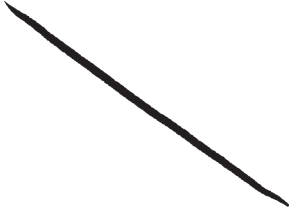


BODY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY. FROM *PERFORMANCE* ART TO A CHOREOGRAPHIC *BODY INSTALLATION*

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Abstract: The true coherence of a performance depends on a structured and efficient vision, which can be symbolically reduced to three “key moments,” each having an essential role in the relationship between the “living body” and its connection with performance, which is more and more defined by interdisciplinary coherences. This paper starts with the American experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, which envisioned the “body” not only as mere “material” for feminist *manifestos* but also as a medium suitable for achieving the new goals set forth by *performance art*. The supportive environment around the *Judson Dance Theatre* created the necessary milieu for the convergence of body, postmodern dance, and visual arts. This openness towards experiment had important consequences for the next stage, the “Flemish wave,” and subsequently on the works of the German choreographer, Sasha Waltz.

Keywords: performance, body, interdisciplinarity, dance, body-installation, anatomic theatre, cruelty.

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Looking at the complicated artistic landscape painted by recent performances, characterised by intricately woven theatrical and visual elements as well as by the integral presence of dance, the performer’s movement and body, the need for a structured and coherent approach aligned with these intertwined reforms and transformations, is a daring objective. But undoubtedly, one of the most challenging aspects are the extensions of performance, particularly those of the choreographic art, towards interdisciplinary visions generated through the collaborations of artists with other disciplines. These collaborations lead to unique textures of theatricality and artistic visions, where the essential component of the performance is the human body.

In order to make a clear distinction between these bewildering mixtures of trends and artistic poetics, it is important to show their interdependence with another pillar of performance: the space, a combination toward which the entire scheme of ramifications coalesces. Moreover, the arguments supporting the connection between these two elements, body and space, and the evolution of performance are symbolically established in three stages. In addition to the European avantgardes that emerged in the early twentieth century, and which represent the real “starting point” for the courageous artistic fusions between art forms as performance components, driven by the obsessive quest of the “total work of art,” this study focuses on the “mature period” defined by the vibrant American avantgarde of the mid-twentieth century.

Under revolutionary circumstances, political, cultural changes, and feminist manifestos, the body becomes the main “material” for expressing – in a nonconformist and provocative manner – personal views on contemporary issues.

American *performance art* and the artistic “treatment” of the body led to irreversible consequences in Europe. The Flemish wave of the 1980s, defined by an intense absorption of interdisciplinary extensions, contributed to the emergence of a type of performance where non-conformism was a vital condition. The body, an essential component intentionally designed to be the driving force of performance, remains the most important challenge, constantly influenced by various artistic and non-artistic disciplines. “Living matter” maintains its precedence as a suitable symbolic material, processed through visual instruments, continuously reshaped through its interferences with dance, physical theatre, or other disciplines. Its physicality and biological function become the essence of the performance, constantly influenced by scientific research exploring the intersection between art and neurosciences, brain sciences, and other forms of investigation of both mental and physical traumas. Recent relevant performances in this direction include the creations of Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard. Her body discourse is oriented towards both the complexity and expressiveness of movement generated by incomplete anatomy. Artistic qualities are reconfigured through the distorted lines and effort sustaining the process of movement, as well as through the display of aesthetic qualities of difference (as seen in “bODY/rEMIX”). On another note, Wayne McGregor combines interdisciplinary strategies rooted in the most recent technology with his interest in neuroscience, resulting in a very personal concept of image and body within the process of movement.

These choreographic compositions undoubtedly depend on the connection to the starting point and the entire course of “interdisciplinaryization.” This connection is influenced by reforms inspired by “randomness” and performance art, as well as by theatrical pillars such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht.

In contemporary choreographic views, the body exhibits an artistic consistency characterised by “impurity,” formed through the *amalgamation* of diverse avant-garde perspectives. These perspectives lead to combinations of strategies from various disciplines, including an interest in biological phenomena and political interpretations. These are not only explored through the lens of the “theatre of cruelty” but also as a political objective.

It is not incidental that one of the most frequently mentioned artists after 2000, strengthening the argumentation of this study, is the Belgian choreographer Jan Fabre. His mature level of interdisciplinary choreography is focused on the artist’s exploration of the biological dimension of the body. Fabre’s aesthetics revolve around his “fixed idea”: the bio-chemical transformation of matter, be it human, animal, or vegetal. Theatricality is developed through the intersection of these themes, performance art, and the scientific instruments, which Fabre

uses to invasively explore the body, thereby establishing a crucial link with the experimental attitude of the '60s. This is reminiscent of performances like those of Chris Burden and Carolee Schneemann, which involve the real experience of dissection, both physical and emotional. Fabre refines and reconstitutes the body, drawing from the solutions offered by performance artists, and reconfigures theatricality through the tools of visual arts.

