

Flexible Performativity: the Invisible Visible Labor of Contemporary Dancers

Master's Thesis | Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy

University Utrecht 2020

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title: Fulfilling Your Expectations (2014) **medium:** performance

description:

Fulfilling Your Expectations is a performance that contains singing, dancing, painting, touching, logical speech, non-sensical speech, nudity, and a surprise.

–Christian Falsnaes, *Performance Works*, PSM Gallery 2014

Abstract

This thesis examines the performativity of dancers in contemporary performances and its correlation with the multifaceted and precarious modes of working associated with Post-Fordist capitalism. The theoretical framework departs from Marxist and feminist understandings of labor to examine how danced labor and virtuosity have been conceptualized in dance theory, particularly the “hired body” of Susan Leigh Foster, and later work on the production of subjectivity from Bojana Kunst, Bojana Cvejić, André Lepecki, and Italian Post-Operaist thinkers such as Paolo Virno. Jon McKenzie’s notion of performativity as a highly normative organizing principle of our times is then used to develop the understanding that performativity in a theatrical setting is greatly affected by the (off-stage) labor of dancers. The notion of “flexible performativity” is proposed to describe the versatile, fragmented, unfinished subjectivities proposed by contemporary dancers on stage. Its attendant characteristics (hyper-referentialism, hyper-subjectivation, auto-dramaturgy, and negotiating proximity) are examined for the labor they entail for dancers. These characteristics are further unfolded by drawing on the work of various contemporary dance theorists, and by connecting them to specific modes of working within the field. Developing flexible performativity as an analytical framework, two case studies of common contemporary dance formats, the “precarity solo” (*How Do You Imagine the Devil?* by Dani Brown (2012)) and the “dance exhibition” (*This Variation* by Tino Sehgal (2012)), highlight how dancers’ work contributes to the doing of these performances.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my peers of the MA Contemporary Theater, Dance and Dramaturgy, especially the Saturday Nightzz Girlzz Ari, Kim, Mai, Naomi, and Polina, who even in a pandemic kept my morale high and the thesis blues at bay;

Thank you to Konstantina Georgelou, supervisor extraordinaire, who has been unfailingly supportive, eerily speedy with her emails, and thoughtful with her feedback;

Thank you to Annelies van Assche for agreeing, very very early on, that what I thought was a good idea, might actually be a good idea;

Thank you to the many truly astonishing performers of the Berlin dance scene who I have been privileged to see on and sometimes even offstage, y'all are my heroes and inspiration: Barbara Berti, Boglarka Börcsök, Dani Brown, Dragana Bulut, Madalina Dan, Jule Flierl, Martin Hansen, Leah Katz, Roni Katz, Justin F. Kennedy, Julek Kreutzer, Ligia Lewis, Ana Laura Lozza, Sergiu Matis, Lee Meir, Manon Parent, Maria Scaroni, Claire Vivianne Sobbotke, Annegret Schalke, Cathy Walsh, Frank Willens, Melanie Jame Wolf, among others; not sure how y'all keep your balance on that pedestal I put you on, but please stay there;

And of those many performers, thank you especially to Dani Brown and Dragana Bulut for reading this thesis and offering your feedback;

Thank you to my parents, Ruth Higgins and Jim Fulkerson, who have always provided light, love, encouragement, and proofreading; as well as taking my sudden occupancy of their guest room in their stride;

And finally: thank you to Marius, for your kindness, strength, and sense of humor, which always seems to make the world right again.

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1. Introduction

A great deal of recent dance and performance studies research has been focused on describing and contextualizing the various ways in which contemporary dance is made within the ever-shifting, largely precarious, network-based performing arts field that can be found in Europe today. Some of the scholarly debates focus on the *modes of production* found within processes of dance and contemporary performance (Van Assche 2019; Kunst 2017; Jackson 2014). Others analyze the variegated aesthetic proposals presented in contemporary performances, within which performers and spectators constantly experiment with different modes of being together (Cvejić 2015; Fuchs 2004; Lepecki 2016). In such analyses, the labor of the dance artists who dance in these performances has been referred to as that of a “multitasking bricoleur” (Cvejić and Vujanović 2010, p.4).

Once this bricoleur has entered the performance space, however, what does and can this bricoleur actually *do*? Given the multiple interrelated skills on display in contemporary performances, how might we best conceptualize danced labor in such situations? It is rare to read detailed accounts of how dancers contribute to the aesthetics, dramaturgy, and even composition of contemporary performances through their specific performative capacities, even though in my experience as a professional dancer, I know that they do. This thesis will examine how the labor undertaken by contemporary dancers becomes visible in performances, and how this labor co-constitutes specific performative dispositions that are ubiquitous, if not taken-for-granted, in large parts of today’s contemporary performance field. This assumption, that dancers performing are obviously always laboring as well, is already suggested by the thesis title: the act of performing, i.e. the visible labor of dancers, is rarely taken into account, i.e. it remains invisible. Therefore my central research question is: *How does the labor of contemporary dancers become visible in contemporary performance?*

The multifaceted, oscillating, fragmented, shifting, ludic subjectivities produced on stages by contemporary dancers have been a matter of deep ambivalence for both dance spectators and dance scholars, an ambivalence often designated by the objection “But, they are not dancing?” (Andersson 2017). When connected to discourses of virtuosity and technical skills, this sentence might also be understood as, “But, they are not working?” The scholars and dance artists who have patiently unfolded the working methods and conditions of the contemporary dance field make it clear that both of these statements are patently untrue (Kunst 2015; Chauchat et al. 2010; Van Assche 2019), which leads to my first research sub-question: *1) What forms of labor can be identified within the contemporary dance field, and how do they inform the bodies and subjectivities of the dancers who perform there?* However, the very different temporalities of making, performing, and

attending a contemporary dance performance as mentioned in *Choreographing Problems* by Bojana Cvejić (2016, p. 22) is almost certainly a reason that the performative labor apparent onstage is frequently under-theorized: one cannot analyze what one does not see. This leads to the second research sub-question: *What type of performativity is enabled through the variegated, (im)material labor of contemporary performers?* This thesis and the developed notion of *flexible performativity* provide a much needed framework for bringing the onstage labor of dancers and its concrete effects on contemporary performance into focus for dance theory and discourse, including for performance analysis, which will be exemplified in answering my third research sub-question: *3) How does danced labor materialize on the contemporary performance stage, and how does flexible performativity become fundamental for the doing of the performances* *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* by *Dani Brown (2012)* and *This Variation* by *Tino Sehgal (2012)*? Conversely, the relationship between labor and performativity developed in this thesis may contribute to a broader examination of labor in contemporary capitalism, particularly in its connection to “performance” both in the context of the arts and in its broader sociological understanding.

1.1 Defining “Contemporary Dance”

The observations, analyses, and case studies in the following are all rooted in the field of “experimental contemporary dance” (Burt in Brigshaw&Burt, 2004) as it is produced in Europe in the first decades of the 21st century. As Cvejić has pointed out, the term “contemporary dance” is not uncontested: it both “promotes an obsession with contemporaneity” while failing to account for the greatly differing aesthetic points of departure of post-modern and modern dance, which among other genres still both appear under that moniker (Cvejić, p. 4). The term “contemporary dance” will be used here because I am undertaking not so much an aesthetic analysis of dance works as of the work of dancers. “Contemporary dance” happens to be the term that organizes the formal discourse of funding bodies, educational institutions, and performance venues, which shape the opportunities for working and performing within the field. Contemporary dance is not only a contested aesthetic field, but a (largely non-profit) economic one, an ever-shifting network of performers, choreographers, visual artists, dramaturges, curators, theatres, museums, and rehearsal studios. How this double nature of the field becomes visible on stage is exactly what is at stake in the following.

1.2 Methodology

The motivation for exploring danced labor has to do with my background as a choreographer and performer in the contemporary dance field, and a desire to make sense of my professional

artistic practice through the theoretical grounding of the MA in Contemporary Theatre, Dance, and Dramaturgy. First, it must be noted that I developed the titular concept of *flexible performativity* many years before writing this thesis in order to communicate my own experience of performing in and attending contemporary dance works. It was, first of all, a part of my own artistic jargon.¹ The term and its attendant characteristics in the following thesis are in part based on the experience of navigating the field of contemporary dance as a labor market, and some parts of this thesis rely on an embedded and embodied ethnographic approach to organize my observations. For example, I performed in one of the two case studies at the end of the thesis, *This Variation* by Tino Sehgal, several times over a period of years. However, these aspects of performativity can also be deduced from the careful attendance of contemporary performances, and analyzing them for the kind of labor being performed, as becomes apparent in the analysis of *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* by Dani Brown.

Many aspects of what I call flexible performativity have already been extensively treated in political-aesthetic analyses of specific dance performances or of contemporary performance as an epochal genre: in other words, in analyses of *what dance pieces can do*. The theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in re-evaluating the compositional, aesthetic, and dramaturgical aspects of contemporary dance performance from the perspective of *what dancers can do*. In doing so, there is a constant reflection on how the visible labor of dancers onstage mirrors the invisible labor, unseen by audiences, that dancers must execute in order to navigate their multifaceted, precarious, and mobile professional lives. As such, this research takes a contextualist approach (Saukko 2003) in examining the materiality of dancing bodies in and outside of performance and the ways in which these bodies and subjectivities interact with, react to, and resist both abstract and material economic and social forces. Bringing danced labor into focus calls attention to some of the most underpaid workers of the performing arts field, who are often caught in the crossfire of societal debates surrounding the value of art, dance, and virtuosity, encompassing a deep ambivalence about what is being presented on stage in contemporary performance.

However, it must be acknowledged that the focus on danced labor in this thesis (and my own position as a dancer-and-dance-scholar) does little to undo the rightfully criticized historical foundations of Western dance, in which the body of the dancer is inextricably linked to movement. In this understanding, the dancer's skill in performance reifies notions of the value of an individual self, as has been examined by Lepecki (2016), Cvejić (2015), and others. Neither can this thesis be

¹ In an academic context, I first shared the term with Annelies van Assche in research for her doctoral thesis (2019, p. 249)

said to be a sociological account of the motivations and desires of contemporary dancers within the field. Instead, it is hoped that, by providing an account of the labor of contemporary dance, in further steps we can identify the ways in which dancers' bodies and subjectivities can indeed challenge a broader societal imperative to perform.

