

CRIES AND WHISPERS ABOUT VINCENT DUPONT

a text by
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Perspective: geometrical science that sets out to construct forms and determine proportions relative to the elements composing a real or imaginary spectacle considered from a fixed point of view. (Encyclopédie Larousse).

Situation: a dancer alone in a slightly scaled-down dining room. Overexposed, white light on a domestic scene. He crawls over the floor and furniture. Groans. Cries out. Sound sensors, probably placed around the set and on his body, prolong each movement, every contact, all his expirations and turn them into a deafening racket. Dread. These tiny captures act, via real-time acoustic processing, like a giant resonance chamber. Amplify the sound. Make it bigger. Swell it. So, paradox aplenty. A deafening murmur. A devastating slowness. A raging immobility. Inaudible expression. A contained but spreading rumble. In an indescribable aural din, but with methodical and determined gestures, the dancer will end up emptying the set of its objects. Breaking this stifling interior and cutting it up with a chainsaw. And will finally bring the walls down. Destroy it. Then move gently towards a tree trunk placed at the front of the stage. Will hit it with a piece of wood, triggering a desynchronised projection of lines by Agrippa d'Aubigné like subtitles on the trunk.

A singular figure in the field of contemporary choreography, Vincent Dupont, who was an actor and then began dancing for others, creates pieces that have very little dancing and are almost static, pieces in which the movements of the body, sometimes almost imperceptible, seek to translate the energy of a tension that is internal to the stage. A magnetic kind of



Qui pensois ployer Dieu
parmi la boucherie.

Vincent Dupont, *Hauts Cris (miniature)*, 2005, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Sandrine Aubry

concentration. He also bases each of his shows on literary sources, and with the same dynamic rather than literal relation to the text. In the form of invisible causality, his borrowings from the poets Christophe Tarkos and Agrippa d'Aubigné are never illustrative, nor are they pretexts for dance. Implicit, inaudible, they build a stylistic and rhythmic foundation for the work on stage. By taking the example of two shows—*Jachères Improvisations*, and above all *Hauts Cris (miniatures)* premiered at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in September 2005—and looking mainly at his practice of positioning bodies within complex optical systems with strong connotations, I would like to show how the choreographer's formal radicality is in itself the vector of an active discourse on the history of forms (notably the question of perspective), aiming to bring about a crisis over physical presence within artistic representation.

At first glance, Dupont's choreographic work seems essentially visual—or, more precisely, pictorial. The gestures of the dancers, which are minimal and so radically slow that they verge on immobility, embody a frozen mode of representation that has more to do with composition than with animation. Like figures from a painting, the two protagonists of *Jachères*, in particular, who are motionless in a faithfully recreated contemporary interior on the stage, partake of an iconography that, *a priori*, is closer to painting or photography than to "living art".

Tiny changes of equilibrium. A slow gestural morphing. In fact, Dupont's shows "make the image." Their deliberately

pictorialist tendency is backed by the decisive, sensitive work on set, light and sound.

The sets of Dupont's shows, which are meticulously designed and made in collaboration with the artist Boris Jean, are thus composed of fully-fledged installations assembled on stage, symbolically endowed with a frame that doubles the proscenium of the theatre. This frame focuses the gaze and seems to project the action onto a flat surface. The proportions of this single opening on the stage also circumscribe a panoramic kind of gaze, following a model that is as much cinematographic (as in the 16/9 screen or cinemascope) as pictorial. This well defined mode of exhibition forces the show to observe unity of time, place and action, but also constrains the bodies of the performers, exhibiting them and giving them the form of motifs. In *Hauts Cris*, indeed, the character physically experiences this frame and is clearly trying to escape from it, to go over the wall. But in vain. There can be no escape. The equally remarkable use of lighting, which is extremely precise while at the same time very simple, also attests an interest in classical iconography: Chiaroscuro for *Jachères*, *sfumato* for *Hauts Cris*. At once powerful and diffuse, the light overexposes the scenes, flattens them, makes them unreal. To such an extent that one incredulous spectator who was nevertheless fascinated by the illusionistic effectiveness of these minimal effects, was, during the first ten minutes of *Jachères*, moved to observe: "It's incredible what people can do with video nowadays!"¹

3D Reform. Holograms. But sound has no small role in the perceptual disorientation wrought by Dupont's shows.

2

Regarding the temporality of Dupont's work, I would briefly note here that if *Jachères* explored the question of suspended time, then the time at play in *Hauts Cris* is more "swollen," since the visual and aural set-up tends to exaggerate and enlarge everything. Playing on extreme immediacy, setting up the radical coincidence of image and sound, movement and its instantaneous resonances, it obtains the subtle chaos of a constant breaking of the sound barrier. A continuous "bang". The dancer's infrequent, slow gestures with their disproportionate acoustic effects seem to suggest the famous butterfly effect, complete with instantaneous hurricane. The butterfly of chaos theory with instantaneous hurricane. A theory of chaos concentrated in space and time, resonating with itself.

