

XAVIER LE ROY'S "RETROSPECTIVE":
CHOREOGRAPHING A PROBLEM, AND A MODE OF PRODUCTION
BOJANA CVEJIĆ

This book responds to one of the questions which Xavier Le Roy addressed to the performers of "Retrospective", a problem meant to trigger "their own retrospectives": what did the encounter with his work mean for them? Refracted through "Retrospective", this question formulates the inquiry of all the writing published in this volume: what did "Retrospective" do *for* you, but also *for* choreography, the history and medium of exhibition, contemporary art, the disciplines of performing and dancing, for the dramaturgy of the spectatorial position and gaze, for the art institution in its normal or experimental praxis, for social and public space? And at the same time, what did it do *to* you, you who invite, perform, attend, or interpret "Retrospective" in the sundry registers and concerns it invoked? A speculative pragmatic sense lurks in this question, one that describes the type of genesis and cognition that this choreographer favors: an uncertainty with respect to the future-perfect tense of a projected situation, the experience of which obliges one to speculate and then assess its consequences as they will have happened, or, in dance lingo: the doing which makes one learn or understand through experience, in retrospect. This is how I grasped Le Roy's wish to explore and present the reflection engendered by "Retrospective" in a publication. Like its object of study, bracketing off the retrospective as an exhibition-genre in its name, this book too is not a catalogue nor monograph. In addition to comprising the thoughts which arose *post hoc*, as an effect, and as an assessment of what the work had done, this

publication—a volume of essays, interviews, and reports ensuing from “Retrospective” as a single new work—embraces the conversations *prior* to the first edition of “Retrospective” in 2011 in the Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona wherein Le Roy probed his ideas and prepared the “material” for the performers.

Situation by way of a choreographic machine

“Retrospective” condenses the poetics and politics of Xavier Le Roy’s oeuvre without extracting from it a consolidated retrospective value. Many a page in this book is dedicated to discussions about how this work bypasses the format of retrospective, either from the viewpoint of art history or by way of curatorial strategies. In my view, the distinction intrinsic to the approach that Le Roy takes here, and that characterizes all his works, is its posing of a problem, and its offering temporary solutions to that problem through the several past and future editions of “Retrospective”. The creation of “Retrospective” began by critically reflecting on the conditions that structure a burgeoning practical and theoretical field (namely, that of expanding choreography into the museum) by questioning the status of the work *qua* object, or event, or rather, as Le Roy describes in his definition of choreography, as “an artificially staged situation” in which things, concepts, images, encounters, stories, and durations partake; as extended temporality in an entirely different apparatus of museal representation when compared to theatrical representation; as the peril of expropriating performance from its material conditions of production. His answer to Laurence Rassel’s invitation (which issued from her history with the self-organized, experimental, feminist, and queer interventions made by Constant,¹ rather than from a curatorial ambition to absorb dance into the medium of exhibition) was to experiment with the given constraints: the relegation of Le Roy’s oeuvre to material in which media of display are recast as

“immobility,” as a sequence in a loop, and as narration. Under such constraints, it follows that the mimesis of sculpture and video, and the performance art of speaking in the first person singular are subsumed under a choreographic machine: a composition of entries, displacements, actions, and encounters whose setting into motion is, strictly speaking, cued by the appearance of each new visitor. The machine doesn’t only operate the space, which is either empty (inactive) when no visitor is present (just like a theater that is only triggered by co-presence), or reconfigured in motion. The machine also demonstrates the form of labor entailed by the performers’ work and the division of that work into various activities, into dancing, learning a dance, performing, and discoursing with the audience. The mimesis here is synonymous with the constructing, but not the objectifying, of situations, because the encounter between the performers and the visiting audience depends on the time they will give, a time that is necessarily social. When a performer recounts how she became a dancer, the subjectivity produced is tied to the diverse geopolitical cultural contexts in which Le Roy’s work may or may not have surfaced—contexts which the performer might share more readily with the visitors than with the choreographer. A historical frame of sociality and culture is sampled through the attempt of the performer to contextualize a dance-aspect of her biographic narrative beyond the immediate interests of presenting Le Roy’s oeuvre. Likewise, the images and gestures emanating from the performer’s study of Le Roy’s solo and manifesting as immobilities and loops often show a substantial disregard for the aesthetic image of the original artifact. This doesn’t seem to matter, for we could say that “Retrospective” is an aesthetically unburdened work that sets its priorities elsewhere, namely, in the agency of the staged situation, or in Guattari’s terms, in the *agencement collectif d’énonciation*: the capacity to connect individuated subjects with particular contextual realities through words, movement, gesture and exchange of address.² Observing visitors roam the Tàpies

“plaza” without the guidance of text, I couldn’t help but read in their bewilderment the spectrality of an unknown name: who is Xavier Le Roy?

