

THEATREWORKS

presents

# RETROSPECTIVE

BY XAVIER LE ROY

WITH

AARON KHEK | BERNICE LEE | CHAN SZE WEI | JEREH LEUNG | JOAVIEN NG  
KAI ENG | LOO ZIHAN | MAX CHEN | MELINDA LEE | MOHD FARED JAINAL  
NORISHAM OSMAN | SCARLET YU | WIING LIU

25 JULY – 2 AUGUST 2014 | 1 - 9PM [NO PERFORMANCE ON 28 JULY 2014]

72-13 | MOHAMED SULTAN ROAD

## DIALOGUE BETWEEN SCARLET YU AND XAVIER LE ROY

Each edition is created with local artists sharing their individual stories and experiences within what I call their "individual retrospective of my works through their life"



**SCARLET:** You have created and presented several editions of this exhibition in different cities such as Barcelona, Hamburg, Salvador de Bahia and Paris. What are the specificities of working and presenting *Retrospective* in Singapore?

**XAVIER:** Each edition is created with local artists sharing their individual stories and experiences within what I call their "individual retrospective of my works through their life", therefore that makes the work specific to each location it takes place in. That work is also very permeable and affected by the visitors and how they interact with the exhibition and the performers. So the work is and will be specific to that place: TheatreWorks, that city: Singapore, and the cultural, social and political aspects linked to it. Since a week that we work on individual rehearsals during extended dialogue with each performer, I see that the work will be about concerns and issues conditioned by certain Singaporean specificities. For example: the difficulties working as independent artist in that city, how the question of cohabitation of diverse cultures is embodied or not and often the subject of critical approaches,

questions about fusion, monoculture, poly-culture or multi-culture struggles to find an expression that nevertheless wants to be contemporary. What does it imply and what are the restrictions to make "contemporary" art in Singapore itself, in Singapore within Asia, within the world and the norms imposed by its global rules? It will also show how censorship condition and influence the art production.

You have experienced *Retrospective* as a visitor last summer in Hamburg and studied it from that point of view. Since a month ago, we've started preparing together for this exhibition, and, now it has been a week of rehearsing with the performers at TheatreWorks in Singapore. What are your impressions of the project from these 2 points of view?

**SCARLET:** In the process, I noticed that the notion of expectation surfaced. In certain circumstances, performers expect the author to provide them with something, on the other hand, performers come with the expectation from themselves to provide something for the author. However, in

this process, this mechanism is put into question because the project is working through dialogue where we look for places that we don't know, where nothing can be provided, in order to find something together. Similarly, when I entered the exhibition in Hamburg, my expectations have been swept away by the actions taking place in the space that induced a necessity for me to negotiate with. I don't feel displaced, because the space is very much an exhibition space. Although I expect the performers to perform, I can't look at it as I would usually watch a performance nor attend an exhibition. I felt that I was entering in dialogue with the situation, I am experienced by it as much as I am experiencing it. I don't feel pushed or obliged to participate in a pre-determined manner or to conclude my experience when I walk out of the door... it's not an imperative to disclose oneself but by entering in conversation indirectly with the other visitors and performers, I am disclosing something to them. I don't stay totally anonymous, as I would in a theatre attending a performance. Likewise, although the objective is not to disclose during rehearsals, in order to talk about ourselves as being constructed by circumstances, disclosing becomes necessary to go over generalities.

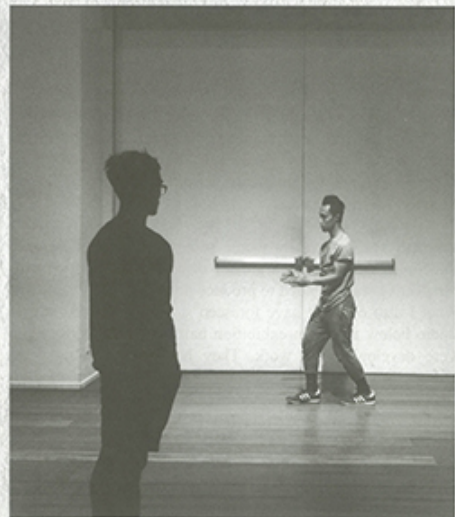






Photo Credit: Kiki-Wai Wai Leung

# GIVING TIME WITHOUT LOSING IT

– Interview with Xavier Le Roy by Bojana Cvelić

**BOJANA:** We are in between two productions of your exhibition *Retrospective*. The first was at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, and you are now preparing a new edition for Musée de la Danse in Rennes, France. Since Barcelona, have you thought about the project and whether it fulfilled your expectations? How you “rehearsed” it in your imagination versus how it was produced and then received?

