The missing history of (not)conceptual dance
by Jeroen Fabius

The term ‘conceptual dance’ first appeared in relation to new developments in Western European choreography in the middle of the 1990s. However, the application of the term remains contested and ambiguous. Is it used to describe something someone did not, for some reason, like? Does it refer to the ideas generally attributed to the conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s? Does it imply that there is a question regarding when something is conceptually a dance? Is there such thing as ‘conceptual’ dance; namely: a dance of ideas and not of bodies? Does the term refer to a gathering for which the exposure of bodies is required? Are concepts disembodied entities or is embodiment required for the consideration of thought and ideas? Clearly, this term raises important contradictions regarding the status of thought and ideas in dance and performance.

In this article I will trace some of the discussions circling around conceptual dance in order to ascertain whether we can speak of such a concept. The main threads I will follow include, first, the reception and discussion of ‘conceptual dance’. What is its status? Can it be located as a contested term, one that is proposed not by artists but rather by commentators who use it as a definition with negative implications? Although rejected by theorists it continues in informal conversational use—implying that something vital is being addressed. I will trace it by identifying it as a developing strand in Western European choreography in the 1990s. Secondly, I will offer an exploration of the historical affinities of the notion of conceptual dance with conceptual art, minimalism, and postmodern dance and performance art that emerged in the 1960s-70s. Third I will explore the relationship between dance and concepts via a discussion regarding how the choreographic works referred to by this term ‘conceptual dance’ proposed new methods for thinking about the embodiment of thought.

I

What if there is no conceptual dance? Let us call it something else

‘What if there is no conceptual dance?’ This is a quote from Mårten Spångberg’s blog spangbergianism (2010). Not conceptual was the title of a 2007 panel
discussion during which Jonathan Burrows interviewed Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy and Bojana Cvejić. Both statements seem to indicate that there is something we should not think about, but cannot help thinking about. During the panel Cvejić stated that the term ‘conceptual dance’ is a misnomer; a term that assumes similarity with the visual arts and transplants the word 'conceptual' onto the field of dance. In her view the term is used to polarise the field of dance by reinforcing oppositions between thinking and feeling, dance and not dance. And, that there is a great animosity towards the works that it is used to refer to, implying that the works abolish dance as a body practice and further that the works tend to deal with difficult theory, becoming altogether theoretical. Instead, she says, the works are highly performative and do not imply the withdrawal of the perceptual, rather proposing a conceptualisation of dance parameters. Like Spångberg’s statement ‘what if...’ Cvejić’s analysis seems to confirm rather than deny an existence of something indicated by the term ‘conceptual dance’. It is striking how the artists’ plea for not using the term has been heeded by theorists and critics. Ramsay Burt agrees with the artists’ rejection of the term, by saying that it suggests something primarily located in the mind (2009).
He goes on to say it would suggest a linear and mechanical execution of the ideas of the choreographer by dancers. Voices in the Belgian debate stress the ‘sociological fact’ of the term: when it is used then it acquires meaning. But there is no desire to embrace the term. Belgian dance critic Pieter ‘t Jonck (2005, p.51): ‘Therefore, I propose that from now on, just to be able to think clearly about what is at stake here, we stop using this label. (....) I would propose just to speak of “new dance and performance” as a rather neutral term (if at all possible of course)’. Similarly André Lepecki (2004, p.171) suggests that it is important that ‘the project remains nameless’. Thus, both artists and theorists have rejected the term, but the ambivalent rebuttal of the term invites some further investigation.

*What if there is no conceptual dance? Poking in the dark.*

Again, what if there is no conceptual dance, following the quote by Spångberg? Is there something else, was there something at all? The ambivalence in the statements so far do not shed sufficient light. By 1993 something seems to be happening. *The beginnings of a 'New Wave'* is the title of a contribution by Jean-Marc Adolphe in Ballett International magazine which he extends a year later, again in Ballett International. In particular he refers to Meg Stuart, Caterina Sagna and Vera Mantero, saying that their work does not depart from dance technique. Rather he sees in them a suspicion regarding the celebration of the forceful dynamics of the body so central in dance of the eighties in Europe. This generation is looking for ‘informality’ and the human dimension of the body. Their work reveals the qualities of the body. Time in these performances suggests the ‘simultaneity of thinking and physicality’. (1993, p.35) He does not use the words conceptual dance, but this connection of thinking and physicality may not be too far from it.

