

IMPERCEPTIBLE VIRTUOSITIES

Experimental Genealogies for a Contemporary Dance Field in Québec

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Part I. Frozen grounds



A paradoxical beginning for a contemporary dance history: Françoise Sullivan dancing across the Québécois frozen landscape in February of 1948. Her movements, prompted by the slippery and uneven ground; the brisk and muffled atmosphere of the countryside just outside Montréal, were witnessed by two other members of the Automatiste art movement, who, along with Sullivan, will co-sign the *Refus Global* manifesto a few months later that year. If Jean-Paul Riopelle's 16mm-film was lost

shortly after, Maurice Perron's series of still photographs were "rediscovered" – by the art market that is – in the late 70s, and came to crystallize the event as a foundational moment for experimental dance practices in Québec's history.

The performance was the second of Sullivan's planned four-part improvisation project, a "dance of the seasons," which she had initiated 6 months earlier, performing "summer" on the rocky northern shore of the St-Lawrence river, at les Escoumins. Each part was to be danced in distinct geographical and atmospheric conditions, where movement would emerge "spontaneously," expressing or being attuned to the singularities of a situation – the shifting temperature and winds, the texture and rhythm of the terrain, the mood of the ambient light, the play of forces and relations woven across the landscape. "Fall" and "spring" were not in fact performed that year (they would only be so in a recreation project organized by the Université du Québec à Montréal gallery nearly 60 years later) and no filmic or photographic trace remains of "summer." It is therefore those images of "winter," later to be titled *Danse dans la neige*, which broadly came to represent, or to stand for, the inaugural gesture of modern dance in Québec. The series of 17 photographs expose a dancing body in the midst of a desolate yet charged canvas, folding a sense of sheer slowness into other speeds; as the still body always points to movement, drawing a series of restless articulations with its surroundings. What do these uncanny images of a dancing body venturing out in the open, away from the city and the stage, as it negotiates a rough, unleveled ground, say of Québécois dance's relation to modernity? What kind of history and futurity do they

invent; what do they hide and call attention to? Beginning with these images, I argue they figure a paradoxical relation for dance across Québec's historical landscape, holding together a series of past gestures and those yet to come, the still and the moving, meaning and its undoing.

Less than two weeks before the improvised performance in the snow took place, Sullivan gave a lecture, "La danse et l'espoir" (*dance and hope*), which might be read as a score for the event to come. The text, the only one by a woman to be included in the *Refus Global* – which argued for a vital movement of art away from academic and religious hierarchies – can further be read as an early political essay on the dancing body, a dance manifesto of sorts. There, Sullivan defines the dancing gesture in its inner expressive potential, in her words: "more than anything, dance is a reflex, a spontaneous expression of intense emotion." One might hear the echo of Modern dance's early principles, for instance Isadora Duncan's call to find a movement practice that would be dictated, or finely tuned with, nature and its harmonious forms and rhythms; or Martha Graham who as famously and drastically declared: "the body never lies." But what I want to call attention to, is how Sullivan's text outlines a singular tension for dance in relation to temporality: how movement here emerges as that which is spontaneous and yet follows a somehow planned trajectory; between immediacy and re-activity. Indeed, departing from what Sullivan denounces as the static condition of "academic" dance, which favors a rigid and unifying use of technique, movement should be singular and spontaneous, she argues, drawing a new beginning each time it is

performed; writing its own history at each occurrence. Furthermore, she insists on the fact that dance is never the same, that it undoes the very idea of sameness, criticizing religion precisely for assigning a defined, fixed meaning to what dance is, locking up its actions in service of a given ideology. For Sullivan, dance remains fundamentally undefined and “unresolved”: attending to its forms and contents thus implies a trajectory, filled with vibrations that prompt variation and metamorphosis. If dance can enact “hope,” then, it is through this movement away from closed, sedimented hierarchies and identities, and toward what Sullivan calls “social change.” She argues we need to “challenge the human organism,” not to be afraid to go as far as possible in this experiment, which Sullivan maps along an inside out motion. (These words, “*remettre en cause organiquement l’homme*,” can be read as an uncanny echo of Antonin Artaud’s body without organs: “there is nothing more useless than an organ,” or indeed the organization of the organs; “then you will teach him again to dance inside out (...) and this inside out will be his true side out.”) For Sullivan, dance proceeds “inward out: from intuition and obscure feelings outward into the external matter from which art draws its form (time, space, and weight). We must begin again at the beginning.” The dancer is thus engaged in a constant negotiation between interior and exterior rhythms: in this play of exchanges, the dancing body “participates in the creation of a world.” Seeking to reactivate dance’s emotional, gestural, and poetic potentials, Sullivan therefore outlines new techniques for moving through the social and political body. The “hope” here is to learn *how to move*, again, individually and collectively.

