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Dancing the New Realities

The Beauty and a Beast of the War

Abstract

This essay is a record of the experience of the ongoing war in Ukraine, presented from the perspective of the contemporary dance artist Anton Ovchinnikov. Captured almost in statu nascendi, his moral dilemmas and difficult choices—personal and artistic—constitute a kind of a war diary, a record of a moment in history. The author also asks important questions about artistic responsibility, whose relevance resounds ever more strongly in the face of the continuing conflict. Joanna Szymajda's introduction offers a historical panorama of artistic phenomena and attitudes in response to the state of war. The author focuses on twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists, showing the variety of formats and aesthetics in the works of such major figures as Martha Graham, José Limón, John Cranko, and Rami Be'er, among others.

Keywords

war, choreography, dance, manifesto, protest, video dance, trauma, memory

Abstrakt

Tańczyć nową rzeczywistość: Piękno i bestia wojny

Tekst jest zapisem doświadczenia bieżącej wojny w Ukrainie, przedstawionym z perspektywy artysty tańca współczesnego – Antona Ovchinnikowa. Uchwycone niemalże *in statu nascendi* dylematy moralne i trudne wybory – życiowe oraz artystyczne – stanowią swoisty dziennik wojenny, zapis historycznego momentu. Autor zadaje także ważne pytania o odpowiedzialność artystyczną, których aktualność w obliczu nadal trwającego konfliktu wybrzmiewa coraz donośniej. Wprowadzenie Joanny Szymajdy ma zarysować historyczną panoramę zjawisk i postaw artystycznych w reakcji na stan wojny. Autorka skupiła się na prezentacji prac i postaw twórców z XX i XXI wieku, pokazując zróżnicowany format i estetykę dzieł między innymi tak znaczących postaci jak Martha Graham, José Limón, John Cranko czy Rami Be'er.

Słowa kluczowe

wojna, choreografia, taniec, manifest, protest, film tańca, trauma, pamięć

The following text by Joanna Szymajda discusses the relationship between dance and war and adds contexts to Anton Ovchinnikov's text. The English text of Anton Ovchinnikov follows below.

Dance in the Face of War

War, in terms of a humanitarian tragedy and a state of emergency, not only determines the future life of artists and their right to freely use their own bodies, but also redefines relations in the art world, the contexts of reception, and the status of works. But paradoxically, while feeding on individual dramas, forced migration, and flight, war can also contribute to the spread of new phenomena and the evolution of ideas around the world.¹ This is exemplified by the stories of Jewish female dancers who began their careers in the interwar period, presented here by Małgorzata Leyko. Moreover, the international dance scene is also full of similar examples from other countries.

Dance history itself is also full of symbolic acts responding to the tragedy of war, from performances depicting suffering and trauma, created in tribute to victims of conflicts, to protests engaging the body in public spaces in group choreographies of resistance, to conceptual reworking of facts, such as figures, maps of conflicts, images of battles, and so on. In the following brief overview, I will bring up examples of the reactions and positions that male and female artists have taken towards the act of war. I will also briefly introduce the extra-artistic purposes that dance can serve, either as a form of resistance or as an element of military strategy.²

Manifestos

The classic form of antiwar artistic expression is choreographic manifestos, which I will interpret here as works of solemn character, with a universal, emotional message, free of pathos. Numerous notable artists of the twentieth

¹ See, among others, Tomasz Majewski et al., eds., *Migracje modernizmu* (Łódź: Officyna, 2014).

² In this text I focus on the relation between dance and war; nevertheless, the domain of the political involvement of dance as a form of resistance and protest is much larger. Examples of such are given by, among others, Anka Herbut in a series of publications under the collective title *Ruchy oporu* (Resistance movements), published on Dwutygodnik.com. In addition, I do not cover here topics related to the choreography of military parades, the training of soldiers, entertainment for soldiers, traditional war dances, or the like, which are described extensively in related literature. For recent developments, see Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf, eds., *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The Green Table by Kurt Jooss, Łódź, 1972.
Kazimierz Wrzosek as Death, Zbigniew
Sobis as The Profiteer



PHOTO: JERZY NEUGEBAUER © THE GRAND THEATRE IN ŁÓDŹ

and twenty-first centuries created them, but in this text, we will focus on the early Modernist trends, in which the expression of individual and collective emotions was central, which was particularly suited for the aestheticizing of suffering and sadness.

Totenmal (1930) by Mary Wigman, the main representative of *Ausdruckstanz*, could be regarded as one of the first manifestos of this type. It is a group work dedicated to the memory of the soldiers of World War I, performed to a poetic work by Albert Talhoff, composed for a movement choir and a speech choir. Yet the performance, as Susan Manning argues, “reveals a coherent ideological strategy, a strategy that can be termed protofascist,”³ which, to some extent, foreshadows Wigman’s later succumbing to Nazi propaganda and at the same time undermines the work’s humanistic dimension.

