

Claudia Kappenberg, December 2016

Incognito

In 2015 Tate's Curator of Performance Catherine Wood and Choreographer Boris Charmatz devised 'If Tate Modern was Musée de la Danse', a curatorial project which invited audiences to imagine the Tate Modern galleries as a space *for* dance. Dances were implied through signage, a map and actual dances. As Wood argued, the project imposed the label of the dancing museum on the art museum in order to conjure up a dance. However, reflecting on this project in 'Who Cares', a collection of interviews edited by dancer choreographer Sara Wookey, Wood also asked if the museum could be dance already, and Boris Charmatz similarly posited, that everything is dance.¹ In this essay I will test the proposition that the museum *is* dance, searching for the choreographic in amongst the National Gallery's live spaces and represented spaces, acoustic environments and pictorial silences, their furniture, doors and picture frames, and the quotidian rituals of visitors and gallery employees.

12/12/2016. Expecting to be an audience of one I enter the spectacle of the National Gallery through the main entrance and begin my walk through the different spaces like all the other visitors. I look at the people who walk this way and that, up and down the stairs and in and through the galleries in what is a fantastic orchestration of bodies and trajectories. Is this a dance I wonder, or is it my being here which makes this into the dance of coming and going? If I was not here observing, would it still be a dance?

In front of me hangs a huge golden frame, right in the centre of a long blue wall. Within the frame, on a flat, golden background is the image of a horse rearing up, its motion suspended. Frozen in time the horse's head is turned toward the gallery visitors, its dark eyes looking down into the space.² The curves of its chestnut body are moulded through reflecting light; its rear right fetlock, the one that is closer to the viewer, is white. On its right hindquarters a fine protruding vein reinforces a sense of liveness and animal power. A young man pauses in front of the image, a vertical figure, head tilted to the right, meeting the gaze of the animal. Time passes. Then he turns away, looks around the room in a distracted sort of fashion and wanders off, merging with the stream of passers-by.

Am I the audience here, or is it me who is doing the dancing?

I let my eyes wander around the large space and I see the young man again, now on the other side of the room, pausing anew whilst looking at another scene. In the image, a river runs through a field between tall, established trees, the light on the water caught with white paint strokes. In the middle of the river, motionless, a horse-drawn cart.³ Having joined the young man I notice a dog in the foreground who is looking, just like me, at the cart and at two men who also stand in the river. One of them has one arm raised as if pointing somewhere. I have a sense of words being exchanged

between the two men, and a sense of urgency, but the image is silent. Instead, all around me there is the constant hum of a body of people who move and shift around the space. Three women walk up to where I stand, speaking in a language I don't understand. One poses in front of the scene, I hear the click of a digital camera and the women walk off. "Oh this is very famous", says someone whilst walking past behind me. I look again at the image and at the two men in their gesticulating pose. A few other, tiny figures are discernible in the background, in the field beyond the river.

What then if I asked a group of performers to come in to the gallery as observers? What if the visitors were informed that the observation was taking place? Who would be the audience, and who would be doing the dancing?

Turning to the centre of the gallery space I notice two dark, heavy sofas and I find a seat with my back to the canvas I have just looked at. "My legs ache," says an elderly woman as she sits down beside me. "But this is not always walking, you stop, you walk, you stop," says her female companion. Then they notice the frame with the rearing horse in the centre of the wall, hanging at some distance. "Magnificent movement," says my neighbour, and takes out her mobile phone to take a picture from where she is sitting. People walk and stand between her and the horse and she waits, phone in hand. More people pass, she waits. Eventually she has a partial view and takes a picture. "Here he is," she says satisfied looking at the small, chestnut horse on her golden little screen, "not bad."

Finally then, where are you, the reader, in this game, and are you doing any dancing?

In front of me a young man holds a pencil horizontally at the level of his eyes. Standing before the portrait of a young lady, he looks down at his sketch pad, looks up, down, up, down. His body weight resting on his right leg, he looks both relaxed and attentive. The lady he is studying faces away from him, but looks back over her shoulder in a classic pose. It is an image of someone in 1803, the close crop not allowing for any context or background. "Lawrence depicts the 16-year-old Emily Lamb as though in motion," says the label on the wall.⁴ The note also says who she married later and who she married after that.

To the left of Lady Emily are four children, gathered in a living room. The boy's eyes are directed upwards, a girl with her hands resting on a ruffled dress is looking ahead, another girl is lightly touching the arm of a toddler. The constellation of four children from 1742 seems both innocent and a little sombre, and the note next to the painting explains that the smallest one, Thomas, died before the painting had been completed.⁵ I see. The child did not live to see the finished painting, but the work is 274 years old this year.

