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Dancing with risk: risk-taking as a performance practice in contemporary dance

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Thesis

Dancing With Risk

Risk-taking as a performance practice in contemporary dance

*What is the significance and function of voluntary risk-taking as a
performance practice in contemporary dance?*

Gemma Dawkins

**2010 Bachelor of Arts (Dance)
Honours**

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

Why is risk intentionally cultivated in contemporary dance? What purpose does it serve, for performers, choreographers and audiences?

This thesis explores the ways in which risk-taking affects the meaning and significance of a dance work. It seeks to question whether the use of risk can render a dance more powerful, affecting or confronting, or whether intentional risk overshadows and, thus, detracts attention away from the aesthetic content. I also ask how being 'at risk' affects the performer. Can it engender investment and authenticity?

The risks explored in this thesis include both physical and emotional or intellectual risks. I refer to the work of choreographers, visual and performing artists, sociologists, philosophers and psychologists to investigate the ways in which risk is used in contemporary dance to create meaning, authenticity and content, and I present varying views on its success and validity in doing so. I also draw parallels between the application of risk in dance and other arenas, including extreme sports, performance art, and modern society in general. Furthermore, I examine attitudes to risk from a historical perspective, discussing how prevailing views on risk have evolved with time and how this affects its treatment within dance.

Beyond defining risk and what it may be in a dance context, I address the topic by way of four major analytical frameworks: sociology, psychology, art and performance theory, and cultural theory. My findings via these discrete approaches allow for a broad summation of risk-taking in contemporary dance.

Declarations

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education

II. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made to the text; or

III. Contain any defamatory material

Signed:

Dated: 31/1/11

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Contents

1. Abstract	ii
2. Acknowledgements	iv
3. Introduction	1
4. Defining risk	3
5. Risk in sociology	4
5.1 Risk culture	4
5.2 The benefits of risk-taking behaviour	5
5.3 Risk in dance teaching	6
6. Risk in psychology	7
6.1 Managing and minimising risk for optimal performance	7
6.2 Risk and flow theory	9
7. Risk in art and performance	11
7.1 Risk in contemporary performance	11
7.2 Investment	11
7.3 Authenticity and the performer	14
7.4 Authenticity and audience	17
7.5 Risk and the creation of meaning	20
7.6 The performer/choreographer schism	23
8. Risk in cultural theory	
8.1 Risk as a modernist discourse	25
8.2 Risk as a postmodern discourse	27
8.3 Risk and failure	32
9. Conclusion	34
10. Bibliography	37

Introduction

As a dancer stands on stage a brick is falling from the air above. The dancer does not move until another dancer pushes him out of the path of the brick at the last possible moment (Wim Vandekeybus, *What the Body Does Not Remember*, 1987).

Backstage, a name is drawn out of a hat to determine which dancer will perform an improvised solo in the performance in thirty minutes' time (William Forsythe for Australian Dance Theatre, *The Enemy in the Figure*, 1992).

In their seats, audience members watch dancers risk "the pain of self-exposure" (Wehle, 1984, p. 35) as they confront the psychological inhibitions that the choreography demands they address (Pina Bausch, *Kontakthof*, 1978).

These examples are not isolated incidents, but rather illustrate a steadily developing phenomenon that gives rise to the question: why is risk intentionally cultivated in contemporary dance? What purpose does it serve, for performers, choreographers and audiences?

This thesis explores the ways in which risk-taking affects the meaning and significance of a dance work. It seeks to question whether the use of risk can render a dance more powerful, affecting or confronting, or whether intentional risk overshadows and, thus, detracts attention away from the aesthetic content. I also ask how being 'at risk' affects the performer. Can it cause them to become more involved or invested in performance, or does it engender too much anxiety for the experience to be enjoyable or fulfilling? How do audiences respond to risky performances? Does a dance work have to take risks in order to be valid or worthwhile? Are the answers to these questions affected by trends within society or by current philosophical fashions?

This thesis seeks to address these questions by investigating the notion of risk-taking in contemporary dance, specifically examining the significance and function of voluntary risk for performers, audiences and choreographers. The term 'voluntary risk' in this context refers to risks that are taken deliberately and purposefully, with the intention of employing the risk as a device or philosophical framework through which a desired outcome is achieved. It does not refer to circumstantial risks that arise within the dance industry, such as risks associated with occupational health and safety, or the ever-present risk of injury. While dancers and choreographers may knowingly accept these risks, they are not consciously employed in order to fulfill an agenda.

The risks explored in this thesis include both physical and emotional or intellectual risks. I refer to the work of choreographers, visual and performing artists, sociologists, philosophers and psychologists to investigate the ways in which risk is used in contemporary dance to create meaning, authenticity and content, and I present varying views on its success and validity in doing so. I also draw parallels between the application of risk in dance and other arenas, including extreme sports, performance art, and modern society in general. Furthermore, I examine attitudes to risk from a historical perspective, discussing how prevailing views on risk have evolved with time and how this affects its treatment within dance.

Beyond defining risk and what it may be in a dance context, I address the topic by way of four major analytical frameworks: sociology, psychology, art and performance theory, and cultural theory. My findings via these discrete approaches allow for a broad summation of risk-taking in contemporary dance.

