her first real engagement with contemporary dance as an adolescent, when she began to attend dance workshops and courses in Alexander Technique, a bodywork therapy program, with two contemporary dance instructors, Barbara and Catherine.<sup>9</sup> During an interview, Auden recounted the following autobiographical story:<sup>10</sup>

W: Why did you decide to attend the workshops with Catherine and Barbara?

A: I did it partly because of my appreciation for osteopathy, actually, and because I know that so many things are regulated by the body. When I was little I had a problem with my eyesight and an osteopathic physician healed me. I would have had to wear glasses otherwise, you see, and he healed me just by touching my vertebrae, something like this [she demonstrates] – and then, I didn't have to wear glasses anymore. I had something or other, a vertebra out of place or something, which isn't too serious. It's not too out of the

ordinary. But, if I hadn't gone to that doctor I wouldn't have known. After that I realized that this idea [of regulating things through the body] applies to the personality too. I know that people can suffer from *blocages* as a result of experiences, things you live through . . . some people even become violent. Often the emotional *blocages* are caused by bodily *blocages*, you see. I really needed to do that kind of learning because, well, I realized that to change my personality it's necessary to change my body.

So, I appreciated the importance of my body. Later, I was seeing another osteopathic physician and one day he said to me, 'You don't inhabit your body. You only inhabit your head. You inhabit down to here [motions to the neck]. And all the rest, it's like you've let it rot. You really don't inhabit it.' So, after that I went to see Catherine, and she said, 'It's true, you need to inhabit. You need to descend a little toward the ground. You're too much up in the air.' So, *voilà*. I decided to take a few classes [in Alexander Technique and contemporary dance]. I realized that it's a long process. Things don't just change like that.

I did some singing [at that time], and it's extremely important there too. You have to be between the sky and the ground, be upright, pull up, with the right posture. It's for the vibrations you see, if you never pull up then the body won't vibrate and you'll have a bad feeling . . . and when the body does vibrate, the sensation – well, it's quite memorable. You vibrate entirely, up to the soul, up to the head, it's – it really makes you feel good . . .

W: What does it mean to 'be between the sky and the ground'?

A: Well . . . it's when you feel your weight, in the ground. You feel grounded. But at the same time you feel the same weight pushing for [she motions upward].

W: Yes . . .

A: You are like a tree. You have roots and it's only by feeling into the ground that you can elevate yourself a little. You don't want to be too stretched though. You feel that you elongate yourself, in fact, you grow. When I took my classes, I thought I had grown 10 centimeters! And, I no longer had a sore back. I felt like each part breathed. Although I still haven't yet quite arrived at it – there are moments when I prepare myself, I expect it to happen – but it just doesn't quite happen but almost, the right *état corporelle* [bodily state] I mean. I'm getting there though . . .

W: What does it feel like, the bodily state?

A: You feel it if you think it actually . . . that's the sort of magical aspect of this technique. You have the impression of stirring your body through imagination. It's what one calls the *conscience du corps* [consciousness of the body]. I don't know if it's a consciousness really, it's an imagination. But, in any case – in a bodily way you feel better, you know? [smiles in demonstration].

W: So, it's real, but it comes from the imagination?

A: It's profound. But, you have to work hard, master the techniques, specific techniques. . . . I believe it's really a mixture between the science of it and the feeling of it, and the emotions. . . . It's not just random movement. I guess you could just try random movements, without knowing the techniques. You could do them and try to reflect, to breathe, to begin to imagine the inside of your body and say, 'Oh! I imagine that I am well.' [she laughs] But when you don't really know the techniques I think you could hurt yourself. Or, it could have no effect at all.

. . . You see, the techniques of *thérapie* and the techniques of *bien-être*, they're really the

same thing. When I was little, when I was an adolescent, my dream was to become a sage, like Socrates, to succeed in mentalizing everything. But now I understand that no, I couldn't do it. It's impossible. People speak of control, mastery . . . but eventually there comes the time when you let go of your grip a little. There was a time when I was very mathematical. I didn't believe in anything that I couldn't see. God didn't exist, Jesus didn't exist, the Devil didn't exist – all of it! And I would tell my grandmother 'You are all superstitious,' since she was a believer and all. Time passed, I had gotten into ethnology, and then it really hit me. Modern science and medicine, it's not the world you know, it's not everything. There is so much more going on. . . . Other things happened too. I have a stepfather who is crazy. [laughs] Well, not really crazy. He's violent, very violent. And, he is very mathematical, Cartesian, in his head. So, between that, the ethnology and other things, especially working at the psychiatric hospital, and the classes with Barbara and all of that. . . . That's when I finally learned to put things in perspective. I realized that, I don't know, there is – for me magic really exists. So, I don't know. Magic or other things, things that are not provable. You can sense them, you can live them, but you can't speak them. It's part of the invisible I guess. That's why, for me, dance is superb. Because it touches that too, it touches something of the invisible too. (personal communication, 2002)

Auden's account is extremely rich, and it demonstrates the complex convergences that dancers in Aix-en-Provence often experience between their dance training and healing processes. By beginning with the story of being healed by an osteopathic physician, Auden contextualized her experience with contemporary dance in a larger long-term trajectory of healing. At the time that Auden began to participate in the workshops, which eventually marked a turning point for her, she felt *bloquée* in several ways. Her *blocage* consisted of a combination of physiological, emotional and spiritual symptoms, including back pain, general bad feelings, a desire for control that she found problematic, difficulties with family violence and struggles in defining a personal spiritual worldview. Auden understood and experienced the problem, which she called a *blocage*, as 'not inhabiting' her body. As she learned to 'inhabit', through the workshops and further training, in contemporary dance, singing and Alexander Technique, her symptoms began to alleviate. Her back pain dissipated and she felt 'better', and she arrived at a fresh sense of resolve about psychological and spiritual dilemmas. In her words, she began to experience '*déblocage*'. Auden located her healing process in the development of particular technical achievements that she learned in contemporary dance training. She described these achievements as learning to 'inhabit the body', to 'vibrate', to 'be between the sky and the ground' and to experience '*conscience du corps*', or consciousness of the body.

Two additional points in Auden's narrative are important to note. First, 'training' in contemporary dance is different from training programs in other dance forms. In France, professional dancers complete '*formations*' that are usually very formally defined and standardized at the national level. Although such programs of study and the corresponding national diplomas have been

established for professional contemporary dancers in France, the people I spoke with usually did not describe their training in terms of these specific classes. Instead, they described the process of learning contemporary dance as one of personal growth that occurred inside and outside the dance studio. As one informant put it, contemporary dance training was learning a 'way of being', an '*esprit du corps*' that encompassed all areas of life. Second, the types of illnesses that dancers usually spoke about when discussing the healing benefits of contemporary dance were equally holistic. Like Auden's multi-faceted *blocage*, the problems described by dancers were often complex and long-term issues that incorporated physical, spiritual and emotional distress.

