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COMMUNITY AND CHOREOGRAPHY: A REFLECTION ON DANCE'S CONSTITUTIVE OUTSIDE

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Introduction

Browsing through the programmes of contemporary dance performances, one encounters numerous ambitious promises: to remove the distinction between spectators and performers, to address burning political issues, to rebuild communities and even to share the creation process with members of the public. These attempts to connect the aesthetic with 'the social', in the broadest sense of the word, have been discussed by scholars under such headings as "social choreographies" (Klein 2013, 196) and "immersive performances" (Kolb 2013, 34) and can be classified as part of a broader "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud 2002). Although these choreographies are a continuation of the happenings, installations, and radical performances that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, their number has significantly increased since the early 2000s (Kolb 2013, 34). Ever more choreographers seek to *bridge* the gap between onstage dancing and the world outside that stage: the audience, the broader community, and the urgent ethical and political challenges that we face today. Alexandra Kolb, among others, has investigated the political significance of this trend and doubts whether the widespread assumption that these immersive performances are "liberatory", "innovative" and "anti-establishment" is justified (Kolb 2013, 35). Rather than a countercultural force, they might just as well be the ideological "reflection" or "mirror" of a new phase of capitalist production that is centred on creativity, cooperation, and participation

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(Kolb 2013, 41, 48). (In the field of the visual arts, a similar tone is struck by Claire Bishop [2012, 277].)

In this essay, I will not address the trend towards social or immersive choreographies head-on and I will mostly leave aside its political implications. Instead, I propose to take a step backwards and ask a more basic question. Why is this *bridging* such a challenge? Why does contemporary dance not have a more natural or self-evident connection with the communities in which it finds itself? The relation between dance and the outside world seems fraught with obstacles and is a source of permanent concern, but why is this so?

My premise is that this question can only be answered by taking into account the constitutive outside of artistic dancing, namely *social dancing*, the kind of dancing that can today be found in clubs, at parties, in private homes, and in retro ballrooms. This is where most dancing actually happens, but it falls outside the remit of contemporary western dance as an artform. In social dancing, the nature of dance is on full display: dancing always served community formation and used to be an intrinsic part of life's most important rituals. Anthropologists and historians abundantly show that the original purpose of dancing was social: collective dancing strengthened communities and contributed to communal flourishing (cf. Turner 2017, McNeill 1995, Ehrenreich 2006).

Yet in order to become art, dancing was transformed into *works*, which populate an "imaginary museum" (to use the term of Lydia Goehr) and which transcend the moment of performance so that they can be seen, re-seen and contemplated by audiences and critics.[1] This transformation allowed artistic stage dancing to flourish and to rival the status of the fine arts, but it also deprived dancing of its embeddedness in the life of communities, that is, of the very role that had given dance its purpose and its meaning. I believe this historical constellation might help to explain the condition in which contemporary dance finds itself. No longer an organic part of communal life, it must re-connect with societal and ethical issues from within the artificiality of its own medium.

I will flesh out these intuitions in four separate sections. I will start by offering a brief historical account of the way music and dancing emancipated themselves from their earlier social roles in order to become autonomous artforms. In the second section, I will seek to explain why this background remains relevant for the medium of dance today and why it puts dance in a difficult and somewhat tragic position. I will then discuss two examples of choreographers who deal with this condition in very different yet remarkably lucid ways. In the third section I will look at the historical case of Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Noces* (1923). In the final section I turn to the work of contemporary choreographer Tino Sehgal.

Dancing as art

My reading of the history of dance is strongly inspired by Lydia Goehr's book, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Goehr 2007). In this book, Goehr reflects on the convoluted process through which music became an artistic medium. It is worth looking at this process, and at Goehr's

presentation of it, in some detail because it provides a good template to understand what happened in the history of dance. Both music and dance started out as ephemeral social practices but ended up as mediums of high art. Today, many people take it for granted that composers and choreographers can produce autonomous works of art: works that are, like the products of visual artists, available for aesthetic appreciation independently of their context of creation. But this way of understanding music and dance is not a natural given. It is the outcome of a specific historical development.

In the case of music, this development has to be situated between the Renaissance and nineteenth-century Romanticism. Somewhen in this period, the way music was perceived underwent a profound change. According to Goehr, the watershed is the beginning of the nineteenth century. Up until the late-eighteenth century, musical practice was understood and evaluated in light of extra-musical ideals. Music was, for instance, an instrument at the service of religion or a pedagogical tool. (And it served pedestrian causes like dancing or military marching.) Such extra-musical purposes were operative in discourses about what music is and in its self-legitimation as a practice. The word practice is of particular importance here. As Goehr explains, music was sometimes included in broad definitions of the arts, but was mostly seen as separate from painting, sculpture, and the decorative crafts for the simple reason that it is performative. To the extent that music was accepted as a form of art, it was because of the skills involved in singing, playing an instrument or composing music. But it fell short in comparison to the other arts because nothing permanent was created: music might be an admirable form of "skilled doing" (Goehr 2007, 149), but it was tragically distinct from the productive arts because it "did not result in lasting or concrete products" (151).

As the eighteenth century progresses, however, aesthetic discourses about music shift and music gradually frees itself from its entanglement in non-musical concerns. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Beethoven is producing his mature works, this process is complete and music is accepted as an autonomous artform. Analysing a great variety of texts, Goehr demonstrates that music is now discussed and evaluated in light of intra-musical ideals. Music, it turns out, can "be divorced from everyday contexts, form part of a collection of works of art, and be contemplated purely aesthetically" (Goehr 2007, 173–174). This outcome is less obvious than it might appear in retrospect. The material that was actually available, "transitory performances" and "incomplete scores", was hardly comparable to the concrete objects or "commodities" turned out by the fine arts (Ibid.). Important conceptual help came from the notion of a *musical work*, which emerges around 1800. The notion of a work established an analogy with the visual arts and conveyed the message that musical compositions should be "valued and contemplated as permanently existing creations of composers/artists" (174). Moreover, it helped to construct what Goehr calls (borrowing an expression from André Malraux) an "imaginary museum", in which the music of great composers is arranged as if it is a series of discrete objects, perfect upon completion by their author, in a clear chronological order, always available for retrieval and inspection, and with a value that can be greater or lesser than that of other objects in the museum.

