

# Against the Erosion of Gesture and Gaze

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**1.** Laurent Pichaud Workshop, Gare de La Plaine-Stade de France, 2008. Photo: Julie Perrin

# AGAINST THE EROSION OF GESTURE AND GAZE

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## Dance, body, architecture

My investigations on the capture of the dancing figure by a spectator or the construction of a mode of theatrical appearance, have led me to interrogate the spatialities in dance. In other words, to analyse the complex overlapping of architectural, theatrical, sonic, choreographic, and corporeal spatialities. The building introduces the frame of representation and composes a powerful optical apparatus. Stage spatialities –the scenographic installation, but also the choreographic drawing of the pathways, their rhythm and their speed– are likely to reconfigure this first frame. Eventually, corporeal spatialities –the orientation of the interpreter, the amplitude and the direction of her movement, her relation to projection, the dynamic, rhythmic, and stabilizing nature of her gesture that colours the nature of the space, the way in which the gaze can make spaces exist...– shape the exchange with the audience (Perrin, 2005: 2). The aesthetic analysis of the choreographic work in a theatrical context touched the question of architecture and the site. A dialogue with architects was going to be the logic continuation of these investigations. The dialogue starts in 2004 with the organisation of the encounters "Dance, Body, Architecture" in the *Théâtre de la Cité Internationale* in Paris, where architects, choreographers, and historians of both disciplines are invited to speak. From these exchanges, two sorts of tensions arise. The first one concerns the constraint operated by architecture over the bodies: is it possible to invent a gesture that has not been assumed by the architectural order? And the answer to this can be: if gesture arises from the organisation of my perception, the most powerful frame lies less in the architecture I inhabit than in the perceptual matrix that I have constructed myself. Is it possible then, not to arrest perception in order to liberate the possibilities of gesture? The second tension concerns the anachronism imposed by any architecture. Buildings (like the arts of representation) witness the evolution of the conceptions of space and of the place occupied by man within it. The

city reveals that overlapping of historical conceptions of space, of perceptions, and of gestures. So the contemporary body produces a relatively anachronistic friction (Perrin, 2005: 1).

These reflections on the relationships between the body and architecture were going to find an extension in the frame of a master's seminary entitled "*Le corps à l'édifice*" [The body in building]. Between 2005 and 2007, the dance department of the University Paris 8 Saint-Denis and the National Superior School of Architecture of Paris Malaquais (ENSAMP) organised a course designed for the students of both disciplines, in collaboration with the *Rencontres chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis* [International Choreographic Encounters of Seine-Saint-Denis]. It engaged architects (Philippe Guérin, Xavier Fabre), architecture historians (from the office of patrimony or from the ENSAPM), choreographers connected with the Choreographic Encounters, and myself. It was about sharing knowledge and practices specific to each discipline through lectures: history of the evolution of theatrical architecture and the debates that go with it, landmarks in the history of spatial problematics in dance (Laban, Schlemmer, Cunningham…), architectural visiting. The course was articulated around practical experimentations: a drawing course linked to an introduction to morphology, and above of all workshops with the choreographers that constituted the heart of the seminary.

For the ENSAPM, it was about questioning the body, its structure and its movement. The students had indeed some trouble imagining the human body and representing it in their scale model, or taking into account the movements of the users of a building, the dislocations of the pedestrians. How to reintroduce the reality of the body and the human scale within a career path in which the students work mainly with drawing and computer software? For dance studies, it was about confronting different conceptions of space and different ways of naming, describing, and analysing it. I wished to open a dialogue with another discipline about the reading of choreographic works –of the works' space–. And also raise the question of theatrical architecture and the dance that inhabits it.

At the intersection of both fields, common questions were raised, concerning the reading of architectural space and its project. Firstly, how does a building, an architectural construction, anticipate the pathways and movements of the users? What kind of behaviours does a building induce? Is an architectural work capable of giving rise to new movements/behaviours? These questions are sustained by phenomenological presuppositions: the idea of porosity between bodies and places. They also derive from an idea of architecture as constraint over the bodies, as a factor determining our gestures. For Xavier Fabre, "any architecture is the framing of a movement. The architect limits possible movements – but he tries to arrange it that the movements that will be realisable be accomplished in the best way, that they give a sense to our presence in the space" (Fabre, 2006: 16). These questions are anyway close to

the debates that have accompanied the history of the evolution of theatrical place (Freydefont, 1997).

