

## 2 Violent Desire Writing Laughing

Dance involves breath, the respiration of the earth. This is because the central question of dance is the relation between verticality and attraction. Verticality and attraction enter the dancing body and allow it to manifest a paradoxical possibility: that the earth and the air may exchange their positions, the one passing into the other.—Alain Badiou, “Dance as a Metaphor for Thought”

For those who laugh, together become like the waves of the sea—there no longer exists between them a partition as long as the laughter lasts; they are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters.—Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*

From landscape to liquid horizon, we now trespass from the scaffolding of sculpture into a more intimately corporeal terrain. Captured in the tremulousness of gesture—torqued, twisted, splayed out, laughing—we witness body becoming landscape becoming liquid becoming desire as so many openings toward another approach to the choreographic and to writing (the pressure of the choreo on the graphic, yet again). If chapter 1 asked how we encounter history in the present as we walk—feet tracing patters in dirt, eyes turned toward sky—this chapter attends more closely to the stumbles, stutters, and spasms of gesture, danced and laughed. In these encounters violence exists not only as shadowy surround, a series of symbolic and systemic contours that are deeply pervasive, ideological, and material, but is explicitly bodily as well. Under duress, whether gestural or emotional or historical, language falters, can only fail, leaving us in a volcanic abyss of sorts but also offering a possibility for escape. In these strangled moments, language, as much writing as speech, must search for a different transversal poetics that ruptures the imperative and known. Writing after the devastation and ashes of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the camps,<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille evokes an “atmosphere of death, of the disappearance of knowledge” in the same breath and then attempts his own writing

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1. In his introduction to Bataille's *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Stuart Kendall notes that Bataille published “Nietzsche's Laughter” in *Exercice de silence* in November 1942 at a moment when the war was finally turning against the Germans (Bataille 2001, xxii). Laughter

of nonknowledge or unknowing (*non-savoir*) as a never-ending process to uncover something of the impossible experience. Refusing the servile qualities of knowledge and of philosophy, Bataille seeks experience, intensity, as slippery sites to interrogate writing and thinking. A deeply paradoxical project, he acknowledges that nonknowledge must always exist in a “perpetual rebellion against itself” and must constantly seek out ways to elicit our own disorientation ([1951] 2001b, 129–130); laughter and tears offer two gestures that actively participate in such a vertiginous undoing of knowledge and of language.<sup>2</sup>

Laughter is convulsive: an “intimate overturning, of suffocating surprise” not only of our body and mind (and both simultaneously) but explicitly of knowledge as well (Bataille [1953] 2001, 133).<sup>3</sup> As Bataille writes: “*Laughing and thinking* at first

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appeared in the midst of the horror and continued to echo across Bataille’s thinking until his death in 1962.

2. Throughout this chapter, I refer to the translations of Bataille in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. Yet my initial reading began with Annette Michelson’s translation of “Unknowing: Laughter and Tears” published in *October* 36 (Bataille [1953] 1986). I include an excerpt to reveal the slight discrepancies, most obviously the shift between nonknowledge and un-knowing: “Laughter is, let us say, the effect of un-knowing, though laughter has not, theoretically, as its object the state of un-knowing; one does not, by laughing, accept the idea that one knows nothing. Something unexpected occurs, which is in contradiction to the knowledge we do have. . . . He who laughs does not, theoretically, abandon his knowledge, but he refuses, for a time—a limited time—to accept it, he allows himself to be overcome by the impulse to laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but he retains, deep within, the conviction that it is not, after all, destroyed. When we laugh we retain deep within us that which is suppressed by laughter, but it has been only artificially suppressed, just as laughter, let us say, has the power to suspend strict logic” (Bataille [1953] 1986, 97).

3. Umberto Eco narrates the confounding confusion of laughter and knowledge in *The Name of the Rose* ([1980] 1983) through the character of the librarian who is so afraid of the potential contagion implicit in laughter that he hides away the only copy of Aristotle’s exegesis on comedy and soaks each page in deadly poison. Of course, when the character of the monk-detective finds it, the librarian consumes every page and dies laughing in the midst of his burning library. Laughter figures as contagion to the sites and bodies of knowledge (literal and metaphoric), one so deadly that it must be contained and ingested lest it seep out off the boundaries of the page, the text, the library. And so for Eco’s librarian, laughter and its discourse must be kept in the dark. This marks a distinct difference from Bataille, also trained as a medieval librarian, who in his secret societies and writings on the *Acéphale: Religion-Sociologie-Philosophie* and atheology celebrated the dark powers of laughter.

Also to note, the anecdote from Eco opens the “Introduction” by Jane Taylor to *The Anatomy of Laughter* (2005), an anthology of discursive texts on laughter including scientific assessments;

appeared to complete each other. Thought without laughter seemed mutilated, laughter without thought was reduced to this insignificance" ([1952] 2001, 153).<sup>4</sup> From within the experience of laughter, we witness something of nonknowledge as an opening to a messier ethics of dancing, of writing, of living. Such tremulous dances allow us an entrée into violence as gesture or act, a force (Walter Benjamin will use the word *Gewalt* to suggest both violence and force simultaneously<sup>5</sup>) warping speech and sense, sound and inchoate illegibility to produce another choreographic possibility. Within these precarious encounters, an incendiary corporeal logic undoes the rational along its insurgent and desiring edges, invasive and involved, I am captured in the glistening luscious viscera of spit sound speech. Such dances intoxicate: pleasure and horror and beauty are never singular but always multiple, echoing, stumbling, spasming, dancing.

### Laughing

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles.—T. S. Eliot, "Hysteria"<sup>6</sup>

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metaphysical ruminations; speculations on humor that cross disciplinary lines of anthropology, ethnology, psychology, physics, and literary and cultural studies to foreground laughter as always already a strangely ambivalent mode of translation, one that breaks with an Cartesian division of body and mind. Is laughter possible to translate? What does it say? Where does it come from? But always laughter is deeply citational in its echoes, repetitions, refrains.

4. Even earlier, in 1946, when he was practicing yoga and organizing his principles for "Method of Meditation" Bataille wrote: "If I wish it, to *laugh* is to think, but this is a sovereign moment" (2001; italics in original).

5. See Benjamin [1921] 1996.

6. Anca Parvulescu concludes her introduction to *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* with a brief mention of this quote, as a reminder that laughter is never only joy but also terror. As laughter reiterates so it also incites citation and association. We become involved in these moments of the ecstatic trapped in the quotidian (Eliot is describing an interruption in an otherwise seemingly dull dinner date). Laughter's pleasure is always singed with violence.

Taking Bataille at his word, I begin again from experience. Here laughter and its many repetitions force a more promiscuous critical encounter with writing as laughing as dancing.<sup>7</sup> Entering the theater was my only initiation to this improvised action; dissembling spectator relations there would be no audience only participants in this one-hour performance of laughter. Laughing, coughing, smiling, doubled over, sweating, red faced, embarrassed, I awkwardly wander across the space. Part of the *Politics of Ecstasy/Altered States of Presence*<sup>8</sup> festival held at the Hebbel Theater (Hebbel am Ufer) in Berlin in January 2009, *A Single Action: Laughing* offers a provocative experiment of laughter as durational gesture through what choreographer Meg Stuart described as a “risky blissful experiment” of laughing together (Stuart 2009). Yet her joyful promise of laughing on an empty stage for one hour dissolves into a chaotic and excruciating event as we attempt to make each other laugh and then pull away. Tentative connections form as we test different forms of intimacy—tumbling, spinning, kissing, jumping, spilling water, crawling, undressing—touching and then recoiling out of exhaustion or confusion. Here the risk of ecstatic involvement requires an undoing of usual patterns of physicality and language. Entering this messy, sweaty experiment is sometimes an illuminating escape—momentary glimpses of community formed as friends collide with strangers—and more often unsettling as physical duress transforms into emotional betrayals.

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7. Bataille was often accused of promiscuity, most blatantly by Jean-Paul Sartre, but for my purposes, I’m intrigued by Bataille’s programmatic promiscuity that resists differentiation between life and thinking, particularly in regard to the process of non-knowledge. In his opening statements for his lecture “Consequences of Nonknowledge,” he apologizes for bringing anecdotes from the previous evening’s conversation at the local bar to the lecture hall, thus admitting to “the embarrassment of beginning” (Bataille [1951] 2001a, 111). Let us continue.

8. *Politics of Ecstasy/Altered States of Presence* was curated by Jeremy Wade and Eike Wittrock in collaboration with Pirkko Husemann as the sixth edition of the CONTEXT-Festival at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin, January 23–31, 2009. Oscillating between religious fervor and sensual force, the artists, lecturers, and curators sought to develop a new language of experience, of identity, and perhaps of politics, while simultaneously calling attention to language’s limitations. The ten-day festival of performance, music, film, lectures, and food aspired to an experiential intensification, which the curators described as a “magnification of perception [through] . . . trance, somatic exploration, intoxication, improvisation, club culture and ecstatic prayer” (Wade and Wittrock 2009). Artists and lecturers included DD Dorvillier, Miguel Gutierrez, Jeremy Wade, Ron Athey, Vaginal Davis, Reggie Wilson, Yasmeen Godder, Meg Stuart, Gabrielle Brandstetter, and myself, among others.

Bodies are thrown against each other, becoming projectiles conflating sensual and spiritual, aesthetic and erotic; my own conflicted participation evidenced in interior contractions as exterior encounters became less felicitous. One woman lies on the ground: her mouth open, eyes squeezed shut, sweat dripping off her face. Her mouth becomes vanishing point; a dark hole emitting joyful and toxic expulsions that animate her entire body and resonate against the nearby bodies. To be saturated by laughter and strange paroxysms of utterance feels more risky than blissful; the experience oscillates between a compulsion toward laughter and a resistance or wariness of being caught up in it. I feel something almost gravitational as laughter swoops through the crowd and instigates other acts. During some moments I require a narrative, an inner dialogue reminding myself of what makes me laugh, then laughing takes over my body, crying smiling gasping exhausting writhing, waves of pleasure and melancholy and excitement and curious confusion again and again. Then my dependence on narrative subsides, subdued in the tremulous shaking all around me. Laughing ceases to be a conceptual exercise and moves into a physical drive, a constant relay among concept, artifice, story, and gesture. This is perhaps laughter's theoretical and agonistic force—through excessive repetition, utterance and gesture contract in a precariously intense economy.

Laughter writes body as gesture and as language. In this intertwining, a surprising discourse on laughter (like laughter itself) contagiously spreads across theories of language, of violence, of the sublime, of gesture, to name just a few. Perhaps initially these connections seem almost accidental, but then not at all. When laughter speaks its words are doing something explicitly performative, yet it is not what J. L. Austin seemed to have in mind. Or perhaps it is one of the many things written into the peripheries of his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Translated from his notes and those of his students, a score for the lecturer's body in effect, the lectures record an elliptical series of possibilities of what a performative utterance might do or be. As he describes in the last minutes or final pages: "(1) producing a program, that is, saying what ought to be done rather than doing something; (2) lecturing" (Austin [1955] 1962, 164).<sup>9</sup> It is as if he is reminding us that

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9. In an interview with Joan Richardson for *Bookforum*, Stanley Cavell speaks of Austin's program as also influenced by his work decoding military propaganda for British Intelligence in World War II, where Austin came to see philosophy as parallel to propaganda; accordingly his style of lectures and his program worked to disrupt these models (Cavell 2010). And this is perhaps part

we are reading as listening and so must go back through the text to listen attentively for utterances as well. This close listening will also reveal quiet laughter along the edges of his arguments, in the moments when his language becomes confused or he turns to puns and jokes to undercut what it is he is saying. In these moments, laughter reveals the fault lines of the linguistic performatives in Austin's writing, which later appear as an "excess of utterance" in Shoshana Felman's meditation on Austin through the literary figure of Don Juan in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*<sup>10</sup> (Felman [1980] 2003, 80). Drawing on the writings of Baudelaire and Freud, Felman marks the interruption of laughter in Austin's text as shifting moments marking a "disparity of levels between theory and humor, between meaning and pleasure" (84). Laughter points not only to the asymmetrical shifting between these disparate qualities as thought meets body, as comedy meets tragedy, as Baudelaire meets Freud meets Austin, but also to our own complicity in the reading and response to these stumbles across uneven (theoretical, linguistic, psychoanalytic) grounds. Or as Freud would like to prescribe: "laughter arises if a quota of psychical energy . . . [requires] free discharge" (Freud [1905] 1960, 180). In Freud's analysis, it is required that only the witness of the joke laughs (laughter on the part of the teller of the joke would ruin the joke and thus the work of release). Yet in Felman's exegesis laughter not only offers a release from various kinds of tension but also more promiscuously participates in disrupting the differentiations between listener and speaker, between language and symptom, between psychoanalysis and linguistics, between pleasure taken in humor and the pleasure experienced in

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of what Cavell describes as the impulse behind Austin's desire to uncover "philosophy's own scandal" as he writes in the foreword to Shoshana Felman's seductive mediation on Austin. A seduction he shares with Felman (Cavell in Felman [1980] 2003, xi). Yet again, the specter of war is undoing the ways we might speak, write, think.