Defining Risk

Defining risk as a performance practice or device is challenging. There is certainly a distinction between an undertaking which is defined as risky due to its potential for fatality, damage or harm, and one defined as such because of its thrill-seeking motives. For example, surfing is not defined as a risky pursuit only because it is grievously dangerous (though of course it is), but because its purpose is to provide a thrill which is directly caused by the risk-taking (Stranger, 1999, p. 267). The same can be said of dance, especially where the risk is emotional. While taking an emotional risk may not be particularly dangerous in terms of a threat to the performer's life or body, it is nevertheless risky and can be classified as such for two primary reasons. Firstly, it is risky by definition when the motive for engaging in it is to experience a thrill brought about by risk. Equally, the risk exists because the potential for failure is a real possibility.

Risk in performance involves a number of elements, including but not limited to: experiencing a sense of vulnerability and of being exposed or outside a comfort zone; the real possibility of failure; and a lack of control over external factors.

Risk can be responsible for bringing about what many commentators claim to be a sense of *authenticity* and *investment* (these terms and their context are examined in greater depth later in this thesis); not only in performers, but also for audiences and choreographers. If this is indeed the case, it could be argued that risk therefore engenders greater engagement in contemporary dance and contributes to the construction and interpretation of meaning within it. These are, however, contentious and often somewhat intangible interpretations, inviting ongoing debate.

Risk in sociology

Risk culture

In order to fully understand a form of dance, we must also understand the contextual setting from which it is produced, because “dance is not something plucked out of the air, nor dreamed from nothing by choreographers. It is a translation of practical consciousness, starting from what is, from what exists” (Brinson in Spencer, 1985, p. 212). A study of risk in dance, then, must begin with a study of risk in that dance’s society.

Risk as a cultural artifact has been discussed by scholars in great depth. Cultural attitudes to risk have evolved significantly even within recent history. Harari notes that “whereas premodern risk was believed to be generated by supernatural forces beyond human control, contemporary, incalculable risk is generated by humankind” (Harari, 2009, p. 173).

Research suggests that today’s attitudes perceive risk as a cerebral notion, to some extent within the control, and subject to the choices, of individuals. This is in direct contrast to historical attitudes to risk, which were more concerned with the idea of risk having some autonomy as a mystical phenomenon; beyond the realm of human control or influence (Harari, 2009, p. 173).

The literature concerning more current sociological attitudes to risk presents a different perspective. Modern Western society is frequently referred to as a “risk society” (Beck in Lupton, 1999, p. 59), obsessed with managing and controlling ever-increasing risks. Giddens believes it is modern society’s preoccupation with the future “which generates the notion of risk” (Harari, 2009, p. 174), and Beck attributes this focus on the future to the importance and production of wealth, of which greater risk, and an obsession with minimising and controlling it, is a direct byproduct (Lupton, 1999, p. 59). As a result, modern culture is classified as outcome-focused (Giddens in Lupton, 1999, p. 74).

The benefits of risk-taking behaviour

Lupton notes that a distinct counter-discourse has emerged, which emphasises the positive outcomes of engaging in risk-taking behaviour (Lupton, 1999, p. 149). Evidence can be found in the increased participation rates for high-risk leisure activities and extreme sports (Stranger, 1999, p. 265), and the fact that “certain modern performance practices have embraced the element of risk” (Harari, 2009, p. 173). Modern Western culture in general appears to reflect this trend, with advertising foregrounding daring, spontaneity, and ‘live in the moment’ ideologies (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993, p. 2). Whereas Victorian culture arguably favoured rationality, careful thought and consideration over rash behaviour, modern culture encourages us to “Just Do It” (Celsi, et al., 1993, p. 2). Macken highlights this development, noting that “the dare has been declared. Leave behind the speed limits, the smoke-free zones, tight deadlines, the low-fat shopping list, the SPF-15 routine and yell in the face of life” (Lupton, 1999, p. 149).

Numerous sources suggest that this ideology reflects a conception of risk as a pathway to a deviant or alternative lifestyle. One might reasonably presume that to deliberately put oneself at risk of harm, for little purpose beyond a thrill or experience, conflicts with human nature. However, Harari suggests that this view is no longer prevalent, and that rather:

in late modern society risk-taking is no longer considered deviant or negative, but is rather an accepted, even trendy, mode of interrupting the flow of everyday life, or transcending the mundane ... In short, it has become an *attempt to engage and explore an alternative reality* [emphasis added]. (Harari, 2009, p. 174)

According to this view, engagement in risk-taking behaviour can be attributed to an attempt to disentangle oneself from the highly regulated, controlled and structured nature of modern society, and to reconnect with a more natural or ‘authentic’ lifestyle, removed from the “norm” (Harari,

2009, p. 174). Authenticity is a term which is frequently linked with ideas of risk in dance, and is a feature I will comment upon further in my explanation of risk from an artistic framework.

Risk in dance teaching

The culture of dance education, too, now values risk-taking as a highly advantageous teaching tool. In 1991, The Australian Association for Dance Education (now Ausdance) prepared a position paper detailing the organisation's official stance on the desired trajectory and outcomes of dance in Australian schools (Osmotherley, 1991). A key objective was identified as developing students' "willingness to take risks and accept challenges" (Osmotherley, 1991, p. 7). The official incorporation of risk-taking as a performance practice in the national dance education agenda represents the significance of risk's presence in contemporary culture, and the extent to which it is embodied in our consciousness. Dance students are encouraged to take risks because, as declared by choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker upon the opening of her school (the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios, in Brussels), "discoveries are made only by taking risks" (Grauman, 1995).

