

SLEEK

Why the Art World Is Obsessed with Dance

Performers are confronting the differences between art and dance and upending aesthetic and political realities into the bargain.

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For years dance has held a largely ceremonial role in the arts, often being relegated to the opening and closing ceremonies of exhibitions, fairs and biennials. Traditionally, major retrospectives of this form at public institutions have been rare, and coverage in private art spaces even scarcer. But during the last two decades that's begun to change.

At the start of the new millennium, performance artists such as Tino Sehgal, Boris Charmatz and Jerome Bel began building new bridges between the world of dance, visual arts and theatre. Since then, the cross pollination of these disciplines has spawned a new generation of like-minded practitioners who were slowly introduced to the art world and are now enriching it with brand new concepts, materials and critiques.

Indeed, despite its fringe status, dance has a long and studied relationship with art that goes back to Picasso and pioneers such as Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti and Isadora Duncan (among others). This dynamic, however, has frequently been contentious. Art critics have often viewed non-classical dance as supposedly low culture, whereas performers have feared being perceived as pandering to the fine art industry.

Nonetheless, this resurgence is changing the status quo, and has sparked a slew of interest from galleries and museums. The way in which dance has been incorporated into visual art – like other forms of artistic production – has influenced this development, but alone does not explain it. Perhaps the real reason is socio-cultural. In today's society, social media and video content permeate nearly every aspect of our lives, art included. As Facebook updates and Twitter threads begin to replace TV soap operas and crime dramas, museums are responding with Instagram-able live art.

Dance is not just being staged in museums and galleries, either. It's being collected, despite the obvious problems this entails. For instance, in 2008, after complex and lengthy negotiations, MoMA notably bought Tino Sehgal's "Kiss", consisting of a performance of performance art's most famous kisses – meta indeed.

The precedent for dance as collectable consumable was, however, set much earlier. Although the history of these sales is not well documented, one notable example stems from 1994, when dancer and choreographer La Ribot sold her solo choreographies to a small group of collector friends.

Moreover, in her conscious effort to critique dance's subordination to fine art, La Ribot was a trailblazer for shaking up aesthetic hierarchies. What's different today is that dancers and performers are not just deconstructing this binary, but outright ignoring it, taking both practices into new realms. One illustration of this is the way in which dance has become a regular feature at galleries, the upshot of which is a correlative increase in that amount of criticism it receives in the art press. Major institutions are following suit. In 2012, the Tate Modern opened its Tanks, a space dedicated to live art, and this year Volksbühne Berlin's new director Chris Dercon will begin their dance-heavy programme featuring choreographer Boris Charmatz.

As a result of this critical and institutional attention, the medium has officially entered the archive, and therefore the mainstream. Even brands are happy to associate with it. At the end of "BMW Tate Live

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Exhibition: Ten Days Six Nights” this April, Ligia Lewis performed “Minor Matter”, while Tate curator Catherine Wood also chose to display dancer Trisha Brown’s early experiments, placing the series in a historical frame.

Performance artist and director Theo Adams agrees. Having begun his career in his teens, the Londoner’s productions mix theatre, performance art, dance and fashion. “[It used to be that] art was a lot less accommodating to theatricality than [it is] now,” he says. “Performance was much drier and people in the art world have opened up to that kind of thing. [Nowadays], we live in a space where definitions don’t matter. Fashion designers are showing collections at the V&A and you have musicians performing at the Tate. Everything is mixed now, how it should be. I don’t think we should pigeonhole practices and I don’t believe in the hierarchy of culture.”

Unlike the black box, the white cube also invites dance to explore itself historically while placing it in a larger context. Although it has its origins in performance, the word choreography is now frequently applied to installation and video work in order to explain the immateriality of the body. Even sculpture is taking notice: this year Skulptur Projekte Münster, the once in a decade show, features one of Alexandra Pirici’s choreographed performances.

Granted, Visual Arts has a tendency to cannibalise any other discipline it can get its hands on. Even so, this symbiotic development between the two aesthetic domains is making dance more critical, and to a certain extent, more democratic, while serving as the ideal medium to identity politics. From ballet’s early beginnings as a manner of perfecting the correct way to bow to a monarch, to vogueing as social liberation, dance has always had strong political associations.

Three prime examples of this are Adam Linder, Keyon Gaskin and Niv Acosta. In his live performances, choreographer and dancer Linder raises questions about the socio-economic conditions through which contemporary culture is produced, while creating new ways of measuring time. Keyon Gaskin uses anti-theatrical dance and performance to challenge rules of performer/spectator engagement, while questioning issues of race and masculinity. Meanwhile, Acosta develops dance productions with non-dancers that present the black body not for viewing, but to confront them with white audiences and their reaction. In this respect, Justin J Kennedy (who also starred in Sehgal’s “Kiss”) and Rashaad Newsome’s work could also be considered political. The movements of Kennedy’s tall, slender brown body are designed to provoke his white audience members, whereas Newsome brings New York gay ballroom culture to the gallery as a tribute to the radical culture associated with the black and Latinx queer communities of Eighties Harlem.

In one of his latest pieces at New York’s Recess, Brendan Fernandes reimagines the dancefloor as a space where tensions between freedom and oppression play out in reference to the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida. Previously trained as a dancer, Fernandes has been creating installation art for more than 10 years. “My practice consists of performances that are a mix of art and dance,” he explains. In his opinion, the increased focus on bodies in contemporary art is due to the number of artists reflecting on the prevalence of violence against specific communities and minorities. “POC [people of colour] queers are still looking for their rights and agency, while their bodies remain targets of social, political and real physical violence.” Fernandes believes that blurring the lines between cultural forms has the potential and power to confront prejudice. “In ballet, race and characterisation is a problem – as a young boy I was told that I would never be Romeo because I was brown,” he says. “And there are still also huge issues with regards to body ideals and the ways dancers train to achieve certain standards and desires.” However, he thinks that there is the possibility to challenge those norms via art.

In 2017 dance’s technicalities and at times extreme rigour are finally being taken seriously in the art world. And while the medium is still not quite at the top of the museum pecking order, the number of institutions showing support is increasing. Moreover, the merging of performance and art is offering new and sometimes radical aesthetic possibilities changing how we perceive the world, as well as the way in which identities and bodies function within it. The black box has finally entered the white cube, and it’s here to stay.