As a result, the body takes precedence in the realm of performance art, serving as a genuine Artaudian political manifesto, which sparks the development of choreography. This transformation commenced during the mid-20th century. One aspect rarely mentioned in this context is Antonin Artaud and the poetics of the "theatre of cruelty," which served as a catalyst for these developments. The influence of his ideas significantly contributed to the shaping of American postmodernism. Artaud's texts hold profound significance and are intertwined with the new directions of the counterculture, navigating the labyrinth of interdisciplinarity and the process of encounter between visual and performance artists. This phenomenon thrived against the backdrop influenced by European forces, including the impact of Sigmund Freud, surrealism, and the repercussions of the New York art exhibitions of the 1920s, such as those at MoMA and Fifth Avenue, where works by Salvador Dali and Juan Miro were displayed. These ideas underpinning the philosophical dimension of emerging visual arts, were transferred to experimental performance and, subsequently, to postmodern and contemporary choreography. The representation of the body in performance is, in this context, pursued with the goal of abstractness and through various means, encompassing form, movement, discourse, and the effects of minimalism as conveyed by artists like Donald Judd and Tony Smith.

Apart from the influence of Antonin Artaud, the postmodern choreographic movement, entwined with the experimental attitudes of the 1960s and interdisciplinarity, also incorporates concepts such as "aleatory" and John Cage's "indeterminacy." This dependence of postmodern dance on references to the American experimental milieu is noteworthy. Merce Cunningham, building on the aforementioned foundations, forged new connections between the grammar of movement and the universe of pop art visual artists, such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. The notion of the "political body" and its journey through both postmodern and contemporary choreography found significant support in the Feminist Art Movement of the 1960s. Carolee Schneemann, whose performance concepts pertaining to the body bear important connections with Artaudian theories, inspired choreographic compositions, which expanded movement beyond traditional dance, giving rise to new interpretations in the works of artists like Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer.

From another perspective, the relationship between the body and interdisciplinarity is also profoundly influenced by the consequences of the events of 1968. These events catalysed the emergence of a new facet of performance art, drawing from various other disciplines (Peggy, Pellan, p. 63) and the feminist movements of the 1970s. For example, the body in performance, as exemplified by artists like Rachel Rosenthal, served as a medium for conveying autobiography filtered through memory and feminist philosophy. This resulted in performances that illustrate the characteristics of an Artaudian exorcism.

The body, when employed as political material, indirectly brings forth the influence of Bertolt Brecht, leaving a profound artistic impact that intersects with the tumultuous backdrop of the vibrant 1960s. These performative directions reworked feminist ideas through both physical and visual rituals, resonating with the recurring motif of cruelty. At its core, performance art revolves around the central theme of the body and its biological functions while also exploring the perplexing and disoriented mental landscape of the contemporary individual. Living matter lends substance to political manifestos, and the dissected body, displayed in a manner that transcends taboos, becomes the focal point of performance art. Its coherence is not only comprehensible through its connection with contemporary events but is also deeply rooted in references to Artaud and Brecht.

The focus of the last part of this paper is on Sasha Waltz, a German choreographer, whose artistic origins are deeply influenced by the American avant-garde movement. Waltz's work is inspired by the interplay between performance art and various other artistic and non-artistic disciplines. Incorporating diverse influences from the Judson Dance Theatre, her dance performances incorporate various elements, including recognisable textures and historical references. Furthermore, her understanding of the body reflects a European attitude influenced by interdisciplinary artists, drawing inspiration from the experimental dimension of visual arts.

From Performance Art to Choreography

Judson Memorial Church, following in the footsteps of Merce Cunningham, acts as a key influence for choreographic directions in relation to performance as disciplinary intersections. In a context shaped by the ever-evolving relationship between art and violence, the performer's body becomes a tool of protest, often utilising nudity as a form of desecration. This instrumentalization of the body, coupled with the caustic attitude of the 1960s, which embraced destructive art as a response to societal changes (Ramsay, 2006, p. 26), aligned with Judson's ethos of embracing contemporary art. The centre becomes a "melting pot" of

revolutionary ideas that rise from the encounter between artistic experiment and research, welcoming not only visual artists like Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg but also choreographers and performance artists.

