

CHAPTER 51

ON “CONTEMPORANEITY” IN BALLET AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE: *JEUX* IN 1913 AND 2016

HANNA JÄRVINEN

Thinking through the approaches to contemporaneity in concert dance inevitably brings up the slippage between how “contemporary” is understood in common parlance and how different genres of dance understand it as a stylistic category. For the purposes of the present text, “contemporary dance” is one of the monikers for European art dance after the 1960s conceptualist turn, dance that is no longer following the perceived credo of either modern or postmodern (in the sense of post-Judson Dance Theater) dance. As a stylistic category, “contemporary” is thus invoked to create a distinction between what is happening now from what was before: “contemporary dance” or “contemporary ballet” draw on the commonplace significance of “contemporary” as indicating temporal simultaneity or co-presence in time. But in this sense, “contemporary” is always-already an evaluative notion, prescribing this form as the “new” and the “present” of dance, much as “modern dance” has done since the turn of the twentieth century.¹ However, as the first uses of the stylistic category recede from our present in time, a work of art is ever likelier to be labelled “contemporary” without being contemporary to us. A past dance that is seen as belonging to the stylistic category thus extends the temporality of “contemporary”, creating interesting tensions whenever the contemporaneity of past dance is under scrutiny.

As a historian, I had to consider the practical aspect of what “contemporary” signifies when, in 2015, the Finnish contemporary dance choreographer Liisa Pentti invited me to collaborate on what became *Jeux: Re-imagined* (2016). This was a piece for three young dance makers, Anna Torkkel, Maija-Reeta Raumanni, and Jouni Järvenpää. It evoked Vaslav Nijinsky’s 1913 choreography *Jeux* for which Claude Debussy composed the music and Léon Bakst designed sets and costumes. In dance history, *Jeux* is an oddity: on one hand, it is considered lost and forgotten, as after eight performances in Paris and London, it was never danced or taught by the three dancers involved in it—Tamara Karsavina, Ludmila Schollar, and Nijinsky—nor revived by the choreographer.² On the other hand, it has been found significant enough to merit reconstruction or re-enactment several times over, from Kenneth Macmillan’s balletic version for the 1980 biopic of Nijinsky directed by Herbert Ross through Millicent Hodson’s reconstruction (1996), to more recent creative reinterpretations by John Neumeier (2000), Wayne Eagling (2012), Dominique Brun (2013), and Helen Pickett (2015) for example.³

All the works referenced above reproduce the sexual innuendo in the narrative of the 1913 production, in which three young tennis players engage in a threesome. Following Nijinsky’s quip in his so-called *Diary* that the work was supposedly his former lover’s homosexual fantasy, the plot is also often rendered biographical.⁴ As Linda Nochlin has pointed out, to see art as this kind of direct translation of the personal life of the artist into the work of art rests on a misperception of what art is and what its practices entail.⁵ With *Jeux: Re-imagined*, we thus had to actively distance ourselves from both the plot and the biography of Nijinsky and from any idea of “remaking the 1913 original”. Hence, we settled on “re-imagining”, aware how each performed return strengthens the canonical position of the historical work it

references in a manner similar to reportorial reproduction of “classics” in any performing art strengthens their status as “classical” and worth repeating.⁶ After all, this is part of the tension between contemporary and canonical in dance.

Our general agreement that “reconstruction”, in the sense of recreating dance from the archive, was not the purpose of *Jeux: Re-imagined* arose in part from the kind of understanding of choreography in contemporary dance that dance theorist Bojana Cvejić has described as choreographing problems that actualize in performance.⁷ Maija, Anna, and Jouni became involved in the process because of their interest in this method and in working with Liisa, and by extension, myself. Liisa, Jouni, Maija, and Anna shared the choreographic credit, since much of the choreography emerged in performance out of dancers’ focusing on agreed-upon tasks. The five of us formed a core group that negotiated basic principles of the production.⁸

The choreographed problem in *Jeux: Re-imagined* dealt with transforming historiographical questions that arose in our studio practice into what became seven events, each with a particular assignment. Unlike in reconstruction that claims to know the past work in order to recreate it, our re-imagining focused on the not-known and the not-knowable in order to invite the audience to be with the problem of how the past of dance remains.

Prior to our collaboration, Liisa and I had discussed how bodies carry histories that are not linear but circular, as the dancing bodies return and reinterpret their past dances. Whenever a dancer dances a new choreography, their body dancing carries earlier dance techniques and choreographies, their practices of dancing and everything they have learned to assume about themselves as dancers. A dancer can both draw on this lived expertise for each new dance and never entirely ignore or bypass it. But what danced expertise might emerge in studio practice out of the imagery and notes of

a dance of which no corporeal expertise or experience has been directly transmitted from one generation to the next? In other words, could we somehow access the contemporaneity of *Jeux*, find its past contemporaneity relevant to contemporary dance in the stylistic sense?

