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Originators: Transformation and Collaboration in the Production of Original Written Artefacts

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William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas, *Human Writes*, Performance view, 2010, Radialsystem, Berlin. Photography by Dominik Mentzos.



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Fig. 1: View of Trisha Brown's loft with drawings *Untitled* (New York), 2001, Charcoal on paper, 102 x 120 inches (259.1 x 304.8 cm) (wall, left); *Untitled* (New York), 2001, 102 x 120 inches (259.1 x 304.8 cm) (floor); and Burt Barr's *Double Feature*, 2000, Lithograph, 53.5 x 38.75 inches (135.9 x 98.4 cm) (wall, right), New York, December 2001. Photography by Burt Barr. Screenshot of the website of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, 5 June 2024 <<https://trishabrowncompany.org/archive/about-the-trisha-brown-archive.html>>.

Article

Written Artefacts in Performance, Writing as Performance: Origination and Dissemination

Franz Anton Cramer | Berlin

1. Introduction

Although dance and choreography are widely conceived of as an essentially body- and time-based art form, in cultural contexts of pervasive literacy they make use of writing in numerous ways, for different purposes, and to varying degrees. In fact, writing practices have been shown to be a constitutive part of dance making in Western modernity.¹ This makes an analysis of written artefacts in the field of performing arts a key concern both in understanding individual choreographic artefacts and in the historiography of dance at large.

Writing occurs at various levels and stages of conception, creation, and presentation of performance-based artworks. In general terms, it can have the function of preparing a performance (e.g. scores), of being part of the performance (as this article will explain), or of testifying to the pastness of performance (e.g. in archival contexts).

Written artefacts are thus produced in preparing the conceptual set-up or in applying for funding. Writing also happens as part and parcel of the performance itself, as an embodied action that may or may not have semiotic meaning. And writing is used for the purpose of documenting, remembering or archiving performance events and choreographic artefacts. These writings are shaped as part of the embodiment of the events and artefacts, and at the same time represent the practice, making it transferable to other viewing contexts and across time.

The question of how corporeality and orality of dance cultures relate to scriptural cultures is pertinent in both literate and non-literate ecosystems of dance and performance making.² It concerns the actual writing practices and skills employed by the relevant actors, as well as the representation of choreographic processes such as movements, thoughts,

ideas, developments, and fixations, via idiosyncratic writing rather than via standardised notation. When investigating choreographic manuscripts of the last decades, we are dealing with a pragmatic understanding of scripturality: one that shows less elaborate features than those of more traditional manuscript cultures, yet that also – through its conundrum of idiosyncratic and conventionalised writing – affords insight into the functionality and the valorisation of writing within artistic processes.

As far as writing as part of performance is concerned, the written artefacts sometimes vanish, for instance when writing happens on the dancers' / performers' bodies, or on elements of the stage that are washed off after the show or discarded with the stage set. In other cases, written artefacts produced during the performance are detached from their theatrical context and, once the live situation is over, are treated as objects in their own right, either in archival settings or, as this article investigates, in museal surroundings. In both cases they testify both to their originators and to their circumstances and processes of coming about.

In the last decades, artists of various fields have produced numerous examples of artistic action involving writing as a key element. A comprehensive list of examples would be long and would notably include, among others: Carolee Schneemann, Trisha Brown, William Forsythe, Martin Nachbar, Antonia Baehr, deufert&plischke and Jérôme Bel.³ In all cases, whether stemming from dance / choreography or performance and visual art, the entanglement of writing, performing, embodying and creating written artefacts has specific features with regards to style, aesthetics and dissemination.

¹ For further reading see Louppe 1994; Arns et al. 2004; Klementz 2002; Brandstetter et al. 2010; Bénichou 2015; Bouteloup and Malivel 2015; Plokhova and Portyannikova 2020; Forster 2021; Jeschke 2023.

² Leibovici 2014.