The healing process took different forms for different dancers, but a surprisingly high number of informants – without prompting from the interviewer – connected their development as contemporary dancers with experiences of healing. For some of the dancers, the *blocage* only became evident after months or years of personal growth and discovery through contemporary dance. Others, like Russell Maliphant and Sylvie Nabet, began studying contemporary dance with the knowledge that they had a *blocage* and with the expressed goal of overcoming it through dance. Russell Maliphant<sup>11</sup> was principal soloist in the London Royal Ballet before a debilitating knee injury ended his ballet career. He unsuccessfully underwent several surgical operations and physical therapy before turning to contemporary dance as an alternative mode of rehabilitation. As part of his training in contemporary dance, Maliphant studied body-awareness techniques including body-mind centering, tai chi, yoga, Feldenkrais method, Alexander Technique and Rolfing. After several years, Maliphant created his own dance company and became one of the most acclaimed contemporary choreographers and dancers in Europe (*La Provence*, 2002; Sirvin, 2002). Maliphant attributes his new career and his newfound bodily abilities to the rehabilitation he underwent during his contemporary dance training (personal communication, 2002). Sylvie Nabet also began a career in contemporary dance in response to personal tragedy. The inspiration for founding her contemporary dance company, she said, happened when her brother suffered a sudden accident and became paralyzed. Her brother's accident left her with what she called a 'need to dance' (personal communication, 2002). By engaging in contemporary dance, Nabet responded to her new calling and began to work through the emotional *blocage* related to her brother's injury. Whether abrupt or gradual, physiological or emotional, the circumstances that led Auden, Maliphant and Nabet to pursue contemporary dance constituted disruptions in multiple aspects of their lives. For each of them, dance became a means of treating their personal problems and permitting *déblocage*.

### Situationism and Socio-cultural Outreach: Healing the Social Body through Dance

The experience of illness as *blocage* and the idea that illness can be healed through dance find a parallel in two earlier developments in French cultural history: first, the Situationist movement in the 1960s that advocated public performance as a means of awakening French society from miserable consequences of modernity; and, second, the development of nationally funded socio-cultural outreach projects that used dance as a means of treating problems of social exclusion. In each of these movements, dance (or performance art in general) was promoted as a way of healing the social body of France.

The Situationist art movement, an arm of the short-lived anarchist group Situationist International, developed out of the social criticism of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord of the 1950s and 1960s, and peaked during the 1968 student protests in France. The Situationists viewed mass consumerism and globalization as a force of stagnation, causing widespread malaise in society, and they wished to redirect people from this malaise by introducing experimental, thought-provoking, sometimes shocking, performances in public spaces. They called these events '*interventions*'. The tradition of street performance is strong in French contemporary dance, and contemporary dancers in 2002 promoted many of the same ideas – even using the same terminology – that the Situationists discussed in the 1960s.

In the 1980s, another form of *intervention* appeared, which also focused on performance art as a tool for social reform. This time, instead of a counter-culture movement, the project was conceived and funded by the French state. Under Jack Lang and the socialist Mitterrand government, the Ministry of Culture rewrote its mission statement, shifting its vision from a '*mission civilatrice*' to a policy of promoting cultural pluralism through '*métissage culturel*'. Federal funds were set aside for projects that employed contemporary dance as a specifically multicultural art form that might help resolve social problems in France. Funding continues to be allocated to these kinds of projects in the early 21st century, and some of the contemporary dance organizations in Aix-en-Provence originated during the socio-cultural projects of the 1980s.

While these political shifts transformed France as whole, the dance scene was also undergoing dramatic change. Between 1950 and 1980, the modern and improvisational dance movements of the United States spread into Europe, encouraging artists to break away from classical and eventually modern dance forms (Novack, 1990; Robinson, 1990; Gore et al., 2000). In the contexts of these changes, contemporary dance emerged as an *intervention sociale*, a form of public art aimed at social reform.

The Situationists and the socio-cultural public service organizations shared an important discourse of healing which is shared by the dancers in Aix-en-Provence in the early 21st century. All three groups – the Situationists, the public servants and the 2002 Danse-à-Aix Festival participants – referred to contemporary dance as an '*intervention*' (intervention, operation) which was supposed to '*animer*' (bring to life) individuals or portions of French society. The *interventions* took several forms: public performance, training and self-development, and educational outreach. Through the idea of the *intervention*, dance became a society-improving, individual-developing, health-producing project that was, in many cases, funded by national and local government and carried significant moral and political implications.

#### *The Situationist Legacy*

By 4 May 1968, France is said to have reached a peak of post-war economic prosperity and modernization (Ross, 1997: 24). However, for at least a decade leading to this pivotal historical moment, French intellectuals had been criticizing modernity and the growing consumerism, Americanization and 'mass culture' that seemed to be transforming everyday life in French society. Henri Lefebvre's influential *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (written 1947, published 1958–81) ignited movements in academic writing and in the arts that Lynn Gumpert called an 'important aspect of postwar French culture – a sustained cultural and political interest in the quotidian – [which] has informed the work of a current generation' (1997: 13). Lefebvre saw, in the increasingly modern urban spaces of France, a shift in the everyday existence of middle-class people to lives of repetitive, bored consumerism that characterized the development of a mass culture. *Le Monde* printed a famous article in 1968 entitled 'La France s'ennuie' ('France is bored') as Lefebvre and other critics of modernity warned gloomily of cultural ruination, a troubled society of sleeping people.

In his book *L'Esprit du temps* sociologist Edgar Morin (1962) outlined in detail the causes and dangers of a societal transformation toward 'mass culture', which he called 'a colonization of the soul' (1962: 11). According to Morin, the modernization that had occurred in France in the 20th century, ushered in by the end of colonialism and the development of what he called a 'neocapitalist global economic complex', gave everyday life in France a particularly 'technical, industrial, consumerist air' that he found distasteful and potentially destructive (1962: 13). Calling the emergence of a mass culture 'a crisis of the greatest depth', Morin describes an epoch in which everyday life, for the first time, becomes commercialized, and even the most private and intimate of human emotions ('l'amour, le bonheur') become the property of a commercial world of mass production and

industrialization (1962: 6). New technologies of communication and entertainment make distant places closer and make the rhythm of life faster, more immediate, while consumer culture allows people to live vicariously, through television and material consumption, the pleasures that they lack in everyday existence. 'The individual develops a new relationship to space, to the world', Morin writes, 'la culture de mass nous introduit dans un rapport deraciné, mobile, errant à l'égard du temps et de l'espace' (1962: 12).<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, despite his efforts to balance positive assessments with gloomy ones and to show the complex web of oppositions inherent in the social evolution, Morin concludes that the modern societal development has led its citizens to the most terrible of situations, what he calls a loss of being. The problem, he says, is that people are detached from their own existence:

Triste fantômes de la transcendance, les critiques amers de l'Esprit du Temps sont plus aveugles que les aveugles dont ils sont les contempteurs; ils ignorent que ce qui est mort, ce n'est pas tellement Dieu, qui a sa planque hors du monde, c'est l'Être. (1962: 213–14)<sup>13</sup>

*L'Esprit du temps*, for Morin, is an illness – perhaps fatal – of the suffering of the spirit, a disease of existence.

