

failure is an option

Essay by Hamza Walker

The history of modernist figure sculpture usually begins exclusively with Auguste Rodin but in fact the stage could be shared with his contemporary Eadweard Muybridge. Needless to say, their respective practices give them different perspectives on the human figure. Whereas Rodin inherited a classical sculptural paradigm of imparting life to inert materials, Muybridge exploited what would become one of photography's definitive traits, namely the ability to stop time in motion. Insofar as the achievements of both these canonical figures inform a modern sensibility, any subsequent nobility accorded the human form would also encompass movement. More than an appreciation of the body as a form in itself would be the ability to appreciate the body in motion, the body as a dynamic form that is also generative of form.

whenever on on on nohow on | *airdrawing* is a five screen video installation and related photographs and drawings by Berlin-based sculptor Peter Welz (b. 1972) that features world-renowned choreographer William Forsythe (b. 1949). Forsythe's performance lasts five and a half minutes. This is screened twice, once in real time and then at half speed for a total running time of roughly 17 minutes. The title, *whenever on on on nohow on* is derived from the signature phraseology of *Worstward Ho* (1981), a late prose work by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989).

Despite his commanding use of video, Welz describes himself as a figure sculptor, with video being the means to further fundamental investigations of the human form. First and foremost, *whenever on on on nohow on* is sculpture in the expanded field in its engagement with space and the body at a phenomenological level. At a scale of 10' x 13' the screens function architecturally, immersing viewers in Forsythe's performance, forcing them to move around and make sense of the work in a participatory manner. Dramatic to the point of disorientation, the set-up for *whenever on on on nohow on*, is actually very simple. Each of the five screens shows a different camera angle of Forsythe's movements. Three of the cameras are trained on Forsythe, with views from the front, side and above. The remaining two cameras are attached to Forsythe's hands. One camera faces out and the other faces in toward Forsythe's body. The views offered by these last two cameras are visceral, eroding the boundary between passive viewer and active performer. They provide a first person point of view, a way of understanding Forsythe's movements from the perspective of his body as it is able to survey its own movements from within arms reach, as well as survey the body's place and orientation in the space extending out from it. One is not only watching Forsythe's movements, but in trying to

understand and/or appreciate them one's body is being implicated. It is on these grounds that Welz is unquestionably a sculptor.

Weaving Rodin and Muybridge into an art historical helix whose DNA serves as the blueprint for sculptural practices reliant upon photography and its grandchild, video, casts *whenever on on on nohow on* as a traditional work in no uncertain terms. Now a staple of contemporary art practice, the use of multiplechannel video is no immunity from this claim. As a collaboration between Welz and Forsythe, and inspired by a mutual fondness for Beckett, *whenever on on on nohow on* is an interdisciplinary work that can be read through the lens of sculpture, dance or literature. Given this description, *whenever on on on nohow on* could be a poster child for postmodernism, making its legibility as a classically modernist work surprising. Whereas its fragmentation over five screens corresponds to a postmodernist call for the radical dispersal of the viewer's subjectivity, this turns out to be nothing other than the net effect of the Russian avant-garde's call for revolutionizing perception. The array of camera positions is *whenever on on on nohow on*'s most conspicuous feature, and the dizzying motion produced by the cameras attached to Forsythe's hands captures points of view belonging exclusively to the camera.

As Rodchenko would have it, we are allowed to see in new ways, not the way we normally observe things, but the way the camera sees. The technologically liberated eye celebrated by Rodchenko at the beginning of the Twentieth Century is little more than a convention at the beginning of the Twenty-First. With no edits, let alone digital effects, *whenever on on on nohow on* qualifies as "new media" insofar as video has not been grandfathered out of the genre. As a work of video art, with its austere *mise-en-scene*, and a Forsythe dressed in utterly non-descript casual wear, *whenever on on on nohow on* is strictly old school. The piece is in fact anachronistic given its cozy relationship with work of the mid to late 1960s, when minimalism's repercussions for figuration blossomed into interdisciplinary practices, with a notable relationship to dance, in particular the Judson Dance Theater. Artists from that period resorted to film, video and performance as a means to reinstate the body on the terms under which it had been displaced by minimalism. Banished from rigorously selfreferential artwork, the figure, as the subject of art, returned not on metaphoric or illusionistic terms, but as the literal body of either the viewer implicated in the work, or more directly as that of the artist/performer. Whereas there had been collaboration and mutual respect between dance and the visual arts prior to the mid-60s, minimalism forced a shared stake in figuration as visual artists became performers and performances became part of the visual arts, with an attendant translation of these activities into film and video. *whenever on on on nohow on* is clearly indebted to the work of Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer and, last but not least, the sculptor Bruce Nauman.

