

## “In- Between Bodies”

### **I Introduction of the topic**

The rhythm sets in, the steps follow: “5, 6, 7, 8... 5, 6, 7, 8, each step each turn, each movement choreographed to follow the beat, to follow the sequence. But is there more to dance than just following a sequence of steps ? When I dance, I think of it as a conversation with space. Each step and each gesture is a form of expression, a silent dialogue with our surroundings that unfolds with every movement. In the world of choreography, as dancers move across the stage they navigate not only the physical space, but also the intangible spaces between themselves and the audience. I found inspiration in choreographers that challenge the notion of space and movement. For instance, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker captures the essence of her work by saying “ It's always about not just the space within the body but the space between bodies. How the space between performer and spectator changes, breathes and expands itself.”<sup>1</sup>

However, what exactly is the connection between movement and space, and how does it affect the dancer’s perception of the world around them? In order to open up this discussion, I will explore new perspectives on this dynamic between bodies and space in the context of choreography. Through this research, I aim to increase the understanding of spatial perception and its implications in other fields ranging from art and design to psychology. Looking at pioneering choreographers that push the boundaries of conventional perceptions of space, but also at Gestalt psychology to understand how our brains organize visual information. I intend to

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker with Gillian Jakab. "Social Bodies". the Museum of Modern Art. New York. March 29. 2017.

show how people can be easily influenced by space and movement, giving them back their consciousness and the power of decision.

## **II. Choreographic Innovations in Navigating Space**

In the realm of dance and choreography, it is important to start with the term “conventional movement”. It often refers to established forms and techniques, such as those found in classical ballet. These traditional styles emphasize specific body positions, steps, and gestures that have been studied over centuries in the practice of performance. Conventional ballet movements correspond to strict rules of alignment, turnout, and coordination, with an emphasis on precision and choreographic patterns. In contrast, innovative approaches to movement challenge these conventions by breaking away from rigid forms and exploring new possibilities of expression. Artists like Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Schlemmer, Forsythe and Jalet, have pushed the boundaries of conventional movement by experimenting with unconventional gestures, spatial relationships, and choreographic structures. Their work defies traditional balletic norms, inviting audiences to reconsider their understanding of movement, space, and the human body in motion.

Stepping into a world where geometric shapes come to life, where dancers merge with their surroundings, and where movement becomes a language of its own, it is important to dig deep into these choreographic explorations.

Starting with Oskar Schlemmer, a pioneering figure in the exploration of movement and space in dance.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1888, Schlemmer focuses on the fusion between movement and space to create visual experiences. He took inspiration from the principles of the Bauhaus and emphasizes the relation between form, movement and color in his work. In this renowned school of art, design and architecture in Germany, Oskar Schlemmer developed a unique choreographic style that mixed the boundaries between performer and the environment in his iconic performance, *Triadic Ballet*. It served as a statement to his innovative approach to dance and spatial design. Schlemmer explores the relationship between the human body and its surrounding space, using abstract forms and movements to evoke a sense of dynamism and fluidity. In the *Triadic Ballet*, Schlemmer integrates abstract geometric shapes and avant-garde costumes, creating a transformation of the performance space into a visual landscape. These abstract forms and movements evoke a dynamic and fluid relationship between the human body and its surroundings, inviting audiences to perceive space in innovative and unexpected ways. The dancers become living sculptures, their bodies are dressed with geometric costumes, accentuating every movement and every gesture. By incorporating elements of sculpture, painting, and architecture into his choreography, he leaves aside the distinction between performer and environment, inviting the viewers to immerse themselves in a multidimensional experience of dance.

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<sup>2</sup>Mead, David. "The Triadic Ballet." SeeingDance.com. September 27, 2022.



