Corps rebelles : la danse s’expose

Rebel Bodies: Dance Exhibited

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Abstract

The expansion of the notion of cultural heritage to include its intangible aspects, as they were defined by the 2003 UNESCO initiative, has guided museums towards new fields of action. Intangible cultural heritage has led to a much needed reassessment of the traditional values of museums, and is now calling for new exhibition and collection practices that envisage other ways of perpetuating new forms of memory. The exhibition Rebel Bodies, presented at the Musée de la civilisation in Québec City, highlights a particular form of intangible cultural heritage: the performing arts. The exhibition invites visitors to discover bodily movement and expression, to experience choreographic culture. It puts the active and living element of contemporary dance memory front and centre by placing the creation process at the very heart of the exhibition and by inviting visitors to partake in a physical, immersive experience. This exhibition review examines the different facets of Rebel Bodies as well as the museological means and methods that the Musée de la civilisation employed to reveal and highlight the intangible dimensions of contemporary dance.

Keywords: dance, performance, intangible heritage

BRINGING DANCE TO THE MUSEUM

The heritagization of culture that has occurred in the last few decades is increasingly concerned with the performing arts. The ever closer ties between dance and museums exemplify this relationship (Franko and Lepecki 2014). Likewise, choreographers are increasingly being invited to take charge of a museum space and to “choreograph an exhibition” (Copeland 2008:182), thereby bringing the realm of representation into the domain of the exhibition. According to Cramer (2014:36), choreographic works “have begun to leave present-day stages to occupy the places of history and memory that are museums, while theatres and performing arts festivals are experimenting with various forms of exhibition” (our translation). These new approaches to curating the performing arts are taking into account the performative aspects of these works and their inherent intangible heritage, calling into question the atemporality associated with museums and transforming the visiting experience which has, until recently, been seen as the aesthetic reception of a museum object. Nonetheless, if dance is getting closer to museums, it is perhaps because the question of how to best preserve choreographic memory is being asked in a new way.

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An art form at the crossroads of the tangible and intangible, the memory of dance is best preserved by bridging approaches drawn from both of these forms of heritage. Choreography is described through a series of written and audiovisual documents, but preserved through traces – both intangible (voices, postures, movements, etc.) and tangible (costumes, sketches, scenography, etc.) – that bear witness to past performances. Like the “memory of the intention of dance works” (Sebillotte 2009:10, our translation), archives make it possible, among other things, to make the context and history and the social emergence and reception of choreographies and their choreographers more readable. Dance memory refers to the traces that the history of dance leaves and to the “vivid memory of a show, understood as a living memory absorbed during the act of creating, a memory embodied in both the technical and artistic movements of the show” (Poirson 2008:7, our translation). Dance is an art of presence. The identity of a choreographic work is thus inscribed in a performative act and the dancer’s direct experience (Louppe 2004:352) and, as such, is essentially based on orality (Bernard 2001:218). As argued by Pouillaude (2009:265), unlike music, a choreography cannot be transmitted through a text that fixes the identity criteria of the work. Rather, it is transmitted through a redoing, a transfer of a role from one dancer to another, from choreographer to dancer, a transmission conducted using multiple languages, both verbal and bodily. This culture of orality and physicality must be preserved. But how can we express, in an exhibition, the tangible and intangible aspects of dance? This exhibition review explores just how the Rebel Bodies exhibition at the Musée de la civilisation in Québec City answers this question.

INTANGIBILITY IN MUSEUMS

Museums, whose museographic discourse has always been built on the study of material culture and the physical presence of objects in exhibition spaces, are now turning to visitors’ experiences and the intangible aspects of heritage (Poulot 2005:8; Turgeon 2010:9). This change in direction follows upon the “visitor oriented approach” of the 1980s in which museums increasingly became objects of study for the information and communication sciences. Moving toward their visitors transformed the focal point of museums, which shifted from collecting to communicating (Hooper-Greenhill cited in Montpetit 2000), from the tangible conservation of objects to the physical experiencing of culture (Turgeon 2010:14). Museums were encouraged to generate a cultural mediation between their public and what they were presenting (Bergeron 2002), and to put this approach on a par with conservation (Bénichou 2013:135). In the West, the objects collected and exposed in museums have revealed the sources that choreographic activities can generate. In the 2000s, contemporary art museums began exhibiting contemporary dance and performative works. An object’s permanence or materiality are no longer necessary conditions for something to be considered a work of art because experience has replaced the work (Heinich 2014:100). This new discourse is breaking away from object museology in favour of performance museology. The body becomes a place of palpable experiences and museography turns the museum space into a theatre for the memory of bodily actions.