Previously, I had thought of the 1913 *Jeux* as a dance that *represents* contemporaneity, but Liisa challenged me to see it as *contemporaneous* to us. In the repertory of the Ballets Russes, *Jeux* was an outlier. The first example of a work set in the future—purportedly, it depicted life 1920—and in an urban environment, its aesthetic was incongruous with what was expected of the Russians and of art dance more generally.⁹ In research, it has been overshadowed by Nijinsky's two more famous works that framed it: *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912), returning in the 1913 season as a still scandalous representation of a faun failing to catch nymphs, and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) that premiered a fortnight after *Jeux* in a performance where the audience's vociferous protests have become one mythical origin point for modernism.¹⁰ Whereas *Faune* was set safely in the Antiquity and *Sacre* allowed for easy reduction of art to racist stereotypes, *Jeux* was, as the choreographer himself put it, “a dainty trifle”, too ordinary and meaningless to merit much more than satire.¹¹

Yet, *Jeux* challenged both dancers and audiences. Almost plotless, it had little virtuosic movement of the kind audiences expected from the star dancers who performed in it.¹² Although the choreographer provoked his audiences by separating his style from ballet altogether, Russian critics discussed *Jeux* as an interesting new development by a young and ambitious ballet master attempting to renew ballet's movement vocabulary. With few exceptions, their French and British colleagues mainly expressed discomfort at the explicitly sexual spectacle stripped of escapist pretexts, and dismissed the work as meaningless and not even dancing.¹³ A key

difference between these readings relates to the notion that “free-form” or early modern dance “liberated” the body from the classical (ballet) idiom—a claim frequent enough to be canonical even today, and only plausible if these forms are seen in isolation from dance on popular variety stages.¹⁴

Liisa persuaded me to join her project by insisting that *Jeux* was the first contemporary dance in the sense we use the term today. *Jeux* did not “liberate” the body, it posed a problem: it challenged the spectator to find their way into idiosyncratic movement they had not previously encountered as art. Although this movement idiom relied upon the physical strength and ballet training of the superb dancers who performed it, it eschewed virtuosic feats and the prescriptive aesthetic of graceful, extended lines of the body and defiance of gravity with which ballet is so strongly associated even today. Simultaneously, *Jeux* broke apart expected narrative structure of theatrical representation, confusing the assumed rules of stage pictures.¹⁵ For Liisa, the images of *Jeux* recalled contemporary dance precisely where they *differ* from ballet’s emphasis on line, extension, verticality, and defiance of gravity: she pointed to how the dancers crouch, sit, or lie down on the floor, turn their backs to the audience, tilt their heads or wrists in seemingly awkward ways. Yet, in a collage with contemporary tennis players, they seem right at home.¹⁶ Unfortunately, in the aesthetics of 1913, everyday life was distinctly *not* art: the urban youth flirting next to a tennis court in *Jeux* met with a degree of incomprehension and hostility not directed at *grands ballets* of contemporary life shown on variety stages, such as Luigi Manzotti’s *Sport* (1897).

WHOSE CONTEMPORARY? ON HYBRID MARGINS

Liisa's insistence that *Jeux* was the first contemporary dance required me to think through what is meant by "contemporary" in dance and, specifically, ballet. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines contemporary as an adjective in two distinct senses: as temporal simultaneity (simultaneous, coeval) and as having the characteristic of the present period (modern).¹⁷ In 1897, Manzotti's work would have been both; fifteen years later, neither. Given this slippage in significance, Timmy de Laet has suggested that a distinction may be in order between dance that is contemporary and dance that is contemporaneous. He proposes that:

the contemporaneity of dance might consist precisely in being contemporaneous, as a coming together of times, rather than in its upholding of the label 'contemporary' as the primary token of being up-to-date and in pace with the present. [-C-]ontemporaneity can only be defined as a new period to the extent that it allows to look back on both modernity and postmodernity from the vantage point of a contemporaneous perspective that shows how the past continues to move on, in the multiple sense of moving with us, through us, and beyond us.¹⁸

In an art that is always-already *contemporaneous* in the sense that dance exists in the moment of performance, the specifics of what is labelled "contemporary" as a form or genre, are, as Chia-Yi Seetoo has argued, political choices that always-already connect to and contrast with tradition. The contemporaneity, like the earlier modernity of dance, is meaningless as a stylistic category or periodization except as defined against that which it is not—the not-contemporary (the not-modern).¹⁹ Cvejić, too, notes that the epistemological obsession with presentness and aesthetic value judgment in what is called contemporary dance reflect an opposition to historical

precedents (notably, modern dance) that this contemporary dance ostensibly criticizes.²⁰

So, what a century-old work could tell us of the nature of “contemporary” as a stylistic category? Thinking through qualia associated with contemporary dance in Europe in the late 2010s, it is clear that the virtuosity of small gestures and everyday movements in *Jeux*, the dancers standing and sitting and lying on the floor all resonate with American postmodern dance, the so-called New Dance in Britain and France—or in Finland—and even with certain European dance theatre forms.²¹ On the other hand, Nijinsky’s manner of choreographing to the musical score is far closer to many forms of modern dance (at least if one excludes Laban’s *Freie Tanz*, which explicitly separated dance from music). Similarly, the narrative (albeit slight), reliance on the sightlines of a proscenium stage for carefully planned poses and a particular relationality between audience and performers, and the use of ballet steps that, for example, the critic of *The Times* found in the choreography,²² all echo contemporary ballet’s manner of expanding the movement possibilities of ballet whilst retaining its technique and training as the foundation of the choreographic composition. In other words, just as contemporary critics saw *Jeux* as both in the continuum of ballet *and* as a negation of dance, from our perspective, it appears a hybrid with both the qualia of contemporary dance *and* those seen as “outdated”, not-contemporaneous.