Risk in psychology

Managing and minimising risk for optimal performance

There is an abundance of information available regarding risk from a performance psychology perspective. The literature I have collated in this section is particularly relevant to an analysis of the significance and impact of risk for performers and approaches the idea of risk as a 'problem' to be managed and controlled through the application of logic and practical scientific steps. This framework engages with the concept of risk from a rational, scientific viewpoint. It is largely concerned with explaining why a performer feels at risk, and usually focuses on minimising or harnessing that risk to achieve the most beneficial outcome – optimal performance - for the individual (Taylor & Taylor, 1995).

The consensus amongst the psychological literature is that risk has a clear functionality for performers, in that perception of risk directly affects the way an individual engages with what they are doing and motivates their actions (Slovic & Peters, 2006, p. 322). This motivational potentiality can have a positive or negative impact. Much of the psychological research focuses on strategies to maintain a positive equilibrium between too much and too little risk (Wilson, 1994, p. 186):

In general, psychology-based approaches to risk regard it with wariness; by definition, risk involves a real possibility of failure (Newson, 1993).

Performance psychology is steeped in probabilities and its theorists seek out the most predictable and stable patterns in which performers should invest in order to ease anxiety and increase motivation (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p. 33). Engaging in risk-based behaviour means the outcome is unpredictable, which can be problematic, given that "dancers are typically motivated to engage in activities in which they often succeed because the experience reinforces and enhances their self-confidence and sense of

competence. Conversely, dancers have little motivation to participate in activities in which they usually fail" (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p. 33).

However, psychological texts on risk also note that to some extent, risk is beneficial in maintaining a dancer's motivation and performance capability. Wilson notes that "a certain degree of emotional arousal", caused by the performer feeling at risk or challenged beyond the capabilities of which they are certain, "is usually beneficial to performance, and this even applies to levels of anxiety that seem uncomfortable and unwelcome to the performer himself" (Wilson, 1994, p. 186). This is in part due to a generally agreed upon formula which suggests that while an excess of risk will be detrimental to a dancer's motivation and performance ability, causing too much anxiety to be beneficial, the absence of risk leads to boredom, lack of motivation, and a deficiency of the required adrenaline; states which are equally detrimental to the performer (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, pp. 33-34). A happy medium will create optimum performance; this rule is referred to as the 'Yerkes-Dodson Law' (Wilson, 1994, p. 186). The effect of risk or its absence on a dancer is also sometimes referred to in psychological literature as a dancer's 'intensity' (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p. 49).

Evidently, there is some contention amongst psychologically-based research as to the value of voluntary risk-taking in dance. The majority suggest that an optimal outcome can be reached when the risk to a dancer is equally matched to their skills; so the challenge is neither beyond their capabilities nor too easily attainable (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p. 33). This definition is, however, problematic. I would argue that if the challenge perfectly matches the dancer's ability, there is no authentic risk, but only a likelihood of success. Of course in performance, there is always a possibility of failure (Harari, 2009, p. 174), but if the possibility is unlikely, can this be legitimately categorised as a genuine risk? This tautology brings into stark relief some of the arguments posed by postmodern criticisms of risk-theory, and I elaborate upon them further in my examination of risk through a framework of cultural theory.

Risk and flow theory

Psychological literature reveals another concept relevant to a study of risk in dance: the notion of 'flow' as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1988). Flow occurs when an individual is internally or intrinsically motivated to participate in a given activity, because the experience is "*autotelic*, or rewarding in and of itself" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 8). The term 'flow' refers to the experience whereby an individual is completely engrossed and immersed in what they are doing and is able to reach a point of ecstasy, sometimes described as a 'transcendence of self' or a loss of self-awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Flow is used to

explain the psychic process whereby ... transcendence occurs. Flow theorists argue that the achievement of these ecstatic moments – which they call optimal experience – can be understood in terms of a harmonious match between challenge and skill, where there is a 'merging of activity and awareness'. (Stranger, 1999, p. 268)

Surfing has been used as an example of an flow-inducing activity in which "it is a total engagement of psychic capacities in a physical challenge" (Stranger, 1999, p. 270) which creates the optimal experience. This physicality as a means to achieve transcendence is a feature of flow which can and, indeed, has been applied to dance.

Because flow can only occur when an individual is challenged in some way (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 33), risk - both physical and emotional or psychological – provides a dancer with an ideal breeding ground for flow. Mitchell notes the need for balance in an individual's engagement with risk, if they are to achieve a sense of flow within their daily lives, introducing the terms *anomie* and *alienation* to describe the binary relationship between the two polarities of flow:

Anomie is experienced when uncertainty about behavioural outcomes extends to the greater part of social interactions met by the individual ... when the behaviour of others in [an] interaction and the effect of one's own acts upon those others remain uncertain ... [However] when people can predict their own behaviours on the basis of the social order in which they are situated, when they perceive their world as constrained by social forces, bound over by rule and regulation at every turn to the extent that personal creativity and spontaneity are stifled, when they know what they will and must do in a given situation regardless of their own interests, they experience *alienation* ... when the social world becomes too certain, the individual feels powerless and self-estranged. (Mitchell Jnr., 1988, pp. 42-43)

According to Mitchell, a lack of stability or routine, brought about by an individual indulging consistently in risks, can cause *anomie*, leading to feelings of meaninglessness or isolation. Conversely, an absence of risk and an excess of predictability, leading to *alienation*, is not rewarding and can cause feelings of impotence or the belief that the individual has no effect on or control over their own circumstances.

One could infer, then, that some degree of risk or unpredictability is necessary for a dancer or performer to glean a sense of meaningfulness or purpose from their actions and profession. Mitchell's conclusions are far more wide-reaching, in that they concern all individuals within society, however, I propose that these concepts are of particular relevance to dancers who, by nature of working as live performers, deal regularly with personal risk and unpredictable outcomes. I will further expand upon the idea of performance as a risk when discussing risk through an art-based framework.