Movements in the arts began to address the same concerns that Morin and Lefebvre outlined in their writings, and one in particular, the Situationist movement of 1958–72, developed a strategy for treating the societal problems that they saw modernity inflicting on French society. Led by an activist-minded political leader Guy Debord, the Situationists created provocative art events to shake French spectators from what they saw as a deadening monotony of consumerist passivity. Cultural historian Michèle Cone describes the Situationist movement as follows:

[In] June 1957, Debord observed a circular pattern of interaction between the material environment of modern urban life and the behavior of those living in it. As the environment became more and more structured, Debord warned, the tendency toward passive day-to-day comportment would increase, allowing for an even more structured situation to take hold – hence fewer choices and less freedom, to the point where individuals would become totally submissive and powerless. To counteract this unhealthy pattern, Debord advocated a 'methodical intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the compartments to which it gives rise and which radically transform it'.

Debord urged individuals to devise creative strategies that would prevent the 'society of the spectacle' – his term for the society of the future – from becoming a reality. His idea was to create ephemeral situations which he called 'passageways', games that could prod the spectator into questioning his or her own passive behavior, thus 'provoking his (or her) capacities to revolutionize his (or her) own life'. . . . [Debord and other artists of the Situationist movement] agreed that interactivity and play were essential to fight the 'society of the spectacle' and to reawaken the city dweller's consciousness. (1997: 47–8)

In an effort to 'reawaken' the French city-dwellers, Situationists staged events in the streets or the sidewalks. Debord's (1967) idea of the 'spectacle', which he outlined in an influential book *La Société du spectacle* (1967), warned about the same problem of 'anti-Being' that Morin described in *L'Esprit du temps*. According to Debord, if nothing were done, people's lives would become less and less directly lived, until they became a series of representational or virtual spectacles that had no real meaning for them personally. The Situationists tried to intervene to avoid establishment of a society of the spectacle, especially by creating art in which they attacked problems of growing consumerism. For example, one artist filled the entrance at her gallery opening with so much garbage that no visitors could enter. Another team of artists stopped traffic on a Paris street with a wall of oil barrels (Cone, 1997: 50).

#### *Social Outreach: Dance as Intervention*

A decade after the 1968 protests and the enactment of anarchist street art designed to 'awaken' society, another historical development emerged that brought performance art together with the concept of social intervention. Government funding of dance outreach programs gained momentum in the political climate of 1970s France and, with a change in management at the Ministry of Culture in 1981, became a reality in the 1980s. From 1959 to 1969 André Malraux built up the French Ministry of Culture as an institution that promoted the use of art and heritage-based non-profit organizations ('*associations socio-culturelles*') to treat a growing social problem called 'cultural exclusion'. Rural communities, members of economically disenfranchised groups and growing populations of ethnic minorities were all thought to be socially excluded groups who needed assistance integrating into French society. Under the first constitution of the Ministry of Culture, written by Malraux in 1959, the mission statement of the Ministry of Culture resembled the imperial *mission civilatrice* promoted in the French African colonies (Conklin, 1997):

Le ministère chargé des Affaires culturelles a pour mission de rendre accessibles les oeuvres capitales de l'humanité, et d'abord de la France, au plus grand nombre possible de Français; d'assurer la plus vaste audience à notre patrimoine culturel, et de favoriser la création des oeuvres d'art et l'esprit qui l'enrichissent. (Poirrier, 2001)<sup>14</sup>

The goal presented here is to make French artistic and cultural production accessible to wider audiences, including deprived audiences within France. Much like the *mission civilatrice* turned inward, France seemed to be turning policies of popular education that had once been aimed at colonized populations outside of France onto domestic populations in France who still remained outside the realm of elite society (Conklin, 1997; Poirrier, 2001). Through outreach projects,

representatives of French government wanted to bring Frenchness ('*notre patrimoine culturel*'), through cultural and artistic education, to those who had not yet attained it. In addition, they wanted to promote community integration and development by organizing collaborative projects. To these early reformers, a healthier society was one that was more socially integrated and also more thoroughly French (Chevènement, 1995).

In 1981, under a socialist President (François Mitterrand) and government, the mission of the Ministry of Culture changed. The budget of the Ministry of Culture doubled, and a new mission statement was issued in 1982. It read:

Le ministère de la Culture a pour mission: de permettre à tous les Français de cultiver leur capacité d'inventer et de créer, d'examiner librement leurs talents et de recevoir la formation artistique de leur choix; de préserver le patrimoine culturel national, régional, ou des divers groupes sociaux pour le profit commun de la collectivité tout entière; de favoriser la création des oeuvres d'art et de l'esprit et de leur donner la plus vaste audience; de contribuer au rayonnement de la culture et de l'art français dans le libre dialogue des cultures du monde. (Poirrier, 2001)<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the 1959 mission statement emphasized the democratization of a unified national elite form of art, the new statement of 1982 expands the scope of the French '*patrimoine culturel*' to recognize artistic, regional and cultural heterogeneity within France. The new statement argues that people should have access to artistic training, in a field of their choice. The shift shows a new valuation of variation and diversity in artistic production, as well as official support for projects that encourage cross-cultural collaboration and exchange.

The official stance of the Ministry of Culture has a critical impact on the development of dance in France. In France, unlike in the United States, dance is almost completely funded by government subsidies, and the Ministry of Culture, along with the regional institutions beneath it, is the primary source of these funds (DRAC, 2000). In a study entitled *La Politique de la danse: l'exemple de la Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur [PACA] 1979-1990*, Marianne Filloux-Vigreux shows how Aix-en-Provence and the surrounding region<sup>16</sup> became the primary site in which the new politics of the Ministry of Culture in France in the 1980s were acted out in the form of experimental dance-based projects. Since the mid-20th century, PACA had been the most vibrant region in terms of modern and contemporary dance activity in France. As a result, she argues, it became the primary 'territoire d'expérimentation' in which the Ministry of Culture developed its new programs for social outreach through dance (Filloux-Vigreux, 2001: 7). In France, contemporary dance developed in direct contrast with classical ballet. Classical ballet, because of its alliance with opera and high culture of Paris, was supported under the 1959 constitution of the Ministry of Culture. Thus, when



the leftist political shift occurred and the Ministry of Culture's mission changed in 1982, support for contemporary dance was invoked as part of that change. Contemporary dance, with its emphasis on the mixing of dance traditions and on individual innovation, fit perfectly with the new rhetoric of cultural diversity at the Ministry of Culture. The mixed demographic make-up in PACA,<sup>17</sup> combined with an already vibrant contemporary dance scene, made it the ideal site for outreach projects that used contemporary dance for treating economic, social and political problems.

