

The Movement of Embodied Thought The Representational Game of the Stage Zero of Signification in *Jérôme Bel*

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As conspicuously reported in the press, legal action was instigated in 2002 against the International Dance Festival Ireland, following the French choreographer Jerome Bel's performance of his piece *Jérôme Bel*. (See Managh 2004 and Garvey 2004).

The Festival was sued for 38,000 euros by one of its patrons, Raymond Whitehead, a Dublin businessman, Equity member¹ and part-time actor, on the grounds that it misled the audience with regard to the 'true' nature of Bel's performance, which did not contain 'a single step of dance'. According to Whitehead's counsel, Seamus O'Tuathail, 'the performance was anything but dance and shocked and disgusted him to such an extent that he walked before the end'. O'Tuathail also made the point that it was 'a particularly tasteless and vulgar performance that included an actor drooling on his penis at the same time as he urinated on stage' (Garvey 2004). As a consequence, reported the *Independent*, the traumatized Whitehead had not been able to attend theatre since the incident (Managh 2004). The case was dismissed in 2004, but the Festival was still faced with legal fees of around 10,000 euros.

The publisher and regular columnist of a New York online dance magazine *The Dance Insider*, Paul Ben-Itzak, commented on the words of the Festival organizers who claimed that they were attempting to 'challenge, stimulate and entertain audiences while nurturing a love and appreciation of dance as an art form'. Ben-Itzak asked:

But where is the challenge, besides to the stomach, in forcing an audience to watch a stage transformed into a toilet? The key words here are 'breach of contract'. Mr. Whitehead expected a dance performance, and in his view, he didn't get it. Let's hope more audience members follow suit and hold 'anti-dance' (as one newspaper characterized him) 'dance' artists like Jérôme Bel to account.

(Ben-Itzak 2004)

There are two significant tropes in these news reports and commentaries: firstly, they suggest a familiar and an exhausted image of the artist as *provocateur*, someone who is attacking established social norms (urinating and touching his genitals in public) and appropriately and conveniently shocking a bourgeois audience. Secondly, as already suggested by André Lepecki, they reveal a particular understanding of what dance is, and at the same time offer an interpretation of how Bel is attacking that understanding (Lepecki 2004:2). Dance pieces should not involve naked bodies, human genitals or onstage urination, but they should involve dance 'steps'. The articles even mention the cost of not following the above regulations: 10,000 euros, the legal costs the Festival was forced to pay.² These news reports, however, do not attempt a formulation of what the significance of the moment of urination and other controversial points in the performance might be. Urination is merely treated as a fixed universal sign that transgresses the context or structure in which it appears. If we were to judge this action according to Mr Whitehead's suit, it can only have one

¹ Equity is the UK Trade Union representing professional performers.

² Raymond Whitehead was also ordered to pay his own legal fees, and though the press did not report how much these amounted to, there is evidently also a price attached to suing the Festival for not getting what you expected out of an art work. However, Judge Joseph Matthews did not, for instance, reprimand Whitehead for wasting the Court's time. Instead, he praised him for being 'a man of integrity and high principle, a person taking a stand on grounds of principle against what he considered had been a performance at a cultural event undeserving of the name' (Managh 2004).

unproblematic meaning: that of disrespect and contempt (for the audience). By considering other accounts of this particular moment of urination in *Jérôme Bel*, we can begin to examine how the moment has been constructed in alternative ways.

Jérôme Bel (1995), Bel's second performance work, starts with four naked performers entering an empty black stage. One of the performers (Gisèle Peluzelo) carries a light bulb plugged into a long cable that will turn out to be the only source of light throughout the performance. She writes the name 'Thomas Edison' on the wall behind her, thus evoking the person to whom the invention of the light bulb is credited. On entering the stage, the remaining three performers arrange themselves with their backs against the wall, facing the audience. One (Yseult Roch), writes 'Igor Stravinsky' above her head with a piece of chalk before starting to hum Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The humming will continue through to the end of the performance, or the performance will last as long as the humming, however we decide to read this relationship. A pattern is already slowly discernible: what is already there is being explicitly stated or underlined. Signs are doubled. Also, the writings on the wall in the first instance fix the 'authors' or 'originators' of the cultural artefacts they are most famous for. Both names fall within the area of 'general knowledge': they are people whose names one 'should' know. They are unproblematic as signs. What is performed on stage is a signification shortcut, announcing others that will follow: a sign equivalence - by which I mean a reliance on the ease of quick thought, of operations of immediate mental connection - the moment of instant recognition of the very general facts of Western cultural history. Even though Thomas Edison was responsible for 1,093 different patents, in popular perception, the light bulb is Thomas Edison and Thomas Edison is the light bulb. His identity is established and sealed off through this invention. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* is even more indicative in that respect.³