Risk in art and performance

Risk in contemporary performance

Risk has increasingly become a predominant feature in contemporary performance, defining new approaches to performance theory and practice (Harari, 2009, p. 173). This sentiment is common among performance theorists: Etchells claims that “risk is the thing we are striving for in the performance” (Etchells, 1999, p. 49). The significance of risk in contemporary performance is evident through the practice and bodies of work of a number of performance artists and choreographers, including Felix Ruckert, Lloyd Newson, Anouk van Dijk, Jerome Bel, and Xavier le Roy. It is this application of risk theories to performance, and dance specifically, which poses questions about the ways risk can be used to create and convey meaning. Furthermore, the practices of these artists shed light on the contentious issue of whether risk is necessary for work to be of ‘value’, and why.

Investment

One of the key outcomes choreographers refer to when utilising risk as a philosophy in dance is that it fosters emotional *investment* in the performance; for anyone implicated in the risk, including performers, audience members and choreographers. Etchells describes the notion of the performer’s investment and its significance to the work being performed:

Investment is what happens when the performers before us seem bound up unspeakably with what they’re doing – it seems to matter to them, it appears to hurt them or threatens to pleasure them, in some quiet and terrible way. Investment is the bottom line – without it nothing matters ... Investment is the line of connection between performer and their text or their task ... investment draws us in. Something is happening – real and therefore risked ... and the performers are ‘left open’ or ‘left exposed’. (Etchells, 1999, pp. 48-49)

A performer becomes invested in their work when they feel it has real implications for them, when it matters and affects them profoundly. Without investment, a performer is merely going through the motions, or pretending; their performance has no real meaning for them personally and will not impact upon them when it is over. The idea of a performance's effect on the future is integral to the concept of performer investment: "investment forces us to know that performative actions have real consequence beyond the performance arena" (Etchells, 1999, p. 49).

Being at risk in a performance, both physically and particularly emotionally, fosters a dancer's investment in their performance, because being at risk creates an environment of vulnerability. If the dancer cannot predict the likely outcome of a performance, if they feel exposed or that there is a significant risk of failing at their assigned task or revealing too much of themselves, they will logically feel more implicated and invested in their performance than if they believe it is a safe and predictable undertaking. The psychological origins of this response can be found in the previously discussed concepts of *anomie* and *alienation*.

A prime example of risk-taking leading to greater performance investment can be found in dancer Fabien Prioville's account of his experience performing in a work entitled *Airbag* (personal communication, October 2, 2010). An eleven minute duo, the work required that Prioville repeatedly catch his partner, who was throwing herself into the air on the other side of the stage. Prioville's timing, in knowing precisely when to cross the stage and catch his partner before she hit the ground, was pivotal not only to the successful performance of the choreography, but in protecting the safety of his partner, who disposed of caution and trusted Prioville entirely to protect her wellbeing. Prioville's role had a 'real' outcome, as Etchells intimated, beyond the realm of the performance itself.

Describing this experience, Prioville determined that the work was "special ... there was something more than just performing" (personal

communication, October 2, 2010), and attributed this conviction to the fact that his *responsibility* in the work was exacerbated: "someone else was relying on me" (personal communication, October 2, 2010). When questioned as to how this affected his personal investment in the piece, Prioville confirmed that, unlike other works in which he could at times rely on muscle memory or 'autopilot', in *Airbag* he was fully absorbed in his performance, completely and at all times (personal communication, October 2, 2010). This certainly suggests that the heightened risk-factor was, at least in part, responsible for Prioville's keener mental and personal investment in his performance.

However, investment does not only occur in the realm of the performer. Audiences too can become emotionally invested in a performance. Kohut proposes that the "openness and vulnerability of the artist" has a "consequential and beneficial psychological effect on others" (in Press, 2002, p. 74). Seeing a performer invested in their work necessarily involves the audience, perhaps because they experience empathy and can recognise, even if subconsciously, that "the world of illusion which the audience expects from the artist is ... the world of their real selves, the image of their own world, the translation of their hopes and joys and sufferings into the magic of the stage" (Weidman in Press, 2002, p. 75).

The work of choreographer Elizabeth Streb is highly physical, and fraught with risk. In using risk as an agenda to create meaning in her work, she has found that the audience is deeply affected and becomes invested in the performance along with the dancers. Many of her works necessitate

going to a place that's not comfortable and that you've actually been told is off limits ... For a good month I was completely startled by the reaction of audiences, which was pretty vociferous ... it had some kind of resonance for people in their lives, like, 'Oh, my God, don't do that, please!' (Streb in Morgenroth, 2004, p. 106)

Seeing Streb's dancers putting themselves at risk created a reaction in the audience akin to that of a circus show, which also hinges on feats of daring

and risk. Perhaps the key difference lies in the intended meaning behind the performance: while risk is employed in circus shows to entertain with bravado and spectacle, contemporary dance – certainly Streb’s work – (often) seeks to use risk to illustrate a more abstract idea and pose questions to the audience regarding why the risk-taking affects and engages them the way it does. In this sense risk is a functional element of performance: “the concept of risk has proliferated in reference to performance that wishes to regain its function as a cultural site” (Harari, 2009, p. 175). In this sense, risk-taking allows the performance to facilitate critical debate, albeit silently, in the minds of the audience.