By 2001 Helmut Ploebst, an Austrian dance critic, published his book *No Wind No Word*. The book is dedicated and written with: Emio Greco PC, João Fiadeiro, Vera Mantero, Boris Charmatz, Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Raimund Hoghe, Maria La Ribot and Benoît Lachambre. It may be considered the first overview of this generation in Western European dance history. Ploebst contextualizes the work of these conceptual choreographers within the ‘society of the spectacle’, referring to the writing of Guy Debord. He sees these choreographers as self-conscious makers who comment on the mediatised
postmodern culture. Ploebst states (2001, p.265) that 'the (...) artists (...) launch political discourses: in the analysis, staging and contextual placement of the body, in the thematic location of their subject, in the texture of their work or in various co-operative methods, and even in economic strategies (...)' An example for this may be the document called Manifesto for a European Performance Policy in 2001. In this document many of the above-referenced artists wrote a plea for a performance policy that acknowledges the broad range of artistic expression, among which conceptual dance is listed together with all kinds of forms of dance, theatre and performance art. It asks for understanding and support for innovation, risk, hybridity, social inclusion, cultural diversity and states: 'we address issues of cultural difference. Our practices have proved to be an articulate platform from which to challenge the dominant post-colonial narratives and traditional representations of the "other"' (Manifesto for an European Performance Policy). Thus, one could say that according to Ploebst the artists practiced an overall 'cultural critique' and in overall reconsideration of ways of making dance (2001, p.265).
In her book *Am Rand der Körper* (2009) Susanne Foellmer speaks about the remarkable recurrence of a particular stylistic figure that has developed from the end of the 1990s, one that expresses something evanescent, undefined, and that she calls the ‘unfinished’ body, thus referencing the 1999 work of Xavier Le Roy, *Self Unfinished*. The plot is richer now, here is something indeed, which Foellmer prefers to call ‘contemporary dance’ rather than conceptual dance.¹

Still, the issue seems to deal more with the definition; what it could be called. Ploebst (2001, p.251) prefers to speak of 'Neue Choreographie'. This however has not been picked up, which means this generation is left to either be described with a misnomer or to remain nameless.

**What’s the problem with conceptual dance: Nottdance.**

There is some proof for the thesis Cvejič presents that there is polarisation around new developments since the nineties. Johannes Birringer, a German theorist based in Britain takes an explicit stance, writing as one of the critical voices in his article on the Nottingham Dance Festival Nottdance. He asks: ‘can we simply enjoy the bare human presence of performers?’ (2005, p.15) He describes his attention drifting from the stage to auditorium and seeing people leaving in a state of panic. He concludes that conceptual dance creates claustrophobia: ‘We go to see dance because we love movement and enjoy dancing ourselves as it is a vital part of our physical and sexual culture, and perhaps the oldest sense we have of feeling alive in our bodies.’ (2005, p.15)

Although he argues that there may have been good reasons for the strand of work to emerge, he firmly rejects the works themselves on strong normative grounds. Apparently it can get worse still: Una Bauer (2008) tells of a Dublin business man, the patron of the International Dance Festival in Ireland, who sued the festival in 2002 after seeing the work *Jérôme Bel* by Jérôme Bel. According to Pieter ‘t Jonck (2004) the term ‘conceptual dance’ came to be perceived as a hybrid, a rival definition of contemporary dance at odds with the more general practice of contemporary dance. He writes that these hybrid dances seem to have attained a degree of self-reflexivity which makes them ultimately uninteresting for a broader public. In conceptual dance all emotion and