The primary manner of highlighting danced labor proposed by this thesis is in the development of several new concepts, particularly the notion of “flexible performativity” and its characteristics: hyper-referentialism, hyper-subjectivation, auto-dramaturgy, and negotiating proximity. As a methodological approach, the development of these concepts is intended to answer my research questions, providing a frame of reference for looking at contemporary dance today as a very specific type of work. As Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink notes in the introduction to *Nomadic Theatre: Mobilizing Theory and Practice on the European Stage* (2019), “Concepts ‘do’ things because they create focus: they organize phenomena and define the sphere of questions addressed to an object...A concept works as a searchlight; it focuses interest and installs a certain, articulated perspective, without denying that a different perspective would produce a different object...” (p.16). Before proposing flexible performativity in this thesis, I unfold my own perspective by connecting two central notions of contemporary theater and performance studies, the notions of “labor” and “performativity.” In exploring labor, critical materialist approaches as to how post-Fordist modes of production influence cultural workers have been paramount, as has my own experience as a performer and a fan of contemporary dance. For performativity, an examination of performance as the defining “onto-historical formation” of our times, as proposed by Jon McKenzie (2001), has been crucial.

I have used qualitative research methods including literature research and performance analysis. The relevant literature in the fields of dance and performance studies, as well as philosophy and linguistics, were accessed either in person at the University Utrecht library, or online through the WorldCat search engine. For the analysis of *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* by Dani Brown, video documentation provided by the choreographer was used, as well as relying on my memory of having attended a live performance. For the analysis of *This Variation* by Tino Sehgal, I relied on the estimated 950 hours I have spent performing the work, as well as the corroboration of co-performer Martin Hansen.

1.3 Case Studies

This thesis contends that the kind of work done by dancers offstage is reflected in the work done by dancers onstage. This contention is tested by analyzing two works whose formats have been definitive of contemporary dance in the first two decades of the 20th century: the “precarity solo” (Van Assche 2019) and the “dance exhibition” (Bishop 2018). Focus on these two formats is due to the assumption that their ubiquity has entailed that the performativities honed within them have also carried over into a broad spectrum of dance performances.

In her doctoral thesis *Dancing Precarity*, Annelies van Assche coined the term “precarity solo” to describe a solo work, made and performed by a single artist, that because of its minimal tech requirements and labor can be easily toured and performed. Juggling multiple projects over months is a part of professional life for many dancers, and a solo work can fill large gaps and a certain non-continuity of practice. As Van Assche notes, the conditions for producing work within the field of contemporary dance lead to an (over-)production of precarity solos, and their omnipresence makes it essential that they are considered here.

Thus the first case study is *How Do You Imagine the Devil?*, a solo work by American-born, Germany-based choreographer Dani Brown from 2012, which premiered at Kampnagel in Hamburg.² Having seen this piece live in the 2014 edition of the Berlin Tanztage in Sophiensaele, I selected this piece for analysis because it made a deep impression on me. The abrupt shifts in atmosphere relied almost entirely on Brown’s physical and vocal versatility, making the spectator experience one of somewhat awestruck ambiguity.

The format of the “dance exhibition,” in which dancers are often performing for the duration of a museum’s opening hours (Bishop 2018), has provided an important new sphere of employment for contemporary dancers, albeit one with equally precarious working conditions as in theatres and with rather specific demands on the performer.³ The second case study is a piece for a gallery space by Tino Sehgal: *This Variation* (2012). Sehgal is perhaps the most well-known contemporary dance artist to bring his work into the gallery space. I was a part of the +/- 25 member original cast of *This*

² It should be noted here that the term “precarity solo” is in no way a reference to the quality of the performance work, but rather to the paucity of resources involved in producing the work (which Brown also explicitly references in her solo). Also, Dani Brown has produced much of her work within the framework of fingersix collective, a group of six dance artists who met at ArtEZ in Arnhem during their studies. Several members of the collective were involved in producing *How Do You Imagine The Devil?* in various capacities.

³ In her article coining this term, Claire Bishop suggests that there is an “underclass” of gallery performers who exclusively make their livings from performing other artists’ work in museums. This is not exactly true, particularly because there is hardly enough work going around to sustain any significant number of people over a period of years. Instead, gallery performers are often professional dancers or other performers working on projects for limited periods of time, often alternating between museum, theater, and other jobs.

Variation during its initial 100-day run at the documenta13 in Kassel, Germany, and subsequently toured on and off with the work for several years afterwards. Thus, my analysis of the work also lies in my knowledge of performing in the work and of how the piece is structured, which is almost certainly not apparent to a casual observer.

1.4 Structure

In Chapter 2: “From Dancing Bodies to Dancing Subjectivities,” the term “labor” is examined as it has been used by Marx, redefining the notions of “visible” and “invisible” labor to correlate with the labor that dancers put into preparing for, and then performing in, contemporary dance performances. I then draw on Susan Leigh Foster’s notion of the “hired body” to activate the idea that post-Fordist capitalism and its structures for training, rehearsing, and producing dance inscribe themselves onto dancers’ bodies. To examine how this relationship has changed since the development of the hired body, I draw on the work of Bojana Kunst, who brings the theory of Italian Post-Operaists on the production of subjectivity (esp. Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno) to bear on the labor of the contemporary dance field. I then examine how Virno’s notion of virtuosity as a communicative skill has created a tension with other understandings of virtuosity and the labor of dance as comprising a technical skill. Currently, contemporary dancers must bridge both notions, although the former may well be under-estimated.

Chapter 3’s “Note on Performativity” activates the second strand of my theoretical framework by examining how the term “performativity” has been developed, particularly by Erika Fischer-Lichte within the realm of theatre studies and Jon McKenzie beyond it. McKenzie suggests that the notion of “performance” is the defining onto-historical structure of our times—and thus is also a concept that limits what is in the realm of the possible. When transferred to the dance field, this implies that the (im)material labor of dancers today also circumscribes what can be present in performance.

Chapter 4 proposes the notion of “flexible performativity” to describe what dancers can present in performance: a disposition that navigates between different performative modes depending on the situation, and that is in part constituted by the manifold demands of working and dancing in the field of contemporary performance. Departing from Annelies van Assche’s exploration of the effects of precarious working conditions on artistic processes and productions within this field, I propose four different characteristics of flexible performativity: hyper-referentialism, hyper-subjection, auto-dramaturgy, and negotiating proximity. Each characteristic is connected to current discussions in theatre studies, particularly contemporary dance theory, and to the invisible labor of

dancers offstage. Finally, on the basis of these observations, Chapter 5 examines how danced labor materializes in the performance of the two case studies, *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* by Dani Brown (2012) and *This Variation* by Tino Sehgal (2012). The analysis of these two performances demonstrates that without the specific abilities of the performers, these works would not be able to be what they are. In the concluding remarks of Chapter 6, having connected and developed the notions of labor and performativity, I also contemplate the limitations of this interrelationship, offering avenues for further research.

2. Dance as Labor: From Dancing Bodies to Dancing Subjectivities

In this thesis, the terms “labor” and “work” will be used interchangeably in the traditional Marxist sense of a “collective and creative human capacity harnessed by capital to the production of surplus value” (Weeks 2011, p. 14). Both terms refer to *all* kinds of “productive cooperation around, but not necessarily confined to, the privileged model of waged labor” (ibid. p.14), both paid and unpaid.⁴ This is because the distinction between paid and unpaid labor has increasingly blurred in post-Fordist times, as “the once essential qualities of life after work (imagination, autonomy, sociality, communication) actually turn out to be at the core of contemporary work....” (Kunst 2015, p. 101). This holds true for many types of workers, but especially for those working within the field of contemporary dance. While many forms of work make up the careers of professional dancers, often only a fraction of it is remunerated: usually performances and often studio rehearsals. Ironically, those activities undertaken by professional dancers that are very similar to the main tasks of many office workers (communicating with project members and venues; organizing transportation, rehearsal spaces, and schedules; writing grant applications; updating websites; etc.) are generally not paid—something that professional contemporary dancers have in common with many other freelance workers. When one considers that most dancers pay to participate in the classes and workshops that provide them with the training necessary to develop one's dancing skills, it becomes apparent that distinguishing between paid and unpaid labor in the dance field has analytical value mainly in the struggle—by dancers and nearly every other worker in the cultural field—for appropriate wages.

This thesis will focus on the labor that prepares for and then constitutes the act of performing in front of an audience. As such, I will borrow the terms “visible” and “invisible” labor, applying them specifically to the work of performing artists. In feminist theory, the term “invisible labor” has frequently been used to denote traditional “women’s work,” the reproductive labor that takes place in the domestic sphere and has been “mystified into a natural vocation,” often to preclude it from being remunerated or valued (Federici 2004, p. 75). Analogous to this, in this thesis the invisible labor of the contemporary performer refers to the wide variety of activities related to maintaining, restoring, and preparing dancers’ bodies—the “backstage” labor of rehearsal, process, training,

⁴ Marx distinguishes between several types of labor, starting with abstract and concrete labor: the former refers to human labor in its capacity to produce exchange value, whereas the latter refers to a specific activity that produces a specific useful effect. Marx brings this twofold nature of labor together in the notion of “living labor,” which he describes as “labor-power in action,” (Marx 1887, p. 130). In other words, living labor is the work of workers who “revive” the dead labor of capital into something that has value. Multiple scholars have used performing artists as prominent examples of living labor, highlighting the connection between the body as both material and nexus of labor as a way of re-materializing the supposed “immaterial labor” of the art world: notably Dunja Naradi for the contemporary dance artist (2014) or Joshua Lebin-Lev and Aliza Shvarts in the context of performance art (2016).

collaboration, travel, attitude, and experience—for performance. Performance is, of course, “visible” labor. Perhaps this is why performances are sometimes the only remunerated aspects of danced labor: there is no denying the materiality of the bodies on the stage, and the audience itself can (over)see the ways in which these bodies are spending their time. Even when spectators confront their uneasiness with dancers on stage who appear to be doing nothing more than “hanging around” (Kunst, p. 126), the performance as a cultural product is enabled through dancers who put their embodied selves at stake as living labor (Van Assche, forthcoming).