As such, *Jeux* exemplifies how any stylistic categorization is artificial, a generalization post factum. Such categorizations acquire power through repetition, creating expectations of the works presented under such labels, which may or may not be in the interests of the dance makers themselves. In ballet, the terms “modern” and “contemporary” are often used almost synonymously; but in fine arts, literature, or music, “modern” is quite distinct from “contemporary”. “Modern” is not only a

matter of periodization, it is seen as requiring a particular kind of relationship to time distinct from “the contemporary”.

Given the slippage between contemporary as simply coeval and contemporary as particularly vanguard, it is reasonable to ask how long can “contemporary dance” remain contemporary? What happens in fifty years—will there be another label to indicate the work is cutting edge, a “post-contemporary dance”?²³ Although pertinent to dance makers, I feel that these discussions have less to do with a need to set present forms apart as a period or style than with the long-term connotations of “contemporary” itself. Contemporary is *not* a neutral adjective precisely because it relates to time and history.

In his definition of contemporary dance, the French philosopher Frédéric Pouillaude asserts that “contemporary” already signifies a particular kind of never-ending present tense of the event.²⁴ In contrast, the Dutch art historian Pascal Gielen has criticized contemporary art for creating, through its obsession with temporality, a constant state of flow that forbids any kind of social or political engagement in art. Whereas the historical avant-garde strove to be ahead of its time and to create a utopian future, Gielen claims that the idea of “contemporaneity”, especially in its apparent international and transnational form, deprives art of any notion of futurity and change. Instead of striving for something, contemporary art just floats, safe within the white walls of the gallery.²⁵ Gielen is, of course, making a generalization: many contemporary artists have left the gallery and the studio in part to respond to the political call for socially responsible art—a policy the British Arts and Humanities Research Council have aptly criticized,²⁶ whilst others feel, like Gielen, that art institutions themselves require an overhaul in the anthropocene.²⁷

Regardless of whether one sees dance as a fundamentally ephemeral art or not, contemporary connotes differently in a time-based art that does not produce lasting objects for historical contemplation in the manner that literature or fine art are assumed to do.²⁸ Yet, Gielen's critique points to political lacunae in Pouillaude's defense of the 1990s French dance makers of whom he uses the same liquid metaphors as Gielen does of contemporary art.²⁹ Pouillaude argues that American postmodern dance is not postmodern because it avoids the utter disappearance of historicity that he sees as paramount to the postmodern condition. Through this deliberate misunderstanding of Sally Banes's term "postmodern dance", Pouillaude can claim American postmodern dance as the last instance of modern dance. The new French dance, he claims, takes into consideration the coincidental contemporaneity in performance of the dance makers and audience members, contemporaries who are not in a hierarchical relationship but merely present in the event.³⁰ Yet, this co-presence is precisely what Gielen criticizes the notion of contemporaneity for—the production of a *coincidental* encounter where meaning remains on the level of the subjective experience rather than societal or political message, action, or effect. For Gielen, this kind of contemporary dance would be irrelevant, non-political, because political art requires more than a *coincidental* encounter: it requires questioning the institution that allows its emergence.

Working in Finland, in a hybrid, local variant of what is seen as this international trend called "contemporary dance", the historical inquiry in *Jeux: Re-Imagined* further required asking the question Joseph Roach raises and Seetoo elaborates about the limits of kinesthetic empathy in transnational contexts. Any aesthetic value judgment depends on familiarity created in a process of acculturation to local contexts. As Seetoo discusses, in the post-colony, these local contexts are

construed as a tradition or a past against which contemporary art is *more* contemporary simply by joining an international (Eurocentric) trend.³¹ The colonialist project of contemporary dance is, in fact, startlingly similar to that of ballet. As Thomas F. De Frantz has pointed out, advocates of contemporary dance often assume a shared universality of contemporary existence as well as a shared aesthetic of what kind of dance can qualify as contemporary. In this discourse, the researcher is a bourgeois globetrotter fluent in the concepts of a specific clique of poststructuralist (European, white, and male) philosophers and accessing the most recent of the contemporary in the international festival circuit. At the margin of this dance discourse, outside of the language games of hegemonic Indo-European languages, in a tradition invisible in textbooks, one therefore experiences the belated entry into modernity that Lepecki designates as characteristic of developing nations.³² In this context, *Jeux: Re-imagined* was not repeating the hegemonic—the Ballets Russes, Nijinsky, and all that—because Finnish (predominantly oral) histories of dance postdate their influence.