³ Klein and Cramer 2024; Wortelkamp 2021. In more general terms and referring to visual and performance art, the phenomenon has been categorized as 'gesturing bodies', Warr and Jones 2000, 70–91, 201–215.



Fig. 2: Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, performance, June 1976, Studiogalerie Berlin.

When investigating the formation of written artefacts and trying to understand their status as an original – in other words, when identifying what traces of interaction left by what actants have informed a specific written artefact to be considered an original – it seems obvious that the institutional, social and economic frameworks of the art form have a major role to play. Public theatres, independent venues, galleries, and museums have different forms and ways of communicating with the public and of dealing with the objectal qualities of a written artefact. And whether an artistic project is funded by the public sector or not is decisive for the possibility of its realisation and distribution, and thus its visibility and recognition. All of these factors are relevant indicators of the market value attributed to the works as a whole, and also to the value, appreciation and circulation of the written artefacts produced within the artistic process.

Two cases shall serve as examples to discuss the strategies and mechanisms at work here. They are from different artistic and aesthetic contexts and times:

1. Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (first performed 1973).
2. William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas, *Human Writes* (first performed 2005).

2. Schneemann

Throughout her artistic career, visual and performance artist Carolee Schneemann (1936–2019) worked on the interface between painting, writing, drawing, inscribing, performing, and exhibiting. She is essentially known in the field of visual arts, even though her practice leaned heavily on physical aspects and somatics, as well as performance.⁴ In *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973), she was hanging in a tree surgeon's harness attached to the ceiling by a rope. The floor and the adjacent walls were covered with large sheets of paper. While swinging back and forth and abandoning herself to the forces of gravity, pendulum, and her own weight, the artist traced marks on the paper – handwritten strokes and dashes, mostly round and haphazard, but at times also written in recognizable letters (see Fig. 2).

⁴ McPherson 1979.



Fig. 3: Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973 to 1976), installation, 2012, Museum of Modern Art, New York, object number 520.2012.a-j.

This performance was iterated nine times between 1973 and 1976, and its material conditions changed over the years and according to the circumstances. The artist was sometimes naked, sometimes clothed. She presented the work mostly in public spaces (usually museums and art galleries) but also sometimes at her studio. She nevertheless consistently created written artefacts that were produced by her own hands as she performed.

In subsequent years, Schneemann stopped performing herself and instead made an installation work out of the initial project. Thus, the initial performance was transformed into a material work of art that was bound to the museal context (see Fig. 3). In 2012, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City acquired this piece of installation art and the written artefacts that belonged to it. On its website, MoMA presents *Up to and Including Her Limits* in the following terms:

As *Up to and Including Her Limits* evolved, the artist wanted to capture and sustain the ephemeral work. This installation incorporates the harness and drawings from a performance at The Kitchen art space in New York in 1976, which are illuminated by a square of light emanating from a film projector, an element in several incarnations of the work. This glowing light and the performance documentation displayed on stacked video monitors stand in for the artist's body, which is now absent from the work.⁵

For this installation, Schneemann combined various utensils she used in the performance context, such as the harness and the sheets of paper she wrote on. To give an idea of the live action *Up to and Including Her Limits* originally consisted of, she added film documentation from performances.

⁵ MoMA, 'Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1973–76' <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/156834>> (accessed on 19 March 2024).



Fig. 4: William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas, *Human Writes*, performance view, 2010, Radialsystem, Berlin.

The installation has also been exhibited, for instance, in Salzburg's Museum der Moderne in 2015.⁶ It is obvious that this move towards an objectal quality linked to appreciation of the work as art, independent of the physical presence of its originator, is based on the artefacts produced in the live situation of the performance. Through this direct link to the originating gesture of the performative inscription of a prepared surface, and the fact of having it symbolise the performer's physicality – somewhat in the way religious relics stand in for the presence of the holy figure –, Schneemann is understood to be present via, among other objects, the inscribed surface, that is, the written artefact produced in the course of one particular performance. By way of the mechanisms of the art market, Schneemann's writings have been detached from her physical presence and visually presented as emanating directly from the artist. They are originals because the museal setting highlights their singularity and relevance, distinguishing the inscribed

surface of the performance paper from a mere scribbling or ephemeral doodle, an accidental by-product of the 'real performance' that has disappeared materially.