The following will trace the transformation of danced labor since the 1980s with a parallel development in the ways that dance scholars and practitioners think about virtuosity and its relationship to dance. I position this thesis at the intersection between two conceptions of danced labor. Writing in the 1990s, Susan Leigh Foster described a newly-minted “hired body” of the dancer who could adapt her physicality to match the needs of each new choreographer—Foster describes the intense (invisible) labor that goes into acquiring such a body. Recently, other scholars such as Bojana Kunst and Bojana Cvejić have described the ways that dancers have both internalized and attempted to resist the demands of the Post-Fordist art market, while drawing parallels between artistic labor and that of other (cultural) workers. By drawing on the account of practice provided by Foster and the shift in notions of virtuosity through the imperative to produce subjectivity described by Kunst, I will be able to examine what specific visible labor must be executed by dancers in performance today, and how the various modes of production of contemporary dance contribute to sculpting this performativity.

2.1 What Hired Bodies Can Do

“Typically, a dancer spends anywhere from two to six hours per day, six to seven days per week for eight to ten years creating a dancing body. During the course of this travail, the body seems constantly to elude one’s efforts to direct it. The dancer pursues a certain technique for reforming the body, and the body seems to conform to the instructions given....” (Foster 1997, p. 236)

In her 1997 article “Dancing Bodies,” Susan Leigh Foster looks at the dancer as an object of analysis through the techniques that instruct it: she examines those bodies that have been deeply informed by ballet, Duncan technique, Graham technique, Cunningham technique, and contact improvisation. Finally, she notes that a sixth form of dancing body arose during the 1980s, a body she dubs the “hired body.” As the number of independent choreographers working in short-term projects without overarching institutional support proliferated in the 1980s, and as interdisciplinary genres of performance combined (or invented) different dance techniques, dancers became adept in

various techniques in order to be hired in different projects. This hired body “trains in order to make a living at dancing” (Foster 1997, p.255). Foster describes the hired body with some ambivalence, concerned that it “homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface” (ibid.). Assumed to be both natural and completely adaptable, the hired body is created at a distance to an authentic “self” (unlike early modern techniques) as well as removed from any particular aesthetic vision: it is a body trained for in the gym and aimed towards a market interested in display. Foster notes that the hired body both masks “the process through which dance technique constructs the body,” as well as eclipses “the opportunity...to apprehend the body as multiple, protean, and capable, literally, of being made into many different expressive bodies” (ibid., p. 256).

Importantly, Foster connects both methods of instruction (the different dance techniques, aesthetics, and their modes of facilitation) as well as various modes of contemporary production (project-based, interdisciplinary work) to the bodies of performers, making the obvious connection that how a body spends its time concretely affects what it is able to do. Foster accounts for how off-stage, invisible labor, such as dance training, inscribes itself onto dancer’s bodies in ways that provide for specific performative possibilities once put onstage. Her descriptions equate the practice of dance with a mastery of a technical skill, although the quote above makes clear that this mastery is a difficult and ambiguous process.

The interrelated conditions of making a living by dancing in independent projects *and* the necessity of being able to adapt one’s physicality to specific conditions are still as imperative to today’s contemporary performer as it was for the hired body of the 1980s. However, the versatility expected of today’s dancers has broadened even beyond what Foster describes, especially because her notion of the hired body suggest a polishing away of the individual differences that have become increasingly important in navigating a career in contemporary dance. At this point, it may be useful to examine some of the actions performed by contemporary dancers today, and address some of the changes to presentation formats and work processes that trouble the notion of a sleek, virtuosic, more-or-less neutral hired body. In other words, what are contemporary dancers actually doing in the moment of performance?

In any given performance, contemporary dance audiences may be met with some of the following performative actions: dancing, of course—from release, floorwork, and contact improvisation to raving to ballet to hip-hop to somatic techniques to folk-dancing to striptease to a plethora of movement vocabularies or physical states so specific to a performance that they may well never be named. Along with movement, performers in contemporary dance pieces often produce a large variety of sounds, both musical and linguistic: one can hear singing, beatboxing, monologues, lectures,

pre-melodic howling/crying/laughing, musical theatre repertory, and conversations. Many performers can play musical instruments of some sort. Interaction with the audience is frequent: performers may order, beg, question, converse with, fondle, or otherwise interact directly with spectators. Performers may improvise, manipulate objects, or remain perfectly still. In describing such performative eclecticism, it has been frequently noted that contemporary performance often draws on the performative knowledge of many different genres, performative actions from both “high” and “low” art: from happenings to vaudeville, from competitive sports to political speeches. This hyper-referentialism has been variously connected to the “indeterminacy” of contemporary art (Cvejić 2015, p. 8), postmodernism (Laermans 2015, p. 205), or the neoliberal obsession with the self (Lepecki 2016, p.10). Contemporary choreographers often also work at creating an idiosyncratic dance language that appears as their unique signature: thus performers in such performances are required to learn this specific movement vocabulary (Van Assche 2019, p. 40).

In addition to a plethora of expected abilities on stage, several other changes within the field have modified how dancers work in recent years: a comprehensive digitization of the working process, in which Youtube and Instagram have become primary resources for the inspiration and appropriation of movement material; the incursion of contemporary dance into the museum context, which has placed a host of other demands on performers; and a slow but steady diversification of the actors that can be found on contemporary stages (from amateur performers to screens to animals to fog) all come to mind. However, perhaps the most enduring transformation has and continues to be the post-Fordist working structures—temporary, networked, project-based, precarious—that gave rise to Foster’s hired body. In subsequent debates on immaterial labor and the production of subjectivity, contemporary dance and the labor of dancers serve both as metaphors for further thought as well as examples of a shift in virtuosity, from the technical to the communicative, that is still contested in both artworks and theoretical discussions.

3.2 What Dancing Subjectivities Can Do

How the labor of dancers is conditioned by its circumstances has been developed by other scholars in the years since Foster published her article. Within this discussion, it is useful to think of a shift in the discourse from the “dancing bodies” described by Foster and the “production of subjectivity” as described by Kunst, Cvejić, Ana Vujanović, André Lepecki and a host of other theoreticians with close ties to artistic practitioners. For these scholars, Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno of the Italian Post-Operaists have been important references.

Lazzarato suggested in 1996 that post-industrial capitalism has been increasingly predicated on “immaterial” labor, the type of labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity (Lazzarato 1996). As one of the first of his articles to be available in English, the notion continues to be widely cited, even though Lazzarato distanced himself from the term quite early on. The distinction between material and immaterial labor remains full of ambiguities, especially when considering dance: what is the (im)materiality of dance—body, individual, technique? Later, Lazzarato re-focused on the “production of subjectivity,” as “subjectivity is capitalism’s biggest output. It’s the single largest commodity we produce, because it goes into the production of all other commodities...” (Lazzarato 2010, p. 14). According to Lazzarato, the subjectivity produced in post-Fordist capitalism is an extreme form of individualization, whereby one becomes “one’s own entrepreneur” and assumes the risk of marketing one’s self as an inherent part of one’s work. This production of an individualized subjectivity is increasingly homogenized and standardized, until political alternatives for it become unthinkable.

This highly-individualized and entrepreneurial self may actually be exemplified in the contemporary dancer, who “can even make work in spare rooms with nothing more than their bodies, often unshod, subsist on few calories, and even among performing artists deliver more for less by garnering the most meager wages” (Randy Martin quoted in Lepecki 2016, p.17). The dancers of today must be flexible, fast, creative, and able to communicate and understand working processes: in other words, “the labor of the artist is often strongly in tune with how we are working today—with flexible hours, no distinction between private life and work life, a high personal investment and an emphasis on the value of collaboration” (Kunst 2017, p. 116). In her article “On the Labor of a Dancer,” Kunst argues that dance artists have countered this ever-accelerating pace and variety of their production by producing a series of works, since the 90s, in which entrepreneurial subjectivity is questioned, works in which “dancers have actually abandoned the labor done with their bodies. Not only have they refused the beauty and virtuosity of movement, but also the effort which is needed to produce it, the labor which has to be invested in the movement itself...such a refusal of the dancing labor and the virtuosity originating from strain and effort produced many idle, passive, and neutral dancers....” (ibid., p. 122). These performances no longer exhibit the athletic generalization of the hired body; other notions of dance are at stake.

In this same article, Bojana Kunst ultimately argues that this new kind of subjectivity is not so much an *abandonment* of labor, but the introduction of something new. She describes how the field of contemporary dance has undergone a transformation of its understanding of virtuosity, which is usually perceived as the fulfillment of a technical skill. For this Kunst draws on Virno’s

work, who describes a kind of collapse between the spheres of human activity characterized by Hannah Arendt. Within the post-Fordist regime, Virno maintains that “labor”—the organic exchange with nature and the (re)production of objects—and “politics,” the realm of common social relations (Virno 2004, p. 50), have fused. Virno furthermore maintains that virtuosos—a term he uses generally for *all* performing artists, specifically including dancers—produce an activity that, performed in the presence of others, is its own fulfillment. In Marx-inspired words, there is no product of a performance once it is finished. Virno claims that the act of speaking, or rather the possibility of utterance, functions in a similar way: language is “without end product,” (Virno 2004, p. 55) because language presumes the presence of others and thus institutes the publicly organized space that traditionally involves the realm of the political. Thus for Virno, “virtuosity” is a term connected to all such activities that serve to create a common sphere, particularly linguistic-discursive-communicative activities. He notes that, within our current economic structure, these skills are important to most forms of waged labor—even as the material production of objects, for example, is delegated to an automated system of machines.

It should be noted that Virno begins his discussion of virtuosity with the performing arts, including dance, and yet in his discussion virtuosity becomes a collaborative and communicative skill. When applied to dance, as Kunst does, this skill suggests an entirely different form of labor: “The fact that dancers talk and dance with dramaturgs, continuously show open processes and discuss unfinished work, construct sharing networks of methods, focus on process and method instead on the product [sic] and at the same time resist perfection and emphatic perception of the spectacle, can be related to the shifts in the modes of virtuosity, which focuses on linguistic and collaborative capacities” (Kunst 2017, p. 127). This shift in virtuosity also becomes apparent in the visibility of new kinds of danced labor in processes that have been commodified as performances: in talking, lounging, distracted bodies on stage, or in the materialization of the art-making process in open rehearsals, artist talks, publications, laboratories, residencies, and festivals (Cvejić and Vujanović 2010, p. 4).