The most famous anti-war manifesto of German modernist dance, which is also a satire on the world of politics, is Kurt Jooss’s *The Green Table* (1932)—a theatricalized *danse macabre*. It can be interpreted as a choreographed morality play, clearly pointing out the sources of evil, namely political gamesmanship

³ Susan Manning, “Ideology and Performance between Weimar and the Third Reich: The Case of *Totenmal*,” *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 2 (1989): 212, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207860>.



The Green Table by Kurt Jooss, Łódź, 1972. Kazimierz Wrzosek as Death, Ewa Wycichowska as The Young Girl

and the decision-makers responsible for them, and the resulting true social consequences—the separation of families, loss, suffering, and death. The plot unfolds in a dozen scenes, featuring a number of archetypal characters—such as the Soldier, Mother, Young Girl—while all scenes are dominated by the main figure—Death, danced in the original version by Jooss himself. This is an example of a performance whose substance is constantly being revised, aided by the fact that a choreographic notation has survived, which is being staged to this day. In Poland it was played in Łódź in 1972 and in Warsaw in 2014.⁴

The rise of the Nazi movement was addressed not only in Europe, but also overseas, among others, by Martha Graham's evening performance of the 1936 *Chronicle*. Although the choreographer works here with symbolic, universal meanings, the performance can at the same time be considered a very personal artistic statement, which is further emphasized by Graham's rejection of the German government's official invitation to participate in the festival accompanying

⁴ See documentation of the performance on the website of the Digital Museum of the Grand Theater in Łódź, <https://cyfrowemuzeum.operalodz.com/ballet/zielony-stol/>, accessed November 9, 2023.



PHOTO: JERZY NEUGEBAUER © THE GRAND THEATRE IN ŁÓDŹ

The Green Table by Kurt Jooss, Łódź, 1972. Krystyna Zalewska as Mother, Kazimierz Wrzosek as Death

the 1936 Berlin Olympics.⁵ A year later, the artist also created the solo piece *Immediate Tragedy: Dance of Dedication* (1937) in tribute to the women who fought during the Spanish Civil War,⁶ or *Deep Song* (1937), dedicated to the memory of the victims of the same war.

José Limon, another of the great modern dance masters, was an American choreographer with Mexican roots, who repeatedly evoked the subject of war

⁵ Martha Graham's full response to the invitation sent by the Nazi government was as follows: "I would find it impossible to dance in Germany at the present time. So many artists whom I respect and admire have been persecuted, have been deprived of the right to work for unsatisfactory and ridiculous reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, with the regime that has made such things possible. In addition, some of my concert group would not be welcomed in Germany." Quoted in "Spectre," Martha Graham website, <https://marthagraham.org/portfolio-items/spectre-1914/>, accessed October 29, 2023. Invitation scan available as part of the virtual exhibition "Politics and the Dancing Body: Finding a Political Voice," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/politics-and-dance/finding-a-political-voice.html>, accessed October 29, 2023.

⁶ John Martin, "The Dance: New England Festival Notes—Martha Graham Premiere," *New York Times*, August 15, 1937, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ih5.200154006/>.

in his works. Just as Graham, he too looked with compassion at the civil war in Spain (*Danza de la Muerte*, 1937) and the bloody history of the colonization of Mexico (*La Malinche*, 1949). Whereas in *War Lyrics* (1939)—a duet with May O'Donnell—he focused on a woman's situation in wartime, *Deliver the Goods* (1944) was devoted exclusively to the fate of the soldiers. However, one of his best-known works, oscillating around this thematic axis, and a turning point in his career, was *Missa Brevis* (1958), to the music of Zoltan Kodály. This choreography was created after Limón's trip to Central Europe on a US State Department tour serving as a cultural ambassador. The set was an image of a bombed-out Budapest church, while the choreography was described as an abstract dance with a high dramatic component, expressing a blend of complex emotions consisting of compassion, anger, and guilt. The performance was an homage paid in particular to the Polish nation and its determination for survival after World War II.⁷

Political and social involvement was also a part of Lester Horton's work, resulting in such works as *The Dictator* (1933), voicing the choreographer's concerns about the spread of fascism, and one of the first choreographies to commemorate the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto, simply titled *Warsaw Ghetto* (1949). This work was created with the choreographic collaboration of Jewish dancer Bella Lewitzky. The story's central character is a woman and her frantically terrified child, with the action taking place on the rubble of Warsaw's Jewish district.⁸ *Warsaw Ghetto* was praised by critics for its political and artistic sophistication.

Anna Sokolow, another representative of American modern dance, an artist of Jewish descent and involved in leftist artistic and post-political movements, was particularly sensitive to the fate of the Jewish community in Europe. Her numerous works dealt with the subjects of exile and the associated suffering, but also with the condemnation of war in general (*Slaughter of Innocents*, 1939). Her most famous was *Kaddish*, a solo performance to music by Maurice Ravel, created in 1945 while the artist was in Mexico. In the performance, Sokolow dances while wearing a phylactery (tefillin) on her shoulder, which is part of a traditional Jewish men's prayer ritual.⁹

⁷ Lynn Garafola, "Works Choreographed by José Limón," in *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir*, ed. Lynn Garafola (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 133–151.

