

Rethinking Contemporaneity in Contemporary Dance

By Pia Brezavšek

When asked to speak about the topic “troubles with contemporaneity”, I immediately thought about my so-called “field of expertise”. That is (or at least I strive for it to be) contemporary dance. It struck me how unreflected the naming of this field of art usually is in everyday usage. We tend to use it simply by inertia. This is a great opportunity for me to thoroughly think through the “contemporaneity” in contemporary dance. For what we see onstage (and everywhere else where contemporary dance takes place) today is an extreme variety of situations, marked with this vague term “contemporary dance”, for which we cannot really find another common denominator than this (self-)label, which is hardly classificatory. Even though it marks a certain artform with a certain history, it is exactly because of its “presentist naming” – obsessed with the present – that it seems to imply a certain evaluative note to its subject or, as Bojana Kunst and Bojana Cvejić claim: it is “used in masterly judgements on 'contemporary' vs. old-fashioned, outdated, passé, déjà-vu”.¹

But let us start slowly with the untangling of this short but curious history of the name “contemporary dance”, which has some predecessor name forms from which but also in tension with it emerged. I speak here, of course, of the terms “modern” and “postmodern” dance. Of the two, “modern dance” has the longest history. In his lecture *Undoing Postmodern Dance* (2004), Ramsey Burt claims that it can be traced back to the 1913 book *Der Moderne Tanz* by Hans Brandenburg, contemporary with the historical emergence of what we now call modern dancers, such as Isadora Duncan or Grete Wiesenthal, who rejected ballet in order to dedicate themselves to freer forms of movement. The term modern dance then echoed in the famous John Martin's 1933 book *The Modern Dance* and remained in use until the seventies or even longer sporadically.²

But modern dance is not an unquestionable synonym for modernism. Modernism is an art history name for the late 19th and early 20th century art that questioned the quickly changing world after the industrial revolution, whose aim was the creation of new forms of art (as well as philosophy and social organisation). Though modernism in art is reflected in many different aspects, a significant one is its departure from realism. This is why the most radical endpoint of this movement was understood by many to be the notion of high modernism, or ‘pure art’, as developed in the 1950s

¹ Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing problems*, Palgrave MacMillan 2015, p. 5. See also Bojana Kunst, »Politics of Affection and Uneasiness«, *Maska* vol. XVIII, no. 82-83, Maska, Ljubljana 2003, p. 27-30.

² Ramsey Burt, *Undoing modern dance history*, SARMA, 2004. <http://sarma.be/docs/767> (last access 19th Nov 2020)

and 60s by American art theorist Clement Greenberg, who argued that the “American-type painting” (such as that of Jackson Pollock and the like) of the New York School was the logical conclusion of earlier European modernist painting. Purity in art is reached when there are no more external references in an artwork, which is now composed of only the very possibilities of the art medium itself. In painting, these elements are lines, colours, geometrical forms. In dance, it would be pure movement, without any narrative or historical reference whatsoever.

Allow me a small digression here: this Greenbergian “end of history” shows the typical arrogance with which the US placed themselves into art history. Another example of this was, as shown by Andrew Hewitt's analysis in the book *Social Choreography*, trying to enthrone the modern dance of Isadora Duncan as the first true, fully and authentically American art form that broke with literacy: it was new and authentic as the country itself. But with that, it of course made a gesture of erasing the whole indigenous art history of the continent.³

But to go back a little – for dance historian and theorist John Martin, it was Mary Wigman who first encapsulated these modernist puritan notions. He writes: With “Wigman, the dance stands for the first time fully revealed in its own sphere; it is not story telling or pantomime or moving sculpture or design in space or acrobatic virtuosity or musical illustration, but dance alone, an autonomous art exemplifying fully the ideals of modernism in its attainment of abstraction and in its utilization of the resources of its materials efficiently and with authority”.⁴

But even these autonomist endeavours were not “modernist” enough for famous Judson Church theorist Sally Banes. Or they were, indeed, too “modern”. The word modern was then obviously already a word that implied a historical form with which contemporary art should break. Banes is the one who coined the term “post-modern dance” in her 1980's book *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, subtitled *Post-Modern Dance*. For Banes, postmodern dancers broke away from modern dancers by “reacting against the expressionism of modern dance which anchored movement to a literary idea or a musical form”.⁵ With Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1978), which, to Banes, is a key piece which marks this shift, “it is not only a new style of dance, but a (whole) new meaning and function, a new definition”⁶ of dance.

