**And the Choreography Bent Softly, Desirously**

Bojana Cvejić

*Rain* (2001) marks the high midpoint in the curve of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s career as a choreographer—in tandem with *Drumming* (1998), whose choreographic quest it furthers. Highly praised by critics, audiences, and several generations of dancers who performed it as part of the Rosas company or Paris Opera productions, this piece of dance offers a rich output of choreographic principles and techniques, forming the baseline apparatus of every work De Keersmaeker has created since. Its process of creation was relatively short compared to many other works by Rosas, whose germination has often taken more than a year. This could be accounted for by a sudden outburst of the experience which that the choreographer had accumulated over many choreographic engagements with classical and contemporary music throughout the 1990s––as in *Achterland* (1990, with the music of György Ligeti and Eugène Ysaÿe), *Erts* (1992, which includes Ludwig Van Beethoven’s “Op.133 Grosse Fuge” and the music of Anton Webern, Alfred Schnittke, and Luciano Berio), *Kinok* (1994, with the music of Thierry De Mey and Béla Bartók), and *Drumming* (set to the eponymous work of Steve Reich),to mention only a few.

In *Rain*, De Keersmaeker returns to the music of Steve Reich once again, with which her oeuvre began, and sets to choreography his *Music for 18 Musicians* (1978). Whereas in *Fase* (1982) she derived choreographic principles from the early phase of Reich’s music––such as the implications that more straightforward processes of repetition, variation, and gradual phase shifting could have when translated into dance––with *Rain* (and previously *Drumming*), her own choreographic writing evolved in parallel to Reich’s. The composer notes: “The artists I admire are the ones that move on. There’s no point in simply rehashing those same principles in another orchestration. Would you really have wanted me to sit there cranking out just one perfect phase piece after another?”1 Likewise, De Keersmaeker’s *écriture* will proceed to change and mature, and she is ready to embark on a one-hour long musical composition with ten dancers. In *Music for 18 Musicians* Reich admits the combination of harmonic and melodic development together with string instruments and clarinets for the first time, which suffuses the repetitive texture with breath and sensual orchestral timbres. De Keersmaeker shows that she is prepared for a multifaceted challenge. It concerns the economy of expression and functional coherence of late minimalism: how to press out a maximum of variation––structural, dramaturgical, kinaesthetic––from a minimum of initial material. *Rain* also addresses the relationship between music and dance, which, in times when contemporary music is losing a devoted partner in dance, has proven to be a serious commitment in De Keersmaeker’s oeuvre. She investigates to what extent choreography must rely on the structural support of music, and where it can part with it in order to take a path of its own toward an exploration of specifically choreographic procedures. In that respect, counterpoint in *Rain* is the most developed among all Rosas works, and it succeeds at emulating Reich’s textures on its own account.

*Rain* is a work of putatively “pure” dance, where the spectators’ experience rests on sensations produced by the means of formal composition of dancing movement alone. In that sense, it relates back to *Fase*, De Keersmaeker’s first choreography, which unraveled her interest in, and capacity for, rigorous formal composition. But unlike *Fase*, *Rain* is linked with a precedent work as its theatrical antipode: *In Real Time* (2000). In that large-scale performance, De Keersmaeker, in collaboration with the actors of the Belgian theater company tg STAN and musicians of the ethno-jazz band AKA Moon, experimented with a hybrid form of dancing and acting with a variety of spoken texts, live music, and film projections––heterogeneous expressions in which only some of the dance material for *Rain* would be born. *In Real Time* ends with a sentence written by the Dutch theater maker and writer Gerardjan Rijnders: “I hope it’s not going to rain tomorrow.”—and the title of this performance is *“Rain*.” One of the materials in the creation of this large-scale work of theater, dance and jazz music was *Rain* (1994),a novel by an author from New Zealand, Kirsty Gunn, which the dancer Ursula Robb brought with her. The text describes life-saving techniques from the perspective of a young woman who is trying to reanimate her younger brother who drowns in a lake. De Keersmaeker told me in an interview:

What attracted me to the text is a subtle metamorphosis of an objective medical description into an intensive emotional realization that life is lost, and that there is no way of bringing the dear person back to life. The accident of drowning endows water with the notions of flow, danger, and melancholy as a response to a feeling of loss. Mentioning “rain” in the title was keeping the trace of a loss and acceptance of the impossibility of revival. It’s a metaphor for contrary feelings of vitality and melancholy.2

The motion of waves, coming and going, appearing and fading out with the breath, is present in Reich’s music as well. One element comprises a dynamic pulsation of chords, like heartbeat and breath, which drives the music forward like a vital force. The other element consists of long, sustained notes by woodwinds, which last as long as the musician can sustain the breath. The sound emanates, grows, and fades away, which resonated with De Keersmaeker’s thoughts and sentiments inspired by Gunn’s *Rain*. But leaving words and theatrical acting behind, the choreographer trusts the dramaturgical potential of Reich’s music aloneor, better, her own compositional tools—to shape the dramaturgical arch that is congruent with the development of the sensorial experience of the viewers’ listening to the music through bodily movement.