**XAVIER:** Of the unexpected outcomes that arose in Barcelona, the most striking, for me, was how the work distributed visitors in the large exhibition space. The Tàpies became a village plaza reflecting a wide variety of group behaviours and different kinds of knowledge, trafficked and exchanged. Sometimes it could seem to be inhabited by a group of friends, or there could be two crowds back to back, facing opposite directions.

A particular, rather extreme experience was having kids take over the work. The Tàpies organised school visits in the morning hours, and one day I recall two classrooms of kids between four and six years old coming into the space. They started running in all directions and playing and screaming. They literally appropriated parts of the exhibition, imitating the actions of the performers so loudly that the performers had to stop and let the children do the work. I couldn't have foreseen all the choreographies of exchange that “*Retrospective*” produced—not only between the work and visitors, but also among the many parallel actions and situations going on in the space.

Another, perhaps simpler, unexpected product was the comment—which was new to me but came up over and over—that some visitors found it fascinating to see people dance so close to them. Dance movement is usually performed at a distance. I didn't realise the importance of that before.

**BOJANA:** Museum spaces display and bring things closer to the visitor than the theater stage.

**XAVIER:** Each performer was dancing their “retrospective” for the visitor. And many visitors referred to the situation of having something danced to them as an experience of intimacy.

**BOJANA:** It is both an exhibition and a theater performance. It demands some respectful distance around the exhibit, but is less intimidating than participatory theater. It doesn't want to absorb the visitor into a spectacle, but it does propose a dialogue. Perhaps a more precise term would be that it “gives attention” to the spectator.

**XAVIER:** The performers would sometimes come close and sometimes withdraw to a greater distance. The elasticity of perspective was intended to produce diverse kinds of address. What I also couldn't have foreseen is what happened in the studio below the main exhibition hall, when the performers were developing the work. They had conversations with visitors for hours, and to my surprise many visitors wanted to learn the dances. I also remember a conversation between a performer and a mathematician about the politics of curiosity.

In the other space, the so-called dark room, a number of human-like dummies clad in dark grey were lying on the floor, with and without puppet strings. There was something

uncanny about that room, and many people felt something like fear, or other strong emotions. The performers told me stunning stories of things happening in there, because visitors also really appropriated that space. They would stay there for a long time, lie down or kiss, and so on.

**BOJANA:** What we can also learn from *Retrospective* is that people are less intimidated than you might expect when a familiar apparatus, such as an exhibition, is dismantled. This encourages the construction of new apparatuses. The strongest impression that *Retrospective* made on me was of a performance-and-labour machine, triggered every time a visitor entered. An evident automatism that supported the choreography of social interactions.

**XAVIER:** This machine, as you call it, was more robust than I thought it would be. I had imagined a certain flow of visitors per hour based on the size of the space, and thus a corresponding choreographic system. So having many more people than expected was scary, because I feared the “machine” would collapse. But it didn't, for two reasons. One, the performers had appropriated the material in such a way that it strengthened and enhanced the system. And two, its rules were sufficiently simple so that visitors could appropriate the function of the machine and challenge the rules. For instance, some visitors would test the machine by exiting and reentering the space in order to check how it would react—if it would run again in the same way.

**BOJANA:** The choreographic machine restructured the space every time someone came in. And if no one new comes in, then the situation can evolve in many other different directions.

**XAVIER:** From my point of view there were parallel, discontinuous, and continuous elements operating at the same time within the structure. Something remained unaltered despite all interruptions, namely, the storytelling of the performers, in which they narrated parts of their lives using excerpts of my work that they chose from a subset that I had preselected.

**BOJANA:** For the 2010–2011 exhibition *Move: Choreographing You* at the Hayward Gallery in London, you made *Production in co-authorship with Mårten Spångberg*. To me, *Production* corresponds to a mechanism of social control, where the encounter between the performer and the visitor is open-ended and almost invisible, based on freedom and the expression of subjectivity within an “immaterial labour” kind of contract. Whereas *Retrospective* (in my view) yields a kind of disciplinary machine, a rational Cartesian mechanism that goes on and off. It sets rules of conduct for the performers, a transparent grid through which visitors move. And yet, because of this clarity, it allows modification—parallel actions under, through, or beside the machine.