But this major break that Banes tries to mark (with a terminological effort) may again be an overly “presentist” statement, as Ramsey Burt argues. “Banes's statement is similar to John Martin's 1933

³ Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography*, Duke University Press, 2005.

⁴ John Martin, *America Dancing*, Brooklyn, N.Y.: Dance Horizons, 1968, p. 235

⁵ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980, p. 15.

⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

claim that 'The Modern Dance is not a system but a point of view'"⁷, he says. Burt thus asks himself whether Banes' point of view, exemplified in works like *Trio A*, was just a newer, more minimalist point of view than that exemplified by the works Martin was writing about in the 1930s.

Strangely, in the game of naming these new artistic dance/theatre dance forms throughout the 20th century that are said to be, again and again, changing the paradigms of dance itself, lies the obsession with the present, with the new, which dominates our current consumerist society. Though modernism's stance was also to critically address consumerism ("being *a-la-mode*") by deploying from kitsch to purer, eternal forms, it is marked by progressively eliminating what is still too representational in order to be more pure, and thus, ever more modernist (as was in Banes' postmodern opposed to modern, as modern was not "modernist" enough).

Ramsey Burt argues that this constant rush for the new, for the present, for the truly modernist, for ever more pure, is a symptom of "a dialectic of exhaustion and reaction, whereby dancers, having found an older style boring and unfulfilling, have turned instead to find something new".⁸

But purity can never be con-temporary, as it is, in itself, timeless and ahistorical, as Burt argues. It detaches the abstract ahistorical dance or choreography from "the historically specific embodied experiences of actual dancers and their audiences".⁹ Burt thus prefers "a contemporary view of dance history, that recognizes that there is no pure, abstract dance that is not attached to its historical moment or conditioned by experience".¹⁰ His case studies that were selected to prove this point come from the field of what we now call "conceptual dance" of the 1990s (Martin Nachbar, Quattuor Albrecht Knust group from the 1980s/Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily*), which play with modern and postmodern pieces through a contemporary lens and reconstruct them in a way that reworks them regarding the present moment.

But to linger a bit more on the term "post-modern". I will not go into analysis what postmodernism in art history is here, but it obviously does not overlap with Banes' account of "post-modern dance". In postmodernism, value systems are considered socially conditioned, as products of history, hierarchies, discourses, but there is hardly any irony in post-modern dance, though we could observe a strong emphasis on the medium (of dance) with a lot of auto-referencing. We could moreover observe some overlapping of postmodernism and the so-called conceptual dance of the 1990s (and later), with its emphasis on reconstruction, self-referentiality and the questioning of the value

⁷ Burt 2004.

⁸ Burt 2004.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

systems themselves (“hat is dance?”). Or we could even classify it as neo-avantgarde, referring to the avant-gardism of Judson Church Theatre. As modern dance and modernism do not fully overlap, postmodernism and Banes' postmodern dance do not either. The questionable “post-modernity” of Banes' terminology was pointed out back in 1988 by Susan Manning, who claimed that “Banes was attributing to only one generation of 20th-century choreographers a set of formal concerns shared by other generations as well”.¹¹ In any case, as Cvejić points out: art history's narrative is not translatable to dance. And there are of course problems within the art history narrative itself. The very naming of an era, i.e. modernism, is a symptom of art history's own historicity.

But if the terms modern and postmodern dance are marked with a “presentist” ideology, does not the same hold true for the phrase “contemporary dance”? What is contemporary dance anyway? What does it stand for and what does it mean?