⁸ Elvi Moore, "Bella Lewitzky: A Legend Turned Real," *Dance Chronicle* 2, no. 1 (1978): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472527808568716>.

⁹ Henia Rottenberg, "Anna Sokolow: A Seminal Force in the Development of Theatrical Dance in Israel," *Dance Chronicle* 36, no. 1 (2013): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2013.757461>.

Trauma and Memory

For many years after World War II, the Holocaust remained a repressed element of collective memory among the Jewish people, in part because the newly established state of Israel espoused values that had no place for mourning and trauma. The subject of the Holocaust was more widely taken up in public discourse with the Eichmann trial in 1961.¹⁰ The fact that the first choreographic works dealing with the subject of the Holocaust were created in countries far from Europe and Israel, and often by artists who were not personally affected by the tragedy, as was the case with the previously mentioned Lester Horton, was also a consequence of the repression of trauma. Meanwhile, an example of how difficult it turned out to be to work through personal history was the case of Pola Nireńska, whose family was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto and who created a play about the Holocaust, in exile, in the United States. *Whatever Begins Also Ends: In Memory of Those I Loved... Who Are No More*, later known as Holocaust tetralogy, was created in several phases between 1982 and 1990. In it, the artist evokes realistic images of the Shoah, emphasizing the individual experience of the female protagonists. In *Dirge*—reminiscent of a death march—Mother consciously leads her daughters to inevitable death. In contrast, the last part of the series—*Train*, uses images of railway cars and gas chambers. The Mother is witnessing the death of her children and her own mother, praying with words full of grief and reproach. Eventually, she also perishes.¹¹ New York critic Alan M. Kriegsman phrased the relevance of these choreographies as follows:

The tetralogy begins with a family closeted in warmth and affection, and ends with the same clan a morbid heap of lifeless bodies. It is an unforgettable metaphor for the numbing finality of genocidal extermination, wherein a whole people disappear without a trace. And for this very reason, keeping alive those traces represented by Nireńska's creation is not just an artistic but moral imperative.¹²

¹⁰ See Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511497537>.

¹¹ Rima Faber, "Ghosts of the Past: The Creation of Pola Nireńska's Holocaust Tetralogy," *Dance Today*, no. 36 (2019): 34–38. For more on Pola Nireńska biography and works, see Weronika Kostyrko, *Tancerka i zagłada: Historia Poli Nireńskiej* (Warszawa: Czerwone i Czarne, 2019); Karen A. Mozingo, "Choreografie nieobecności: Wspomnienia Holocaustu w pracach Poli Nireńskiej," trans. Agnieszka Kamińska, *Kultura Enter* 60, no. 6 (2014), <https://kulturaenter.pl/article/choreografie-nieobecności-wspomnienia-holocaustu-w-pracach-poli-nireńskiej/>.

¹² Kriegsman's review in the *Washington Post*, July 29, 1990, quoted in Faber, "Ghosts of the Past," 37.

On the day of the premiere, Nireńska was already eighty years old. Two years later she committed suicide.¹³ Some parts of the Tetralogy, most notably the *Dirge*, lived to see revivals after the artist's death, including by Jacek Łumiński and the Silesian Dance Theater (1997).

In Israeli dance circles, the subject of the Holocaust made its first appearance thanks to Anna Sokolow, who, after visiting Israel a number of times, founded the short-lived Lyric Theatre company (1962–1964). However, *Dreams* (1961), performed by the company, met with an ambivalent reception, and did not gain wider acclaim; nevertheless, it was revived by Batsheva in 1978.¹⁴ In contrast, John Cranko's *Song of My People—Forest People—Sea* (1971), created for the Batsheva Dance Company, was a groundbreaking work in this area. The company had been founded in 1964, and by the time Cranko was invited, it already had international renown, but what is significant is that *Song of My People* was the first Jewish-themed performance in the company's history. Cranko, a choreographer of Jewish descent, born in South Africa but working mainly in Germany, decided to build the work around four poems by Uri Zvi Greenberg, written in Hebrew and dealing with the violence and persecution of the Jewish people. At the same time, they formed part of a soundscape that was accompanied by several musical compositions by Jewish artists—percussion pieces performed by Ruth Ben Zvi, an excerpt from a classic work by Erich Walter Sternberg, and a song by Dubi Zelzer. In Israel itself, the performance evoked strong emotions, the audience included Holocaust survivors, and the creators recalled powerful images on stage—the scenes included people being killed and piles of dead bodies.¹⁵

In my suggested typology, *Song of My People* is an example close to manifesto performances. However, it differs from others in its relation to the category of time, as Cranko reaches for particularistic content within the space of collective memory. One can venture to say that—in psychoanalytic terms—this performance, after closing the stages of displacement and mourning, opened the door to a number of future choreographies dedicated to the Holocaust that were created in Israel from the 1970s onward. However, it was not until 1994's *Aide Mémoire*, choreographed by Rami Be'er and performed with his company the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, that such a work gained international

¹³ See Alicja Iwańska, "Pola Nireńska, człowiek i dzieło: Taniec z przeszłością," in *Polskie artystki awangardy tanecznej: Historie i rekonstrukcje*, ed. Joanna Szymajda (Warszawa: Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, 2017), 121.