10. The original title *Le Scandale du corps parlant* was altered in the 1983 English translation to *The Literary Speech Act*, which loses and "regains its body" as Judith Butler notes in her "Afterword" to the 2003 publication. An attention to the return not only of the body, but also of seductive citation and pleasure on the opening pages seems perhaps not simply a coincidental nod to Felman's own attention to the humorous pleasure that Austin takes in his own titles. And here coincidences are not just aleatory events, they are also ciphers of unconscious logic that perhaps (I propose) link to the allusive fires and mis-fires accompanying the multiple translations and publications of Felman's own work ([1980] 2003, 59). She points out three titles of different works by Austin—*How to Do Things with Words*; *A Plea for Excuses*; *Three Ways of Spilling Ink*—that act not only as punning innuendos, but also as ruptures in expectation and delivery, harbingers of the attendant pleasures in his economy of knowledge and its uncertain production.

desire. The pleasure in her text and in Austin's is not only that of humorous play with the possibilities of language, its felicitous and infelicitous relations to meaning and knowledge production, but also a more explicit negotiation of an erotics of knowledge through the repeated failures inherent in the notion of performative acts themselves. Laughter, she writes, is not only pleasurable but also "convulsive and brutal" (Felman [1980] 2003, 84). And thus, for Felman, Austin figures as Don Juan in his pedagogical perpetuation of scandal—a scandal of speech made bodily that speaks (and writes) against the logic of the constative and its philosophic assumptions (86); a difficult labor attempting to articulate a different economy of language, of pleasure, and of desire. Laughter participates in this sonorous scandal as testimony to the uncertainties attendant to pleasure and desire that often catch us unaware. Laughter contains excessive slippery motion and emotion illuminating the irruptive relationship of the performative to referentiality (84). Thus the choreographic scandal of the performative lies in its inherent multiple failures. Laughter gives rise to the limits of what gesture as language or language as gesture might mean and what it might do. Again Bataille reminds me that the problem posed by laughter to philosophy is one of repetitive failure;<sup>11</sup> laughter incites endless theories that can only miss the very act of laughing (Bataille [1953] 2001, 134). The perverse seduction of laughter and language is that to speak of it is to miss the very experience it undoes, similar perhaps to Bataille's thinking of death, an experience that we can know nothing of until we are in fact dead, an act rendering any knowledge impotent or so we project.<sup>12</sup>

In her eloquent meditation *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*,<sup>13</sup> Anca Parvulescu imagines her own "limited and fragile archive of laughter" that continues Bataille's

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11. I imagine that Austin and Bataille might seem strange bedfellows, yet it bears pointing out that for both the proximity to and involvement in World War II marked an explicit shift in the ways each wrote and thought about philosophy. Violence forced an undoing of precedent and meaning.

12. Bataille will explain that in his comments about death, he collapses the death of thought and actual death, a problem that his interlocutor, Jean Wahl, calls attention to. And yet, he persists even while he admits that he is wrong to pursue this dialectic (Bataille [1951] 2001c, 124).

13. Parvulescu takes laughter as a hermeneutic to trace the conditions of race, feminism, philosophy, and cinema across the twentieth century and finds, particularly in the chapters on Bataille and Hélène Cixous, a compelling way to unthink community even as she imagines another community of laughers. Attending to Bataille's laughter returns us to Hegel while also opening to Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy as so many interlocutors of laughing philosophically.

interrogation of laughter as insurrection toward community, one in which laughter is simultaneously transgressive act and subject, “an opening in which self unfolds” as part of an antiphonal community of laughers and listeners (Parvulescu 2010, 5, 3). Importantly, this concept of community, like the discourse of laughter it bursts from, always renders a “perverse intimacy” as it repeats and echoes again and again (80). Perhaps in this way laughter as community escapes the traps of a sterile contract and instead comes closer to communication (89). And yet, laughter will always be a trembling, shaking, passionate, strange communication: a paradoxical mode that like language, as Slavoj Žižek writes, “the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition” also “involves unconditional violence” (2008, 65). So how might we negotiate a choreographic laughter on these terms, or what might an ethics of laughter look like, especially when we are not laughing alone?<sup>14</sup>

### Stumbling

SHIT HERE . . . DESERT FLIGHT . . . DEADLINE . . . CLEAN LAUGHING . . . BRUTAL HELP  
. . . MUM'S DETENTION . . . BRUTAL MEMORY . . . MISSING BODY . . . TERROR  
CAMPAIGN . . . BRUTALLY STILL . . . MISSING CONTEXT . . . YOUR'RE DISTURBING . . .  
OVER 40'S MUM . . . ANONYMOUS DEATH . . . DRINKING HOLE . . . JUST ALIENS . . .  
STILL LAUGHING . . .—La Ribot, *Laughing Hole*

Laughter is a spasm—a movement of thought and of body, a trespassing between utterance and gesture, a pollutant of contained subjectivity—a dialectical force that reveals interior externalized in facial distortion and sonic relay as a critical choreographic strategy. When extended in duration, laughter becomes unstable in its form and signification. As witnessed in *Laughing Hole* (2006)<sup>15</sup> by Spanish choreographer La Ribot, laughter is simultaneously utterance and gesture, a material and linguistic outburst, out of context and unbounded by comic narrative

14. In “Laughter, Presence,” Jean-Luc Nancy asks if “there is a laugh of aesthetics” (Nancy [1988] 1993, 371).

15. *Laughing Hole* premiered on June 12, 2006, at Art Unlimited at Art Basel 37, Switzerland, produced by Galeria Soledad Lorezeno, Madrid, Spain. Written and directed by La Ribot; performed by La Ribot, Marie-Caroline Hominal, and Delphine Rosay; sound design and performance by Clive Jenkins.

or humorous intent (figure 2.1). Over the course of four to eight hours, three women dressed in loose housecoats, flip-flops, sometimes kneepads, and bracelets of packing tape wander across an art gallery floor covered with 900 pieces of cardboard. Their task for the duration is to move the cardboard pieces from the floor to the wall while laughing. Crouching down, one dancer pauses, holding the card for the audience to read the two words written on one side: *DIE THERE* or *HELPING IMPOTENCE* or *STILL WAR* or *REMAIN ILLEGALLY* or *FEED TERROR*. The two words image a descriptive, but also an imperative. Language becomes a force, a deluge of images and associations. La Ribot rises and tapes another card onto the wall as the other dancer throws herself to the ground or stumbles on loose terrain. These movements become the refrain of the piece; each sequence prompts another approach to a different card held and displayed for reading.

Laughter echoes across the interstices of choreography and criticality, unsettling languages of physicality and of semantics. In a sense, La Ribot literally takes on and then amplifies this scenario in *Laughing Hole* as laughter signals the moment of language's failure. The floor is no longer a smooth surface for dancing on; it has been cut up or perhaps was never smooth at all,<sup>16</sup> but always already a myriad of scattered piles that must be returned to the wall. Lying on the floor, La Ribot displays another card: *KILLING OPERATION* another *GAZA STRIP* another *GUANTANAMO BEACH* another *DEAD LINE* another *FEED OCCUPATION* another *JUST SALES* another *DESERT FLIGHT* another *ME FALLING*. Language accumulates as the dancers move through the space, picking up one card, pausing, posing with it, cradling it, displaying it, revealing the illicit secret scrawled on the back, laughing throughout. Sometimes their laughter is slight or murmured, sometimes hysterical, cacophonous. Throughout the performance, their laughter is recorded and played back, conjuring an uncanny ghosting of sound and stumble. Laughter disturbs their labor, interrupting the placement of the cards on the wall, tripping them up as they fall; or perhaps it is their labor that disturbs laughter. The careful and almost tedious repetition of moving and fixing these signs reveals

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16. Speaking in a post-performance talk at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, choreographer Faustin Linyekula reminds us: "[To perform] in the Congo is about clearing a space of rubble and not only physical rubble. Then the colonial heritage of the proscenium theater is a blessing. The possibility of clearing space here [MoMA] is the opposite. The space is cleared already. . . . Oh no, even in the white box you have rubble. I come in with my own obsessions and build from there . . . invent them. . . . The work is the same story over and over" (2012).



2.1 La Ribot, *Laughing Hole*, 2006. Photograph by Anne Maniglier.

laughter as less about comedy or humor, but more darkly about impotence, anxiety; laughter is a physical-linguistic utterance that performs the affective overwhelming condemnation of the words covering the walls and floor.

La Ribot's refrain—selecting, displaying, sliding, falling, pausing, attaching—conflates crucial gestures from her earlier works: performances that included taping of objects to the wall and performances that included cardboard as object and terrain. Describing the function of cardboard in her work, André Lepecki writes of its almost Proustian affects, an olfactory madeleine of sorts: “Smell blurred straight

lines and folded flat planes; it vaporized the rigid striation of the grid. Smell performed the distension of the horizontal and the vertical planes into so many obliques, folds, and curves" (Lepecki 2006, 81). As he sits along the periphery of the gallery witnessing La Ribot's *Panoramix* (2004)<sup>17</sup> performed on a gallery floor covered with cardboard, Lepecki remembers "a small square piece of cardboard [carried] . . . always parallel to the vertical plane of her body" from *Pieza Distinguida #2 (Fatelo Con Me [Do It with Me], distinguished proprietor Daikin Air Conditioners, Madrid)* (1993) (82). He suggests that this small square of cardboard removed from the wall and walked through the gallery anticipates the cardboard floor in *Panoramix* or, if we extend it further, inverts the massive proliferation of cut-up pieces of cardboard piling up in *Laughing Hole* that are then taped (reapplied) to the gallery wall (82–84). The dramatic shift from the strict verticality of the first cardboard square to the flattened horizontality of endless sheets of cardboard in *Panoramix* performs, Lepecki argues, an unsettling of representational logic associated with visual art through a choreographic "toppling" that "privileg[es] aimlessness, meandering, drifting . . . [and] deterritorializes the striated, orthogonal space of the institutional gallery and turns it into a *dimension* both indeterminate and precarious" (Lepecki 2006, 77; italics in original). It is not only the presence of the cardboard that inspires these effects. However, cardboard is central to how La Ribot negotiates her interruption and displacement of choreographic and visual codes. When Lepecki returns again to the question of cardboard he laughs at the preposterous literality of taking the material so seriously.<sup>18</sup> And yet. Implicit in this choreographic toppling is also a critical stumble marked by an irruption of laughter: perhaps the philosopher's laugh anticipates the artist's laugh or perhaps it is the other way around.

The dense intertwining of laughter and language in *Laughing Hole* is difficult to traverse (physically, linguistically) and as the dancers stumble and fall, we as

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17. *Panoramix* is a "durational performance" within which La Ribot performs all of her *Piezas Distinguidas 1993–2003* (Distinguished Pieces) (Lepecki 2006, 76). The version Lepecki describes was performed in March 2003 at the Tate Modern, London.

18. Like the stumble, laughter unsettles Lepecki's critical approach: "The question is this: where did all that cardboard covering the huge areas of gallery floor come from? First we laugh at the question, as laugh we must with several of La Ribot's incredibly humorous *piezas*. But if after the laughter we stay with the literal question for one more second, we find out it is not at all an unreasonable one" (Lepecki 2006, 82).

spectators struggle to make sense of this vertiginous vibrating world that is filled with laughter, and yet, never funny. Laughter, or is it language, trips us up constantly manifesting its “contradictory” force as Charles Baudelaire describes it; laughter disfigures categorical or aesthetic distinctions, instead inciting a “perpetual explosion” between the superior and the insane, the grand and the miserable, the satanic and human (Baudelaire [1855] 2008, 153). These moments of contradiction are figured by a stumble. The stumble over cobblestones (over cardboard) is both the *mise-en-scène* inciting laughter in the spectator<sup>19</sup> and—for my purposes, more intriguing—the discursive gesture that unsettles language and writing.

In his intricate genealogy of gesture in *Social Choreography*, Andrew Hewitt juxtaposes the stumble to that of dance and argues that “dance fails as gesture through an inability either to begin or to complete the gesture, and it figures a linguistic play that neglects the work of semiotic closure” (Hewitt 2005, 83). For Hewitt, choreographic gesture takes on its social and political force through its interrogation of action. He asks how gesture and its falling out of action in the moment of spasm renders subjects within the social: Is this spasm an intentional disruption of the social, a mode of resistance? Or is it an unexpected somatic rupture conditioned by the very hegemonic forces that seek to control it?<sup>20</sup> The stumble, a staggering step toward an almost falling, figures the dissolution of perfect poise and intention; it reveals the unevenness of ontological, theoretical, and literal grounds. This choreographic event communicates a critical breaking point, signaling toward an impossible legibility—the moment when gestures become spastic, when bodily expression becomes undone and unreadable. Hewitt witnesses this in Giorgio Agamben’s alignment of gestural collapse with the naming of

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19. The scene of the stumble appears in Baudelaire’s text and also in the opening pages of Henri Bergson’s *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* as both a literal stumble and fall on the street and then as the “stumbling-block” that incites other kinds of laughter (Bergson [1900] 1999, 4–5).