The term contemporary dance slowly replaced the term modern dance. The term dates back to the 1950s (for example, in 1967, London Contemporary Dance Theatre was founded), but it wasn't until the 1990s that it started to circulate as a “putatively more neutral denominator than modern and postmodern dance”.¹² Bojana Cvejić's recent book *Choreographing problems* defines it in the following way: “Contemporary dance serves merely to distinguish the present day production of dance from the coexisting historical or canonical forms and styles – originally West-European-theatre dance (ballet, classical dance, academic dance) or from other non-Western dance traditions as well as dance forms geared to non-art purposes (social, therapeutic, entertainment). Its widespread usage nonetheless indicates the current pluralism in performing arts, where no movement or style vies for critical dominance.”¹³

But, as Cvejić further argues, despite of its intention to accommodate pluralism in dance which blossomed in the last couple of decades, the term contemporary dance does not resolve the controversy about what postmodernist as opposed to modernist dance was said to be. This time the antagonism is captured in the term “conceptual dance”, or the debate on what is dance (pure dance, dancy dance) and what is not (choreography where there is hardly any movement). In a 2004 article published in *Maska*, Katja Praznik went so far as to propose the term “post-contemporary dance” for these kinds of dances that contest the very foundations of the medium (that enable it). The term

¹¹ Susan Manning, letter (Terpsichore in Combat Boots) *TDR* T-121, Spring 1989, pp 15–6.

¹² Cvejić 2015, p. 5.

¹³ Ibid.

contemporary dance is, she writes, in “a way hegemonic, as it appropriates the potential and autonomy of the body as a type of select discourse of global universalism”.¹⁴

She is referring to Bojana Kunst's article from *Maska*, where the latter argues that “Contemporary dance in its institutionalised form somehow paradoxically became a token of modernity, urbanity, freedom, democracy, and so on”¹⁵. But this is true only for the Western physicality that was equipped for the present because of its developed educational and other institutions. Eastern and other non-Western dance was thus, with an unease for the dominant gaze, always seen as old-fashioned. Claiming “contemporaneity” is therefore always a hegemonic gesture upon the Other, Kunst argues. It is dangerous to claim that contemporaneity is exclusively our own, as there are all these other, simultaneous contemporaneities.

As Kunst puts it: “Western gaze is hesitant when it comes to attributing autonomy and potential to the body of the other. It is seen as rather defused, non-articulated, not there yet, narrative, /.../ Western contemporary dance somehow institutionalised its exclusive right to modernity, urbanity, autonomy – right to universality.”¹⁶

It is funny, how, almost 20 years later, there are still no major contemporary dance schools in the East or the global south, and the centralisation of the contemporary dance scene in the West is ever more evident. The periphery is, of course, dosed with a masterly gesture as, says Kunst, “The essence of contemporary cultural politics is that the center knows very well, where its guerrilla is the entire time”.¹⁷ Eastern dance is no longer trendy, there are other “others” that are in the spotlight in this certain contemporaneity.

To really see contemporary dance now, in our own contemporaneity, it also means to admit, that it has itself become a bit *demode* and marginalized. Today, we could hardly say, that contemporary dance still stands for “modernity, urbanity, freedom, democracy and so on”. Though it is still solidly subsidized in the Western world, where it has managed to institutionalize itself in its peak era, it is becoming more and more of an unnecessary burden for the state funding in the periphery, Slovenia being no exception.

But not to fall too much into a moaning mode, perhaps now is the time to look up what “contemporary philosophy” has to say about what contemporary art is, and what contemporaneity is. In a 2007 lecture, when asked to talk about contemporaneity in art, French phenomenologist

¹⁴ Katja Praznik, »What about 'post contemporary' dance?«, *Maska* Vol. XIX, Nos 84–85, Ljubljana 2004, p. 19

¹⁵ Bojana Kunst, *Politics of affection and uneasiness*, *Maska* Vol. XVIII, Nos 82–83, *Maska* Ljubljana 2003, p. 29.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 30.