But what does *Danse danse la neige*, as a singular, somewhat arbitrary beginning then, a loosely planned improvisation across a slippery ground, propose for a dance history in Québec? If the performance, along with the manifesto written just beforehand, outlines an unresolved relation between the dancing body and the times and spaces it performs, it paradoxically came to stand as a highly visible and stable landmark for Québécois dance history and identity. And indeed it is worth noting that a certain dance history, or what we might call dance legacy, often tends to rigidify bodies in time. And here I am referring to dance history in its institutionalized, monolithic appellation (l'histoire de *la* danse): as an ensemble of disciplinary structures that organize the ways in which movement is disposed in relation to time, visibility, legibility. In a cultural context largely dominated by capitalist imperatives, the dancing body is systematically apprehended as fleeing, ephemeral, inconsistent, and to this lack of substance or consistency so to speak must respond an ever increasing apparatus of capture. (More could be said about the specificity of the year 1948 in relation to Québec culture: as the power of catholic church is just about to vacillate, and give way to another economy, which could be defined as a variation of advanced, post-fordist capitalism.) These acts of capturing, of securing, of making dance legible, thus emerge as market-driven or political recuperations. They give rise to disciplinary practices of dance history, as many archival machines seek to preserve *the* dance and reproduce *the* movement. And so we come to the industry of the dance legacy, amongst many examples, let me mention the Laban Notation Bureau in New York, whose motto—*preserving the past, enriching the present, securing the future*—literally locks the possibilities

for dance in time. Between a stiff past and an already known future, how can the present be enriched, or expanded? *How can we move* from here and now; where can we go? As Merce Cunningham has affectively shown us, through the dissolution of his school and company with his death, the desire of dance legacy to control or orchestrate movement across history may be in vain, as movement's meanings and affects will always exceed our expectations and take us elsewhere.

And as an inventive, radical example of where dance's movement can take us, I would like to bring attention to a singular project of recreation of *Danse dans la neige*, one that was given very little visibility in Québec, despite the numerous efforts in promoting the legacy of the work in the last decade. In 2007, at Documenta 12, the Toronto-based Peruvian artist Luis Jacob presented *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice*, a multi media installation around a film that stages a reinvention of Sullivan's choreography in a close dialogue with Barbara Hepworth's sculpture and a series of contemporary concerns. What could be seen as a vital animation of the work in another time and space, met favorably in Kassel, encountered sheer resistance in Québec and was quickly discarded by the community as having nothing to do with dance – let alone its history and legacy. Here, one might argue that the queering of the work and the transformations it forcefully enact cast the performing body outside of dance's thresholds of legibility, and thus out of dance's history.



In the face of this sedimentation – or instrumentalization – of the dancing body in history, the tight securing of its forms and contents across time, Sullivan’s question – *how to move* – can be seen as a crucial one. And in fact, dance has a lot to teach about just how to move. We can think of the “task of the dancer,” as André Lepecki has named it, as the necessity to experiment with how to move politically: the ways in which dance calls for action, activates lines of freedom, while reminding us that this movement is always provisional and incomplete. And indeed the vibratory actions of the dancer can be said to cause disturbance and tremulousness – if not fascination and oblivion – across different regimes of knowledge. In western thought, the dancer recurs as a figure at the limits of that which makes sense, and conversely at the limits of time; pointing to the very threshold of language, or offering potent lines of flight. One example amongst many is Paul Valéry’s meditation, as he watches the dancer: “What is time? But what is dance?” Studying the motions of the dancer in order to define that which time is, the philosopher sees her as she “weaves and unweaves a temporality of

her own,” and further “enters into a kind of life that is at once strangely unstable and strangely regulated, strangely spontaneous, but at the same time strangely contrived and, assuredly, planned.” Dance is here ambiguous: it appears as impromptu, and yet somehow and mysteriously *planned*, following a distinct if illegible trajectory. I would argue that through this persistent, ontological oscillation between the fugitive and the directed, flight and confinement, the figure of the dancer slowly moves away from a natural or naturalized idea of movement and spontaneity, and begins to invent a practice of freedom – one that always negotiates a series of tight constraints, as Danielle Goldman has proposed in *I Want To Be Ready*. Moving along a course is enacting a plan. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney remind us in *The Undercommons*, the plan is fundamentally different from “the project” or “the policy” – which we might define as the business of politics or of politicians, a form of command that is imposed from above. In contrast, the plan would rather constitute an orientation, that which happens in relation and in motion.