Of *whenever on on on nohow on*'s five camera angles, the view of Forsythe placed on its side is a hat tip to Nauman's *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968), a one-hour, stifflegged walk Nauman performs in an empty studio for a video camera likewise placed on its side. For Nauman, the reductivist phenomenaology on which minimalism was predicated corresponded to a subject whose capacity for expression was restricted to an emptied tautological reasoning. Nauman videotaped *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*, along with roughly two dozen other seminal film and video works, in studio settings void of the tell tale signs of creativity. As a consistent *mise-enscene*, they represent the vacated premises of the imagination. All that remained was a body, one answering to Bruce, and a rationality determined through redundant physical gesture. Nauman repeated simple but often strenuous gestures sometimes for an hour in an assertion of what "it" the body, not "I" the self, could know of itself. Similar to the protagonist of Beckett's *Molloy*, Nauman's body becomes a closed circuit, speaking itself to itself, all in an empty mind. Little wonder he should feel a kinship with Beckett for whom the body, in its inevitable decrepitude, would spite a mind arrogant enough to dream of disembodied thought. Stamping his feet, walking in contorted positions, bouncing his body against the wall — Nauman's body, under the tenets of minimalism, became a purely self-referential medium, albeit with nothing to say to itself. Through his friendship with Meredith Monk, Nauman was fully aware of his work's relationship to dance to the extent that in a 1970 interview he said he thought of his film/video performances as "dance problems without being a dancer." In this respect, he was not thinking of his body as communicative, let alone of expressive, to anything outside of itself, in which case his performances are anything but dance.

Nauman arrived at his conclusion through the trajectory of modernist sculpture. Here was the body banished from yet understood through minimalist sculpture. The film/video performances are an extension of minimalist logic doubling as recourse to the body, marking the end of one discipline and the beginning of another. Tellingly, the word "dance" appears in the title of only one of the roughly two dozen film/video performance works he made between 1967 and 1969. *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1967-68) is an unavoidable flirtation with the discipline to which sculpture, after minimalism's success in dismantling metaphor, would have to cede the body as an expressive medium. In this sense, *whenever on on on nohow on* is not simply a collaboration between Welz and Forsythe, it marks a meeting between sculpture and dance on mutual ground that both disciplines arrived at by their own historical route and pace.

Forsythe approached Welz after seeing *'the fall'*, a video installation Welz had done with a group of dancers whom he videotaped individually performing the simple act of falling down. Historically speaking, the torch being passed from Nauman to Welz was little more than an

invitation upon which Forsythe rightfully made good. Having choreographed upwards of 70 ballets over the past three decades, Forsythe has been credited with a re-imagining of the art form. After beginning his career as a dancer with the Joffrey Ballet, New York, he later joined the Stuttgart Ballet, for whom he began choreographing in 1976. From 1984 to 2004 he served as Artistic Director of the Frankfurt Ballet, a company with which his name became synonymous. As four centuries of codified form, ballet is no doubt a language. Forsythe takes this language quite literally, not only as inherited transcription and notation, but also as a form of writing with the body—all of it. Shoulders, butt, elbows, skull and nose are just as capable of describing shape as hands, arms, legs and feet. But far more important than an innovative style of dance is Forsythe's understanding of ballet as a tradition of codifying movement that is ongoing rather than as a fixed set of specific movements. Less concerned with orthodoxy of movement, Forsythe is more concerned with extending the number and kinds of relationships between parts of the body when dancers assume specific positions, including those belonging to “classical” ballet. This would dissolve ballet’s traditional positions into what Forsythe refers to as the kinesphere, the total space surrounding the body in any position. Diagrammatically the kinesphere is an icosahedron, an irregularly faceted volume whose planes are described by various points of the body. Within the kinesphere, classical ballet positions are understood as geometries, which is indispensable to Forsythe’s choreographic language whose basic elements are points and lines.