Jean-Luc Nancy rather decided to talk about “art today”, as the term contemporary art is an art history category still in formation so it may change in unexpected directions.¹⁸ It cannot encompass all current art, he says: it excludes art being made today, but in pre-contemporary “modes”. He goes on to say that “contemporary”, in a vulgar sense, means the past 20 or 30 years, so it is a constantly moving measure. If we now shortly turn back to ‘contemporary dance’ and take seriously the 20–30 year time span for contemporaneity, we can see that, if the term contemporary dance had begun to be widely used in the 1990s, this same dance can hardly be contemporary today.

In the same lecture, Nancy reminds us that every (true) artwork ever has been contemporary to its own time. And Nancy’s criteria for “art” is that it must make us feel “a certain formation of the contemporary world, a certain shaping, a certain perception of self in the world”.¹⁹ And by world, he, in Heideggerian terms, means “a totality of ‘significabilities’, that is, of possibilities of meaning, not a totality of given significations, but a totality of possibilities of signification”.²⁰

Or put differently: “art is there every time to open the world, to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world, to its possibility thus to open meaning, while the meaning that has already been given is closed”.²¹ By that, Nancy says that art, if it is art, is to be a sign, or rather a signal, if only a mere wink, that works beyond the artwork itself. He is strongly against the notion of art for art’s sake. On the other hand, he also thinks that art for signification’s sake is equally a false idea. Be it a religious, political, or ethical signification. He says that he is offended by artworks that shoot giant blocks of signification at him as a viewer. Any work of art that is merely explaining the world as it is and does not open it up for possible meanings is for him a failed work of art, where message precedes form.

Nancy’s view on contemporary art is thus also balancing to find the right measure between form (purity) and content (reference). But the form he is searching for in this particular contemporaneity, which is our own time, is “the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given”.²²

Preliminary form is a schema, as interpreter Terry Smith explains. It is, in Immanuel Kant’s terms, “the non-sensible that precedes and makes possible the sensible”.²³ In the times we live in, there is a crisis of signification, where there are no more great narratives, there are no big schemas and even

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Art Today*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010, p. 91.

<https://paralelotrac.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/03-nancy-art-today.pdf> (last access 19th Nov 2020)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²³ Terry Smith, *Agamben and Nancy on Contemporaneity and Art*, 2013.

<https://www.haa.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Smith-AgambenandNancyOnContemporaneityAndArt.pdf> (last access 19th Nov 2020)

the schematism of man himself has disappeared. This loss of meaning is the defining characteristic of the present world. Thus, the forms that characterise contemporary art today are those that somehow begin from this shapeless state of self. Art is therefore understood as a fundamental gesture, one that “puts us in direct communication with the creation of the world”.²⁴

It is interesting that Nancy has a strong philosophical *soft spot* for dance – he speaks of the importance of a gesture, which is beyondness, an implication, but not yet a signification – and it is dance that seems to be all about gestures. We can remember other philosophers’ accounts that prioritize dance, namely Alain Badiou, who thinks dance has an ontological primacy among other arts – “In itself, it is not art,” he argues, but rather “a sign of the possibility of art as it is inscribed in the body”²⁵. But this essentialist doxa about dance as the origin and the potentiality of art of all kinds fosters a special affinity to “presence” and “the ineffable sublime” as the key points of this self-founding act of contemporary dance, which are still being reproduced uncritically, says Bojana Cvejić, summing up the main problems with these essentialist affinities towards dance.²⁶ Dance is the philosophical embodiment of “the presence”, which is again contemporaneity itself. But this is also exactly why it is under such a “presentist” pressure.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between Badiou’s essentialist doxa, which prioritises the purity, the presence and the merging of the signifier and the signified in dance as the origin of all art, and Nancy’s account of dance as being abstract enough, not to shoot with blocks of signification too much, but with its means it has a strong potential to be able to create, or as little as indicate, the possibility of a world beyond. Dance’s medium is somewhat privileged in “the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given”.

