

GAGOSIAN

Frieze

Beyond Ballet: How Choreographer William Forsythe Helps us to Return to our Bodies

In his first comprehensive exhibition in the US, at ICA Boston, a kinetic economy of endeavour quickly emerges

Emma McCormick-Goodhart



Caption (TNR 9 Italicized)

Open your ears before entering the maze and listen to William Forsythe's narrative voice-over in *Lectures from Improvisation Technologies* (2011), screened on a monitor at the entrance to his first comprehensive show in the US, 'Choreographic Objects', at ICA Boston. Not devised as a work, but rather as a training video to introduce techniques of 'self-governing action' to dancers during his tenure at Ballet Frankfurt, it conveys the extent to which Forsythe's practice is, essentially, research-driven. Freely borrowing terms from set theory, topology and other practices, Forsythe's demonstration displays his pioneering, heterodox engagement with dance. 'Ballet doesn't exist per se,' he claims, 'only examples of people approximating its principles.' It follows, then, that his 'choreographic objects' act as 'modelled abstractions' for generating choreography in real-time.

'Choreographic Objects' stems from a provocation formulated in Forsythe's eponymous essay, which sets out to trouble the long-entrenched conflation of choreography with the dancing body. 'Is it possible for choreography to generate autonomous, accessible expressions of its principles – "choreographic objects" – without the body,' he asks, to generate nonhuman choreography or choreography that is 'unconscious of itself'? In this show, which coincides with the artist's five-year partnership with the Boston Ballet, Forsythe proposes a series of exertions across 11 diversely 'site-responsive' installations. Conceived as 'epistemological environments' for physical thinking, and improvisatory frameworks for motion activation, Forsythe's 'choreographic objects' ventriloquize us, as viewers, by establishing spatial parameters against

which our bodies gesturally adjust. The ceiling height in *A Volume, within Which It Is Not Possible for Certain Classes of Action to Arise* (2015), for instance, is brought so low as to necessitate an investigation of the crawl. A kinetic economy of endeavour quickly emerges, and several works in particular register only commensurately with our efforts.



William Forsythe, *The Fact of Matter*, 2019, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Courtesy: the artist and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; photograph: Liza Voll © William Forsythe

The threshold of requisite physicality is wide, however: both minimal (always deceptively), as in *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze* (2013), which directs us to hold a feather duster ‘absolutely still’ (a cruel stethoscope?), and maximal, as in *The Fact of Matter* (2009), which challenges us to traverse a dense cluster of polycarbonate rings at varying heights – an aesthetic nod to Forsythe’s fascination with the visual marginalia of sports science and occupational manuals. Likewise, *Aufwand* (*Expenditure*, 2015), a door hinged so tightly that it cannot be passed through, actually proffers a glimpse of *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, No. 3* (2015), a metronomic composition. Entered elsewhere, the work impels us to navigate while avoiding contact with all 80 plumb bobs in contrapuntal sway, puppeted by pneumatic pistons that audibly percuss the air.



Alignigung 2 (2017), shot at a glacial 200 frames per second and set to a Ryoji Ikeda score, follows two bodies infolding in algal knots, enmeshed in a ‘collapsed’ pas de deux distilled, in part, from Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s cloud-perched figures in dimensional configurations that explicate Forsythe’s notion of a ‘video-sculpture’. Attendant with a growing suspicion that there

is no inside or outside to action or its initiation, we find ourselves approaching the outer limits of choreographic practice that Forsythe queries.

Forsythe's project is as much a terminological one as anything; it's a test of choreography's capacity, as a category and class of ideas, to transit between media and across domains of practice – to verb itself. Deploying the terms 'choreography' and 'thinking' interchangeably, the exhibition delineates a field of inquiry and action; and Forsythe makes no secret of the fact that he is 'looking for readership'. An echo of 17th-century pedagogue Jan Amos Komensky, who stated that 'there is nothing in the understanding which was not before in the sense', 'Choreographic Objects' might – by outsourcing choreographic expression – actually help return us to our bodies.