For the past several years, Forsythe has been engaged in the creation of a digital archive of his work replete with line-drawn animated analysis. As a choreographic tool it furthers the centuries-old dream of a means to transmit knowledge about the most ephemeral of arts. In addition it has also facilitated Forsythe’s rigorous deconstruction of ballet so as to ground a critique of that art form in the understanding of a broader range of formalized movement. It was this interest in new media, that led him to contact Welz after seeing ‘the fall’. *whenever on on on nohow on* is a fluid sketch of Forsythe’s body thinking, writing and drawing in the formal vocabulary he has developed over the past thirty years. However transient, the movements are nonetheless very confident and expressive geometries, made of clearly articulated lines and planes that morph and flow one into the next, yet maintain a syntax. While there are signature elements and movements unmistakably belonging to Forsythe—the forearm, which is his trusty ruler in mapping lines extended to become planes; elbows to floor (dropping points); elbows to knees (collapsing points); use of shoulders, head, hips and butt betraying no fear of funk, etc. — these devices serve a sensibility for which dance is a self-reflexive language. It is not simply a question of how the body has spoken through the historical language of ballet. There is that for sure. But insofar as Forsythe’s movements constitute a writing, a language in which the body can perform

its thinking, part of that thinking is also a questioning. Forsythe's is a dancing that simultaneously asks itself what it is as it is, one movement seeming to question the next. As a mode of conversation, his movements extend their inevitable erasure through conditionals ("yet" "if" "but"), only to arrive at conclusions that are submitted to the same process of inquiry all over again. It could be Wittgenstein set to interpretive dance. There are, however, narrative passages in Forsythe's performance that betray Beckett as its inspiration in general, and *Worstward Ho* in particular.

Say a body. Where none. No mind.

Where none. That at least. A place.

Where none. For the body. To be in.

Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out.

No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still.

In the absence of music, the very cadence of these lines from *Worstward Ho*, not to mention their content, offers itself up as unabashed accompaniment to Forsythe's movements, which on occasion are clearly narrative. Forsythe's frequent kneeling and at times seeming inability to leave the floor are most likely direct references to the story, as is the moment when left and right hand survey one another. The stiff-armed body slaps toward the end of the performance are the body affirming itself to itself rather than to the mind. And finally, Forsythe's dramatic collapse at the end of the piece could not help but refer to the grandest of Beckett's themes, namely failure. Despite all that has been and will be written about Beckett, he remains utterly enigmatic and inexhaustible. Failure has never been so thoroughly and exquisitely wrought, in particular the failure of language, which in Beckett's hands becomes the failure of thought itself. His work maps a deep, dark hollow that subsumes literary criticism, Beckett's recourse to the body being the solipsistic mind's only escape. In this respect, dance, particularly a language such as Forsythe's, may offer an understanding of Beckett where literary criticism dead-ends. The idea of a conversation between dance and literature being mediated through sculpture is postmodern in a manner that Nauman's turn toward figuration and interdisciplinary thinking would most certainly allow. But sculpture's deference to other disciplines means accepting them at their pace of historical development.

However postmodern, Forsythe's dance, by virtue of being ballet, must contend with tradition. Although interdisciplinary, *whenever on on on nohow on* is not as inscribed within a legacy of postmodernism as it is within a teleological modernism, an historical epoch with a purpose and an end. As expressions of the period, modernity's cultural forms have evolved into a language

speaking to that era's triumphs and failures. On that note, Beckett is often referred to as the last modernist. Insofar as both Forsythe and Nauman are concerned with how the body might think and speak itself to itself, they have each produced adroit and stunning responses to Beckett. Nauman's film/video performances, however, present the body as anything but an expressive medium. According to Nauman, failure within the trajectory of modernist sculpture would be synonymous with creative impotence. This is hardly the case with *whenever on on on nohow on* which suggests the body is an inexhaustible source of complex form and expression as Welz's drawings make clear. This is not to say that *whenever on on on nohow on* is not about failure. It most certainly is. But unlike Nauman's, Forsythe's performance presents failure as a fixture of modernity that can be spoken of beautifully, which in Welz's case makes failure not simply an option, but a productive one.

Peter Welz

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in collaboration with **William Forsythe**

September 18 – October 30, 2005

Opening Reception: Sunday, September 18, 4:00-7:00pm

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