That the background sound for the duration of the performance is provided by such a strong cultural symbol makes for a paradoxical relationship in the work. To quote *The Rite of Spring* immediately invokes the exceptional status of a piece of art in the history of art - a moment of violent departure from well-established musical practices - and proposes alternative codes of operation: on the other hand, the act of quoting *The Rite of Spring* almost abolishes the status of the idea it stands for. *The Rite of Spring* produced a rupture in the fabric of musical (and dance) practices of its time. By repeating it, one can't repeat the rupture it caused; on the contrary, one is pacifying the effects of that rupture. What happens, however, might not be uninteresting: what happens is a certain pointing towards the rupture, which deconstructs itself through the process, instead of representing rupture.

The subsequent names that will 'end up' on the wall are Claire Haenni and Frédéric Sequette, the 'real' names of the other two performers. The presence of their names next to those of cultural icons at the same time disturbs and re-establishes the clear-cut distinction between those who are to be known and those who are supposedly 'irrelevant'. Though Haenni and Sequette's names are written on the same wall, they are only representative of their own bodies, and their own bodies are only representative of them. They don't stand for anything in terms of Western cultural history. They are defined in terms of their 'accidental', 'irrelevant' existence, not in terms of their 'cultural products': their names are followed by their bank account balances, height, weight, date of birth and phone number, which reiterate their marginality in relation to Edison and Stravinsky. Unlike Edison and Stravinsky, who are because of the work they did, who are 'a by-product of their own cultural production' (Bordieu 1984: 23), Haenni and Sequette 'simply' are: depersonalized, yet individualized, functioning like some sort of objective presentation of subjectivity. Their individualities are marked, but they are 'content-

³ Composed for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky, it remains one of the most important musical works of the twentieth century, inspiring huge controversy at the moment of its premiere on 29 May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. The audience was scandalized by both music and dance: the violent movements of the pelvises of the dancers, an emphasis on dissonance and asymmetrical rhythm, on polyrhythms and polytonality, the scoring of the instruments of the orchestra in unusual and uncomfortable sounding registers and, in general, a shattering of most of their expectations. Loud boos and ferocious arguments in the audience between supporters and opponents of the work eventually turned into a riot and intervention by the police.

ambivalent': we can see that Sequette has a 643 euro overdraft and that Haenni's height is 1.68 meters and weight 54 kilos. All the information we receive about Hanni and Sequette creates a certain identity shell, presenting signs for identities rather than any particular identities themselves. They are obsessively detailed and yet somehow withhold more information than they present. They are unrepresentative of the specific thematics of the work. It is a paradoxical case of exposure that actually doesn't expose anything other than exposure itself. However, there is also another certain loose theme there, a theme defying its 'themeness'. When you compare the position of the writings of the wall, the names of Stravinsky and Edison with the position of Haenni and Sequette one thing becomes clear. They have something that Edison and Stravinsky lack, because Haenni and Sequette are not 'by-products of their own cultural production'. They exist in potentiality; a potentiality that belongs to someone who has knowledge or ability.⁴ Because the performance frequently occurs in the context of a dance festival, because the music that accompanies it is, historically, the score for Nijinski's ballet, certain sets of expectations are invoked: we expect them to know how to dance. We give them the benefit of the doubt that they will at least dance, and that dancing will be the manner of their presence on stage. By not defining the particularities of their presence on stage, their particular personal identity and subjectivity, but a sketch of 'some' identities that they have, they are enabled to exist in a state of *potentiality* - they *could be something* because they are nothing specific, they are not an embodiment of a particular idea or identity. Their identity is located in that could be moment. And this *could be* moment does not exist in some unidentifiable space but in a precise context of a dance/theatre performance. It's not about the utopian potential of the child to be whoever it wants to be but of the specific potentiality of a dance/theatre performance. It proposes an answer to the question of how to stage potentiality.



