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[Ramsay Burt](#)

Undoing postmodern dance history

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I was just reading the email from the Colloquium's organiser requesting a title and abstract for my paper when the postman rang the door bell to deliver a copy of Judith Butler's latest book *Undoing Gender*. What a great title, I thought. Undoing not only suggests the theoretical process of deconstruction but also the practical act of putting things right. That, I realised, is what my paper is about. As you have guessed I borrowed from Butler's title though, in comparison, mine is less felicitous. I've never liked the term 'postmodern dance', and while I am indebted to Sally Banes for her extensive documentation and discussion of the work of Judson Dance Theatre, I've never been happy with the theoretical account of it she proposed. My paper does two things. First it critically examines the largely American concept of 'pure dance' as an aesthetically autonomous, modernist form. Then, drawing on the art historian Mieke Bal's concept of 'preposterous history', it looks at the work of some European dancers during the last decade who, I shall argue, used their knowledge of dance history to undo postmodern dance.

I suspect that the term postmodern dance is on the way out -- or at

Contextual note

This is the text of the lecture Ramsay Burt gave at the colloquium '[Constructing contemporary dance](#)', organised by Aisthesis on the occasion of Amperdans 2004. You can also listen to a recording of this lecture: [high](#) - [medium](#) - [low](#) streaming quality, and to the panel discussion with Myriam Van Imschoot, Alexander Baervoets and Pieter T'Jonck, in [high](#) - [medium](#) - [low](#) streaming quality.

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least it no longer seems to me to be used by critics to describe innovative new work by new, up coming dance makers. Yvonne Rainer may have been the first to talk about postmodern dance, while in 1973 Michael Kirby edited a Post-Modern Dance issue of *TDR*, but it was surely Sally Banes's 1980 book *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* that put the term into wider circulation. Now however, it is in process of following a lot of other labels that in their day were used to denote what was new and innovative, but ended up as names for historically specific styles or movements. These names were sometimes associated with a particular group or company of dancers, sometimes with a book or periodical. The term modern dance had the greatest longevity. Hans Brandenburg called his 1913 book *Der Moderne Tanz*, John Martin echoed it with his *The Modern Dance* in 1933; while Don McDonagh's *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* appeared in 1970. Contemporary dance has perhaps taken its place. There was *Impulse: Annual of Contemporary Dance* published between 1951 -1966; *London Contemporary Dance Theatre* was founded in 1967; Ann Livet's book *Contemporary Dance* appeared in 1978, but it was in the 1990s that the phrase contemporary dance appeared most frequently in book titles, perhaps as a more neutral term compared with postmodern dance. Other similar terms include new dance and tanz aktuel. The most fashion-conscious label is surely the name of the autumn dance programme at Brooklyn Academy of Music: the Next Wave Festival.

Underlying this 'presentism' - this obsession with the present - which these names imply is a dialectic of exhaustion and reaction whereby dancers, having found an older style boring and unfulfilling, have turned instead to find something new. The most widely accepted account of modern and postmodern dance is one in which choreographers have progressively eliminated representation and 'external reference' in order to create an increasingly abstract 'pure dance'. Here the discourse of dance history and criticism has reproduced the model of the history of modern art proposed in the 1930s by Alfred H Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The idea of the move towards a putative 'pure dance' follows Barr's theory of the development of pure, abstract painting out of cubism. In the 1950s and 60s, the art critic Clement Greenberg in effect completed Barr's work by identifying the

'American-type painting' of the New York School as the logical conclusion of earlier European modernist painting. Following Greenberg, many American dance critics and historians in the 1970s seemed to equate ballet with representation, Europe, and the past, while modern dance was valorised as modern, abstract, and American. In the 1970s Hanya Holm was celebrated as one of the four pioneers of American dance because of her role in the Bennington College summer schools in the 1930s. It is only recently that her relationship with her teacher Mary Wigman has been discussed. Marcia Siegel wrote that while European 'experimentalists' like Antony Tudor and George Balanchine were not fully successful or comfortable until they had moved to New York, 'academically minded Americans like Glen Tetley, John Butler, Robert Cohan and John Neumeier have gravitated to Europe, where stability and formality are more highly praised' (Siegel 1979: xii). To suggest that American modern dance arose because European ballet as an art form was exhausted is to set in place a mechanism which places Americans in an arrogant and superior position while effectively marginalizing and subordinating modernist dance making in Europe and, indeed, the rest of the world.