In *Rain*, choreography encompasses integral composition, which, similar to the logic of integral serialism in the music of Webern or Stockhausen, extends structure to all parameters: vocabulary, syntax, counterpoint, spatial organization, and time, as well as set design, lighting, and costumes. The aesthetic principle here is a structure based on a core dance material unfolding in a gradual, continuous process. The monothematic nucleus consists of two complementary phrases that endow the entire construction with the geometrical principle of a spiral. In other words, apart from reasserting the compositional model of the basic phrase as the integral source of dance vocabulary, De Keersmaeker designs the phrase according to the spatial structure of the whole, a circle intersecting with two symmetrical rectangles in which spirals of smaller rectangles are inscribed. In addition to the choreographic structure, colors and textures evolve in a process divided according to the golden section, from the color of flesh to pink, marking the climax at the center of the golden section with intensive magenta lights, after which the colors wither into an autumnal shade of gray.

The choreographic treatment of the basic phrase material systematically exhausts a range of contrapuntal techniques. The basic phrases, extensively long, exist in the going and retrograde versions, which all the dancers deliver at different times in juxtaposition, superimposition, or alternation. From a spatial perspective, the phrase is mirrored along various access points of intersecting geometric trajectories, in reflective symmetries staged left to right, up-stage to down-stage, or in diagonal. From the viewpoint of time, the phrases also come in canons, delayed entries of dancers by which the dance texture of exposing the phrase progressively builds up and condenses, or dismantles itself in successive reduction. Perpetual repetition of the parts of the two phrases can be furthered in phase shifting, whereby one dancer accelerates in a process of falling out, then returns to unison with another dancer. Looping can also be combined with accumulation, a progressive growth of the sequence of movements, which are being “scratched” forward and backward, as if the choreographic machine starts hesitating and stuttering, halting the advancement of its course. The most sophisticated procedure, called “stacking,” entails a three-part counterpoint whereby the same phrase is borne by a piling up of movement after movement by three dancers in three stages of speed, using both “going” and “retrograde” versions. This brief summary of the main choreographic procedures testifies to a kaleidoscope of shuffling configurations, which is how the spectators’ kinesthetic experience could be described. The skeletal structure of kaleidoscopic transformations is traced in the dense traffic of colorful strips intersecting on a circle. Eventually, the highly disciplined procedures of choreography are bent by a dancing quality of softness that releases a *jouissance* of a performance that desires its spectators.

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When he was advocating “libidinal philosophy” in 1974, Jean-François Lyotard speculated on the power of a free circulation of energy to spill beyond the limits of capitalism, accelerating capitalist overproduction to the point of burning it out through sheer excess. His perspective could be paraphrased like so: in the age of the rising libido, being right is not important; laughing and dancing are what matter.3 While Lyotard’s celebration of profusion and waste could be afforded by the economic affluence of the 1970s, and would nowadays be contrasted with the politics of austerity, the performances of *Rain* today revive vitalist, machinic, and libidinal thought. By suggesting that dance can be a form of conducting intensities, hidden within a choreographic structure and then released from it once this structure is, like a machine, set into accelerating motion, this dance reclaims the importance of the living, through both its machinic and its organic characteristics. Unlike a rational technical mechanism, the “desiring machine,” as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would have it,4 is here a principle of a perpetual and differential productivity that makes movement divorce from individual subjected bodies and circulate on a plane of functional and self-referential singular intensities, in a flow that cuts and reestablishes itself over and over again.

The organic aspect combines the social and the physical planes of dancing, unraveling a fireworks of traffic in between the bodies. While dancers follow their vigorous paths in the various forms of choreographic counterpoint, their seemingly accidental encounters on the intersecting lines are amplified. This is where the dancers deterritorialize the choreographic structure inscribed in the meticulous geometric design. They skip and vault over, jump, bounce, and slide through one another’s bodies, freeze as if pieces of furniture, and lift and move one another about in the space. They also exchange movement, double or shadow each other, as if the movement doesn’t belong to them individually, but is instead generated in a sum effect, through a collective effort. What would be an instance of classical partnering in duet form turns into multiple assemblages of two bodies that mount and dismantle, always with difference, varying in terms of how, by means of what movement, what body part, and what quality, these bodies meet, touch, and incite movement out of one another.

Comparing De Keersmaeker’s attitude toward dancers with that of other minimalist choreographers, such as Lucinda Childs, for example, repetition and difference are not just a matter of a precise and complicated calculus that dancers execute as instruments; the dancers are not mere figures that remain untouched in their virtuosity. In order to run this machine as one that produces a temporal process rather than a serial object, not only do they have to master the memory of intricate variations, but they also need to allow themselves to be affected by the movement: their sweaty joyfulness must feed back into the fuel required for their dancing. Manifesting enjoyment here is nothing like the narcissistic shtick of a dance virtuoso. It is a collective endeavor of dancing together, which, like Reich’s musicians, who need to rely on one another in order to build and vary processes or determine their length, is “unconditioning” (De Keersmaeker’s term). At any moment, standing or sitting on the edges of the choreography’s written-out territory, they might join. And this makes the audience also retune their attention, as if everybody is a responsible witness to the desiring production of this choreography.

**Notes**

1. Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94.

2. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejić. *Drumming and Rain: A Choreographer’s Score* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2016), 110.

3. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Philosophy*, trans. I. Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 41.

4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 36.