3. Forsythe / Thomas

A quite different example is the so-called 'performance installation' *Human Writes*, by choreographer William Forsythe (born 1949) and law professor Kendall Thomas.⁷ First iterated in 2005 by the dancers of The Forsythe Company at the Schauspielhaus Zürich, it was subsequently performed in Dresden, Frankfurt, Brussels, Istanbul, Berlin, Geneva and Stockholm, up until 2012.

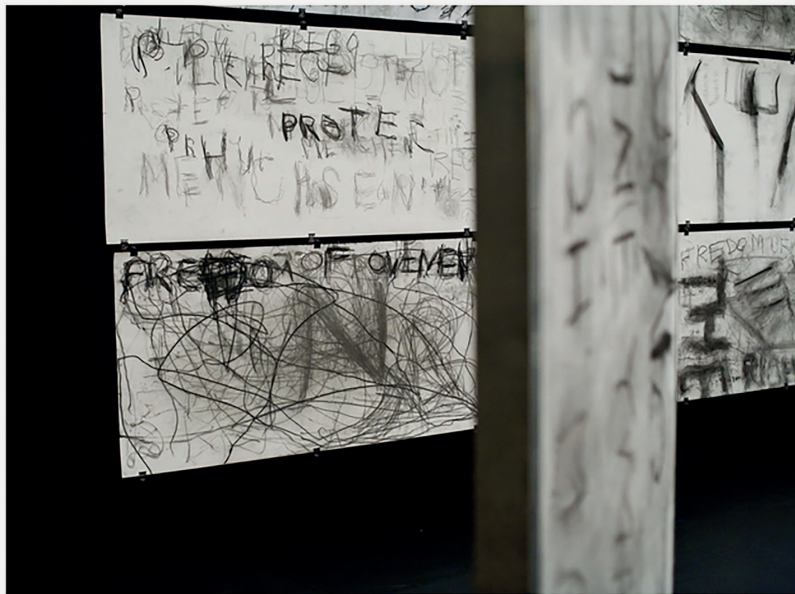
Playing with the homophony of 'right', as in law, and 'write', as in script, the project focused on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the UNO in the wake of World War II. *Human Writes* instantiated and artistically made visible the complex idea of Universal Human Rights by way of a live situation in which performers, assisted by members of the audience, tried to write down the

⁶ Breitwieser 2015, 228–239.

⁷ Kendall Thomas has been the Nash Professor of Law since 1984 and co-founder and director of the Center for the Study of Law and Culture at Columbia University, New York.

WILLIAM FORSYTHE CHOREOGRAPHIC OBJECTS

WORKS SOLO EXHIBITIONS GROUP EXHIBITIONS VIDEOS ESSAY THE LECTURES



HUMAN WRITES DRAWINGS

William Forsythe
1949, New York, NY (US) – Frankfurt am Main (DE)

William Forsythe and The Forsythe Company Ensemble
Human Writes - Performance installation by William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas

Courtesy of the artist

In the collections of:
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD)
British Museum, London
Akademie der Künste, Berlin
Folkwang Museum, Essen
Kunsthhaus, Zurich

Berlin, Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2009
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett, 2015
Berlin, Akademie der Künste, 2016
Essen, Folkwang Museum, 2019
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett, 2021
Zurich, Kunsthhaus, 2021

[Human Rights Watch](#)

Fig. 5: 'Human Writes Drawings 2005–2010', Screenshot from the website of William Forsythe.

articles of said declaration in various situations of constraint: blindfolded, with bound limbs, behind their back, etc. (see Fig. 4). They did so on a varying number of tables distributed in the respective performance spaces.