This "objectification" of music, as Goehr also calls it (Ibid.), was not a merely conceptual move. It involved concrete changes at the level of composing, playing and listening to music. One striking change is the appearance of *Werktreue*, the norm that performers should be faithful to the work and execute music exactly as intended by its maker. This was necessary to give musical compositions the permanent existence already enjoyed by paintings and sculptures. Musicians were also increasingly expected to *rehearse* before *performing*, a novel distinction that broadened the gap between merely playing music and showcasing 'the work'. Equally striking are the new rules for listeners. Before, music was often part of a ceremony or was played in the background during other activities. In consequence, compositions were not necessarily performed from beginning to end and audiences rarely bothered to listen all the way through. The practice of listening to lengthy musical compositions in silence and full concentration had to be invented and imposed upon audiences. These and other changes gradually lifted music from its embeddedness in social practices—in churches, courts, and elsewhere—and turned it into a self-sufficient artform enjoyed in dedicated buildings and settings. As Goehr notes, this process went hand in hand with greater commodification: if music consists of works or objects, then it can circulate more easily in the marketplace of art.

Similar stories can and have been told for other art forms. But I believe music offers the best model to understand what happened in the history of dance. On the one hand, this is because dancing also had to make the bold jump from an immaterial collective practice to a form of objecthood before it could join the elevated ranks of the high arts, a challenge which painting, for instance, never had to face. On the other hand, it is because the chronologies correspond. Around 1800, the professionalization of dance accelerated and ballets were increasingly designed to be independent works of art, repeatable and available for aesthetic enjoyment by passive spectators. Thus, the emergence of dance as an autonomous medium of art seems to coincide with the emancipation of music as an artform. Let me spell out this evolution for the case of dance in somewhat greater detail.

As anthropologists have amply demonstrated, dancing already played an important role in early human societies. The practice of dancing together, be it in ceremonial or non-ceremonial contexts, always served to forge a sense of community. Dancing, Barbara Ehrenreich writes, can be considered a form of "biotechnology", invented and developed to strengthen group cohesion (Ehrenreich 2006, 24). Moreover, dancing patterns often carried symbolic meaning, expressing what participants shared in common and offering a condensed representation of social structures and communal norms—as is attested, for instance, by Victor Turner's classical analyses of rituals in indigenous societies (cf. Turner 1987, 94; 2017, 117). One should be wary of using the anthropological record for making universalizing claims about the ritual or societal role of dancing (cf. Savigliano 2009, 171–172) or for painting an overly harmonious picture of early human societies (cf. Geenens 2023, 219–223), yet recent empirical research in psychology certainly confirms that there are deep causal connections between dancing and social bonding (e.g., Reddish, Fischer, Bulbulia 2013; Tarr, Launay, and Dunbar 2016).

What matters here is that in European Renaissance and Baroque dancing, the soil from which dance as an autonomous artform has sprung, this communal role can still be recognized: even here, dancing remained deeply embedded in collective life. This is certainly true for the social dancing of common people. Weddings, fairs, and other events provided ample occasion for joint dancing, often including dance competitions (cf. McGowan 2008, 202), a far precursor to the way today's amateur competitions continue to connect dance and community. And staged performances, including dance sections, were regularly set up in schools or richer homes. But it is especially true for the complex and codified dancefloor interactions of the higher classes in this period (as attested by ample historical research). Although partly done for enjoyment and entertainment, aristocratic dancing was highly structured and normative and it was suffused with meaning as it presented, in the terms of Jennifer Nevile, "a moving depiction of the relationships between men and women" (Nevile 2008a, 5). Moreover, it had an unmistakable function in communal life, as a centrepiece activity at major social and political meetings and as a means of establishing or maintaining personal connections. Social dancing also played a role in upholding hierarchy and class structure. On the dance floor, couples were typically "arranged in order of rank" and it was "those who were the highest in rank or were the most honoured guests" that initiated the dancing (Nevile 2008b, 80–81). At the same time, the elite's dignified style of dancing was an important social marker: as a sign of their purportedly superior self-control (and other mental and physical qualities), it served to assert the distance from the way ordinary people moved and danced (Nevile 2008b, 81). The writings of Renaissance and Baroque ballet masters testify to this, for instance when they connect dancing skills to morally desirable character traits (cf. Nevile 2008c, 19). On a sidenote, it can be mentioned that these same features—affirming hierarchies and performing purportedly superior identities—remain pervasive in social dancing today (see, among many other examples, the illustrative work of Cindy García on different salsa techniques and their social meaning in contemporary Los Angeles [García 2013, 47–65]).

Dance's societal role was also on display in the dance performances staged in aristocratic and court circles, think of the seminal *Ballet comique de la Reine*, held in 1581, or the numerous similar ballets organized throughout the next century. These ballets were performances executed before a public, carefully crafted and often very costly, but they were not understood as autonomous works of art. The name of the choreographer seemed irrelevant (often it is not even recorded) and there was no intention to make these ballets endure beyond the moment of performance. Particularly telling in the case of the *Ballet comique de la Reine* is that the lavishly expensive decor pieces were burnt in a bonfire at the end of the celebrations.

Moreover, the line between dancers and spectators was fluid (Prudhommeau 1989, 81–82). Those who were watching could become dancers, and the other way around. This reversibility of roles was possible because the steps were not particularly challenging. As Julia Sutton explains, the steps performed during spectacles were largely the same as those that were used in ballroom settings. At most, they "enlarged upon or heightened the standard steps and dance types of the time" (Sutton 1995, 22).[2] Thus, theatrical dances in this period were not designed to "demonstrate a vast division in skill between amateurs and professionals" (Ibid.). It was rather the case that "aristocratic amateurs and professional dancers performed side by side in these productions" (Ibid.). Margaret

McGowan, in her standard study on Renaissance dance, writes that spectators were "not separated from but really part of the performance. Performer and spectator belonged together through their mutual knowledge of dance steps and figurations" (2008, 58).