**XAVIER:** I associate discipline with restriction. *Retrospective* elicited permission to appropriate, modify, or break the rules. But different rules were operating at the same time, and parallel forms of social interaction competed for space and attention. The performer in the role of what I call immobility—a kind of sculpture or image—wasn't supposed to answer if a visitor addressed him or her. Nevertheless some performers did speak when the situations called for it. Immobility was also what many children would imitate.

In the individual retrospectives, exchange with the visitors was included, so sometimes performers whose current roles didn't allow them to speak would two minutes later switch to the position of introducing themselves to the visitor. Because the performers were circulating through different roles, I believe this might have given visitors permission to do the same, to participate, even if their participation wasn't explicitly called for.

**BOJANA:** I always stayed long enough to experience the loop, and encounter the performers in different roles.

**XAVIER:** We observed more and more people spending a really long time in the exhibition, also coming back on multiple days, realising that at any one time they were only seeing a subset of the sixteen performers. Laurence Rassel, the Tàpies artistic director, anticipated this and offered the option of returning to *Retrospective* the next day using the same ticket. Somehow the system created an appetite to see more, to know the other stories.

The performers mentioned to me that the possibility of circulating in different activities made their work challenging and interesting. But with the growing number of visitors, it also became more tiring and difficult. They used the room downstairs not just to rehearse, but also to rest.

**BOJANA:** So multitasking prevented the work from becoming dull, but in the end it was still exhausting. Doesn't that actually mirror a real day in the life of a freelance dancer?

**XAVIER:** Yes, but with the difference of always having a public confrontation, which isn't always the case when one is rehearsing or developing something. The performers in *Retrospective* were deprived of the small, private, organic circle in which dance is usually created.

**BOJANA:** There was more a feeling of solidarity, though there could be competition between them in these activities.

**XAVIER:** Yes, exactly. They also told me that after five weeks they'd had enough; it had become too repetitive, which I totally understand. Despite the fact that *Retrospective* constantly renewed itself through encounters with visitors, it also ultimately involved repeating the same actions for two months. In anyone's work, really, there is a balance between sustaining an activity, perfecting it, and the corresponding addiction to moving on to the next, new thing, the lure of novelty in the market economy.

**BOJANA:** In asking them to make their own “retrospective”, you were following the procedure of your lecture-performance *Product of Circumstances* (1999), where you narrated your personal and professional biography with dancing and science and reflected, in theoretical terms, on these subject positions.

**XAVIER:** I asked the performers to construct a biographical narrative that was about their personal development as dancers, related to the context of their work, and so they were trying to approximate the context of their work—or their culture, city, and all kinds of other circumstances—and the context in which they encountered my work. One prevailing mode was the story of becoming a dancer. A peculiar and different direction came from someone who saw my work for the first time on video, and so proposed to describe and analyse the moment of that encounter.

**BOJANA:** The outcome was often anecdotal.

**XAVIER:** I thought of it as a way to touch on a subject in a way that isn't universal, but concerns many. Not every anecdote can be transformed into a matter of interest for others.

**BOJANA:** This produced a kind of idle talk, to use one of the characteristics of the multitude in Paolo Virno's conception. And that makes this parlance rather average. Which isn't necessarily bad but, rather, revealing.

**XAVIER:** It reveals the composition of one's life and work, and has value as such. Visitors could learn what made each performer an individual and what connects them: the practice



of dance and choreography, and that they all live in Barcelona. One could say that they produced their community through the work while representing it, as they weren't all connected before.

**BOJANA:** I am interested in the title *Retrospective*. It refers to the genre, but the work doesn't really fulfill the genre. I heard some informed visitors comment on how surprised they were to see you "let your work be done in such a way." They meant that *Retrospective* didn't have the function of representing your work.

**XAVIER:** Because *Retrospective* is a new work. But your question is more about how much my previous work formed the object of this new work. My solos comprise the material of the work, but they could not be distorted or transformed. So I really don't see it as a retrospective of my works. On the other hand, my work appears to be the object of the retrospective of each performer in some moments. And yes, I do recall remarks like, "Oh, it is not well done. It's really not good for the work."

**BOJANA:** But you didn't mind that.

**XAVIER:** It's a copy of my work, maybe sometimes a bad one, but the bad copy might be needed for the biographical narrative. Whereas it's more delicate how the material is handled in loops and immobilities, because these should give the opportunity for the visitor to re-experience the body-politics embedded in the original works.