¹⁴ Rottenberg, "Anna Sokolow," 48.

¹⁵ Liora Bing-Heidecker, "How to Dance after Auschwitz? Ethics and Aesthetics of Representation in John Cranko's *Song of My People—Forest People—Sea*," *Dance Research Journal* 47, no. 3 (2015): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767715000339>.

Aide Memoire by Rami Be'ér, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, 1994



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acclaim and the status of a canonical dance work dealing with the topic of the Holocaust, albeit not in a direct way and in a non-factual setting. Be'ér belongs to the second post-Holocaust generation, the one that was able to break the silence of witnesses and victims. The performance is dominated by a vast, moving set made of wooden panels, which fills the stage space with obstacles that the dancers must face, such as walls, crevices, holes, and traps. The soundscape is created by the use of train sounds. Yet the performance does not evoke a sense of danger, nor does it evoke scenes of martyrdom; it is rather a testimony to postmemory—the deep emotions experienced by those who did *not* experience the trauma, but who have inherited it.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gaby Aldor, "The Borders of Contemporary Israeli Dance: 'Invisible Unless in Final Pain,'" *Dance Research Journal* 35, no. 1 (2003): 87–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767700008780>.

Protests

Future generations of artists and creators not only tackled memory and loss, but also actively protested against military actions or the involvement of their governments in war conflicts. Johann Kresnik's anti-military and anti-Nazi stance is commonly known, and he manifested it both in his personal life, participating in street demonstrations, and in his provocative *Tanztheater* (dance theater) performances, which were often a commentary on current political events.

The works of American artists from the postmodern dance movement also provide us with examples. The work of these artists came at a time of particular intensity with regard to activist movements. For example, in New York during Angry Arts Week, a protest action directed against the Vietnam War, which lasted from January 29 to February 5, 1967, featured more than five hundred artists.¹⁷ During that event, Yvonne Rainer performed a version of her famous *Trio A* (1966) as *Convalescent Dance*, using her own body's weakness, after her hospital visit, as a critical tool. A different version of *Trio A*, also in protest against the Vietnam War, used the American flag as the performers' only clothing. Thirty dancers protested the same cause in *War* (1970), while in *Street Action* (1970) a group protested the US invasion of Cambodia in a choreographed performance on the streets of New York City. Among the artists of this generation who were particularly engaged was also Steve Paxton. One interesting case is when an attempt to censor his performance would be transformed into an activist performance. In *Beautiful Lecture* (1968), Paxton would usually show a screening of *Swan Lake*, performed by the Bolshoi Ballet, paired with a porno movie, at which time he himself made only small gestures standing in the space between the two screens, while pretending to deliver an exposé on the ballet-sex relation, where in fact, the sound was from a recording. When Paxton was forced to remove the porno movie during a screening at the New School—an act of censorship—he replaced it with a documentary about the war conflict in the Republic of Biafra, highlighting the pornographic obscenity of war.¹⁸ In *Air* (1973), on the other hand, two different videos were shown simultaneously on two TV screens: a televised speech by Richard Nixon about the Watergate political scandal and a video collage consisting of ocean views, another Nixon

¹⁷ For more on the protests of the art community in the US in the 1960s, see Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 63–64.

speech, and shots of dancing feet.¹⁹ Thus, his selection of the Biafra video and Nixon's speech are examples of Paxton's use of political documentaries, a procedure that, along with showing ordinary activities and physical states, was initially considered by some critics to be off-putting, even distasteful, linking the theater and the outside world too closely. Another example of his involvement is his collaboration with Wintersoldier, an organization of Vietnam War veterans. This resulted in a performance called *Collaboration with Wintersoldier* (1971), in which a video on Vietnam, made by Wintersoldier, is projected onto the bodies of two performers, dressed in jumpsuits and suspended head down, which evoked imagery of torture.²⁰

A sign of such a form of artistic protest, also using a para-documentary treatment, while filtered through the aesthetics of large-scale performance, is present in *Three Atmospheric Studies* (2006) by William Forsythe. Composed in the form of a triptych and providing a commentary on the war in Iraq, the work is considered to be the artist's single most politically engaged work. Forsythe's work is based on Lucas Cranach's sixteenth-century painting *The Crucifixion*, as the choreographer was interested in the visual, and therefore semantic, synchronicity of this painting and a 2005 Reuters photo documenting the conflict in the Middle East. In the foreground of this photograph, which served as the visual frame as well as a dramaturgical anchor of the performance, four men carry a corpse, while in the background the form of a cross takes shape out of the ruins of a bombed building, and a cloud of smoke and fire appears in the upper left corner.²¹ In the show, accounts of persecuted civilians are quoted, interrogation scenes are staged, and direct references to Bush's policies appear, including the figure of Condoleezza Rice, at the time serving as Secretary of State, giving a speech in a booming voice. The final scene of this dance triptych is dominated by shouts, creating a "cloud" in the audiosphere analogous to the one in the Cranach painting or the Reuters photograph. The performance closes with a lethargic image of war, using the bodies of the dancers.²²

Contemporary choreography and dance bring new forms of active protest engaging the body in motion, these including street raves or flash mobs, which

¹⁹ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 64.