The fact that the steps were often standard steps from social dancing, helps to explain why the choreography was not seen as a work of art. The movements were not supposed to express anything particular, and they were certainly "not designed to give an audience the choreographer's dramatic or philosophical vision" (Sutton 1995, 22). There was simply no need to create distinct movements for the purpose of one specific ballet. The primary purpose of this period's sophisticated dance vocabulary was to help people appear in an elegant way in front of others in prestigious social settings. Stylish dance moves functioned, just like expensive clothes and jewelry, as props in an all-important status game (Nevile 2008b). As McGowan put it: "in Renaissance dance each movement, each step and each gesture served to display the person" (2008, 18).[3] Although Renaissance choreographers sometimes tried to convey philosophical or mystical messages to their audience (for instance through geometric floor patterns, cf. Nevile 2012, 30–31), the focus was really "on self-presentation and display through dance, rather than on choreography conceived (in twentieth century terms) as art" (Pakes 2020, 27).

Of course, all of this will change dramatically. Already in the early 1700s, authors like Pierre-Jean Burette and John Weaver explored the idea of dance as a serious artform, but it is Jean-Georges Noverre's 1760 *Lettres sur la danse* that shows most clearly the emergence of a new discourse. Part of Noverre's motivation in writing this book was to rebut criticisms that had been levelled at the successors to virtuosos like Marie Sallé. Professional dancing, as it started to flourish outside earlier court and ballroom settings, was often perceived as hollow entertainment and empty technical display. Even Jean-Jacques Rousseau weighed in, for instance accusing the celebrated ballet master François-Robert Marcel of performing mere "monkey tricks" (in the French original: "*singeries*", Rousseau 1969, 391). In satirical prints of the day, dancers were sometimes mocked for providing merely physical feats, such as jumping very high (Au 1997, 33). Noverre went on the offensive and laid out an ambitious programme for dancing as an artistic medium, seeking to demonstrate that ballet can reach the same expressive heights as painting and other respectable arts. He argues that, "under the direction of a man of genius", dancing will, "in time, obtain the praises, which the enlightened world bestows on poetry and painting, and become entitled to the rewards with which the latter are daily honored" (Noverre 2014, 257).

Noverre's attempts to emancipate dance as an artform centres on its potential to tell stories in pantomimic form. He agrees with the criticisms levelled by Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and others, admitting that much of the ballet of his time is "dull" (Noverre 2014, 248), "mechanical" (250) and mere "*divertissement*" (285). But he believes that ballet is capable of much more. Against the "mechanical-material" dancing he dislikes, Noverre presents the ideal of a "pantomimic-soulful" form of dance (Pakes 2020, 47), in which every movement becomes meaningful and expresses inner feelings, just like "every stroke of the pencil conveys a meaning" (Noverre 2014, 253).[4] Noverre also proposed novel ways of viewing dance, insisting for instance "that the theater should be dark and quiet" (Homans 2010, 76).

Thus, in Noverre we see an analogous development to the one Goehr observed in the history of music. Eighteenth-century dance is seeking a justification to be elevated into a serious artform. It is no coincidence that for Noverre, more than for any of his predecessors, the evanescence of dance—the fact that, unlike the fine arts, it does not result in stable, tangible products—was so intolerable (Lepecki 2004, 125–127). Expressiveness and narrativity have to step in and compensate for this weakness. In the terms of Anna Pakes: "For a dance to be a work of fine art, it seems, the presence of meaningful gesture is crucial" (Pakes 2020, 46). Dances should thenceforth be "interpretable or *about* something", "their semantic content is what renders them *art* rather than 'mere' entertainment or divertissement" (Pakes 2020, 52–53). This distinction between expressive or representative dancing on the one hand and mere dancing around on the other, is also connected to a growing gap between professional and non-professional dancers, and between performers and spectators. The theoretical dichotomy, Pakes notes, "reflects the growing division between social and theatrical dancing" (46).

Despite Noverre's innovatory programme, the actual steps and poses in theatrical dancing remained mostly those of social dancing. Noverre, by the way, admits that he is not so much after changes and improvements at the level of steps or the technical quality of execution. In this regard, he writes, the art has already "attained the highest degree of perfection" (Noverre 2014, 256). Thus, even if Noverre and his contemporaries see themselves as artists creating individual artworks, it is not "the detail of the danced pas or even the pantomimic action, but rather the dramaturgical construction for which (they) [...] take authorial responsibility" (Pakes 2020, 57). It is only after the French Revolution that the vocabulary of stage-dancers will drastically change and will be divorced from its background in aristocratic conventions (Homans 2010, 97). Some authors, like Edmund Fairfax, claim that the movement vocabulary of ballroom dancing and that of stage dancing had already drifted apart in the first half of the eighteenth century, with higher jumps, ornate limb movements, bodily exaggerations, lifts, and even acrobatic tricks giving stage dancing an exuberance that went far beyond the decorum acceptable on the social dance floor (Fairfax 2003, 17, 37, 42, 135).[5] This pertains especially to lighthearted, comical or grotesque dances (precisely the kind of entertainment that Rousseau, Noverre and others criticized), with the serious ballets that dominated the Parisian scene maintaining a slower and more subdued style (86, 161–162). Fairfax's findings suggest an evolution rather than a sharp break, with the increasing complexity and virtuosity of theatre steps making them gradually unattainable for non-professionals. Yet this evolution certainly accelerated in postrevolutionary France, as professional dancers now subjected themselves to gruelling training regimes, in line with new anatomical insights. Dance training, Susan Leigh Foster writes, became a "science" (Foster 1996, 154). Ballet dancers thereby acquired things like advanced point technique and extreme turnouts and executed ever more complex combinations of pirouettes, cabrioles and entrechats (Foster 1996, 157, 168; Garafola 1997, 4; Homans 2010, 128), technical developments that helped to harden the divide between professional and amateur dancing (cf. Foster 1996, 173).