¹ See also Huschka 2002. It is a movement, as Lepecki calls it, that achieves coherence in the early 2000s and that wanted to evade stylistic formation, but in fact produced exactly that: a stylistic figure of the unfinished, similar to that formulated by Foellmer.
pleasure has been replaced by dry intellectualism. The questions asked in these performances are better treated in a paper than on stage. After affirming these negative qualifications, however, 'T Jonck concludes his article more positively: 'through these new developments dance has become a means to think about the relation between the imaginary, the spectator and the performer in a way that is highly critical towards the common construction of images of man and his body or even of society.'(2005, p.50) As difficult and as hard to enjoy it may be, he writes, it is important precisely because it undermines a mode of gazing and phrasing that seems all too self-evident. Therefore, it may be possible to talk about a 'sociological fact' as Rudi Laermans (2004) has called it—in other words that there is a phenomenon of conceptual dance because the term itself is in use; there is ample description of works being addressed and there is a rich debate about the term. Thus it will be useful to explore the term 'conceptual dance' and its historical reference to conceptual art.
II

Conceptual dance and conceptual art: paradise lost/paradox found?

For the conference *It Takes Place When It Doesn’t. On Dance and Performance after 1989*, organised in Vienna in 2005, Bojana Cvejič proposed an inquiry into the historical parallels between developments in dance and conceptual art. Her goal was to determine what is involved in the use of the term ‘conceptual’. (Cvejič, Le Roy and Siegmund (2006)) She distinguishes four parallels in discussions of ‘conceptual’ art and dance.

First, there is a similarity between conceptual dance and conceptual art in the proposition that calls for a redefinition of what constitutes a proper medium of expression. In conceptual art, this is done through the use of what Cvejič calls the aesthetic of the speech act: when one says it is a work of art it is so. One can think of the artists Klein, Rauschenberg, Weiner, or the Fluxus affiliated artists. Conceptual art arose in the 1960s as a radical critique of both the art market and of institutional constraints on what was ‘allowed’ to be art, having to do with the monopoly of art dealers on the one hand and intellectuals on the other: those who were entitled to define what art was or was not supposed to be. One could say conceptual art operates as theory made manifest as practice; that it explores the limits of art, thus uncovering its possible meanings. The second similarity Cvejič points out is self-reflexivity. Like conceptual art, conceptual dance interrogates the proper characteristics of the discipline, the apparatus of the theatre, and the production of meaning in contemporary culture. Third, this self-reflexive focus results in makers actively addressing frames of perception. Fourth, conceptual dance shares with conceptual art an institutional critique. (See also Ploebst (2001); Kruschkova (2003); Lepecki, (2004))

Cvejič goes on to consider differences. Unlike conceptual art, conceptual dance does not represent a stylistic unity. Also, conceptual art was fundamentally utopian, striving for a transformation of the format of presentation in the art market. In contrast, conceptual dance participates within institutional distribution, and proposes a critique within rather than outside the system. Finally Cvejič posits that conceptual dance is not based on a withdrawal of the perceptual, rather, conceptual dance approaches writing it its own methods, which cannot be reduced to a theoretical text.

Here a paradox of conceptual art emerges which requires some further attention. Conceptual art is based on a provocation that art can be only an idea,
immature. Two issues in Cvejič’ argument thus prove productive for a further consideration of conceptual dance. First, however it is incorrect to describe conceptual art as a unified field as Cvejič does. Any account of conceptual art speaks to its enormous variety, as for example Buchloh (1990, p.105) says: ‘For to historicize Conceptual Art requires, first of all, a clarification of the wide range of often conflicting positions and the mutually exclusive types of investigation that were generated during this period’ (see also McElreavy (2002); Alberro (2004); Ward (1997)). The very notion of redefining a medium leads to a broad range of options and possibilities. Additionally, such work depends on the spectator to complete it; this itself precludes such work being able to define itself as a stylistic unity.