In such a context the moment of urination is placed in the performance. Towards the very end of the performance, both performers start urinating, Frédéric Sequette standing up, Claire Haenni squatting. The moment of urination is neither particularly exposed nor covered. Sequette's face remains expressionless; he does not touch his penis but lets the fluid out in a manner that appears effortless. The only source of light on the stage is not pointed directly towards them, nor is it completely withdrawn: they are performing this action in semi-darkness. Once the liquid leaves their body, they take it in their hands and use it to erase the chalk writings on the wall. The German dance critic Arnd Wesemann suggests the following about Bel's usage of urine: 'there is nothing dirty about it whatsoever. Rather, this urine seems fit for the stage, transparent, odourless' (1998). According to the same logic, the critic Catherine Girard places the act within the overall abstinence of the performance from the usage of any stage effects: no décor, no costumes, a simple light bulb as the only source of light, and the performer murmuring Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* as the music for the performance (Girard 1997). She seems to suggest that urinating in this context

• Jérôme Bel Jérôme Bel (1995). Photo © Herman Sorgeloos.

⁴ For a distinction between the two forms of potentiality see Aristotle 1986: 94.

⁵ A quote from Martha Graham shows how she instrumentalized the body and put it in the service of a self: 'The acquiring of technique in dance has been for one purpose - so to train the body as to make possible any demand made upon it by that inner self which has the vision of what needs to be said' (Graham 1974: 139).

simply follows a pre-set logic: usage of what is there, i.e., what is already provided by the processes of the human body displayed in the performance. Bodily fluids are simply used as a means of erasing the chalk writing on the wall. Interestingly, even though it seems Girard attempts to read the performance as an exploration into the reduction of both the means used and the signs deployed, she uses a powerful adjective here: 'liberating' - ('the dancers use their own fluids like a *liberating* liquid' (1997, my emphasis) - which, in contrast to the image offered by Whitehead's legal counsel, yet very similar in its logic, points to an understanding of the suppression or avoidance of bodily fluids as something repressive, something that goes against the 'naturalness' of the body, bringing to mind the 1960s discourse of the liberation of the body as a liberation of the self.

It is worth contrasting this view with Bel's own understanding of what he is doing:

For me, dance as dance for the stage is no longer the never analysed, beautiful expression of somehow 'natural' feelings through the body, a body that exists, and served because we are not sure of it. No. Not at all.... Everything that we know about the body, that we understand, is based on codes and language. (Quoted in Siegmund 1998: 36)

Bel tries to avoid several familiar placings of himself as an artist and/or choreographer, and while doing that he is conversing with the history of contemporary dance and art. One idea he is trying to dismiss is of himself as an artist who insists on obscenities in order to shake the 'stale' politeness and propriety of the bourgeoisie (as with Dadaist provocations or coprophilic and scatological elements in the work of body artists such as, for example, Stuart Brisley, Karen Finley or Andre Stitt). Another idea is using modern dance as a mode of emancipation from the suppression of civilizing processes and institutionalized power mechanisms: the link between dance and freedom, an idea deeply rooted in the very foundations of modern dance (the free personal expressions of Isadora Duncan,

Mary Wigman and Doris Humphrey against the restraints of ballet). Another is the idea of dance as the expression of an inner self (Martha Graham).⁵

What he is primarily interested in, in contrast, is the body with its signifying potential in the first place, the moment of signification of the body, but not the *definite content* of its signification: the body as text and image, the body as a plane. Bel is keen on placing the body primarily within codes and language but at the same time refusing to create a link with particular codes and language as fixed and firm, as a mere expression of them. He is interested in dealing with the question: what is the signifying power of the moment of urination on stage, how can basic bodily functions participate in the signifying mechanism of performance revealing at the same time that very mechanism and its operation?

Here is what Bel states about his process of work on *Jérôme Bel*:

Having been stimulated by reading *Writing Degree Zero* by Roland Barthes, I wondered about the 'degree zero of a dance show'. I managed to isolate four elements which make up a dance show in a slightly, I admit, schematic way. The body ... well, there are two in humanity, woman and man. So I put



• Jérôme Bel *Jérôme Bel* (1995). Photo © Herman Sorgeloos.

two naked dancers of different sexes on stage. Music. I wanted the most zero point of music possible! I thought that a voice would be the least cumbersome and the most corporeal instrument. So I asked an actress to sing nude, on stage. The choice of music conformed to dramaturgic choices which it would be tedious to describe here but all the same I fixed my choice on Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, a work which enabled me to link the piece to the field of dance. The light was more of a problem, the zero point of light obviously being the sun ... and it would have been quite difficult to perform outside with naked actors on stage in our temperate climates. So I finally chose the zero point of electric light! I therefore asked a naked actress to light the stage with a simple electric torch, which remains the same as the one invented by Thomas Edison. (Bel 2002:27)