Commenting from an audience perspective, Gardner certainly substantiates the argument that risky performances are more affecting than ‘safe’ ones: “the circus performances I always enjoy most are those when something fails, when the performers try to do the impossible with their bodies and simply try again” (Gardner, 2009). Gardner appreciates risk in performance because it is “far more interesting than the pretence that no one is breaking a sweat” (Gardner, 2009).

This notion introduces another key concept that arises out of risk in dance: that of the performer’s authenticity.

Authenticity and the performer

Taking a risk in performance has been credited with leading to the dancer inhabiting a performance which is referred to as ‘authentic’ or ‘real.’ Theoretically, authenticity occurs when the performer is being truthful onstage in representing their own personal identity, or genuinely embodying a role, rather than superficially taking on the affectations of a character or portraying an idea of how they should perform. Of course, authenticity is an intangible notion because there is no known objective measure of authenticity; rather, it is a constructed concept which is immeasurable. There is, nevertheless, an implicit understanding of what it is

to be authentic or, at least, appear to be authentic (though strictly speaking this is an oxymoron). In its most idealised incarnation, authenticity on stage does not allow for *portraying*, for “the shape of a passion and the noise of a politics” (Etchells, 1999, p. 48), but only for truly *being*.

The presence of risk in performance is a catalyst for the cultivation of authenticity. This is due to the fact that

risk is inherent to performance and to the performative, which on a very basic cognitive level always involve decision-making, weighing alternatives in terms of their desirability and likelihood, as well as the performer’s responsibility for the future outcomes of his or her acts. (Harari, 2009, p. 175)

When a dancer is at risk in a performance, the risk is not pretence; it has real outcomes for the dancer, whether the physical outcome of being hurt or the emotional impact of feeling compromised, vulnerable, or of having failed. The dancer must take responsibility for his or her own actions on stage and within the performance, and so must own some element of the performance. In this sense, it is the individual dancer – not the character or role they portray - who is at risk, and therefore the individual dancer is ‘real’, ‘present’, ‘authentic’.

Xavier Le Roy has investigated using games as a choreographic device, in order to bring about authenticity in his dancers. His 2003 work *Project* used games to introduce an element of risk, and played with rules to inform the choreographic process, resulting in

different levels of involvement of the actors in the choreography. The game is used as a tool to enable performers to go beyond the mere performing of a role ... The goal is to point out what stands between the ‘reality’ of the player’s actions while playing and the ‘fiction’ of the role he or she performs. (Le Roy, 2003)

This idea may be linked to the availability of choice in the performance, in that the performer is responsible for decision-making on stage which affects

the outcome of the game and is, therefore, being authentic in their actions rather than playing a role which is predetermined and rehearsed. This allows Le Roy to “disembody the authority of simulation” (Le Roy, 2000). While Le Roy determines the availability of the choices, the performers themselves have the autonomy to select their own responses onstage and are therefore performing their own identities.

A dancer’s authenticity in performance has implications for their own sense of personal satisfaction and ability to find meaning or purpose in their work. Returning briefly to the psychological concept of flow, Mitchell notes that “flow is possible only when real, meaningful, fateful outcomes are dependent upon the volitional action of participants. Activities that are trivial in substance or beyond the control of the actors do not facilitate flow” (1988, p. 55). Performers have to feel that they are pursuing something significant, that is somewhere within their grasp, in order to reach optimal experience, and being authentic in that process – and authentically at risk – is essential for this to be the case. Grotowsky eloquently summarised the relationship between risk and authenticity, asserting that “every performance is as hazardous, as risky, as a rehearsal ... nothing protects me from the risk of losing, during a performance, all that I have obtained. Such are the conditions under which my spontaneity and my totality appear in all their authenticity” (Harari, 2009, p. 176).

Choreographer Wim Vandekeybus refers also to risk-taking as a means to generate not only authentic emotional performance, but also authentic physical movement. His 1987 work *What The Body Does Not Remember* introduced risk as a framework through which to force the performers’ bodies to resort to instinctive, and therefore ‘authentic’ movement, in a culture in which bodies (particularly those of dancers) are ingrained with trained, learned movement patterns and skills. The risks the dancers submitted to in the work were intended to overwrite these imported movement pathways and recall authentic movement. For example, when the dancers have to escape out of the trajectory of falling bricks, they are being

strategically manipulated into reverting to instinctive movement, which is more authentic to human movement than invented choreography. Jans notes that:

What the body has forgotten in its everyday reality is its instinctive trust in its own nature ... We try to take chance and the unexpected into our calculations, to protect or insure ourselves against it. When the body actually comes up against immediate danger or menace, instinct may or may not manifest itself again. It is that moment that Vandekeybus looks for and puts on stage in his performances. ' ... For me it is important that we ... make the public question the authenticity of things. Right from the beginning, one of my mottos has been: back to reality. A return to "real" movement, which others later called dance,' says Vandekeybus. In Vandekeybus' performances the body is shown 'in free fall', delivered up to forces it can no longer control, given over to 'reality'. It can be said, somewhat simplistically, that in Vandekeybus' dance, nature breaks through culture once again. Set against a society that depends on an unambiguous and coded physicality, Vandekeybus presents a body that frees itself of its cultural references under extreme circumstances. (Jans, 1999, p. 8)