De Laet notes that Pouillaude's understanding of contemporaneity is a flattening of time, a homogenization of time and space to which globalized capital aspires. He contrasts this with André Lepecki's argument of stillness as enabling the multiple temporalities of dancing bodies that question the impetus to move, of mobility (of bodies and of capital) that is crucial to Eurocentric ideas of modernity and progress.³³ Like Seetoo and DeFrantz, I would criticize both models for excluding from "contemporary dance" the politically radical steps on the streets of Cairo or in the underground independent dance clubs of Shanghai, opting out of the capitalist logic of the global marketplace of "contemporary dance" as understood in television reality shows and the festival circuit alike—circuits that directly benefit from global

attention and ideals of dance as a “liberation” of the body.³⁴ Rather than see our entry into modernity—or to contemporary dance—as belated, I would ask what shifts our hybridity requires of the discourse? Performing in a European country with a complex relationship to its past as colony as well as colonizer,³⁵ it was perhaps appropriate that the *Jeux: Re-imagined* project sought to incorporate and re-imagine, not through claims to know and appropriate this past work, but rather through approaching its remains and the experiences of dancers we agreed we could not quite understand.

ON THE PRESENTNESS OF THE PAST: CREATING CHOREOGRAPHY

The parallel Liisa drew between the 1913 production of *Jeux* and contemporary dance drew my attention to how what is perceived as political in contemporaneity has changed. In 1913, the most lauded works of the Ballets Russes were all set in temporally and/or geographically distant places, and the critics in France and England were not expecting Russians to belong to their contemporaneity. In this sense, the urban, everyday city life in *Jeux* made it as politically as aesthetically awkward. Complaints of nothing happening in the work, of the lack of dancing and the ugliness of movements, even the moralistic and nationalist opinions of some French critics, could all be positively interpreted as a refusal to meet the Orientalist expectations of the audience. Russian critics certainly saw this reaction as evidence their foreign colleagues did not understand the art form.³⁶

Once Anna, Maija, and Jouni had agreed to Liisa’s proposal and created a schedule of production, the choreographic process of what became *Jeux: Re-imagined* began in the studio of Kutomo in Turku, in March 2016. The first week was structured around sharing my historical source materials on the 1913 *Jeux* through movement exercises. We used a shared cloud service, print-outs, and basic exercises I

had picked for thinking through the movement potential in descriptions of the choreography and in photographs and drawings of the work. Over the course of the rehearsals, the dancers, Liisa, and I all contextualized these with music, imagery, dances, and other sources. Nevertheless we were surprised by how much of the material developed in that first week ended up in the performed work.³⁷

Although the interest of dance makers in performative histories of their art form is well known, it is quite rare for a choreographer to invite a historian to collaborate in studio practice.³⁸ Part of this has to do with production schedules being incompatible with the pace of research, particularly historiography, which requires lengthy periods of archival investigation before hypotheses can be turned into research questions. Other concerns include who has the authority over the history of an art form and for whom, as well as the different interests of a dance maker from what historians are perceived to be interested in: a choreography is a repeated performance, perceived as always changing and unstable in how it signifies. A history, in contrast, is a text that simplifies the complexity of a lived situation into a linear narrative that claims to be “true” in its references to a past practice. The further the performance practice is removed from the scholarly endeavor, the more difficult bridging these gaps in how both “dance” and “research” are understood can be. Re-enactments of history and of past dance have frequently been criticized for excessive focus on creating experiences for the participant and for erasure of historical difference—the understanding of which is the part and parcel of the historian’s practice—in short, for popularizing the notion that people in the past were just like us but chose to wear funny clothes.³⁹

From the beginning, our question was how to access a work of which no living human being has any direct experience, and how could that work and the process of

accessing it signify in the present, for the dancers of today. In other words, when attempting to embody the positions of past dancers in the images remaining of the 1913 choreography, re-imagining aimed not at re-enacting the poses themselves or reconstructing a choreography around what can be known of the movements through the images. Rather, we emphasized alternatives, improvising to tasks, and retaining each performer's personal style of movement in an effort to avoid a prescriptive movement aesthetic that in reconstructions functions to mark the work as reproduction of the past author's fictive original. We trusted that a practitioner trained in a very different technique to that of 1913 can still imagine the past sense of contemporaneity in the sense of presentness, but we asked what, if anything, of those relevant contemporaneities could be discerned, or even imagined, out of the materials that remain?

We first tried out movement responses to descriptions and metaphors of action from Nijinsky's 1912 notes. Maija, Jouni, and Anna explored the space as I translated from Russian to English and Finnish. They called out words they found arose from their movement practice whilst Liisa acted as our scribe. In the second exercise, we tried out various poses from the photographs taken of the 1913 choreography for publicity purposes and gouaches drawn by Valentine Gross from her notes in the Paris performances of the work. Whereas the metaphor exercise was directed by intuition, trying to imitate the poses was mimicry. These poses were clearly selected to represent the choreography because they held a gist of something important, but the process of imitation revealed just how difficult deciphering the actual pose of each dancer truly was. As Jouni noted, the tilt of the head by a couple of degrees up or down completely changed how the posture felt and the affect it seemed to convey. The poses also held what Liisa called "potential for movement", almost to the degree

that the dancers were immediately drawn to improvise how to get into or out of the still moment in the image.