Powerfully, electronically amplified, modified live by the musician Thierry Balasse (another fertile collaboration) and piercingly reproduced, it acoustically and penetratingly overexposes the ensemble, completing the transformation of this physical and material reality of the stage into overwhelming spectral apparitions.

The eminently plastic character of Dupont's pieces also carries multiple references, which can be sought in the recent history of the visual arts. If in *Jachères* the light, the chromatic tones and the choice of subject itself recall the paintings of Edward Hopper, the "hot" photos of Nan Goldin, and even a West Coast atmosphere à la David Lynch, *Hauts Cris* tends more towards the neutral and enigmatic interiors of a Balthus or a Wilhelm Hammershoi. Subtly, indeed, Dupont combines several pictorial fields within his frame, playing notably on the superimposition of figurative and abstract motifs. In *Jachères*, a beam of bright light on a coloured wall contrasts with the generally very realistic figuration on the stage. In *Hauts Cris*, a diaphanous screen of light shining from the back of the set operates as a second level of projection. Like a monochrome overhanging a genre scene. These emphatic interventions, we can wager, are not solely formal. Nor are they gratuitous. Heightening a fundamental contradiction between the materialism of one part of the set (the strangely familiar, clean and immaculate interiors) and the evanescence of the bodies' movements, they explore a decisive theatrical question, regarding the way in which bodies and objects are caught between the abstraction of their signified (de-realisation of forms by light and sound) and the exacerbated realism of their appearance (extreme reification by means of the same procedures). A fundamental tension between immanence and transcendence, which certainly generates this powerful psychological dramatisation of the frozen scene in *Hauts Cris* as in *Jachères*, referring to the oneiric character (used in painting, notably by the Surrealists, but also in cinema) of the confusion obtained by such extreme clarity.

According to the classic apprehension of images, it is more precisely the notion of perspective, in its two-dimensional artificiality, that Dupont really seems to be working on by transposing it to the stage. This question is present in *Jachères* through a distancing presentation of the action in relation to the spectators (the set and the dancers positioned well to the back of the stage) in contrast to sound made excessively close, because is broadcast by the individual headphones offered to the public. The relation of scale between image and sound is subverted. *Dikrömatik*, a piece premiered in 2002, also explored this question, using a system involving the anamorphic projection of lines on moving screens, setting up a dynamic interaction on the fluctuating perspectives of the set. In *Hauts Cris*, it is the whole formal set-up itself that questions this proportional mode of representa-

tion of the real. "Natural" perspective is redoubled and exaggerated by the arrangement of the five visible panels of the set box (walls, floor, ceiling) which converge in a forced, constructed way on a hypothetical vanishing point situated behind the luminous screen of the backdrop. Perception is subordinated to the representational order of things. The dancer, who by design is too big in relation to the elements of the set, merely intensifies the unease caused by the artificiality of the set-up.

Since Panofsky, whose work was mediated by Hubert Damisch, we have known that perspective is more than a pragmatic or even intellectual way of thinking about what the eyes see, but an actual way of seeing with the mind, rather than with the eyes. So: no longer seeing things as events in themselves, but uniquely in proportional relations. In other words, considering reality as primarily a system of metrical relations more than as inventory of autonomous and sovereign entities. Consequently, its advent and its systematisation inevitably mark the institution of a certain politics of the gaze. In this perspective (if I can express myself in this way), the actualisation of such a motif on stage in Dupont's work is more than just a visual game; it is just as much a defiant, reactive gesture directed against that conceptual system and, in the same measure, political system for representing the world. The character in *Hauts Cris*, who crawls like an animal (one thinks of Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa who suddenly becomes a stranger to his own world), then bellows and growls in the middle of his "modern" lounge, seems to be replaying that original societal conflict between nature and culture. While he appears to be fundamentally unadapted to a domestic world that has become stifling, intolerable and scandalous, is the situation not intolerable primarily because he is held inside it, locked in by walls, for one thing, but beyond that by a doctrine of representation that ultimately constrains bodies as much as it forces the gaze? Vanishing point. There's no escape. Thus—and this is what founds the singular genealogical depth of the show—the synchronous destruction of this immaculate architecture could be the echo of a destruction that is more fundamentally diachronic but just as driven; that of the very rules of perspective. Here, as in *Jachères*, Dupont's precise work on the space is only one particular way of working with a temporality experienced through spatial constraints.² In an exemplary way, the inexorable destructive movement of *Hauts Cris*, carried out in a strict economy of gestures and resources, sketches out a much wider temporal line, affirming a real and passionate relation to history.