20. Tracing the historical force of gesture and its undoing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the writings of Honoré de Balzac, Giorgio Agamben, Henri Bergson, and François Delsarte, to name the most oft-cited, Hewitt suggests that these spastic gestures intertwine aesthetic and social ideals at the moment of collapse. Against bourgeois fantasies of democratic grace, he focuses on the stumble as the gestural and critical undoing of these Enlightenment aspirations (Hewitt 2005, 79).

Tourette's syndrome, suggesting that "embodied communication [performs] a crisis of writing and intentionality (a loss of control of gesture) and of legibility (the gestures no longer 'mean' anything)" (83).<sup>21</sup> The spastic stumble figures a crisis, not only as a bodily residue of repressed emotions or history or as a meaning-less movement, but also as a supplementary excess of corporeality, a somatic disturbance of the social and the linguistic.

Stumbling joins laughter as a critical hermeneutic marking decisive intervals in Hewitt's gestural topography that image a body within social space stuttering at the edge of balance. Drawing attention to the stumble that incites laughter in Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Bergson [1900] 1999), Hewitt looks at the ways in which "immanent bodily community" forms when we laugh at the one who almost falls, repeating our laughter as another "form of sonic stumble" (Hewitt 2005, 99). The repetition and reiteration of writing of stumbling parallels the labor of laughter itself, which never appears as a singular act, but always as a multiplicity. As Bergson describes: "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something that would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings" (Bergson [1900] 1999, 3).

In this rare moment in his book, Bergson tunes into the vibrating sonic qualities of laughter as affective transmission to articulate its regulatory relationship to social space and communication. Bergson spends most of his treatise examining where laughter comes from, what incites our laughter, and why we laugh, but leaves aside an examination of laughter as gesture (sonic or anatomical) even though his definition of gesture sits within this laughter-filled text. Similar to Hewitt, Bergson is less interested in laughter as gesture itself, as anatomical distortion, but more compelled by its irruption within a social situation. And yet hidden near the end of *Laughter*, Bergson inserts very specific definitions of what gesture is: "By gestures we here mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching. Gesture, thus defined, is

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21. Here Hewitt is referring to Agamben's *Notes on Gesture* (1992) where he defines gesture in terms of dance.

profoundly different from action. Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic" (Bergson [1900] 1999, 129–130).

Bergson defines gesture through what it is not—motivated action. While gesture may be initiated only by an almost passive "inner itching," it still maintains an "explosive" potential to "awaken our sensibility" (Bergson [1900] 1999, 130). In this moment, the gestures Bergson refers to are those of comedy—"the attitudes, the movements and even the language" of the comedian attempting to incite laughter in the audience. Yet, if we transpose his theory of gesture from the comedian's repertoire to laughter itself, then laughter becomes something quite complicated and even contradictory as an expression of both an internal impulse and that which "slips out" without our prior approval. Laughter irrupts, entangling physicality and language.

While Bergson, Freud, and Austin return to the joke, to humor, as the instigator for laughter, I am less interested in the joke that incites laughter, but rather in the laugh itself. The laugh as gesture performs a specific kind of work that calls attention to the messy physical aspects of corporeal movement even when it is written, painted, or uttered, and undercuts any attempt at a clean theoretical articulation.<sup>22</sup> The laughter in *Laughing Hole* does not come from outside the piece. It is not an antiphonal response of the audience to the staggering, slipping dancers or to the litany of language, but it is gesture itself. It is laughter that critiques the function of laughter. This laughter is not an open invitation to laugh with or a complicit avowal of another's slips and stumbles that incites laughter in the onlooker. It seems to work against laughter as cathartic release described by Freud and parodies Bergson's description of laughter as a moral and aesthetic "corrective" (Bergson [1900] 1999, 22). For Bergson, laughter is a "*social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake . . . softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity" (176; italics in original). Laughter, specifically that incited by the comic, points to the

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22. Even in its representational form (I laugh on command) there is something about laughter that is infectious. Choreographer Antonia Baehr speaks of this contaminating and nomadic function of "laughing as laughing" that happens as "gestures wander possessing bodies on their paths," as witnessed in her performance *Rire (Laugh)* (2008) (Baehr 2008, 11, 6). Combining research on laughter in its various forms (yogic, comedic, personal, social, etc.) with scores given to her by friends for her birthday, Baehr developed *Rire* as a series of vignettes of her performing the scores. Within these scores, laughter acts as "a choreographic movement of emotion, as a material itself" (95). *Rire* is documented in *Rire/Laugh/Lachen* (Baehr 2008).

falling out of sociality or a becoming too mechanical, particularly the ways in which individuals stray from the human continuum that Bergson describes as a movement between “*tension* and *elasticity*” (22; italics in original), the ways in which we mold ourselves to fit within the evolving social structure. Laughter, for Bergson, is “social signification” (13) that stands outside the joke, against the stumble, highlighting the breaks or dissolutions of models of good, moral, upright living. *Laughing Hole* disassembles Bergson’s conception of laughter as “social signification” as it glaringly illuminates through shattering tones and eerie echoing whispers that we too are complicit, indicted, involved somehow within this massive horizontal accumulation of language.

### Seizure

Does laughter have an origin? A source or code? Or is laughter’s seizing of power, the victorious cavalcade of its multiplicity, all that exists? An initial bursting out and its unmitigated echo. Laughter is a shadowy creature which after millions of years still feels at home beneath the outer shell of the human being. There it resides and moves about as chemistry, as network, as fungus, sprouts tubers and shoots, grows into dendrites and veins, waxes and wanes. Limited by this underground existence, it makes its appearance through eruption, swelling through pores or cracks; it breaks out of its mantle, gushes, gallops, stumbles, rushes, hovers. Laughter spreads like gas, like language, infects, advances like a herd, an electrical current or like an oil spill or slime, then oozes away in retreat once again, evaporates, flees, submerges, goes back underground.—Stefan Pente, “Laughter. Minus-Laughter”

Laughter is the philosopher’s undoing; it leaves us writhing under the desk, rolling on the floor in ecstasy and anguish. Remember how unsettled Michel Foucault becomes in his Introduction to *Archaeology of Knowledge* when he hears Hegel’s laughter echoing through his own self-interlocution: “no, no, I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you?” (Foucault [1969] 1972, 17). This laughter appears just following Foucault’s own admission of the “stumbling manner of this text: at every turn, it stands back, measures up what is before it, gropes toward its limits, stumbles against what it does not mean” (17), indexing yet another

critical irruption of laughter in the mapping of a theory of language.<sup>23</sup> Foucault's words echo the choreographic quality of La Ribot's gestures, her constant struggle to move and make sense of the endless litany of inscriptions scattered across the floor, and simultaneously point to the self-reflexive questioning required of both his writing and her dancing/laughing in relation to the content of their performances. What they are both attempting to communicate (in distinct ways) demands a stumbling approach that participates in the decentering work of defining discourse (for Foucault) and defying discourse (for La Ribot). Remember for Foucault, discourse is an alternative to the writing of history and its condition is one of "traces" that like laughter requires an object that overflows and offers something more to attach itself too, something that is equally unstable such that in the process of signification of the object, its meaning and its relationship to the subject are suspended (107).<sup>24</sup>

This excessive instability becomes the ground and architecture for *Laughing Hole*. It is not that the words themselves represent statements, this would contradict both La Ribot's and Foucault's purpose, but rather what they do—hundreds of handwritten inscriptions about war, about torture, about economics, about family, about debt, about secrets, about politics, about love all performed while laughing—that hints at a different writing of history as a crucial undoing of its own descriptions, of its own monuments, moments, names, codes through association, and excess. *Laughing Hole* renders a messy convergence closer to the "neither hidden nor visible" (Foucault [1969] 1972, 109) facts of experience as MISSING SECRET overlaps HERE SOFT SELL ALIEN and CLEAN POLITICIAN obscures ECONOMIC making the second word unreadable or perhaps irrelevant. We are forced to read differently and listen to the distant silences.

Laughter repeats and reiterates; it is not singular but always a complicit multiplicity. It is a contagious refrain that "bursts," as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, the

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23. Parvulescu points to another seminal moment of laughter that opens Foucault's *The Order of Things* when he cites Borges and the laughter that laughs (2010, 13). Interestingly in both cases, it is not Foucault who is laughing but either Hegel or the text itself.

24. Drawing attention to a slightly different alignment between Foucault's concept of discourse and contemporary European choreographic practice, Mårten Spångberg explains: "dance has been occupied with the transformations of techniques into utterances, utilising different loosely organised grammatologies to propose extra-discursive topographies where the danced utterance takes place, it thus positioned itself outside the realm of the archive" (Spångberg 2002, 35).

expected boundaries of responsibility and of meaning. While Nancy's burst points to the spontaneous explosive quality of laughter, this bursting also speaks to laughter's force of interruptive disorganization when it is performed as a score. Even as a performed gesture (and when is it ever not performed?), laughter distorts and explodes, it contracts and disfigures body, voice, and utterance. I cannot simply read or scan La Ribot's cryptic ciphers of recent catastrophic events, wars, secrets, or quotidian facts, without also feeling the anxious pressure of laughter circulating and amplified through the gallery. One dancer opens her mouth slightly, drawing near, and a quiet subdued laugh escapes, her whisper of intimation. Moments later her mouth gapes open, a dark hole emitting a crashing moan more animal than language. These sounds and textures, simultaneously voice, timbre, language, tenor, and body, all signal the multiplicity of which Nancy writes that undoes representational logic and the hegemony of visuality associated with representation; this is an explicitly choreographic project. Undoing the categorical distinctions between senses he writes not only of a mouth that bursts, but the eyes too (Nancy [1988] 1993, 373). There is a correlation between the eyes and the mouth in *Laughing Hole* as well in the intensity of La Ribot's screaming laughter. Her laughing mouth becomes a black abyss, so open, so stretched that her eyes squint. In these moments I desire to avert my gaze, yet laughter pierces my closed eyes conjuring an ecstatic awareness that is violent and abject. Laughter surrounds me, infiltrating my senses, dissembling expected boundaries between artwork, wall, spectator. It is a sensuous undoing that like the "certain laugh" that inspires Nancy's meditation—a painted red mouth of a woman in a Baudelaire poem—moves from word to color to paint to sound to philosophical and choreographic provocation (392).

Laughter becomes an affective indictment. I feel it, hear it, tremble with it, so that even as I might think: these words are not mine, this is not my "killing operation, my missing secret, me falling" laughter unsettles any easy evasion of responsibility and intention. La Ribot's explicit intertwining of laughter and language and violence conjures an incredible potency that resonates, perhaps too strongly, with Žižek's discussion of the "gesture of what is called fetishistic disavowal" at the paradoxical heart, or shall we say laugh, of ethics. "I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know.' I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know" (Žižek 2008, 53). Like laughter, this gesture of disavowal, of forgetting,

stutters, requires Žižek to repeat his radical provocation that ethics requires forgetting, particularly along its extreme edges. We are complicit not only symbolically but structurally as well. Language, he writes, “pushes our desire beyond proper limits. . . . Reality in itself, in its stupid existence, is never intolerable: it is language, its symbolization, which makes it such” (65, 67). Then Žižek offers me an image of a rioting crowd, burning buildings, and asks me to remember their “placards” (67) and I cannot help but return to the relentless montage of signs that La Ribot trips on and then raises above her head as she slides down the wall in the final hour of *Laughing Hole*.

### Intoxication

Laughter bursts without presenting or representing its reasons or intentions. It bursts only in its own repetition. . . . The “burst” of laughter is not a single burst, a detached fragment, nor is it the essence<sup>25</sup> of a burst—it is the repetition of bursting—and the bursting of repetition. It is the multiplicity of meanings as multiplicity and not as meaning.—Jean-Luc Nancy, “Laughter, Presence”<sup>26</sup>

Nancy’s meditation on laughter’s insurrection extends his labor of ekphrasis; laughter acts as the hermeneutic for reading aesthetic theory in terms of erotics and desire, and conversely erotics becomes paradigmatic for a different articulation of aesthetics. Charles Baudelaire’s “The Desire to Paint” (1869) marks the point of departure of this meditation. Reading along the peripheries of the text (a poem but also prose together), Nancy exclaims: “it is along this edge that desire itself bursts into laughter” and later that “laughter might be the transformation of desire” (Nancy 1987, 721–722; 723). Laughter works on and against the limits of representation and presence, forcing a tremulous and vibratory negotiation that

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25. This nod to “essence” is perhaps a critique of Baudelaire’s essay on “On the Essence of Laughter,” one that Nancy claims in a footnote he will not deal with, yet it seeps in. Tricky as laughter is the rupture of the limit and so it too does its own work on Nancy’s writing.