Second is an interesting investigation into the divergent disciplinary contexts of exploring conceptualism in the visual arts versus in dance. What distinguishes visual arts from dance is the production of objects rather than dance’s central notion of performativity. One of the perhaps sad conclusions about conceptual art is precisely that the artists did not succeed in overcoming the production of objects; it is a failed attempt to escape the object through producing art only as idea. In fact, conceptual art has become as commodified as any other genre in art history. Ironically conceptual art did not abolish the physical object. Rather, it introduced many new kinds of artefacts, often in order to provide documentation. These are ‘art objects’ that can be and are exposed and sold just as much as any other art works (McElreavy, 2002). If anything, conceptual art has resulted in a radical amplification in the range of objects that can be considered art. McElreavy therefore speaks about a paradise lost, the utopian world of art without objects, and a paradox found, the tensions found in exploring the limits of what art can be (2002).

Despite Cvejič’s dismissal of the term, she uses it herself (2006), it may be an expression of ambivalence that reaffirms the inherent power of ‘conceptual’ dance. The ambivalence toward the term is also nourished by similarities between postmodern dance, minimalism and conceptual dance. I will revisit some of the concerns of Yvonne Rainer for this purpose.

Postmodern dance, minimalism and conceptual art
As several authors (McElreavy (2002), Alberro (2004)) have made clear, conceptual art arose in the 1960s amidst discussions that critiqued modernist
notions of art. Some of the arguments and propositions of conceptual art making overlap with that of minimalist and performance art practices. Postmodern dance had a similarly active engagement with these fields; Sally Banes calls Yvonne Rainer’s work paradigmatic for postmodern dance (1987). Rainer’s work remains relevant for a discussion of conceptual dance in the 1990s, and not only because of the collective Orquator Knecht’s reconstructions of her work (in which Xavier Le Roy participated).

In her beautiful book *Being Watched* (2008), Lambert-Beatty shows why Rainer can be considered the godmother of engagement with reflexive considerations in the medium of dance. In Rainier’s text *A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies etc* (1999) she makes explicit how she was seeking transparency. Her application of minimalist ideas to the making of dance makes this evident. Rainer states (1999, p.35) that she wants to make ‘dance visible’ and is interested in ‘only empirically verifiable realities’. She strives for a ‘work’ mode, in which the ‘doing’, a neutral execution, is central. She strives for the human dimension, against the monumentality and virtuosity of the body of previous dance styles. She is looking for a performance without emphasis so that the spectator is free to determine what to look at. She wants to present performance without reference to other realities, to present only simple and ‘literal’ movements. The dancer’s body should be treated ‘like an object, picked up and carried, and that objects and bodies could be interchangeable’.

What postmodern dance, minimalism and conceptual art share is a great concern for the framing of perception and transparency. Attention to transparency in dance means a certain sense of redirecting of the intensity of affect, shifting from expressive projection to matter-of-factness. It implies a focus on the modality of perception and on the reduction of projection of a message, a feeling or an emotion by the dancing bodies. The focus on transparency introduces questions about visibility: how can something be made visible through moving bodies? How can transparency, permeability, clarity be created so that nothing stands in its way? How can disturbing factors be erased so that the attention is drawn to what makes seeing possible: the mediation of perception in the design of the dance and the perception of the spectator. It also means a problematizing of the idea of transparency itself, the suggestion of an immediate empiricism and purely objective perception. This is why Lambert-Beatty states that what Rainer was actually introducing was not so much the idea of pure empirical perception, but
rather the ‘seeing-difficulties’ of dance through operating upon various presentational modalities (2008).

This is exactly the point at which the discussions in conceptual art and conceptual dance diverge regarding the consideration of the status of ideas and thought. Where the utopian attempts to escape the object failed in conceptual art, conceptual dance can be considered a proposition to consider the performativity of embodied thought.

III

The conceptual in conceptual dance? Performing concepts

The conceptual exercise in conceptual art had a lot to do with an inquiry into the limits of what can be conceived of as art (see McElreavy, 2002). As stated above, in doing so it produced a whole new range of objects, rather than discarding objects and traces altogether. It is here that the consideration of concepts works differently within dance. I will briefly introduce dance theory that engages with these matters, describing how dance can be found to both compose and perform concepts.

