

10000 gestures

Interview with Boris Charmatz
by Gilles Amalvi, September 27, 2016.

There is something “programmatic” about the title 10000 gestes, as well as a hint of “maximalism” which has haunted your work for some time. What are the stages of this process, from the idea of producing a “profusion of gestures” to giving it shape as a performance?

I recall that when I saw the version of *Levée des conflits* at MoMA, I experienced a sort of a flash. It was a “continuous” version which comprised the solos, then the whole piece, performed twice—in total, it lasted 4 or 5 hours. At that time, I was brainstorming the idea of a choreographic piece for 100 dancers—the present project, *10000 gestes*, finally led me elsewhere—and it may well be that a piece for 100 dancers will remain outside the realm of possibility... What spurred me at first was a reaction I often heard à propos de *Levée des conflits*, namely that it is a *repetitive* piece. For me, *Levée des conflits* has little to do with repetition, in the sense that every gesture is constantly undergoing transformation. What I was aiming for was rather *immobility*. In fact, one could say that gestures do repeat—there are only 25—but that was not the point that interested me, but rather the impression of immobility that it produced, like a kind of choreographic *sculpture*. How could one set in motion a group of dancers so that their gestures would, paradoxically, create an impression of immobility, rather than a dramaturgical evolution over time? How might one invent a static object while the dancers never stop moving, dancing, sweating?

It was this reaction to *Levée des conflits* that gave rise to the idea of *never repeating a single gesture*. This is really at the heart of *10000 gestes*: a piece free of repetition. Of course, from the start, it was a choreographically impossible idea simply because it would involve *too many gestures*. And then again, how does one define a “gesture”? Where does a gesture begin, where does it end? How can one verify that no gesture is identical to—or derived from—another gesture? Like *Levée des conflits*, *10000 gestes* stems from a pure idea, opening onto a larger series of questions and a choreographic investigation. Pieces such as *enfant* or *manger* originated in a much wider spectrum where multiple ideas—whether aesthetic or political—come into friction. By contrast, the principle behind *10000 gestes* is contained in its title. This is about nothing other than designing the choreography for 10000 gestes.

This project is effectively very choreographic insofar as from the very start it raises the question of the “limits of the gesture.” What allows you to define a choreographic gesture—not in the absolute terms, but within the scope of this specific piece?

I think that we will confront this question, and reformulate it, throughout the rehearsals. It is then that we will need to determine which gestures to choose, which to eliminate, how to compose them, at what speed. How much time does a gesture need in order to be registered? In *Levée des conflits*, there are 25 gestures, but after all one could say that there is but a single gesture—or rather a single phrase—broken up into 25 steps, as points of reference, but which do not represent entities separate from one another. It is not so much that each gesture, taken separately, matters, but the way in which each bounces off from the other, or how one gesture is hidden within the next one... In *10000 gestes*, the big question will be to figure out how to go from one gesture to the next. The more gestures there are, the more precise they need to be, the more clearly separated from one another, the clearer their contours, their boundaries. When there are just three gestures, they get repeated pretty quickly. But when there are 10,000? You can no longer see them, or read them. Suddenly, the bulk of your task—besides producing the gestures—will be to delimit them, to isolate them; to work out how to set them against one another—simply in order to make them visible! Otherwise, it’s just a blur, a mass of movements...

Where does the number 10.000 come from? Is it a bit like 1001 in 1001 Nights, an image of the infinite, a number that tends towards infinity?

For me, it’s a question of an actual number obtained through calculation. There will be 25 dancers. If we decide there will be 10,000 gestures, this means that each dancer will make 400 gestures. In fact, I feel that 400 gestures is a minimum. If you make about a gesture per second, the performance would be only 400 seconds long, since we all dance together. A gesture per second seems very fast—perhaps too fast for each gesture to register. And it is possible that not all gestures register systematically at the same speed; that some are quicker and others slower. On the whole, however, I would like to have the gestures executed rather rapidly. I envision—rain, an uninterrupted torrent of gestures. I have just completed *danse de nuit*, a piece in which speed is also an important parameter that brings the different elements together.

In addition, I did a workshop around *10000 gestes*: I asked the dancers to choose 20 gestures each and interpret them. They worked in pairs, so as to verify there are no overlapping gestures. During our first attempts, I didn’t see the desired effect of profusion emerge: I just saw dancers moving about. So I asked them to accelerate, to reduce the whole from 4 minutes to 20 seconds. As the speed increased, something came to light: I found myself confronted with a gushing of gestures, a multitude of events succeeding one another so rapidly that my eye was no longer able to follow: it was ensnared, disoriented,

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attempting to distinguish the gestures and sequences; but then, all of a sudden, the gestures I was able to discern became all the more distinct. Perhaps I managed to perceive *less* than when the performers danced slowly, but the effect, the impact they produced, was much more powerful. It magnified the electric stimuli received by my eye. But this also means that, had I not been focused and attentive, I might have just as well *missed the whole thing*; I might have been simply confronted with an indistinct mass. It seems to me this is one of the keys to this piece: to produce, through a riot and a rapidity of gestures, an extreme concentration of the gaze. This is what makes this project *concrete*. But this is also what makes it difficult, what calls for precision.