The tables were covered with large sheets of solid paper. On them, articles of the Declaration of Human Rights⁸ had been written down with pencil beforehand as thin and barely visible matrixes, as it were. The project consisted in the continuous act of over-writing – or writing over – these pre-written words, which thus served as blueprints to the acts of writing that the participants were to perform. Gerald Siegmund described the scene as follows:

The task the dancers have to perform together with the audience is to bring those thin and barely visible lines into existence. Pieces of charcoal and ropes may be used to spell out the letters. But nobody is allowed to do it directly. A set of rules stipulates that contact with the paper can only be

indirect. The coal is thrown at the tables to mark the letters with dots. It is tied to a rope held by two people across the table and [...] bounced up and down. Dancers stand with their backs to the tables, while the tables are moved [...] as if they were the writing instrument.⁹

Here is how the project is described on the website of William Forsythe:

In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Over 50 years later, in a joint project with Professor Kendall Thomas, The Forsythe Company focuses on the act of inscribing basic rules for both the individual and society. 'Human Writes' is a performative installation that reflects the history of human rights and the continuing obstacles to their full implementation.¹⁰

⁸ Articles 19 (Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression), 22 (Right to Social Security) and 26 (Right to Education) for the Zurich version. Other articles were included, based on the personal choice of participating dancers.

⁹ Siegmund 2011, 33.

¹⁰ William Forsythe, 'Human Writes' <https://www.williamforsythe.com/installations.html?&no_cache=1&detail=1&uid=16> (accessed on 18 April 2024).

As a writing project, *Human Writes* produces written artefacts above all. These highly idiosyncratic artefacts, striking the note of impossibility, failure and futility in their embodied realisation, testify first and foremost to the material arduousness of both writing and justice. ‘Human Rights is dirty work’ commented Kendall Thomas in a talk¹¹. Many press reviews as well as scholarly accounts also insist on this dirtiness and the fact that at the end of the performance, dancers and audience alike are sullied by traces of charcoal, graphite, and exhaustion.¹²

The written artefacts thus generated during the performance, and as one of the performance’s main topics, were subsequently detached from the enactment and its immediate liveness, to become art objects circulating on their own behalf,¹³ both in the museum and on the art market. As Thomas recounted in the above-quoted interview, after each performance William Forsythe would select a small number of manuscripts that to him seemed of an aesthetic quality, and would keep them (see Fig. 5).¹⁴ Under the title *Human Writes Drawings* they have since turned into a museal exhibition without any live performative elements.¹⁵

4. Concepting, Scripting, Originating

The labour and arduousness of writing are inscribed and fixed, imprinted in the artefacts whose value is inferred from their artistic context, namely the performance reality. However, in contrast to Schneemann, whose celebrity as an author reverberates as it were directly from the installation version of *Up to and Including Her Limits*, the material originators of the *Human Writes* objects are generally not mentioned by name. They are documented as participants in the respective performances, but in the version that circulates in the museum, authorship – and thus origination – is often granted solely to William Forsythe. Thus, the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, stated in a press release in 2019:

¹¹ Thomas and Franko 2010, 7.

¹² Huschka 2010 and Siegmund 2012 and 2011. In the accompanying publication to an exhibition held in 2018 at the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art, the entry for *Human Writes* was: ‘Performance, oilstick, graphite, and charcoal on paper’, Neri and Respini 2018, 85.

¹³ It is, however, one of William Forsythe’s artistic concerns to uncouple the notion of choreography and embodiment. He asks: ‘[I]s it possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, a choreographic object, without the body?’, Forsythe 2011, 90.

¹⁴ Thomas 2010, 9.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2019, <<https://www.museum-folkwang.de/de/ausstellung/william-forsythe-2019-im-museum-folkwang>> (accessed on 18 April 2024). As Kendall Thomas pointed out, revenues from the sale of these works were donated to human rights associations, Thomas 2010, 9.