²⁰ Joanna Szymajda, "Steve Paxton – choreograf," *Kultura Enter* 6, no. 1 (2009), <https://kulturaenter.pl/article/steve-paxton-choreograf/>.

²¹ Zob. Lucia Ruprecht, "Crossmapping Grief in William Forsythe's *Three Atmospheric Studies*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 50, no. 3 (2014): 289–304, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cquo24>

²² Joanna Szymajda, *Estetyka tańca współczesnego w Europie po roku 1990* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2013), 242–243.



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Aide Memoire by Rami Be'er, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, 1994

are usually short, often spontaneous actions performed in public spaces. A recent example is an international dance action involving the formation of small choreographic forms to the sounds of an air raid emergency signal, in support of Ukrainian civilians. Anton Ovchinnikov writes more extensively about this action in this publication.

Confrontations

The freedom to protest is framed within the democratic environment, which by definition allows people to demonstrate their views in a safe environment. By contrast, in both dictatorships and de facto war zones, where all democratic rules are suspended, protest also becomes a confrontation—an action laden with real, physical danger.

One such example would be the traditional *dabke* dance done on the streets of Damascus, taking on the form of a radical performative trophy, becoming

a sign of reclaiming the city's streets by protesters opposed to the Syrian dictator.²³ In occupied Palestine, on the other hand, the very practice of traditional Arab dance forms becomes a way of resistance, exposing male and female dancers to very real danger.

There is also a confrontational nature to dances performed by the occupying soldiers to symbolically seize territory or humiliate the other side in the conflict. Such situations occurred in Palestine, when Israeli soldiers danced the Macarena in the streets of cities or joined in uniform in an Arab wedding dance.²⁴ In this perspective, it is interesting to note that dance was used for many years in the training of Israeli male and female soldiers as a form of body discipline.²⁵

Documentaries

One more type of creative stance towards violence and war is adopting a para-documentary perspective, which is fundamentally different from the modernist manifestos cited at the beginning of the text, but evokes equally strong emotions. A classic example is Ai Wei Wei's film *Human Flow* (2017), featuring monumental choreographies performed by crowds of refugees who have been forced to migrate due to war, poverty, and the climate crisis.

The historically established format of using dance as entertainment for soldiers is provocatively thematized by Erna Ómarsdóttir and Emil Hrvatin in their performance *We Are All Marlene Dietrich FOR* (2005), in which they attempt to create an actual entertainment program with elements of theater, dance, and song for soldiers stationed at UN peacekeeping bases, a program "as global and multicultural as the peace forces themselves."²⁶ The performance confronts the viewer with a certain ethical stake, as it balances between a real and a fictional event, with no clear moral overtones or attempts to convince the audience of a particular rationale (peace/war).²⁷

The listings of dry facts, numbers, names, dates, places, and maps, refined by personal stories or processed by a computer program, while striving for

²³ Miriam Cooke, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3-4.

²⁴ Melissa Melpignano, "A Necropower Carnival: Israeli Soldiers Dancing in the Palestinian Occupied Territories," *TDR: The Drama Review* 67, no. 1 (2023): 186-202, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000910>.

²⁵ Melpignano, "Necropower Carnival," 188.

²⁶ Tomaž Toporišič, "Strategies of (Political) Subversion in Contemporary Performing Arts," *Maska: The Performing Arts Journal* 92/93 (2005): 68.

²⁷ Toporišič, "Strategies of (Political) Subversion!"

objectivity or even neutrality, rarely leave the viewer indifferent. Of the numerous artists and creators tackling these subjects, Arkadi Zaides—a Belarusian-born Israeli choreographer currently working in Belgium—is worth noting, because of the comprehensive nature of his work, directed at creating a constantly updated archive of contemporary conflicts, wars, and the situation of refugees.²⁸ In one of his solo projects, *Archive* (2014), Zaides investigated the impact of acts of violence on the body's somatic responses carried out against Palestinians in the West Bank by Israeli fundamentalist settlers. The performance combines two parallel elements: a video from an archive collected by B'Tselem, an organization that documents human rights violations in the occupied territories, and a live performance by the artist, in which he embodies the violent, physical, and vocal gestures of Israelis, as recorded on video.²⁹