The relation between museums and intangible cultural heritage poses a challenge that is having a certain impact on current debates about the future role of museums in society. As noted by Cécile Duvelle (2010:28), presenting the intangible aspects of this heritage in museums can result in a decontextualization and objectification of these manifestations, and lead to the museumification of this heritage if it is not appropriately presented. Accordingly, the presentation of intangible heritage requires that we show the value that a community and its memory-bearers see in this heritage. In so doing, the museum displays the heritage’s subjective, intrinsic value, as defined and acknowledged by the community in question. How can museums present the intangible heritage of dance, which arises out of a creation process, movement, and body memory? This is where a museographic and museological analysis capable of grasping the intangible and creating an exhibition out of it is necessary (Poulot 2009:165). As such, the exhibition Rebel Bodies meets the challenge of making dance come alive in a museum, by making the body the common thread, putting it front and centre, and inviting spectators to engage in a physical experience of dance in which they can become “spect’actors” (Chaumier 2007).
REBEL BODIES AT THE MUSÉE DE LA CIVILISATION

The exhibition Rebel Bodies was conducted by the team at the Musées de la civilisation with the collaboration of the Montreal firm Moment Factory, the Fondation Jean-Pierre Perrault, and the choreographer Harold Rhéaume. This exhibition encourages people to come and discover contemporary choreographic works and creators, both Québécois and international, and presents dance as a universal language and a reflection of society. Inaugurated in March 2015 at the Musée de la civilisation, the exhibition invites the general public to participate in a physical and immersive experience of contemporary dance. Assisted by an advisory committee comprised of members of the dance community, it proposes an initiation into contemporary dance that takes the body as the starting point. The first words that a visitor can read at the entrance of the exhibition are from a famous adage by Rudolf von Laban: “There is a dancer inside every human being.” This adage, which each visitor can espouse, is at the heart of this exhibition’s main objectives, that is experiencing dance through the body and its five senses.

The exhibition comprises several zones in which visitors follow a thematic route that defines six bodies. Added to this are the main installation dedicated to Nijinsky’s Rite of Spring (1913), the Studio and four content capsules. The first zone proposes a didactic space and a brief definition of contemporary dance, introducing visitors to its history through some of its major figures. The didactic content is presented on four opaque banners on which an iconography with textual descriptions can be seen (Figure 1). In the centre of the exhibition hall is the Rite of Spring section, a video installation with eight screens that are arranged in a circle and that propose an immersive, visual, and auditory experience (Figures 2-3). This installation presents different versions of the Rite of Spring, all combining in a choreographic re-creation set to Igor Stravinsky’s music. While making the public aware of the artistic and societal scope of a dance piece, the installation also shows the diversity of the interpretations and choreographies that a same piece can give rise to.
Around this installation, the zone *Six Expanding Bodies*, based on body-related sub themes (*urban, natural, atypical, political, virtuoso,* and *multi*) punctuates the path and brings together the works selected for the exhibit. *Urban body* looks at works and body movements for which the choreographic vocabulary borrows from walking and street dancing and draws upon the city’s modern and anonymous environment. *Natural body* displays free, instinctive, natural, and fluid forms of movements. *Atypical body* presents works and expressions of nonstandard bodies (constrained, disabled, transformed, or hybridized), calling into question our perceptions of beauty and the perfect body. *Political body* proposes politically engaged,
protest choreography comprising brusque movements, nudity, and non-dance. Calling upon the idea of performance, of technique, and of physical power, the virtuoso body zone brings together works and creators who push the body’s limits even while revealing its fragility and poetry. Multi-body is associated with the interdisciplinarity in dance and the contribution of new technologies (Musées de la civilisation 2014). These sub-themes inform the exhibition’s central proposition and take visitors along a discursive journey around the body.

The Six Expanding Bodies zone comprises six immersive units illustrating the body themes (Figures 4-5). Each immersive unit presents a short video produced by the Museum in which a choreographer talks about the theme in question and to which listeners can listen with headphones. A dance sequence shot during the filming illustrates the theme. The video is shown on three screens surrounding the visitor, with the exception of two units where the projection is separated, thereby intensifying the sensation of being immersed in the dancers’ movements. The correspondence between the orality of the choreographers and the movements of the dancers gives rise to a striking visual effect. These multiple screen combinations display bodies in action while providing a framework for the expression of intangible heritage, making the human presence and the danced movement almost palpable. The installations in the exhibition space are set up as if they were re-presentations of dance shows or events. The presence of these frameworks creates a second, museum-based discourse with a raison d’être separate from the one that presides at the time of a show; it conveys a dramatization of reality that brings out its deeper truths (Caillet 1995:68). For Caillet, a museum is closer to a show than to a medium. Each one of these units has a station that illustrates a theme through video and photo archives of international dance pieces and choreographers (Figure 6).