For this lecture, I was asked to analyse this present (contemporary) moment in order to give a definition of the kind of art, or dance, that most properly responds to the now. But before any such attempt, for which I must say I do not feel entitled to make, I will present to you what another philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, said about contemporaneity, or contemporariness in a 2007 lecture for the European Graduate School.²⁷

²⁴ Nancy 2010, p. 99.

²⁵ Alain Badiou, »Ples kot metafora misli«, *Teorije sodobnega plesa*, Maska, Ljubljana 2001, p. 36

²⁶ Bojana Cvejić, »To End With Judgment by Way of Clarification«, in Martina Hochmuth, Krassimira Kruschkova and Georg Schollhammer (eds), *It Takes Place When It Doesn’t. On Dance and Performance*, Frankfurt: Revolve, 2006, pp. 49–58.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, »What is Contemporaneity?«, *What is an apparatus?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford California 2009 <https://soundenvironments.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/agamben-what-is-and-apparatus.pdf>

The Italian philosopher (who deal with biopolitics, his famous notion being “bare life”) has unfortunately become even more famous because of his recent scandalous writing about the coronavirus, comparing it to flu, and about the disproportionately strict social control measures, meant to cause panic and prolong the state of emergency. These writings put the radically left philosopher dangerously close to right-wing virus deniers. One of the first to respond was the aforementioned Nancy, who warned against such dangerous remarks. Surveillance and the state of emergency have only become more visible since the outbreak of the virus but were present long before its emergence. For him, to limit the virus is a priority, “governments are nothing more than grim executioners, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary manoeuvre than a political reflection”²⁸, he argues. However, Agamben writes that living indefinitely in a state of bare/naked life is not worth living at all, which (Agamben too being elderly and in a risk group) – is a rather courageous statement.

Putting this very current debate to the side, let us see what Agamben has to say about contemporaneity. Firstly, he recalls Friederich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*. Nietzsche argues that his contemporaries have become servile to the determinative power of History. For Nietzsche, those who are “truly contemporary, truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands”.²⁹ For Agamben too, total immersion in the present, absolute up-to-datedness, is blindness. Rare people, marked with this out-of-joint-ness, which is a disconnectedness and an anachronism, are more than others able to grasp their own times. It is also a matter of courage: “It is to perceive in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot.”³⁰

This is to say that “contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic.”³¹ But archaic not in the sense of a chronological past – but archaic which is contemporary with historical becoming. Archaic in the embryonic sense of the word. The present thus necessarily takes the form of an – Foucaultian – archeology: “an archology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living.”³² Agamben too, as Nancy, in a way points to the act of creation when talking about contemporaneity. Not creating *ex nihilo*, but “returning to a present where we have never been.” Contemporary is the unlive life of the present that we must strive to make visible.

²⁸ More on the polemics: <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (last access 11th Nov 2020)

²⁹ Agamben 2009, p. 40.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 46

³¹ Ibid., p. 50.

³² Ibid., p. 51.

This beautiful, if somewhat paradoxical notion of what it means to be contemporary, will now help us unpack some of the contemporary dance pieces from our present that, in one way or another, correspond to the aforementioned notions of contemporaneity.

The first piece I want to mention in this context is Snježana Premuš's *Every Now is Time, Space*: a series of coreo-social situations, or "laboratories" that took place at the Old Power Plant. This is not a conventional performance. The limited audience are invited into a sound-space landscape: the stage is divided into sections using localised speakers and other sound technologies (Boštjan Perovšek) and utility scenography, such as chairs, pillows, a couch and lights (Špela Škulj). The visitor is given only a map (where smaller spaces on stage are marked, such as "shower" or "periphery") and is encouraged to investigate/explore the space by herself. On the top of the stairs, there are microphones, where anyone can read or speak – but their voice is not enhanced, it is localised onto one of the small speakers on stage. One can move around freely, one can listen, watch, lie down, dance, interact, or hide. Among other visitors, there are six dancers/performers in the room, who are very discrete in their own whereabouts, they too are listening and moving. Firstly, everyone is preoccupied with their entering into these subtle situations, so a very unhierarchical situation can be established among everyone present. Slowly but surely, encounters take place. The gaze is shifting all the time and a personal montage of images is inevitable. The scores of the performers gradually become more visible but are still subtle and inclusive. The whole situation is attuned for the visitor to enter a state of body and mind where she can perceive the surrounding more intensively, with greater awareness of the effects of different impulses, such as space changes, sound nuances, light shifts, body positions, encounters with others, different textures of movement, have on one's wellbeing.