But on second thought, what's more important is not how the material is performed in a loop, but that it is a loop. I substitute the loops for the videos and sound installations exhibited in museums. The same goes for the immobilities. I relate this mode of composition to image and sculpture in the scopie regime of the museum. Thirdly, narratives point to the role of the cinematic in video and film. The performative qualities that make visible and sensible the specificities of the loop, the immobility, and the narration are very important here.

**BOJANA:** Visual recognisability of your work is ablique, because some of your solos used as material in "Retrospective", like *Giselle* and *The Rite of Spring*, are based on appropriated rather than originally generated movements.

**XAVIER:** A vast majority of visitors won't recognise the material as coming from my works, which isn't problematic. The performed material should be able to stand on its own in this new situation. This guided my choice of excerpts from my work.

**BOJANA:** Many visitors came intentionally to see *Retrospective*, but for others the name Xavier Le Roy doesn't mean much. They came to visit the Fundació Antoni Tàpies. Le Roy as the author of this exhibition, and a choreographer and dancer himself, is not present for them, which makes "Xavier Le Roy" a fictive name operation.

**XAVIER:** It could be anybody.

**BOJANA:** Absolutely, which makes me return to the social dimension of *Retrospective*, which emphasises more what it does to the visitors and less what it does to the Western art-historical canon of privileging the object in a museum.

**XAVIER:** When I considered what would interest me about making an exhibition, objects weren't my concern. My focus is more on time-space relationships, or in other words, on exploring time and space in attention. The immobility, the narrative, and the loop should be regarded in terms of their respective relationships to time. Immobility represents something that is continuous and sustainable without transformation. The loop stands for something that is always there by means of repetition. And the narration is structured from a beginning to an end, where the end is not the beginning, because time develops.

**BOJANA:** Circular or cyclical time, linear time, and time out of joint, or the empty time of immobility.

**XAVIER:** Exactly. And on top of this, the visitor produces another time, thus creating a set of heterochronies. The general overarching loop of this choreographic machine isn't regular, but sometimes faster and other times slower. Sometimes, it's with three people, other times with four. There is a sense of repetition, but with so many possible

variations that it is another kind of temporality that is difficult to describe.

**BOJANA:** I'm wondering what *Retrospective* could do to theater. And what it will do to your work when you continue to make performances for the theater. If you are still going to do that?

**XAVIER:** Well, we'll see.

**BOJANA:** You don't know?

**XAVIER:** I know I want to do at least one more. The idea comes from thinking of the theater space as a situation with specific relationships to time and space. My experience of



time is conditioned by my very occupation. Working in the exhibition space showed me how to transform time into something that it is not necessarily cut into the usual slices. The slices that we experience in the theater are an hour or two in duration, which is very different from the time frame of an exhibition. This future work I am planning would expand upon this observation.

**BOJANA:** The way you stage your experiments reminds me of the notion of mimesis in the writings of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Renewing the tradition of the eighteenth-century *Theatrum mundi* and Diderot's Paradox of Acting, Lacoue-Labarthe emphasises the importance of theatricality as artificial staging. If we consider performance more in terms of artifice than here-and-now reality, more in terms of a distance, it basically means there is nothing essential about humanity that needs to be exposed and performance is not a direct or immediate way to do it. But performance conversely allows fictionalisations, masks, and differentiation. The theatricality of staging installs a civil distance between the spectators, the audience, and those who are exhibited. In one of your recent group choreographies, *low pieces* (2011), which stages a series of tableaux of bodies as animals, plants, stones, etcetera, I recognised this special function of mimesis. The piece was sometimes referred to, and dismissed as, imitative. But what it enunciates or enhances is a distance in the artificiality of the construction.

**XAVIER:** It's pointing to the fact that choreography is an artificial situation or action that is staged. But the question could be: How do we understand "artificial"? In opposition to the real? As being more direct? If we look at the situation of this conversation, its artificiality is in the setup. We put the camera in front, you are sitting here, I am there. We carry out a real talk in order to collect material to produce a text. In the exhibition *Retrospective*, socialites are produced out of artificially constructed situations in which we experience the real.

**BOJANA:** "Artificial" could also be understood in terms of performance—that I could become someone else for a moment. It is an experiment with otherness.

**XAVIER:** Perhaps the artificial is a necessary condition for any experimental situation, comparable to how one tries to understand something through science.

**BOJANA:** Yes, you isolate some factors from others, and so on. In his 1977 book *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett claims that theatricality provides us with civility. We are more civilised when we are not our true psychological selves. Emotional representation and claims of authenticity and originality started to reign in the nineteenth century in what he calls the intimate society, where warmth became our god and

feelings became more important than actions. Not what you did, but how you felt about it.