An example of one such experimental outreach program is Josette Baïz's Groupe Grenade. Groupe Grenade was born out of a Ministry of Culture funding program in 1989, and it remains a major center of contemporary dance creation and dissemination in Aix-en-Provence. Josette Baïz established herself as a professional contemporary choreographer in 1982, when she won the most prestigious prize for choreography in the Bagnolet competition. In the same year, she started a contemporary dance company, located in Aix-en-Provence. Baïz enjoyed generous government funding throughout the 1980s, and in 1989 she was invited to participate in a program of art-based outreach initiated by the Ministry of Culture. The program, entitled 'Five Cities/Five Choreographers', allocated funding to five contemporary dance choreographers to work in poor neighborhoods in five specially selected cities in France. Baïz was asked to work with children in the ethnically diverse and economically depressed 'northern neighborhoods' of Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence. Her charge was to spend a

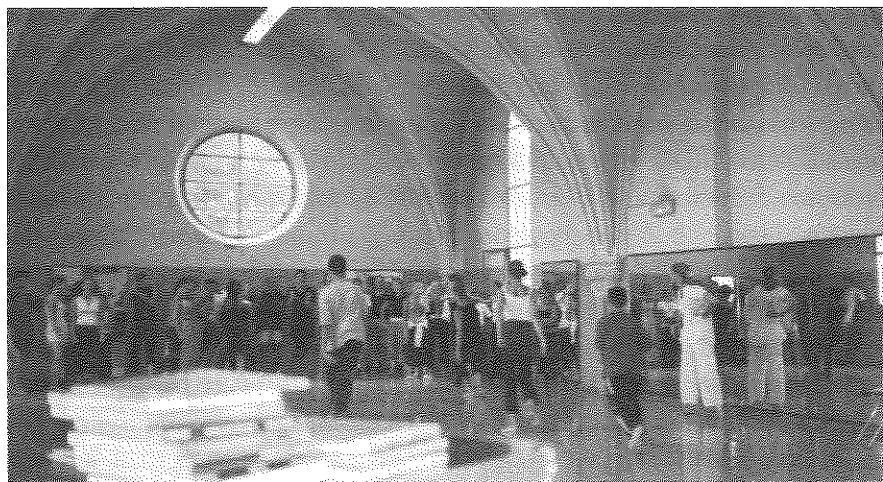


Figure 1 Classes at Groupe Grenade in 2002 (Josette Baïz on right, in white)  
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year with the children of these neighborhoods, producing a creation of contemporary dance. The year of collaboration and creation was intended to be an experimental project of social reform, aimed at the growing national problem of social exclusion and its related issues: poverty, urban violence and ethnic tension. By funding Baïz's project, the Ministry of Culture hoped to reduce problems of social exclusion and to improve the upward mobility of the children living in the poorest and most troubled neighborhoods in Aix and Marseilles.

After a successful year with 'Five Cities/Five Choreographers', the Ministry of Culture extended Baïz's funding, and she set up the Groupe Grenade, a dance school and performance troupe for children. The school is open to youth between the ages of 8 and 24 in Aix-en-Provence and Marseilles, and it continues to draw primarily from the 'northern neighborhoods', through a special bussing program and fee-waiver policy. Groupe Grenade promotes the idea that dance serves as a form of *intervention*, a way of solving problems in the community and helping to improve social well-being. 'Some of the children here come from very difficult backgrounds', explained Léo Ballini, head administrator at Groupe Grenade. The training that the children receive at Groupe Grenade is not only for dance, students and teachers alike are quick to explain. It is a process of personal formation that teaches integrity, cultural tolerance and the skills necessary to participate as an active and upwardly mobile individual in contemporary France's diverse and changing society (Grenade, 2002). 'The children really are obliged to change in our program,' Josette Baïz explains:

... because first of all it's a project of internal development. They are required to work rigorously on themselves, forging character. ... And secondly, we promote a certain philosophy of life here. The philosophy here, it's really about communication and respect. Communication, respect for cultures, and respect for being human. If someone doesn't follow this philosophy of life, they can't stay with us. (personal communication, 2002)

In the context of Groupe Grenade, dance served as a vector for social improvement in two ways: it helped create collective cohesion that made for healthier communities; and it helped children grow into the kind of adults who would be correctly socialized to participate in French society as healthy individuals. In Foucaultian terms, the Groupe Grenade and other outreach projects like it could be seen as inculcating people with 'technologies of the self', methods of self-development that would mould the participants into more empowered, self-propelled, healthy, happy and socially integrated individuals (2003: 146).

The professional titles associated with the type of work Baïz does with Groupe Grenade suggest that this outreach work is seen as a process of healing the social body. The professional titles are: '*artiste intervenant*' (intervening artist) and '*animateur*' (animator) (DRAC, 2002). The term *intervention* has similar

meaning to its English cognate ('intervention'), but in French it also has a second medical meaning, 'operation'. By intervening in the children's lives, the *artist intervenant* attempts to change the children and their communities. On a personal level, the *intervention* is supposed to help them acquire new technologies of the self through dance. As an 'animator' of society, Baiz is thought to bring new life to the children and their communities, to bring them out of a state of economic, political and social stagnation, a *blocage* of grand scale.

The political shift at the Ministry of Culture between 1959 and 1982 did not change the idea that promoting artistic production was supposed to help underprivileged populations. What changed was the way in which the administrators thought art might enact reform. In the earlier policies of *mission civilatrice*, administrators hoped to solve the problem of social exclusion by making high art accessible to all. In 1982, it became politically important to recognize all art forms as legitimate and valued, and to recognize products of minority populations in France as an essential part of the nation's cultural heritage. Thus, the new program emphasized individual innovation and cultural pluralism, a sort of *déblocage* by which excluded populations were encouraged to bring to life their own traditions and to put these creations into dialogue with others. Much like the Situationist art that attempted to awaken people from a zombie-like life of consumerist inertia, the new approach to cultural outreach could be seen as an attempt to make the excluded populations of France develop themselves artistically from their own sources of creation, rather than adopting artistic forms from a traditional French high culture.