Authenticity and audience

Beyond employing authenticity to enhance the performer's experience and open new avenues for generating movement, there are also choreographers who are interested in the performer's authenticity as a means to connect with the audience. Dutch choreographer Anouk van Dijk recognises the role of risk in allowing her dancers to engage authentically with the choreography: "the driving force for my work comes from the authenticity of the dancers on stage and the sincerity with which they take certain risks" (van Dijk in van der Linden, 2008, p. 5). However, while it is important to van Dijk that her dancers be authentically invested in her work, she is also aware of the effect that this has on the audience and harnesses the imminent threat of failure as a central element of her work:

Dancers are always balancing on the edge of success and failure. This vulnerability is also a strength and, as a creator, I want to show that area of tension. In dance you are constantly battling with glamour. What you see is not usually what it feels like, and there is tension between the artificial and the natural, and the cerebral and the

animal. It is all about someone who is at odds, yet in harmony, with themselves. Someone who is trying to stand their ground, both literally and figuratively. This is what makes dance, in my view, more theatrical and exciting than any other art form. (van Dijk, 2010)

In presenting vulnerability on stage by positioning her dancers in risky situations, van Dijk acknowledges the emotional power of the authentic dancer in communicating to and engaging audiences.

Similarly, Gardner recalls “the shock of first seeing the pain and exhaustion etched on the faces of Pina Bausch’s dancers – so real, it felt almost indecent” (Gardner, 2009). The perceived reality, or authenticity, of the dancers was more affecting and engaging for Gardner than work which was “risk-adverse” (Gardner, 2009).

Elizabeth Streb takes a more egalitarian (or, perhaps, economical) approach to addressing authenticity for an audience. Discussing how she endeavours to undertake a choreographic practice that engages successfully with audience demands, Streb declares “I’m not sure that movement alone can fill out a theatrical space in this day and age or keep people’s attention in the way that I think a show needs to. So I am theatricalizing my show” (Morgenroth, 2004, p. 114). In a piece entitled *Squirm*, Streb had eight dancers locked in a transparent box onstage. A ninth dancer then squirmed through the box, despite the lack of space. The ninth dancer suffered from claustrophobia, which Streb considered an excellent element of emotional complexity, providing a window through which to examine why the choreographic task invoked fear in the dancer (Morgenroth, 2004, p. 105). The fact that this dancer would be suffering real fear in the process of performing meant that – supposedly - he would be more authentic in his performance. Regardless of whether this would make the experience more fulfilling for him personally, it could certainly be argued that this kind of personal investment and authenticity from performers makes the performance more arresting for audiences.

The issue of whether or not the audience can consistently and genuinely recognise a performer's authenticity, however, is one of contention.

Choreographer Clare Dyson is particularly interested in the performer's authenticity as a means to foster audience engagement. For her work *Being There* (2007), Dyson sought audience feedback, which revealed that

the performers' realness made [audience members] engage with the dancers more: 'We really felt them fall and cry and hurt themselves'. Other feedback supported this: it was suggested that when the performers spoke text that they didn't write the connection was broken – because 'they weren't as believable as when they were just being themselves'. In other words, they were not authentic. (Dyson, 2009, p. 4)

Dyson goes on to reference the work of Pina Bausch as a choreographer who tapped into the possibilities of authenticity produced by risk, noting that "Bausch utilised theatricality but asked her performers to undergo often difficult situations on stage, so they reveal themselves as people – thus forming an unexpected and individual connection with the audience" (Dyson, 2009, p. 5).

Dyson is certainly not alone in classifying Bausch as a risk-taking choreographer. Bausch's choreography has been described as the "pornography of pain" (Croce in Supree et al., 1986, p. 82), while Shevtsova argues that Bausch's risk-taking agenda is so pivotal to her work that her dancers "use their personal experiences – generally anxieties – as the very subject matter of performance" (Shevtsova, 2003, p. 9), consistently being asked to "push back their psychological limits while they go 'from the inside out' as (Bausch) puts in, as if she were quoting Stanislavsky (Shevtsova, 2003, p. 9). This certainly indicates an engagement with authenticity as a performance practice.

American dancer and choreographer Daniel Nagrin refers to Spanish poet Federico García Lorca's concept of *duende* in justifying the need for dancers to take risks, explaining that "to have *duende* in the act of performing, one

gives over being careful and risks opening the dark gates of one's inner being" (Nagrin, 1988, p. 188). *Duende* is by its nature an authentic performance presence, impossible to cosmetically imitate. According to Nagrin, therefore, the dancer engaging in risk necessarily enriches the audience's reception of the performance, by means of their authenticity.

Franko B, a performance and visual artist who blurs boundaries between genres, has taken authenticity to extremes in terms of bodily risk. His work *I Miss You!* (2003), performed at the TATE Modern Museum, consisted of the artist, covered in white body paint, walking slowly up and down an aisle reminiscent of a catwalk, while bleeding from open veins in his arms. The performance was obviously controversial, and affected audience members deeply and varyingly. *I Miss You!* epitomises the most unadorned incarnation of performer authenticity; he 'really' bled, in the 'real world'. Franko B makes literal the concept of placing his body on the line for his art.

One outcome of this approach was that the performer's risk-taking had an emotional effect on the audience, causing them to feel invested in the performance themselves (Doyle, 2005). It could also be described as placing the audience at risk, by implicating them in a confronting emotional situation which made them feel vulnerable: "the risk we take in attending such a performance is that we might actually feel something" (Doyle, 2005), reflecting a trend in which "the artist offers him or her self up to the audience ... soliciting a personal, emotional, and narcissistic investment from the spectator" (Doyle, 2005). Doyle proposes that what was shocking about the work was not the violence or controversy of it, but that Franko B managed to divert the self-indulgent representation of the performer's emotional state and elicit real feelings in the audience (Doyle, 2005).