Secondly, do the reactions of a dancer to a building produce, the other way around, interesting indications for the architect? To what extent can a body in movement adapt to a building... or displace the expected uses? The inventiveness of the dancer, her unexpected reactions to the building, give rise to unusual readings by the architect (poetic, humorous, critic...). Xavier Fabre moreover

> prefers that people are the ones that dance, rather than architecture. [...] The most common ideology in architecture consists of considering that it is vitalist, that it transmits life, progress. But I prefer to dance in a calm peaceful place, which does not try to be mobile in itself: in such a frame, the slightest movement will have a sense. It is not a matter of neutrality: architecture should merely give an impulse, say the most exact thing, the subtlest possible. It should not tell stories; it should only allow them. [...] Philippe Guérin: We could see architecture as a score, or a beginning of a score, which would supply the conditions for a possible intimacy, but would remain in the background until somebody seizes it.

So the place remains to be interpreted, both by the artist and the user, having become interpreters of architecture. It is not anymore about thinking of the space first and foremost on the scale of the place, but rather the space on the scale of individuals[1]. Thus turning towards a "bodily perspective", according to the expression by Laban, for whom "Movement is so to say a living architecture" (Laban, 2003: 162, 76).

Finally, and more widely, does the knowledge of the dancer –her sensible intelligence, her thinking on corporeality in movement– lead to another understanding of the architectural project? If we consider that any architectural project, just like any choreographic project, is built on an idea or even an ideal of body, it remains to be seen which body is in question. The conceptions of the body in each discipline do not always match, and are sometimes even very far from each other. Architecture has often been constructed upon a normative conception of the body, which is built on supposedly ideal dimensions or proportions[2]. Le Corbusier, for instance, defines a scale of proportion with the Modulor (1945), conceived according to a standard size of the human body that is going to determine the dimensions of architecture. The actual security rules impose precise norms to contemporary architecture. Modern dance cares little about anthropometry, and even less about a normative one. To abstract systems of proportion, to measure, it often prefers a less quantitative than qualitative labile corporeality that cares more about the fluxes, the forces, and the rhythms. Dance replaces a knowing-how to feel that abolishes the idea of bodily envelope by an open corporeality: "sensation is always a process of crossing. [...] in a sense, the body is unlimited, for sensation overflows itself. [...] It is therefore difficult to reason in terms of relationship between interior and exterior. Where does exteriority start?" (Bernard, 2005: 46). In this manner, the imaginaries of the body that sustain choreographic practices are able to renew the ways of thinking architecture, if we consider, like Marc Perelman, that "the

body is at the *basis* of any architecture, the *sine qua non* condition of its existence (Perelman, 1994: 46).

## Spatialities *in situ*

These common interrogations were tested in choreographic workshops *in situ*. The reflection was sustained by that practice, in a constant coming and going between the dancer and the observer, between feeling and analysing, experimenting and coming back to history. The places, chosen in dialogue with the office of patrimony of Seine-Saint-Denis, pertained to very different activities: the nursery Emile Aillaud (Maria Donata D'Urso in 2005), the housing estate 122 of Blanc-Mesnil (Prue Lang in 2005), the public health establishment of Ville-Evrard (Christophe Haleb, Caroline Picard in 2006), a territory crossing from Seine-Saint-Denis to Paris (in 2007 with Gabriel Hernández), the district of Petite Espagne in Plaine Saint-Denis in 2008, with Laurent Pichaud (without the ENSAPM, this time). Let us get back to some of these experiences.

## Christophe Haleb: tactile reception and gravity

The psychiatric hospital of Ville-Evrard, or rather the "lunatics asylum", is built in the 19th century and is based on the idea of an architecture that heals[3]. The bad treatments and the violence that had been reserved to madness until then are replaced by a "microphysics of power" that produces a medical knowledge. A reasoned architecture imposes its order, which "surrounds, penetrates, and works on the bodies, not only applying to their surface but also imprinting deep in the nerves" (Foucault, 2003: 4). The asylum is the place of permanent regulation of the times, activities, and gestures. And the institution works, as Foucault analyses, as a panoptic machine that practises its power by establishing a permanent visibility, a principle of central surveillance, a principle of isolation in cells. The harsh, symmetric appearance, the straightforward lines of the buildings have to transmit a favourable impression, embody the institution and soothe madness. The beauty of the countryside, present all around, provides the calm required for healing.