#### Awakening, Awareness, Expression: The New Aesthetic of Contemporary Dance

Situationism and 1980s government policies about social outreach are certainly not the only sources for the aesthetic of experience in which contemporary dance becomes a form of healing in Aix-en-Provence in the early 21st century. Yet these historical events do seem to have contributed to the current formation of contemporary dance in Aix-en-Provence. An examination of the funding patterns and institutional structures of contemporary dance organizations in Aix shows that the idea of dance as *intervention* continues to shape contemporary dance in France in the early 21st century. In 2002, every major contemporary dance organization in Aix had a branch that was devoted to social outreach, and this branch always earned government subsidies based on claims that it helped promote social reform through dance (ARCADE, 2002).

The outreach projects took several forms. Most of the projects involved educational programs for children: Ballet Preljocaj, the Centre Chorégraphique National located in Aix, sponsored a program called 'Dance in the Middle

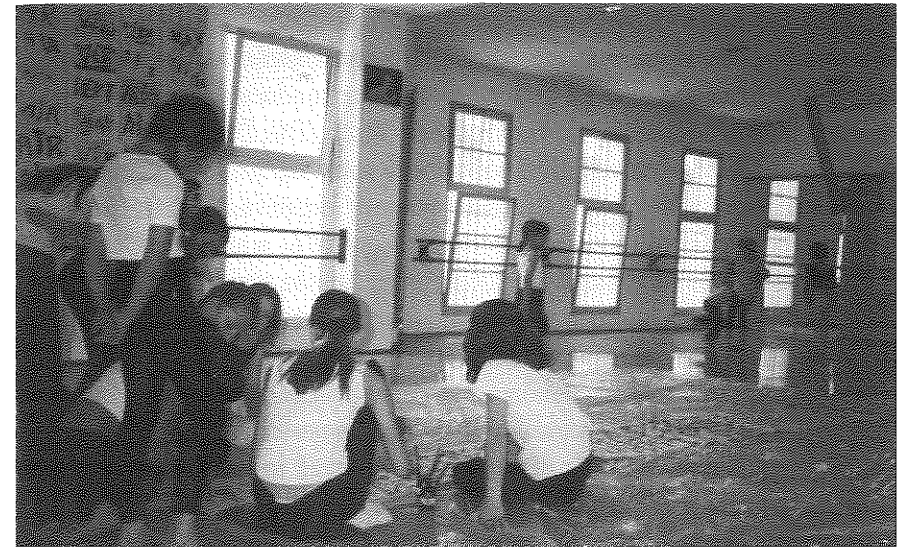


Figure 2 A children's workshop in Aix-en-Provence taught by Marie-Hélène Desmaris  
© Emily Wilcox. Reproduced by permission.

Schools', Danse-à-Aix organized a similar program called 'Actions Artistiques'; and the Marie-Hélène Desmaris Dance Company worked in schools and held summer workshops for children. These companies also held free public events like rehearsals and interviews with choreographers, through which they encouraged the public to learn about and benefit from contemporary dance. The company 3 Bis f had a somewhat unconventional outreach project. Their studio and performance spaces were located within the Aix-en-Provence psychiatric hospital, and their work encouraged collaboration and interaction between patients and non-patients at the ward. An administrator at Ballet Preljocaj's Dance in the Middle Schools program confirmed that these projects were indeed part of the legacy of the 1982 Ministry of Culture. He explained:

It is important to realize that [Dance in the Middle Schools] exists because of political financing from the city. You must know precisely – because you work in anthropology – that it's not by accident that the project was instituted in Jas de Bouffan.<sup>18</sup>

Jas de Bouffan was what he called a 'special type of neighborhood'. It had a large population of residents of North African decent and also was the site of a factory workers' *jardin*. Most of the programs still employed the terminology of *intervention* and *animation*. For example, the annual performance event created by the students enrolled in Dance in the Middle Schools was entitled, 'Intervention de Proximité: Groupe Urbain d'Intervention Dansée'.

While the legacy of the Situationist art movement is not as directly invoked by contemporary dancers in the early 21st century, some connections can be inferred based on the types of performances being conducted by contemporary dancers and the ways they talk about their work. The Danse-à-Aix summer festival was the first festival in France to be devoted exclusively to contemporary dance (Filloux-Vigreux, 2001: 163). When it began in the late 1970s, the festival was a series of outdoor performances, many of which were '*projets de rue*' (street projects) that were actually performed in the street. Much like Situationist art, the street projects were designed to interrupt the daily lives of passers-by, to inject art into the realm of the quotidian.

During the 1985 festival, a choreographer suspended dancers on giant ropes from the trees along the central boulevard in Aix-en-Provence (see Figure 3; Noisette and Robin, 1997). In 1996, dancers splashed in the Roman fountains around Aix, and in 2000, one scaled the stone outer wall of the town hall. In 2002, *projets de rue* were still a major part of the festival and the artists who created them shared many of the goals of the Situationist artists of 1968. As part of the 2002 festival, professional dancer Bernard Menaut staged improvisational choreography in public spaces of Aix. He performed in the bus station, the city of Aix tourism office, and in several local museums. In the bus station, Menaut and two other men dressed in business suits interacted with busses and



Figure 3 *L'école des hommes-oiseaux*, by Alwin Nikolais, 1985 Danse-à-Aix festival  
© Christiane Robin. Reproduced by permission.

commuters by balancing on railings, playing trumpet music and twirling umbrellas in the air. Although the performances were listed in the festival brochure, they came as a surprise to the passers-by who happened to be in the streets, offices or hallways in which the performances occurred. Entitled *Perturbations Chorégraphiques*, the impromptu shows were designed, like Situationist art, to 'intervene' in everyday situations of people's lives and to wake them up.

The new aesthetic of contemporary dance developed through the social changes of late 20th-century France. It connects the experience of self-movement to awakening, *déblocage* and health. When they train as contemporary dancers and create works of contemporary dance, the new dancers seem to believe they are practicing healing, through a transformative process that changes themselves and/or the community. I will now attempt to outline the precise process of change that dancers go through as they learn contemporary dance as well as the techniques they use to achieve this transformation.