Perhaps we might follow the dancer’s planned yet fugitive gestures then, their trajectory across a series of tight constraints, toward the space of the ground. In another passage by Valéry, who elaborates his famous point about the difference between poetry and prose, or between dancing and walking, the philosopher says: “The state of mind of a man dancing is not that of a man advancing through difficult country of which he is making a topographical survey or a geological prospectus.” For the philosopher, the dancer needs to attain and enjoy a certain “state of mind,” an absorption, being

disinterested in their actual environment, devoid of social and political concerns. In other words, dance can only take place once the ground has been cleared off and leveled. As Paul Carter suggests, in *The Lie of the Land*, “Logically, and perhaps historically, the colonizing explorer precedes the pirouetting dancer.” What this reminds us is that the dancer’s gestures often take place because of the prior activity of the explorer and the colonizer. There is a singular affiliation between dance and grounding, belonging. Dance underscores the ways in which its practices are often related to that of investing in or secreting space.

And yet, on this cold day of 1948, Sullivan travels on slippery ground, walking-dancing on the ridges of an uneven terrain; her movements oscillate between spontaneity and planning. Here, dance ventures outside, it moves away from defined centers, from stable grounds, to draw a series of articulations with broad areas of life. If these photographs outline any meaning for Québécois dance history, it is that of openness and unresolvedness. They make *sense* only insofar as they point toward dance’s constitutive motion – here emphasizing the double etymology of the word *sense*, as it folds meaning and directionality. *Danse dans la neige* might thus be said to enact an ungrounded condition of life. It shows us how to move at the edges of territories and bodies, outlining dance history as that which is relational, temporary, incomplete, and multiple.

I argue that this movement of dance toward the outside may unlock possibilities for other moving bodies in time, bringing our attention to other grounds, to other histories that have often been overlooked or eclipsed from historical narratives. For instance, it might be worth noticing that in same year, the choreographer Ruth Abramovic Sorel was working on the first ballet with Québécois content, *La Gaspésienne*.



The work would be première in 1949 in Toronto, then performed in Montréal, New York City, and Warsaw. Coming from Europe, where she danced with influential choreographers such as Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, Sorel settled in Montréal in 1944, via Brazil, fleeing the war and the Nazi regime. Along with other emigrant artists from Europe, she brought to Montréal a rich expressionistic dance tradition that never quite made it into historical or aesthetic canons, remaining, so to speak, on the outside. What is also fascinating is the way she strongly identified with the land, changing her

name to that of a Québécois city, Sorel, and being the first modern choreographer to start schools and troupes outside of the city. And yet, this history has been very little discussed – although I should mention Iro Tembeck’s seminal work in recovering some of the important history that composes the diversity of Québécois dance, especially by Jewish, Anglophone emigrants. Not only did the work receive very little attention in the study and history of dance, but also it never really found a “place” in Québécois culture. The circumstances of Sorel’s exile from Québec in 1955 are unknown, but it seems that her manifold investment in developing what might be a modern Québécois dance were met with skepticism locally. What such works as *La gaspésienne* point toward is the need to draw an experimental genealogy—a history made of ruptures and discontinuities—for Québécois choreography, which would include diverse traditions and trajectories in and outside its territories. Such a genealogy, I suggest, outlines dance as practice of contemporaneity: it follows the ways in which its experiments at once intensify the present while making persistent and heterogeneous articulations toward past and future gestures.

Part II. Contemporary virtuosities

In her manifesto, Françoise Sullivan further critiques “an exceptional virtuosity of the legs”: a crystallized phenomenon that prevents dance from moving freely, from realizing its emotional and poetic potential. The question of virtuosity, its relation to flight and constraint, is one that recurs in dance history since the inception of the field.

The dancing body is in turn identified as that which lacks technique – that which is in need of training and codification – or as it is being caught up in a web of overly specialized, formalized gestures – in need of ridding technique, of undoing itself so to speak.

