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Altered, Divided, and United States: The Venice Dance Biennale Arseny Zhilyaev



Simone Forti, *Dance Constructions (Huddle)*, with the dancers of Biennale College Danza.
Courtesy of the Venice Biennale. Photograph: Andrea Avezzi.

In his preface to the catalog of the seventeenth edition of the Venice Biennale Danza, its artistic director and award-winning British choreographer Wayne McGregor explains the edition's theme, "Altered States," by delving into the chemical transformations that both dancers and their audience undergo during mesmerizing performances. He concludes by describing dancers as "movement alchemists."¹ Undoubtedly this is true. Nevertheless, is it not the case, in the words of neuroscientist Anil Seth, that we all live in a rapidly changing world appearing "as a mosaic of globally altering states"??²

Alchemical transformations occur not solely within the bodies of dancers or those captivated by their performances. Soldiers fighting for their country's freedom hone the automatism of their actions and strive for an ideal interconnection with their fellow soldiers, navigating the complexity of technological systems. Workers who meticulously prepare data sets or engage in various performative routines, refugees adjusting their bodies to new spaces, partisans and protesters in their political struggles, and countless others have trained their bodies and minds to act with precision in pursuit of noble goals. They, too, can be considered alchemists, or if one wishes, even dancers.

However, the Biennale Danza and its attendees find themselves in a fortuitous position, dodging the harsh realities of historical circumstances. There are scarcely any traces of actual or potential catastrophes. Instead, the festival serves as a shelter, a cure that helps people endure the storm. As Simone Forti said about her iconic series *Dance Constructions* during a conversation with Sarah Crompton:

There was trouble in my home, and I just needed to be able to push against something, or pull against something, to feel my strength. I remember feeling that if I was dizzy from drinking, I had to look at a line and see something straight. So, I made something that would give me that. That was the *Constructions*.³

This year the distinguished American artist and dance innovator with Italian roots (her family fled the country to escape fascism and anti-Semitism during the Mussolini era) won the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement. She presented in Venice an exhibition produced in collaboration with MOCA Los Angeles, with early pieces from the collection of MoMA in New York (acquired in 2015).⁴ Three pieces from *Dance Constructions*, first performed in Yoko Ono's loft in 1961, are here brilliantly restaged by "neo-modernist" Sarah Swenson and the Biennale College dancers.

Among the sixteen fortunate international participants chosen to train with Wayne McGregor and be involved in several biennial projects were Dayana Mankovska and Daria Hordiichuk from Ukraine. Unfortunately, their participation was the sole contribution from a country divided by a full-scale imperialist invasion. As Dayana Mankovska's biography states, "Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, she and her fellow dancers have defended their country in the army and as volunteers, while trying to continue their dance development abroad."⁵

Dance Constructions draws upon repetitive patterns of movement and the interplay between unity and disengagement; these once provided a stable refuge for Forti when she was about to divorce artist Robert Morris.⁶ At the same time, it seems that their algorithmic obsessiveness and abstract nature also serve as a protective ritual and an analgesic against any form of suffering. A similar approach to "alternating states" can be found in other works at the biennial. For instance, the minimalistic *Variation(s)* by French-Algerian choreographer Rachid Ouramdane, made in collaboration with composer Jean-Baptiste Julien and dancing duo Ruben Sanchez and Annie Hanauer, concentrates "on the musical structure in a different way through gesture, dance."⁷ But perhaps the most curious resonance with Forti's legacy emerged in *Materia* by Rome-born Berliner Andrea Salustri and *Pendulum* by the Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin and composer-percussionist Matthias Schack-Arnott.

Materia is very ascetic in its expressive means, although it is not devoid of a certain touch of something circus-like. It is performed by the artist himself, accompanied by a few fans and a set of styrofoam plates. Following studies of contact juggling and fire manipulation, which Salustri practiced as a busker, he earned a degree in philosophy. All these elements were found within his performance, which provided a sort of new materialist manifesto written by dance. If one were to ask what "an autonomous movement of the nonliving" looks like, one could point to *Materia*. The choreography here is determined by chance, or more precisely by stochastic processes in open systems, formed by gusts of air, objects, and restrictions imposed by the performer. Indeed, the same physical processes are involved at the most basic level of the organization of our world, where the difference between the living and nonliving blurs.

Pendulum also concerns one of the basic physical forces—gravity. The project transcends the realm of performative action, comprising one of the biennial's permanent installations, thoughtfully designed by Robert Larsen and Nick Roux. It consists of a structure with numerous steel cables on which are hung bells or bowl-shaped sonic sculptures differing in size. Each is equipped with a loudspeaker, internal lights, and a sensor system that responds to the dancers' touch while collecting data used by the controlling system of the installation. While the repetitive character of the performance, along with the symbolism of a bowl as a tool for meditation in Buddhism, and the Venetian sound landscape (where time is marked by the campanile bells), invite an interpretation through the lens of spirituality, the makers prefer to speak about rational organization and the functional interconnection of human bodies and machines. "Researching this work," explains Guerin, "involved the investigation of gravity. We had to go into the physics of it. We had to figure out all the elements: does a big swing take more time than a small one? Does a bigger bell suspend for longer than a smaller bell?"⁸