The healing process of contemporary dance seems to happen in three stages: (1) '*l'éveil*' (awakening); (2) '*le conscience*' (awareness); and (3) '*expression*'. Without all three aspects, the process of transformation that is integral to contemporary dance cannot occur. Miriam Auden describes the first stage (awakening) as follows:

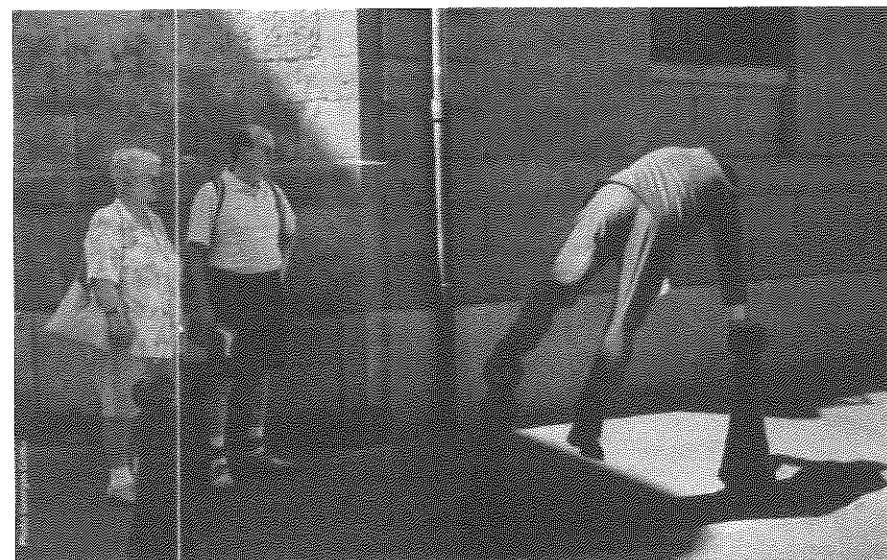


Figure 4 *Perturbations chorégraphiques*, by Bernard Menaut, 2002 Danse-à-Aix festival  
© Jean-Christophe Moine/Ethnomedia. Reproduced by permission.

I remember we did these exercises. Let's see . . . [she flips through the pages of her notebook] Ah! here- 'dance studio' . . . ok. We worked with massage first. We had one person on the ground like that and the other one on top [points to a sketch on the page]. We used massage a lot with vertebrae, worked a lot on the base of the neck, the head, the spine. . . . Then we also went out into nature. We closed our eyes and guided each other around – with just the hand, resting the hand on the other's back like this [she demonstrates], the hand guides, but it's just there without forcibly pushing, it's just rested like that, feel it? . . . Barbara showed us how to do it – so that one person becomes the eyes of the other. We walk around in nature like that. Eventually, we begin to have an idea . . . a sensation that is really completely new and different. You close your eyes and you walk, and you feel your feet completely differently – the rain, the heat, the sun – everything is there after you open your eyes. When you go out into nature again later . . . you feel like you're back in that situation. You don't close your eyes again, it's not that, it's just that *on est éveillé quoi*. . . .<sup>19</sup> Also, there are a lot of exercises with objects, where you permit yourself to forget and . . . I don't know – afterward, in a bodily way, you're not the same. All of a sudden, you really experience sensations. (personal communication, 2002)

Bernard Menaut, the professional dancer who conducted street performances in the 2002 Festival, gave a similar description of the early stages of his contemporary dance training:

When I was in my twenties, I discovered a dancer named Tanaka Min and Japanese dance . . . it was called Butai – no, not Bhuto, Butai – the 'dance-state', it means. I think it was Tanaka Min who named it that. His current of dance was called 'Meteorology of the Body'. Anyway, I went to his workshop, we did a lot of exercises. I remember manipulations that we did in pairs, stretches, something between massage and dance, I guess. We worked with music, then a lot of working with breathing too, often with our eyes closed. We'd have our eyes blindfolded and someone would lead us around, and then we'd *discover* – we'd discover the ground, people, many many things like that. Indoors but also in nature . . .

And then, we danced the extreme slowness. The slower than slow. For example, there was an exercise when he did a workshop and you close your hands, like this [he demonstrates the simple gesture of making a fist], this movement – and you do it again and again, slower and slower each time. One minute. Five minutes. Eventually you take 20 minutes – just to do that movement. It's a type of experience. . . . I knew movement before, in social dancing, some ballet, some jazz and modern dance – but all of a sudden to live *that*, it was – well, it was a *révolution*. It's a unique corporeal experience to really live that, when you've done five days of workshops, or ten, full of exercises like that. Afterward, well, you're zen [laughs]. You don't look at the world in the same way. You do this and you see. You are really in the time, after you see the little things. You can feel, for example, if you close your eyes [motions for me to close my eyes]. You can feel on your skin the places where the sun is hitting it, or the wind. . . . Can you tell which side the wind is coming from? Yes, and from there you can work on the movements of dance. What's happening are the movements on my skin, or the warmth of the light. There it is. There, dance is this – experiences, sensations pushed very far. (personal communication, 2002)

The particular exercises that Bernard and Auden described constituted only a small part of their trajectory of learning in contemporary dance. But they identified these as the pivotal and formative experiences. Both Auden and Menaut described their personal development through contemporary dance as a process

of learning in which they became more sensitive and attentive, both to their bodily states and to changes in their environment. This process of learning to be sensitive and aware constitutes the first two phases of contemporary dance training, the awakening and the development of awareness.

Other professional contemporary dancers in Aix, including Marie-Hélène Desmaris, Claire Burnet<sup>20</sup> and Josette Baiz, also listed processes of awakening and awareness as their formative experiences in contemporary dance. Baiz described contemporary dance as a '*grand rigueur à l'intérieur*', and she argued that the most difficult and important aspect of training is learning self-knowledge that will lead to greater awareness. Marie-Hélène Desmaris reported that the most important part of her training was learning the '*écoute du soi*', or 'learning to listen to the self'. Claire Burnet used the term '*champs corporelles*' (bodily fields) to express her understanding of contemporary dance. She explained that contemporary dance was a process of learning to achieve new sensations and modes of awareness by altering the dispositions of one's bodily fields.

In the first two stages of contemporary dance training (*l'éveil*/awakening and *le conscience*/awareness), individuals attune their bodies to new forms of experience. After awakening and awareness, the final stage in the process of contemporary dance training and transformation is expression. Expression is the ultimate creative process in contemporary dance. According to the dancers, expression can only occur when the performer has developed the techniques of awakening and awareness and achieved what Auden called the 'correct bodily state'. Once this state is achieved, the dancer can achieve the highest level of contemporary dance performance.

Nassar Martin-Gousset, a Parisian choreographer who performed in the 2002 Danse-à-Aix festival, described expression in the following way:

The base of my work is what I call 'intuition of the body'. For me, the intuition is when you begin to put yourself in motion, and you let the things come. That is to say, I – it's as though you have an internal mechanism. That's what I call my abstract side, the side of me that is more a part of form. If you have a certain, how to say it? Uh, a tendency toward a certain type of gesture, the gestures mechanize themselves and lead to others. It's a form of sensation that is really very intimate which develops. And it is very, very individual. So, it's something that speaks of you. After, you can pass it on to your dancers [as choreographer]. But, it's really something that develops out of, well, a mechanism of the body. I mean, it doesn't come from mathematical writing on a piece of paper, you see? It comes through practice. It constructs itself a bit naturally. It's almost like magic. I can't really describe it another way. I guess it's the inclinations of the body. . . . So, in the end *l'intuition* is not about reflection. It's not cerebral like that. It just comes by itself.