**XAVIER:** Gerhard Schulze discusses the shift from intimacy toward the "society of experience." I think that's what I see happening with *Retrospective*. It really produces experiences.

**BOJANA:** To what extent is the visitor actually responsible for these experiences? I felt that as a visitor, I had to work a lot to make my experience.

**XAVIER:** There was one visitor comment that was great. She said, "Ha, I cannot consume here? It's impossible." In other words, she cannot buy the experience; she has to do something. But you don't have to participate. You don't have to dance, or do what the performers are doing, or sing, or behave in a certain way. But from your action you produce your experience.

**BOJANA:** Does that mean that basically you are creating situations in which people have to give their time? You create different temporal zones, different apparatuses, and in order to interact with them, to at least receive them, one has to give one's time. I mean, people should stay at least an hour to "make" experiences.

**XAVIER:** Apparently many people ended up giving more time than they planned to. If they wanted to stay a minute, that was totally possible and agreeable for me. Some people stayed the whole day, and then came back another day. Time implies patience too, patience with not knowing what something will or can become. And I think that this type of uncertainty is also connected to the fear that exists in our society about production in general, which informs the time of production. One hardly invests without knowing what one invests for, what the end of it will be.



# Hear what our 13 collaborators have to say about t working with Xavier Le Roy in *Retrospective*



"Retrospective till now is an ongoing personal dialogue mainly as to negotiate if thoughts or movement comes first or the sound ... I am very curious, intrigued and excited and confused all at once."

— AARON KHEK



"Today, during the *Retrospective* rehearsal, I did a dance that is important to me, next to Mohamed Sultan Road, with cars zooming by. And I realised that my dreams have already come true."

— KAI ENG



"This collaboration has helped me sieve through my life, to see myself and our society through multiple lenses. It's been therapeutic and thoughtful; a challenging performance task. I really look forward to how we will produce a different experience each time someone new comes in."

— BERNICE LEE



"Through inhabiting the gestures of others one generates true compassion and understanding. The sharing of information and knowledge is the most enriching part of the process of creation."

— LOO ZIHAN



"Sze has been swallowed by a large dance-digesting monster. Fortunately, while having her ideas masticated she found that she was in excellent company with some amazing artists. Please leave a message or come for a chat in the conversation room."

— CHAN SZE WEI



"Absolutely inspiring, I feel like a baby once again."

— MAX CHEN



"Relationship and reflection. A process of ascertaining and moving on. And the real act of integrating and sharing. Taking time to celebrate our similarities and differences. Hopefully emerging stronger."

— JERAH LEUNG



"In four days coming together, time-travel of 20 years: geographies and states of mind, desire, understanding. Phew! What began initially as, how can I possibly tell my story?! starts to transform to, how shall I make you a gift of my remembering, into our collective corpus?"

— MELINDA LEE



"It has been an intense but wonderfully inspiring process. *Retrospective* has given me this precious opportunity to study and research into almost the entire library of Xavier's work and to experience the richness and depth of his artistic process."

— JOAVIEN NG



"A lot of sincerity and giving. It's about finding a common ground between his work and our practice. Art imitating life imitating art."

— MOHD FARED JAINAL



# their experience



"I discovered and shared common thought process between most of Xavier's works. The way he conceptualised each of his work is very theoretically and technically precise. I am sure that we both benefitted from one another and I hope this shall continue so that we can further learn from one another."

– **NORISHAM OSMAN**



"Through the multiplicity of exchanges and simulations during the process, it opens up the unknown, the possibility, the potentiality of an experience; a experience in motion, in conversation, in interaction, in self-reflection."

– **SCARLET YU**



"It's challenging to share personal stories with strangers. But I got addicted to the process as I've confronted myself like I've never before. Fascinating to see how we relate ourselves to one another. The experience is mysterious, enticing, genuinely honest and can make one feel very vulnerable."