After the French Revolution there was not only technical but also increasing artistic innovation, with new ballets requiring new and original movements, leading to, among other things, the collapse of Feuillet-notation as it could not accommodate these newly designed and ever-changing

steps (Pakes 2020, 43). At the same time, choreographers and dancers stumbled upon the thematic content that perfectly befitted the medium of ballet as it had now developed: the evocation of a dreamy, sensual world outside of modernity and populated by such delicate creatures as sylphs or wilis, characters "whose modus operandi was dancing itself" (Foster 1996, 199). This delightful, otherworldly atmosphere is evoked, not just by the plot or the costumes, but most of all by the new dance vocabulary: it is the ethereal steps and body movements that pointed to an alternative, imaginary realm and that captured the imagination of romantic writers like François-René Chateaubriand. Thus, with ballets like *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, dancing can finally present itself as a distinct and fully fledged artform, with its own unique language and purpose (Foster 1996, 209–218). And that means that the break with social dancing is now complete. Two distinct fields of dancing have replaced a previously unified field. Foster summarizes this momentous development in particularly strong language when she states that dancing, "as the celebration of shared physical values through which individuals discovered and defined identity no longer existed" (1996, 173). According to Foster, an eighteenth-century spectator to a nineteenth-century ballet would immediately notice and complain that the connection with "performative sociality", a connection previously maintained through the language of social dancing, has been lost (173, 253).

Again, one should not exaggerate the sharpness of this historical break. Anna Pakes has argued that the emergence of dance as an autonomous medium did not exactly happen in 1800: dance's expressive force remained long dependent on music or programme texts and dancing was often closely wedded to the medium of opera (Pakes 2020, 45–67). Against Foster it can also be argued that nineteenth-century ballet maintained connections with social dancing by prominently featuring scenes of ballroom dancing and folkloristic dancing, thereby including an, albeit stylized, representation of some of its ancestry within itself. And this was not just a matter of looking back at the past: the national dances on stage were connected to an ongoing craze for national dancing in the audience, especially in the 1830s and 1840s, when amateur dancers "flocked to dance studios to take lessons in national dancing" and "purchased national costumes to wear to public balls" (Arkin and Smith 1997, 17). One could also point to the broad and rich current of spectacular, popular ballets, playing in music-halls and commercial venues from the 1870s onwards. The ballets performed in this circuit were driven by profit rather than artistic ambition, but they did occupy a central place in the social world of urban nightlife. Sarah Gutsche-Miller provides vivid descriptions of the Parisian music-hall ballets and emphasizes that they pulled in very diverse audiences (although usually not the highly cultured or intellectual) and as such certainly had a community-creating effect (Gutsche-Miller 2015).[6] And there are further popular side-currents and social phenomena that are all too often overlooked, think for instance of the ritual role *The Nutcracker* has come to play in North American society (cf. Fisher 2003, 171–194). Yet it seems undeniable that ballet, in its dominant form, eventually made the jump to high art and, just like music, came to be recognized as an autonomous and serious artform, with a value that transcends momentaneous pleasures or social effects. Early confirmation of this jump is provided by the acceptance, already in nineteenth-century legal practice, of the choreographer's intellectual ownership over their artistic creation (cf. Alsne 1994; Marquié 2012), neatly in line with the work-logic described by Goehr.

Further confirmation of dance's credibility as a medium of high art is provided by the development of modern and postmodern dance. One could even claim that the ultimate part of the jump was only made here. It is impossible to cover, within the bounds of this article, the full spectrum of twentieth century dance. But among its many strands it is probably American modern and postmodern choreographers who most self-consciously distanced themselves from popular and commercial forms of dancing. Among other stylistic choices, this often implied a marked preference for difficult, i.e., less 'dancey', music. The ambition of these choreographers, like that of Noverre two centuries earlier, was to bring artistic dancing close to other, more prestigious forms of art, in particular the modernist visual arts as they triumphed in the middle of the twentieth century. I believe it is here, and in the contemporary dance that inherits and today continues their technical and aesthetic practices, that the divorce between artistic and social dancing has been consummated most radically.

The constitutive outside

The historical ground I am covering here, will be familiar to most readers. Yet I bring it to mind because I believe that, even today, dancing as an artform continues to be haunted and defined by that which it separated itself off from. French philosopher Jacques Derrida has a concept that accurately captures this particular relation: the constitutive outside. For Derrida, identity is constructed by excluding and by establishing hierarchy: things are what they are by distinguishing themselves from something else. And in order to remain what they are, maintaining the division is necessary. Yet the excluded object is not completely different or outside: it remains present on the inside and is even constitutive of it. Derrida incites us "to speculate upon the power of exteriority as constitutive of interiority" (Derrida 1995, 313).

This scheme has been fleshed out in various contexts. Ernesto Laclau invokes it when explaining that the objectivity of political identities is achieved by denying, excluding, or repressing something else which, at the same time, continues to threaten "the identity of the inside" and prevents it "from achieving positivity" (Laclau 1990, 137). Judith Butler uses it when discussing the form-matter distinction in *Bodies That Matter*, where she states that a system's "constitutive outside" is "nevertheless *internal* to that system as its own nonthematizable necessity" (Butler 2011, 13). And in *Gender Trouble* she claims that heterosexuality derives its libidinal energy (i.e., its "cathexis") from an initial yet forbidden homosexual attraction (Butler 2007, 80–81). This is the dynamics of the constitutive outside: the self is identified by excluding—and by elevating itself above—something else which, nevertheless, remains present and even productive of the inside.

I do not wish to propose this scheme as a general ontology, but I think it might reveal something about dance, which, as an artistic medium, cannot be exhaustively defined or understood in reference to itself but remains tainted by that which it separated itself off from, namely social dancing. This differentiation is a work without end: dancing as art has to continue proving that it is *not* social dancing. Note that the word dancing, in most languages, refers to both practices indiscriminately. In daily language use, the first meaning that listeners hear is probably that of social dancing: the kind of dancing that happens in familiar settings for enjoyment and

entertainment without any artistic aspirations. Yet artistic dancing does have a lot in common with social dancing—the relation between these two forms of dancing is not merely homonymic—which makes it all the more important to mark the difference. The very identity and legitimacy of dancing as an artform depend on securing the distinction. Even if the uninitiated might see in contemporary dance nothing more than just 'dancing around', for dance as an artistic enterprise it is crucial to establish beyond doubt that the dancing on stage is different and more meaningful than what happens on the social dance floor.