Next, each of the dancers developed what they found of interest into what we called “embodiments”—embodiment here being the form an image or concept takes in the body, not a movement phrase or choreographed sequence. They also combined these embodiments with the poses they found of interest in the images. As most of the choreographed events were task-based and improvisational, Jouni, Anna, and Maija first had to rehearse moving into and out of their chosen poses until they felt they had incorporated them into their own movement practice. This, too, was in contrast to how reconstruction assumes dancers’ bodies adapt to preconceived aesthetic dogma and fixed step choreography of the fictive original, and thus projects an understanding of the past as something that can be known. The experience of Maija, Anna, and Jouni as choreographers enabled them to keep to their distinctive movement styles regardless of how the others imagined the same postures or phrases. For me, the heterogeneity of their different styles of contemporary dance exemplified the heterogeneity of our interpretations of what remains of past dance, just as the tasks executed differently from one performance to the next emphasized the contemporaneity of each reiteration.

In practice, the methods of creating movement focused our attention, contributing to the relative speed with which the seven “events” of the choreographic composition came together. For a historian, participation in the rehearsal process raised questions about how I write history, what kinds of generalizations I make, and made me ask if such re-imagining could be used for pedagogy of dance and performance more generally. Recreating some of the exercises in pedagogical and

conference contexts, however, revealed the importance of period contextualization and choreographic aim, as well as issues of multiple levels of linguistic translation.

RE-IMAGINING AS A DESTABILIZING PRACTICE

Historian Reinhart Koselleck has argued that at any time, a particular “horizon of expectations” conditions what kind of behavior we see as possible in a given situation. As our contemporaneity shifts, so does what is acceptable. By utilizing what Joseph Roach has called kinesthetic imagination, and thinking of performance not as something singular and ephemeral but as a repeated scenario in the manner that Diana Taylor has done, a performative historiography emerges that does not attempt to fix the past into a singular (written or performed) narrative.⁴⁰ *Jeux: Re-imagined* attempted to reveal the possibilities that the ontological ephemerality of performance creates for shifting our understandings of the past of the art form. The corporeal practice of one’s own body emphasizes the present: the imitation of images or invention of movement is conditioned by what this body can do right now and what it can imagine doing—Koselleck’s horizon of expectations. For me, the concrete doing with the dancers in the studio shifted attention from narrating a history to how the past can become significant in the present, which is, somewhat paradoxically, similar to how the significance of history is always in the present, even if it purports to *represent* the past.

Unlike a reconstruction that claims to re-create the past as it really was, or re-enactment that focuses on creating an experience of being-in-the-past for the participants, re-imagining is always-already fictional, and eschews the power relationship in which a historical individual—a dancer or a choreographer—is wholly

subservient to the present-day author's agenda or idea of the past. Reconstruction and re-enactment often rely on conservative agendas seeking to preclude any plurality in historical interpretation. Both represent the past not only as knowable but as already-known; if this were the case, there would never have been any need for historical research on topics already covered. Re-imagining is performative also in the sense that it does not operate in the axis of true/untrue: there is no incorrect way to re-imagine, although there may be more or less felicitous ways of re-imagining. But the focus on the complexity of corporeal experience reveals, if anything, how little we can understand past bodies, as everything from the materiality of what we wear to how our bodies have trained in particular ways to our assumptions regarding the appropriate aesthetics of movement is quite simply different.

At the same time, *Jeux: Re-imagined* drew my attention to how little dance history tends to say of rehearsal processes, of the actual labor of dancers beyond the time spent in front of an audience, or their professional concerns.⁴¹ Thanks in part to Nijinsky, dance has become the art of the choreographer, and much of historical scholarship focuses on the names of the choreographic authors wherein choreography is the “script” of dance, even when this script is the proposition of tasks. The local and temporal specificity of movement practices is a means of resisting the homogenization of dance that takes place both in colonializing movements of global capital and in predominantly Anglo-American scholarship. By taking an example from a hegemonic form (ballet) and a canonized author (Nijinsky), our contemporary dance project rethought genre lines. What was shown to audiences sought to counter the idea that even a much-researched past work can be in any sense “known” to us in the present. By divorcing both significance and experience from knowing, the work

allowed the affective, spectral presence of the past work rather than claimed a relationship of power over this past as a reconstruction would have done.

In practice, we had to develop strategies to bring this “not knowing” into the experience of the audience. One such strategy were the short solos of each performer, in which they elucidated an issue close to their heart. Jouni began the second event by introducing the process and our relationship to the 1913 choreography, specifying which particular iteration of *Jeux: Re-imagined* this was, and thus drawing attention to how we tend to collapse past performances of what we call “the same” work. Later, Maija’s miniature lecture-demonstration concretely demonstrated the process of re-imagining words used in the manuscript of the piano score to describe the movement, which explicated how little we know of how dancers spoke of movement in 1913. Finally, in the sixth event, Anna reminisced about her late centenarian grandfather’s manner of speaking of the past as if it were always present. His lifespan exemplified how our distance from the dance we were re-imagining is not that long a time after all.