Going through the sheltered galleries nowadays equals feeling in our bodies the order imposed to our pathways. The regular galleries give a unity to the place, connecting the different buildings and limiting the walker (or the dancer), as they expose her to the gaze of everybody. The understanding of the place in the workshop *in situ* directed by Christophe Haleb in 2006 begins by observing: looking, crossing, and touching in order to detect the characteristics of a place. Continuously changing the perspective on a precise element by changing the distance that separates us from it, or by changing position (lying, crouching down…). Pacing in all directions. Varying the speeds of our displacements. Observing the modifications of the landscape produced by the movement of the participants. Making the densities vary by holding oneself alone in an open space, or many in a recess.

Christophe Haleb chose to lead the workshop in a more recent (probably from the 1930s) and disused building: the collective kitchen. The discovery of the place is also done with closed eyes: touch becomes indispensable then, both for the orientation in the place and the recognition of the materials and forms that constitute it. Evaluating the differences of level, the hardness, the temperatures, the stability, the comfort or the danger… how does the body react to the contact with the tiles, the cement, the wood, the glass? Do these materials call for a change of speed in the movements, in the way of walking or jumping? Which pressure do these materials exert on the skin, in the muscles, in the bones? The workshop requires a tactile reception of architecture[4]. The collected perceptive information, in return, gives way to postures and gestures.

That recognition of the place and of the effects it produces on the body means getting to grips with it and liberate oneself from the unconscious ascendency of the building. It becomes therefore possible to envisage other gestures in that apparently hostile, inhospitable environment (because it is dirty, abandoned, and crossed by freezing draughts). The students of movement underlined the contours of the place, but they also detached from them by making choreographic spaces arise. And they dialogued with the place, aware of the frames that the building could impose to the gaze. By insisting on touch and the kinaesthetic sense, Christophe Haleb offered future architects the possibility of reconsidering the predominance of sight that characterizes our societies. At the same time, he invited the participants to experiment notions that are common to dance and architecture: balance, orientation, forces. The experience of the contact against a wall, the floor, or between two bodies obliges to adapt one's own balance and draws attention to gravity. This latter, very concretely felt, was thus placed in the heart of this workshop's stakes.

Christophe Haleb is familiar with the work *in situ.* A number of his pieces interrogate urban living modes, the standardisation of behaviours and the relation to the habitat. Which artistic response can be given to the conditioning of people within public spaces? Mariana Rocha analysed the way in which the choreographer involved the users in his works, in order to interrogate the political and social values and the borders between the public and the private (Rocha, 2007). The workshop proposed for the students draws from that approach, which consists in loading the bodies with a story in order to recreate it in an unconventional, merry, and critical way.

### Gabriel Hernández: "long distance actions"

Gabriel Hernández approaches the workshop *in situ* in a quite different way. In February 2007, he proposed that the students crossed a part of the territory of Seine-Saint-Denis in a three-day walking, organised around a protocol of actions that each student had to invent. The walking unfolds according to a precise score: the path is previously decided on the map and will be punctuated by stops every sixteen minutes, in order to carry out an action decided beforehand

and repeated at each stop. For Gabriel Hernández, that action consists in photographing the site in the direction of the school of architecture, of the University Paris 8, from the point of departure of the walking and from its point of arrival in Paris. The GPS becomes therefore an indispensable tool to situate oneself. And both the walking and the action are first of all asserted within their spatiotemporal dimensions. Each photo will be precisely dated and referred to its geographical coordinates. As for the students, they could prefer physical actions (responding to the site where one is by a gesture, overstepping near obstacles, deciding the action to carry out by drawing lots…). They could choose to take a sample of the ground or to add an object to it. They have also documented these protocols by photographing or filming.