To these installations are added four Content capsules (memories, young audience, performers, and networks) that constitute additional didactic material. The first capsule, which looks at dance heritage, expands on the different ways of keeping records for an ephemeral art. A consultation area with an interactive terminal presents two examples of the conservation and illustration of contemporary dance: research in movement notation for Synchronous Objects by William Forsythe, and the endeavours of the Fondation Jean-Pierre Perreault, together with the virtual exhibition project Jean-Pierre Perreault, choreographer.
Objects evoking the choreographic works and means to preserve Perreault’s creative process are displayed in a showcase (Figure 7). The second capsule highlighted choreographers whose productions are intended exclusively for young audiences, demonstrating that contemporary dance can be accessible to everyone. In the third capsule, which examines the daily life of dancers and their place as collaborators in the creation process, visitors can watch video excerpts about the transmission of a choreographic work and see Merce Cunningham giving a dance class. This capsule underlines the importance of the dancers’ work in the transmission of a dance piece, but also their role as creators and bearers of dance’s memory.
The last capsule presents different professional dance networks in Canada and abroad,\(^8\) in particular the Toile-mémoire (memory web) of dance in Québec, established by the Regroupement québécois de la danse, which shows the constellation of relationships between the various actors who have contributed to the transmission of dance in Québec in the 20th century.\(^9\) The issue of dance memory is now seen as an essential element for the development of choreographic culture by these different Canadian networks. Immersive museography makes it possible for visitors to enter into contact with intangible heritage and have them partake in an interactive, participative, and physical museum experience (Turgeon 2010:10).

The last part of the exhibition, Studio, reproduced a ~100 m\(^2\) dance studio and shed light on certain aspects of the artistic work involved in the creation process, while offering visitors the possibility to observe dance in the making. The dance studio thus becomes a place where a culture and way of thinking are learned (see also Vellet 2014). Studio has two functions, namely to transform the visit into a participatory activity and to host artist residencies. The participatory experience of Studio was conceived by Moment Factory in collaboration with the Cultural and Educational Mediation Department of the Musées de la civilisation. In homage to Joe (1983), a choreographic work by Jean-Pierre Perreault (Figure 8), Studio proposes, through the educational activity “Danser Joe,” to experience dance in real-time. The visitors are invited to put on a costume for Joe (reproductions of a raincoat, boots, and a hat) and to carry out part of the choreography in a group. They are guided by the luminous directions and voice of Ginelle Chagnon, Perreault’s collaborator and rehearsal mistress (Figure 9). The visitors’ performance is recorded live, then shown alongside excerpts from the original piece. The Musée de la civilisation is thus participating in the transmission of the living memory of dance, an approach begun several years ago by the Fondation Jean-Pierre Perreault. It has also turned to in situ creation projects in which various choreographers are invited to share their work with visitors all throughout the exhibition. The choreographers-in-residence share the ins and outs of their occupation with the public, providing the latter with an occasion to appreciate contemporary dance in an audience development perspective. The residencies also support and stimulate choreographic creation, providing a platform for its dissemination and fostering exchanges between the public and creators.\(^{10}\) The visitors are invited to Studio to watch choreographers and dancers as they create and to see choreography taking place live. As noted by Michel Côté, the Executive Director of the Musées de la civilisation,\(^{11}\) this “experience changes
the relation with the exhibition; we go from being spectators to actors” (cited in Lambert-Chan 2014, *our translation*). Several other educational activities are proposed, such as a workshop for families “Un dé pour danser” (dice for dancing), designed in collaboration with a dance teacher and led by a Museum guide trained for the activity. Another activity was the second edition of Cinédanse Québec, which proposed a program of dance films, danced performances, encounters with artists, master classes, and open workshops. To promote the intangible heritage of dance and the people who bring it to life, the Museum invites choreographers and dancers to their cultural activities. These mediation activities help in a small way to ensure that contemporary choreographic creativity continues through the participation of these...
essential contributors and the involvement of visitors in the construction of memory and comprehension of this heritage (Bernier and Viau-Courville 2015). The Museum, as a cultural mediator, becomes a place where visitors can have a unique encounter with dance through their exchanges with dance companies.