I do not wish to go so far as to accuse some dance historians of engaging in the kind of biased historiography that Winston Smith practiced in George Orwell's *1984*. Smith's job in the Ministry of Truth was to rewrite articles in newspaper back numbers so that no information in them might suggest that government predictions had ever been faulty: 'Day by day and almost minute by minute' Orwell wrote, 'the past was brought up to date ... All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary' (Orwell 1966: 35). Our knowledge of the past is not fixed but continually developing as new generations find new concerns and formulate new research questions. What is at stake however is who is able to rewrite history and with what effects. The left-wing art historian John Berger wrote in 1972: 'A people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or a class than one that has been able to situate itself in history'. What concerns me is how dancers and dance audiences situate themselves in relation to the history of innovative, experimental dance. My aim in this paper is to investigate the effects that the writing and rewriting of the history of modern and

postmodern dance have on the processes of transmission between generations of dancers. It therefore proceeds as follows. First it shows how some American ideas about modern and postmodern dance in effect stop dancers and dance audiences from using the past to locate and interrogate their experience of the present. It then identifies an alternative approach to dance history that underlies the recent practice of some dance makers who have used an ability to acknowledge the continuing existence of the past in the present to create what, following the art historian Mieke Bal, I shall call preposterous history.

The term postmodern dance is confusingly tied to two historical periods. Sally Banes applied it to the radical, innovative dance work that first developed at Judson Memorial Church in the early 1960s. But it has also been applied to dance in the 1980s and early 1990s which exemplified some of the artistic strategies associated with postmodern culture and theory. Banes acknowledged the latter when she wrote in her new introduction to the 1987 edition of *Terpsichore in Sneakers* that 'In the visual-art world and in theatre, a number of critics have used the term [postmodern] to refer to artworks that are copies of or comments on other artworks, challenging values of originality, authenticity, and the masterpiece and provoking Derridean theories of simulacra. This notion fits some post-modern dances but not all' (Banes 1987: xiv). To unpack this a little, it was Barthes and Foucault who questioned the role and function of the author; Baudrillard proposed that simulacra - copies without originals - were characteristic of postmodern, media-saturated culture; while Derrida problematised the idea that the author's presence is present in writing, suggesting that it is undecidably both present and absent or in his term 'spectral'. Following Peggy Phelan's essay 'The ontology of performance', some dance scholars have discussed the performative presence and absence of dancers within works from the 1960s like Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* as well as more recent dances like Vera Mantero's piece *a mysterious thing said e.e. cummings*(1).

Banes, as I will show, had a very different view of *Trio A*. Far from accepting a poststructuralist theorisation of postmodern dance, she backed away from discussions of dance and postmodernism as such and turned instead to the nature of modernist dance:

In dance, [she wrote,] the confusion the term 'post-modern' creates is further complicated by the fact that historical modern dance was never really **modernist**. Often it has been precisely in the arena of post-modern dance that issues of modernism in the other arts have arisen: the acknowledgment of the medium's materials, the revealing of dance's essential qualities as an art form, the separation of external references as subjects. Thus in many respects it is post-modern dance that functions as **modernist** art. (1987: xiv-xv)

Susan Manning, in what became known as the Terpsichore in Combat Boots debate in *TDR*, argued that in this passage Banes was attributing to only one generation of 20th-century choreographers a set of formal concerns shared by other generations as well' (1988: 43). Manning pointed out that the claims which Banes made for postmodern dance echoed those made in the 1930s by John Martin and Lincoln Kirstein. She quoted a statement Martin made in 1939 about the modernism of Mary Wigman's dances which closely corresponds to Banes's definition of modernist dance:

With Wigman, [Martin wrote] the dance stands for the first time fully revealed in its own sphere; it is not story telling or pantomime or moving sculpture or design in space or acrobatic virtuosity or musical illustration, but dance alone, an autonomous art exemplifying fully the ideals of modernism in its attainment of abstraction and in its utilization of the resources of its materials efficiently and with authority. (Martin 1968: 235)

Martin claimed that Wigman revealed these ideals for the first time so that her work represented a breakthrough and created a new paradigm. Banes made the same kind of claim for Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*: 'The history of dance theory,' she wrote, 'has been the repeated conflict between those who value technique and those who value expression. With *Trio A* this cycle is at last broken. It is not simply a new style of dance, but a new meaning and function, a new definition' (1980: 49). So for Banes *Trio A* exemplified the way in which postmodern dance superseded previous ways of thinking about dance by shifting from questions of style to an entirely new conceptual level. But isn't this in effect what Martin had suggested back in 1933 in his famous statement that 'The Modern Dance is not a system but a point of view' (Martin 1965: 20)? Wasn't Banes merely arguing that the new, minimalist point of view exemplified in works

like *Trio A* was just a newer point of view than that exemplified by the works Martin was writing about in the 1930s?