– **WIING LIU**

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**Tay Tong**

Production Manager:

**Grace Low**

Technical Manager:

**Stevie Kwek**

Stage Manager:

**Greg Swyny**

Publicity / Ticketing:

**Mervyn Quek**

Engagement:

**Brendan Tan**

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Technical Crew:

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# DIALECTICAL ONTOLOGY OF ART: XAVIER LE ROY'S RETROSPECTIVE IN / AS CONTEMPORARY ART

by Peter Osborne



Much has already been written about Xavier Le Roy's *Retrospective*, first performed/exhibited at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, February 24 to April 22, 2012, and much of it has focused, unsurprisingly, on the artistic and critical uncertainties generated by such an extended and sustained occupation of gallery space by dance. Yet for all the emphasis that has been placed on the self-reflexivity and deconstructive intent of the work (expanding the reach of the analytical aspect of Le Roy's work from dance to the conventions of a broader artistic space), along with the subtle and nuanced phenomenology of its perception, there has been surprisingly little interrogation of its significance for the concept of contemporary art, or, conversely, of the relevance of the idea of contemporary art, in its most general critical sense, to the comprehension and criticism of *Retrospective*. Yet the foremost critical interest of *Retrospective*, it seems to me, lies precisely in its claim (explicit in a practical state) to be a work of contemporary art as such.

Entranced to the point of beguilement by the combination of its strategies for engaging its audience, on the one hand, and the affective power of the dance fragments on display, on the other, critics have tended either to rest with the idea of a sceptical destabilization of the boundaries between categories (dance – performance – exhibition and viewer – audience – participant) or to seek meaning in an expanded aesthetic response, incorporating the mild bewilderment occasioned by the suspension of “rules of the game” of exhibition space into the force of the work.<sup>1</sup>

This is in part a consequence of following a certain trail of artistic intentionality, highlighted by the place of interviews with the artist in the literature on the work. In part, it is a result of presuming a substantial or “ontological” category of dance (at the core of a wider concept of performance) as the medium of the enactment of its own questioning, deconstruction, unravelling, expansion, and transformation. If the former is a symptom of the critical renewal of Romantic individualism under the conditions of neoliberalism, the latter is a sign of the

still-enduring power of the discourse and practices of medium-specific modernism. Here, however, such practices coexist alongside and in relation to what otherwise appears as the beating heart of the counter-tradition of categorial mixing and principled indeterminacy: the legacy of Duchamp–Cage–Cunningham–Fluxus, reactivated under new institutional conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, there is a lot going on here—in the work, the writing on the work, and the institutional space it inhabits—that belies the powerful, honed-down simplicity and the directness of address so important to the immediate experience of the work itself. Three separate sources of complexity converge: the history of the individual pieces from which the fragments that make up *Retrospective* are extracted and reworked, the state of critical discourse on contemporary art, and the highly fluid current situation of the institutional space of the gallery within the broader set of relations that constitute the social and artistic actuality of “contemporary art.” I shall concentrate my remarks here on the relations between the latter two. For it is the way in which *Retrospective* is constructed with regard to—and intervenes into—these relations that constitutes it as a work of contemporary art as such rather than, more simply, a contemporary dance event in a gallery space.<sup>3</sup>

Much rests on *Retrospective*'s particular mediation of the critically opposed traditions of medium-specific and inter-/transmedia modernisms, and the way in which the categorial dissolutions of “dance” into “performance,” and “performance” into the performativity of “art” in general—which act as historical and conceptual relays between these traditions—are suspended here by a particular way of inhabiting the exhibition space of the gallery: its complete durational occupation by performance, while the space is open to the public. What this means is that the temporality of the dance/performance events themselves (even in their empirical totality as the event of the work, *Retrospective*) does not exhaust the temporality of the work, but rather occurs internally to a broader, overarching,

de-temporalizing temporality of art in general, which renders the work ideational, thereby substantializing it, but only within the domain of the imaginary or that of a constitutive illusion. This is derived, on the one hand, from the art-constituting institutional space of the gallery (indeed, in the case of the Tàpies Foundation, an explicitly art-history-constituting space), and on the other, from the unifying function of the title, *Retrospective*, which posits the work as a metonymic selection or sample of a preconstituted whole (the artist's oeuvre up to that point). The fragmentary status of the dance components making up the work render explicit this ontological inadequacy of the dance elements (in their empirical totality) to the work of which they are a part—the ontological insufficiency of “dance” to “art” within the work.

Overarching art-historical and art-critical narratives gain their meanings from their heuristic function in the interpretation of particular works. These in turn appear most interestingly when they problematize certain of the assumptions underlying such narratives. The revisionist historiography of Western art from the late 1950s through to the end of the 1970s—the period of the formation of what we now call “contemporary art”—has come, increasingly, to privilege various performative, aleatory, and inter-media lineages. And it has tended to stress their independence from the subsequent histories of the mediums out of which these lineages developed (music and dance, in particular) and with which they interacted (painting and sculpture, especially), a still prevailing tendency to trace back the source of all art “action” to Jackson Pollock, via Allen Kaprow, notwithstanding. One of the things that is most interesting about *Retrospective* is the way that it stages (and thereby condenses) relations between medium-specific categories (“dance”) and generically artistic categories (“art,” “exhibition”) at the point of their transformation into one another—dance becoming performance becoming art; generic art “made of dance”—in such a way as to dissolve the ontological significance of medium specificity, without dissolving the critical



significance of medium as a historically received element, or sedimentation within the work. At the level of its ontology, *Retrospective* seems to work in both directions at once: from the (medium-)specific to the generic, and as a nominalistic particularization of the generic. This is a sign of the rigorously dialectical character of the internal structure of the work.