This shift in understandings of virtuosity, from the technical-skillful to the discursive-cognitive, has fueled very different discussions on the meaning of the work of dance. As both Kunst (2017, p.129) and Cvejić (2015, p.9) have pointed out, barely under the surface is a fear that exploring a new form of virtuosity will lead to a loss of the traditional skills of a dancer. In an essay devoted to the “occupational hazards” of those working on the chiasmic interrelations of the live performance and visual arts fields, Shannon Jackson laconically phrases this fear: “...when does the invocation of the conceptual turn seem to be rationalizing the fact that certain artists never learned

any skills in the first place?” (Jackson 2014, p. 58). Jackson uses the term “de-skilling” to describe a certain conceptual movement of postmodern dance artists who renounced their acquired technical skills in order to highlight other forms of movement: pedestrian, awkward, amateur, singular. She questions whether the generations succeeding these postmodern choreographers still even possess their virtuosic dancing skills.

It is worth noting that contemporary dance practices actually confound this binary that Virno suggests and Jackson reduces to a question of skill: both technical and discursive-cognitive skills can only be articulated through our bodies. Skills do not simply appear on the body, the body acquires such skills through how it spends its time, how it labors. What Virno does not account for in his description of virtuosos is that the virtuosos who are producing an “activity that is its own fulfillment” (i.e., performances) inevitably prepare for these performances with a variety of means, but most often in the form of practice. Whereas performance might be a dancer’s most visible form of labor, this can only be produced through an invisible labor that may or may not establish a public sphere. The professional dancer thus inhabits a contested space in which physical labor resists its divorce from the “life of the mind”; it remains unclear whether the eschewal of one type of virtuosity in favor of another necessarily entails the loss of the first; and the appearance of different evaluative models regarding her skills will engender changes to the dancer’s practice and subjectivity.

The proximity of the dancing subjectivity to other types of labor within contemporary capitalism has already been noted. However, the common use of the terms “cultural workers” or “contemporary performance practitioners” may also obfuscate the qualitative differences of types of labor within the dance field, which may already be obscured because so many performers out of economic necessity fulfill different roles in different productions. For Foster, the specificity of danced labor is obvious: dancers work at creating a dancing body, a hired body, which can then perform in certain ways. Even today, in contrast to many other types of cultural worker, the dancer labors in a multitude of different physical, repetitive, improvised, communicative, affective ways not only to produce a dancing subjectivity. A second step is to produce this subjectivity *on call and again* within the narrow confines of a cultural performance. In other words, one specific quality of danced labor is that the skills necessary for executing it are amassed with an eye to being deployed *in performance*. Performance remains the chief commodity of the dance field (Cvejić and Vujanović 2010, p. 4), even though our understanding of what constitutes a performance has expanded to include parts of the process (i.e. open rehearsals or artist talks) or different types of performer-spectator interaction. Performances are produced through two steps of danced labor: in preparations shared with all others involved in a production, as well as in the visible moment of performance.

The dancing subjectivity of the first decades of the 21st century, although still undeniably “for hire,” is a distinctly more changeable and porous dancing body than what Foster was proposing with her gym-trained, MTV-video-imitating hired body. The skills exhibited by these bodies include not (only) mastery of different dance techniques, but also an active awareness of selecting the correct mode of being according to the performance situation in which one finds one’s self. These dancing subjectivities are shifting constantly between different modes of being because they *must*: if dance jobs are scarce, jobs that require performing “hanging around” are even more so. Thus the dancers who have “abandoned the labor done with their bodies” (Kunst 2017, p.122) in one production, may well be called on to take it up again in the next. The chameleon-like skills required to accommodate these rapidly changing conditions can and do make themselves felt in the type of performativity that dancers provide in their work in contemporary dance performances, a performativity that unites, as Van Assche writes, “a great adaptability, a personal movement style, and a unique presence on the stage.” (Van Assche 2019, p. 249).

In the following, I will examine the term “performativity,” especially as it has been related to theatre studies, in order to discuss how the labor of dancers conditions a certain kind of performativity visible on stages today, a performativity produced through danced labor that both engenders and *limits* contemporary dance performances.

3. A Note on Performativity

J.L. Austin, speech philosopher, is generally credited with one of the first theories of the performative: in his 1951 *How to Do Things with Words*, he focuses on those utterances that accomplish what they signify. At the moment a bride says the words “I do thee wed,” she constitutes a new reality: she is married, no longer single. Whereas Austin was mainly looking at language and speech, in 1988 Judith Butler expanded the notion of the performative to include not only utterances but also “performative acts,” bodily acts that materialize identities: they do not refer to a fixed, stable identity but constitute (fragmented, unstable) identities, particularly through repetition (Butler 1988, p.519). Butler examines mainly the “performative acts” of everyday life, where, for example, the announcement “It’s a girl!” when looking at a newborn sets off a series of mutually reinforcing actions throughout the life of a person which shapes this person as female. Butler has been tremendously influential to the field of gender studies: because one’s gender is based on a series of performative acts, gender can also be done differently (ibid., p. 520). This way of looking at performativity highlights its emancipatory potential. However, Butler stresses that performativity describes processes that bring certain kinds of reality into being—precluding others. Performativity in its iterative function can thus be limiting and constraining.

Another scholar to examine the limiting, conservative aspects of performativity is Jon McKenzie in his book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001). McKenzie develops (or, in his words, “rehearses”) a general theory of performance as the definitive “onto-historical formation of power and knowledge” of our times—in contrast to “discipline,” the mode of control which, according to Foucault, defined formations of power in the 18th and 19th century. McKenzie examines the three realms of cultural, organizational, and technological performance as exemplary of the post-World War II explosion of performative paradigms, noting in his analysis of the 1986 NASA Challenger disaster the uncanny coalescence of these three forms in what he calls the “performative stratum,” a stratum of knowledge and power implicating broad swaths of contemporary life.

Of interest here is McKenzie’s argument, with Butler, that performance as a dominant formation within the Post-Fordist regime is a highly *normative* force: the “—or else” part of his title. He contrasts this imperative to perform with a common mode of understanding performances within performance studies, which as a discipline has tended to emphasize the transgressive and/or resistant potential of performance. Within the (academic) fields of performance and theatre studies and the (artistic) field of cultural performance, he thus suggests that liminality and transgression have become something of a norm: “the liminal-norm operates in any situation where the valorization of

liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative” (McKenzie 2001, p. 50). The realm of cultural performance, to which contemporary dance performances also belong, thus values that which does not re-affirm social norms, but transgresses them.

This “liminal-norm” becomes apparent in how, for example, Erika Fischer-Lichte claims the concept of performativity for theatre studies: the key aesthetics of the performative are seen as *transformational*. Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that Austin and Butler “both see the accomplishment of performative acts as ritualized, public performances” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 28), or in other words: “performativity results in performances” (ibid. p. 29). Fischer-Lichte uses the concept of the performative to particularly describe those works of art created in the Western art world since the 1960s which do not represent actions, but in which the actions of the performer accomplish what they signify:⁵ These accomplishments are not interpreted by spectators but experienced by them. In contrast to a hermeneutic or semiotic analysis of such works, Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetic theory of the performative accounts for how spectators react to performative actions in the here-and-now moment of performance. Fischer-Lichte refers to performances that particularly allow a “role reversal” to take place, frequently by putting audience members into situations where they don’t know according to what rules to act: in other words, in performances where the social norms of the performance itself is transgressed. Transformation becomes the fundamental category of an aesthetics of the performative.

If one shifts temporalities from the length of a single performance to the span of a contemporary dancer’s career, dancers will dance in multiple performances, most in their own way aimed at renewal, transgression, and resistance—sometimes even towards the wider cultural imperative to perform. This is where the bodies described by Kunst in the last chapter can be found, the idle and passive bodies that reject the exhausting labor of dancing. This imperative to perform still permeates the contemporary dance field, however: in the various ways formerly invisible parts of danced labor have become subsidiary commodities of performance, in the seemingly endless expansion of techniques and registers contemporary dancers might be required to perform, and in the layers of unique subjectivity dancers must produce both on and offstage. McKenzie postulates that performance “produces a new subject of knowledge, though one quite different from that produced under the regime of panoptic surveillance” (McKenzie 2001, p. 18), one that is “constructed rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual” (ibid.). Kunst has described how

⁵ Cf. Virno (2004): As mentioned in Chapter 2, Virno describes performing artists as virtuosos who produce an activity that, performed in the presence of others, is its own fulfillment (p.55). This way of looking at performers, while remarkably democratic, does not account for *how* performing artists are able to accomplish performative acts.

this new “subject of knowledge” is co-created in close proximity to art and artistic labor (Kunst 2015). The labor of the dancer thus embodies the dominant modes of social control. In the era of the performative stratum, the contemporary performer develops a flexible and ever-changing performativity. The following chapter will examine more closely the characteristics of this flexible performativity, which I propose has become the common-sense mode of being on stage in many different performances of contemporary dance.

4. Flexible Performativity

As has been demonstrated in the previous sections, much labor today is organized around the production of subjectivity: danced labor is specifically organized around producing specific kinds of subjectivity within the frame of a cultural performance through corporeal practice. Influenced by their working lives, dancing subjectivities are subject to similar conditions as those described for Foster's hired body. However, through a spate of developments within the performing arts context since at least the 90s, the ideal-type contemporary dancer has come to exhibit traits that appear to contrast with the "multipurpose" hired body's attempts to "subsume and smooth over difference" (1997, p. 256). In fact, cultivating and highlighting difference may actually be pivotal in order to be a successful dancer, or at least an employed one: in the field of contemporary dance, as Annelies van Assche states in her doctoral thesis *Dancing Precarity*, "having a unique stage presence and individual character are key to success" (Van Assche 2019, p. 243).