For Martin a breakthrough was achieved by abandoning the external references which characterised the nineteenth-century ballet tradition. For Banes, postmodern dancers made their breakthrough by 'reacting against the expressionism of modern dance which anchored movement to a literary idea or a musical form' (1980: 15). Whether or not one accepts these statements, Banes and Martin both believed that pure, abstract dance was more sophisticated than the representational types of dance that each believed their chosen dancer was reacting against. But, as the art historian Meyer Shapiro has pointed out, this view of abstraction is based on a mistaken belief 'that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic; and that abstract art on the other hand is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own internal laws'. Shapiro, however, argued that 'all art is representational. There is no "pure art" unconditioned by experience' (quoted Frascina 1985 p 4). Susan Manning was in agreement with Shapiro when she concluded that an exclusive emphasis on the formal aspects of modernist dance has 'deflected attention away from the sociological and ideological dimensions of modernism' (1988: 37). The differences between modernist dance in the 1930s and 1960s in Manning's view are connected to the differing social and political factors which the dances of each period mediated. When Manning pointed out that issues of 'nationalism, feminism, and male liberation ... rarely appear in the literature on twentieth-century dance' (ibid.: 170), she was indicating the principal concerns that would inform her own work on Wigman and more recently on gay and African American dancers in the 1930s and 1940s. The implications of Manning's critique for postmodernist rather than modernist dance still remain largely undeveloped.

The main challenge to the modernist account of an aesthetically autonomous 'pure dance' dance has come from scholars who want to interrogate the way ideologies of gender, 'race', sexuality, and other components of identity are mediated through dance. In doing so they have focused on the way dancers have embodied these ideologies during performance. Some scholars have drawn on

poststructuralist theories to analyse the way these are mediated through the kinds of performative presences that dancers produce. Peggy Phelan has argued that 'In the plenitude of its apparent visibility, the performer actually disappears and represents something else - dance, movement, sound, character, art. (...). Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body' (1993: 150-51). Too often in conventional canonical histories of dance, as Marcia Siegel has acknowledged, it is the dancers who disappear when their dancing is turned into written history. Introducing her book, Siegel admitted that 'If there are too few dancers mentioned by name here, it is only because choreography must be able to outlast dancers in order for us to have a history' (Siegel 1981: xiv). Neither she nor Banes were interested in the kinds of disappearances that Phelan discussed.

Yvonne Rainer, in her polemic statement that began 'no to spectacle', pronounced 'no to seduction of the audience by the wiles of the performer' (Rainer 1974: 51). She thus renounced what she saw as her own narcissistic pleasure in attracting the audience's attention by producing a kind of performative presence that they habitually appreciate. Her refusal in effect staged a disappearance and a rejection of the idea prevalent among older modern dancers that to dance is to express a psychological interiority. She thus said that her favourite performance of *Trio A* was one she gave in 1967 while still convalescing from major surgery and thus even less able than she might otherwise have been to seduce the audience. Called *Convalescent Dance* this version of *Trio A* was performed as part of the Angry Arts Week festival protesting the war in Vietnam. Rainer was drawing a parallel between her own physical condition and that of wounded Vietnam veterans.

Banes played down the subversive and disturbing effects of Rainer's refusal to attract the audience's attention, seeing *Trio A* instead as a celebration of the actual material presence of the body. 'The achievement of *Trio A*', Banes wrote, 'is its resolute denial of style and expression, making a historical shift in the subject of dance. Not even posture or architecture enter into its projection of what dance finally is, at rock bottom. In its neutrality, complexity, fleetingness, and

outgoingness, Trio A sets up a world of thoughtful activity that sets forth the earthly intelligent body' (Banes 1980: 54). This setting forth of the earthly intelligent body, in Banes's view, rejects both the expressionism of early modern dancers and the metaphysical ideal which ballet dancers strove to attain. For Banes, *Trio A*'s minimalism, its neutral manner of performance, stripped away the external references more radically than any choreographer had previously managed to do. But she described this stripping away as neither troubling nor subversive but as complex, fleeting, outgoing, and thoughtful: all positive attributes. For Banes, however, these were not attributes of the three dancers, Rainer, Steve Paxton, and David Gordon who first danced Trio A in 1966, nor of the enfeebled, convalescent who performed in Angry Arts Week, but attributes of the choreography itself. What dance finally is at rock bottom, in Banes's view, is the presentation of the essence of an ahistoricised body and not the historically specific embodied experiences of actual dancers and their audiences. Banes had to make these dancers disappear in order to reveal the choreographer's authorial presence, which, following Siegel, is a necessary prerequisite to writing a history of aesthetically autonomous, modernist dance. If dancers disappear in this kind of history, there is no way of acknowledging their embodied experience and, without such acknowledgment, no way of understanding how performances position dancers and spectator in relation to discourses that mediate normative ideologies. To write dancers and performances back into dance history is to enable both dancers and audiences of the present to understand their relation with dancers and audiences in the past and engage in what I called earlier a preposterous history.