Anna’s solo segued into the final event that further emphasised not-knowing. In this event, seen in **Figure 1**, one of the performers settles a small distance from the audience with their eyes closed. Another comes to them and begins to whisper, inaudibly, but with a particular task, whilst the third moves in the space. At some point, the whisperer joins the dancer, then both depart before the standing person opens their eyes and departs, ending the work. What is being whispered is that which does not take place in this space, and the performers decide who takes which role at the beginning of that event.

[Insert Jarvinen-Fig1 here]

As with not hearing what the whisperer says, and not knowing the task at hand, another strategy to destabilise the audience's expectations was not seeing, not showing. Part of the Kutomo space was cut off by a curtain, making documentation difficult. We decided to use that: the performance continued regardless of where the dancers were. Some of the dancing was therefore not visible to the audience but it took place in a space through which the audience had entered and in which Anna had moved when they entered. We also placed images of the 1913 choreography on the walls of the foyer without any explanation or contextualization, so that when the dancers fleetingly assume these poses, audience members might recall having seen these images. The poses with more than one dancer did require a degree of co-ordination from the dancers. In order to avoid fixity in the representation, the event with most co-ordination—what we called “the drawing series”—also included different configurations of the same poses.

The three solos in particular appeared to some members of the audience as excessively pedagogical.⁴² However, like staging the foyers, their purpose was to contrast Mark Franko's famous critique that the most interesting aspect of reconstructing a past work—what materials or documentations have remained and how these are interpreted into dance—tends to remain on the level of texts in audience handouts rather than being performed and staged.⁴³ Rather than take the gaps in the archival resources as a hindrance to knowledge, re-imagining celebrates them as examples of the kind of not-knowing inherent to creative process.⁴⁴ This, too, arose from the orientation in contemporary dance towards posing problems, as in contemporary dance works, the process of creation and re-creation often continues throughout the performance history of a piece and beyond.

Because we are not the dancing bodies of 1913, we can never know exactly what it was like to dance in 1913. That does not mean those dances are irrelevant or unapproachable through the corporeal practices of today, at least as long as we make no claims as to the authenticity of either experiences or end results. I would argue that awareness of how our bodies are produced by past experience—by particular techniques, choreographies, and lived experiences more generally—is more difficult to reach if the technique of the past being evoked is easily assumed as already-known.⁴⁵ Yet, if anything, dance history shows vast changes in what qualifies as “dancing” or mastery of a particular technique, and the bodies dancing produced by today’s regimes of exercise, diet, hygiene, and so on, create very different kinds of bodies than the regimes used a century ago. By acknowledging our ignorance about past bodies in performance we can make visible the power relations involved in dance practice as well as in research, such as what is “contemporary” and why.

The very heterogeneity of what counts as “modern” or “contemporary” in various dance forms over the past century speaks of more than simple changes in what counts as the cutting edge in art. Rather than trying to delineate what in the present practice qualifies as avant-garde, attention to how presentness itself shifts in time can reveal instabilities in the power relations in the institution of art, the categorization of authors, works, and canons into “dated” and “vanguard”. This may perhaps destabilize the colonial legacy of the institution of art itself so that the bodies and practices too long relegated into the category of belated adoption of whatever is classified as new might instead be heard for what they are: contemporary, relevant, and fascinating.

Image Credits

[Jarvinen Fig 1]: *Jeux: Re-Imagined*. [Credit line: Photo ©Hertta Kiiski, Courtesy of Hertta Kiiski & Liisa Pentti +Co.]

NOTES

¹ Rosalind Krauss (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988)) on aesthetic style (and periodization more generally) as founded on similarity and repetitive sameness whilst creating an illusion of originality and difference to other styles; Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5-7.

² Diaghilev dropped all of Nijinsky's choreographies from the repertory of the Ballets Russes after his break-up with Nijinsky. In 1914, Nijinsky's season at the Palace in London was cancelled before *Jeux* was performed, and he also declined the position as the ballet master of the Paris Opéra, where Jacques Rouché apparently planned to revive *Jeux* as well. Further plans of revival appeared only after the exclusive rights to stage presentations of *Jeux* expired in 1917 and 1919 (Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 174-175). In 1920, Jean Börlin created his choreography based on Nijinsky's libretto for the Ballets Suédois (Bengt Häger, *Ballets Suédois (The Swedish Ballet)*, translated by Ruth Sharman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 15, 74). In other words, not only the choreographer but some of his contemporaries considered the piece anything but the puzzling failure it has been represented as having been in later literature.