26. Two very similar versions of this essay exist: “Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death” published in *MLN* (Nancy 1987); and “Laughter, Presence” in *The Birth to Presence* (Nancy [1988] 1993) from which this quote is drawn.

exceeds the rules of aesthetics and resists any terminal figuration. In Baudelaire's text laughter forces an alteric mode of reading and of writing, one that defines what Nancy names a new "erotico-esthetic program" (721). Nancy announces at the beginning of his article that "we" will read Baudelaire's poem together first in French and then in English translation. We read it twice and then again extended through Nancy's own close reading. Like laughter itself, Baudelaire's text returns and repeats throughout Nancy's, so that the sound and image of this particular woman who resists being painted constantly interrupts the discourse surrounding her. Baudelaire writes of the painter who not only desires to paint, but must keep painting, as he and Nancy must also keep writing; laughter's labor (like the work of desire) laughs endlessly. Listen:

Darkness in her abounds, and all that she inspires is nocturnal and profound. Her eyes are two caverns where mystery dimly glistens, and like a lightening flash, her glance illuminates: it is an explosion in the dark.

I have compared her to a black sun, if one can imagine a black star pouring out light and happiness. But she makes one think rather of the moon, which has surely marked her with its portentous influence; not the white moon of idylls which resembles a frigid bride, but the sinister and intoxicating moon that hangs deep in a stormy night, hurtled by the driven clouds; not the discreet and peaceful moon that visits pure men while they sleep, but the moon torn from the sky, the conquered and indignant moon that the Thessalian Witches cruelly compel to dance on the frightened grass!

That little forehead is inhabited by a tenacious will and a desire for prey. Yet, in the lower part of this disturbing countenance, with sensitive nostrils quivering for the unknown and the impossible, bursts, with inexpressible loveliness, a wide mouth, red and white and alluring, that makes one dream of the miracle of a superb flower blooming on volcanic soil. (Baudelaire in Nancy [1988] 1993, 369-370)

Laughter casts her face as landscape, as eruptive volcanic surface that displaces day for night; she incites a tempest calling the moon to earth to dance. Against these shadows, her laughter, feminized, illuminates painting as presence (not representation), reiterating the endless desire to paint her "disappearance or of her disappearing" (Nancy [1988] 1993, 379). Similar to dance, which must often contend with the accusation of its own disappearance, laughter reveals the failure of representation to capture the appearance of the fleeing subject. Yet, laughter is not

beholden to either presence or disappearance, but imagines another economy, an “offering of a presence in its own disappearance” (383). And isn’t this a deeply choreographic proposal, to seek an impossible beauty, an unreachable limit, gorgeous and difficult as a black intoxicating sun bursting from barren burnt ground? This resistance to representation resides in the force of her laughing mouth and like H el ene Cixous’s Medusa we must not only look at her, but listen very closely as well. As Nancy explicates: “This is why laughter itself remains mysterious. It knows with a knowledge that not only remains hidden but is this very knowledge precisely in its own hiding. It shows itself as its hidden-ness. Laughter reveals that it comes from the hidden place, which it keeps hidden. The glance illuminates its own darkness as darkness, and this is laughter” (Nancy 1987, 724).

Knowledge arising from the woman’s red lips resists any easy replication to reveal something secret, explosive, beautiful, annihilating. Reading Baudelaire through Nancy we move from laughter into desire, a movement from stumbling to bursting, that seeks an extremity of experience at the limits of presence—the presence of laughter and the presence of death. Laughter laughs, Nancy repeats, conjuring its own sublime, dare we say rapturous, entr ee into knowledge that resonates along the limits of sensation and of language. Part of the impulse driving Nancy’s text is a movement toward an aesthetic economy not tethered to theories of visibility, verisimilitude, or beauty. Instead, he describes an obscure desiring economy, “illuminated” by a dark glow that might only be approached through an uneasy acknowledgment of our own messy desires. But is it not strange that these peregrinations on laughter emanating from a woman’s mouth, from her uncontained desire, appear along the edges of the grotesque, too much, cruel and delicious, witch or whore? It is another perversion that Cixous responds to when she calls out to Medusa, shatters her stone, listens to her laugh, thus perpetuating a scandal of another sort.<sup>27</sup>

Laughter is of the body and of the voice, yet it is explicitly of language, a strangled or unwieldy utterance that interrupts semantic and syntactic structures through gestural force. Laughter performs as disfunctioning supplement, an

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27. Parvulescu reminds me in her close reading of Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa” that under the influence of laughter, language becomes “old sclerotic words,” a phrase she borrows from Nathalie Sarraute’s novel *Do You Hear Them?* ([1972] 2004, 116). The citations and affiliations proliferate as we continue to move between writing and living, laughing and laughing, around and around again.

utterance of voice and of body that intimately intertwines physical and linguistic in the moment of its undoing; a choreographic maneuver distorting the very grounds from which I might try to think language, to engage its physicality and bodily force. It is a scandalous gesture that undermines philosophies of language and theories of gesture. *Laughter is language becoming choreographic*: a vibratory syncopation. It trembles as gesture and utterance combine in an undoing of linguistic signification. Laughter writes differently; it is an “*insurgent*” writing and a choreographic text (Cixous [1975] 1976, 880). As Cixous instructs us: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). Medusa laughs, not in the self-conscious way of someone made uncomfortable, not in a mockery of social censor, but as a critical gesture, a gesture that revels in her beauty and intelligence that cannot be constrained by the laws of choreography or of time. Her laughter incites writing and discourse, transgressing physical and intellectual, syntax and semantics. Laughter is central to Cixous’s writing as it locates the site of writing as the site of the body, not only a body hunched at a desk staring into a computer,<sup>28</sup> but also a body gripped by emotion and urgency to move and to speak. Language becomes gesture that is simultaneously pleasurable and painful, ecstatic and full of grief, figuring desire in all its beauty and abjection as her mouth opens to reveal a dark throat. Such embodied writing must attempt a sonic corporeality even if it is not intelligible as it externalizes an interior demand. As Cixous instructs:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. . . . When I write, it’s everything that we don’t know we can be that is written out of me, without

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28. During a *Conversation without Walls* event at Danspace Project, Avital Ronnel reminded me of the positions that writing takes in and through philosophy—not only sitting, but also walking, vomiting, turning, dancing: “I’ve often been concerned by the kind of immobilized choreography of the pedagogical situation with the docile bodies that were more or less referred to the kind of broken transference that is already indicated by the positions that people take and all sort of contracts that are implicitly drawn among those who sit and write. . . . That’s already choreographically decided, the one who takes that seat and enthrones oneself is traversed by language to be sure [they are] already materially designated as the driver of thought in a certain way, assuming they’re not too drunk in their steering” (Ronell 2011).

exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. (Cixous [1976] 1980, 245, 264)

Writing, Cixous reminds me again and again in her essay, must not only be written but lived. Write, she implores with a fierce urgency: "Writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous [1976] 1980, 249). And when we write, our text will be a counter-writing, insurrection and anticipatory knowledge that returns us to our bodies, our desires, our territories: "erotogeneity of the heterogeneous: airborne swimmer, in flight, she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous" (260). Cixous is fierce; her text, a crescendo rising from ocean, to astral skies, challenges the ways that history has been written and announces another coming to knowledge. Not coming exactly, a word Bataille and Nancy and Jacques Derrida<sup>29</sup> deploy, but rather an "un-thinking" (*dé-pense*, from *penser*, to un-think but also to spend) (252). Her writing as provocation incites another economy and so Medusa's laugh leads us explicitly to the question of desire.

### Insurrection: Laughter to Desire

with you  
or alone  
no  
languages  
only  
grunts  
moans  
murmurs  
chattering teeth

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29. Jacques Derrida notes that Nancy's exposé on laughter is not only contracting but also "coming," and so for Bataille, Nancy, and Derrida the proximity of death to laughter is not only the death of thought, of body, but another little death as well (Derrida [2000] 2005, 118). It is a death that Cixous will not remain beholden to theoretically or otherwise; she wants to go further, not just "take the edge off," she writes ([1976] 1980, 247).

shuffling  
only sounds  
no languages  
with meanings  
no words  
or signifying gestures  
no  
languages  
...  
no languages  
just  
you  
me  
sounds  
of bodies without  
bodies  
sounds  
with barely body  
hearing  
before sound  
invisible  
inaudible after  
no  
languages  
no  
only  
what  
is

only—DD Dorvillier, *Choreography, a Prologue for the Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!*<sup>30</sup>

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30. DD Dorvillier/human future dance corps presented *Choreography, a Prologue for the Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!* at Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY, in January 2009. *CPAU, Get Ready!* was directed by Dorvillier and created in collaboration with performers Heather Kravas, Amanda Piña, Joaquín Pujol, Elizabeth Ward; composer Zeena Parkins; lighting designer Thomas Dunn.

Apparitions projected in the dark theater: the words emerge slowly at first and then in alternating rhythms: *with you or alone no languages only grunts moans murmurs*. . . . Each word takes its own time to appear: *me pause sounds pause* and then black screen *of bodies without pause bodies pause* then black screen. . . . I read in silence until interrupted by a single tone played by Zeena Parkins off to the side of the stage. *unnameable pause sounds* then a chord resonates *only pause grunts*. . . . The video-text (included above as epigraph) continues until the screen is consumed with a strange proliferation of mushrooms and goes black as bells, harps, and dissonant tones fill the space. Dorvillier's text renders a paradoxical dramaturgy along the peripheries of language—as murmuring shuffling words push language toward its debilitating point. The words intimate a desire to be outside of language, yet still must use language to convey this tension, performing an infelicitous partnering with meaning to reveal the fault lines between sensuous experience and the language we use to describe it, between the materiality of flesh and its linguistic counterpoint. It is as if the stutters conjured by Dorvillier's semantic partnerings attempt to elide the very terms they represent, instead slowly arousing the audience, stimulating our interest. These words act as foreplay for the piece; the timing of their advance is essential to cultivating a slower sensuous experience. This is not dance as virtuosic spectacle, but a seductive invitation, sexy awkward surprising. Dorvillier's negotiation of erotics and semantics, of language and gesture, of words and dance calls attention to the work of language as a choreographic force, and particularly to the labor of and toward desire as a process for rethinking what language and choreography might do together. Here choreography also confronts the historical imperatives of dance, such that Dorvillier's choreographic provocation is not only performed by the dancers on stage but also in the silent hesitations, stillness, sonic interruptions, questions, sculptural assemblages, saturated colors, patterns of light.

*Choreography, a Prologue for the Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!* (2009) intimately plays the in-between of choreography and language, communication and desire, or as Cixous reiterates “work[s] (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live” ([1976] 1980, 254). There is something of the relation between laughter and desire that evokes this same and other, and always the *in* in-between that Cixous intuits. Perhaps if we hold these modalities—choreography, language, communication—together we might begin to understand the disfiguring complexities, agonies, and