French choreographer Rachid Ouramdane's works can be placed in the documentation paradigm as well. In *Des Témoins Ordinaires* (*Ordinary Witnesses*, 2009), the artist uses the accounts of twelve refugees, of different nationalities, who have experienced torture in their countries, including those resulting from wars. In *Loïn...* (*Far...*, 2008), which looks at the wars in Algeria and Vietnam, the artist's mother, in a video, recounts how her father was tortured during the war in Algeria and then murdered along with other family members. The backdrop consists of a screen and an installation made up of radio speakers placed on the floor, the type from which propaganda speeches are publicly delivered in Vietnam to this day. They are connected by cables that become tangled, forming the shapes of puddles that are filled with fake blood. Violence in this piece is not so much depicted as reported on, as the choreographer has said himself:

I'm not interested in war itself. I'm not here to denounce anything. Wars are part of the history of Western civilization. I'm concerned with what happens afterward. If I had made an angry piece, I would be confronting violence with violence.³⁰

The twenty-first century is witnessing a change in the nature of war conflicts: they are becoming more amorphous, hybrid, and volatile, they are constantly

²⁸ See the artist's website, <https://arkadizaides.com/>, accessed October 29, 2023.

²⁹ Ruthie Abeliovich, "Choreographing Violence: Arkadi Zaides's Archive," *TDJ: The Drama Review* 60, no. 1 (2016): 165–170, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/611248>.

³⁰ Quoted in Valerie Gladstone, "Dancing with the Dark," *The Boston Globe*, May 15, 2008.



The Traces, directed and choreographed by Tetiana Znamerovska, 2023

and instantly mediatized, borders and enemies are more difficult to identify, and the distinction between a state of war and a state of peace is becoming less clear than in the previous century. So, the nature of the actions undertaken by artists confronted with the state of war is also changing. This brief overview of potential stances expands to include hybrid forms of actions stretched over time.

Due to the recent brutal collapse of the existing public sphere and the reality of the experiences of immense suffering and death, artists in Ukraine have been confronted with personal (fight or flight?), political (if only in terms of language, for some of them have been speaking Russian until now), and artistic (create, keep silent, if create, then how and what?) choices. These choices are often difficult for artists who use their bodies as a tool of expression.

The following text by Anton Ovchinnikov, a Ukrainian choreographer and dancer with a background of service in the Russian army, is an attempt to convey the state of mind and body in situ, in a situation where decisions have to be made without the comfort of physical or psychological detachment. Let's treat this text as an experience of a living archive of a body, a body in a state of war.

Appendix

This essay was originally written in October 2022 and updated in August 2023 (editors' note).

Anton Ovchinnikov

Dancing the New Realities: A Beauty and a Beast of the War

On February 24, 2022, all of us living in Ukraine and awakened by missile explosions realized that our lives will never be the same again. This understanding fell upon us all at once with the whole destructive weight of the missile strikes, each of which we felt in our hearts. It will take us time to understand what we have lost and how to look at it from a distance. But for now, this time is not enough. Every day of the war, the wound to the Ukrainian body becomes deeper, and the skin around it becomes rougher and tougher. Every new day, we throw away a part of yesterday's selves into the wastebasket of history and try to find today's selves. Can we imagine right now what we will become tomorrow?

This is a question that, unfortunately, there is no way to answer yet. There is no stable ground underfoot, and what ground exists is so unsteady and unreliable that setting foot upon it seems even more dangerous than to linger in a high-rise apartment even after an air raid alarm has been sounded. "There is no future." This is a statement that no longer seems utopian. It exists and it fits perfectly into quantum physics without serious consequences. It exists but is absent at the same time. We came close to it and tried on Theodor Adorno's saying that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today."³¹

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

And looking at ourselves in the mirror, we try on the question “is it possible to dance after Bucha?”

The answer to this question is complex and has too many vectors to simplify even to a single paragraph. Just like contemporary dance itself, which takes on a variety of forms, defending its sincerity, so all the choreographers in Ukraine who believe that they are engaged in “contemporary dance” interpret the “contemporality” of dance too differently for themselves. For the last decade, since 2010, when we started holding the only regular dance festival in Ukraine, Zelyonka, I have been constantly faced with a choice and the need to reformulate what it means to be “contemporary” in dance in Ukraine. And it has always seemed to me that contemporaneity is so shaky that it is difficult to find words for it. Today it is even harder.

War knocks out support from under the body and it works in every sense: emotional, psychological, and physical. Dancing without support is impossible. The body will still seek and find an opportunity to rely on. It feels this absolute necessity even if the dancer does not feel it. In the same way, for a dancer, sometimes there comes a state when the dance itself is the support for existence in the world, when the inability to perform the usual dance rituals in itself makes life unbearable and meaningless, when all the inner energy transforms into an effort to preserve life for oneself and loved ones.