Figure 1: Triadic Ballet, Theater in Berlin, 1926.  
Oskar Schlemmer Triadic Ballet', 1922

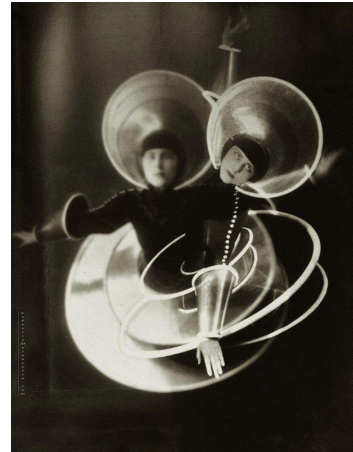


Figure 2:  
Costumes  
by Oskar  
Schlemmer

While Schlemmer focuses on the fusion between movement and space to create visual experiences, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, creates a groundbreaking choreography that redefined contemporary dance. Keersmaeker is a contemporary dance choreographer, born in 1960. She is known for creating captivating performances where the movement in relation with space tells its own story. One notable performance is her solo piece *Violin Phase*, performed at MoMA in New York in 2011. While performing this piece, Keersmaeker dances on sand, her movements creating captivating patterns that invite the audience to perceive space differently.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of the *violin phase* by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker is all about understanding the relationship between music and time, as well as the concepts of linear and nonlinear time; the piece offers insights into how movement unfolds in relation to temporal structures. This understanding of time enriches our perception of movement and space by emphasizing the temporal dimensions in choreographic compositions. By considering how choreographers

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<sup>3</sup> Kozak, Mariusz. "Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's Violin Phase and the Experience of Time, or Why Does Process Music Work?" Music Theory Online, vol. 27, no. 2, June 2021.

navigate temporal structures and create narrative trajectories through movement, we gain a deeper appreciation of how movement shapes our experience of space and time.

By challenging these notions, Keersmaecker opens up new ways for understanding the dynamic relationship between dancers and their environment. As well as highlighting the dynamic interplay between continuity and transformation in dance.

From the solo piece *Violin Phase*, by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, where movement and space intertwine in several ways, the focus is shifted to William Forsythe's precisions in his exploration of movement in choreography.

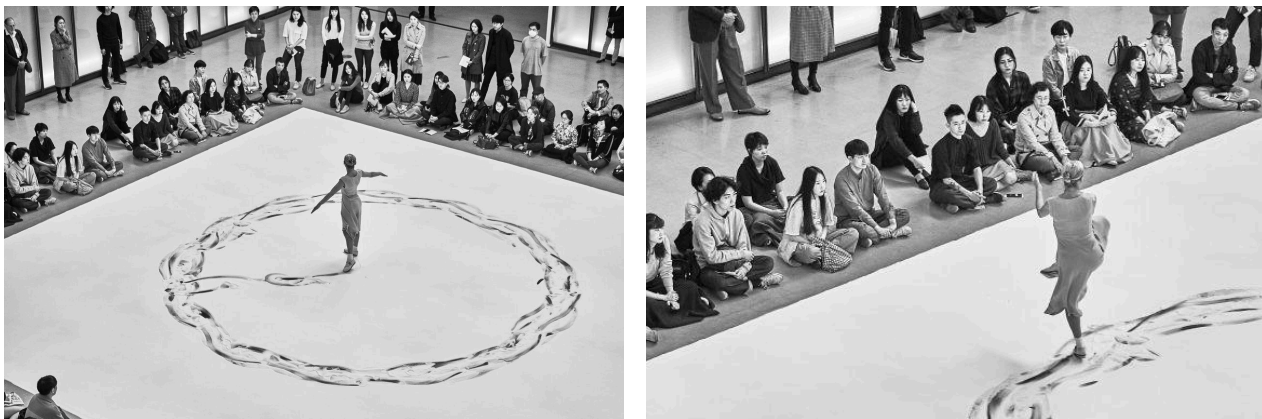


Figure 3: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea, "Violin Phase," published April 5, 2018,

Born in 1949, William Forsythe is a choreographer known for his groundbreaking approach to dance. He began his career as a dancer before becoming a choreographer. Forsythe is known for pushing the boundaries of traditional choreographing and exploring new dimensions

of space, body and movement. <sup>4</sup>Forsythe's interest in spatial concepts such as rotation, infraction and extrusion had led him to create choreographic works that redefine the relationship between the dancer's body and the surrounding space. William Forsythe's method comes from the principles of classical ballet, which he has studied and analyzed extensively. He recognized that ballet dancers are trained to match lines and forms in space. Starting from this point and twisting the classical ballet ideals, he developed his own unique choreographic vocabulary. By imagining lines in space that can be bent, tossed, or distorted, he takes basic ballet positions, such as the hands held over the head, and imagines endless transformations and variations that extend into space. Forsythe's choreographic method is the concept of "movement alphabets," a vocabulary of 135 movements that serve as keyframes in choreography, allowing dancers to explore the relationships between different positions and transitions. Forsythe's choreography, particularly exemplified in *One flat thing* draws inspiration from his extensive training in classical ballet, which he then subverts and reimagines through his innovative approach to movement and space. By deconstructing traditional ballet forms and introducing elements of unpredictability and dynamism, Forsythe challenges the audience's expectations and perceptions of dance.