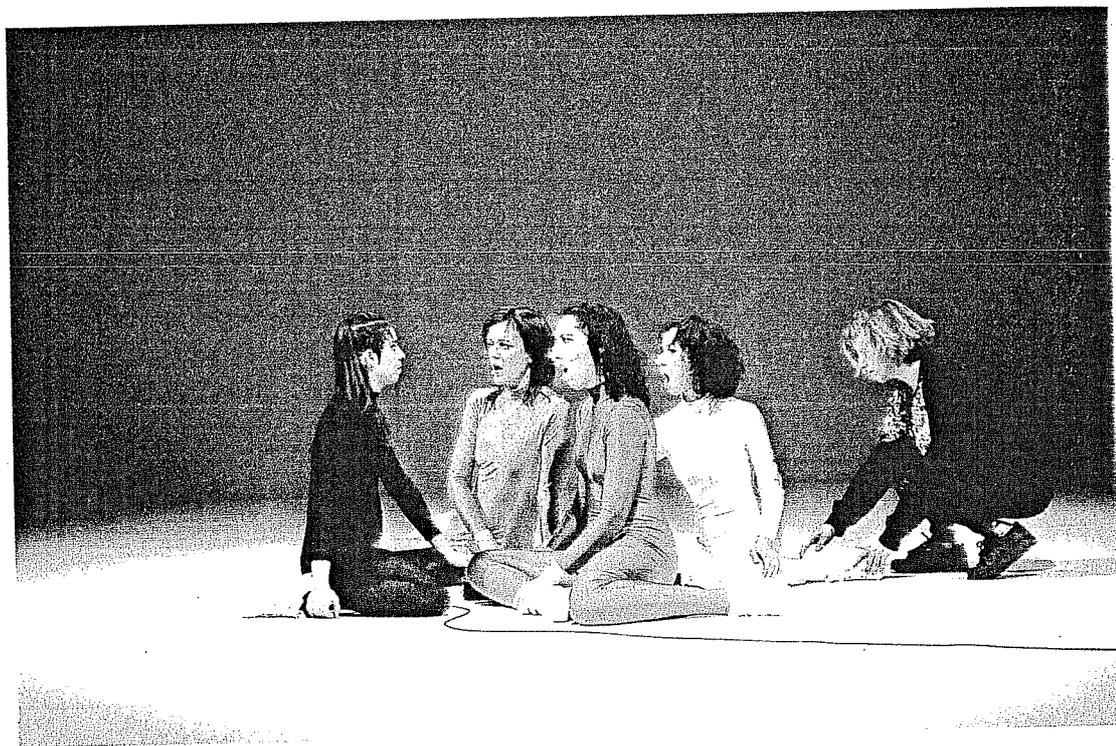
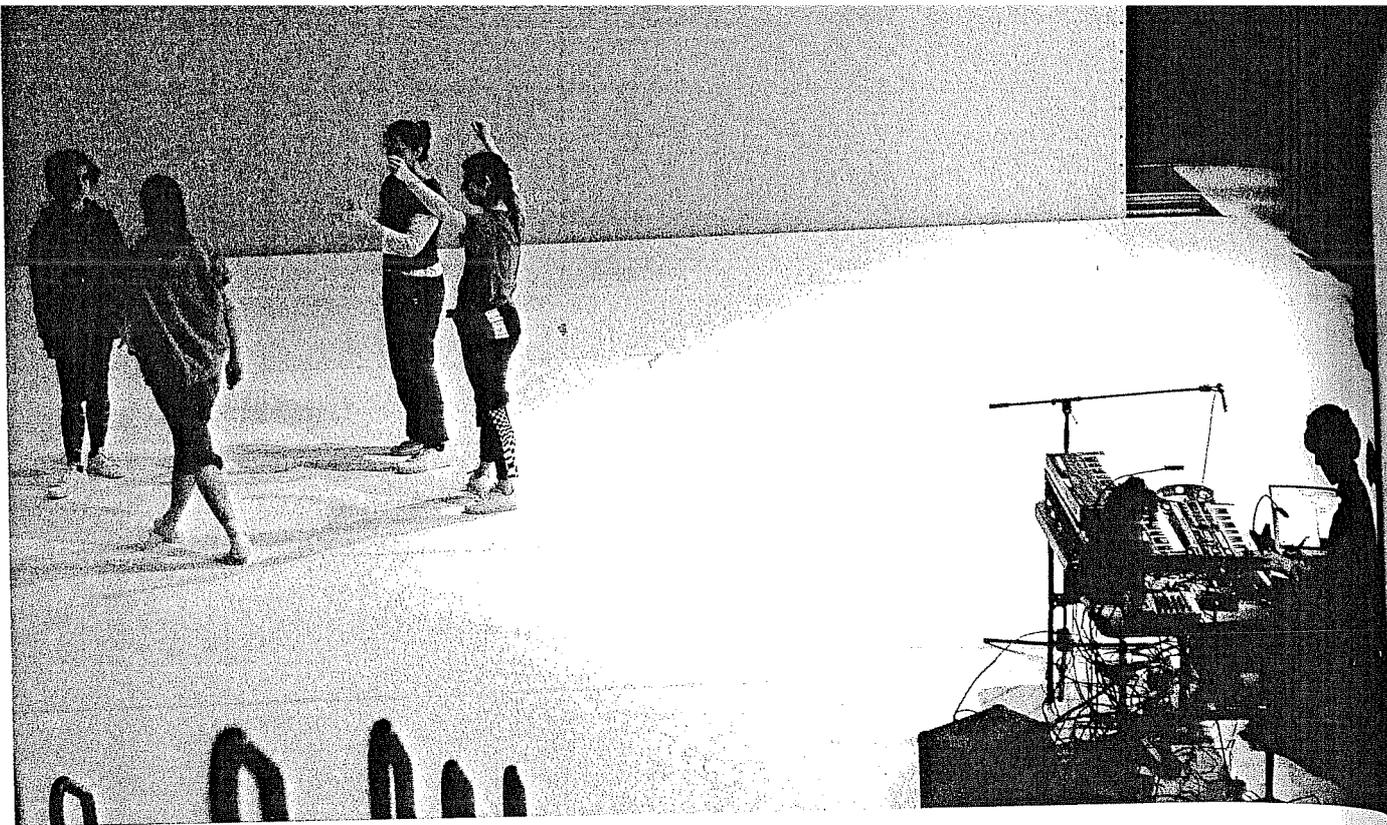
pleasures of laughter and desire. So now as we dance with Dorvillier deeper into the realms of desire coming undone in language or language coming undone in dance in desire, these many transmissions imagine a choreographic as something else, a different temporality and spacing (figures 2.2-2.3).

The pas de deux continues as Dorvillier and Joaquím Pujol lie on the ground in sweatshirts revealing sections of their backs to the audience framed by black microphone cords.<sup>31</sup> Slowly sitting up, still facing away from the audience, Dorvillier howls faintly and then with more volume as her voice reverberates a strange emotional even animal cry. When she finally stands and turns to the audience and to Pujol, she asks: "Can you hear me? Can you see me?" This confusion of seeing and listening and feeling continues as she narrates her indecision and anxiety surrounding the making of the choreography while he translates her words into Spanish and responds with his own interpretative movements. Here the difficulty of creating a dance corresponds to the fragile seductions of courtship as Dorvillier and Pujol carefully move closer together and drift farther away, whispering into their microphones, startling us with admonitions as the microphone cords cross and uncross, coil and recoil. Their words enact a subtle dance, teasing questions along the surface as if trying to obscure the more complicated physical intimations happening in the gaps and silences between bodies and voices. This sensual relay informs the perceptual work of the piece as Dorvillier's choreography constantly reaches toward different modes of communication and of understanding not limited to linguistic structure and meaning. When I asked Dorvillier why language is so foregrounded in *CPAU, Get Ready!* she answered:

Language is the fault of a desire, whether conscious or not, for communication. I have an interest in the expansion of means of communication, and therefore in the expansion of language and of its definitions, as well as those means of communication that slip away from linguistically inscribed forms of cognition. . . . There's a kind of reactionary almost utopic, and I think quite funny, abdication of language, as an exclusive means of sharing knowledge and experience. Yet the video consists solely of words (language), inciting raw sound and movement,

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31. This scene resonates with Dorvillier's earlier work *No Change, or, "freedom is a psycho-kinetic skill"* (2005) in which Dorvillier and dancer Elizabeth Ward appear in the beginning slumped on the ground of the space that is traversed with microphone cords and stands and also draws on the partial reveal of bodies in poses from *Notthing is Importantttt* (2007).



2.2-2.3 DD Dorvillier, *Choreography, a Prologue for the Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!*, 2009. Photographs by David Bergé.



shuffling, and an absence of language as a truer means of reaching consciousness, or understanding together. I'm trying to tap into regions of cognition that function like music but are not music. (Dorvillier 2009a, 6)

This seduction with and suspicion of language extends from the piece, requiring a critical tuning not only to her intentions for the work but also to our dialogic duet as we work toward an elusive understanding together. As the title reminds me: this is a prologue, an opening, illuminating the perceptual and sensual forces of words surrounding not only meaning, but also their sonority. Within this phenomenal terrain, Dorvillier's choreographic gestures interrupt what she refers to as dancing's ontology of "inexhaustible movement" to instead illuminate the fatigue resulting from constantly (endlessly) dancing (2009a). As she explains, gestures function

like a signifying placeholder, a punctuation mark, or an image enacted in time and space. Gesture situates itself in the past, even if through repetition it somehow attempts to free itself from time. . . . I think what I'm attempting to do is to use gesture to bring about an exhaustion of an accepted understanding of dance, and also of an accepted understanding of cognition, knowledge, and artistic value. Eventually if gesture reads like language in my work, it speaks in tongues. (Dorvillier 2009a, 6)

To speak of choreography as the interruption of movement by gesture or as a play between gesture and movement also points to its dependence on systems of signification and their ideological force. Gesture has an aesthetic quality and yet it is also explicitly social and political. Dorvillier revels in this medial becoming quality of gesture as a choreographic strategy, playing with the excessive polyphonic affect of choreographic gesture as a means of rethinking language particularly as it approaches desire. Part Three amplifies this erotic entanglement of language and gesture through its structural design—an intricate score drawn over a photograph of the choreographer's naked body on an unmade bed framed with two words: CHOREOGRAPHY and UNDERSTANDING. Her body underlies a grid of coordinates as letters from CHOREOGRAPHY intersect with letters from UNDERSTANDING marking the horizontal and vertical axes and creating a set of points that will determine the sound and movement scores. The specific points—all the squares touching the edge of the choreographer's body—are then transposed to the dancers' bodies—knee, elbow, chin, lips, humerus—identifying how each will move and in which direction, with which velocity, and in what kind of kinesthetic relationship.

As Dorvillier explains: “a suite of movements could be translated from the following information: 1: (4R- 4E) escape diagonally 4 counts with eurhythmy letter ‘R,’ a vibrating horizontal right humerus . . . 3: (5E-5T) touch floor during 5 counts, maintaining body vertical, with eurhythmy letter ‘E’ while vibrating left radius and ulna” (Dorvillier 2009a, 7). Using a reproduction of the erotic body of the choreographer framed by text as the source of sound and movement material, Dorvillier constructs a very specific structural constellation that activates a multiplicity of “cross-perceptions” transposing letters and sounds and gestures and anatomies (7). Because the grid is placed over a photograph, no square is empty as it is always filled with the background, the bed, the window, the wall. These spaces without body construct a spatial dramaturgy for the piece through the relational play of what she calls the “value”—particular gesture, movement, sound, position.

To perform Part Three the four dancers appear in single-color unitards and white sneakers: Dorvillier in cyan, Heather Kravas in yellow, Amanda Piña in magenta, and Elizabeth Ward in black. The colors of the unitards correspond to CMYK, the separation of colors used in printing—colors that Dorvillier describes as “incompatible and that is why they function to produce other colors” and blur between colors. The idea to use these colors also draws on her personal history of watching her parents’ printing press at work melding colors to create naturalistic images, in what she now recollects as a “physical transformation in the process of making text [and images] that is linked in my mind with the production of language, sense, and knowledge” (Dorvillier 2009a, 7). The four dancers begin seated around a keyboard. Then each dancer opens her mouth in a large “O” as her tone is played; again there is confusion among the values of sound, voice, instrument, and anatomy. Rising to stand in a line the dancers simultaneously execute sequences of gestures and movements invented from the values of the grid. Each gesture—arms circle in front of each dancer’s body, one arm stretches into a diagonal as head turns, arms swing to sides of body resting on hips, hands cross in front of chest then quickly circle and return to hips, hands paw in a circular motion—is accompanied by a sound, a different phoneme for each detail of the gesture. Watching I am reminded of the rigorous stylization of Merce Cunningham’s movement (and the unitards play off this as well), yet Dorvillier is less concerned with a virtuosic body performing (or falling apart under the gravity of) chance and more engaged in a structural saturation as color, gesture, light, and sound mingle and separate. In one section, one of the dancers will interrupt the

sequence and strike a pose; in this moment all the other dancers, lighting designer, and composer must focus only on this single color so that everyone is supporting Magenta, as an example. Alternating between stilled gestures and more frantic combinations of movement-gestures amplified by the shifting lights and sound score, the dancers at one moment appear as silhouettes and at another as frenetic figures barely in control of their simultaneous repetitions. Similar to the grid that inspired these combinations, there is a dense layering effect as the sound score of collaged rehearsal footage of the dancers speaking cuts over mechanical tones. Dorvillier runs across the stage with arms out, head shaking, as Ward stands convulsing on the front of the stage as Piña runs along the perimeter head shaking, arms crossing and uncrossing in front of her chest as Kravas traverses the center of the stage bending over and rising until she stands facing the back wall, arms out and circling as she undulates her hips and pelvis.

Difficult to watch and to narrate, Dorvillier's choreography invents a series of movement phrases, sonic sequences, lighting cues as a dense intramedial multisensorial event. Within this relational saturation each element struggles against its own limitations and gifts, disrupting use-value and function, so that we must always attempt an impossible translation across image and sound and movement and color and light simultaneously. Not simply synesthetic, Dorvillier's process approaches something closer to Clarice Lispector's revelation of music as means to clarify something of writing and reading: "You don't understand music: you hear it. So hear me with your whole body" (Lispector [1978] 2012, 4). In the instant of writing, Lispector forces a slippage of sense, a choreographic rupture of sorts that breaks from narrative and intention to embody something of consciousness or living. For Dorvillier, this consciousness also equates with a mode of embodied knowledge production. So when she explains that *CPAU, Get Ready!* is invested in "reaching consciousness, or understanding together . . . trying to tap into regions of cognition that function like music but are not music" (Dorvillier 2009a, 6), she points to an impossible series of transpositions that seek to undercut the primacy of linguistic and visual with the immersive intimacy of the sonic, exchanging semantics and syntax for tones, volumes, cadences, rhythms; other textures of experience all influenced by the sensuous body underlying the grid.<sup>32</sup>

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32. Dorvillier's attention to the sonic extends further in *Danza Permanante* (2012), a quartet for four dancers who each enact one instrument from Beethoven's *Opus 132 in A minor*. The dancers become sound through movement and timing, yet without sound creating what she calls

This grid generates points of contact between the two axes—choreography and understanding—all along the surface of a very specific body reclining on crumpled white sheets. This representation of the choreographer extends the possible erotogenous zones to the entire surface of the body and at each point a distinct sensation becomes visible. The transposition of this score to the dancers' bodies further disperses these zones as they now stand vibrating, shaking, trembling, seizing on stage. Dorvillier's labor activates very specific points in the body similar to laughter—diaphragm, sphincters, risorius, trapezius—yet is never contained by them.<sup>33</sup> The contractions, convulsions, and undulations incited by laughter's intensity and by Dorvillier's choreography embody (for a moment) the flows of desire as a means toward a mode of knowledge we don't yet understand, one that is tied to but not determined by language, or in which we must rely on the explicit failure of language to approach.