With this workshop, Gabriel Hernández extended and shared an approach developed since 2001, entitled "long distance actions"[5]. He accomplishes works "conceived as an assemblage of simple actions that always imply a displacement" and take as their "place of action the territory (the urban or *natural* landscape)". So this workshop *in situ* follows the tradition of *land art* artists (Richard Long, Robert Smithson…), who place the experience of the body in the landscape at the basis of their project (it does not matter whether it gives rise to a sculpture or to an action). The work is not separable from its site.

It is clear that this project *in situ* cares little about architecture. Not only because the walking moves sometimes away from urban zones: the Parisian periphery offers an urban fabric with holes –fields, areas where no building is permitted in the surroundings of Roissy airport, the abandoned riversides of Ourcq channel. But also because that walking is not motivated by the search for a dialogue or a direct confrontation with the site. The walker crosses a territory and that territory was not chosen because of its singular characteristics: the walker discovers it following the path defined on the map. The set protocol of actions is therefore not so specific to the place, even if it reveals it, and could be applied to another walking (besides, the protocol chosen in Seine-Saint-Denis is very close to the one of *Campagna romana*, a walking carried out in 2006 with the Stalker group).

In dance, the *in situ* widely overflows the question of the relations of dance to architecture. However, their point of articulation or of common reflection surely lies in the conception of the space that is at stake. In this workshop, the urban environment and the action are understood under the mode of the trajectory: the space becomes first of all a trajectory.

> The landscape is not considered as a static image with a frontal vision that situates the spectator in an "external" point of view, but as a dynamic base without entry or exit, crossed by a network of trajectories and constituted of fields and counter-fields interwoven with one another (Gabriel Hernández).

The trajectory can be read on the map and is experienced in the bodies –tiredness, cold, repetition. Through the frequent stops it imposes, the protocol reveals the repetitive character of reality. It constantly interrupts the trajectory and delays the arrival to a goal, which in itself has little importance. So the pro-

tocol confronts the walker with her physical limits but most of all with her obstinacy: a certain amount of patience and tenacity is required to respect the rigour of the set protocol.

That walking in Seine-Saint-Denis, undoubtedly like all "long distance actions", takes you back to a relation to yourself. The restrictive structure, both for the body and the mind, supposes that you find the undercurrents of your motivation. Fulfilling the task implies inventing a relation to the mental and physical site. Even if the choreographer never mentions the body, each participant is nevertheless silently sent back to it. Physicality is the tacit part of that approach, a necessary one but never claimed as such. The body is at the service of a territory: "the walking has a function of reading and writing of the territory. We read it and construct it as we travel across it". The traces retained by Gabriel Hernández thus make this body disappear for the benefit of the territory and of the conceptual approach. The crossed space is documented by photography, schemes, texts that will be shown to the public. The body appears there in the negative, it is the invisible holder of the project, the one through which a territory exists. So for *Campagna romana*,

> a photo is taken at each stop and sub-stop, by placing the camera on a different spot of my body each time. The whole of the points of view –that have become "points of body"– of the photos taken in this way constitute a mould of my body. As the body is deconstructed all along the territory, it imprints in all that territory. The multi-directionality of the points of view (a field of 360° is covered) situates the body "in the middle of" instead of "facing something".

The traces –the only parts of the project that are visible for a public– do not represent the walking or the walker, nor do they document a work that would have taken place somewhere else (as is very often the case in *land art*), but are themselves "the mechanism on which the work will be grafted".

Other choreographers have borrowed the way of walking *in situ*. "Walking, like dance, belongs to the instant", writes Christine Quoiraud, "welcoming the circumstances and the unexpected, letting the formulations emerge, the only reality being experience. (...) Each walking remains a particular one, even when it is shared in time and space" (Quoiraud, 2003). Collective or solitary, walking takes form according to a variety of modes, according to the choreographers. The stroll with Mathias Poisson[6] takes us to different places, and why not places organised like strolls, by the way (strolls along the seashore). The pathway insists on the trajectory: to walk, go further; reach one's goals (Gabriel Hernández, Christine Quoiraud[7]). The wandering of Laurent Pichaud, as we will see, invites to roaming, to walk aimlessly. The drift (Mathias Poisson, Laurent Pichaud) proposes letting oneself be driven or deviated under the effect of an event. The strolling around of Yves Musard[8] is not far. Collective walking oscillates between the march, the demonstration, the procession, the guided tour (Gustavo Ciriaco & Andréa Sonnberger[9]). A history of walking in dance is yet to be done, that would go through the conceptual, sensorial, or political aspects of the different projects. And that would draw the links between walking and dance (Gérard Mayen has started this project in Mayen: 2005).