The majority of the projects showcased at the biennial were geographically rooted in what is commonly referred to as "the West," even as choreographers addressed issues related to minority cultures and decolonization. This stands in stark contrast to this year's Venice Architectural Biennale, where its curator, novelist Lesley Lokko, chose "the laboratory of the future" as the theme for focusing on countries in Africa. Nevertheless, there were exceptions. The main counterpoint to Simone Forti's work was the Chinese Theo Theater, the recipient of the Silver Lion award. Their choreography draws on reworked traditional Chinese approaches to dance, martial arts (particularly kung fu), and spiritual practices of self-discovery. Despite the numerological titles of the performances (*11*, *13*, and *14* were shown at the biennial), indicating the number of participants involved onstage, and the often very limited use of musical accompaniment (*14*, for example, is performed only to a rhythmic beat similar to a metronome), the works of Theo Theater are very holistic and expressive. Other noteworthy projects challenging the limits of geography included *Navy Blue* by socially engaged choreographer Oona Doherty, who won the Silver Lion for her class-war drama *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* two years ago, and the world premiere of *BOGOTÁ* by the Colombian-Canadian experimentalist Andrea Peña, winner of the international call for new choreography.

Navy Blue rethinks socially engaged art, mixing the epic integrity of socialist realism with the momentum inherent in leftist modernism. The performance is divided into two contrasting parts. The first moves to Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, resembling early Soviet propaganda films. It depicts blue-clad workers united in the struggle against invisible forces of oppression. The second part picks up from their defeat and resurrects lost hopes. It is driven by the music of Jamie xx and a poetic text that mentions "corrupted politicians," including a lengthy list from "Jim Crow and Donald Trump" to "Ronald Reagan and Vladimir Putin," and highlights the history of political assassinations and genocides, including the full-scale Russian

invasion of Ukraine. All of a sudden, the text employs techniques characteristic of Brechtian theater and lays bare *Navy Blue*'s economic foundations. We are told that the total production budget for the project amounted to €291,656⁹—a substantial sum for an average art production today. Despite their differences, the two parts of the performance are united by a profound meditation on the significance of the color blue, expressed primarily through the historical context of the blue-collar class struggle and sailors' riots. As someone born in the USSR, I couldn't help but recall the ill-fated rebellion of Soviet sailors in Kronstadt, which sought to restore democracy during the proletarian revolution of 1921. However, Carl Sagan's famous book *Pale Blue Dot*, inspired by the iconic photo of earth taken in 1990 by Voyager 1, also finds its relevance. During the performance a voice-over repeats, "A pale blue dot on a pale blue dot ...," almost breaking into a scream. Ultimately, blue serves as both a mood and a symbol of leftist melancholy, permeating the (outer) space of artistic exploration.

The mood of *BOGOTÁ* is vastly different from this cool blue void. Its atmosphere evokes projects by Anna Imhov, if they were transported from the halls of European museums to the imaginary quarters of Colombia's capital city. The choreographer explains: "Death and resurrection are explored through my Colombian heritage, colored by the historic nuances of this colonized country, as a source of resilience that is deconstructed from a queer, post-industrial and post-human lens."¹⁰ Andrea Peña's dance is collaged, ecstatic, and at times convulsive. It seamlessly transitions between moments of rave-like frenzy and frozen states akin to tropical amber. The mechanics of her performance can be seen as a net of repeating circles growing from one another. It is difficult to say whether they are circles of financial speculation, protective obsessive rituals, or unsuccessful attempts at liberation. Especially compelling is the idea that *BOGOTÁ* queers death; at least in such a danse macabre there is a constant hope of rebirth.

The notion of altered states implies a return to some form of normalcy, in the same way that the existence of everyday speech is presupposed by poetry. But at some point, it becomes clear that there is no norm or ordinary speech to fall back on, just as there is no art as an autonomous territory. Everything can undergo estrangement, defamiliarization, or alteration. Dance, like a dream, can be a meeting ground for what seems impossible to us in reality, but not because reality is so different from dance. On the contrary, everyday life is always in some kind of altered state. And thus the task becomes understanding dance as a reality. Sometimes this can lead to the birth of a new artwork, like Simone Forti's *Dance Constructions*, which deals with real-life separation and reunion. And sometimes it alters existing dreams, in the case of the opening of the Venice Film Biennale, where the premiere of Luca Guadagnino's *Challengers* was cancelled due to a strike by actors from SAG-AFTRA.

Notes

- 1 Wayne McGregor, "Altered States," in *Altered States: Biennale Danza 2023* (Venice, 2023). Exhibition catalog.
- 2 Anil Seth, "Altered States: Varieties of Consciousness," in *Altered States*, 27.
- 3 *Altered States*, 41.
- 4 Catherine G. Wagley, "All Positions Possible: Simone Forti Across Time, Through Community," *Momus*, January 31, 2023 →.
- 5 *Altered States*, 160.
- 6 "In 1959, Forti moved to New York with Morris, and began to take movement and composition classes with Robert Ellis Dunn at the Merce Cunningham Studio. By then, she felt in need of a change ... At the same time, her relationship with Morris was ending." *Altered States*, 41.
- 7 See →.
- 8 "Rhythm, Gravity and Time: Lucy Guerin on the Creation of 'Pendulum' for RISING Festival," Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, May 21, 2021 →.
- 9 Full text available here →.
- 10 See →.

Category

Dance, Contemporary Art

Subject

Biennials

Arseny Zhilyaev (b. 1984, Voronezh, USSR) is an artist based in Venice. His projects speculate on possible future histories of art, using the museum as a medium. Zhilyaev plays roles in the Institute for the Mastering of Time and the Institute of the Cosmos, while following the reflections of the Museum of Museums in the lagoon.