

GAGOSIAN

frieze

William Forsythe
Gagosian Le Bourget, Paris, France

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William Forsythe, Black Flags, 2014, readymade industrial robots, nylon flags, carbon fibre flagpoles, steel plates, dimensions variable. installation view, Gagosian Le Bourget, Paris, 2017. Courtesy: Gagosian, Paris © William Forsythe; photograph: Thomas Lannes

Reading Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* (Man a Machine, 1748), in 1978 the philosopher Karl Popper suggested that 'there may be no clear distinction between living matter and dead matter'; that man 'is a computer'. William Forsythe's 'Choreographic Objects' puts this thesis to the test in the vaulted space of an aircraft hangar that houses Gagosian Le Bourget. What Forsythe calls 'choreographic objects' are the installations, films and sculptures that he's been creating since 1989, which lie at the intersection of dance and the visual arts. Exploring choreography, technology and space, his work brings us closer to understanding our own bodies.

In *Black Flags* (2015) two industrial robot arms wave around an enormous black flag, sometimes in unison, sometimes in counterpoint, in immense, impressive sweeps. The work foregrounds the contrast between the specific, unchanging process of the code and the aleatory movements of the fabric. Visually, it suggests Loie Fuller dancing with poles, elongating her arms to accentuate the line and the swirl of her oversized sleeves.

But Forsythe, who made his name as a dancer and choreographer before extending his practice to the visual arts, asks in this piece what kind of gestures a robot can produce that a human dancer can't. During the 28-minute sequence, the flags wave overhead and brush the ground or drag across it; the arms create straight lines, reaching up, or out, or down, or manipulate the flags so quickly that they make popping, rippling sounds. Human dancers could never achieve such perfect horizontality or move such heavy flags; even if they could, they couldn't keep it up for 28 minutes.

The idea of humans exploring space through technology is echoed by the location of Gagosian Le Bourget, around the corner from a functioning airport and the Museum of Air and Space, which has an enormous space rocket in its backyard. But *Black Flags* is not without its limitations; the code for the movements has to be rewritten each time the work is installed to adapt to its new surroundings. Every installation is an invitation for Forsythe to rethink the way the piece moves in space; the concept may not vary from performance to performance, but the work is constantly rearticulated.

The next work is a video installation called *Alignigung* (2016, a threading-together of the English word align and the German word Einigung, or agreement) with sound by Ryoji Ikeda. Filmed in a white room, as if suspended in space, two dancers – Rauf ‘Rubber Legs’ Yasit and Riley Watts – are entwined in what I can only liken to a human ball of yarn. They tangle themselves together, moving very slowly and subtly, somewhere between dance, sculpture and embrace. It provides an interesting counterpoint to *Black Flags*: where, in that piece, the viewer watches the robots, in *Alignigung* the humans are watched by a robot with a camera; we see what the robot sees. There is nothing more human than this kind of entanglement, but the mechanical gaze mediates it.

The show concludes with a technically simple work. The large-scale complications of *Black Flag* are foiled in *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze* (2013), a feather duster that invites the audience to become reacquainted with their bodies. ‘Hold the object absolutely still’, instructs the stone shelf it lies on. Visitors pick up the feather duster and see that it is impossible to keep it still. Unlike a line of code, we cannot perform the command. With due respect to Popper, we’re left to contemplate the constant motion and unpredictability of the human body, registered in feathers.