In *Dancing Precarity*, Van Assche uses a mixture of performance analysis, statistical inquiry, and ethnographic fieldwork to investigate how the precarious socio-economic positions of contemporary dance artists affect their working processes and performances. She describes the "modi operandi" of contemporary dance artists as "the fast, the mobile, and the flexible." In particular, "the flexible" is of interest here. Van Assche draws a parallel between contemporary dance artists and other workers within the Post-Fordist regime. In order to survive how the labor field is organized today, all workers are called to be "resilient subjects, skillful in flexibility, persistence, and adaptability" (ibid., p. 237). Van Assche identifies several parallels between the skills that contemporary dance artists must demonstrate on and offstage. She recognizes that the skills of being polyvalent, flexible, and adaptable are qualities inherent to the jobs of project-based workers. As Van Assche demonstrates, these "pragmatic transferable skills" are also necessary in order to create the productions that are shown in the field of contemporary dance in Europe. Incidentally, these are *also* the skills that dancers must demonstrate on stage: their embodied selves on stage echo both the conditions under which their art is made as well as fundamental structures of control within the "performative stratum" postulated by McKenzie. When we see contemporary dancers performing, we see bodies that "shuttle back and forth between different evaluative grids" (McKenzie 2001, p. 19). These dancers must be "accustomed to mobility, to be able to keep up with the most sudden conversions...to be flexible in switching from one set of rules to another..." which is how Virno describes contemporary workers in general (Virno 2004, p.45). Shuttling back and forth, switching, oscillating, navigating: such movements are also among the characteristics of what makes an out-

standing contemporary dance performer, and these abilities are continuously showcased in a variety of contemporary dance performances.

In performance situations, contemporary dancers exhibit flexible performativity, which is characterized by an ability to navigate between different performative registers, to create complicity with the audience, and in general to adapt one's performance to the specific audience, location, and situation, although this does not preclude the development of an often highly charismatic onstage presence. This is not to say that dancers performing pre-defined movement sequences that can be experienced through their synchronicity (with other dancers or music) or technical fidelity no longer account for much of the pleasure people derive from watching (and performing) dance.⁶ However, the formats and novelty of some contemporary performances suggests other skills have become equally important. This tension points to the shifts in virtuosity described earlier: the dancer negotiates different kinds of (technical, dance, discursive, affective) skills and different expectations of audience members in the moment of performance.

Even an expert audience of contemporary dance may have very little idea of what it is that they will see on the night of a performance. If they do have expectations, it is likely based on their knowledge or experience of the choreographers' previous work, the profile of the venue in which it is shown, the texts that have been written about the work (frequently written by the maker of the work), and/or photographic documentation. Contemporary dance unfolds in very different performative situations and very different spectator relationships. Whenever the "rules" of the performance are unclear, the performers within the piece end up with an additional responsibility to not only perform the material or structures that have been developed, but to guide the audience through an unknown territory. In the following, four characteristics of flexible performativity will be addressed: hyper-referentialism, hyper-subjectivation, auto-dramaturgy, and negotiating proximity. In developing these characteristics, I have drawn on observations of my own experiences as a contemporary performer and as an attendee of contemporary performance. As will be further examined in the case studies in Chapter 5, these aspects of flexible performativity tend to be bound up in one another. For now, each characteristic will be examined separately, drawing on the work of other dance theorists and their analyses of specific dance performances or contemporary performance trends, and connecting these compositional, aesthetic, and dramaturgical aspects of contemporary dance performance to the labor of dancers. In doing so, parallels will be drawn between the invis-

⁶ Most contemporary dancers continue to be excellently trained—they will undoubtedly perform in technically demanding performances at some point in their careers. Additionally, with extremely limited rehearsal times, many choreographers will still prefer those dancers who can refer to a large range of embodied knowledge before the process even begins. (Van Assche 2019, p. 242).

ble and visible work of dancers that Van Assche has developed, constantly reflecting on how the visible labor of dancers on stage mirrors the invisible labor, unseen by the audience, that dancers execute in order to navigate their multifaceted, precarious, and mobile professional lives.

4.1 Hyper-referentialism

The movement material of Liz Kinoshita's performance *VOLCANO* (2014) is clearly inspired by 30s and 40s tap-dancing, despite the fact that none of the performers are explicitly professional tap-dancers. In Silvia Garibaldi's *Graces* (2019), performers dance ballet, sing arias, and complete calisthenic workouts onstage. For *Monument 0: Haunted by Wars* by Eszter Salamon (2014), the dancers perform war-like dances from around the world, from the Balinese Baris to crumping. In *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church* (2009), Trajal Harrell considers the question of "What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?" (Harrell 2009). In drawing on such complex references, all of these works make use of a "core idea of contemporary dance...that the choreographer can have access to any kind of material and that s/he recharges the material with artistic substance, with or without a reference to the context from which it transpires" (Van Assche 2019, p. 241). What this presupposes for dancers performing in such works is their ability to learn and then embody a range of different movement techniques and materials. As has already been mentioned, the training background of contemporary dance artists usually consists of a diverse collection of different movement practices and techniques, from ballet and release to somatic techniques. The professional life of a contemporary dancer consists of learning and *unlearning* a variety of techniques for specific shows and, in many cases, combining several of these techniques within the span of one show.

To "refer" implies making a connection to something that is not present, beyond the undeniable concreteness of the body. Yet how does one do such a thing within a practice of embodiment? When neurological pathways and muscle memory coalesce to perform a movement, is it even possible that this movement is not also *of* this body, even when the history of the dancer and of the movement have become quite different than in its "original" context? Contemporary performance works—and thus necessarily the performers within these works—deal transparently with this tension between appropriation⁷ and embodiment through primarily two strategies. On the one hand,

⁷ Here the term "appropriation" is used in the sense of either reference and adoption. That said, the complication of embodiment within the discourse surrounding *cultural* appropriation would be a tremendously interesting avenue of further research.

“dance’s inescapable *corporeality* constantly demonstrates to dancers and audiences alike concrete possibilities for embodying-otherwise” (Lepecki 2012, p. 15). To “embody-otherwise” is to engage with an embodied practice as a fiction, in the acknowledgement that it both does and does not belong to one. Second, Kinoshita mentions in an interview with Rita Natalio (quoted in Van Assche 2019, p. 255) that although her dancers are not professional tap-dancers, “we can do it well enough.” Strategies of hinting, of mastering techniques “well enough” to evoke their contexts *without* allowing the audience to switch to the evaluative grid implied by classical dance techniques are finely balanced skills of contemporary performers.

Within the field of linguistics, the term “code-switching” refers to the “alternating use of two or more languages in conversation “ (Auer 1998, p. 17). This alternating use can occur in a variety of ways: between speakers (a mother speaks English to her German-speaking children) or even within a single sentence. Although code-switching was originally seen as an “inferior” use of language when linguists began to study the phenomenon in the 1950s, since then it has been recognized that code-switching allows important insights into how language is situationally constructed. Linguist Peter Auer emphasizes that “code-switching has and creates communicative and social meaning” beyond the singular meanings of words and phrases in the languages used. The very act of switching languages within a conversation can reveal multiple levels of understanding and references to common or diverging experiences. Switching genres, dance techniques, or the parameters of performance within the performance also creates its own experience: the switch itself, its very in-betweenness, and the efforts required by a performer to jump from an intense physical state to a series of steps to a monologue—or perhaps do all three simultaneously—create a distinct aesthetic flavor to contemporary dance work. Furthermore, this ability to switch (which can be between spoken language and danced movement, but also between different types of speech and utterance) is often what allows contemporary dance works to create multiple levels of interpretation within the same work. In the widely embraced format of the lecture performance, for example, the specific quality of the performance is related to the ability to perform something, as well as to talk about it.

This constant (re-)combination of different performative skills and techniques within contemporary dance works I define as “hyper-referentialism.” I include “hyper” in this notion to emphasize an acceleration of this quality in performances, not least influenced by the enormous amount of physical practices that have been made at least visually available through platforms like Youtube. As a significant portion of contemporary choreography has become videography (Laermans 2015, p. 195), contemporary performers might well spend large parts of the research process citing dances seen in videos.

The second part of this notion, the act of *referring*, evokes both Lepecki's "embodying-otherwise" and Kinoshita's dancing "well enough." A caveat remains that hyper-referentialism is often performed as well as interpreted as being humorous or ironic: "...the endeavor to produce unmistakably 'impure dance' through the joyful quotation of all sorts of popular music and culture...the ironic play with semi-characters, emotional theatricality and narrative nonlinearity... 'Impurity' also means diverse references to vernacular dance traditions or formerly illegitimate performing genres (such as comedy or Broadway dancing), as well as virtuoso eyewinks to the vocabulary of classical or romantic ballet..." (Laermans 2015, p. 205). When references and their executions on the contemporary dance stage are seen as frivolous, this playful approach to embodiment within contemporary performance work also eclipses the fact that the dancers "referencing" tap-dance on stage have obviously acquired the skills necessary for tap-dancing. At this point, let us note that the skill of hyper-referentialism means the ability to point out one's reference to the audience without allowing them to apply the norm associated with it, remaining squarely in the situation of a contemporary dance performance as one points to other realms of life or movement experience. Within a contemporary dance performance, this hyper-referentialism offers a recognizability to the audience which, in the face of the unknown parameters of a work of art, allows them an anchor in the work.

Finally, hyper-referentialism must necessarily also denote that contemporary performers are frequently also called upon to speak, sing, or otherwise vocalize in performance works, and these utterances must fulfill a variety of functions within a performance, from building a soundscape to giving instructions. This heavy focus on the discursive nature of some performance work again echoes Virno's description of the communicative nature of labor in the Post-Fordist regime, at the same time expanding the scope of reference beyond a dancer's physical abilities (most people can evoke the movement of a "pirouette" just by saying the word, even if they aren't able to do one!).

Of course, performers are only able to switch or navigate between those languages (spoken and danced) that they are aware of, and this is often highly contingent on the personal biographies of the performers in question. At the same time, a significant body of contemporary performance has sought to emancipate dance and choreography from the dancer: casting the labor of dancers (as we shall see in Chapter 5, sometimes quite literally) into darkness and thingness (Lepecki 2016). This movement, between individualism and self-negation, can also be seen as a characteristic of flexible performativity: hyper-subjectivation.

4.2 *Hyper-subjectivation*

As already explored in chapter 2, a central motif of contemporary life in post-Fordist capitalism is an extreme form of individualization (Lazzarato 2010), in which the individual person, obligated to (re-)produce a neoliberal subjectivity, assumes all risks related to one's labor. For Lazzarato, the central figure of our times is the (weak) subject of the entrepreneur. A deeply intertwined history of colonialism and capitalism has led to an intensely neoliberal mode of governing conduct, which appears to be the "only possible and reasonable option for life," as André Lepecki states (2016, p.3). In his book *Singularities*, Lepecki examines several works of experimental contemporary dance that question this hegemonic mode of being, dance works that propose "singularities" as "modes of collective *individuation* away from the monadic-juridical form of the person" (Lepecki 2016, p.6). Drawing on a definition by Didi-Hubermann, the singularity is not "unique" but rather implies the production of an irreducible and multiple strangeness that replaces a modernist "creation of the new" and disidentifies dance works from the artistic self.