At the same time, the outside continues to exercise a strange attraction. Stage dancing, at its most energetic and engaging moments, comes close to the dynamism of intense social dancing and maybe even depends for its aesthetic effect on the audience's familiarity with the frenzy of non-artistic dancing. At some occasions, contemporary choreographers seem to deliberately recreate the energy and intensity that we associate with the delirious dancing at, say, a rave party. Of course, even if choreographers hope to evoke the excitement and the wild abandon of a dance party, they do not want their work to be fully identical to it. Yes, the audience should experience a moment of total involvement, but all the while sitting quiet and motionless in their seats, consciously aware of the fact that they are consuming an artwork. At such moments, choreographers are walking an interesting thin line. They want to conjure up the vitality and involvement of social dancing, while posting enough signs to mark the difference between their work and an ordinary dance party. In fact, nineteenth-century ballet already offered a version of this. When the first act of a ballet is set in the real world, it is often to display ballroom or other social dances that the viewer might be familiar with.[7] These stylized representations of social dancing forge a connection (the dancing you will see on stage is not unlike the dancing you might do yourself) all while maintaining a clear separation (the professional dancers have 'balleticized' the vernacular material and the audience is certainly not expected to join in). In one and the same operation, the audience is drawn in and excluded.

All of this suggests that the medium of dance finds itself in a somewhat tragic position. It is connected to the practice of social dancing, with which it has a lot in common. Yet historically it has separated itself off from social dancing, a separation that needs to be constantly reaffirmed. At the same time, this outside continues to present an appealing picture of what dancing ideally is. And I think this outside is particularly appealing because of its manifest and almost effortless communal role. Social dancing is naturally embedded in the lifeworld and—even when it takes a critical or countercultural form—rarely fails to engender a community. This is in sharp contrast to artistic dancing, which has lost this firm embeddedness in communal life and now has to try and re-connect with the community (and with the issues that occupy the community) from within the artificiality of its own medium. This is a tall order, and often it does not go well.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, explains in detail how the performative turn of the 1960s had this precise aim. Performers wanted to make the hard boundary with their spectators permeable and even tried to make the roles of performers and spectators reversible again (2008, 40–41). There was a very diverse range of participatory techniques, experiments, and strategies, but the idea was always to explore the bodily co-presence

of performers and spectators so as to establish a temporary community of co-subjects, the most intense examples being the ritual performances directed by, for instance, Richard Schechner or Hermann Nitsch (2008, 40, 51 ff.). These temporary communities did sometimes have a "transformative" effect on all those involved and, according to Fischer-Lichte, could even achieve a "reenchantment" of the world (2008, 181). However, even if the boundary between art and everyday life was sometimes successfully erased, it has to be admitted that these small communities quickly fell apart after the performance. Moreover, the participation of spectators sometimes led to rather undesired outcomes. Even Fischer-Lichte wonders whether these performances were not simply recreating the old, hierarchical relationship between performers and spectators in a new guise. One is reminded here of Victor Turner's lucid warning that a true return to ritual is impossible: the differentiations of modern society cannot be undone.

Gabriele Klein, in turn, has analysed the new wave of participatory projects that swept the performance arts from the late 1990s onwards, when performers and choreographers again sought to blur the boundary between art and life. Although they often do so by operating outside the traditional buildings dedicated to the arts, one should not forget that such initiatives are politically and institutionally welcomed and stimulated. Klein rightly remarks that funders increasingly expect the performance arts to justify themselves in reference to their impact on social integration and participation (Klein 2013, 205–206; see also Kolb 2011 and Mullis 2021, 433). Inspired by Andrew Hewitt, Klein uses the label "social choreographies" to indicate choreographers who try to establish explicit connections "between the social and the aesthetic" (Klein 2013, 198). As Klein explains, the participation of the audience in such choreographies can take different forms. Sometimes things are set up so that the presence of the audience becomes, at least conceptually, an indispensable part of the work. Other choreographers aim for active participation and try to turn spectators into genuine performers. On occasion, the audience is even invited to take part in the artistic creation process and becomes a co-producer of the work. Such projects sound promising, but Klein sees a yawning, inevitable "chasm between the theoretical promise of and political aspiration towards participation and the actual aesthetic practice of art" (Klein 2013, 202). In reality, "the promise of community" leads to a tension or even a "conflict" with the artistic commitments and with the expectation of "artistic quality" (Ibid.). A true return to the integral embeddedness of dance in social life, as we imagine it before the emancipation of dance to high art, seems impossible.

In order to counter the pessimistic tone of this message, I would like to discuss two examples of choreographic strategies that are interesting precisely because they display a clear awareness of the ambivalence of dance as an artistic medium. On the one hand, choreographies are works of art: the use of a specific formal technique (imposing movements on human bodies) generates products that circulate and compete in the marketplace of art. On the other hand, they remain internally connected to what seems to be the inbuilt telos of dancing, namely to provide a collective experience that serves community formation. I believe that Bronislava Nijinska and Tino Sehgal, each in their own way, play with exactly this doubleness and smartly exploit it for their own artistic purposes. Of course, they cannot offer an escape from the artificiality of the medium of dance (there is no escape). But by using the medium of dance in a lucid way they might be able to reveal

something of the condition in which that medium finds itself. Moreover, their work shows that there is no reason to be nostalgic or to hope for reconnection. Dance's ambivalent situation is tragic, but maybe this is also what makes dance so interesting.