Dorvillier's choreographic proposal invites us to reconsider Bataille's processes of nonknowledge particularly when he speaks of nonknowledge as an inability to recognize oneself or other (Bataille [1953] 2001, 133). In this context, I hear Dorvillier asking Pujol: "Can you hear me? Can you see me?" even as she stands next to him on stage. Nonknowledge requires an intimate proximity even as it disorients, provoking anxiety at the uncertain and illegible tremors, whispers, laughs of a choreographic erotics. Bataille's and Dorvillier's disparate practices do not erase all previous experience, but rather disperse my/her/our knowledge into something else. In this strange temporality of laughter and of nonknowledge, pasts and presents collide in convulsive breath, awkward silences, gasps, groans, spasms undoing how we think, write, choreograph desire not only in its pleasurable moments but also in its crueler states.

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"visual music" (Dorvillier 2011). Again Lispector intercedes: "Beethoven is the stormy human elixir searching for divinity and only finding it in death. As for me, I've got nothing to do with music, I only arrive at the threshold of a new word. Without the courage to expose it" ([1978] 2012, 6). Neither Dorvillier nor Lispector, in her less self-effacing moments, lacks this courage; both arrive at other thresholds of dancing writing. *Danza Permanante* opened in New York City at The Kitchen on September 26, 2012. Created by Dorvillier; score transposed by Dorvillier and composer Zeena Parkins with dancers Fabian Barba, Nuno Bizarro, Walter Dundervill, and Naiara Mendioroz, and rehearsal assistant Heather Kravas. Lighting design by Thomas Dunn; acoustic environment by Zeena Parkins.

33. See diagram "Muscles activity during the laugh" included in Antonia Baehr's *Rire/Laugh/Lachen* (2008, 7).

## Darkness, Desire: Repeat

Dance . . . makes the negative body—the shameful body—radiantly absent.—Alain Badiou, “Dance as a Metaphor for Thought”

Cruelty is never far from pleasure or so Baudelaire’s taunting witches remind us, as does Gilles Deleuze when he writes of difference as the substance of repetition. That which (witch) is not the same is cruel, distinct; it is in repetition that we face this difference, again and again and again. Over and over and over, like laughter, repetition echoes and contracts. For Deleuze this moment of contraction, or rather this moment, this moment, this moment, reveals time as always out of joint (think Hamlet’s ghost) as past collapses into present signaling the future within an instant.<sup>34</sup> If Deleuze were to speak of ontologies, which he usually avoids, being would take the form of contraction or rather a series of accumulated contractions even “modifications” as its very condition of difference (Deleuze [1968] 1994, 79). Repetition reveals these differences constantly and thus works against repression and representation; it is both “a theft and a gift” (1). Establishing his distance from Sigmund Freud’s theory of repetition that restricts repetition to a compulsive drive to replay the experience of the identical, of pleasure without the possibility of fulfillment,<sup>35</sup> Deleuze celebrates the transgressive powers of repetition, its ability to

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34. Here Deleuze connects his thinking to that of Henri Bergson whose book *Matter and Memory* ([1908] 1991) argues for a concept of duration, of virtual experience, as a cone of suspended memories filtering to the point where it touches the plane of experience. Bergson also offers much to Deleuze, in this moment figuring an alternative to Freud’s concept of repetition aligned with repression and later as a model for cinema and thought as processes of accumulative becoming.

35. Freud develops his concept of repetition across much of his writing from his early essay “Screen Memories” ([1899] 2003) to “The Unconscious” (1915 [2000]) to find its apotheosis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ([1920] 1961). In this text repetition is linked to the death drive, as one of the boys he writes of exclaims to his startled mother: “go to the fwont,” “go to the fwont”; repetition as the process of disappearance and return is not only a child’s game but also a way to

“make something new” (6).<sup>36</sup> Dance acts as a movement of thought propelling his concept in multiple directions simultaneously, so that repetition “puts law into question” (3). When Deleuze chooses dancing over leaping, he sides (like Bataille) with Nietzsche to challenge the regimes of representation and the same through an attention to the forces of nature and history. Remember that choreography historically and etymologically arises during a meeting between a priest and a young lawyer who desired to dance; thus from its very inception choreography is beholden to laws of church and state.<sup>37</sup> Following Deleuze, repetition offers choreography a transgressive gift, stealing back its forces of paradox as freedom.<sup>38</sup>

Instead of how do you do say dig your own grave

Instead of flimsy excuses say devious nature

Instead of almost there say scantily clad

Instead of heart felt say fell flat

Instead of lost cause say high standards

Instead of buck up say ass-fucked

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process the conscious and unconscious effects of death and war to which we are never immune but must always turn to again and again ([1920] 1961, 15).

36. An example of this newness might be the unnamed animal Deleuze writes of in the midst of a discussion of “Repetition for Itself”: “An animal forms an eye for itself by causing scattered and diffuse luminous excitations to be reproduced on a privileged surface of its body” (Deleuze [1968] 1994, 96).

37. In *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (2006), Lepecki establishes a genealogy of choreography that begins when dancing and writing meet at the shared table of a lawyer and a ballet master in 1589. A “peculiar invention of early modernity, as a technology that creates a body disciplined to move according to the commands of writing. The first version of the word ‘choreography’ was coined. . . . *Orchesographie* by a Jesuit priest Thoinot Arbeau (literally, the writing, *graphie*, of the dance, *orchesis*)” (Lepecki 2006, 6-7).

38. One of Pina Bausch’s dancers, Ruth Amarante, speaks of a perhaps similar difference generated within repetition: “when we dancers repeat the movements at least we don’t stay the same person as when we started . . . these possibilities grow and accumulate on each other” (Amarante in Fernandes 2001, 30). Bausch was many things as a choreographer, among them a virtuoso of repetition as difference.

Instead of cold comfort say which way did they go partner  
Instead of wrongly accused say all that meat and no potatoes  
Instead of grave robber say bit part  
Instead of roll over say play dead  
Instead of beauty queen say black sheep  
Instead of fat chance say spare change  
Instead of shit or get off the pot say oopsy daisy  
Instead of pitch perfect say lost innocence  
Instead of say it isn't so say that's all she wrote  
Instead of blank check say credit check  
Instead of over say over and over and over and over ...

(Kravas 2011d)<sup>39</sup>

*Over and over and over ...* lights out. Spoken by the nine dancers standing at the edge of the stage wearing only one boot and holding their dresses in front of their now naked bodies, choreographic repetition achieves a fierce dissolution of narrative. This final section of Heather Kravas's *The Green Surround* stuns as much in its immediate proximity as its durational force contrasting the opening mise-en-scène of distance when the dancers stand silently staring from behind dark glasses, and wearing white kerchiefs and white dresses, as we enter. We wait as the sound texture thickens to a droning electronic atmosphere that reverberates in the small downstairs theater perfectly repainted with a white band across the center of the black walls. Finally the women remove their dark glasses and gather in the center of the stage, sound cuts to silence and they begin repeating: *boot lick boot lick boot lick boot lick boot lick lick boot lick boot lick boot lick boot lick boot. ...* while counting on

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39. *The Green Surround* premiered at Performance Space 122 in New York City, May 4-7, 2011. Choreography by Kravas; performance by Laurie Berg, Milka Djordjevich, Cecilia E., Carolyn Hall, Lyndsey Karr, Sarah Beth Percival, Liz Santoro, Antonietta Vicario, Elizabeth Ward; sound design by Vorhees aka Dana Wachs; lighting design by Madeline Best; costume design by Maria Garcia.

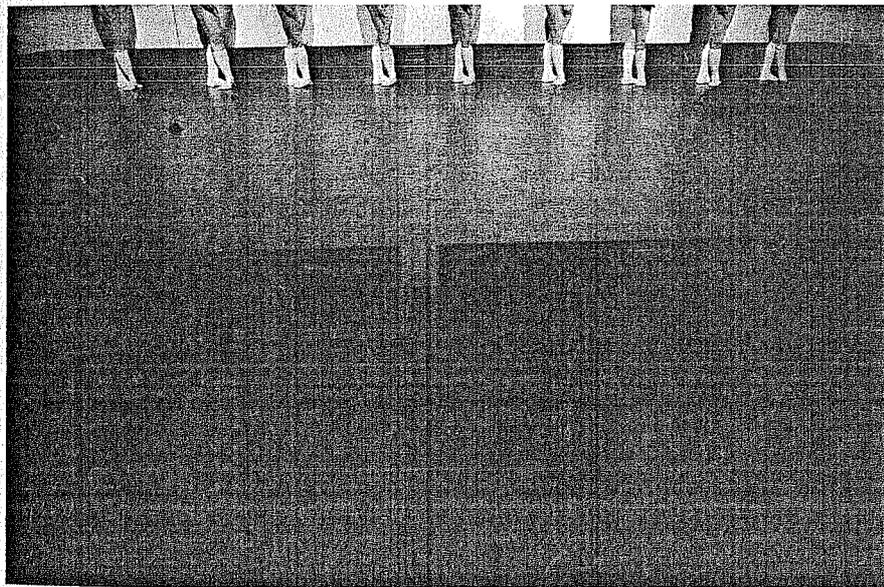
their fingers until a harp interrupts and they remove kerchiefs and dresses, pull on white knee socks, and walk in black leotards to the back wall as if in ballet barre class. Or rather it is ballet turned burlesque, as they execute exacting combinations of pliés, arabesques, and kicks, hips undulating, head rolling, ass toward the audience, then turn to face us again. In one moment the dancers all slide down the wall together, with their red painted mouths opened wide, and urinate in unison. Walking to the audience with their mouths still open they bend over as if to vomit and then rise, remove their socks, and pull on black tutus to begin another dancing sequence. As their movements accumulate and repeat and retrograde under dimming lights I am reminded of William Forsythe's *Duo* (1996)<sup>40</sup> performed by two dancers at the edge of the stage in black leotards, yet with transparent gauze revealing their breasts and the ever present conditions of erotic voyeurism. Yet Kravas's choreography takes a more aggressive approach to desire and subjection in its fierce challenge to the dancers who are always pushed to the edge of failure. Later they kneel in three rows with small bells in front and a metronome counting time as they repeat in various patterns *boo hoo hoo boo hoo hoo boo hoo hoo boo*. Each time a dancer misses a cue she rings her bell and they begin again. Of course, as Kravas admits they become very skilled at this game and she had to devise more complicated patterns during the performance run to mess them up (figures 2.4-2.6).