Risk and the creation of meaning

There is also a distinct faction of choreographers who choose to work with risk and authenticity in order to create work which is, in their opinion, more

inherently meaningful or significant than work which is not concerned with these performance agendas. In this sense, risk has implications for choreographers and producers of dance, as well as performers and audiences.

One example can be found in the advent of 'extreme' forms of dance such as tumbling and physical theatre and its incorporation into more mainstream representations of contemporary dance. Turner argues that "dance companies like DV8, V-Tol and Random have developed energetic, high-risk and extreme forms of physical expressiveness. By pushing the body to its limits, choreography comes to explore the limits of humanity" (2005, p. 11).

In this instance, the physical risk performs the function of a metaphor, providing a physical representation of an attempt to break boundaries, produce something new and something that has meaning and weight. This perspective represents a dance-specific illustration of the proverb 'nothing risked, nothing gained', and emphasises why dance teaching methods so encourage risk-taking. Avoiding risk necessarily means avoiding dance which has not already been created and trialled, because anything new is untested. By this definition, risk is a prerequisite of choreographing.

Describing his reasons for employing risk as a choreographic practice, Xavier Le Roy states

I wanted to work between the types of work processes that each of us knew and practiced, to be able to find new ones. I expected that we concentrated on the questions and problems I had proposed without taking refuge in the comfortable habits of known experiences that we could infinitely repeat. (Le Roy, 2000)

It is perhaps this desire to avoid 'safe' and 'known' dance practices that has fed the interest in physical risk-taking in dance, though ironically it could be argued that physical daring has now simply replaced previous forms of virtuosity as the new 'safe' approach to dance.

Certain choreographers are fascinated by the potential of risk, as a performance practice, to allow for the dancer's arrival at a point accessible only via danger. Wim Vandekeybus identifies this as an important choreographic strategy that grants him and his audience access to an otherwise hidden emotional landscape. He places his dancers at risk so that

It comes to the point where the body has to surrender blindly to what it can no longer remember: to its own instincts (which ensure that the falling body lands safely on the floor without being hurt) and to trusting in another body in the vicinity (to pull it away from the falling stone in time). Not only does [this] force the dancer to go to the limits of his powers and capabilities, it also confronts him with his own vulnerability. [It] shows the moment when power comes up against its own limitations, and recognises and admits its own fragility (Jans, 1999, p. 16).

For Vandekeybus, taking risks means pushing physical and emotional boundaries, and hopefully breaking them. Risk is therefore integral to his success in creating meaningful work.

However, the belief that physical risk can engender real or significant meaning in dance is not a universal one. Though he is cited as one of the choreographers who pioneered physical risk, Lloyd Newson has also deliberately avoided it "because we had done this before and I felt it had been repeated so often on the European dance circuit that it was now a cliché" (Newson, 1993). He further voiced his criticisms of the limits of physical risks and their capacity to communicate:

Dance has always dealt with success – how many pirouettes I can do, how high my leg can be. It's about showing how successful you can be; but if that is the criterion for what is presented on stage, then you're only talking about life's successes. You're not talking about failures; you're not talking about insecurities. I think vulnerability is a highly important theatrical tool, because we all identify with it. We can sit back and go, 'Wow, they flung themselves through midair and they're caught at the last moment, how skillful'; but it's also distancing. I would like the people on stage to be pulled into a deeper visceral connection than physical danger. (Newson in Shank, 1993, p. 20)

Risk in dance is not limited to the physical or emotional, however. Conceptual risk-taking is another area in which Newson has some expertise. He emphasises the lack of value placed on risks “in terms of content or approach” (Newson, 1993), and claims that risk can be found in simply attempting new methodologies in creating work, or tackling themes which are difficult or confronting, such as 1993’s *MSM* (Shank, 1993, p. 18).

Newson is not alone in proposing this. Felix Ruckert is another choreographer who delves into deliberately risky, confronting content in order to connect with the audience in a meaningful and affecting way. His work has explored themes of sexuality and sado-masochism, often involving the audience in revealing and participatory situations. He says of this approach, “It is a big challenge, but I think that is why people go to see art” (Ruckert, 2005). Perhaps Etchells would support this view of performance as a cultural site, saying “I ask of each performance: will I carry this event with me tomorrow? Will it haunt me? Will it change you, will it change me, will it change things? If not it was a waste of time” (Etchells, 1999, p. 49).

The performer/choreographer schism

The examples cited reveal a certain distinction between the function of risk for performers and for choreographers, though they may be implicated in the same risk in different ways. Though these roles are related, from an artistic framework in particular the boundaries between them are rather fluid. Reflecting upon his time as a dancer in Pina Bausch Tanztheater, Fabien Prioville asserts the belief that choreographers are far more besieged by the risks they ask their dancers to take than the dancers are themselves. He attributes this to the fact that when a choreographer produces work “you never know what the response will be. You can’t decide how the audience will feel, you have no control over this” (personal communication, October 2, 2010). According to Prioville, as a choreographer, the images you see in your work may conjure some specific emotion in you, but “there is always a

risk that these images are just for you, that this piece is just for you”
(personal communication, October 2, 2010) – and is therefore unsuccessful.

This belief that the onus of the risk lies with the choreographer informed Prioville’s engagement with risk as a dancer. When dancing for French choreographer Josef Nadj, Prioville was called on at late notice to replace the choreographer in a role he had made on himself, injury preventing Nadj from performing. Despite the lack of preparation and the burden of expectation in replacing the choreographer of the entire work, Prioville did not feel he was at risk in the performances, because he believed it was Nadj who had taken a risk by entrusting Prioville with the role, stating: “the risk is not mine – the risk is his” (personal communication, October 2, 2010).