And indeed, dancers and choreographers have engaged in manifold experiments along this trajectory, unworking and reinventing the question of virtuosity, with persistence. These experimentations sometimes bring us at the limits of dance, as movements point toward imperceptibility and stillness, as a means to question the very choreographic discipline – its codes, conventions, vocabularies – while activating a string of new functions for the dance subject across broad artistic, social, and political spheres. This tackling of virtuosity can be traced back to Jean-Georges Noverre's *Letters* published in 1760 and which outline a thorough critique of *Chorégraphie*, the notation system coined by Raoul Auger Feuillet on the orders of the King some 60 years earlier, and which arguably provides a codification ground for the Western discipline of choreography. For Noverre, *chorégraphie* is solely concerned with the study of the steps (think of Sullivan's legs here): as an "unfortunate algebra" it does nothing but to limit dance's expressive potentials. The writer goes on, "*Choreography* is very imperfect: it indicates with exactitude the movements of the feet only, and if it shows us the movements of the arms, it orders neither the positions nor the contours they should have." The problem is twofold: *Chorégraphie* cannot transcribe the emotional content of the dance or its "color," as Noverre puts it, and, its complicated and segmented

methodologies inevitably reduce movement's immeasurability. We can see how choreography is caught up, from its inception, in this tension between writing and dancing, the constrained and the spontaneous, the training and the ridding. Some 200 years later in 1968, Yvonne Rainer announces a shift in dance's function as it moves away from an emphasis on virtuosity: "this particular kind of display has finally in this decade exhausted itself, closed back on itself, and perpetuates solely by consuming its tail." In this regard, the use of pedestrian movements in the work of the Judson Dance Theater throughout the 1960s might be seen as an experimentation that shifts from the dead end in which virtuosic display had enclosed dance; to get rid of a self-invested virtuosity as a technological tool of the dance institution that isolates the dancer in a web of strictly codified gestures. Pedestrian movements might be said to be unworking some disciplinary mechanisms of dance, while connecting the experience of the dancing body to a range of matters and modalities across "every day" culture. In a statement released two years later, in the frame of the interdisciplinary art show presented at MoMA, Information, Rainer further exposes the necessity for dance to move *away from* "formalized choreographic gestures" and *toward* a renewed attention to the "ways in which we engage with each other." This short statement in lieu of a dance points to the impossibility of creating choreographic gestures in that specific context: a radical undoing of dance's forms, which simultaneously broadens its actions in tune with the world's upheavals. Here again, the issue of virtuosity is vital: one might follow the ways in which the dancer unravels the specialized vocabularies constitutive of the dance discipline, while engaging in mobile, multiple, complex—in short, virtuosic—

articulations with reality. It therefore echoes Paolo Virno's definition of virtuosity as a "public-political" activity that does not objectify itself in an end product, but always requires the presence of others, that is of an audience. The work of the dancer is a privileged site for the exposition of a "labor without an end": the dancer performs nothing but the "public-political" display of movement and its potential to ceaselessly recompose its forms and redefine its relations. In other words, it exposes the moving body as it draws from, but cannot be objectified or subsumed as, a distinct gestural and linguistic vocabulary.

These paradoxes around virtuosity are certainly playing out in the scene of experimental choreography in Québec. To end, I now propose to turn my attention to two recent creations I argue are particularly meaningful in that regard, and yet somehow remain at the margins of the field of Québécois contemporary dance. I want to briefly outline the ways in which their movements and affects create a series of dense articulations between heterogeneous genealogies, while pointing to a necessary becoming-exile of dance.



In April 2013, Caroline Gravel performed her first choreographed work, *Ma mère est un mâle alpha* in NYC, at Danspace project. As she enters the stage, she begins by introducing herself, saying a few words about the project. As she does so, language fails; she stops, stutters, and begins again. After a series of unfinished sentences, the dancer morphs into movement, through a series of jolting, tremulous gestures, never fully accomplished, never presenting or objectifying themselves. In what she describes as an “unfinished solo,” Gravel worked with the idea of the rehearsal, including its constitutive mistakes, vacillations, repetitions to build a singular, dense kinetic dramaturgy. In the studio, she tried to get rid of her training, of the characteristic gestures of the many choreographers she worked with. What remained after this impossible process was something intimate and yet distant, the figure of her mother, perhaps, a kind of spectral kinetic imprint, which she tries to shake off over and over again.

On stage, the dancing body contradicts itself as it unfolds, as it is being composed. Movement and language collide and fail: the dance works against

signification and representation, it unfolds through a kind of virtuosic stumble, a staggering move that oscillates between the fall and the flight, revealing the slippery, uneven grounds of history and ontology. Dance here signals an impossible legibility: the moment when bodily expression becomes undone and unreadable. “Are you still watching me?” she asks, with her back to the audience, her hair covering her face, shaking and twisting. Are you still watching; what can you recognize? The choreographic tremulousness arises as an interrogation of the certainty of gestures as they meet their outsides. A mimetic everydayness is no longer a de-formalization, but one fragmentary choreographic possibility amongst many others, to be played into a radically morphing movement, where the legibility of movement itself is in question.