A countryside wedding

Bronislava Nijinska's choreography, *Les Noces* (1923), is a key work in the history of dance for many reasons, but here I will concentrate on the way Nijinska dissects the connection between dancing and community.[8] The theme of *Les Noces* is a Russian peasant wedding which Nijinska depicted in sober colours and rigid movements. This was in opposition to the initial plans of Sergei Diaghilev, who imagined Igor Stravinsky's music as the soundtrack for a dazzling, colourful Russian countryside feast. Nijinska, who had developed into a self-confident choreographer in the context of Kyiv's modernist art scene (cf. Garafola 2011), had no desire to embellish the harsh reality of Russian peasant life and present a folklorist fantasy. Nor, by the way, was she ever seduced by the new, utopian collectivism propagated by Soviet authorities.

In *Les Noces*, Nijinska's political views are clearly on display: her choreography criticizes the oppressive nature of organized countryside weddings and, beyond that, of community and tradition in general. Nijinska would have preferred to convey this message through a completely abstract choreography, but had to compromise on this point with Diaghilev, who insisted that a ballet should have a clear story (cf. Nijinska 1937, 617–618). The result is an unusual mixture of abstraction and figuration. The ballet's four scenes depict four consecutive moments in the wedding feast, but the plot is only thinly sketched.

The ballet's severe, abstract and very rhythmical movements, often danced in unison by large groups, clearly symbolize the oppressive effect of tradition and uniformity. Think for instance of the energetic male group dancing (with many steps borrowed from Russian traditional social dancing) or the monumental mass scenes. Nijinska uses the corps de ballet, Susan Jones writes, to reflect "the will of the community" (2013, 124). Often, the spatial positioning of the dancers, on long lines with their bodies fully facing the audience, or in tight blocks and tableaux, melts the dancers together in an anonymous collectivity—an effect that can be traced back to Russian icon painting (Johnson 1987, 155–158). Nancy Van Norman Baer captures the effect well when she writes that Nijinska "manipulated masses [...] as an impersonal body, thus symbolizing the weight of custom and the inexorable working of fate" (1986, 34). Jones talks of "massed human blocks" (Jones 2013, 124).

In stark opposition to these heavy masses, Nijinska regularly draws attention to what can only be described as the *humanity* of the dancers. Nijinska makes their presence as individuals felt, for instance by emphasizing their eyes and faces and sometimes by having their gaze linger unusually long on the audience. (Stephanie Jordan describes other "flashes of humanity" as well (Jordan 2007, 360).) This contrast, between a monolithic and geometric choreography on the one hand, and the presence of the dancers as recognizable individuals on the other, vividly evokes the powerlessness of the individual Russian peasants (and, in particular, their young daughters). This theme is

expressed most strikingly at the climactic moment of the choreography, close to the end of *Les Noces* (at number 122 in the score), when all dancers incline their head and bodies in a grave and ceremonial way. This collective moment of solemn bowing, by the newlyweds, their families, and the entire corps de ballet, is inspired by the libretto, which describes, at this very moment, how the bride will have to be obedient and bow to everybody (cf. Stravinsky 1986). Nijinska expresses here, in a gripping and monumental scene, both the enormity and the terror of collective subjection to tradition. Somewhat surprisingly, the pivotal importance of this moment is overlooked by the existent interpretations of *Les Noces*.

In all these ways, then, Nijinska has turned the dancing and feasting at a wedding party into an activist denouncement of the oppression of the individual by convention and community. But it seems to me that there is a second level to *Les Noces*. Nijinska is also suggesting that dancing itself has something oppressive about it. Or, at least, she uses dance's oppressive potential as a means to convey her political message. In Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel "We", written in Russian in 1920–1921, and like *Les Noces* dealing with the tension between collectivity and individual, there is a striking passage where the protagonist wonders what makes dancing beautiful. He concludes that it is beautiful because it is "constrained movement". Fitting the body into abstract shapes and collective rhythms points to an "absolute and ecstatic obedience". And he adds that if our ancestors danced at the most important moments of life, in religious rituals and military ceremonies, "it is because the instinct of subjection always existed in man" (Zamyatin 1924, 6). It is not known whether Nijinska read anything by Zamyatin, but I believe that, in *Les Noces*, she is operating on a similar intuition.

Nijinska has altered the ballet vocabulary to make it harder and less natural. Already by putting her dancers in very stark, "flat", front-facing positions, all movements acquire a rigid character (cf. Johnson 1987, 158). And she strongly emphasizes the geometric shapes inherent in the academic vocabulary; arms, for instance, are extra rounded so as to form clearly visible circles. Several other features, such as the machine-like *pas de bourrée* on points, similarly contribute to the geometric and harsh quality of *Les Noces*. As Van Norman Baer explains, Nijinska consciously used pointe technique, not to make the dancers look elegant, but in order to strip "naturalism from the movement" (1986, 34). This effect is further strengthened because the dancers often seem to "approach their material like a series of facts" (Jordan 2007, 347) and execute it in a "task-like", "untheatrical" manner, as Stephanie Jordan aptly notes (356). Combined with the grueling, repetitive rhythms of Igor Stravinsky's music, *Les Noces* uncompromisingly brings out the constraining and mechanical character of the ballet vocabulary. Dance is ultimately about forcibly imposing collective forms on the movements of individual human beings, or so Nijinska suggests in *Les Noces*.

This betrays a lucid awareness of the specificity, and the ambiguities, of dance as an artistic medium. Yes, dance has an inherent connection with community formation. But Nijinska sees nothing attractive there. To the contrary, she uses dance's inbuilt collectivism as a means to expose the risks of too much community. Hence, Nijinska would see little reason to be nostalgic about times when dance had a more organic connection with community life. This creates a sharp

contrast with *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) which, as conceived by Igor Stravinsky and Nikolai Roerich, was driven by fantasies about archaic peasant communities in an imagined pagan Scythia. Roerich, in an early programmatic text, had already set up an opposition between the rationalism and artificiality of intellectual, high art and a new art that would recreate prehistoric spontaneity and would unite "artist and spectator [...] in a creative ecstasy" (Roerich quoted in Taruskin 1996, 853).