Martin-Gousset described expression in terms of what he called the '*intuition du corps*', or 'intuition of the body'. For him, expression meant acting out natural

impulses, allowing the intuition of the body to create movement. Through training in contemporary dance, he learned to make his dancing proceed from an internal source, a source that could not be accessed through mental deliberation, but which could be accessed through the study of contemporary dance. For Martin-Gousset, the ultimate achievement was for his personal essence to become a part of the dance he created, in a way that could be felt but was difficult to articulate.

The contemporary dancers have a name for the experience of expression. They call it presence. For example, Auden explained:

It's about being present in each movement. You achieve the virtuosity of movement when you re-create the movement anew each time you repeat it. You aren't just going through the motions, you are really living each movement. (personal communication, 2002)



Figure 5 *Neverland*, by Nassar Martin-Gousset, 2002 Danse-à-Aix festival  
© George Grimas. Reproduced by permission.

Thus, presence, or the experience of really living each movement, becomes the coveted quality that defines a skilled contemporary dancer. In his piece *Neverland* (see Figure 5), Nassar Martin-Gousset was said to have achieved presence. Russell Maliphant was also praised by journalists and audiences for achieving presence during his performance (*La Provence*, 2002; Sirvin, 2002). From the point of view of the audience, who apparently could sense the presence of the dancer by watching him or her perform on stage, presence became equated with beauty, elegance and the sublime. For dancers performing the presence, like Auden and Martin-Gousset, the experience was 'magical'.

### Conclusion: Presence as Technique

The achievement of presence designates aesthetic quality for a group of contemporary dancers. André Lepecki (2004) also recognized that what he called 'an insistence on presence' was a key feature of European contemporary dance. He argued that the emphasis on presence signaled a turn away from technique. This is why he claimed that contemporary dance posed an 'ontological shift' in the history of dance. For Lepecki, when contemporary dance focused on presence, it rejected the central ontological quality of all other traditions in dance – the emphasis on techniques of movement. Because it seemed to move away from the development of bodily techniques of movement, for him contemporary dance was a move away from dance itself, as it has traditionally been conceived as the creation of new movement vocabularies and bodily techniques. In light of the material presented in this article, however, it seems clear that a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary dancers' notion of presence might complicate this picture.

For the dancers in Aix-en-Provence, the process of learning to achieve presence requires rigorous training and the development of several bodily techniques. The training process<sup>21</sup> includes a variety of exercises (some of which Auden and Menaut described in their accounts), which are aimed at helping the dancer to develop sensitivity and awareness. Sensitivity and awareness are two of the technical skills required for contemporary dance (there are many others), analogous to pointing one's foot or completing a pirouette turn in classical ballet, or analogous to a rumba walk in competitive ballroom dancing. Once the fundamental skills of sensitivity and awareness become finely tuned, then the contemporary dancer has acquired the technical virtuosity of 'the correct bodily state' that Auden described. Only at this stage, when the dancer has acquired the technical skills necessary for contemporary dance, can presence be achieved.

One way to break down the technique of achieving presence is to translate it

into the language of embodiment theory. Pierre Bourdieu and Yuasa Yasuo each offer helpful concepts for this task. Bourdieu and Yasuo each describe domains of experience in which learned behavior becomes naturalized through embodiment. For Bourdieu, this is 'habitus' and for Yasuo it is the state of 'dark consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1977; Yasuo, 1987). Through repeated practice of an action that may at first be unfamiliar, a person eventually incorporates the unfamiliar behavior and makes it familiar. This is the training process, or the learning of bodily techniques. The behavior becomes a natural part of the person's instinctive repertoire; it is embodied at an unconscious level. If we put Martin-Gousset's account into this conceptual framework, presence can be seen as the state achieved when the 'correct bodily state' of awareness is naturalized, when it becomes part of the habitus or the dark consciousness of the dancer. In the first two stages of training, the stages of developing awakening and awareness, the dancer learns techniques: how to sense and experience the body in new ways. This experience is a form of heightened sensation, and at first it takes deliberate mental effort to enact it (hence Bernard Menaut's entreaty, 'Can you feel the sun on your skin?'). When the awareness happens without that mental effort, however, it becomes part of the dancer's instinctive repertoire. Or, as Martin-Gousset explains, the 'intuition of the body' takes over and 'it just comes by itself'.

At this point, one may be tempted to turn to Lepecki's argument and wonder whether techniques of embodiment, which occur at every level of mundane experience, really belong in the same ontological realm as techniques of dance. This is where the idea of an aesthetic of experience is useful. Posing classical ballet as a counter-example once again, it is possible to see that techniques in classical ballet are different from everyday activities because they tend to be learned with a certain aesthetic vision in mind (vision being the key word). The arm is moved in just a certain way so as to create a graceful visual effect. In contemporary dance, technique is also learned with an aesthetic ideal in mind, but in this case the ideal lies in the realm of experience. In contemporary dance in Aix-en-Provence in the early 21st century, the aesthetic ideal is the experience of well-being. Like the visual effect of the ballet dancer's rounded and graceful arm movement, the experiential effect of the contemporary dancers' bodily technique has certain definable qualities. In the case of French contemporary dance, *débloccage* or self-movement are ways of describing these qualities. The equivalent of the 'graceful' action in classical ballet is the 'self-propelled, awakened, non-frozen, moving, present' action in contemporary dance. For the contemporary dance practitioners encountered in this ethnography, the determinant of beauty is whether or not the dancer moves freely and effortlessly from his or her

own internal source. Expression is the process of using techniques of awareness to move from within, and presence is the end result.

The careful reader of contemporary dance will notice the difference between awareness, expression and presence, and will use these distinctions to understand the relationship between the aesthetic of experience and the notion of dance as *intervention*. Dance as *l'intervention* is a discourse that developed through the history of political changes in 20th-century France. The discourse helped solidify a link between dance and healing that evolved in concert with the adoption of an aesthetic of experience in contemporary dance in which good dancing equated with well-being. Two experiences converged: one was the experience of health as *débloccage*, or free self-initiated motion, and the other was the experience of social well-being as the capacity for self-movement (whether as an awakened consumer or an upwardly mobile citizen) in society. The convergence of these experiences created a well-defined aesthetic sense of health, and this sense then served as the basis for the development of a technique of contemporary dance. Ideology brought dance and health together, but experience defined the aesthetic definition of health. Presence, the aesthetically ideal achievement in contemporary dance, was also the aesthetically idealized experience of well-being: self-initiated movement. Expression was the process of achieving presence (during expression, inner self connected with the outer self and enacted the dance in such a way that it came from within). Awareness was the technical skill necessary to make expression, and then presence, happen.