Mit den ‘Human Writes Drawings’ gelingt es Forsythe, seine choreografische Auseinandersetzung mit den Menschenrechten in das Genre Zeichnung zu übertragen. Eine Auswahl dieser großformatigen Papierarbeiten wird im Frühsommer in der neuen Sammlungspräsentation zu sehen sein.¹⁶

With the ‘Human Rights Drawings’ Forsythe succeeds in translating his choreographic investigation of human rights in the genre of drawing. A selection of these large-format works on paper will be on display in the new collection presentation from early summer. (Own translation)

Strikingly, in this press release not only are the dancers, as scribes of the exhibited objects, totally eclipsed and replaced by William Forsythe as the originator, but even Kendall Thomas, co-author of the entire project, is completely overlooked. Even though, on the artist’s own website, credit for the museum version is given both to Forsythe and to Thomas, as well as to ‘the dancers’ (omitting, though, the audience participants),¹⁷ we can nevertheless claim that the dancers in particular have become the anonymous scribes of the originals conceived of by the authorial initiator. This cleavage between, on the one hand the actual (corporeal, embodied, manual) materialisation and, on the other the intellectual, spiritual or mental conception, is clearly an issue in *Human Writes*.

This sheds light on the question of authorship and the role a choreographer, as opposed to a performer, continues to have in the early twenty-first century. It is an issue that curator Claire Bishop labelled ‘delegated performance’.¹⁸ Her essay, with the same title, examines the practice employed by well-known performance artists such as Marina Abramović to deliver their performance work in iterations realised not by themselves but by (more often than not poorly paid) performers who receive little or no credit at all, even though their labour is sometimes quite heavy and arduous.

It is important to note, though, that the eclipse of both the performers and the co-author by the disseminating institutions

¹⁶ Museum Folkwang (ed.), ‘Der Mensch im Mittelpunkt – William Forsythe realisiert vier Arbeiten im Museum Folkwang’, 5 February 2019, <https://www.essen.de/meldungen/pressemeldung_1286294.de.html> (accessed on 18 April 2024).

¹⁷ The credit is: ‘William Forsythe and The Forsythe Company Ensemble / Human Writes – Performance installation by William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas / Courtesy of the artist’.

¹⁸ Bishop 2012.

is in contrast to Forsythe's own stance, as he has always been keen on collaborative work structures and has in the past often called his choreographies 'collaborations' between himself and the members of his company.¹⁹ However, the authenticating entity, in this case the art market, turns these collectively produced artefacts into originals by attributing them with single and totalising authorship for the sake of commercialisation.

5. Conclusion

In the examples presented, we can argue whether it is actually writing that we see, or rather some embodied practice that resembles scripting by way of gestural and material analogies (writing support, writing instrument, human movement, use of letters and signs). Yet the issue is not so much about written content as about the physical act of handling a writing utensil, of leaving traces on prepared surfaces, and thus of testifying to the artistic set-up from which the artefacts emerged. What comes to the fore, then, is the role of the individuals executing the writing and drawing gestures, along with the role of the author, indeed the originator of the entire project, and, last but not least, the authentication procedures that give the artefacts produced a specific value, symbolic status, and commercial as well as aesthetic visibility.

Artefacts produced in performance and as part of performance testify to the ambiguous and often blurred role 'the originator' has in contemporary artistic practices involving gestures of writing, as the one who realises a written artefact, or as the one who injects it with 'originality' in larger systems of dissemination.

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¹⁹ 'Forsythe has sought to break down the traditional hierarchy between choreographer and dancer. Programme notes [...] have credited the choreography to the dancers and himself. He has often referred to the Ballett Frankfurt as choreographic ensemble.', Spier 2011b, 102.

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Fig. 5: © William Forsythe <<https://www.williamforsythe.com/installations.html?&detail=1&uid=17>> (accessed on 18 April 2024); Photography by Alain Roux.

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