Judson Dance Theatre is considered one of the symbols of postmodern dance for its openness towards the fusion of *performance art* and choreography. The artist's body, alive and vulnerable, is subjected to sacrifices and nudity, expresses physical and emotional mutilation, and evokes feminist themes such as "objectification of the female body" through the "male gaze" (Ramsay, 2007, p. 54). The depiction of the female body lies at the heart of Carolee Schneemann's work, whose complex vision engenders the necessary link with contemporary interdisciplinary choreography. The artist's active participation in the experimental scene led to fruitful collaborations with postmodern choreographers such as Yvonne Reiner, Ruth Emerson, and Steve Paxton, fostering a performative conjugation of body/movement with visual arts, graphics, sculpture, painting and even more, *happening* and *performance art*. Dance now takes place in art galleries as a form that complements the abundance of artistic creations, striving to establish connections with the "objects" displayed in such venues. In this interdisciplinary choreographic *corpus*, the dancing body undergoes important mutations, gradually absorbing other resources of *everyday* movement (walking, running, the "comfortable" exposure of nudity, spontaneity, repetitions of certain movement patterns, improvisation, and random actions or "unfinished" scenarios).

The recent revival of interest in Carolee Schneemann's work and her collaboration with Judson Dance Theatre has shown that her craft proposes not only an exhaustive approach to *performance art* but also a series of instruments for understanding the European interdisciplinary dance theatre of the American-influenced "Flemish wave" of the 1980s. One of the most important events dedicated to the American performance artist has been *Body Politics*, held at the Barbican Art Gallery in 2022 and 2023, which showcased visual documentations of her performances and interdisciplinary creations. The blending of film, *performance art*, *sculptural assemblage*, and *kinetic painting* effectively portrays her recurring themes, such as the objectification of the female body, violence, and eroticism, as she delves into her own memory and inner universe. By infusing her performances with ideas influenced by Artaud's concept of cruelty, which had already been embraced by the 1960s avantgarde movements, she distilled her work through a feminist lens that reached its climax in the 1970s. Through her performance, the artist articulated her personal emotional and sexual growth, while also engaging in activism, and pushing the boundaries by further emphasising the concept of the "political body." The body, the supporting element of Schneemann's performance, developed on a *corpus* that has evolved through

the dissolution of narrative coherence, combining the fragmentary logic of *montage* and the “grammar” of experimental film. In her work, the visual metaphor is as dominant as the tactile quality of the image (Schneemann, 2002, p. 55).

During her collaboration with the choreographers at Judson Memorial Church, this experimental approach maintained the artist’s interest in her own body as the primary material of performance. From this point on, Schneemann’s new dance concepts were influenced by her earlier ideas, expressed in emblematic works such as her first feature *Eye Body* (1963) and *Body Collage* (1967), where painting is blended with the artist’s body, and allusions and memory are juxtaposed.

In her extravagant kinetic theatre phase, Schneemann went one step further, enhancing the philosophical meaning and performative efficacy of her body-centred compositions. In *Meat Joy* (1964), which was created for Judson Dance Theatre, the performance is approached as a *collage* of carnal materials, as a blend between human flesh and animal meat, both edible, interlacing eroticism with nutrition. The performers are envisioned as a “collective body” undergoing a banal meltdown.



Meat Joy (1964) created by Carolee Schneemann

Source: <https://www.schneemannfoundation.org/artworks/meat-joy/3>

The idea of a fusion of disciplines and substances in Carolee Schneemann's performances, a pertinent extension of the Romantic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, fostered the development of postmodern dance. In *Water Light/Water Needle* (1966), for instance, it relies on combining the living body with fluid or mineral elements. The "total work of art" is an indispensable concept, and its main themes – fragments of memory, autobiographical references – are again dominant, creating compositions where the body is complemented by dissonant acoustics, a bizarre mixture of sound and image, the sensory effect of various timbral qualities.

Schneemann's vision of the body as a feminist manifesto matured in the 1970s and reached a climax in *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–6) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), where nudity is part not only of a combinatory composition, which testifies to the artist's earlier interest in the relationship between body and painting, but also a *performative installation*. The first performance involved random movement in a plastic space, defined by a graphic quality of image and action. *Interior Scroll*, the event from the East Hampton Gallery in New York, proposed more than a symbolic display of nudity, relying on connections between a *sumum* of references that became actions, and incorporating information from her own text, *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* and quotations from the film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973).

Carolee Schneemann's creations and their connection with the postmodern dance of the Judson Memorial Church emphasise the artistic interest for body and interdisciplinarity, both becoming a major resource and an activating *stimulus* for the new European choreographic directions.

From American Avantgarde to European "Scientific" Interdisciplinarity. The Living Body in an Anatomic Theatre.