The piece, as the title itself suggests, deals with presence, with the "now". But not in a "presentist" manner. Though the presence of an autonomous body has been contemporary dance's founding act, this time it is not only about presenting such presence, but establishing a situation, where everybody involved have access to this special presence. It is a somatic and sound art research, even a little social experiment, a laboratory situation, that pushes the project-oriented, fast-living individual of today to more fully merge with the here and now. To take as much time as every particular "now" or present moment needs. This does not mean that it is a project that is not knowledgeable of the past or is ignorant about the future. On the contrary. The possibility of a holistic mind-body being in space is a consequence of its complex organic and psychological history. If the body is listened to, there is a sensibility in it that we tend not to give a chance to in our everyday lives. By offering it a time and space in order to make it more alert of what it can do and what it knows, we are, in Agamben's terms, returning to a present where we have never been. And exactly by this act, it opens a world, to quote Nancy again – a common reference for Premuš herself.

There is another current contemporary choreographer from Slovenia I want to mention here – Andreja Podrzavnik (Rauch). Her recent series of work is entitled *Lasting-Passing* and has several incarnations: Firstly in 2016, choreological compositions were staged in the Minoriti church in Maribor. The photographer Nada Žgank's photos from that event were later published in a book together with a text, so this "deviation" was in fact choreography as a book made to last. There was a further staging of the developed piece at the Ljubljana Modern Gallery, a guided exhibition through subtle moving pictures which allowed the spectator to enter them by gaze or co-create them. Some of the scores were then used and developed further in a theatre context in a piece called *What Remains* (in collaboration with poet Lidija Dimkowska), which was, if I paraphrase my review, "A Brutally Beautiful Performance"³³.

There was another part of this same series *Lasting-Passing* that took place one afternoon, where the invited guests were shown scores that were made in a strong interplay with the light (Jaka Šimenc). I remember the uncanniness of the situation of seeing such intensity in the middle of the day, being completely struck by it. I came there from a work situation and it devoured me completely differently than an evening situation would have. This complete change of modalities allowed me to recharge from the usual productive mode and stress. I had the chance to work with Andreja on an article this summer, and it fascinates me how her confidence in what a body can do is in such contrast with other insecurities. That is why I believe her work is truly contemporary. What I experienced when I saw *What Remains* or in that afternoon session at the Old Power Plant was not a comfortable aesthetic escapism, but an opening of a world, the unlive that was brought to life, if only by a glimpse.

In the context of our summer interviews, Andreja Podrzavnik told me she was interested in tackling topics that were not marked as loud in advance. With topics such as sexuality, violence, one has to be really clever to make them low-key, otherwise they are only a very loud block of signification, if I paraphrase Nancy here. I must very much agree with that. To be contemporary in the aforementioned ways means to step out of the modes of the everyday in order to show what is unseen, still unlive.

Among contemporary dance works I saw in our local context recently, I will highlight one last piece, which also (see *Every Now Is time, Space/ Lasting-passing, What Remains*), has a very "temporal" title. It is a piece called *Just for Today* by Maja Delak. In it, five female dancers and choreographers of different generations perform an instant composition. They use tuning and contingency and what they call "an inventory of tools" that is their language during the performance. Scores are open, so

³³ Pia Brezavšek, *Brutalno lepa predstava*, Dnevnik, 7th Nov 2018, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042845961> (last access 19th Nov 2020)

each performance has its own atmosphere to it. It is a fragile piece that calls for a lot of negotiation and dealing with insecurities. At the disposal of these five patient bodies that listen to one another and are responsive to the everchanging situation are also props of different materials, both artificial and natural, which bring new materialities into some situations.