³ The terminology with which performances of past works are referenced is by no means consistent in the field of dance. Re-making, reconstruction, re-performance, re-staging, and so-on imply different ideas of "the work" as well as degrees of reference

to and change in what is understood as “the work”, let alone “the original” thus referenced. See, for example, Stephanie Jordan, ed., *Preservation Politics: Dance Revived, Reconstructed, Remade* (London: Dance Books, 2000); Mark Franko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Of the choreographers here mentioned, only Hodson (in Millicent Hodson, *Nijinsky's Bloomsbury Ballet: Reconstruction of the Dance and Design for Jeux* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008)) claims to have recreated Nijinsky's choreography.

⁴ Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*. Translated by Kyril Fitzlyon, edited by Joan Acocella (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 206–207.

⁵ Linda Nochlin “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 149.

⁶ Beth Genné (“Creating a Canon, Creating the 'Classics' in Twentieth-Century British Ballet,” *Dance Research* 18 no. 2 (2000): 132-162) notes that “classical” is an assigned quality that allows works to be “presented as ‘timeless’ – removed from the vagaries of fashion and universal in their appeal”.

⁷ Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, 46–54.

⁸ Unlike Cvejić, for example, I did not choose to call myself a dramaturg as I work in an institution training professional dramaturgs. Research interviews with Liisa Pentti, Anna Torkkel and Jouni Järvenpää February 21, 2017; and with Maija-Reeta Raumanni March 3, 2017. See also Protopapa cited in Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, 7, 65.

⁹ Leonard Inkster made this clear in his review for the *New Statesman* July 5 1913, when he noted *Jeux* comprised elements not yet considered beautiful in themselves.

See Hanna Järvinen, *Dancing Genius: The Stardom of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 46–49, 214–215.

¹⁰ For example, Truman Bullard, “The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps*.” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music 1971), iii. Paradoxically, as Bullard shows, this reputation was due to a very calculated effort in contemporary reviews to exaggerate the scandal.

¹¹ Nijinsky in an interview in *Pall Mall Gazette* February 15, 1913. See also Hanna Järvinen, “Critical Silence: The Unseemly Games of Love in *Jeux* (1913)” in *Dance Research* 27 no. 2 (2009): 199–226; and “Stillness and Modernity in Nijinsky’s *Jeux*,” in *Discourses in Dance* 5 no. 1 (2013): 13–38.

¹² In her memoirs, Tamara Karsavina (in *Theatre Street: The Reminiscences of Tamara Karsavina* (London: Dance Books, 1981), 237 complained her role was opposed to her ‘normal shape’.

¹³ According to *Peterburgskaya gazeta* April 15/28, 1912, Nijinsky proclaimed his work was no longer ballet but an entirely new stage in the development of choreography, and he claimed to “apply to choreography the theory of Cubist painters”. (My translation.) On the reception of this “Cubism”, see Hanna Järvinen, “Critical Silence”; and “Stillness and Modernity in Nijinsky’s *Jeux*.”

¹⁴ For instance Timmy De Laet (“From Contemporary Dance to Contemporaneous Dance: Choreographic Re-enactment and the Experience of Contemporaneity After (Post-)Modernity,” in *Documenta: tijdschrift voor theater* 2016, no. 2: 64-89), 67-68 repeats this. See Genné, “Creating a Canon”; and Sarah Gutsche-Miller, *Parisian Music-Hall Ballet, 1871–1913* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015).

Russian critics tended to deride the Ballets Russes as an example of popular entertainment: Järvinen, *Dancing Genius*, 234–239.

¹⁵ Ben Brewster & Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially 8–13, 29, 35–38 on contemporary theatrical narration relying on choreographed pauses: stage pictures (tableaux) structured silent narratives and emphasized certain aspects of the plot. The action paused to structure itself, directing the spectators’ attention to specific actor(s) or parts of the stage, creating emphasis or tension, for example. Based on the manuscript notes of *Jeux* (Claude Debussy & Vaslav Nijinsky, “*Jeux*,” manuscript piano score from the Yale University Serge Lifar collection, accessed June 16 2007, [http://www.imslp.org/wiki/Jeux\(Debussy,_Claude\)_score_#03661](http://www.imslp.org/wiki/Jeux(Debussy,_Claude)_score_#03661)), Nijinsky no longer followed these expected rules but had the dancers pause in “wrong” places, repeatedly, or irrespective of the action.

¹⁶ See *The Sketch* June 25, 1913.

¹⁷ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40115?redirectedFrom=contemporary#eid>

¹⁸ De Laet, “From Contemporary Dance,” 86–87.

¹⁹ Chia Yi Seetoo, “The Political Kinesthetics of Contemporary Dance: Taiwan in Transnational Perspective” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gg5d9cm>), x: “‘contemporary dance’ is a relational concern from self-consciously disparate geocultural vantage points”. As such, it functions similarly to “classical” in deflecting criticism: Genné, “Creating a Canon”.

²⁰ Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, 4–6.

²¹ See Hanna Järvinen, “Democratic Bodies? Reflections on ‘Postmodern Dance’ in the United States and Finland,” in *Nordic Journal of Dance* 8 no. 2: 19–29 for a more detailed analysis.

²² *The Times* June 26, 1913.