Do you plan to borrow certain gestures from existing choreographers, recognizable gestures belonging to the history of dance—as a sort of a collection?

No, the idea is to really *create* those 10.000 gestures. I am not at all in a referential mode. Unless one considers that every choreographic gesture is already a citation. Gestures always come from somewhere else. But I don't intend to assemble a collection of historical gestures, as Tino Sehgal did in (*untitled*) (2000). The approach here is closer to that in *danse de nuit*, a piece in which we worked on the act of saying whatever comes to our mind and moving in whatever way. Unlike *danse de nuit*, however, where the vocabulary is more or less the same for all the performers, in *10000 gestes*, it is absolutely unique.

The creation of 10000 gestes raises the question of the method of composition. How does one go about inventing so many gestures? Will you define any criteria by which to distinguish them, build a sort of "database"?

From the moment I came up with this idea, I have been wondering how to generate these gestures... And then: how to verify that there is no overlap? The first thing that comes to mind is starting with a series of parameters and creating a computer program to generate them very rapidly. For example, such parameters as amplitude, energy, complexity, virtuosity... I have thought about this again when reading David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*: you can feel this is a novel written in the age of data, of inexhaustible availability of textual sources. And yet it's a book that is well-crafted using the resources of the human mind. The same is true for *10000 gestes*. The results obtained from a computer-generated gestural database would be much less interesting. But I love this very modern idea of "data," of accessibility, of an ocean of information being processed in an artisanal manner, on stage, in a dance studio, with our bodies and our memory.

I had an opportunity to test the idea of this piece during *expo zéro*. A visitor was seated in front of me, leaning back on his arms, and

asked me: "what is the very first gesture in this piece going to be?" He said it and angled towards me, his palms peeling off the floor. And I said to him: the very first gesture is precisely this one. Unfortunately, I did not jot down the name of this visitor, but I remember his gesture perfectly well, and this will definitely be the first one. This idea fits well with the kind of craftsmanship I have in mind. This gesture is a *given* in a way; it's a bit like Tim Etchells who collected gestures from the visitors during the first *expo zéro*. Many gestures will be provided by the dancers who will themselves generate the gestures they will perform. I already had this idea when preparing *Levéé des conflits*, but it didn't really work out then. I have a feeling that now it is possible.

As you have said, this is a programmatic piece that lends itself to imaginary projections: it's almost a "cosa mentale," a thing of the mind. How do you go from a conceptual exercise, from a mind-game to a real dance performance?

It seems to me that the two keys to unlock this project are not just ideas, but speed, on the one hand, and *gift* on the other: expenditure of energy and gift. I can sense a tinge of melancholy here. Every gesture would carry a loaded charge because it would be executed *only once*. This magnifies the ephemeral nature of dance, the fact that *it comes about*, and immediately thereafter, *it's gone*. One could say that we are dealing with a "positive" project, since it involves, above all, an enormous amount of production. But the contrary, the negative of that production, is expenditure, loss, the fact that each gesture occurs and will never return. In a sense, this is a memorial to disappearance. So, to return to the example of Tim Etchells asking the audience to *give a gesture*, the question that drives *10000 gestes* is: "what gesture would you want to give?" However, I do not at all understand the idea of the "gift" in a ... dramatic ... inspired ... sacralized sense. Gift giving is an elementary social operation. The process of production / giving / disappearance roughly defines the framework which I feel can turn this performance into more than just an idea. This is fundamentally also a way of acting, of *transforming* this fairly commonplace idea of dance as an ephemeral art—whether we understand it in a positive or negative sense.

Regarding danse de nuit, you have evoked the idea of making gestures to get rid of them, like in an exorcism. Here, you are replacing exorcism with gift in a way...

In *danse de nuit*, there is a text that was composed at high speed, *Charb est mort*, in which the lifespan of caricatures, of humor, and of meaning conveyed by cartoons is compared to that of movement. In a sense, the humor of a cartoon is even more ephemeral than a dance gesture. The cartoon does, certainly, endure, but everything around it, the context that

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charged it with meaning, is fleeting. *Danse de nuit* and *10000 gestes* are worlds apart, they are based on completely different principles, different affects. However, they share a penchant for speed and disappearance, which makes them resonate.

The creation of this piece is going to be a formidable "manufacture of gestures," with an almost ... industrial ... feel to it.

That's quite right. Except that in a factory, the "assembly line" process consists in manufacturing the *same* car 10.000 times over. We go back to the distinction between mass production and absolute singularity, automatic generation and artisanal fabrication. Unless we are talking about an industry of the future. The industrialization of singularity; customization, personalization of mass products, 3D printers... Here we touch on a cutting-edge field. One thing is certain: we will need to come up with a way of recording these gestures, of reprising them. How to unite absolute singularity and a form of conservation? For example, how to take into account potential replacements? In a group of dancers, you always need some backup in case a dancer is absent, or injured, etc. So the replacement needs to be taught the material of the dancer whom they are replacing. Here, the roles are very individualized. So I would like each dancer replacing to invent their own gestures, their own score, which would then be grafted onto the others. If someone is absent, then their gestures won't be performed. Afterwards, it may turn out that some gestures are indispensable and that they must be incorporated, regardless of who is performing them. But I like the idea of a part "made to measure" by the dancers themselves.