Particularly within the tradition of Western theatrical dance, this disavowal of the self on the dance stage contraindicates a central aesthetic mode, namely "dance's foundational emphasis on the person and on the praising of the dancer as one of its main aesthetic traits" (ibid., p.11). This is not to say, however, that Lepecki is ignoring the labor of the dancer, even when this labor (and indeed, even the bodies of the performers) are invisible on the stage in works exploring darkness, thingness, and animality. "As both producers and objects of their own labor, dancers reveal dance as a system where creativity and corporeality fuse in and as work. This offers dance an opportunity for an urgent and embodied critique of neoliberal idealization of, and demand for, conformed and profitable creative labor" (ibid., p. 17). In other words, a tension appears to be at stake between "making a living" as a dancer by pursuing job opportunities predicated upon the "unique stage presence and individual character" described by Van Assche, and the working towards questioning, struggling against, and finding the "unintegrated life" (Elizabeth Povinelli quoted in Lepecki 2016, p.17) within the hegemonic status quo. On the one hand, this tension also has to do with the differing temporalities of the respective author's analyses (whereas Lepecki focuses on modes of being within the framework of a dance performance, Van Assche is examining contemporary dance as a labor market). On the other, this struggle can also be conceived as an oscillation *between* different forms of "embodying-otherwise" that produce different kinds of relations to the self and the community at an ever-increasing speed. I refer to this characteristic of flexible performativity as "hyper-subjectivation."

Dancers rarely dance characters such as Esmeralda on the contemporary dance stage—doing so would almost certainly be an “eyewink” towards the narrative structures of ballet.⁸ Instead, performers on stage will usually be somewhere on a spectrum between performing their own “selves” (for example, the epigraph of this thesis describing *Fulfilling Your Expectations* by Christian Falsnaes (2014); *Kein Applaus für Scheisse* by Florentina Holzinger and Vincent Riebeek (2014)) or embodying an absence of identity as nameless, “neutral” performers (*Lang* by Kat Valastur (2008); *Low Pieces* by Xavier Le Roy (2015)). Constructing (a) subjectivit(ies) in the service of a contemporary dance performance might serve to establish common ground with the audience, or conversely construct identities that are highly *different* from the audience. It requires the willingness and ability to perform or distort one’s own or a group’s identities, to articulate feelings and sensibilities, to move and be moved from deeply personal experiences and convictions, onstage, for the edification of an audience who will largely remain anonymous. These abilities lie at the core of theatricality in general, and as such also belong to the repertoire of actors and other performers, as well as dancers. Dance’s grounding in corporeal practice, however, its exploration of the ever-unstable materiality that makes up the body (“embodying otherwise” must always involve “embodying”!) has lent itself to the examination of unstable, flickering, fragmented, and even duplicitous subjects.

When thinking about hyper-subjection as a characteristic of flexible performativity, it is relevant to consider whether this characteristic is an inherent quality or a learned skill. It appears that the backgrounds of many contemporary performers contain some level of cultural or disciplinary hybridity, which would presumably construct unique repositories of experience on which performers can draw onstage (see Hoogterp, forthcoming). For example, many contemporary performers share the experience of being an immigrant by the very nature of their jobs and the training necessary for it (Van Assche 2019, p. 46). As the working language of contemporary dance in Continental Europe is largely English, many contemporary performers are at least bilingual, and many have worked in different fields than that of contemporary performance. However, this appears to be true of many fields—academia, IT, or government as key employers of the “dance cities” of Berlin and Brussels come to mind. Hyper-subjection must thus also be an acquired performative skill, not only the result of a specific biography but an expert play with affect, in which a navigation between and experimentation with both unique and ungraspable subjectivities highlight the fundamental instabilities of our “selves” and the potential for transformation that this implies. As opposed to discourses on the authentic and the natural, the hyper-subject acknowledges that the flickering,

⁸ For example William Forsythe, *Artifacts*, 2017.

fragmented subjectivities on stage are constructed, are performed: falling out of “character,” acknowledging subtext, and a continuous self-referentiality are strategies deployed by performers to point to the ambiguity of the material they present.

4.3 *Auto-dramaturgy*

Maaïke Bleeker, writing on the function of the dance dramaturge within the creative process, describes a “dramaturgical mode of looking” that can be found in the process of creating a dance work. This mode of looking involves a) “an understanding of the directions in which this creation could potentially proceed” and b) an awareness of “the implications and complications of the material being created” (Bleeker 2015, p. 68). While all participants in a creative process contribute to this mode of looking, the dramaturge, in her lack of authorship and view of the totality of the production (ibid., p.71) is in a particularly suitable position to keep track of the thoughts that emerge in the creative process, those thoughts that are enacted in a practice *between* various actors and as such are “no-one’s thought” (ibid., p. 69). Accounting for “no-one’s thought” allows the dramaturge to develop an awareness of “how what is being created addresses the audience,” and of “how this very address triggers the audience to think along with the performance.” (ibid., p. 75). Bleeker draws on Hubert Damisch, who in *The Origin of Perspective* (1994) describes thought as a set of relationships materialized in a creation (in his case, painting) that must then be re-activated by the viewer: in other words, a painting does not simply transmit the “idea” of the object it depicts, but proposes a logic materialized in the relationship between the various elements that the painting consists of. Bleeker transposes this to the often collaborative process of making dance (ibid., p. 74), suggesting that a performance is also just such an enactment of materialized thought.

As João Cerqueira da Silva Jr. notes in his monograph on risk-taking in large group dances (2017), the fundamental tension between “choreography” and “improvisation” as polar opposites—the known and the unknown qualifiers of dance—is in practice untenable: performing a series of steps will also call for the adaptation to a dancer’s body, and improvisational scores can be developed that restrict dancers’ movements in much the same way as a movement sequence. What becomes apparent in the widespread experimentation in dance with game structures, improvisation, and scoring is that, through the implementation of such structures on the stage, performers are often called upon to employ a dramaturgical mode of looking *in situ*, as the performance unfolds. In the moment of improvised performance, performers must base their actions on “an understanding of the directions in which this creation could potentially proceed” and an awareness of “the implications and complications of the material being created.” In pieces where different outcomes are possible

and different constellations of elements arise in unforeseeable ways, performers' choices affect the dynamics, tempos, rhythms, levels of physical interaction, and affective intensity within the piece (for example, the dancers in *Faust* by Mary O'Donnell (1993), as described by Cerqueira da Silva). The ability to make such choices, to sustain, support, diverge from, or radically shift what is happening on the stage—and to negotiate these choices with other performers, the audience, and the theatrical apparatus—is tantamount to the work of the contemporary performer.

Bleeker situates the work of the dramaturge firmly in the creative process: the dramaturge's labor is executed primarily offstage, always with one eye to understanding how the audience will be addressed by what is being created. "Thinking no-one's thought" is thus based on a few degrees of removal to the performance itself. The same is obviously untrue for the performer, who has the specific responsibility of embodying the logic of the performance, and whose labor straddles the visible and invisible realms. If dance and performance are "processes of thinking through material practice," (Bleeker 2015, p.69), then dancers are material, labor, and thought in one. Of course, performers' decisions during a performance will usually be conditioned by the elements and structures developed beforehand: however, one cannot account for the specificity of dramaturgy for *live* performance without expanding a dramaturgical mode of looking to include choices made *during* the performance itself, by the performers, in an act of what I call auto-dramaturgy. Thus, performances cannot only be seen as the result of choices made during the creation process, but also as the result of choices made *during the performance*.

The auto-dramaturgical mode of the contemporary performer is not the same as dealing with the unforeseen events that arise in live performance, as sometimes determined by the old adage "the show must go on," or perhaps more fittingly for this thesis, "perform—or else." Instead, it is intimately connected to an age-old tension between scoring and the act of dancing, the "risky uncertainty...[that] keeps in place a certain degree of improbability and freedom in the performance outcome"(Lepecki 2016, p. 16): as choreographic work has reduced its amount of directives, performers have more agency within performances to explore this freedom. Most professional performers know through experience the creative labor required to give life to a score or set of instructions on stage. What makes the auto-dramaturgical mode a definitive characteristic of flexible performativity is that this creative labor of decision-making within the performance shapes the performance in ways that are unforeseeable *before* the performance.

4.4 *Negotiating proximity*

As already mentioned, to a large extent Fischer-Lichte ascribes the transformative power of live performance to the role reversal certain contemporary performance works offer. That is, when, through the performance, spectators are put in a position where they must step out of the passive role of watching what occurs onstage. She describes the redefinition of the relationship between spectator and performer as definitive for the performative turn within the theater (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 20), and analyzes Richard Schechner's *Dionysus 69* to examine how this redefinition breaks down multiple binaries associated with dramatic theatre, (subject-object, observer-observed, *and* spectator-actor) in the attempt to constitute a "community of co-subjects" instead (ibid., p. 40).

Fischer-Lichte expresses some doubt as to whether these attempts are always successful (ibid., p. 40), as does Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells*, in which she traces participatory performance works primarily in the visual arts field, intertwining the desire to reform the passive behavior of spectators with a parallel desire to politically activate the population in moments of historical crises (Bishop 2011). Interestingly, this negotiation of the relationship between spectator and performer continues to be at stake in many performances today, as Bishop notes in her essay "Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone" (2018). For example, she maintains that in the "dance exhibitions" of the early 21st century, "behavioral conventions are not yet established and up for negotiation" (Bishop 2018, p. 38).

