Book Review

Choreographing Intersubjectivity in Performance Art

By Victoria Wynne-Jones (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

ZOE THEODORE

Victoria Wynne-Jones' *Choreographing Intersubjectivity in Performance Art* provides an in-depth analysis of contemporary performance art, pointing to choreography as an analytic tool that determines new forms of intersubjectivity, and in turn subjectivity. Wynne-Jones' impetus for writing this book was the 'choreographic turn', or the influx of dance-based knowledges and performances being presented in museums, galleries, and art biennales since the turn of the twenty-first century. Wynne-Jones' offers a timely account of recent performance art history that successfully decentralises the monocentric narrative of this newly burgeoning field by putting key players such as Tino Seghal and Xavier Le Roy into conversations with artists from the Australasia-Pacific region. Through an analysis of a wide array of performance art case studies, Wynne-Jones aims to provide a conceptual framework for how one might experience choreographic bodies within museum spaces in such a way that moves beyond visual or formal analysis akin to art history. Adopting an empirical analytical method, Wynne-Jones' thesis is twofold: firstly, the book presents intersubjectivity as a conceptual framework for understanding choreography and its interface with the museum; and secondly, the book asserts that performance art can also be understood as producing intersubjectivity through interaction with theories of 'otherness' related to post-humanism, queerness, and decolonisation.

Asserting that "philosophical, sociological and psychological theories [can] help to provide a critical framework for understanding" performance art, Wynne-Jones' thesis is indebted to Nicholas Bourriaud (Wynne-Jones 2021, 6). Understanding this art historical lineage, one that includes Claire Bishop and her *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, is critical to analysing Wynne-Jones' hypothesis of intersubjectivity-as-art. Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics was developed to account for a paradigm shift in contemporary art to include a "set of artistic practices which takes as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context rather than an independent and private space" (Bourriaud 2002, 118). Fundamental to Bourriaud's theory is how artworks can "engineer

intersubjectivity" and collective meaning can thus be constructed by one-on-one experiences of "sheer human togetherness" (81). Following Bourriaud's reflections on collectivity, collaboration and socially engaged practices, Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* provides an alternative account of this recent artistic interest which she calls "the social turn" (Bishop 2006, 79). Bishop declares that while her study appears similar to Bourriaud's, the artists discussed in her book "are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicized working process" (Bishop 2012, 2). The distinct common thread, however, in both Bourriaud and Bishop's contributions, is the possibility of an artwork constructing meaning via collective or open-ended engagement with others and beyond the model of the singular, heteronormative, white, male artist genius. Further contributing to the paradigm shift in Western visual arts practice—a discipline that historically has been predicated on authorial singularity—both Bourriaud and Bishop describe how art can produce intersubjective encounters to create meaning through politically or community-engaged working processes. These concepts highlight the embodied role of spectatorship in unsettling new art practices that involve new kinds of participation and, at times, the subject's own performance within the encounter.

Pursuing the "radical or sociological" approach to intersubjectivity, Wynne-Jones employs this hermeneutic lens as a means to examine the reception of performance art in a new way (Wynne Jones, 2021, 14). For example, she writes convincingly on *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) by Tino Seghal through this "paradigm of exchange", neatly applying Emmanuel Levinas' existential phenomenology of the face-to-face encounter in order to articulate how embodied, one-on-one encounters can lead to an emancipatory revelation of the uncontained self who is interdependent on others (21). However, Wynne-Jones' thesis—that "relationality is integral to choreography"—and the application of intersubjectivity as a lens is not as persuasive when applied to choreographic work that is not attempting to unsettle spectatorship or work that does not involve new forms of participation. This might be because a new model for a more critical or political understanding of an artwork cannot be argued for, or prevail, without responding to prior readings of the work. This is particularly relevant to her analysis of choreographers such as Simone Forti, video artists such as Angela Tiatia, and installation artists such as Jordan Wilson. The analysis of these artists' work through the intersubjective lens would be bolstered by touching on other prevailing issues such as kinesthetic awareness, the use of improvisational scores, the commodification of the body, and the use of spectacle. Wynne Jones' treatment of such work would benefit from being in dialogue with the historical lineages and disciplinary specific contexts that these works respond to, or the communities of criticality that support these practices.