I am acquainted with and strive to maintain contact with my colleagues from various cities in Ukraine. Since I realized the emptiness within myself, I have become curious to know what they feel and where they draw inspiration for dance. I know and see that many of them still can't regain the meaning of dance and still don't feel the need for it. Yes, the need. This word has become one of the defining factors in the lives of people who remained in Ukraine after the start of the war. Is there a point in doing something if there's no necessity in it? Is there a need to invest time in actions if they don't lead to victory in the war? Every potential action became possible to legitimize only after answering the question, “Why is this needed?” This is how familiar Ukrainian expressions like “cultural front,” “economic front,” and “diplomatic front” emerged in the language. The only way to legitimize what you do, if you are not defending Ukraine with weapons in hand, is to consider it as “another” front in the battle against Russia.

But what about those who left Ukraine and are now so easily labeled as “deserters,” “traitors,” and “cowards”? Many of them continue to work away from their homeland, but it's not just the physical distance that complicates communication. The reason behind these difficulties lies in an internal moral dilemma, which has become part of the daily discourse for most (if not all) Ukrainian choreographers in exile. Can one still be a “victim of war” and talk

about it on a par with those who remained there? Is it worth discussing it on behalf of those who are in Ukraine? Can one talk about anything else?

My first dance since the beginning of the war happened in the first days of April, six weeks after the invasion. All these first weeks passed in an endless search for “good” news, but for some reason only bad was found. Among other things, I sometimes came across “some dances” on social networks. In my opinion, it was these unformed and not fully formulated statements that were the most “honest.” These statements conveyed all the emptiness and uncertainty of existence, which was framed by the physical impossibility of reconciling with such a state.

Contemporary dance in Ukraine is strongly influenced by the music it collaborates with. Often, it’s the music that takes precedence and shapes the dance itself. This is precisely why one of the first dance flash mobs that appeared on the Ukrainian FB was a proposal to create a dance to the music of an air raid siren. It seems to me that this is a completely logical consequence. The long hysterical wail of a siren in the city space, echoing through the empty courtyards, is a completely new sound for a modern urban person. Nothing like this had ever happened to them under any circumstances. They don’t know how to react to the siren. It primarily causes fear and numbness in the body. It seems to me that trying to dance to the sound of a siren is an unconscious desire to “tame” it. This is the desire to make it habitual for the body, so that it stops shuddering from its sounds and turns into a piece of meat in anticipation of the arrival of the missile. I saw several flash mobs of European dancers with the same soundtrack. One of them was performed by Sasha Waltz dance company. For me, it was a rather strange spectacle, in which there was an obvious desire to express support for the choreographers of Ukraine but it was nothing more than this. Looking at the dancers, it was quite clear that they had never heard the sound of a siren on the street and only tried to imagine how it could be with them.

Perhaps the main thing that I realized for myself, tracking the revival of dance activity, is that it gives hope for the continuation of life at least a little like the one that was before. After all, it was most terrifying in the first weeks, not that life can end in one moment, but that it will never be the same again. And that all the most important things in life can leave it forever. This is exactly how terrifying the first spontaneous geopolitical choreography was, which began to be created by the mindless effort of a huge number of people hastily leaving Ukraine through the western border: hundreds of thousands and even millions of people who filled the stations and then the trains, merging into powerful full-flowing streams to cross the border with the European Union and disperse in thin streams in the cities and villages of prosperous peaceful Europe. How many of them will return and when?



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Monochrome, directed, choreographed, and performed
by Anton Ovchinnikov, 2022, Kyiv

In my first dance after the start of the war, a wooden stool was in the frame with me, which I took with me to the shoot along with a camera and a tripod. I did not quite understand what I would do with this, but my body, which had forgotten about the dance, probably knew that it needed visible and tangible support: something else besides the earth that shifts under the feet and the water, which seemed to bring calm and coolness. This first post-war dance turned into a dance film which, without thinking twice, I called *Monochrome*. The title accurately conveys the emotional state of myself, as well as many of those with whom I was able to talk after watching the film. All the variety of colors of the world ceases to matter for those who have felt the flames of war upon themselves. The world is divided only into good and evil, and evil in this confrontation must be destroyed. After the entirety of the video material was recorded, I felt that the dance seemed to return to the body the ability to distinguish halftones and colors, and this became a key idea for me when creating and editing the film.

Another idea that was strongly expressed in the film,³² but at the same time was outside of my focus, was the idea of the loneliness and fragility of a person,

³² *Monochrome* teaser, Vimeo, April 27, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/703832182?share=copy>.

coupled with the tranquility and serenity derived from the ability to be alone in a safe space. These were the first comments I received from others after watching this video. This is another reality of war that does not let me go even now, even when I spend time among people close to me. The feeling of danger that arises when there are “others” nearby has always been my companion, but it has become especially acute now, especially if these are people who do not have experience similar to mine.