Reading Bel's statements one becomes aware of the constructedness of the zero degree when it transfers from an abstract level to the level of human bodies on stage. At first reading, the story seems plausible: two sexes, bare human voice, the light bulb. And yet, all of these equations might very easily not be there at all: the neutrality of a naked human body on stage? What could be less neutral than the naked human body in or outside the field of art? It almost guarantees controversy. Focusing on the biological differences of two unproblematic sexes after years of gender studies work? How can the fixity in the two oppositional sexes today be perceived as neutral instead of being perceived as a charged battlefield? The neutrality of an unaccompanied *a cappella* singing of *The Rite of Spring*? How can an occasionally harsh, occasionally irritatingly high-pitched, and for the most part completely out of tune human voice singing *The Rite of Spring* be conceived as neutral?

I would argue that a complex game is at stake here: while Bel argues that he is trying to represent neutrality on stage or a zero degree of signification, what he is actually doing is creating a particular sign construction that produces a movement of thought (in the audience) that deals with the representation of neutrality. He produces an incentive for us to

think about neutrality as a signifying moment. He is playing tricks with representational processes, unravelling their operations - making us aware that the performance was 'supposed to be' the representation of neutrality, the representation of the zero degree of signification. The issue here is not that the particular elements that Bel chooses *cannot* be perceived as neutral, or that other elements unproblematically and easily can be, but that the *neutral* or *stage zero* can never be neutral enough, zero enough. The neutral always creates a desire and a space to be even more subtle, even less expressive, even less visible and less affirming. The force of the neutral that *opposes* its representation, *staged together* with an attempt at its representation, nevertheless creates a tension, a movement, a choreography between those two, which is the true object of the performance. This is a representational game, an answer to the question of how you can play with signs as signs: by carefully constructing them as only partially successful: because in their half-failure to represent they are exposed as signs. Yet one has to be aware of the attempt at representing neutrality for the game to work, which is why Bel is so explicit and literal about what he is trying to do in his work, using also the tool of the interview as the continuation of his artistic work.⁶ It has to sound and appear convincing *at first*.

Bel is trying to induce the movement of an embodied thought process dealing with neutrality on stage: that is why his representation of neutrality has to constitute a lack. Or rather, and to be more precise, that is why he chose to deal with neutrality in the first place. Because neutrality, or the zero degree of signification, refuses us the satisfaction of its full presence, it is read as a sign, as an attempt, unfixed in an actualization of that attempt. And therefore the play with representation, the perception of representation as a game, is ensured.

Let us now return to the moment of urination in the performance, remembering the comment

⁶ In an interview with Bel I asked: 'Do you think that part of your artistic work is the production of discourse around your artistic work and around yourself? Or is there any difference between those two moments?' He replied 'My artistic project has always been to produce discourses. But unfortunately my performances produced a lot of misinterpretations until *Veronique Doisneau* and *Pichet Klunchum* and *Myself* that most of the people have understood. I don't make any difference between artistic works and discourses. They are the same for me' (see 'Jérôme Bel in Interview' in this issue).



• Jérôme Bel *Jérôme Bel* (1995). Photo © Herman Sorgeloos.

of Arnd Wesserman, already quoted: 'there is nothing dirty about it whatsoever. Rather, this urine seems fit for the stage, transparent, odourless'. As such, urine is taken out of the modes through which it is habitually seen. However, in the moment when the performers stick their hands in urine, it is very difficult not to feel physically disgusted by their action. The disgust that we experience is a bodily reaction, but it is not the one we were born with, it is not a biological reflex. Quite the contrary, children have to be trained into finding urine and faeces repulsive. Toilet training, according to many psychologists, is one of the most formative events of the human psyche, because it is the child's first introduction to the fact that social structures can take precedence over bodily demands. The physical reaction of disgust is constructed, which does not make it any less real. In the moment when the performers touch their urine with their bare hands, years of social training in finding urine repulsive⁷ are playing their role in the audience's reception of it. As audience witnessing this performance, we are constantly in movement between two poles: one is the pole of being able to conceive urine as neutral, the other is the

inability to do so. The effect of estrangement does not lie in Bel's success (or lack of it) at presenting urine as an 'odourless liquid' but in the moment between the socially and culturally constructed difficulty of seeing urine as an odourless liquid and the attempt at presenting it as such, which turns 'urine' into a sign caught somewhere in between opposing forces: our social training and conditioning and the possibility of thinking beyond it.

