

PRESSBOOK

Jesper JUST

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Interpassivities: Jesper Just

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CONVERSATIONS

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Jesper Just and Noam Segal in conversation

A small crowd of people is entering a freight elevator, the backstage entrance to an empty, gray, linoleum-coated floored space. The performance begins to unfold through the movements of some dancers interspersed in the crowd, who become identifiable by their subtle motions. The complex show functions almost as an ongoing workshop. It consists of classical ballet dancers, pedestrian migrant workers, a modular floor, a self-playing piano, three new video works, and a composition made by Kim Gordon and the audience—all roaming the room during the eighty-minute duration of the show.



**BARCELONA
GALLERY
WEEKEND** 28.09
—01.10
2017



Touching on two main conceptual anchors—Jorge Luis Borges's fable "On Exactitude in Science," involving a map so detailed it is as large as territory itself, and the notion of interpassivities, as coined by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek, which refers to a human action and is based on outsourcing emotions and feelings—this layered

project slowly unraveled in the theater of the Royal Danish Ballet, the commissioning institution.

NOAM SEGAL: You introduced your first multichannel work in 2008. This shift entailed a change in your perception of gender-body-spatial-corporeal investigation. From examining masculinity, you started to look at female body representations, which then led you to delineate structures surrounding challenged and disabled bodies. This investigation of physicality correlates to the architecture that facilitated the works, namely the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and the lower level of Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2015. Can you speak to this development

JESPER JUST: When I created *Intercourses* for the Danish Pavilion, the space within the films and the exhibition space played equally important roles. I wanted the exhibition experience to start when you approached the pavilion, so you would experience it before you even entered. Using concrete blocks, I built fragments of wall completely encircling the pavilion as a third architectural element, both guiding the viewer and also suggesting that behind these walls something was taking place. In this sense the walls, however incomplete, had a semantic value, or a type of codified meaning. The original entrance to the pavilion was turned into the exit when the modernist addition was built (the pavilion was built over two periods, neoclassical and modernist). I wanted to push that even further, and sideways, so that viewers enter through a window and exit from the tool shed. I think it's important to note that the representations and societal structures I address involve not only the female body, but even more so intersexual relations and transgendered bodies, often mirrored in the city and landscape.

This Nameless Spectacle (2011) features a transgender actress in a wheelchair navigating Buttes Chaumont, an iconic park in Paris. It might seem to be a rather peaceful image, but there is a conflict and also a parallel between her body and the physical terrain she navigates, or into which she inserts herself, depending on how you see it. Aside from the fact (though not apparent) that she is transgender, she is also, the film eventually reveals, not disabled; similarly, the park appears to be a haven of boundless nature but is actually entirely fabricated and human-made. Both are navigating realms of authenticity but also testing boundaries of space—and when you address space, the question naturally arises: Are you addressing space or are you addressing territory? And with territory comes the complicated issue of ownership, belonging, and otherness.

Servitudes (exhibited at One World Trade Center in 2015) built on this idea of obstruction and integration, specifically creating a sense of fragmentation and yet a cohesiveness between what you watch and what you must navigate. The films in *Servitudes* feature two female bodies, one a child, who is disabled, and the other a woman who appears to be the epitome of the American ideal: tall, blond, thin, conventionally attractive. The inherent dialogue emerges on the issue of ableism: perhaps the least-discussed form of discrimination, but omnipresent in any urban landscape. Within the films, One World Trade serves as a mediating character, bringing together both characters' bodies within the space of the films, and also standing like a phantom limb in the skyline, a reminder of what stood before and is no longer—of another wound, or injury, or impairment. In response to this, the installation needed to reflect these negotiations and mediations of space and also demand that the viewer be an active spectator. This cumulated in an installation that was both a physical and an auditory experience so grounded in the perception of physical space that on some level it serves as an architectural structure in itself.

In its original installment, the exhibition *Servitudes* at Palais de Tokyo occupied the basement floor, and this lower-level setting inspired the idea of the spectator as a spelunker, physically descending and then ascending again in order to observe all of the multiple film channels. The installation itself used wheelchair ramps and scaffolding to intersect and fragment the preexisting architecture. The ramps forced the able-bodied spectators to use a means of access typically intended for the disabled spectator—making their bodies ill-suited and in a way disabled for the physical setting.