In his novel *Préhistoire*, Eric Chevillard has his narrator imagine a positivist reading of history, but done backwards. He thus details a highly convincing reverse chronology of contemporary man, born cluttered and held back by too many objects, moving naturally towards a dematerialisation of his

world, gradually ridding himself of the useless in order to get back to the flexibility and naturalness of a rudimentary existence, all the way to the origins of civilisation as the objective end of the evolution of the species. You cannot pursue progress. In a comparable regressivo-progressive philosophy, Dupont's *tabula rasa* could be seen as a way of swimming against the tide of history, stage by stage. The "bourgeois" interior (the word "bourgeois" is indeed often associated with the perspectivist ideal) is like a frozen system in which modern man is imprisoned. Domesticated (in every sense of the word). Hence an inner anger, arising from a feeling of being trapped by one's own body within this prison—a prison within a prison. Locked-in syndrome. A refusal to submit to the crushing light and stifling furniture. And since there is no prospect of escape outwards (impassable frontiers of partitions), it is towards the interior, in a centripetal movement of anger, that the energy of deliverance will emerge. His back to history, the protagonist rids himself of the furniture (goods), then of the side walls (the perspectivist frame), and finally, of the back of his cell (the luminous vanishing point that was merely a screen over the darkness). There then follows a shadowy phase that nevertheless allows for liberated gesture in raw space where, rid of its useless accessories, you can at breathe at last. The place of primal communication, suddenly intelligible now (the stick hitting the tree trunk). At peace but not reconciled, an essential relation of body against body. Trunk against trunk.

Dupont combines this inner rage of 21st-century Western Man with the wild, raw, cruel and poetic writing of Agrippa d'Aubigné, an ardent Calvinist born in the 16th century who found a way to transform her political revolt into mythical narrative. A modern dread echoed, as a modern canon echoed, in canon form one might say, with a terror from the mists of time. Perfectly matching the inner energy that runs through *Hauts Cris*, d'Aubigné's writing uses a rhetoric of enlargement and amplification by means of words, and constitutes an appropriate lyrical counterpoint to the roaring of the figure on stage. As we have seen, these literary choices are not innocent: Agrippa d'Aubigné, and in his way Christophe Tarkos (present in *Jachères*), use a kind of language-before-language. Neither deconstructed or deconstructed, but more pre-structured. Raw. In fusion. Writing from the belly more than from the head. An organic, intense flux that spills out abundantly. Energetically more than reasonably. A way of transforming intimate emotion into a universal abstraction. Painfully.

In the same way, the organic chaos that *Hauts Cris* offers us ultimately has less to do with an identified assertion or contextualised message, than with the timeless figure of the unsayable itself. The archetype of scandal. The universally intolerable. By doggedly crossing, as we have seen, the frontiers of a history of forms and events, Dupont at the same

time begins a process of disindividuation of suffering. Therein lies the great paradox of this static dance that is strongly embodied and even physiologically performed (the amplified sound of the body at work) and that tends towards the metaphysical. A chronicle of Western life (the bourgeois living room) and universal considerations (the irrepressible anger of civilised man), the crawling body and divine light, the organic cry and literary text, or even, as in d'Aubigné, the historical event and the supernatural. Dupont's choreographic writing connects up body and spirit, immanence and transcendence in the paroxystic tension of an immediate present that is swelled to bursting point. This radical representation of an infinite suffering evokes Blanchot's limit experiences and his semantics of the night, the outside, the neutral and the disaster. The night, experience of the intolerable, lived as a rending of the real, an opening onto the abyss at the heart of immediacy that cannot be described with words, and that, even more, cannot be thought or, paradoxically, even experienced. Dupont's dance, engaged as it is in this extravagant grammar of the formless, could well constitute a fascinating physical echo to these limits of writing and thought, whose intellectual aporias fascinated the phenomenologists of radical transcendence. *Jachères*, *Hauts Cris*: sketching the unsayable. This decontextualised, ahistorical suffering is described by Blanchot as a "present without end" in which time seems to "have stopped, confounded with its interval".³ It thus sends being towards non-being, towards the limits of its very possibilities of existence. A radical disindividuation in the experience of the collapse of the world, each event appears as "that which escapes our power to test, but the test of which we cannot avoid".⁴ This impossible character of possibility, this suffering that we cannot suffer, this cry with no one to cry it out, have a unique resonance in Dupont's choreographic work.

Vincent Dupont is a dancer and choreographer, associate artist of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in 2005. He lives in Montreuil (France). *Hauts Cris (miniature)*, shown at the Laboratoires on October 19-20-21, 2005. Production Association J'y pense souvent.../Coproduction: Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers; la Muse en Circuit—Centre de création musicale en Île-de-France; Centre national de danse contemporaine d'Angers; Centre chorégraphique national de Tours; ARCADI (Action régionale pour la création artistique et la diffusion en Île-de-France). With the support of the Drac Île-de-France —Ministry of Culture and Communication; DICREAM—Centre National de la Cinématographie; Les Spectacles vivants —Centre Pompidou.

3
Maurice Blanchot,
L'Entretien infini, Paris,
Gallimard.
4
Idem.