This is ... dancing in a museum

A second, very different example that I would like to discuss, is the work of contemporary choreographer Tino Sehgal, who creates what he calls "constructed situations" (cf. von Hantelmann 2010, 128–174). Typically, this is a group of casually dressed performers doing relatively simple things within a museum setting, to the slight bewilderment of visitors. The performers might chat and sing. They might play games or converse with the spectators about politics. Often they move around in slow motion. But there can also be exuberant dancing. According to Sehgal, the work of art (i.e., the constructed situation) is the complete experience as it is lived in the moment, including the actual interactions between performers and audience members. To underline the situational nature of his works, recordings in any format are strictly forbidden. Yet his works are not ephemeral events or unique interventions; they are usually on display for weeks on end. Museums can even buy Sehgal's works—for steep sums—to continue showing them in the future. For Sehgal, this is a semi-ironic way to participate in the art market: he sells immaterial products, in line with today's increasingly postmaterial capitalism.

On one possible reading of Sehgal's work, he fulfils the promises listed at the beginning of this article: removing the distinction between spectators and performers, bringing them together in a new community, all while addressing burning societal issues. *Yet Untitled* (2013), for instance, is sometimes interpreted as an "enthralling union of spectators and performers" (Engels 2015, 9). Similarly, it has been claimed that *This Situation* (2007) creates "a collective bodily attending" of performers and spectators, a union that "goes beyond conscious acts of individual participation" (Pape, Solomon, and Thain 2014, 90). At certain moments, *This Situation* "is fully experienced as a shared embodiment" (92).

The reading of Sehgal's work that I wish to propose here, goes in the exact opposite direction. It is true that many of his pieces create intricate connections between performers and spectators. To the outsider, performers and spectators are sometimes hardly distinguishable. In *Yet Untitled*, for instance, the performers initially look identical to regular museumgoers. Yet at some point they proceed to sit down on the museum floor, slow their movements and start going through an endless series of poses, often accompanying themselves by beatboxing. Thus, a contrast emerges with the other museum visitors, who are of course moving in a perfectly ordinary way: walking, scratching their hair or pushing a stroller. The difference in movement quality marks the separation between spectators and dancers, but in a very minimal way. Spectators and dancers supposedly share the same experience, but in fact the latter occupy an intimate sphere from which the audience remains excluded. The separation is not spatial in nature, as in a classical theatre

building, but is marked by the choreography: the performers' movements are highly stylized—they are slower and non-functional—which gives them away as danced or constructed.

The same contrast can be seen in *Kiss* (2002), which features two casually dressed dancers going through a number of kissing and intimate poses from the history of art (Rodin's kiss, Klimt's kiss, and so on). Their horizontal positioning on the floor and the very slow tempo of their movements, even more than the eroticism of their poses, sets them strongly apart from the standing and walking museum visitors. When, at the end of their sequence, the dancers stand up and casually walk away, they re-enter the register of ordinary movements and the distinction dissolves.

It seems to me that Sehgal is playing, in a subtle way, with the boundary that inevitably excludes the spectators from the work of art. Dance movements are consciously shaped, constructed or scripted, and this always sets them apart from ordinary movements. Hence, dance as an artform, even in the very stripped-down version offered by Sehgal, creates a boundary between dancers and spectators, between those who are part of the artwork and those who are not. Seen in this light, Sehgal is clearly not trying to close the gap between performers and spectators, as Fintan Walsh also notes (2014, 65). He is rather revealing something important about dance as an artistic medium. As soon as movements are intentionally planned and created, a product or an 'object' appears—albeit a non-material object—that the spectators can only approach from an outside perspective. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Sehgal affirmed that this is what really interests him: "The experiment at the core of my practice is to see what happens if you don't produce something material but still produce something" (Lescaze 2018, 48). Of course, the spectators might feel involved and can be defined as part of the situation. They might even join the dancing, as some spectators do when they see Sehgal's performers dance. But no matter how well they dance, they remain outsiders. Sehgal's constructed situations obstinately remain works of art. We can observe and contemplate them, just like material objects. We can even dance along with them. But we cannot access them. Sehgal's rejection of recordings and written scores pushes this tension to the limit. He does not want the performance to leave any physical trace (to prevent it from becoming a physical object). Still, his interventions as an artist result in 'objects' or 'products' that are understood as such by spectators and that have a very tangible value in the art market.

Ramsay Burt's observations about Sehgal's *Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000), confirm this interpretation. Burt notes that the performers, who were simply doing what Sehgal asked them to do, appeared to him "anonymous, servile and almost disturbingly deindividuated" (Burt 2011, 273). In regular dance performances, the programme at least mentions the dancers' names and possibly some biographical information, but Sehgal's interpreters in this piece (as in his other pieces) are "objectified and rendered entirely anonymous" (275). According to Burt, this is exactly what Sehgal is after. The performers are physically close to the spectators and in many ways indistinguishable from them, yet the boundary is palpable. The performers are executing a work of art (a form of "servile, non-productive labour") whereas the spectators are looking at these objectified human bodies from the outside, so they clearly do not belong to the same community (276).

Conclusion

Bronislava Nijinska and Tino Sehgal, each in their own way, display a clear awareness of the peculiar condition in which dance, as an artform, finds itself. Dance, as social dancing, was embedded in communal life in an unmediated way. But when dance is used as an artistic medium, it is inevitably shut off from this possibility. Any hope that artistic strategies can overcome this gap, abolish the distinction between performers and spectators, and rejoin art to the 'promise of community', is illusionary. At the same time, dancing, even as an artistic medium, continues to elicit a certain sense of community. Artistic dancing cannot but invoke potentials and energies which, by its very constitution, it also has to exclude.

The choreographic strategy of *Les Noces* is lucid precisely because it plays with this communal appeal of dancing. Nijinska shows us that dance generates a sense of community because it imposes identical forms—shapes, rhythms, spatial patterns—on people's movements and thereby melts individual subjects together. But rather than celebrating this mechanism, Nijinska activates it for critical purposes, namely to expose and denounce the oppressive potential of communities and traditions, deliberating shattering romantic visions of happy communal dancing. Nijinska does so on the side of artistic dancing, but one could of course do similar work on the side of social dancing. For contemporary examples of strategies to counter the potentially oppressive conventions of social dancing, see Savigliano (2010, 142) and Khubchandani (2020, 23).