So actually, the physical installation is an intervention that divides and restructures the exhibition space. As an architectural intervention, it echoes themes of ableism and fragmented feminized space—forging a connection with the content of films, manifested in physical space—while this same use of space obscures and confronts the

viewer's access and ability to view the films. Bridging a link to the disabled character of the Child, the installation forces visitors to confront their own bodies and physical abilities to illuminate ableism. Contemporary society is overwhelmingly designed for the able-bodied, to the extent that able bodies are taken for granted and those deemed disabled are rendered somewhat invisible. This focus on increasing the visibility of the disabled body was in turn extended to an exploration of gender and wholeness in physical space. As the female body is traditionally viewed as the place from which everything derives historically, space has been perceived as female, whereas time, and relatedly history, have been viewed as more male concepts. Henri Lefebvre has described neocapitalist/postmodern space as fractured—the “docility” of a space “cut into pieces.”

NS: All of these ideas are very present in *Interpassivities*, where the performance becomes porous by way of its own forms and actions. To start to untangle this work, can you elaborate on the ideas of the post-simulacrum condition, physicality, and the mechanic body, and how they are expanded in this show?

JJ: *Interpassivities* explores changes in space, and communication, within the context of contemporary society and technology. There is this prevailing sensation that time and space are being compressed—an issue addressed years ago, somewhat prophetically, by the philosopher Paul Virilio, who wrote about it at great length. *Interpassivities* engages with a different aspect of the post-simulacrum condition, that of hypernormalization. The ballet draws on an analogy that Jean Baudrillard cited, the fable derived from “On Exactitude in Science” by Jorge Luis Borges. The floor of the performance space forms a movable map and terrain. The ballet approaches this fable from a contemporary perspective, one in which the origin is removed from Baudrillard's idea of simulacra—replaced with a universe of endless, source-less replicas—which renders Borges's map merely an echo of an idea. The performance and all its elements navigate a topographic landscape relating to both the realms of the performance space and the virtual space within the films, compressing time and space to switch the inherent boundaries and hierarchies of reality and virtual reality.

NS: August Bournonville was a leading figure in shaping the Danish ballet tradition. Coming from classicistic and expressive French and Russian methodology, he took a more realistic approach. Under his management the Danish Academy became a prominent school that provided fully a sponsored education system, welfare, and health care to its students from early childhood until eighteen years of age. It was a labor-minded practice that was focused on the inclusion of the lower working class. The core structure of *Interpassivities* is based on three cycles, each containing a different perception of the body: the body as a subject for aesthetic investigation and experience, the body as an object that you perceive as a still, passive entity, and the practical body which is the daily functioning, laboring body. These conceptions are also realized through the framing of the video works, and moreover by different choreographic registers. What made you concentrate on these three paradigms, taking into consideration August Bournonville?

JJ: I was partly interested in the overlap of different body paradigms within the same space. Putting the aesthetic body on display was almost like having the dancers dance in quotation marks—extracting the aestheticized body by adding a sort of double exposure to it. For example, injecting a sequence in which bodies slide into becoming other bodies: pedestrian bodies through support movements that seem untrained and un-choreographed; sexual bodies through movements that emphasize relationships between bodies; or isolating parts of the bodies within the films, decontextualizing the body from the performance space. It was interesting to see how in filmic space the performative body can quickly take on a fetishized or sexualized tone. Once removed from any context and from the same space occupied by the audience, suddenly the body is not something experienced but merely observable and prone to our projections of desire or sexuality. I did turn to Bournonville technique for influences, as he is noted for what seem like isolated, purer, simpler movements: the *port de bras* or carriage of the arms is simplified, the wrists and lower arms maintain the same line. The footwork is speedy and precise, while the upper body remains more static or upright than in other techniques. So, I wanted to cut into the classical movements that are the basis for all ballet genres. Instead I used repetitive, simple steps which then could be interrupted. When traditional ballet vocabulary is present, for instance when the dancers execute a series of syncopated *tendues*, the movements are so simple and straightforward they would rarely appear in traditional classical ballet performance; it's the basic vocabulary of ballet class, of the body in training, rather than the seasoned performer. In this sense, I wanted to expose the dancers falling in and out of “aesthetics.” Additionally, there were inserts of sequences in which the dancers did something practical—a practical body that performs practical actions mechanically. Machines are practical and they are objects that do something actively. This

questions then the relationship of the body to the machine—what the difference is between an object doing actions and a body that is commanded to do the same actions.

As you described, especially in contemporary society, the different roles or registers of the body are markedly pronounced. How we use bodies has shifted. There is frequent discussion of bodies and the workforce being replaced by machines, leading to debates on the phenomenon of universal income. Also when we consider this time-space compression brought about by advancing technology, I was interested in how that manifests in physical form, how it changes the way our bodies move, operate, and interact. Within the performance space this manifests within the shifting physical boundaries of the moving, topographic floor. Integrated into the space you have the bodies of the dancers and those of the laborers moving the floor pieces, as well as the bodies of the audience members. The presence of the migrant workers contrasting with the bodies of the performers experiments with the idea of delegated performance. This contrasts with the idea of performance as it relates to delegated consumption or enjoyment. Within this context, the roles of agency, authenticity, and participation are questioned—who has the right to create or observe, or who has the right to be relieved of having to do one or either. Bodies bring into question the ideas of inter-passivity but also alienation.