Because this "irruption of the real" (Lehmann 2006, p. 99) is such a mainstay of all kinds of contemporary performance, it is worthwhile to examine what this means for the labor that contemporary performers must execute within such performances. Even in performances where behavioral conventions are not established, the structural imbalance in the types of knowledge possessed by performers and spectators remains. Performers usually have at least a premonition of what will (or should) happen in a performance, audience members do not. Performers therefore, instead of relying on the apparatus to establish the "rules of behavior," must do this themselves. As the parameters of a performance are thrown open, audience members may begin behaving in ways that are unexpected. They may move around, touch performers, undress, climb on the stage, question, contradict, or boo performers, organize other audience members, etc. A flexible performer must engage with audience members as people, as co-producers of an experience that can also touch on the bound-

aries of consent for both parties.⁹ She takes the experience and response of the audience members into account, changing her actions in real time to adjust—and is able to “go with the flow” should things not go as planned, or indeed, if the performance format collapses completely. I will refer to this characteristic of flexible performativity as “negotiating proximity,” taking into account that the proximity might be affective or spatial in nature.

What has occurred since the “performative turn” in the theater since the 1970s is not so much that every performance work attempts to create a “community of co-subjects” with performers and spectators: rather, dancers and audience members will encounter each other at a *variety* of different distances.¹⁰ In addition to the variety of locations outside the theatre where contemporary dance may be performed, performers may appear on the stage or in the audience, and above or below the spectators. Perhaps they are not physically in the space at all, their presence mediated by a panacea of (digital) technologies. Whereas many dance techniques have been developed with an eye to the form of the body when seen from a distance, works that renounce this fixed distance between performers and spectators require that performers (come close enough to) be touched. Negotiating proximity is a part of the dancers’ job—the shifting boundaries of this proximity might be intended to provoke, to initiate intimacy, or simply to be present, at close quarters, with someone else. Closeness to the audience requires physical awareness and control (i.e. the ability to judge when full extension of a movement would be a literal slap in an audience member’s face), a trained disregard for personal and social boundaries that usually dictate space and interactions with strangers, as well as empathy for how this might affect spectators. Initiating physical or emotional closeness with audience members may seem strange, exciting, or stressful for spectators, and thus part of the labor of performance might be the performer guiding spectators through the experience in specific ways. These instructions may be more or less explicit, and can include (or ignore) verbal instructions or touch cues, reassurances, or direct orders.

⁹ The question of consent becomes more pressing when regarded within the #metoo movement: in a workshop of the platform “Whistle While you Work,” (nobody100.com) at Uferstudios in August 2019 facilitated by Robyn Morg Doty and Frances Chavierini, I learned that many cases of sexual harassment within the dance field arise *in performance* with audience members as harasser. This has a long and disturbing history which merits greater attention: as Fischer-Lichte notes, even in *Dionysus 69* it was particularly the female performers who “repeatedly felt mistreated and sexually exploited” (p. 42). The very possibility of audience misbehavior is rarely adequately addressed by institutions, artistic directors, or training programs within the field. It should be considered that most professions that require close interactions with the public are frequently and comprehensively prepared for this as a part of their training.

¹⁰ Recent examples of works in which the audience decides to a large extent how close they will come to performers include *Durcheinander* by deufert&plischke (2015); *A Piece You Remember to Tell—A Piece You Tell to Remember* by Silke Bake & Peter Stamer (2018); or *Neverendings* by Sergiu Matis (2017)

5. Case Studies

In her PhD thesis, in addition to sociological and ethnographic methods, Van Assche also undertakes an analysis of multiple performances: *VOLCANO* (2014) by Liz Kinoshita, *Crisis Karaoke* (2016) by Jeremy Wade, and *Only Mine Alone* by Ana Dubljević and Igor Koruga (2016), to name a few. Van Assche chose to focus in particular on performance works that *explicitly* deal with the precarity involved in making contemporary dance work. However, in the following I wish to go one step further, to maintain that even those works that do not explicitly reference the working conditions of contemporary dance are still influenced by their modes of production as well as the necessity of mastering a certain type of performativity, described above as flexible performativity. In the following two pieces of very different scale, subject matter, and movement quality will be examined: *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* (2012) by Dani Brown and *This Variation* (2012) by Tino Sehgal. These analyses will specifically highlight how the different kinds of performative labor in which the dancers are engaged contribute to the construction and experience of these performances.

5.1 How Do You Imagine The Devil? by Dani Brown

As mentioned in the introduction, *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* is a solo work by American-born, Germany-based choreographer Dani Brown from 2012, which premiered at Kampnagel in Hamburg, Germany. Having seen the piece live in the 2014 edition of the Berlin Tanztage in Sophiensaele, I also referred to a video of the Hamburger premiere in writing the following section.

The very beginning of the piece is a monologue by Brown, who stalks down the aisles of the theater. She has a slight British accent and wears a tuxedo jacket with sparkling lapels, and although her text is obviously aimed at the audience (“*I am very excited to see you tonight...*”), Brown herself first walks upstage, facing away from the audience, before slowly turning around just as she haltingly poses the question: “*I do however wonder how far you, and I, might get...tonight.*” Voice sultry, she suggests that some of the audience might want to touch her, and wonders aloud if she has created the conditions that would allow this to occur as she moves into the shadows at the edge of the stage. This wondering aloud continues until, barely four minutes into the piece, she asks what would happen if “*I really wanted to kiss...one of you. Won't you please come up and kiss me?*” In the recorded version of this piece, an audience member stands up almost immediately, goes over to the edge of the stage, and kisses Brown. In the performance I attended, no one did, even when Brown particularly focused on a single audience member.

The opening scene of *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* introduces many of the themes and dramaturgical strategies that will be used again through the course of the piece, but I will mainly scrutinize the two that seem most clearly aligned with flexible performativity. First of all, with this monologue Brown directly addresses the audience as both herself (by concretely referencing the performance situation that everyone is in) but *not herself*—the British accent suggests that not all is as it seems for the subjectivity of this American choreographer. Second, by inviting an audience member to kiss her—and going through with it when the occasion arises—Brown is negotiating a proximity to the audience that goes far beyond any fourth wall.

Who exactly Dani Brown is performing—herself, a variegated cast of characters, or perhaps the devil—is very much what is at stake in *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* She changes accents, costumes, and movement qualities in nearly every scene, and in this demonstration of hyper-referentiality appears to form a contradictory, fragmented version of her “self.” Speaking always in the first person, whoever is presented on stage seems like it should be Dani Brown. In another early scene, Brown changes into a cheerleading sweatshirt and a smiling Southern accent and conducts a poll with the audience on their assumptions about her—is she from a middle-class family? Does her daddy own guns? Did she used to work in a massage parlor? The audience raise their hands to the yes or no questions until Brown remains standing, one foot tapping a beat onto the floor. This tapping eventually shifts into triadic rhythm, which gradually builds into a gentle soft-shoe routine, or at least a hinting at one. Although Brown performs a vaudeville side-shuffle, arms opening wide in a gesture that draws the attention to her feet, there isn’t any trace of the cheesy smile or sprightly vitality that might accompany this on a vaudeville stage. Even when, abruptly, the soft-shoe gives way to a few bars of what could be cheerleading, what could be stepping, and then the stepping gives way to a languid *ronde-de-jambe* and a very contemporary backward roll, the same quizzical look remains on Dani’s face until, with a final backward kick, she comes to standing upstage.

Brown bends forward and takes off her shoes as a hiphop track comes on. Like nearly every other transition in the piece, Brown faces away from the audience as she takes off her clothes. It is a striptease in its slow rhythm, but a relaxed one: we see a naked body move to the music, but it is not a body over-invested in maintaining the pointed hip-thrusts or presentation of body parts that we might associate with the striptease. It feels more nonchalant than that—how one might dance to a favorite jam while on the way to the shower. This physicality again changes when Brown takes off her sweatshirt and, instead of discarding it, ties it around her head, masking her face. When she finally turns around, we see a headless naked woman, the arms of the sweatshirt atop the head remi-

niscent of horns. The body breathes, slivers of micro-movement shuddering through its arms, torso, legs, before gently collapsing to the floor as it continues its slow path to the audience on all fours.

In the scene described above, Brown navigates through a variety of dance techniques, physicalities, and concepts of the body in a relatively short time frame. Her actions, although disparate in their references, all serve to highlight an eerie *inbetweenness* of this body onstage. The constant switching, in addition to the references themselves, is what evokes a sensation of instability. In another scene, Brown again combines a multitude of references, this time vocal ones. Like a radio dial flipping through stations, we hear a broadcaster's voice, the mutterings of the demonic entity that is frequently heard whenever Brown faces away from the audience, someone singing "Son of a Preacherman," a prolonged scream, and some of the text of a B-Zombie movie, before Brown settles into a nasally hummed rendition of the Marseillaise.

The above two scenes demonstrate how, by switching through different references (both physical and vocal), hyper-subjectivation is in fact achieved. What Brown is performing draws on her own wealth of performative knowledge and skills that, in their combination, appear very specific to her person: while other performers could perhaps mimic what Brown is doing, the combination of voices and elements and references also feels distinctly personal; the playfulness, seductiveness, dark sense of humor, and uncanny depths of this body onstage all appear as aspects of the individual performer. In this case, hyper-subjectivation and hyper-referentialism seem bound up in each other.

Another aspect of flexible performativity visible in *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* is, as mentioned above, the manifold ways Brown negotiates proximity with the audience. The performance starts with a kiss; the audience is invited to raise their hands in one scene. Specific members of the audience are singled out to assist with Brown's costume changes, zipping up her skirt, buttoning her trousers. One specific scene involves Brown selling a lapdance to a single audience member—she disappears offstage with her customer as everyone else is served drinks. In addition to providing quite a few examples of how contemporary performance work might be analogous to various kinds of sex work, Brown's performative labor revolves to a large extent around making explicit what parameters of behavior are available to the audience members in situations where, from the beginning, different rules seem to apply than in a traditional theatre performance.

Finally, as in almost any "precarity solo" in which the dance artist both authors and performs her work, the question of auto-dramaturgy is nearly unsolvable in *How Do you Imagine the Devil?*: how is the audience to know what choices are being made in real time? I do, however, have a very clear memory of Brown singing an aria from *Madame Butterfly* in Chinese in the first ver-

sion I saw of the work: this aria is missing in the video recording of an earlier show. Did Brown add the aria only later, or did she perhaps make a decision to not sing the aria on the night of the video recording? Solo dance work is a format that very much encourages the skill of auto-dramaturgy in the flexible performer, because one's accountability is primarily towards one's self as the maker of the work and to the success of the work. However, as will be examined in the next section, the characteristics of flexible performativity are also crucial to the performance of works that have been developed on a significantly larger scale.