There are few moments when the dancers are not forced to perform in unison, one when Liz Santoro balances in an extended arabesque looking out the window and another when Antonietta Vicario pulls on black boots and stomps back and forth across the stage. As Vicario repeatedly jumps up then crashes onto the floor, the other dancers exit the stage while counting and we hear them faintly as they march up and down the exterior stairs. Vicario's movement is violent, angry, she is a punk rock vigilante alone in the space.<sup>41</sup> *The Green Surround* is a relentless choreography that strives for an almost fascist perfection that revels in a gorgeous abject labor of dancing, stealing traditional techniques and claiming them again in

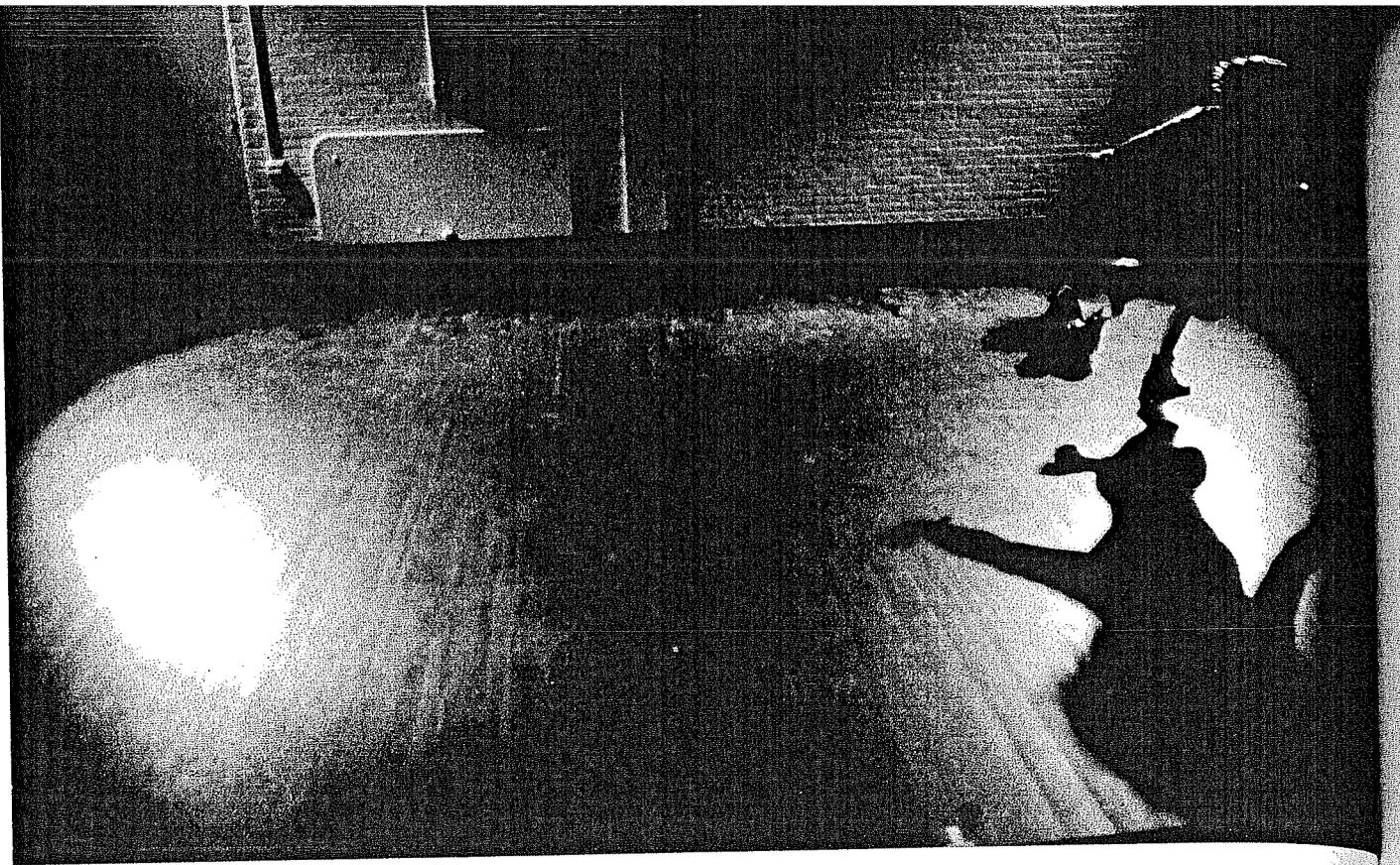
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40. I refer here to a performance of *Duo* I watched danced by Allison Brown and Jill Johnson of Ballet Frankfurt at Brooklyn Academy of Music in September 2003.

41. Her bent-over posture and swinging arms are reminiscent of the young men circling at the Minor Threat concert captured in Dan Graham's video *Minor Threat* (1983). And then I think too of the Melvins' *Bootlicker* (1999); there is in these punk moments another annihilating use of repetition as noise.



2.4-2.5 Heather Kravas, *The Green Surround*, 2011. Photographs by Ryan Jensen.



2.6 Heather Kravas, *The Green Surround*, 2011. Photograph by Ryan Jensen.

a difficult dark beauty. No longer will the ballerina remain mute, she will speak, she will dress and undress, on stage, and we will watch complicit.

In the solo that follows *The Green Surround*, Kravas makes the transgressive power of repetition even more explicit as she explains:

I'll work on a solo because I feel like I need to ask a pretty intimate question. Not even one that is necessarily something I can articulate. But, I need to go to a pretty internal place or I need to investigate something that is not as defined. I'll do that for maybe a year or two. Then there will come a point where all of the ideas and research, whether through a series of performances or something that's been kept more private, needs to be realized outside of myself. I need to see it. Generally, I consciously decide I want to step out and be more compositional about it. And, I like working in both ways and I hate working in both ways, too. (Kravas 2011b)

Dressed in a black Miu Miu cocktail dress and pink DG sneakers, Kravas stands with her hand on her hip, head tilting back as her eyes roll to almost white. Her face transforms from smile to grimace, quivering and distorted, as her amplified breath growls against the soundtrack of a catfight and howling and then silence. Painted in bright red lipstick, her mouth stretches open like a dark void emitting a silent prolonged scream. Spit slowly collects on her lips and falls onto her dress. She brushes it off and walks toward the altar of St. Mark's Church, approaching a large mirror on wheels that she pivots and rolls toward the audience. With each turn of the mirror a different section of the audience appears reflected on the surface. Placing the mirror at the edge of the audience, she stands facing it, removes her shoes and black lacy underwear, tapes up her dress above her waist with black gaffer's tape and stands in silent observation. Kneeling in front of the mirror her now bare ass and asshole facing the audience, she repetitively flexes her spine again and again and again accentuated by the loud syncopated braying of a donkey. Penetrating and penetrated—her virtuosic intensity and exquisite physicality render the velocity and violence of desire as her facial expressions morph with each repetition from what might appear as pleasure to pain to confusion to desire and on and on.

Kravas describes her solo *Kassidy Chism* that premiered at Danspace Project in October 2011 as the “underbelly” of her earlier group piece *The Green Surround* (2011a).<sup>42</sup> Shifting from an investigation of “perfection and precision” witnessed in the relentless repetitions of nine female dancers attempting and failing to execute various physical and linguistic tasks, Kravas’s solo focuses on “the grotesque and un-repeatable. Like all of my work, it will strive to illuminate a sort of hideous beauty. Luscious, wet, monstrous” (Kravas 2011a). While *Kassidy Chism* still relies on extreme repetition and precision in its choreography, Kravas risks more as she explores “the presence and physicalization of appetite and desire” alone on a mostly darkened stage. The piece takes its name and the opening sequence from hip hop phenomenon Kassidy Chism, age ten, as Kravas reenacts

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42. *Kassidy Chism* premiered at Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, October 6-8, 2011. Choreographed and performed by Kravas; sound by Preshish Moments; lighting design by Madeline Best.

Chism's fearless dance.<sup>43</sup> Trading Chism's off-shoulder white T-shirt revealing a pink tank top, baggy black sweatpants, and white sneakers for a couture dress, Kravas expertly performs the shaking hips, wagging fingers, crotch grabbing, ass pumping gestures of the younger dancer set instead to a barking dog sound score designed by Preshish Moments (Michael Carter). What appears as naïve sexy play in Chism's piece descends into erotized punk rock in Kravas's rendition. As Kravas dances with her wide open red-painted lips, the smiling emulations of a young girl playing with sexual identity or simply enjoying dancing without necessarily understanding the content in it as witnessed in Chism's version is overshadowed by the sexual implications always present in aspiring adolescent dancing yet not usually explicitly revealed. Or when revealed, the audience is not asked to be a complicit witness in the same ways that Kravas requires.<sup>44</sup>

So part of the implicit cruelty (to borrow Baudelaire's description of the witch's dance and Deleuze's meditation on difference) of *Kassidy Chism* is that it taunts you with a tickling sensation of desire, drawing you in, seducing and exhilarating until it reaches the convulsive, darker, uncomfortable edges of desire; witness desire's complex economy of needs, fears, humiliations, vulnerabilities, risks, excesses, and shame. All of these emotional qualities are amplified by the soundtrack of animals fighting, barking, howling, in heat, a sound score that functions not only as metaphor but also as a more primal acknowledgment of desiring forces at work. In the barking dog section Kravas asked Preshish Moments to replace the lyrics and rhythm of Chism's soundtrack with barking dogs; and in the mirror section she asked that each of the repetitive back-bending movements correspond to the hees and haws of a braying donkey with speed changes (Kravas 2011c).

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43. Kassidy Chism's dance can be found on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loFHR9JoUMU> (accessed December 10, 2013).

44. Speaking about the piece with Jodi Bender, Kravas describes not only watching it on YouTube, but also reading the comments—some celebratory and some vulgar, particularly about the ways that Chism dances with her mouth slightly open (a gesture that Kravas amplifies in her version) (Kravas 2011b). So while Kravas speaks about her own childhood dances as also drawing on this sexual content without knowing its meaning, per se, or as a rehearsal for an older identity, much of this exploration remained private in the bedroom and dance studio rather than circulated around the web. This marks an important difference in the timing of the dispersion of these economies of desire and its reception and audience (Kravas 2012).

Integrating these sonic cues into her movements, Kravas now stands in front of the mirror, shaking her head to the sound of trees falling, static; her left arm becomes a claw and she intones: *please*. Turns away from the mirror: *stop*. Turns back to the mirror: *please*. Turns: *stop*. Repeat. Lying down splayed out in front of the mirror, she brays: *maaaaaaaaaa*. Her voice merges into the score, which crescendos as she walks to the front of the stage and performs an intense jumping thudding dance with her hands holding her breasts. The virtuosity required of this dance (of sound and of movement) casts a difficult dark beauty, one that stages the ambivalence of desire and the dangers of going too far as desire becomes disfigured through repetition and resistance. For Kravas, repetition allows a total exhaustion of gesture, movement, and sound that breaks what she calls the “fiction” of creating dance, instead drawing out more tenuous, precarious states as physicality and psychology meet (Kravas 2012). Witnessing these states is at times excruciating, but still I cannot look away.

Part of Kravas’s labor, particularly when she is standing still with spit gathering on the edge of her lips, is to remain in one emotional or psychological state—smile, happy, grimace, frown, angry, sexy, grumpy, confused—that connects with her facial expression until it comes undone and moves into something else. As Kravas explains, once she can name and identify the state it has already passed and she shifts to the next (Kravas 2012). Her attempt to stay with a state extends her work with repetition and the inherent failure resulting in this obsessive durational performing of a gesture or expression. Describing her own work with “dancing states,” choreographer Meg Stuart explains: “In states you work with oblique relations. The body is a field in which certain mental streams, emotions, energies and movements interact, betraying the fact that actions and states are separate. The internal friction and rubbing creates unexpected relations and by-products, revealing and concealing, expressing how people tend to control their mind and reactions most of the time” (Stuart 2010, 21). *Kassidy Chism* powerfully pressures control and social comportment—of the audience and of the dancer. Following Kravas as she jumps, trembles, drools, and brays, I am not only seduced and intoxicated but also anxious about where she might be taking me, worried that perhaps I am complicit in these patterns, that my own desires might seep, uncontained, into these aggressively uncertain and empowered terrains.

## Economies of Desire

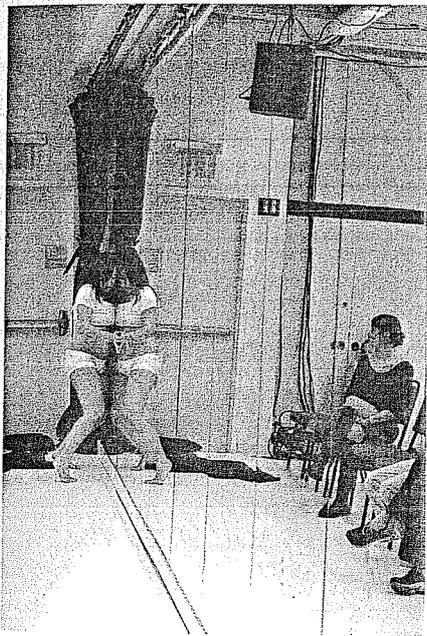
To write is to let oneself be swept along by a tongue of black ink that glides slowly without gestures or character, all the while imposing its will, giving away your self as if you were a murderer.—La Ribot, “Panoramix”

Desire like laughter can never only be narrated into semantic and syntactic forms, but floods in less expected ways across flesh and synapses: desire wakes me at night, it writes me, choreographs me, seductively disarming my critical and aesthetic apparatus (much like laughter but more intensely). The desiring labor of the choreographic incites other thoughts, other gestures, other words and deploys this generative potential in pursuit of an erotics of knowledge that is not only about sexual interest, but also explicitly about the desires and pleasures and pains of dancing, of writing, of thinking, of living, and all of these together. So perhaps it is not only coincidence that these choreographic projects by Hélène Cixous, Meg Stuart, La Ribot, DD Dorvillier, Heather Kravas, luciana achugar and I are all produced by women around a certain age, with a certain experience of work and life, who perhaps like Susan Sontag desire “an erotics of art” rather than yet another “hermeneutics” (Sontag [1964] 1966, 14).