Wynne-Jones supports her argument that choreography has the ability to instigate new forms of freedom and political transformation by adopting dance theorist Andre Lepecki's distinction between *choreo-policing* (choreography as a commanding force that is authoritative) and *choreo-politics* (choreography as an emancipatory political force that can reinvent bodies). After introducing this dichotomy in Chapter Two, Wynne-Jones reads all subsequent examples of performance art through this binary to suggest

that “certain performance artworks undermine the operations of choreo-policing and explore how performers as artistic subjects or gallery visitors might deviate from such [institutional] forms of structure and control” (46). She argues that it is “the task of any artists creating works of performance art within the art museum” to explore the oppositional forces of Lepecki’s choreo-policing and choreo-politics (46). Extending this assertion, Wynne-Jones continues by noting that, on the one hand, performances within the museum can be prescriptive about the behaviours of the museum visitor (i.e. insist on certain embodied interactions with the work and circumambient architecture). She also notes that, on the other hand, “through deliberate practices of unsettling spectatorship contemporary art museums have attempted to align themselves with the choreo-political project” (29). This latter assertion, however, doesn’t sufficiently account for the nuanced and incredibly varied approaches to performance discussed within the book, and arguably the choreographic turn overall, which largely comprises artist-led interventions (apart from the revisionist curatorial approaches). I would instead suggest that artists themselves are disrupting the prevailing notions of museological spectatorship, not the museum, and institutions and curators are playing catch-up to artists' self-reflexive experiments that focus on novel spatial and spectator possibilities.

Turning her focus to the museum in Chapter Two, Wynne-Jones draws an analogy between choreography as a system of command and the authoritative power relations found in the art museum. She describes the museum as a system that demands obedience where “so-called subjects” are produced and constituted by apparatuses, institutions and fields of power in museology and art history” (49). Wynne-Jones uses both museum and the gallery interchangeably to refer to a multitude of visual arts contexts, including the commercial gallery and a pavilion in the Venice Biennale, adopting Brian O’Doherty’s critical framework for understanding the white cube as “a chamber of transformation that can break with the conventions of ordinary life” (53). The museum is posited as a disciplinary space, through an engagement with Foucault, noting that it presupposes a “universal viewing subject” (55). The author concludes:

> Such a space as an apparatus or dispositif, as constructed by disciplines of art history, curatorial practice and museology is unique, it encloses those within it and partitions them within rooms. Most importantly, via a process of spatio-subjectivisation, the white cube sets up criteria for the formation of very specific kinds of viewing and artistic subjects. (85)

In other words, Wynne Jones is identifying the museum as a site ripe for the potential subject-formation afforded by choreographed intersubjectivity. This reasoning could be strengthened if the conditions of the museum were explicitly contrasted with another context (such as the theatre).

Within the next chapter, the institutional context of the museum is left behind through a thorough investigation of *Self Unfinished* (1998) by Xavier Le Roy—a dance performance created for the proscenium arch stage. Here the pursuit of revealing intersubjective relations is circumnavigated to undercover how an artwork might “drop the notion of the subject” and achieve “dynamics of change” (87). The close reading of Le Roy is focused

upon the transformation of his body through confounding movement that, as Wynne Jones suggests, allows him to subvert the power imbalances associated with being a cisgender, white, male artist and ultimately "undermine his own *individuation"* (31).
Continuing her examination of subject formation within performance art, Chapter Four suggests that choreography is a speculative utopian project that can intersect with post-anthropocentrism and the post-human subject. Having dedicated a portion of Chapter One to sketching out a definition of choreography, the most useful summary of its application in the book is choreography as expanded practice. This definition, together with Lepecki's notion of the choreo-politics, supports the author's reading of the performance art case studies through the lens of choreography and subsequently adopting the term as "a useful metaphor for subject-formation" (25). Once this framework is established, she asks questions such as: how one might maintain or reclaim one's singularity through choreography? (121) And what is the relation between an individual and the sense of collectivity forged within intersubjective choreographies? (131) Adopting Gilbert Simondon's notion of the *transindividual*, Wynne-Jones writes that*:*

> both psychic and collective individuation are problematized by affectivity, a relational layer that constitutes the centre of individuality, a tension or "liaison between the relation of the individual to itself and its relation to the world'' (114).