## Laurent Pichaud: making invisible gestures exist

March 2008. The workshop starts with an architectural and historical visit going from the city hall of Aubervilliers to the site we chose: the district of Petite Espagne in Plaine Saint-Denis, just behind the stadium of France. An exhibition about Spanish immigration presented in the *Hogar de los Españoles* (The Home of the Spanish) retraces the life itineraries of those economic or political migrants. The workshop opens therefore with a sort of study –a study of the "uses and customs of the place", as Daniel Buren would have it, required by any work *in situ* (Buren, 1998: 37). Laurent Pichaud, like Christophe Haleb before, has indeed wished to inform our reading of the place: detect the historical strata likely to be read on the very buildings; understand the past and present social context, impregnate with the stories of its inhabitants. Dance *in situ*, like the art *in situ* defined by Buren, conceived for a very precise place, is though "with, because of, for, or against that specific environment [...]. The work *in situ* allows taking all the existent parameters into account. [...] The work *in situ* can dialogue directly with the past, the memory, the history of the place" (Buren, 1998: 80-81). Impregnated with these various pieces of information, the students are then invited to "drift in the district[10]", camera in the hand, in order to capture images that appeal to the memory, that re-convoke the collected information to recover it within a play of personal associations. Unfolding stories and revealing the places, taken "as waiting narratives [which] remain in the state of enigmas" (De Certeau, 1990: 183). That first step consists in constructing the space and setting to work; it combines anthropological observation, meticulous lists, personal imaginary, appropriation of the geographical, architectural, and symbolic context. For Laurent Pichaud, the stake of the project is indeed "to start from a place, to make a dance for a place" (Pichaud, 2006: 20), in a "place that does not need dance". The workshop will thus consist in experimenting a non-spectacular gesture that sheds light on the place, perhaps rather than on the bodies at play. This demands from the participants a very big awareness of their solitary or collective presence in a space, as well as a subtle discretion. The *in situ* dance of Laurent Pichaud "does not make up a spectacle", but undoubtedly questions the environment in which it melts. How to disturb in a discrete way, deviate the uses without opposing them, exit the frame while respecting it? To do so, the choreographer introduces a series of strategies: some derive from contextual art[11] (Ardenne, 2002) and its practice of hazardous peregrination (drift, strolling around) or from motivated displacement (shadowing somebody, appointments at precise spots). These instructions of wandering organise the trajectories and work on the posture of the walker; each motivation slightly modifies the attitude. Follow somebody without being noticed supposes the whole art of a detective – discretion, slyness, anticipation. The walker attunes her walking to the person (s)he is shadowing and even more to the one (s)he is ahead of, when it comes to "being followed". These different trajectories then, give way to a place's own space, if we consider, following Michel de Certeau, that a place is

> an immediate configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. There is space as soon as we take vectors of direction, quantities of speed, and the variable of time into account. Space is a crossing of mobiles. [...] In short, *space is a practised place.* In this way, walkers transform a street geometrically defined by an urban planner into space. (De Certeau, 1990: 173)

Through shadowing or its opposite, the dancer embraces the space logic specific to a place by discovering the trajectories of its inhabitants.

Other strategies are more specific to the knowledge of the dancer and to her capacity to modulate her own mode of appearing to the other. So it will be a matter "of being visible but absent", "of being invisible but present", "of being in dance without becoming spectacular" or "of becoming spectacular without spectator". If the body becomes discreet and tends to disappear, it is maybe partly for the same reasons as Gabriel Hernández (to shed light on the place), but according to a very different physical implication of the body. Whereas Gabriel Hernández can abandon the movement to the benefit of a mechanised displacement (carried out by boat or by train), Laurent Pichaud cares very strongly about the mode of presence, of visibility (or invisibility) of the dancer. It is therefore a matter of working on the gesture: of understanding, for example, how to melt in the scenery or among the passers-by, in order to go absent while remaining visible ("being visible, but absent"). Or else: making a "big gesture" in the crowd of urban gestures without anybody noticing it, as we would swear in the stream of a speech. "Becoming spectacular without spectator" demands a big awareness of the timely moment, so that the *grand jeté* or the rolling on the ground may remain imperceptible.