²³ Mårten Spångberg ("Post-dance, An Advocacy." In *Post-Dance*. Danjel Andersson, Mette Edvardsen & Mårten Spångberg, eds., 349-393. s.l.: MDT, 2017) has suggested dance should be separated from choreography, giving room to "post dance", an art with its own epistemology and ethics capable of self-criticism.

²⁴ Frédéric Pouillaude, *Le désœuvrement chorégraphique: Étude sur la notion d'œuvre en danse*, (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. VRIN), especially 357–358.

²⁵ Pascal Gielen, "Institutional Imagination: Instituting Contemporary Art Minus the 'Contemporary'" (in Pascal Gielen, ed., *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), 11–32), 31.

²⁶ British Arts and Humanities Research Council, "The AHRC Cultural Value Project Final Report," accessed May 5, 2016.

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

²⁷ For example, BODYBUILDING:

<http://www.saarahannula.com/bodybuildingproject/exercises/>, accessed May 5, 2016.

²⁸ For example, André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 123–131 has criticized Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), especially 146, for designating melancholia as the affect of performance, produced by its ontological condition as ephemeral.

²⁹ It is as if the terminological fluidity of contemporaneity results in metaphorical association with liquids, just as modernity was associated with the fugitive and the fleeting, as in Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 13.

³⁰ Pouillaude, *Le désœuvrement chorégraphique*, especially 363–368.

³¹ Joseph Roach, “Kinesis: The New Mimesis.” *Theater* 40 no. 1 (2010): 2; Seetoo, “The Political Kinesthetics”, especially 17–18 on “contemporary” as transnational, *becoming contemporaneous with* the international field, 28 on limits of kinesthetic cross-cultural empathy in the understanding of dance, and 44 on aesthetic value judgment as conditioned by acculturation.

³² Thomas F. DeFrantz’s review of *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* by André Lepecki, *TDR: The Drama Review* 51 no. 3 (2007), 189–191. Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 126.

³³ De Laet, “From Contemporary Dance,” 76-77; Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 16.

³⁴ Rosemary Martin, “Dancing in the Spring: Dance, Hegemony, and Change,” in Gay Morris & Jens Richard Giersdorf, eds. *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 207–221, especially 216; Seetoo, “The Political Kinesthetics”, especially 143–144.

³⁵ Finland was part of Sweden until 1721/1809, and then part of Russia before declaring independence in 1917. The relationship of the Finns with minorities like the Sámi, with whom we share a strong linguistic (and non-Indo-European) relation, has been one of colonializing intent, which, like the complex colonializing desires of, for example, Finnish missionaries in Namibia, are usually excluded from the histories taught at schools or referenced in public discourse.

³⁶ See note 11 above.

³⁷ Research interviews with Liisa Pentti, Anna Torkkel and Jouni Järvenpää February 21, 2017; and with Maija-Reeta Raumanni March 3, 2017.

³⁸ See for example, André Lepecki, “The Body as Archive: Will to Re- Enact and the Afterlives of Dances,” in *Dance Research Journal* 42 no. 2 (2010): 28–48; Kate Elswit, “Inheriting Dance’s Alternative Histories.” *Dance Research Journal* 46 no.1

(2014): 5–22. Elswit (2014, 12) notes how there is a risk of ahistoricity in such projects that “risks strengthening, rather than mitigating, dominant narratives” even as they destabilize others.

³⁹ See Alexander Cook, “The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History,” in *Criticism* 46 no. 3 (2004): 487–496; Vanessa Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present,” in *Rethinking History* 11 no. 3 (2007): 299–312. For dance, see e.g. Elswit, “Inheriting”; De Laet, “From Contemporary Dance”.

⁴⁰ Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated by K. Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press; German 1979); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). A particular inspiration has also been Heike Roms’s project “What’s Welsh for Performance? Beth yw ‘performance’ yn Gymraeg?”, accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.performance-wales.org/>.

⁴¹ Other writers in this anthology refer to the studio as being a ‘closed’ space for experimentation. For example, see Janice Ross, Chapter 47 *What is a Rehearsal in Ballet?*

⁴² This was a comment Liisa received from a colleague after one of our Helsinki performances (private communication).

⁴³ Mark Franko, “Repeatability, Reconstruction and Beyond.” *Theatre Journal*, 41 no. 1 (1989): 56–74. For example, Hodson, *Nijinsky’s Bloomsbury Ballet*, xii reveals her 1996 reconstruction of *Jeux* did not include Nijinsky’s notes on the choreography (that is, Debussy & Nijinsky, “*Jeux*,”) nor many of the more descriptive reviews of

the choreography that appeared in the contemporary press—yet, the audiences of the reconstruction are led to believe what they see is based on meticulous research to the extent that the reconstruction has become a new “original” with which subsequent choreographies are then compared.

⁴⁴ See Leena Rouhiainen, “Coming to terms with artistic research.” *På Spissen* 1 (2015): 35–37.

⁴⁵ Maija in particular struggled with her ballet training in *Jeux: Re-imagined* as the ghost of the technique haunted also segments where she did not wish it to appear.