One and many

*Creation’s all about mediators. Without them nothing happens. They can be people—for a philosopher, artists or scientists; for a scientist, philosophers or artists—but things too, even plants or animals, as in Castaneda. Whether they’re real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, you have to form your mediators. It’s a series. If you’re not in some series, even a completely imaginary one, you’re lost. I need my mediators to express myself, and they’d never express themselves without me: you’re always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own.[. . .] There’s no truth that doesn’t “falsify” established ideas. To say that “truth is created” implies that the production of truth involves a series of operations that amount to working on a material—strictly speaking, a series of falsifications.*³

Le Roy designated his solos as the sole material for “Retrospective” (with the exception of *Untitled* with an undeterminable number of human and nonhuman actors), and the explanation of this choice might help situate not only his work, but also what the posing of a problem means in terms of method. A significant part of the legacy of modern dance is conveyed through the solo dance: a historical mode of emancipatory subject-formation which nowadays becomes an intensive expression of individualist ontology. The coincidence of the body that is both the source, the material, and the instrument of movement binds the subject to her sense of self-identity through physical, emotional, historical, spiritual... experience. At the same time, this condition constitutes the organic regime of dance, the onto-historically foundational bind between the body

and movement. The most abundant format in dance performance, a mandatory test of artistry in education as well as a fetish item in a choreographer’s oeuvre, solo dance is also often the most inexpensive commodity traded in the art world nowadays.

Not only is the synthesis between the body and movement the choreographic idea that historically established modern dance throughout the twentieth century; it also continues to regulate recognition in the creation and reception of contemporary dance. Hence the moving body in contemporary dance elicits the following questions regarding its identification: Who or what is this body or movement? What is its expression? Why does the body move as it does? Le Roy’s first solo, *Narcisse Flip* (1994), and then his seminal solo *Self Unfinished* (1998)—but also his anonymous performance with man-sized yet depersonalized puppets, *Untitled* (2005)—disrupted the organic regime of the body-movement bind and called forth a series of inquiries altogether different from the representational “what is” question: How is this a body, if it is a body? How does the body moves as it does, if it moves at all, if there is movement to perceive? Where does the movement come from if it doesn’t originate from the body extending in space? Recognition here is hindered by disrupting the subjectivizing or objectivizing relations between the body and movement. The body and movement enter compositions in which they not only coalesce into one another but also differentiate themselves from each other. They are caught in disjunctive captures that cannot be qualified by the organic disposition of subject and object accounted for by self-expression or by the autonomy of movement qua object.

The solo in Le Roy’s oeuvre appears not only as a target of critical contestation, but also as a conduit for problematizing the expression of subjectivist self-identity through mirroring the objective identity of dancing movement. It also enacts on the base level—the conditions and relations of production—an ethics of undoing oneself in strict self-

reliance. The format of the solo in *Self Unfinished* marks a conscious effort on Le Roy's part to break with the protocol of authorial choreographic signature. The objective was not only to perform alone on stage, but to take responsibility for every aspect of the work in a test of artistic self-reliance. Le Roy was concerned with exploring what happens in a situation where to ask *anything* from *anybody* is untenable. This experiment was conducive to his concern to disfigure the body in and through movement. Hence *Self Unfinished* ensues from an experiment that originated in *Narcisse Flip*, where Le Roy explored transformations of the image of the human body by fragmenting and "dismembering" his own body by movement. When *Narcisse Flip* was interpreted as an image of a "schizophrenic body," the choreographer posed the question: "How to escape metaphor, if metaphor is the product of recognition; is recognition the dominant, if not the only, mode of attention?" He then reformulated it as a problem that deals with the perception instead of its object: "How will I not decide what is to be seen?" This involved setting a number of constraints which would act as conditions and terms in which the problem was posed. The first constraint was to work entirely alone, without an outside eye whose commentary could precipitate and fixate movements by giving them names. A more self-reliant method was to rely on one's own internal sense of weight, position in space, kinaesthesia. Viewing the result of these experimentations, Le Roy discerned the emergence of "zones of undecidability" where movement could be perceived and described in opposite senses: the body moving both forward and backward, right and left, up and down, one and two bodies, man and woman, human and nonhuman entity, living being and inanimate matter—or a multiplicity of unidentifiable monstrous creatures. These zones, as they now constitute the performance, appear as slices of the transformation process in which the spectator is caught in the perception of a paradox. In those moments, it is no longer the object of perception that is at stake; it is the very mode of perception, the modality

