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Wallpaper*

Choreographer William Forsythe on Melding Man, Machine and Dance

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Black Flags, 2014, by William Forsythe, readymade industrial robots, nylon flags, carbon fiber flagpoles, steel plates. Courtesy of Gagosian

Newly presented – and programmed – at Gagosian Le Bourget, the pair of robotic arms conducting giant black flags through a 28-minute sequence on constant loop are the main attraction of ‘Choreographic Objects’, Forsythe’s first exhibition with the gallery. Those who are familiar with his impressive body of work conceived for dancers will detect the transfer of gesture and dynamism to these decidedly nonhuman forms. But whereas dance, even when at its most avant-garde is still a familiar construct, the unprecedented nature of this work encourages a steady stream of questions and interpretations.

Over the course of the recent vernissage, one guest compared them to otherworldly sea creatures, while another suggested that the concept itself felt insurgent (this being the opposite of waving a white flag in surrender). At moments, the arching, swooping, arms would appear athletic or balletic only to turn threatening as the flag rippled horizontally, hovering just above the ground. Those who looked away for a few minutes might have missed the movements slowing down gracefully or else thrusting upward in ways no human could perform. Was Forsythe considering Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* as an animated object, or prophesising automated art as a new medium? Ultimately, everyone seemed to arrive at the same conclusion: wow.

The show, which also includes a video of dancers Rauf Yasit (aka RubberLegz) and Riley Watts entangled in their own contortionist Gordian knot, marks Forsythe’s ongoing pursuit of testing alternative ‘writing tools’ for movement. In a sense, his robots might be considered the

descendants of Loie Fuller, whose mesmerising *Serpentine Dance* from 1896 was owing to wooden poles that she swirled from within diaphanous white robes to extend her range of motion. Forsythe enthusiastically acknowledged the parallel – and the competitive edge an industrial robot has over joints and muscles.

‘What you’re watching is something absolutely platonic, because all the geometries in this event are digital – or mechanical via digital. So it’s a digital entity’s idea of horizontality or verticality or circularity or torque,’ he explains in a follow-up conversation. ‘On the other hand, human movement has more complexity because it deviates more.’

Forsythe presented *Black Flags* for the first time 2014 as a commission by the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and that museum hall was considerably more restricted than Gagosian’s vast, curved-ceiling loft transformed by Jean Nouvel in 2012. Here, the industrial nature of both space and subject correspond especially well. But the different dimensions also meant that Forsythe’s programmer, Sven Thöne, spent six months painstakingly redesigning each movement to account for variables in height or air flow.

This would quell any temptation to consider the robots, supplied by the manufacturer Kuka, as artificial intelligence applied to art. After all, their full-time job is on a factory floor, which is where they return after they finish moonlighting here. ‘We pluck them from their industrial tasks and then for a few weeks or a few months, we give them a poetic task and then they disappear,’ mused Forsythe.

Cue the empathy impulse. When suggested to Forsythe that he’s liberated them, even if briefly, from their mundane existence by allowing them this form of artistic expression he replied, ‘They’re also capable of that, you know? I’m making an assumption here, but no one thought of them as poetic instruments of writing.’

The fact that *Black Flags* is being exhibited in a gallery means it might find a forever home with an institution or collector. As an interesting plot twist, Forsythe, who lives in Vermont, pointed out that the buyer actually acquires the choreography. ‘It’s not like I’m suddenly doing visual art; this is choreographic work. It could be seen as sculpture – sure, why not. But that was not the intention. The intention was to find a site for choreographic writing.’

Still, what results from this writing is visually powerful – and perhaps even more so at a time when issues concerning nationalism and the presence of darker political forces remain ever-present. Forsythe, for the most part, eschews this discussion, offering instead that he settled on black because it was ‘aesthetically, relatively neutral.’

Anyone who can visit this performance live will be distinctly aware of the sound, a push and pull between the fabric flapping and the machines whirring, times two. Forsythe singles out a moment when the left flag drags across the floor to produce a snake-like hissing noise as just one surprise in this unintended music score. ‘It’s like a piano duet because, when making pure choreography like that, there’s no narrative involved. I’m trying to actually erase any kind of associative narrative.’ Which circles back to all the interpretative possibilities. One person’s matador muleta is another’s sting ray.