What is so beautiful about this piece is the affirmation of fragility that is spread among the audience. It is a situation that affirms mutual responsibility, devotion and care. To see that as a principle not only of working, but also of performing, is in our local performing arts context, where there is a strong history of (usually male) author figures, indeed a revelation. Though obviously talking about the present through presence, as its motto is keeping it lively, spontaneous and pristine, this performance too is not falling into “presentism”. If the loss of meaning is what characterises the present world the most, as Nancy argues, if the world has lost its anchors and schemas, the principles of contingency, intuitiveness or instant decision-making, that are also the principles of such an instant composition, are very contemporary.

Before I close this talk, I would like to mention one more piece, this time from a Croatian group BADCo, which was their last performance, as they are now “closing shop” after 20 years of operation. I know that I said in the summary that I would only be talking about Slovene performances, but this was before I saw *Rad panike (The Labour of Panic)*.

This peculiar work is set outdoors, in an open space, a field near Reka – Grobničko polje. It is a wild wide field, surrounded by hills, with Mediterranean thorny growth. This wildness is embraced by modern infrastructural systems, such as power lines, an airport, a car racetrack and a motorway, which are symbols of speed and the interconnectedness of networks that enable our modern lives. The spectator enters this ambiguous natural scenography amidst the man-made infrastructure in the evening. She is given only a list of what seem to be simple scores with simple croquis drawings. She has her earphones on, listening to a soundtrack, a link to which she has received beforehand. She walks into a field, moving away from other audience members, seeing performers from afar and listening to an interpretation of a text (by Goran Ferčec) on *Conquering an Open Field*. A strong wind is blowing and it is getting darker by the minute. Strange poetic texts about an inevitable catastrophe, about starting anew, about a dog that tears everything, about soil and land, are played and have sporadic references to the dancers’ actions or the concrete environment surroundings. It seems as if we are archaeologists, or palaeontologists of some other species, digging up the remains of the human civilization. The accelerated technological progress, made to make our civilisation easier, is inevitably destroying it. One finds oneself in quite a rough, windy, even hostile post-apocalyptic scenography that works better than any theatre. Dancers run through the field hastily,

and finally descend into a quarry. In this open field, dancers seem small, and so do we. Every step is choreographed by the bulges and stones in the soil. The piece is contemporary exactly in a way that shakes the foundations of the present by placing us in the certainty of a catastrophic future. One is left only with one's own body and the privilege to see the insignificance of our contemporary endeavours from a broader perspective. If one is to start anew, what references does one have? In the *Labour of Panic*, the interconnectedness between dance, interpretation and context of the text and the open space scenography was such that a return to theatres seems almost redundant. And of course, open space theatre is also friendly to epidemiological measures.

This PARL series of lectures, entitled "Difficulties with Contemporaneity", is a quotation of the title of Maska's 2006/2007 season *Seminar of Contemporary Performing Arts*. In the seminar description, the authors write, "that contemporaneity is a political category and not a category of time"³⁴. In this lecture, I tried to expose the "presentist" notion of the different naming of theatre-dance in the 20th century in relation to the autonomy of dance or its "purity". I furthermore tried to expose the evaluative rather than classificatory note that the term contemporary has when in an exclusive domain of a hegemon. If contemporaneity is a political category, it is so exactly as it is in strong relation with the one claiming it for herself. Rather than this political aspect of the term, I tried to examine a philosophical one, which, with contemporary philosophers such as Nancy and Agamben, tries to understand contemporaneity as out-of-jointness, of "worlding" and of creation.

³⁴ [http://www.maska.si/index.php?id=135&L=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=258&cHash=744db98de337a1c456250d701931ceb7](http://www.maska.si/index.php?id=135&L=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=258&cHash=744db98de337a1c456250d701931ceb7) (last access 19th Nov 2020)