In the opening moments of luciana achugar’s *The Sublime is Us* (2008)<sup>45</sup> the five female dancers lean into and against each other. Writhing, twisting, their arms rise and fold as rippling effects of the spine (figures 2.7–2.9). The dancers become an organic force, an energetic resonance oozing an ecstatic viscosity distinct from the violent shattering ecstasy performed by laughter. Leaning into one another, arms intertwine as Hilary Clark rolls her head against Melanie Maar’s undulating figure, a quality of movement that achugar describes as an “exposure of the fluids, turning the body inside out. [Moving] as if the arms were webbed and feeling in the body the history of the body’s own evolution” (achugar 2009). Sliding toward desire, the dancers undulate against the studio’s mirror, transforming conjoined group

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45. *The Sublime is Us* premiered at Dance Theater Workshop in New York City, October 21–November 1, 2008. Concept and direction by luciana achugar; choreographed by achugar with performers including achugar, Hilary Clark, Jennifer Kjos, Melanie Maar, Beatrice Wong; music by Michael Mahalchick with Lucky Dragons; costume design by Icon; lighting design by Megan Byrne; set consultant, Mak.



2.7-2.9 luciana achugar, *The Sublime is Us*, 2008.  
Photographs by Ryutaro Mishima.

movements as arms ripple from the spine to simultaneous solos against the cold surface of the mirror. They touch themselves, they touch each other, they overlap in delicate proximity. As Clark plays the piano, the others return to balletic technique, only to find that it too is empty and routine. Head wrapped in her dress, achugar leans into the piano, watching her dancers, watching herself becoming seduced by the sound, the crashing weight of her body falling onto the keys.

Here the choreographic is a feeling, as it participates in what Nancy calls a shared “ecstatic consciousness” that resonates between the dancers extending out to the audience who sit within the dance studio (Nancy [1982] 1991, 19). Importantly, this work takes place within the studio and not on the stage, calling attention to the work of making dance, as itself a desiring process, and this desire—physical, sensual, intellectual—is always an ongoing rehearsal, not an end product. It is also a disruption of audience passivity as we sit with the dancers facing the mirror. Watching the dance that surrounds us, we are also always watching ourselves watching the dancing, and each audience member maintains her own viewpoint, multiplying the perspectives across the space. Later we are invited to participate in the interior machinations of the dance, as achugar directs us to close our eyes, to focus on our own internal organs, to listen, to sense the weight and balance, our relationship to gravity compromised by sitting in these uncomfortable plastic chairs. With our eyes closed, achugar asks that we imagine our pelvis from the inside and then try to move our mind from brain to pelvis to butt, to momentarily suspend cerebral hegemony and to reorganize our thoughts through these other organs, to attend to other possible sites for initiating language and movement. Interpellated by my own interior sensations, I rock, undulating from sitz bones as the dancers crouch and crawl and slide along the floor.

achugar’s work embodies a primitive or animal attention to the interiority of the body as impulse for gesture. While the work begins from a conceptual place—with *The Sublime is Us* the animating question is how to “perform desire”—the gestural content is “intuitive, visceral” (achugar 2009). The performers emanate desire, as their gestures originate from internal organs, inspire fluidity of limbs, loose and at times erotic expulsions of breath. Disrupting a dialogic interrogation of gesture by language and language by gesture, achugar attempts to “break language apart . . . destroying it.” Not simply a naive aspiration toward a prediscursive process, she suspends language, moving toward its possible dissolution and resolution as a bodily practice, as language itself moves through the body, flashes

up from different organs offering up the possibilities of utopic, social, and flexible communicability.

This desire works against representation; it wants instead to be experienced, to become presence. This labor requires a relentless repetition of gesture that seeks its own undoing. Clothed in navy blue dresses and sweatshirts, the dancers' utilitarian uniform signifies the labor of dance,<sup>46</sup> yet also reveals its dissolution as the gestures fall apart. As the dancers' hair loosens, buttons open revealing appliqué satin flowers on leotards underneath. As they remove parts of their clothing, tying them around their waists or on their heads, the expected labor of dance breaks down. Their pliés falter, the make-up smears, they appear almost bruised; their approach to desire is not easy, or direct. Rather through extreme repetition, a notion of work becomes undone through gestural disarray. This is the pressure of desire on dance—messy extreme.

Particularly in *The Sublime is Us*, this relational aspect reiterates through the use of the mirror that includes the audience as intimately part of this desiring collective. Here the choreographic takes on its critical and perhaps ethical force, engaging (momentarily) in an experiential process that simultaneously points outside itself. achugar's choreography invites us to participate in a rewriting of the somatic force of gesture. Her subversion of a notion of dance as a formal exhibition requires a subversion of structure, a dis-signification of gesture that moves away from language toward a more collective understanding that is simultaneously corporeal and sonic.

If *The Sublime is Us* stages a collective body between the dancers that extends into the audience through a scattering of viewing perspectives, then achugar's next piece shifts the terrain of desire to focus more individually and internally. Against the dispersive invitation or implication of *The Sublime is Us*, achugar designed *PURO DESEO*<sup>47</sup> with a singular perspectival framing in mind.

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46. In *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement and Identity in the 1930s*, dance scholar Mark Franko illuminates the political, cultural, and emotional relay between dance and labor. Taking "political emotion as its backdrop," Franko argues that "dance was not on the periphery, but at the center of politics; and . . . the bodies of chorus girls, modern dancers, and ballet dancers were protagonists in the class struggle" to reveal the mutually constitutive work of dance and work as governed by and governing ideologies (Franko 2002, 7).

47. *PURO DESEO* premiered at The Kitchen, New York, NY, April 29–May 2, 2010. Conceived and directed by achugar; created by achugar and Michael Mahalchick; lighting design by Madeline

Leaving the luminous studio and returning to the proscenium stage, achugar exchanges sunlight, windows, and mirrors for a completely darkened theater. Interrupted only by spotlights on the dancers or a dusk-like glow rendering a chiaroscuro ambiance that shifts to bright white light at the end, these cinematic effects focus my attention on achugar as she approaches and moves across the stage (figures 2.10–2.11).

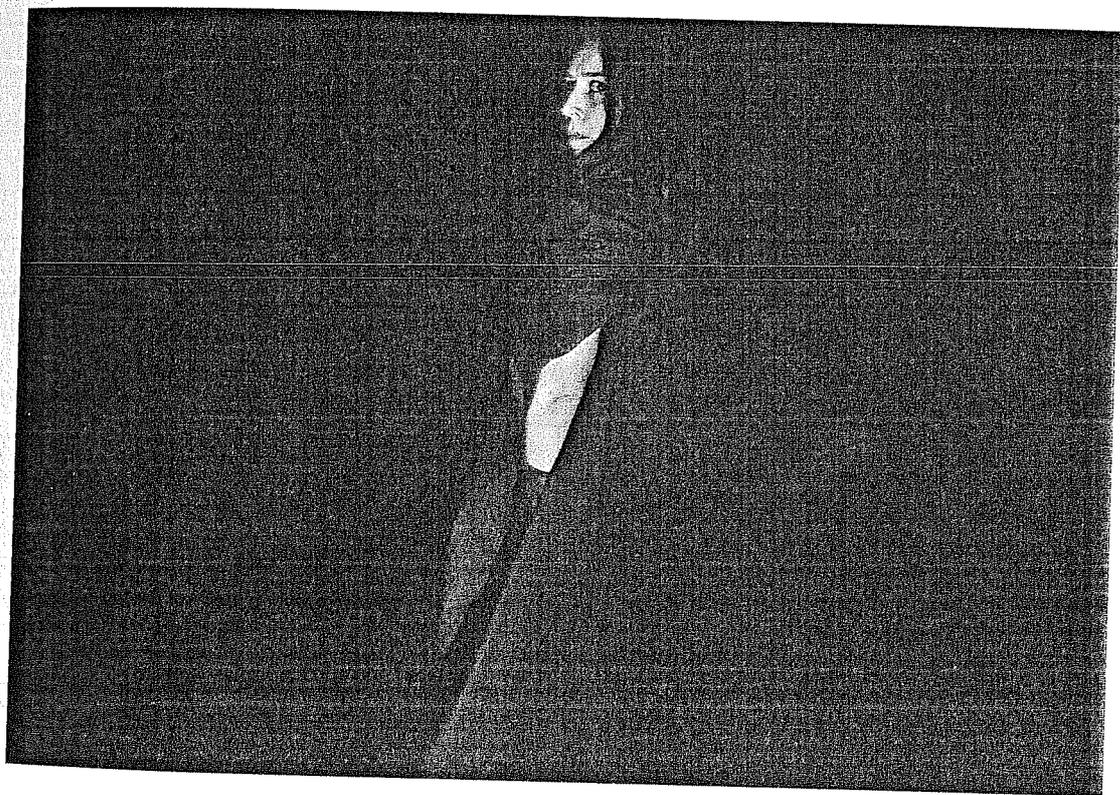
*PURO DESEO* begins in darkness. achugar's whispers resonate across the saturated void of the theater: *Sana, sana, sana . . . colita de rana . . . si no sana ahora . . . sanará mañana*.<sup>48</sup> She sings quietly at first, accompanied by the sound of her shuffling feet and the rustling of her dress. Slowly moving from behind the audience onto the stage, her voice ascends in volume and intensity as this sweet lullaby repeats. Her shuffling movement creates a transverse path into the center of the stage that she continues to walk, forward and backward, while turning her head to stare out at the audience in the manner of Orpheus searching the darkness for Eurydice. Her turning feels like a direct confrontation as her gaze meets mine, an acknowledgment of the implicit voyeurism of the viewing relationship that she intends to quite literally turn, a dramaturgical decision further reinforcing the singular perspective of her gaze.<sup>49</sup> As her singing fades, she continues her trajectory across the stage and back, again and again until she falls to the floor. Now her pale skin glows underneath the gorgeously torn Victorian dress and the black gloves, her long black hair streaming over the layers of fabrics. A chain rattles from somewhere off to the side of the stage. Dim lights illuminate the other performer, Michael Mahalchick, who appears as a heap, a pile of black fabric, long hair, and beard splayed out, writhing slowly on the floor. Now lying down with her arms and legs spread, achugar repeatedly arches her back while opening and closing her arms and legs so they slap on the stage. The constant shifting of voyeurism toward different intensities invites us to watch, drawing us into one of the most subtly erotic moments as Mahalchick slowly curls and uncurls his hand: a pale gesture twisting in the shadows. If this is desire in its pure form, it remains hushed, repressed, tied

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Best; costume design by Walter Dundervill.

48. achugar translated the lullaby for me as “heal heal little frog if not today then tomorrow” (achugar 2011).

49. The press image announced this intention in the form of a tightly cropped image of achugar's eye staring out from behind her long black hair.



2.10-2.11 luciana achugar, *PURO DESEO*, 2010. Photographs by Julieta Cervantes.

up in Victorian ribbons and gothic chains, breathing and murmuring like so many unsettled ghosts.

Removing her dress to reveal ripped lace tights and T-shirt, achugar undulates her hips and pelvis, movements that transform into viscous gestures and liquid limbs until she seems to lose balance and falls or throws herself to the floor. She rises and falls, rises and falls. We witness these movements only in fragments, captured by strobe lights as she falls through the air, her hair in disarray, and lies crumpled on the floor. As the sequence repeats, her vertiginous dance appears in photographic stills only. As breath merges with voice, the sonic quality of the piece taps into an interior anatomy, perhaps the nonlanguage place that she speaks of in relation to *The Sublime is Us*. And again it is not that this sounding is prediscursive, but rather that the intensities of breath and expulsion, of fatigue and labor force language into other forms. Part of the gothic impulse behind this work casts an ambivalent glow around desire, beauty, and abjection to suggest that these are never categorically distinct but are uncanny fragments and forms of a similar animation. Like laughter, a gothic aesthetics speaks through incongruence and layers and veils upon veils,<sup>50</sup> images that achugar makes literal in her and Mahalchick's costumes (designed by Walter Dundervill), but also extends in the sonic materiality of these fabrics and chains and bells set against the darkness. Shifting from the reflective Rorschach effects of *The Sublime is Us* that attempted to "perform desire," the choreographic force of *PURO DESEO* embraces presence in its vampiric draping, repetitions, falls, and dramaturgy of the gaze, casting a complicated image of desire danced.

Tracing multiple economies of desire requires an attention to corporeal and theoretical contingencies as flesh intertwines with syntax and gesture consumes utterance. Choreographic desire creates possibilities for sensuous encounter, yet these are never given, but always subject to failure and disfunction and misreading. Conflating corporeality with sexual and at times spiritual force demands a

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50. Writing of gothic conventions in literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the exquisite layering of surfaces as part of the texture—literary, material, emotional, psychological—of the gothic. And she suggests that it is not only the layer of the "veil" that is erotic, but the fact of its covering that elicits desire, "both as metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified" (Sedgwick [1980] 2007, 95).

vertiginous virtuosity to perform its sensuous communicability and its critique. This is an intensely affective labor that requires language as much as it resists it—reveling in an irruptive mode of communicability that trembles under the influences of physicality, of ideology, and of language to undo meaning and legibility. This is the labor of laughter of desire: an at times violent and spastic doing and undoing of relation, a sensuous entangling of physicality and discourse, a murmuring shuffling movement toward understanding, a surprising contraction of laughter, punk repetitions, and luscious drool, a gothic rattling of chains. These choreographic projects perform an ecstatic attention as they elicit desire and indict our complicity through language and through dance proposing yet another opening for an *Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!*