His choreographic choices are driven by this desire to explore the boundaries of movement and spatial relationships, pushing dancers to their limits while creating visually captivating compositions. Through footwork, rapid directional changes and unexpected gestures, Forsythe's choreography demands a high level of technical precision and artistic expression from the performers.

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<sup>4</sup>Open ended group. "Dance geometry,Forsythe".

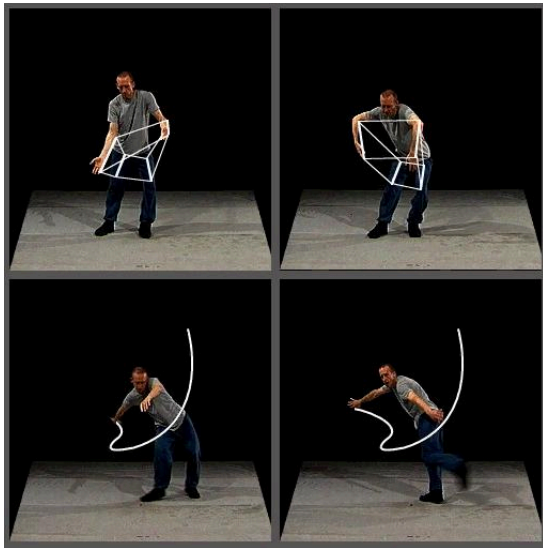


Figure 5: William Forsythe's movement alphabets & "One flat thing,"

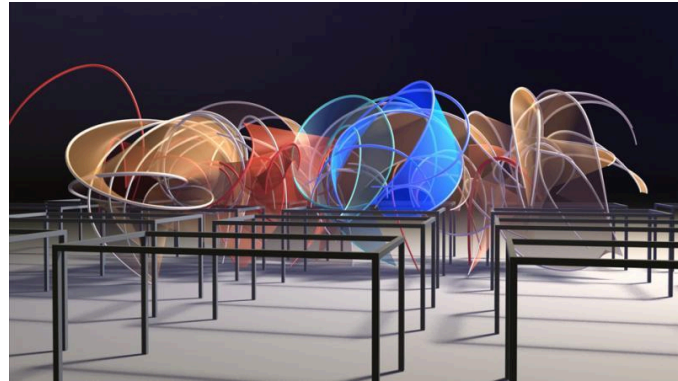


Figure 4: Forsythe Company, 2009

Shifting from William Forsythe's geometric choreography, we enter the immersive world created by Damien Jalet, where dancers mold into the environment. It's a shift from structure to fluidity that will open new paths for the exploration between space, movement and the body.

Damien Jalet was Born in 1976, he is an artist and choreographer that works with the concepts of dance and performance. Jalet collaborated with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, a belgian-moroccan choreographer on a piece called *Planet*. Jalet and Cherkaoui explore spatial dynamics and how performers interact with and navigate their surroundings. Through their choreographic language, they create a sensory experience that transports viewers into an alternate reality, where the performer and environment are not distinguished.<sup>5</sup> The performers move with a sense of purpose

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<sup>5</sup> Jalet, Damien. "Planet [Wanderer]." Damien Jalet

and intention, their movements imitate the flow of natural phenomena. In "Planet," the performance begins with a striking image: eight dancers stand before the audience. As they move, their bodies influence each other, merging into a singular entity. Throughout the performance the dancers transition fluidity between every movement, embodying elements of liquid, mineral, and powdery substances. They become tectonic faults, microscopic creatures, statues, and plants, evoking a sense of constant transformation and evolution.

Jalet's choreographic innovations challenge the audience to engage with space in new and unexpected ways, creating this curiosity of the dynamics between body, movement, and environment.



Fig6:Damien Jalet, "Planet", 2011



Fig7:Damien Jalet, "Planet", 2011

### III. Gestalt Psychology



The choreographers discussed above have stepped beyond the boundaries of conventional movement, creating narratives through dance.