The art historian Mieke Bal has argued that 'Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking ... Hence the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead' (Bal 1999: 1). This is particularly true of theatre dance: if we watch films or videos of old dance performances, we do so with eyes attuned to the technical standards of today's dancers, and performance today of ballets and dance pieces created in the past are reworked by dancers whose training and experience are almost certainly different from those of the dancers who initially created

and performed them. Dance historians like Banes and Siegel in effect want to dismiss these differences and convince us that we can still make contact with the transcendental genius of the choreographer still present in her work. I am arguing that by accepting that these differences exist we can gain access to what they can tell us about the nature of our contemporary experience and its relationship with the past. This is in accord with Bal's project which is to demonstrate 'a possible way of dealing with "the past today"'. To examine how new dances change our perception of ones in the past is to turn things around and put 'what came chronologically first ("pre-") as an after effect behind ("post") its later recycling'(ibid.: 6-7). This, Bal says, is what she would like to call preposterous history. The work of the French group Quattuor Albrecht Knust, together with the piece *Affects/Rework* made in 2000 by Tom Plischke, Martin Nachbar, and Alice Chauchat exemplify the way dancers engaging in preposterous history reinfect the arguments about modernism and postmodern dance.

Quattuor Albrecht Knust was a group who created performances of old works that had been notated in scores. It had a fluid membership including Christophe Wavelet, Jerome Bel, Xavier LeRoy, Boris Charmatz, and Emmanuelle Hyunh. In 1994 they performed forgotten pieces by Humphrey and Jooss from labanotation, and in 1996 performed Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967) and Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1970). In their last project in 2000 they used the labanotation version of Nijinsky's score to remember three historical versions of *L'Après midi d'un faune* in a piece titled *....d'un Faune (éclats)*. Also in 2000, Boris Charmatz curated a summer project in the French Alps at Annecy called *Ouvrée -- artistes en alpage* with a number of dancers and artists including Steve Paxton and the veteran sound poet Bernard Heidsieck. During a ten day period they experimented with a variety of approaches to making and presenting work outdoors. Remembering the open air festivals that Laban had organised at Monte Verita, and the later *bewegungschor* (movement choirs) of the Nazi period, Charmatz drew on his experience with Quattuor Albrecht Knust to use labanotation scores to perform *Feierlicher Kanon* (Solemn Canon, 1933) by Grete and Harry Pierenkämper and *Die Welle* (The Wave, undated, c. 1932-35) by Albrecht Knust. When asked about the experience of dancing in *Die Welle*, Steve Paxton told me that: 'there

was something in the structure of the cube dance which would have been at home and welcome at Judson. The funny thing is, I have long known vaguely about these dances from another age, which thought it interesting to employ "non-dancers" and had to build a structure apparent enough to contain them. Perhaps I would have gained time if I had known them more, or had known more of them; perhaps on the other hand I would have been pre-empted and had no exploration to make...' (2) Paxton's comments indicate how rare this kind of transmission has been within modern dance practice. Most of the dancers who formed Quattuor Albrecht Knust had been members of French contemporary dance companies founded in the 1980s. These, as Wavelet has observed, were marketed in ways that suggested that their choreographers were exploring entirely new and unprecedented ways of dancing but were in fact strongly derivative of older models of modern or contemporary dance. (3) Dancers who work within a critical climate that rewards them for breaking with the past are in effect discouraged from taking much interest in their predecessors. But the development of dance history and theory as an academic discipline has opened up new ways for dancers to reflect in an informed way upon their practice. These performances of older works using notated scores were a form of practice-based research into the difference between the way dancers moved in the 1990s compared with earlier periods. As such it troubled the dialectical account of exhaustion and reaction that informed Banes and Martin's views of modernist dance.