First, I will refer to Una Bauer’s (2008) analysis of the work of Jérôme Bel as a staging of the movement of embodied thought. Leaving behind the idea that concepts must stand for questions of identity and instead considering what they do or how they work, the unsurpassable gap between language and matter can be bridged—and this is what Una Bauer proposes with her reading of Jérôme Bel’s Jérôme Bel (1995). On an empty stage, we see four naked performers. They write signs in chalk on the back wall, that indicate identities. Through the gradual development of these signs we begin to gather information: name, age, weight, date of birth, telephone number. Names are introduced that stand for general knowledge: Thomas Edison, when the light is brought into the room, Stravinsky, when one dancer starts singing the melody of the Rite of Spring. Bauer argues that the work proposes an open form, not statements, but questions, not about what the work is about, but about the construction of the events. The work can be seen as an invitation to consider the dialogue of thoughts and events caused by the physical actions. This she calls (2008, p.40) ‘the movement of embodied thought which refuses to fix itself in particular recognizable types of oppositional discourses, or oppositional response structures’.
The second ‘embodiment of thought’ I would like to introduce here is the notion of the body image as discussed by Lepecki regarding the work of Xavier Le Roy, in particular *Self Unfinished* (1999). Lepecki introduces the concept of body image in *Exhausting Dance* (2006). Le Roy’s work *Self Unfinished* shows a body in continuous transformation. Lepecki refers to Schilder’s 1964 definition of the body image as an extremely fluid and dynamic principle of organisation for the experience of the body (see Grosz (1994); Le Roy in Lepecki (2006), p.43). The body image is capable of embracing a broad range of objects and discourses. It is a function of psychology of the subject, the socio-historical context of the anatomy. Le Roy posits that every individual can be considered as an infinity of extensive parts (in Lepecki 2006, p. 44). Lepecki sees Le Roy’s work as an example of exhausting traditional modernist ideas regarding the subject. The experience of the body is always delayed, or anticipated, beyond physical boundaries (2006). The frequent use of stillness in conceptual dance allows the spectator a careful look at a performer who is actively looking back. The ‘look’ allows ample time to consider the personal qualities of the body of the performer, also the physiological processes that can be observed as result of the staging. Lepecki calls this effect a ‘vibratile microscopy’ that implicates both the performer’s and the spectator’s personal histories as object and subject in the world. It creates a zone of movement where there are no fixed meanings; he describes this as a representational reshuffling that calls for a multi-layered perception (2000).

**Conclusion**

I have engaged here with the debate around the term ‘conceptual dance’ commonly used to indicate new developments in dance in Western Europe in the 1990s and 2000s. The rejection of dance artists of the use of the term ‘conceptual art’ can be ascribed to a refusal to be identified as a group. The explicit project is to avoid being boxed into limiting perceptions of their work and to open up possible understandings of what dance can be. The rejection of the term by theorists and historians is somewhat more puzzling. The alternative terms are rather weak: ‘contemporary dance’ or ‘new choreography’. The choice of the term ‘contemporary’ for developments that happened over fifteen years ago becomes somewhat problematic. As Cvejič
has said, the term ‘conceptual dance’ leads a funny life: called a misnomer (2006), or a fuzzy concept (Laermans, 2004), it still is persistently present in conversational use, used by theorists in speaking rather than in writing. Both a conceptual and a historical analysis show many good reasons for productive use of the term however. There are many similarities between the artistic strategies of conceptual art seeking to avoid definition within visual arts in order to avoid the monopoly of the art market, and theorists trying to determine what art can be. While conceptual art failed to produce an art without artefacts (paradise lost), yet the artists contributed to an amazing increase in the range of artefacts that are now considered art: paradox found. Similarly, the exploration of concepts in dance led to the exploration of the embodiment of thought. And finally, ‘conceptual dance’ acknowledges some of the specific gestures made in the dance field that inspire one to think about the embodied production of thought, to explore the links between thinking and feeling, between cognition and perception. Precisely then, the correct nickname to express something infinite, i.e. ‘conceptual’, should have been attractive to theoretically informed makers from this particular field. But then again, the paradoxical framing of conceptual dance makes the avoidance of definition an important part of the conceptual framing game.

Bibliography


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