NS: There is a strong correlation between the modular fragmented flooring and the bodily concepts represented throughout the show. Architecture responds to the three registers of human physicality, and forms of labor are in action with the shifting flooring. The dancers are changing their register according to the specific arrangement of the architecture, while the architecture is changing in reaction to the pedestrians who are constantly working throughout the show.

Within this symbiosis, the topographic landscape is also a response to the “virtual space within the films,” as you pointed out. In the three films, we see electrical cords applying strokes on the dancer’s muscles, which passively respond in motion, we become witness to the camera’s exploration of a CPM machine, and we see Kim Gordon in a tutu playing on the Mexican-US border fence with a small wooden stick. Can you talk about how the differing architectural structures are responding to the physical registers in the work as well as in the films?

JJ: The content of the films as well as the sonic/auditory structure of the piece create another dimension, in a sense replacing the fourth wall with a continuum in which the architectural structures within the physical space and within the films (landscapes or locations) have a meeting point within the performance space that exists only in that present moment. At the same time, as the performance and the films occur at two different points in time and space, this meeting point does not occur at all. This slippage or rupture forms its own architecture, which also comments on themes of passivity, ableism, and labor—like the way in which the Mexican-American border is emblematic in discussions surrounding labor, migration, alienation, and the right of bodies to be mobile and autonomous. Yet here, as Kim Gordon plays the border fence, it simultaneously becomes a structural tool, the sound providing the music for the dancers in the performance space to perform in real time. Landmarks and monuments, architecture that exists outside the walls of the temporary performance, shift in their symbolic and functional hierarchies once they enter or occupy a space in the films. It is a constant negotiation and renegotiation.

NS: Let’s talk a bit about the musical component, which was made in collaboration with Kim Gordon and August Rosenbaum. The performance has several auditory components: in addition to the single-channel sound in the films, the movable floor also functions as a spatial musical object, and in the middle of the show the audience becomes acquainted with a self-playing piano. Can you say something about this process and how it evolved in response to other ideas resonating the show?

JJ: Kim’s involvement added much to the ballet, both musically and in the sense of her presence in the film. She composed four loops of music, which August then arranged over different parts of the work in various segments and temporalities, helping to form four movements of the ballet. The loops served as this linking thread repeated, much like the movements of the choreography, but sometimes the loops were distorted or building or abstracted. Each movement of the ballet linked to these loops had specific choreography for the dancers and signaled a change for the laborers moving the floor panels. The floor panels themselves contained speakers, so that when they were moved, the soundscape shifted as well, not just the physical topography.

August made the composition for the self-playing piano. I used to work with August's father, a chemistry teacher and a singer with a very deep bass voice. He played a transvestite in my film *Bliss and Heaven* (2005). I used to come to their house for dinners starting when August was a young boy. One day the father suggested that August and I should work together, and we collaborated for the first time in 2008 and several times since.

This is my first collaboration with Kim; it is partly seen in the film but it spills over into the performance space, again breaking this boundary between what is happening live in one space versus in the projected filmic space. In the film in which she appears, she interacts with the dividing structure at the US-Mexico border, and the sound that came out through this playful interaction was transferred to the floor units, which then move around. We used wireless speakers that were attached underneath some floor units, so the fence between the two states was rearranged and translated vocally into the performance space. The sound came both from her whispers and from her performance in the film with the wooden stick. Her clankings and knockings on the physical border created a sound that was physical and played directly from the floor, creating vibrations. This concept is tied to the idea of virtual reality and the endless reproductions of a thing in different manifestations. Some elements were activated elsewhere, yet had an active presence in the space, like the way sound was created from the border, from deploying it as an instrument, and then it turned into floor vibrations.

Another example would be the piano. When you enter the space, the first thing you hear is a piano playing, kind of like a soundtrack of the space. Then later it is revealed to be a self-playing piano, performing on its own. Once the floor is lifted suddenly the piano is revealed, lying underneath. At this moment, the films screening show the dancers' muscles contracting rhythmically, and we become aware that the piano is in fact the same instrument causing the dancers' muscle contractions seen in the film: the vibrations/resonances from the self-playing piano are controlling the dancers with the help of electronic simulation devices, so the dancers are in total sync with the independent instrument. It creates this echo of an object or presence—sound heard in the space, then seen in the film, and made tangible when encountering the instrument. It's like a chain reproducing its own links, all of which lack any original source.