5.2 This Variation by Tino Sehgal

Contemporary dance's incursion into the museum context has had a major impact on the field: not least because the high visibility of the museum context ensures that these works are disseminated far more easily than most theatre works—a two-week dance exhibition can usually handle far more audience than a four-night run of a theatre piece. Working within the museum puts specific demands on the performer: the extended durations of such performances require both physical stamina and an awareness of one's own energetic economy (spectators can and will be present *after* the dance ends—if it ever does). Additionally, the museum space and its mobile visitors put performers in a spatial proximity to spectators rarely achieved beyond the front row in a black box theater. Finally, as shall become clear in the following case study, choreographic strategies for dealing with these parameters of the museum place a great deal of trust in individual performers' abilities to direct the dramaturgy of the piece in real-time.

The last performance I will discuss is Tino Sehgal's *This Variation* (2012). *This Variation* is performed as long as there are visitors to its space during the museum's opening hours. The piece is usually not announced by a sign or exhibit label: visitors must take the plunge of walking through an empty doorway leading into a darkened room. Visitors to the room cannot see when they enter the space, although they will likely be able to hear the performers speaking, singing, or chanting. It takes a few minutes for the eyes to adjust.

The following is a hypothetical description of what part of the performance *could* be like for a first-time visitor.¹¹ As stated, you enter the room not knowing quite what will happen. Naturally, because it is dark you stretch out your hands before you, and you notice that someone has gently grabbed your hand and is guiding you into the darkness. This same person is singing into your ear, a

¹¹ I have chosen to switch to the second person for this hypothetical description to highlight the many ways this performance (staged as an art exhibition) departs from the traditional spectator-audience relationship, thus requiring a performative finesse on the part of the dancers in the room to guide spectators through the experience.

simple four-note melodic line that fits with the other noises—percussive, beatboxed, or otherwise—that emanate from the space around you. The song has a laid-back, ambient quality. The person guiding you brings your hand to a wall, and you subsequently notice their melody moving away from you. You turn to face your back to the wall, and immediately notice that, from here, you can clearly see the outline of the entryway across the room—and a series of shadows flitting between you and the doorway. A high-pitched voice floats over the sounds in the room, singing “This Variation 2009...” and shortly thereafter, the sounds stop. A silence falls. You hear a shift of weight next to you, and when you look to your right you notice you can see the outline of a person, and beyond that, more people. Another voice starts an uptempo beat and is joined by other voices. Some of the bodies you can now see are jumping, twitching, and shaking to the rhythm of the song they are singing, while others—the other visitors—remain still. This song has a higher energy than the noises you heard upon entering the space: the dancers kick and stagger amongst the visitors, although they do not knock into anyone as their voices syncopate and they all simultaneously lean into lunge. The song lasts for maybe two minutes and ends with the dancers rolling over the floor, repeating a softly sparkling line from the song. A performer near you is only repeating a gentle bass “dum-dum” on the upbeat. He comes into a sitting position facing the wall, his shoulder quite close to your leg. He continues the “dum-dum” until his is the only voice in the room, until he, too, falls silent. You watch someone else unfold from their position in one corner of the room to disappear in the shadows of the far side. A voice from that side says, in English, “The income men derive from producing things of slight consequences is of great consequence...”

For large amounts of the piece, the performers present in the room mainly sing or beatbox together. Some of this singing is improvised, and during such parts a performer may also start spontaneously dancing to the music. Additionally, 8 set songs replete with choreographies can be performed by the entire group. Two discursive games round out the performative elements of the piece: a talking game, played by many of the performers, and a confessional, improvised by one performer. Rather than following a set or looped order, a cuing system called or sung by the performers (usually the title of the work, *This Variation*, followed by a year, from 2008 to 2017) sets the performative elements in motion, or *stops* these elements from continuing. An auto-dramaturgical sensibility is at stake: the structure and experience of the work, while functioning within set parameters, is driven by the performers.

Of course, a large part of the spectator experience of *This Variation* is dictated by the circumstances of near darkness. The vulnerability this implies foregrounds dancers’ skills in communicating with the spectators, negotiating proximities in various haptic, aural, and visible ways. The

darkness, the sheer number of cast members, and the frequently quite intimate scenarios at times evoke the sensation of a multitude, at others present deeply personal stories and anecdotes. The subjectivities in *This Variation* never seems quite graspable, as the lights flash on and off and the cast members change seamlessly from moving to singing, from singing to speaking, from speaking to embracing audience members. *This Variation* requires a fairly constant negotiation among the large cast on what the best performative action is at that specific moment—taking into consideration the number, spacing, and type of spectators present, as well as the number of performers in the room. Thus, performing this work demands an openness to supporting the ideas of others, as well as a constant reflection on one's own role in creating an experience for the spectator. In other words, collaboration and self-reflexivity, always prized within post-Fordist working structures, are imperative here as well: the labor of the dancer in *This Variation* materializes in performance aspects of how many of us are working.

The term “dancer” is used here for the simple reason that, although the work requires a great deal of vocal skill and might not necessarily be understood as a work of contemporary dance, it is conspicuous that many of the performers in the work are in fact trained dancers. This may, on the one hand, reflect Sehgal's own background. It may also have to do with the amount of singing demanded from performers (the performers work in 4-5 hr shifts, 5-6 days a week), which is far beyond what trained singers regard as healthy. However, I believe that the unusual situation in which the performers work, the multiple styles of music and movement to which they refer, and the ever-shifting relationship to the audience and each other that is at stake makes contemporary dancers the obvious casting choice for a work that requires a *very* flexible performativity.

6. Conclusion: Invisible visible labor

As has been described in detail in the case studies above, the flexible performativity exhibited by the performers of contemporary dance works determines to a great extent how these works can function and what kind of experience these works are mediating. Flexible performativity is a *constitutive element* of these works. Without the ability of performers to negotiate proximity with their audiences, to direct in real time the dramaturgy of the performance, to navigate between a plurality of techniques and performative actions, and to do all of this with a unique stage presence, these works would not *work*. As such, the various types of labor involved in flexible performativity must be identified and valued for their contributions to aesthetic works. It is my hope that this thesis has contributed to this, in part by filling in the curious lack of academic analyses of performative labor in contemporary dance performances.

In order to do this, this thesis revolved around my central research question: *How does the labor of contemporary dancers become visible in contemporary performance?* I first examined the different forms of labor within the field of contemporary dance, determining the specificity of danced labor within the cultural field as being executed with an eye to eventually being put onstage. Next, this labor was traced in its development from that of the hired body of Susan Leigh Foster into a dancer who produces subjectivity in performance, an act of affective labor that aligns itself with an understanding of virtuosity as a communicative, discursive skill. However, the biographies and broad experience of contemporary dancers point towards a way of overcoming virtuosity understood as *either* technical skill *or* communicative flair. Their eclectic training in a variety of styles and techniques, the constant navigation between contexts, formats, and aesthetic/economic imperatives, all become material for the dancer in espousing a flexible performativity on stage. In developing the notion of flexible performativity, I drew upon Jon McKenzie and his work determining how the performative limits and constrains what bodies can do: the labor of the dancer offstage affects the performativity of the dancer onstage, which again informs what the dance performance can do. In teasing out the characteristics of flexible performativity—hyper-referentialism, hyper-subjectivation, auto-dramaturgy, and negotiating proximity—I clarified that this performativity has become central to the aesthetics of contemporary performance works. Finally, in the analysis of *How Do You Imagine the Devil?* and *This Variation*, I exemplified how a mode of analysis that focuses on the labor of performers untangles understandings of performance works quite different from those focused on the structural logic of the same. In doing so, I developed “flexible performativity” as a concept that can help conceptualize the relationship between labor, performance, and subjectivity in the contemporary dance field.

In establishing these characteristics of flexible performativity, I have moulded a prototypical dancer for the era of McKenzie’s performative stratum, in which the dominant mode of creating the subject is through performance. The ballerina might be said to be the prototypical dancer of the historical era preceding this one, in which, with Foucault, *discipline* was the primary governing onto-historical formation (McKenzie 2001, p.17). However, an unexpected similarity arises between classical and contemporary dance: both the classical ballerina and the contemporary dance performer actually *eclipse* their labor in the very act of performance: *they make it look easy*.

The beauty of a ballerina lies in the optical illusion that the performer has defied gravity: en pointe, she might just float away. Recognition for her labor comes from the fact that most people realize they are physically unable to mimic what they are seeing onstage. The illusion of ease is, paradoxically, what this working body is working towards. Contemporary performers, on the other

hand, often dance in situations they co-create with spectators, tailoring their actions to the moment. The performative labor they present may be based on improvisation structures and oscillate rapidly in terms of register and technique. They tell stories that might be real, and then again maybe not, they embark on flights of fancy, and frequently they fail: to remember sequences, to stand up, to fulfill one's expectations, to move across the stage and through the world in the way that is expected. Their behavior and their dances embrace the imaginative, the spontaneous, the absurd, the eerie, the silly, the ironic, and the impulsive. In other words, often when we see contemporary performers at work, we are seeing bodies at play.

These playful bodies also joyfully disturb one of the basic premises of this thesis: that all kinds of human activity, including art, can be harnessed to or organized around the admittedly rather mundane territory of waged labor. These playful bodies, impish and irreverent, trouble the examination of labor and performance that often has, as Claire Bishop notes, “the reductive effect of rendering live art a victim of neoliberal imperatives” (Bishop 2018, p. 23). Play, especially in its sense of nonsensical frivolity (Sutton-Smith 2001) is an ancient trope that has often been regarded with suspicion: play possesses the potential to destabilize the status quo. Contemporary dancers ping-pong between various performative modalities, including those sputtering, non-Instagrammable vestiges of life outside the economy of attention—they aspire to “unintegrated life,” even as they continuously fail to achieve it. With their playful bodies, contemporary dancers mask the fact that they are working. However, this rendering invisible of visible labor, this stubborn opacity of the body, also point to realms of experience deserving of attention beyond working conditions and labor. Even without this thesis's focus on modes of production, the notion of flexible performativity can serve to reassess the aesthetics of contemporary performance—most obviously from the point of view of spectator experience of the work. It might offer us a point of departure when considering the political and philosophical implications of embodiment—and embodiment otherwise. Such considerations, as well as the implications of flexible performativity for dance education and training, offer exciting avenues of further research.

—15,700 words—

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