By virtue of its sustained occupation of the ("art"-defining) exhibition space at the Tàpies Foundation, *Retrospective* occupies the conceptual space of performance in its opposition to dance. Yet it does so, explicitly, via its function as a type of retrospective, as a kind of sampling of dance. The pieces have a history, and are staged, as elements of dances, even if these dances have previously been performed in art-institutional spaces. (A generically artistic institutional space is not enough to convert dance into performance if its occupation is merely eventful. Nor is it enough to convert performance, ontologically, into art in its fully generic sense, even if its occupation is permanent. As is shown by the Tate Modern "tanks," for example, which reinforce performance as a distinct genre of contemporary art, taking place in a performance—rather than an exhibition—space within an art institution. This is very different from the institutional status of the exhibition space at the Tàpies.) The work thereby sets up a dialectic between dance and performance, internal to its own practices, in which the difference between them appears in its negativity (as a kind of mutual negation), yet without thereby subjecting this difference to the positivity of some more all-encompassing term, since "art" functions here generically, in a manner that can be rendered positive only at the level of the determinacies of the individual work.

Rather, this dialectic of dance and performance is sustained, negatively, by the negativity of the generality of "contemporary art" as the space mediating the disintegration of mediating critical categories and the individuality of particular works. The title, *Retrospective*, thus functions here allegorically, making explicit the claim on the genus made by the individual work, under the conditions famously described by Adorno as the tendentially increasing "nominalism" of modern art. And it does so not only via its allusion to the expansive universality of the oeuvre, to which it inevitably refers, but, crucially, with the reference to the temporality of the unity of art itself. As Adorno put it:

The universal determinations of art are what art developed into. The historical situation of art, which has lost any sense of art's very reason d'être, turns to the past in the hope of finding the concept of art, which retrospectively acquires a sort of unity. This unity is not abstract but is, rather, the unfolding of art according to its own concept. At every point, therefore, the theory of art presupposes concrete analyses, not as proofs and examples but as its own condition.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, this retrospective construction of unity gains its artistic meaning from the ongoing negations to which it is subjected by current practices. Historically, it exists as a unity only as the unity of what is being negated:

The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to be, and perhaps can, become. [...] Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. [...] Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. [...] Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form.<sup>2</sup>

The law of movement of *Retrospective* is that of a type of sampling, closer to the logic of compilation than to musical sampling. Musical sampling generally involves the sample as an element of construction within a work made of markedly different other compositional materials, subjecting the sample to a new and independent logic of production, in relation to which it functions, in part, interruptively. Here, however, the principle of sampling is generalized and subject to the logic of representativeness of the museum. And yet each sample is nonetheless immanently transformed by its mode of presentation as an extract from another, larger/longer work, by the dancer involved. (This is the "autobiographical" element in the dancer's narration to visitors of the significance to them of the particular dance fragment they will perform.) The self-sufficiency of each sample relative to the construction of *Retrospective* as a whole—necessary to the inorganic structure of the work—, which derives from its place within the work from which it has been extracted, is augmented by this appropriation, which reinforces its status

as a self-contained miniature work. (Duchamp's 1935–1941 miniaturized, "portable museum," *Boîte-en-valise*, comes to mind.) The principle of construction is thus applied not only at the level of the whole, but internally to each component, separately, by each of the performers. It is this constructive, rather than readymade, element of the self-sufficiency of the components of the exhibition that make it a "work" in a strong, individual sense, well beyond the popular idea of the "exhibition as work" associated with the increased institutional power of curators.