To pursue this line of thought, we have evoked the repertory of individual dancers, but how will the relationships between them work? Will they touch, or is every "gesture" isolated, only contiguous to others?

I rather imagine a relationship of permeability and friction. Among the possible gestures, some will involve another body. This is, to some extent, what I've done during the workshop: I asked the participants to include a portion of contact gestures in their individual part to see what sort of interactions—and what chance events—were possible. Let's picture, for example, hair-pulling, carrying or pushing another person. So, the dancer who finds him- or herself next to another dancer whose gesture, at instant T, is to push, will have his or her gesture blocked or complicated by the other's presence; this will produce uneven results within a scripted structure. Of course, such a piece cannot be improvised, because no gesture must be repeated. Initially, I was afraid that the principle of *10000 gestes* may lead to a somewhat solitary project, like *Levéé des conflits*, where every dancer is isolated from the others. But then I realized that a lot

of gestures could involve contact with another dancer; however, only on condition that the two dancers are not executing the same gesture—which de facto excludes any symmetrical gestures, such as shaking hands. Asymmetrical gestures, by contrast, may be conducive to grafting, interlocking: within a nested structure, each dancer follows the course and development of their own action. This leads to the question of the composition of the whole: will only individual parts be scripted—the gestures and their unfolding—leaving much to chance in terms of encounters between each of these 25 ongoing sequences? Or should *everything* be scripted? I imagine an extreme case in which the 25 dancers would all try to catch one another: this seems to me impossible to choreograph. So I am leaning towards the first hypothesis: scripting the sequences of individual dancers, and leaving the encounters between them to chance. I look forward to seeing how chance generates collisions between meteors...

You have brought up the issue of recording, which brings us to the question of memory: how will the performers memorize such a quantity of gestures?

Indeed, this is a true memory project. This is true for both the choreographer, who will never be able to recall all these gestures but must find a way of "taking care" of them, and for the dancers who must successfully memorize a series of 400 gestures, at the minimum... This is not impossible, but it does call for very technically oriented dancers.

We could imagine a very fussy visitor, counting each and every gesture to make sure they add up...

Then they would need to be a real team! On one's own, that's impossible. However, he or she could verify that no gesture is repeated... Obviously, this is all very subjective... what does *the same* gesture even mean? What differentiates one gesture from another? One of the conceptual concerns of this piece is that if we push it too far, the piece will become practically unfeasible... It suffices that we take "placing a foot on the stage" as a complete gesture. So then all of a sudden no one can set their foot down. Or walk. Or lift an arm. We must necessarily get around this obstacle, this formal flaw in the concept. It must be possible to move around. To walk. To run *in order to make* a gesture. Dancers will crisscross the stage, and we must accept that this activity is excluded from the repertory of gestures. If I wave my arm while walking, the gesture is the wave of my arm. There must be some flexibility, or else the project becomes impossible even before it began...

Most of your choreographic projects resonate with those undertaken by Musée de la danse. The two often intersect. Knowing that the project of Musée de la danse. is slowly drawing to a

close, are we to consider 10000 gestes as a sort of dissipation of Musée de la danse.? A bit as if one were to open up the Louvre and put all the works of art outside...?

I believe there are two facets to *10000 gestes*: this project is at the same time closely intertwined with *Musée de la danse* –like *Levée des conflits* which, to start with, was intended as a sculpture. *10000 gestes* is about a collection–albeit impossible, but a collection nevertheless. It is the Louvre, but without the historical aspect: an immediate Louvre. At the same time, this is indeed dissipation, disappearance, an anti-museum. *danse de nuit* resonates with *Fous de danse*: with the question of public space, the idea of leaving the stage, of occupying another territory. Perhaps *10000 gestes* picks up on the question of what happens *after Musée de la danse*. What happens to the gestures, to the ideas that the Museum had stirred?

danse de nuit tied in with manger by carrying on the question of orality, of interlinkages between movement, song, and speech. Is 10000 gestes going to take a similar path, or do you feel you have exhausted it in some sense?

In *10000 gestes*, I would like to concentrate on movement, explore the possibility of everything happening in silence–without voices, without additional sounds. If on top of everything we started to sing, or if we added a unique soundscape, the same for everyone ... I feel that we would lose something of this presentation of singularities. I see it as a human architecture, without any décor, without sound, which generates its own form, its own noise. However, like in *danse de nuit*, I am interested in the issue of costumes. I imagine we could have a heterogeneous wardrobe of some hundred pieces, and no two outfits would be alike. Each dancer could have some four pieces of clothing or accessories at their disposal. In the end, perhaps this is a performance for 25 dancers, 10 000 gestures, and 300 items of clothing..