In May 2022, together with the Contemporary Dance Platform team, we started collecting dance videos filmed by Ukrainian choreographers after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The project was called *Let the Body Speak*.³³ To promote the video, a Youtube channel of the same name was created and we made it public on August 1, 2023 with the first three videos. Further, it was decided to publish 3–4 videos weekly until the end of the war. The goal of the project was not only to create an archive of dance videos, but also to meet with experts to discuss the place and especially the role of contemporary dance in the new reality. Now the project’s objectives have significantly expanded. In addition to working with videos, the team organizes educational lectures and workshops online, available for viewing on the YouTube channel. The team also arranges presentations of dance videos at international festivals in Europe and even acted as a co-producer for three dance performances by Ukrainian choreographers: Tetiana Znamerovska’s *The Traces*, Bogdan Polischuk’s *Dance Macabre*, and Julia Lopata’s *Kosachka*.

The first result of the project, even before the publication of the first videos, was a rather startling online discussion organized by the Contemporary Dance Platform. Since the announcement of the project, there have been unexpected disagreements among the dance community about its role as a whole. Perhaps as a result of inaccurate task communication, it caused a backlash among dancers who had been actively involved in creating dance videos before the war. The question that started the discussion was whether it is even ethical to make dance videos during a war. In the process, this question narrowed down to the topic of the ethics of dance and what dance can be like in a country where the entire male population under sixty is subject to mobilization. It was the latter that eventually became a stumbling block due to the fact that some of the dancers and choreographers are physically unable to continue their art practices because they are taking an active part in volunteer activities or are even in the ranks of

³³ *Let the Body Speak* website, <https://danceplatform.org.ua/let-the-body-speak-en>, accessed February 13, 2024, and a Youtube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQ59LxkKkdl0ftz0CrqubJA>, accessed February 13, 2024.



Danse Macabre: The Immortal Dance, dir. and performed
by Bohdan Polishchuk, 2023

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the territorial self-defense forces or Ukrainian Armed Forces at the front. Does this mean that those artists who have the opportunity to dance should give it up out of solidarity? This discussion led us to the idea of expanding the conditions for the presentation of choreographers within the framework of the project. It was decided that these could be not only dance videos, but also interviews and discussions with those artists whose activities have been halted due to the war. After several months of searching for formats for such meetings and their content, this idea remained unrealized. We couldn't summon the courage to bridge the gap that now exists between those who are "dancing" and those who risk their lives every day, staring death in the face.

As for the videos themselves, which are published on the Let the Body Speak channel, they represent a wide range of what is happening now in the (contemporary) dance of Ukraine. To begin with, it is worth saying that we have received more than a hundred videos, but a particularly large number were filmed in the first months of the war. It is rather difficult for me to call everything that can be seen in these videos contemporary dance. But here again the question arises of what contemporary dance is for Ukrainian choreographers. And although this issue is essentially not the topic of this speech, I would like to briefly dwell on it separately.

Another topic that resounded in the first discussion within the framework of the Let the Body Speak project was the search for a new dance language. If there is a feeling that dance has become irrelevant and inconvenient to watch and perform,

then perhaps it is worth trying to turn to language? This is exactly what one of the Ukrainian choreographers Danil Zubkov says in an interview with the American *New York Times* journalist Gia Kourlas: “Ukrainian contemporary dance can only be created now by dance artists living in the country since the Russian invasion on February 24. And that means starting from scratch. As he sees it, now is the time for the birth of authentic, essential Ukrainian contemporary dance.”³⁴ Is this possible now, when the war is in its most severe phase and requires the maximum exertion of all internal forces both among those who are at the front and those who are in bomb shelters?

When we made the decision to publish dance videos featuring different styles of dance, we thought about this very opportunity—the search for a new dance language. Perhaps this is one of the ways—to start paying attention to what you have not paid attention to and what has always been uninteresting to you? In addition, it was important for us to give an opportunity to speak to everyone who has something to say and to create a sense of community and unity among the dancing Ukrainians, who are scattered all over the world. In addition, videos collected on one platform make it possible for everyone to view each other’s work and find exactly what is important for themselves.

It is important to note that by the end of 2022, the flow of video submissions for publication on the YouTube channel had nearly dried up. This essentially confirms my hypothesis that the interest in the video format arose from the inability to create dance on stage and in rehearsal rooms and to be seen live. It became a means of resistance and endurance during those months when it was most challenging.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the history of contemporary dance in Ukraine continues. Someone is simply trying to return to the very dance that they have been doing all the last years and thus trying to restore the broken connections between the inner world and the outer reality. Someone is engaged in extreme experiments with their body and with the camera. And someone else is just trying to find the answer in the body to the emotional experiences of recent times. Ukrainian performances reflecting the theme of war are starting to emerge, some of which were showcased as part of the Ukrainian Platform at the New Baltic Dance Festival in Vilnius in May 2023. What of all this will remain on the surface after the war, we do not yet know. But I hope we find out soon enough.

Translated by Maciej Mahler

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³⁴ Gia Kourlas, “What Does a Dancing Body Feel Like in Ukraine? ‘I am a Gun,’” *New York Times*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/24/arts/dance/modern-dance-ukraine.html>.

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