In *Affects/Rework* (2000), Martin Nachbar danced three solos from Dore Hoyer's cycle *Affectos Humanos* (1962-64) during a performance that also included a solo by Plischke and the projection of a digital film of the latter shaving, all announced by Alice Chauchat. Nachbar tried to perform the movement content of *Affectos Humanos* as faithfully as possible. Hoyer's piece is conventionally seen as a direct development of the new German dance of the 1920s and 30s, part of the lineage of Hoyer's teacher, Mary Wigman. Like the work of Quattuor Albrecht Knust, *Affects/Rework* therefore drew attention to the difficulties of transmission of the embodied memories of dancers who worked outside institutional structures. Nachbar had come across an old film of Hoyer dancing and went through an arduous process of getting permission to dance the cycle from Waltrand Luley, an old

retired dancer in her eighties who had been close to Hoyer and held the performing rights to her work.

Having eventually given permission, Luley worked with Nachbar closely to ensure that he got the dances right. Nachbar has said that in order 'to find out the differences, you have to try to be the same' (Cook 2001: 73). One big difference between Hoyer and Nachbar is their respective genders. Material initially danced by female dancers almost always seems different when danced by male dancers because of a range of factors including anatomy, temperament, and social expectation. Hoyer had danced in isolation. Nachbar danced in a space shared with two other performers. Her flapping skirt contrasted with his black T-shirt and black trousers (the same as those worn by Plischke sitting quietly behind him). No longer connected with the particular rhythms and explosive accents of the percussion score, Nachbar's performance of the dances took place in silence punctuated by footfalls and the actual and recorded sounds of his breathing.

In a programme note, Nachbar wrote: 'The reconstruction of *Affectos Humanos* only begins to lead to a reflection on the individual perception of bodies and events within a social and temporal fabric, and, thus, only then becomes meaningful, when it is embedded within a context of contemporary materials dealing with similar themes' (Nachbar 2000). Nachbar performed the three solos without the percussion accompaniment Hoyer herself had used. A little microphone taped to the side of his face recorded the sound of his breath during one of the three dances, and this was then played back while he danced the next one.(4) This not only deconstructed the expressive potential of the sound of his breath, but also made Nachbar aware of his dancing's place within a remembered history of performances of this choreography -- by himself and by Hoyer.

The coolness of Nachbar's performance of Hoyer's three dances and of Plischke's solo and film, and Chauchat's deliberately neutral announcements suggested a rethinking of the legacy of expressionist dance as the production of performative affect rather than the expression of psychological interiority. *Affects/Rework* thus problematised the kind of normative ideas about the performer's charismatic presence in ways that correlate to Rainer's practice in works like *Trio A*. By dancing Hoyer's choreography in a neutral

manner, Nachbar's performance therefore reproduced choreographed movement which in John Martin's terms exemplified 'the ideals of modernism in its attainment of abstraction' (Martin 1968: 235) but did so in a way that, in Banes's terms, resolutely denied style and expression in order to reveal what 'dance finally is at rock bottom' (1980: 54). To know about *Affects/Rework* surely changes the way we understand the work of Dore Hoyer and perhaps also that of Wigman. It is, in Meike Bal's terms, a preposterous piece which suggests 'a possible way of dealing with the past today'" (1999: 7). It suggests a contemporary view of dance history that recognises that there is no pure, abstract dance that is not attached to its historical moment or conditioned by experience. Such a view creates no illusory dialectic of exhaustion and reaction, and lends no weight to claims about the superiority of either American or European dance. It strips away the 'presentist' pretensions of the terms modern, postmodern, and contemporary, refocusing dancers and audiences' attention on dance as embodied knowledge and perception within the specificity of its social and cultural context.

Notes

(1) Ann Cooper Albright discusses Rainer's performative presence in her book *Choreographing Difference*. Isabelle Ginot discusses Mantero's spectrality in her essay 'Dis-identifying dancing bodies and analysing eyes at work'.

(2) Email communication 21 May, 2002

(3) Personal Communication, May 2002.

(4) Email communication 6 December, 2002

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Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric: A Response to Sally Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, the joint-stock company is interested in hedonism.

The male dancer: Bodies, spectacle, sexualities, consciousness is requisitioned by a midi controller that has no analogues in the Anglo-Saxon legal system.

Judson dance theater: Performative traces, the Fourier integral accelerates the Equatorial crisis.

Fifty contemporary choreographers, grace note attracts free verse.

Spontaneous combustion: Notes on dance improvisation from the sixties to the nineties, the fluctuation is huge.

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Dance composition: A practical guide to creative success in dance making, heterogeneity chooses lepton.