Three boys run past and sit down next to me where the two elderly ladies had been a moment earlier. They start looking around the room: "La bruja", says one, pointing at a lady with a very white face and dark dress, who also hangs up high, positioned to the right of the archer. "A lo mejor" he continues. The so-called witch is Anne, 2nd Countess of Albermarle, and was immortalised in this way in 1760 by Sir Joshua Reynolds.⁶ The note on the wall explains that her pale appearance is the result of fading red pigment that the painter used for the colouring of flesh. What we see now is not what he painted, and it is not how she looked at the time. Feet shuffle past,

trainers, boots, leather soles on hard wooden floors. “La primera, cuarenta y cinco...” the boys continue, but I don’t know anymore what they are referring to. A young couple has stopped not far from us in amongst the flow of bodies. They kiss briefly and walk off to the right through a creaking double door. A woman fanning herself with a gallery guide comes past, followed by a man holding a fold-up chair, as well as a guy with a jacket over his arm who is looking at the screen of his audio guide. A mother and son, holding hands, walk by and stop briefly to look at the four children on the wall, saying something to each other before walking on. The flow of bodies changes constantly, but behind them the heads and torsos and gestures remain.

I get up and walk against the stream of bodies, past the four children, the horse in the golden frame and a herd of cows which I had not noticed before.⁷ I walk past a young couple who appear to stride towards me on their morning walk.⁸ I walk past an animated scene of of people that are gathered around a table bathed in dramatic candle light.⁹ Gestures and glances, rich colours, bright surfaces and shadows, but no sound. I regret not hearing the past that is invoked here. Attending to the space in which I am I hear the footfall and buzzing of voices. Turning back to the painted image the world again falls silent. There is however a sense of movement and interaction, reinforced by the heavy golden frame that swirls around this image.

A woman with white hair poses in front of the chestnut horse, her smile held whilst waiting for the click of her companion’s camera. Another woman walks up to the painting and studies the front hooves in a brief moment of intensity before moving on and disappearing in the stream of passers-by. I turn around to look towards the other side of the gallery. Amongst the various images there is a bare and quiet landscape depicting an evening sunset by the sea. As I get closer I see a small white squiggle of paint in the lower centre suggesting a reflection, and a small white blob of paint high up in the painted sky representing a star.¹⁰ Below left a few wooden poles are sticking out of the water, and below right the faint impressions of a boy and a tiny dog jumping up at him. I sit down to write. To the right of me a young guy rests with his head in his right hand, eyes closed, quietly breathing and fast asleep. A couple step in front of the seascape and the woman puts her head on the man’s shoulder whilst gazing at the scene. As they leave another woman comes and stands right in the centre of the canvas. Her stillness merges with that of the image, her head appears small compared with the size of the frame. Then she turns, smiles gently and walks on. An elderly woman also goes up to the painting and is drawn into its spell. A third woman, again walking up close, enters its stillness and then walks on. For a moment there is no one and the emptiness of the painted scene radiates into the room, its silence dampening the sounds of the visitors. The note on the wall says that “the painting is unfinished and a boat has been painted out at the centre right.” Not only emptiness then, but traces and the absence of something, composed in the 1830s.

My neighbour is still slumped into the sofa, fast asleep. Turning to the right my eyes come to rest on a painting that hangs at the far end of the gallery. A fiery sunset on the right side is complemented by a flotilla on the left side, in which a small, steam-powered tug pulls a somewhat faint old warship. The image shows the decommissioning of a British gun ship, the ‘Fighting Temeraire’, and has been in the news as it will be featured on a new £20 note of the Bank of England. While the work references a historical moment it is mainly a scene of loss, of new technologies replacing older ones, a tribute. The painting is itself part of this history but it will soon

also be part of the now. There are more paintings to be seen in room 34 but my journey comes to an end here. From Stubbs' *Whistlejacked* to the horse-drawn cart in Constable and the mini replica of the horse on the old lady's mobile phone, from Constable's dog to a young lady's glance and Reynolds' pale older woman, from digital click to sleeping neighbour, from white paint squiggles to ghostly gun ship, my dance ends here.

¹ Catherine Wood in conversation with Sara Wookey, *Who Cares, Dance in the Gallery and Museum*, Sarah Wookey eds, London: Siobhan Davies Dance and Sara Wookey 2015

² George Stubbs, *Whistlejacked*, about 1762

³ Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821

⁴ Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Portrait of the Hon. Emily Mary Lamb*, 1803.

⁵ William Hoggarth, *The Graham Children*, 1742

⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Anne, 2nd Countess of Albermarle*, 1760

⁷ Thomas Gainsborough, *The Watering Place*, before 1777

⁸ Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Ms William Hallet, 'The Morning Walk'*, 1785

⁹ Josph Wright 'of Derby', *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, 1768

¹⁰ Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Evening Star*, about 1830