I argue that Bel's work as a choreographer involves creating the movement of thought (an *embodied* thought, not an abstract concept - because we very much *feel* the disgust when we watch hands deliberately stuck in urine, spreading urine across the back wall). Bel's project creates a movement: a movement created as a result of not being able to settle ourselves, either in the perception of urine as 'odourless liquid', or in the traditional perception of urine as disgusting.

In that light, it is inappropriate to dismiss the legal actions provoked by seeing *Jérôme Bel* as a simple misunderstanding on the part of Whitehead of the performance, his own closed-mindedness or a lack of familiarity with a particular stream in contemporary dance and performance art. Rather it serves as an act of contribution to the performance's teasing of sign systems and of the way they operate: an actualization of performance's tensions. However financially dangerous Whitehead's reaction might have been for the festival had he won the case, it contributes to the logic of performance. It is not outside of it, because it emphasizes the tension through which performance engages its audience. There is an attempt to reveal the conventional representation as conventional (urine as disgusting) but not so that one can replace it with an unconventional representation (urine as odourless liquid) and thus fix it within a new representational mechanism (representing ideas of liberation, expression of the inner self, freedom from oppressive socialization). Whitehead's reaction is important in the way it

⁷ Closely related, of course, with the biological facts that urine and faeces are what remains after an organism has used all the nutritive qualities out of food and drink and has disposed of toxins and pathogens, which, treated improperly, can contribute to spreading diseases and intestinal parasites. The treatment of faeces is, clearly, a matter of hygiene.

so clearly (and with such emotional investment) demonstrates a social reality, a particular frozen understanding of what urine stands for, and what dance does not stand for. But the performance does not formulate itself in the opposition to Whitehead and is not settled in that opposition. It does not promote another firm social reality (urine as liberating liquid) but stages a dialogue between the two, between our possible understandings of them. Though Whitehead's reaction is important, it is, however, misleading in the way in which it fixes these oppositions in their antagonistic positions, trying to exclude Bel from the game (as an artist, as a choreographer). The two positions, in Bel's performance, stand in a dialogical relationship, and it is that dialogue that is staged, it is that movement of embodied thought that Bel is choreographing in *Jérôme Bel*. In regard to dance, Bel's proposition is not a definitive 'Look, urinating on stage is also dance! Do not try to censure our new idea of what dance is!'; for with Bourdieu we can say that there is literally no other criteria for belonging to a field of art than producing effects in that field (thus no metaphysical criteria that would a priori distinguish works of art from those which are not works of art). And it is really not particularly hard to prove that Bel is producing effects in the field.⁸ But it is the more open form, that is in the focus of his interest, not a statement, but a question, a question that inspires a dialogue: a question that asks not what choreography is and what it is not but what are the processes of its construction and understanding as choreography, how is choreography constructed? And a proposal is framed: choreography is not constructed through the successful staging of particular representations, or through the impossibility of their staging (and thus, through the success at staging abstract movement) but through the movement of embodied thought which refuses to fix itself in particular recognizable types of oppositional discourses, or oppositional response structures.

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- ⁸ For his work's U.K. reception, see for instance Roslyn Sulcas (2008) and Debra Craine (2008). Bel is still touring extensively with most of his works, some of them dating from 1994 or 1995, which, especially in the field of dance, even more than theatre, is not a minor achievement. Numerous theoreticians, dance scholars and artists from around Europe have written articles or book chapters about his work, such as Helmuth Ploebst, Gerald Siegmund, André Lepecki, Bojana Cvejić, Bojana Kunst, Ramsay Burt, Tim Etchells, Martina Hochmuth, Maaïke Bleeker, Pirkko Husemann, Gabrielle Brandstetter, Hortensia Volckers, Marina Gržinić, Adrian Heathfield. Martina Hochmuth, artistic director of one of the most important dance centres in Europe, Tanzquartier Wien, declared his *Nom donné par l'auteur* to be 'a masterpiece' of contemporary dance during the conference *Inventory: Dance and Performance* (TQW, 2005)