Other strategies still derive from interrogations about the space of representation. How does dance make a place exist? What does it mean to be a spectator? Can we be a spectator and a performer at once? Can we perform without a spectator? These questions haunt the practice of the *in situ* for Laurent Pichaud. And it is for sure insufficient, to acknowledge that "in an *in situ* pièce, the stage is the field of sight of each Spectator" (Pichaud, 2006: 21). The choreographer is not completely satisfied with that answer. He experiments frameworks in real time, which define the scope of the dance scene: so two or four dancers come and situate halfway to a passer-by without her knowledge, in a framework likely to produce a painting or a scene. But could the scene exist without a frame? We understand that these questions could be addressed to the theatrical space: Laurent Pichaud is also interested in the "*in situ* in the theatre", in order to interrogate the theatrical architecture and the representation codes.

These different strategies are not only ways of "revealing what generates the life of a site" (Pichaud, 2006: 20), but also of stimulating drift. We see that the interest in architecture is engaged in a larger ensemble that includes the history of the place and its uses. As with Christophe Haleb, it is not only a matter of considering the geometric, structural, and material characteristics of a building, but of understanding the history of its past and present, of requesting the representations it arises. If the observation and the response to the place

are common to any *in situ* practice, the strategies introduced to make the gesture appear constitute the basis of the aesthetic style specific to each choreographer. Furthermore, we surely cannot attribute the quality of the gestural appearance to places alone. The reactive violence, the enraged impetus, but also the joy of the collective discoveries in Ville-Evrard, are not only the response to a disciplinary and psychiatric architecture. The reserve and delicate poetry that appeared in the district of Petite Espagne are not only inspired by the misery of a place threatened by disappearance, nor are they inspired by the respect imposed by its history. Behind these gestures, there is the whole knowledge of choreographers that were able to transmit their way of inscribing themselves in the space and of fighting against the erosion of the gaze.

**Notes**

[1] For a reflection on the space adapted to the scale of the place, the body, the page, and the work, see Perrin, 2006: 3-6.

[2] It is the case of the architecture of the classical Greece, which is based on the proportions of the human body defined by Polyclète's canon, or of the Italian Renaissance, which conceives of the building according to the logic of a human organism. It remains to be seen how that organism is understood and which model of organisation and structuring are inferred for the whole town.

[3] The creation of the asylum is decided in 1862 and it is built according to the plans of Lequeux, in the tradition of Esquirol and Pinel. It opens in 1868.

[4] Here we do not mean the "tactile reception" that Benjamin refers to in *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1935) [*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*], as it is, for this author, the product of an absent-minded, incidental perception.

[5] The quotations are taken from the choreographer's file.

[6] Mathias Poisson has developed different forms of strolls, most often guided by a visual document, for instance: eight postcards as eight explicit invitations to appropriate the paths in the town of Naples for *Promenades napolitaines 2005* [*Neapolitan Strolls*] (with Alain Michard); or an imaginary map with relief for a blind stroll in Bordeaux: *Promenade blanche* 2006 [*White stroll*]. See www.poissom.free.fr.

[7] For ten years now, choreographer Christine Quoiraud has practised the walking alone or in groups.

[8] Yves Musard invites his fellow equipped with an earphone and ten cards, and a plan to stroll around in Saint-Ouen since 2007. I thank Marie-Juliette Verga for having told me about this project.

[9] In the piece *Aqui enquanto caminhamos* [*Here whilst we walk*] presented in *Paris Quartier d'été* in 2007, the group of participants is surrounded by an elastic bandeau that distinguishes them from the other passers-by. The mute walkers cross the city, in groups or distanced from one another.

[10] The non-referenced words have been formulated by Laurent Pichaud during the workshop.

[11] Paul Ardenne deals with art *in situ* but more generally with an art of action, of presence or immediate affirmation that takes reality and co-presence as his basic principles (André Breton, André Carere, Yoko Ono, Sophie Calle...).

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