French contemporary dance is not the only realm in which expression has been experienced as a key component of healing. I conclude with a brief example from a text in medical anthropology. The comparison helps further explicate the process of expression as understood in contemporary dance while also demonstrating the potential fertility of cross-pollination between medical anthropology and dance studies. In *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (1999), Shigehisa Kuriyama argues that expression, and the techniques developed around expression, make healing possible in ancient Chinese understandings of health and the human body. According to Kuriyama, ancient Chinese medical theory states that patients 'express' the underlying causes of their illness through a process like Martin-Gousset's intuition of the body. The classical Chinese doctors, in order to heal, had to be trained in the art of detecting bodily expression, learning to sense and interpret the expressions of their patients' bodies. For example, the Chinese doctor gathered information from the color of the patient's tongue, the texture of the *mo*<sup>22</sup> or the facial complexion, and from this information they determined which problem was plaguing the inner essence of their patient. Healing, in this context, takes two

people: the patient, who expresses the inner essence of disease, and the healer, who detects and interprets the expressions to make a diagnosis.

For the contemporary dancers in France, expression and sensation remain the two major components of healing. However, in contemporary dance the role of patient and doctor – along with the processes of expression and sensation – become inverted and eventually collapsed. The patient's ability to express inner essence on the surface of the body is not taken for granted for the dancers in the way it is for the patients described in ancient Chinese medical theory. The dancers feel that in their non-healthy state they experience a disconnect between their inner and outer selves. This is why dancers have to train themselves to attain a bodily state in which expression is possible. The process of healing still depends on technical training, but now it is the patient who must acquire advanced levels of sensitivity, rather than the healer. Since the patient/dancer does not know how to sense her own inner essence, she trains to develop the 'correct bodily state'. This correct bodily state allows her to detect and recognize an inner essence and to calibrate this sensation with an awareness of the relationship between the inner and outer essences and the environment. Thus, the sequence of sensation and expression is inverted. Sensation occurs first, making expression possible. Through expression a connection is made between inner and outer and the inner essence becomes manifest. Once this connection is made, and presence is achieved, the dancer becomes the healer and expression cure.

## Notes

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1. For a detailed history of government sponsorship of contemporary dance in France see Gore et al. (2000).

2. See Novack (1990) and Robinson (1990) to situate these artists in the American and the French contexts respectively.

3. For a good introduction to Pina Bausch's work, see Servos (1998).

4. The bulk of research presented here is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Aix-en-Provence during 2000–2. I worked with several contemporary dance organizations located in Aix, including Danse-à-Aix, Ballet Preljocaj and Groupe Grenade. I gathered data through research in

institutional records, in-depth personal interviews, participant observation and group meetings. Unless noted otherwise, all interviews were conducted in French and have been translated by the author.

5. See Beck et al. (1994) for further discussion of late modernity and postmodernity in politics and aesthetics.

6. A similar trend has been cited by Cynthia Novack in what she calls the 'no fault dancing' of early contact improvisation in the US. Aesthetic evaluations were discouraged, she argues, because dancers were released from 'the burden of having mastered or not mastered something' (1990: 174).

7. I use 'Aix-en-Provence contemporary dance community' to refer to the group of people self-designated as contemporary dance administrators, enthusiasts, instructors, students, choreographers and/or performers who came together in Aix while fieldwork was conducted. Generalizations about cultural idioms are drawn from participant observation among the contemporary dance community. I worked as an intern at Danse-à-Aix for two months and conducted 108 interviews with people in the dance community. Conversations with informants were open-ended and unstructured, usually begun with my request that they talk about their personal history of involvement with contemporary dance. Some material presented here comes from open-air discussions facilitated by Danse-à-Aix in which members of the community were allowed to pose questions to the choreographers in a public setting.

8. A pseudonym.

9. Contemporary dance training in France often includes the study of bodywork techniques, such as Alexander, Feldenkrais, tai chi, yoga and body-mind centering.

10. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted by the author in French and have been translated into English by the author.

11. Russell Maliphant is a British dancer who was invited to the Aix-en-Provence festival. Interviews with him were conducted in English.

12. 'Mass culture brings us into a relationship with the world and with space that is de-rooted, mobile, and wandering.'

13. 'Sad phantoms of transcendence, the bitter critics of the Spirit of the Times are blinder than the blind for whom they hold so much contempt. They ignore the fact that the one who is dead, it is not really God, who has his hideaway outside the world, it is Being.'

14. 'The mission of the Minister of Cultural Affairs is to make accessible the grand works of humanity, especially those from France, to the largest number of French people possible; to assure the widest audience for our cultural heritage, and to promote the creation of works of arts and the spirit that enriches it.'

15. 'The mission of the Minister of Culture is: to permit every French person to cultivate the capacity to invent and create, to freely examine their talents and to receive the artistic training of their choice; to preserve cultural heritage at the level of the nation, region, or diverse social groups for the common benefit of the entire collective; to promote the creation of works of art and of the spirit and to give them the widest audience; to contribute to the spread of French culture and arts in free dialogue with the cultures of the world.'

16. Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) is the bureaucratic region that includes the major cities Aix-en-Provence, Marseilles, Nice and Toulon.

17. Marseilles, the second largest port city in Europe, has one of France's largest minority populations, particularly immigrants from North Africa.

18. This statement suggests that artists are very aware of their dependence on public funding and their need to tailor their work to suit the tastes of government officials like those at the Ministry of Culture. While many artists are happy to perform social outreach to receive funding, others resent having limits on their artistic freedom and worry that the idea of 'dance as intervention' may diminish the integrity of true artistic creation by instrumentalizing it.

19. 'You've really been awakened.'

20. The *artiste intervenante* in charge of Ballet Preljocaj's Dance in the Middle Schools.

21. It may not be accurate to speak of 'the training process' in contemporary dance. As the material demonstrates, this process is not homogeneous but differs from one dancer to the next. Certain aspects of this process, however, can be generalized.
22. Pulse of qi energy, detectible in the wrist.

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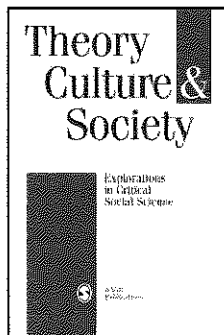
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