The impact of Judson's work can be easily observed in the Flemish artistic wave, which is open to countless combinatory strategies supported by scientific research, raising the bar not only for theatricality but also for the artistic and cultural value of the body in performance. On the one hand, the new generation of stage directors and choreographers, who are greatly influenced by the American phenomenon, combine artistic and non-artistic disciplines, recycle techniques, and create novel forms of expression by utilising the most recent technology, thus pushing the boundaries of interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, Western artists expand on the idea of the body as a *manifesto*.

The "Flemish wave," which is associated with artists like Alain Platel, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and Meg Stuart, whose choreographic design focuses on the purity of movement, represents the pinnacle of European interdisciplinary performance, with significant influences on dance performance in the 1980s.

From a different perspective, multidisciplinary artists or *les enfants terribles*, such as Jan Fabre and Wim Vandekeybus, tested the limits of the body and its connection to visual arts with their interdisciplinary approach, gradually including research-based explorations of the living body.

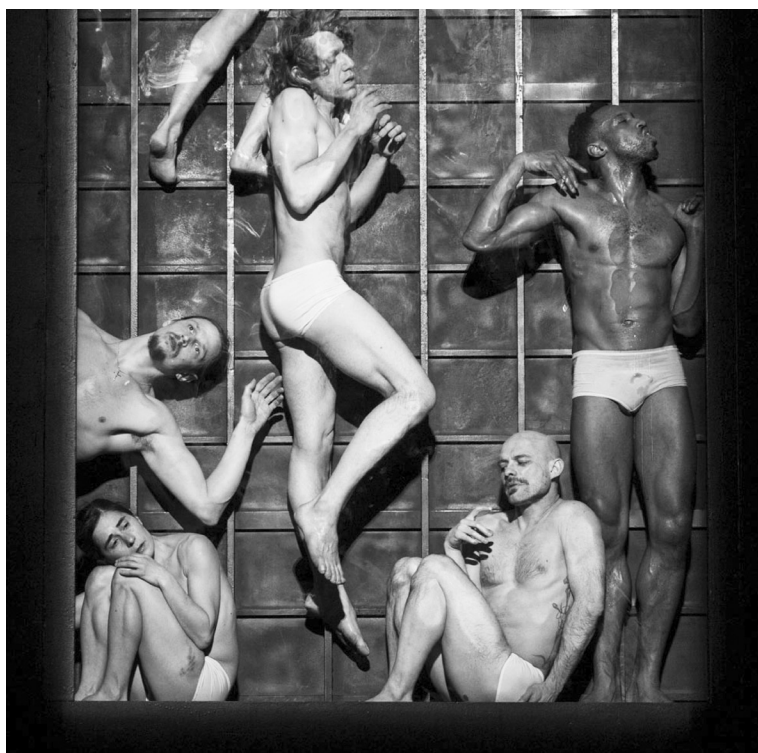
Their work focuses on original theatrical compositions, which are produced through a “surgical procedure” that combines Artaudian elements with a “symbolic/scientific theatricality.” The performer’s body is invested with the metaphoric attributes of *everyday* issues, and displayed as a common victim of a consumption-based society. The compositions conjugate dance, theatre, performance art, installations, and especially science-based images and scenarios. The performance is synonymous with an investigation of the body in a “laboratory theatre,” which brings together biology and neurosciences in support of an interdisciplinary performance. The artistic body envisioned by Jan Fabre continues to be at the forefront of disciplinary fusions and impure performative forms, which are the most susceptible to being considered “anatomic installations.” As both a theatre director and choreographer, Fabre is an extreme multidisciplinary artist, whose main focus is the biological dimension of the body manifested through vital substances such as tears, blood, saliva, sweat, or other fluids. In his work, he uses artistic strategies that juxtapose solutions offered by the “theatre of cruelty” to create “anatomic theatre-like performances”, where the body and its “living matter” undergo dissection. Fabre’s understanding of the body as a *manifesto* and its vulnerability are expressed in scenic compositions, which culminated with *Je suis sang* (2001) and *History of Tears* (2005).

Infused with Artaudian key elements such as raw sounds and screams, the performances rely on the exposure of the body’s vital forces. Fluids illustrate “tears,” which lean towards the symbolical liberation of the organs, transformation, and ultimately purity. Fabre’s performances recall early medical experiments, putting forward scenic compositions where medical practices free the body from blood and various other fluids. In *History of Tears* (2005), Fabre develops on his “obsessive” theme – the interdependence of the body’s fluids – and proposes an aquatic milieu through the liquefaction and melting of bodily secretions as symbolic “tears.” Glass containers collect, through a painful process, the fluids from characters in agony complete a scenic landscape. The purifying treatment eliminates the fluids associated, as in the early medical practices of the Renaissance, with diseases, infections, and dirt.