VISITOR PATHS, NARRATIVES, AND LAYOUT

With Rebel Bodies, contemporary Québec dance enters the Museum as both an object and subject. Contrary to most museum artefacts however, it retains its dynamism. The exhibition’s goal is to display dance in action through immersive, audiovisual installations (Doyon 2015). Carried by a thematic approach that sees the body as the common thread of the visiting experience, Rebel Bodies takes up the challenge of revealing the intangible aspects of dance so that it may “Give body and memory to dancers’ movements, to the language of movement, and render traceable the trajectory of the dance” (explanatory panel in the entrance of the exhibition). Rebel Bodies emphasizes the living expression of dance rather than pursuing a chronological or stylistic narrative; it adopts a museological perspective of quasi-direct experience and the spectacular based on an “endogenous logic” and an immersive museography (Montpetit 1996:62). This exhibition plays with simulation and physically places visitors at the centre of the stage so that they concretely experience dance.

Rebel Bodies explores contemporary dance through these six themes, the six bodies, with the goal of helping us to understand how dance and movement influence our lives (Musées de la civilisation 2015). The exhibition opens the door to various representations of the body throughout history and to the aesthetics of contemporary choreographic creation (Walon 2011). Right from the first zone of the exhibition, the words body, rebel, and living become keys for reading the exhibition. Body allows us to approach contemporary dance as a reflection of the multiple representations of the body in our societies: the body as social product in relation with codes, values, and cultures, the body as a place of memory, an accumulation of knowledge about movement and dance. Contemporary dance reveals our relationships with others, with the world, with oneself. Rebel Bodies likewise encourages us to discover how contemporary dance acts as an emancipatory catalyst in modern society: dance that rebels against classical codes to create a contemporary choreographic language and an aesthetic for each choreographer; dance that challenges the status quo of creation and that does not hesitate to call it into question; dance that breaks the rules and shakes up the references of the ideal body; a transdisciplinary dance that knocks down the borders between the arts. Rebel Bodies highlights the living aspect of dance by “sharing and passing along dance in a tangible form” (explanatory panel in the first zone of the exhibition). Artists are invited to work in the exhibition hall to give visitors direct access to the creation process of a dance piece. This last zone, which is the heart of the exhibition, showcases the living memory of dance by transmitting danced movements and experiencing choreographic movements.

STAGING AND THE SPECT’ACTOR

Designed to simulate a series of stages, the Rebel Bodies exhibition proposes a wandering stroll rather than a linear path, highlighting the physical and dynamic aspects of dance. The visitors walk around in a quiet, private atmosphere where the theatrical illumination between light and shadow enhances the viewing of videos shown in the installations. The video installations place the dancing bodies, as the main elements to be viewed, in the spatial and temporal context of the exhibition. These exhibited bodies display the movements, shapes, representations, and modes of physicality that allow the visitors to palpably experience the dance. There is no narrative or pathway to follow in the exhibition, but rather audio dialogues in which the artists talk about the various themes. Visitors in turn follow their own trail and compose their own story. There is thus a co-construction of meaning that arises out of the visitors’ viewing of the artists’ interpretations (Chaumier 2012:27).
By physically and immersively experiencing the exhibit, the visitors become both the actor and subject of their experience. As the visitors move around, the perceptual effect of the installation walls is transformed and creates a “dynamic perspective that impels the visitor to watch actively” (Formis 2013:6, *our translation*). This museographic “immersion” (Montpetit 1996:62) turns visitors into “spect’actors” (Chaumier 2007). They are no longer simply witnesses-cum-spectators who contemplate an exhibition, but rather, immersed in the stage simulations, they become actors that take part in the progression of their experience. Sometimes the spect’actors interact with the content (integrated into the museographic layout), sometimes they are the actors and activators (as in *Studio*). Included in the structure, the visitors lend it a personal quality through their own presence and participation. By opting for an immersive museography, an interactivity with the visitors, an educational mediation, and a living and documentary memory of dance, the Musée de la civilisation proposes a living form of intangible heritage transmission.

The video production chosen by the Musée de la civilisation presents us with accounts that are not about dance (by the institution), but rather from dance (by the artistic community). The commentary, incarnated by the memory-bearers and materialized through video, participates in the transmission of the history and memory of dance and becomes a central object in the heritagization process. The visitors thus become “smugglers, intermediaries who pass on feelings and emotions, imagination and interpretive frameworks” (Cendoya-Lafleur, Davallon and Lavorel 2015). This immersion in the story actively contributes to the creation of a memorial landscape. The videos have resulted in new contemporary dance content that will be incorporated in the documentary collection of the Musées de la civilisation after the exhibition. This documentation thus constitutes a way of collecting oral culture through digital storytelling, and a means of safeguarding our intangible cultural heritage (see also Réseau canadien d’information sur le patrimoine 2013).