At another level, this independent constructive input from the performers appears as a collective, cooperative aspect of the work, associated by many with the "participatory" interaction between dancers and visitors, and the repeated requests by the dancers to be invited to perform, especially, ("Would you like me to perform... for you?" recurs as the concluding motif of most of these interactions.) In the literature on *Retrospective* (as in that on related types of work, by Tino Seghal, for example), the supposedly "democratic" character of such interactions is generally associated with the epistemological scepticism of a broadly deconstructive approach to the social objectivity of aesthetic forms. Categorical indeterminacy—linked to "aesthetic" in its Kantian formulation—appears as a theoretical form of "democratic openness," marking a withdrawal from critical judgement on the political grounds of the multiplicity of views in a participatory democracy. However, there are grounds for scepticism about this rather-too-comfortable democratic politicization of indeterminacy.

In the first place, in the aesthetic dimension, such indeterminacy offers no grounds for a withdrawal of critical judgement to a "democratic" multiplicity of positions. Quite the reverse, in fact. Famously, in Kant, indeterminacy is the very ground of the reflecting power of judgement, of which aesthetic judgement is an instance; it is a ground of judgement itself. The universality of aesthetic judgements may be subjective, and empirical claims may be multiple, but each makes a claim on the same universality and a "demand" on all others, which, in its difference from their judgements, conflicts with them. This is an agonistics. There is no comfortable pluralism here in the retreat to aesthetic. Nor can a convincing political case be made for the practical, "relational" aspects of this aesthetic.

In fact, one might question the description of the role of visitors in the interactions with performers in *Retrospective* as being "participatory" in any meaningfully democratic sense. Indeed, one might suggest the reverse. Like many so-called "participatory" works involving scripted interaction with visitors, the structure of authority is less democratic than formally authoritarian due to the institutional imposition upon visitors of particular scripted forms of social exchange. The sovereignty of the art institution over its visitor-subjects—who are taken to have consented to the interaction by entering the institutional space (just as one consents to the terms of exchange by entering the market)—is explicit. Often, in this kind of work, it is less "bewildering" that is produced and more a barely suppressed, doubled embarrassment, which is embarrassed in large part about this very embarrassment itself. There is, of course, a politics to the production of this kind of interaction that goes beyond the reproduction of the sovereign structure of subjection that it enacts as a condition of the reception of the work of art. But again, it would be wishful to associate it with anything democratic in the pluralistic liberal (market-based) sense that is normally, if vaguely, evoked. These works are, one might say, "better" than that, however much they may trade upon the comforts of such misrepresentation.

Historically, conceptual, contextual, situational and relational works of art were among the conditions that established the possibility for performance and dance to become practices of contemporary art, in a strong and critical sense, by changing

**"Retrospective seems to work in both directions at once: from the (medium-) specific to the generic, and as a nominalistic particularization of the generic."**



Photo: Credit: Xavier Le Roy

the character of art space, and the spatial ontology of the work of art alike. Xavier Le Roy's *Retrospective* inhabits—indeed fills—this new kind of art space (the space of contemporary art) in a manner that both reveals and gives determinacy to its generic structure through an individuality that remains very much its own.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Marcella Lista, "Xavier Le Roy: A Discipline of the Unknown" and Chris Sharp, "Xavier Le Roy: La Règle du jeu," *Afterall* 33, (Summer 2013): 27–37 and 19–25, respectively. Generically "sceptical" interpretations of art that has a strong conceptual dimension are increasingly commonplace. Two artists whose work has provided a model for such criticism are Gerhard Richter and The Atlas Group.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent recovery of this legacy, see Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, eds., *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2012)—the catalogue of the exhibition of the same name—October 30, 2012–January 21, 2013, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Barbican Art Gallery, London, February 14–June 9, 2013, The Centre Pompidou exhibition, *Dancer sa vie*, November 2011–April 2012, was in many respects the converse of this show, subjecting the "expanded field" to an expanded concept of dance.

<sup>3</sup> For a dance-oriented critique of the work based on the principled insufficiency of exhibition space to dance (and of "Retrospective"'s fragments to the works from which they are extracted), see Nikki Columbus, "Changing Partners: 'Retrospective' by Xavier Le Roy," *Parkett* 91 (2012): 196–200.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 263. German edition: *Ästhetische Theorie. Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 392.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3, 11–12.



**Retrospective** is TheatreWorks' continuing aim to present innovative contemporary performances, artistic expressions that offer Singapore audiences uncommon alternatives. TheatreWorks, a performance company which believes in working across disciplines and cultures, is the bridge between alternative artistic expressions and the Singapore audiences.



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
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 Like us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/theatreworks.sg>

72-13 Mohamed Sultan Road, Singapore 239007

T: +65-6737 7213 F: +65-6737 7013 E: [twoorks@singnet.com.sg](mailto:twoorks@singnet.com.sg)

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