The Symbolic Body in Contemporary Dance

Moving forward to the most recent artistic creations focused on themes such as the body and interdisciplinarity, which push the limits either to new resources of movement or referential depictions of the body, it should be noted that German choreographer Sasha Waltz's performances are not only the interdisciplinary results of the previous experimental attempts, but also serve as an essentially visual performance, through which the body is approached as a symbolic, political, and spiritual entity. The complicated design of Waltz's choreography depends on a methodical approach to understanding dance/movement technique through a "journey" through her artistically complex system of references. To understand the creative poetics of the German choreographer, it is important to recall the American interdisciplinary experiments, which redefined postmodern dance, performance art, and the multidisciplinary compositions put forward by the Judson Dance Theatre during the 1960s and 1970s. Although Sasha Waltz frequently cites the American avant-garde as having had the greatest influence on her technical advancement and multidisciplinary performance vision, she also "aligns" herself with the European artistic movements that focus on the body and utilise it as an installation. Dance and the moving body remain at the forefront of her performance, with the choreographer making repeated use of the *contact improvisation* technique, theatrical "effectiveness," and the discursive complexity of the "point of contact," which allows not only for a visual construction of complex forms but also for movement variations.

The experimental approach of the "Flemish wave," which frequently bases its choreographic principles on "mutations" of dance towards other movement resources, also contributed to the environment that Sasha Waltz's choreography was part of. According to Sasha Waltz, the interaction between the performer's body and the stage creates a unique fusion. The surrounding architecture is infused with dramatic undertones, lending choreographic performances the aesthetic value of an art gallery or museum. A culmination of the West European artistic environment that developed after 2000, the trilogy *Körper (Body)*, *S.* and *NoBody* focuses on references to and emotional connections with history, becomes a symbol of trauma, and becomes a means of expression for the image of agony, stylized as a "body-installation."



Sasha Waltz, *Körper*. © Foteini Christofilopoulou.

Source: <https://dancetabs.com/2018/03/sasha-waltz-guests-korper-london/>

The choreography is defined by both static and architectural compositions, which are created by the “collective body” as a carnal substance that undergoes material combinations. The imagery relies on a massive, fragmented, human body simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing itself while proposing recognisable apocalyptic references, which include not only images from the Holocaust but also various other universal and atemporal symbols (Borges, Nahra, 2020, p. 35). The idea of a choreographic performance as “anatomic theatre” is what keeps the composition together; it is expressed through the impactful symbol of the “mountain of bodies,” evoking images from concentration camps. *Körper* is the perfect example of a visual composition created through choreographic symbolic support and a plastic dialogue between the individual and the collective body. The metaphoric images which recall anatomic fragments dominate the landscape and create an illusion enhanced by the effect of nude bodies sliding along a glass wall. *S.*, the second part of the trilogy, functions as a

symbolic link between the “physicality of the human being” (*Körper/Body*) and its “metaphysical dimension” (Borges, Nahra, 2020, p. 35). *NoBody* is defined by a peculiar choreographic discourse that centres on the impossibility of forging relationships between people and culminates in the symbolic flight from matter. The composition represents the conclusion of the “journey,” the highest and most sublime level of transformation of matter, supported theatrically by an odd sound background ranging from caustic timbral qualities to silence (here, the artist references John Cage’s *Lecture on Nothing*, which emphasises the dramatic function of “silence” in musical composition).

Conclusions

The necessary connection between complex interdisciplinary performances of recent date, which involve increased openness to visual solutions and intricate performative strategies, and the creative turning point of the 1960s and 1970s, which established an efficient and symbolic “alphabet” based on the idea of a “disciplinary fusion” fuelled by the concept of the “total work of art,” not only offers an effective “key” to decode the complex texture of new performances but also explains the process of accumulating “resources” defining its coherence.

The body is the most “stable” and essential component, and it serves as the foundation for performance in any circumstance. The performer’s body remains the “vital pulse” of any performance, the driving force behind any interdisciplinary solution, maintaining its social, political, historical, and symbolic role, whether it is influenced by visual compositions and intellectual provocations or sustained by an effervescent “trend” that favours scientific research. The actual physiognomy of the body draws on the peculiar treatment of American *performance art* while also displaying a dense consistency of both theatrical and philosophical ideas. The body remains as relevant as ever precisely because of its vulnerability, which allows it to express various stances and representations, from feminist *manifestos* to symbols of a traumatised past and memory, whereby a *summa* of historical and philosophical concepts, symbols, and references coalesce.

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