However the question remains: how does the interplay between movement and space influence our understanding of the world around us ? To answer this question, it is essential to turn towards the neuroscience field. As the curtain falls on the choreographer's performances, a new perspective emerges. Gestalt psychology. Used to understand how our brains organize visual information in relation to space. Psychology and perception intersect to explain and discover more connections between movement and space.

Originating in the early 20th century, Gestalt psychology explores how humans perceive and organize their visual stimuli, giving insights on the complexities of perception.<sup>6</sup> Gestalt psychology states that humans perceive objects, not as isolated elements, but as organized wholes, with our minds naturally looking for patterns and connections in what we see. This theory focuses on principles such as figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, closure and symmetry, which dictate how we organize and interpret our visual information. Among all of these concepts, I chose to deeper analyze the figure-ground theory as this concept is really important to understand the relationship between movement and spatial perception. In the context of dance and choreography, as dancers perform on stage, they navigate through the physical space. The perception of their movements rely, in this case, on the audience that needs to have the ability to distinguish between the moving figures (dancers) and the static background (stage). Choreographers often use Gestalt principles to manipulate audiences or viewers'

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<sup>6</sup> "A Century of Gestalt Psychology in Visual Perception: I. Perceptual Grouping and Figure-Ground Organization," Psychological Bulletin 138, no. 6 (November 2012): 1172-1217.

perceptions, playing with figure-ground, but also proximity and other grouping mechanisms to create visually engaging performances. By understanding this principle and how movement and the body interact with the surrounding space, we can start making our own perceptions and making sense of choreographic compositions. Therefore, the principles of Gestalt, serve as foundational concepts for examining how movement influences spatial perception in dance and choreography.



Fig8,9:Figure-ground theory, Gestalt Psychology

#### **IV. Context and Significance**

As a dancer, engaged in the study of art media and technology, I find myself fascinated by how movement interacts with space, breaking the boundaries between disciplines. Exploring how movement and space intersect in different fields, can help us get a better understanding of the world around us, reaching art, design and psychology. Within the world of art, artists such as

Olafur Eliasson and Anish Kapoor stand out for their innovative approaches to manipulating movement and space. Eliasson's immersive installations, such as *Your Blind Passenger* at Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria, invite viewers to reconsider their perception of space and engage in sensorial experiences that step away from traditional constraints. Similarly, Kapoor's monumental sculptures, like "Cloud Gate" in Chicago's Millennium Park, play with form, scale, and reflection to distort and reshape the surrounding space, inviting viewers to interact with their environment in new and unexpected ways.



Fig10:Cloud gate, Anish Kapoor



Fig11: "your blind passenger", Olafur Eliasson

Es Devlin, a renowned stage artist and designer, who transforms space through her innovative use of light projection and form. She designs stages for well known artists such as Beyonce and Kanye West. Her set designs reimagine the relationship between performer and the environment, going beyond traditional stage settings. In Devlin's installations such as "forest of us" she uses reflective surfaces to create a labyrinth experience where visitors encounter multiple reflections of themselves, mixing the tangible with the intangible, what's real and what's not.



Fig 12,13:“Forest of us”, Es Devlin

In essence, the exploration of how movement affects our perception of space opens up a world of interdisciplinary possibilities. I am drawn to the ways in which movement shapes our perception of space and, in turn, influences creative expression across these diverse fields. Understanding this link can lead to new ideas and ways of expressing creativity.

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of movement and space has shown the impact on creativity and how we perceive the world. From stages to screens, movement shapes how we see, think, and create. What began as a hypothesis in the introduction has evolved into concrete ideas, supported by the innovative works of artists from Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker to Es Devlin. Through their groundbreaking discoveries it became clear that movement goes beyond the

physical realm. It has the ability to reshape our perceptions and inspire innovation. Furthermore, this discussion has led to a new significance of how movement and space intersect across different fields, such as art, design and psychology. These new artist's break-throughs open up new doors and inspire creators to keep on finding different perspectives, connections and ways of communication to share new realities. By continuing to explore new possibilities and innovations, I believe that this topic has the potential to reach infinite areas such as advertising to media and communication. Using creativity, movement and space in innovative ways, any message can be conveyed to the viewers by emphasizing new unnoticed forms, rhythms and perspectives.

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