Tino Sehgal's work is, at first sight, aimed at creating genuine moments of community, experiences shared by performers and spectators. But this is deceiving. No matter how minimal his choreographic instructions, there is always a marked difference between the danced (or constructed) movements of the performers and the ordinary, unscripted movements of the museumgoers who, in the end, remain excluded from the work. Sehgal knows that every artistic intervention, even an immaterial one, results in an experience that is not just an experience but also a product or an object that can circulate, as a commodity, in the marketplace of art.

It seems to me that Nijinska and Sehgal, despite their artistic and chronological distance, point to an inspiring choreographic ethos. Whereas some social choreographers try to reconnect the practice of staged dancing with communal life in a direct way, Nijinska and Sehgal reveal the naiveté of such an approach. Instead, they take into account the specificity of the medium of dance. Historically, dancing became an artistic medium by separating itself off from social dancing and hence from the lifeworld where it used to find its purpose. This separation, which *constituted* dance as an artform, might be tragic but it cannot be undone. Nijinska and Sehgal show that this does not need to be a story of decline and that there is no reason for nostalgia. To the contrary, it may be this peculiar condition that makes dance so interesting and makes it different from other artistic mediums. Yet this also poses a challenge for choreographers and demands a specific attitude from them. Dance, as an artform, is inevitably defined by that which it no longer can be. Rather than denying this tragic condition, Nijinska and Sehgal—in very different ways—deploy choreographic strategies that deal with this situation in a lucid manner. They subtly play with dance's constitutive outside, knowing perfectly well that they cannot undo the separation with this outside, even if it

continues to haunt dance from the inside. As such, they show that the medium of dance is an unanticipated yet intriguing example of Derrida's concept.

Ultimately, this points to a lesson that contemporary choreographers would do well to heed. Faced with many incentives—including financial ones, as Klein notes—to direct their artistic practices towards societal and communal goals, Nijinska's work might inspire them to, instead, critically reflect on dance's ambivalent relation to community formation. And instead of thoughtlessly embracing today's discourses on creativity, cooperation, and participation, they might do well to see family resemblances with the current mode of capitalist production, as pointed out by Kolb. This is also why Sehgal's work is so instructive: in all its ambiguity it does, rather unambiguously, lay bare the connection between artistic production and market mechanisms. But these are of course unfashionable proposals. Not just because they assume that understanding cultural and ethical norms requires looking at underlying economic processes (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello 2018, 469), but also because they imply a return to questions about the specificity of artistic mediums (cf. Krauss 2000).

Notes

[1] Marta Savigliano makes a related and highly interesting observation. She discusses how the inclusion of "world dances" into scholarly discourses and into the global market requires turning living dance practices (with "cultural moorings and social functions") into "products" or "objects" available for leisurely and intellectual consumption (Savigliano 2009, 165, 168, 174, 179). These products or objects are then collected and exhibited in ways that are analogous to the operations of museums (Savigliano 2009, 176).

[2] This is a matter of some controversy. Mark Franko, discussing the findings of Julia Sutton, states that he disagrees with her. According to Franko, there might have been some "overlap between courtly social and theatrical performance", but "the differences between them were probably greater than their similarities" (Franko 2022, xxi). In Franko's view, "social dance was not a basic form of theater dance in French court ballet unless there was a need to quote social dance on stage" (Ibid.).

[3] In this brief historical summary, I follow the lead of scholars like Margaret McGowan, Jennifer Nevile, and Julia Sutton. A slightly different interpretation of this period can – again – be found in the work of Mark Franko (2015, 2022). According to Franko, baroque ballet (in particular burlesque ballet) did already contain elements that point to dance's later position as an autonomous artform (see Franko 2015; and see the discussion in Pakes 2020, 36, 39). McGowan would not put it in these terms, but she agrees that sixteenth century grotesque and acrobatic dancing by professional dancers deserves attention as a specific phenomenon that challenges the "permeability between professional and noble performances" (McGowan 2008, 231). In a recent text, Franko writes that earlier ballets functioned and can be read as "poetic structures" and suggests that the question of their status as art is not particularly important (Franko 2022, xxx). Maybe dance in this period can even be seen as "proto-modern art" (xxxii).

[4] Noverre is certainly not unique in this. Gasparo Angiolini, for instance, also criticizes the use of "physical virtuosity for its own sake" and defends the ideal of a "speaking body" (Pakes 2020, 49). But it is Noverre's description of this ideal that became most influential.

[5] Interestingly, Fairfax claims that the misrepresentation of eighteenth-century stage dancing already started at

the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Carlo Blasis for instance providing in 1820 a misleading and disdainful picture of dancing skills in the previous century (Fairfax 2003, xi).

[6] These ballets were often structurally similar to work shown at the Opéra (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 97, 111), but differed in their lighter tone and their strong preference for lascivious and sensuous themes that justified flaunting the female dancers' bodies (Gutsche-Miller 2015, 60, 164, 183).

[7] I have to thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

[8] In what follows, I summarize an analysis of the choreography of Les Noces that I developed in more detail elsewhere (Geenens 2010). A thorough analysis of the choreography is also provided by Robert Johnson (1987). For an excellent analysis of the relation between the choreography and the music, see Jordan (2007, 351–373). For background information on the creation process of Les Noces, see Lynn Garafola's recent biography of Nijinska (Garafola 2022, 127–148) and see Nijinska's own account of the process (Nijinska 1971).

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Biography

Raf Geenens is a professor of philosophy at KU Leuven (University of Leuven) in Belgium. He was trained in philosophy at the universities of Brussels and Leuven and in dance studies at the University of Paris VIII Vincennes. He has held visiting positions at Columbia University, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, and at Queen Mary University of London. Raf Geenens's primary teaching and research interests are in the fields of ethics, legal and political philosophy. In the past years he has conducted a research project on the role of constitutions in the life of communities and he is now in the process of completing a monograph on French philosopher Claude Lefort. Yet he also maintains a vivid interest in the history and philosophy of dance.