This ideology is partnered with Felix Guattari's emphasis on singularity and the cultivation of dissensus within the mechanisms that produce subjectivity, thus challenging the oppositional structures of subject/object, self/other, and subjectivity/intersubjectivity (125). This establishes a framework for Wynne Jones to argue that through processes such as replacing human bodies with animals or subverting the habitual intersubjective processes of facial recognition and identification, "the boundaries between subjects, artworks and the location or environment of the art museum recalls some of the more complex arguments from cognitive science about the relationship between intersubjectivity and environment" (119). The author demonstrates this thinking via Tino Seghal's *These Associations,* arguing that the work challenged habitual notions of intersubjectivity because of how the performers moved collectively like swarming insects. The concept of the swarm is further interrogated through *Defending Plural Experiences* by Alicia Frankovich, arguing that the work "activates tensions between the inhuman and the post-human" (12). From this moment, the author's project shifts gears from discussing Western narratives of individualism, replacing them with post-Cartesian, ecological notions of a subjectivity predicated on mass collectivism. Wynne-Jones thus asserts that choreographic artworks can realise novel forms of intersubjective encounters that might undermine authority and "challenge the very theoretical foundations of such institutions" (128).

Arguably, Wynne Jones' most innovative contribution to the field of relational art is her application of intersubjectivity as a framework that can be applied to what she dubs *networked choreography*. In Chapter Five, the author provides an in-depth examination of the work of video artist Rebecca Ann Hobbs to articulate how "new technologies can

both mediate and communicate the relationship between 'here' and 'elsewhere' in the context of the internet" (33). Continuing with this line of enquiry, she suggests that choreographies developed within the post-internet environment, and built for platforms such as TikTok, can offer possibilities to readily connect with others and permit intersubjective relations all over the globe. The accessibility and ease with which the internet can be harnessed to connect with other communities and build online movement archives is a distinguishing feature of creating performance within a networked society and is illustrated astutely through the case study of *Otara at Night* by Hobbs. The contemporary subject is posited as one shaped by networked technology, where the performers or dancers are reimagined as virtual cyborg-subjects that create networked choreographies capable of complex and intertextual forms of emancipation and experimentation (152).

Wynne Jones further distinguishes her thesis through a nuanced close reading of the work of First Nations artists from the Pacific region, placing them in conversation with prominent artists from the global north. Wynne Jones advocates for these unique voices and the artists' deliberate locating of performative bodies within the museum as a means to create intersubjective encounters that undermine authority and interrogate the institutional structures of both the museum and colonialism (20). She explains:

> As Pasefika artists, they represent those previously categorised by the museum and its binary logic as sexualised and racialised others. Exceeding the disciplinary structures so omnipresent in contemporary exhibition spaces, these counter-hegemonic choreographies present their own particular permutations of relations. They evade authority, challenge subjection and enact dissensus, encouraging criticality and enabling novel or more equitable intersubjective relations. (35)

By drawing on Indigenous Pacific concepts, knowledges and experiences, Wynne-Jones inserts that some bodies can illicit institutional critique by creating counter-hegemonic choreographies or "inflecting the choreo-political so that it can be decolonising" (206).

Looking at performance art through the lens of intersubjectivity, *Choreographing Intersubjectivity in Performance Art* explores the potential for artists to explore and represent multiplicities, diversity, and contradictory subjectivities within their work. The breadth of works referenced includes participatory art, installation practice, performance art, video works and dance performances, in a somewhat homogenising approach. Each of these case studies is identified for its use of choreography as a tool to create a novel intersubjective relational structure. The project, however, foregoes a thorough investigation of the discipline of choreography instead prioritising art theory and philosophy. By advocating for the notion of choreography in the expanded field, the author can reveal novel approaches to the creation of intersubjectivity but is unable to lean on intersubjectivity as a hermeneutic theory that can give context to the choreographic turn. Despite this constraint, Wynne Jones' book is a timely contribution to the field and is one of the first within this burgeoning field to put the global south in conversation with the global north. Furthermore, the great success of the project lies in

the unique articulation of *networked choreographies* and the attentiveness of the reading of Pacific artists, together which construct a compelling argument for the political potentiality of the performing body.

Works Cited

Bishop, Claire. 2006. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." *Artforum* February: 178–183.

----------2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso Books

Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. S. Pleasance, F. Woods, and M. Copeland. Les presses du réel.

ZOE THEODORE *is an independent curator, creative producer and researcher living and working on Gadigal country, Australia. She is a current PhD Candidate at the University of New South Wales, researching the intersection between dance and the museum, and was the Project Coordinator of Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum (2020-2024). She was a Co-Director at Firstdraft from 2022-2024 and was a Co-Editor of Dissect Journal's third issue. Her writing has been published by Art+Australia, Monash University Publishing, National Gallery of Victoria Publishing, Runway Journal and unMagazine.*