The piece could be grasped as a virtuosic re-articulation of Québécois culture. The material draws from the gestural quality of Gravel’s mother, with echoes of folk dancing – a local version of the *gigue*, somewhere between tap and square dancing – and some flashes of popular culture (for instance this passage Gravel refers to as the “Céline Dion arm ritual”). And yet the dance can never be subsumed to these references: it unleashes a series of affects that bring us elsewhere. Interestingly, it seems that this complex assemblage needed to happen outside of the territory: the work has not yet found its way back onto a Montréal stage, where Gravel works as a well-known performer for several companies. Here, something seems to be at stake around the status of the female dancer in and out of her homeland (Susan Leigh Foster’s acute study of Marie Sallé comes to mind): how a certain empowering of the performer as author can only happen elsewhere, through a form of exile. And yet, even at a distance,

I would argue these movements can and should be said to radically question and transform the forms and contents of a Québécois dance field.



While my Parents are in Florida, a work by k.g. Guttman, was performed in March 2014 in North York, a suburb of Toronto. While her parents are in Florida, Guttman invests the family house through a kind of intimate yet critical residency. After having spent many years dancing, choreographing, and teaching in Montréal, Guttman ventures back into the house she grew up in to experiment with shifting boundaries between here and there; self and other; the individual and the family; aesthetics and politics, in a work that forcefully challenges the very question of home, and of ground. After a month of choreographic exploration that included moving furniture around, getting rid of objects, drawing on the walls, cooking experiments, studying family albums, as well as historical research around the political history of the land, Guttman opened the house for a public presentation. The afternoon of events unfolded in a convivial kitchen and eating gathering, and a performance in which Guttman invited the audience to follow her as she draw a wobbly line close to the ground across the space of

the house, bringing attention to the uneven floor and a multitude of objects, residues of memory, gathered along the way. Later, perched on the top of a ladder, she subtly danced with a childhood toy she found in the attic. Then, contemplating the projected image of the front page of a Canadian treatise on settling and colonizing the land, she began to trace the illuminations onto the wall, licking the excessive curves surrounding “Canada.” She goes on, naked, nesting herself within a lamp-shape, and invites someone to join her in this space to co-read excerpts of the treaty, which dictates how the land should be “reclaimed,” fragmented, attributed. Later, Guttman wonders: “*How to become Québécoise? How to undo la Torontoise? How to become space?*” Embracing what she calls a “plurality of identities” in which multiplicity and incoherence produce movement, she performs an effective de-grounding and indeterminacy. Guttman reminds us of a constant negotiation of identity through and as movement: how questions of home and migration need to be grasped in flux and relation, oscillating between freedom and constraint. This housed performance may be said to hold the outside: it crowds the domestic space, and puts it in dialogue with a series of broad historical, social, and political events. What *While my Parents are in Florida* does is to fold the political and the colonial onto the surface of the performing body, through and as dance. Here, again, we reach the limits of dance and its historical territory: this performance of critical intimacy exposes the necessity to re-imagine the spaces and times that compose a contemporary dance field.

Imperceptible virtuositities: that which remain hidden, on the margins of dominant stages and histories, while already pointing to heterogeneous genealogies and futurities for dance. This brief examination of this *becoming-exile* at work in Québécois dance brings attention to the strong claim of sovereignty prevalent in culture. Perhaps that is what is at stake: because of Québec's strong national feeling, dancing bodies are either subsumed or they run. In this regard, what these experimental performances show us is how the performing national body can – and must – undo itself for the sake of dance. Or, using the words of the poet and activist Gaston Miron, they enact “a legend for the future.”

I argue that these experimentations turn the tightly defined choreographic discipline – its geographical and temporal territories – inside out. Here, the affective force of dance resides in its enfolding of intensive choreographic gestures that always point to a series of *foreign* elements, outlining an experimental praxis that is based upon propositions for differences, variations, and metamorphoses. In this regard, rather than questioning whether these experimentations are dance or not, it is a matter of outlining what these experimentations make possible; how they redefine what dance is and what it can do; how they enact a series of articulations, new and radical, with other bodies, other spaces, other histories. As these experimentations venture outside, at the limits of the perceptible and the legible, they ask us to re-imagine that which makes life and makes sense in the work of dance.