The *Studio*, as an intimate place where interpreters and a choreographer can work together, thus becomes a space and time in which body memories can be transmitted. The *Studio*, by enabling practice, study, and transmission, becomes a dance space for the community where mediation projects allow visitors to appropriate choreographic culture through residencies and choreographic transmission activities. *Rebel Bodies* thus counts on the direct experience of dance at the Museum and provides spaces where the community’s creativity can be expressed through the perpetual re-creation of their memories and heritage.

The intangible heritage at the museum helps to construct social ties and increase interaction and community participation (Turgeon 2010:13). The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted in 2003 by UNESCO proposes moreover to consider intangible heritage as a social construction process rather than a product. In so much as intangible heritage is carried onwards by people, the Convention attaches great importance to the preservation of communities and the active transmission of their practices, perceived as an effective means of preservation (Turgeon 2010:14). Intangible heritage is expressed through the human body. Our bodies memorize, conserve, and transmit heritage through words and movement. The direct participation of choreographic artists in *Rebel Bodies*, to borrow words employed by Laurier Turgeon (2010:14) in his study of intangible heritage, “enhances the effectiveness of human movement in social communication and construction” (*our translation*). This new form of curatorial work at the Museum showcases the transformation of cultural practices, performance, and the physical experience of culture (Turgeon 2010:14).

While there is no doubt that choreographic heritage can and should be conserved and promoted for posterity, research, and the future of dance works, in reality the process is not that simple. Despite the wealth of its heritage, Canada still does not have a museum for the performing arts, even though this type of institution can be found elsewhere in the world. Establishing a genuine policy in favour of our performing arts heritage is an issue for creators and heritage institutions (Communications Voir 2015; Regroupement québécois de la danse 2012; Société pour le développement du Musée des arts du spectacle...
vivant 1993). It particularly concerns museums, which play a major role in the protection and promotion of heritage. Given the context, let us continue to provide dance with the necessary means so that we will always be able to remember her.

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NOTES

1 Musée de la civilisation is part of the museum complex of the Musées de la civilisation (MCQ), which also includes the Musée de l’Amérique francophone, the Musée de la Place-Royale, the Maison historique Chevalier, and the Centre national de conservation et d’études des collections.

2 To mention but a few: Dansmuseet in Stockholm; the Museo Nacional de la Danza in Cuba; the National Museum of Dance in the State of New York; the Museo del Baile Flamenco in Seville; the German Dance Archives at the Tanz Museum in Germany; the Theatre and Performance division of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

3 As is the case for New York’s Museum of Modern Art, London’s Tate Modern, Barcelona’s Museum of Contemporary Art, Montreal’s Musée d’art contemporain, and Paris’ Centre George Pompidou.

4 We can see Pina Bausch (1975, recorded in 1978), Heddy Maalem (2004), Maurice Béjart (1959, recorded in 2012), Angelin Preljocaj (2001, recorded in 2004), Régis Obadia (2000, recorded in 2005), Marie Chouinard (1999, recorded in 2013), Jean-Claude Gallotta (2011, recorded in 2012), and Millicent Hodson (who recreated Nijinski’s 1913 choreography in 2008).

5 Six themes for six choreographers and six danced bodies. Victor Quijada (urban body), Margie Gillis (natural body), France Geoffroy (atypical body), Daniel Léveillé (political body), Louise Lecavalier (virtuoso body), Marie Chouinard, Martine Époque and Denis Poulin (multi-body).

6 There are four videos: Pénélope sens dessus dessous by Francine Châteauvert, L’atelier by Hélène Langevin, Symphonie dramatique by Hélène Blackburn, and Derrière la tête by Denis Plassard.

7 Visitors can see a video excerpt from Histoire d’une transmission, So Schnell à l’opéra (1999) by Marie-Hélène Rebois as well as an excerpt from the series Mondays with Merce, which shows Merce Cunningham giving a dance class.

8 The Digital Performance Archive; Inside Movement Knowledge; Dance, National Arts Centre of Canada; Dance collection danse; Numeridanse.tv; and Lartech.


10 As part of interviews conducted with Josée Laurence and Nadine Davignon from the Cultural and Educational Mediation Department at the Musée de la civilisation, March 2015.

11 On October 15, 2015, Stéphan La Roche took over the directorship of the Musées de la civilisation from Michel Côté.

12 Employed in the Convention, it is used in the sense of people “who share a self-ascribed sense of connectedness.” (UNESCO 2002:8).

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