of one's viewing, that is the focus of attention. The solution to the problem ("How will I not decide what is to be seen") was to affirm non-identity through a practical orientation or experience of this thought. The solos that followed *Self Unfinished* continued a process of differentiation and alterity, of becoming-other as opposed to self-identity, of changing the register and tone of this questioning: in *Product of Circumstances* (1999) it is an autobiographical reflection upon the power of knowledge and the subject positions of authorship and apprenticeship in medical scientific research and contemporary dance; *Giselle* (2001) explores a smooth, tireless overflow of any-movement-whatever, the excellence and joy in overcoding and editing a great many human, non-human, social, gendered, sexual, imaged, spliced bodies and movements; *The Rite of Spring* (2007) subjects Le Roy to movements and gestures of a conductor caught up in the music he himself is supposed to prompt, a becoming which he can't master, which he can only strive for; *Product of Other Circumstances* (2009) explores the phantasm of becoming a butoh dancer in two hours of labor and performance. The multiplicity of figures and characters potentially constructed here grows exponentially, expanding farther in a qualitative heterogenesis with each new performer's picking out a body-image, a sequence of movements, or a story from this pool of material in "Retrospective".

Being one and many at once instead of a group of several individuals caught in so many Oedipalizing relations—a dance company—involves a collective dimension of working as *intercessors* or mediators, in Deleuzian terms. Apart from solos, Le Roy initiated and organized several occasions for actualizing collectivity among a large number of collaborators. This includes projects such as *E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S.* (1999) and *6M1L* (Six Months One Location) (2008). In these project-platforms, Le Roy's attention was focused specifically on organizing the conditions of research and collaboration for freelance artists and workers outside

of the institutional structures currently existing in Europe. Experimentation lies in drastically changing the economic and political conditions of freelance, project-based work. As participants in *6M1L*, a group of choreographers temporarily left the network of venues and festivals that had rendered their work nomadic, intermittent, and spectacle-oriented and instead gathered to share their projects and collaborate while working continuously in one location over a long period of time. While *E.X.T.E.N.S.I.O.N.S.* systematically subverted the division between the time of production and time of distribution and consumption by exhibiting the daily pace of work, a permanent rehearsal as performance, in a highschool gym in Berlin, *6M1L* attempted to overturn prevalent freelance styles of work and life by immobilizing workers in one place for a longer time while intensifying a single work focus and multiple collaborations. One of the by-products of the latter was Le Roy's *low pieces* (2008), a group performance that insists on having conversations with the audience at the end, during, and in the beginning of the performance, when it seems that there is nothing yet at stake. It stands as a test for every city and public institution which shows this piece: how will the audience react to starting the performance with a conversation between the performers and the audience without topic or goal. If we consider this with respect to extensive talking that goes on between the visitors and performers in "Retrospective", *low pieces* brings forth another significant aspect of Le Roy's recent work: conversation as a means to transform the performance into a social situation, responsibility for which lies on both sides of the stage.

A multiplicity of voices are found in this book: the performers in "Retrospective", whose testimonies and analyses attest to divergent concerns they engaged (Vera Knolle, Ben Evans, Aimar Pérez Galí, Volmir

Cordeiro, Carme Torrent), but also the artists, theorists and curators with whom Le Roy has been in an ongoing dialogue: Laurence Rassel who converses with Christophe Wavelet about the questions and challenges that this work poses to an art institution; Laurent Goldring who reflects on the vicissitudes of the status and concept of image when performance enter museum; Christophe Wavelet who elaborates a rich fabric of analysis and elucidation of "Retrospective"'s operations in the various contexts of its edition and heterochronous histories of art and dance in modernity; Corinne Diserens for whom "Retrospective" unfolds a fictive adventurous voyage of memory from Marcel Broodthaers to the lionness of the Liberian president Charles Taylor. And then the encounters further multiply with philosophical, art-historical and dramaturgical accounts into "Retrospective"'s capacity of provoking thought: in Claire Bishop's consideration of "Retrospective" with respect to exhibition as medium; Peter Osborne's discussion of the philosophical problem of contemporary art and how "Retrospective" qualifies for it; and Goran Sergej Pristaš's poetical inquiry into the notions of exposure, exposition and exhibition through the very dramaturgy of spectatorial position, attention and gaze. Finally, I would like to thank all authors for their committed response to the invitation to think along with "Retrospective", as well as Xavier Le Roy, who shared a generous portion of the labor of making the book with me. Many thanks to Vincent Cavaroc for coordinating the project, as well as Cyriaque Villemaux for the Gallic humor of his translation, William Wheeler for his impeccable style of editing the English text.

¹ Constant is a non-profit association, an interdisciplinary arts-lab based and active in Brussels dealing with free software, copyright alternatives and (cyber)feminism.

² On "agencement collectif d'énonciation," see Félix Guattari. "Les schizoanalyses," *Chimères* no 1: 1-21. available on the website http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeres/files/01chi01.pdf, accessed in December 2013.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 125.