Nevertheless, this by no means represents the authoritative distinction between the dancer’s and choreographer’s engagement in risk-taking. A fundamental concern in attempting to delineate the respective functions of risk-taking for choreographers and dancers is that risk is not finite. Lloyd Newson acknowledges this issue, noting that “risk should be viewed as a relative concept: what is risky for me may not be for someone else” (Newson, 1993). This is a crucial observation; there are undoubtedly other dancers who would feel at great personal risk if placed in Prioville’s situation.

It is difficult, then, to attempt to separate the significance of risk for performers and choreographers. One could generalise that choreographers trade in conceptual risk, while dancers risk personal and physical vulnerability in performance. Clearly, however, this represents a gross simplification of complex issues. Choreographers may take conceptual risks, but presumably they are bound up personally, too, in their work, and therefore any risk taken implicates their personal and emotional life as much as their professional one. Similarly, while dancers submit themselves to personally risky, destabilised professional circumstances, Prioville’s

perspective highlights the fact that the dancer does not necessarily feel responsible for bearing the risk.

Central to any attempt to define these categories of risk, then, are the concepts of responsibility and ownership. Perhaps what defines an individual's experience in engaging with risk-taking in dance is not whether they are acting in a choreographic capacity or as a dancer, but rather the level of ownership they consider to exercise over the risk. A choreographer who asks a dancer to undertake a risky performance may feel a diminished sense of ownership over the risk, since the control lies with the dancer. However a risky conceptual performance may incite a far greater sense of owning the risk. Similarly, a dancer may feel at risk in a performance where they are responsible for another dancer's safety, but less so where the risk is that the audience will not warm to the performance – since the dancer has little control over the content of what is being presented. Fundamentally, the perceived sense of control over and responsibility for the risk will vary according to the personal prejudices of the individual engaging in it, rather than existing in a categorical definition.

Risk in cultural theory

The final section of my research examines risk from a cultural theory standpoint, investigating binary views on risk; particularly the debate between modern and postmodern perspectives. These frameworks question primarily how and why risk shapes contemporary performance in its inherent meaning and practical outcomes.

Risk as a modernist discourse

Modernist attitudes to risk are exemplified in the theatrical traditions of Artaud and the 'theatre of cruelty' (Artaud & Morgan, 1958). Artaud called for a theatre in which real consequences were elicited and in which "a little real life blood is immediately necessary" (Artaud & Morgan, 1958, p. 77), in

order to incite practical, active responses from the audience, rather than portraying the “banal” (Artaud & Morgan, 1958, p. 76) and valueless. These views foreground risk as a transformative strategy which provides the performer with the opportunity for redemption or the cultivation of a desired outcome (Harari, 2009, pp. 175-176). Marinetti, the founder of the Futurist movement in the arts, encouraged performers to “sing the love of danger” (Harari, 2009, p. 176), in order to create a performance which offers real transformation for both performer and spectator.

This view hinges on the acceptance that performance can have real outcomes and incite real change, so that as audience members “we are watching the people before us, not representing something but going through something. They lay their bodies on the line ... and we are transformed – not audience to a spectacle but witnesses to an event” (Etchells, 1999, p. 49). Essentially, modernist discourses frame risk as a positive force, with the power to bring about transcendence. Modernist art “[j]ustifies risk-taking in order to achieve totality and authenticity” (Harari, 2009, p. 176).

Certainly, the modernist view of risk is supported by psychology’s accounts of the transforming possibilities of risk-taking for the individual performer. The previously discussed concepts of flow and transcendence illustrate the modernist dictum that by inhabiting a risk-based performative state, the performer experiences not only a greater sense of achievement and satisfaction, but can be actually changed by the process, as can the audience along with them.

Ironically, the treatment risk receives in modernist culture is not consistent with modern art’s faith in risk as a catalyst for progress. Rather, modernity’s future-based outlook, concerned with predicting and minimising risk (Giddens in Harari, 2009, p. 174), actually serves to inhibit risk-taking in the arts, particularly where financial support is concerned: “Consolidation rather than expansion looks like the theme for 2010, at least where dance is

concerned. In tough economic times it's more important than usual to maximise audiences and keep costs down. So don't expect risk to be the name of the game, at least not for the next six months" (Craine, 2010). While modern culture may embrace the potential of risk-taking as a means to access an alternative lifestyle and escape the premodern penitentiary of fate, "[i]n advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social productions of risks" (Beck, 1992, p. 19), and these financial risks are not considered to offer the same benefits as those associated with lifestyle. Rather, they are avoided and 'calculated' as much as possible, because "the primary subject matter of finance is the management of risks" (Shiller, 2003, p. 1).

This represents a significant conflict of discourses, but one which Wim Vandekeybus has harnessed as stimulus to inform his choreography. Commenting on society's outsourcing of risk-management to industry and infrastructure, Vandekeybus notes "if someone falls in the street, who will catch them? One says that there are services that are there to take care of security, of everything ... when something happens, one says that the services failed" (Vandekeybus in Riche, 1993). Society's attempted – but essentially impossible – suppression of risk serves to emphasise the impact of the purposeful engagement with risk in Vandekeybus' work, to greater effect. Essentially, this exemplifies the purpose of risk-taking in modern art: a performance practice which forces the audience to recognise that what occurs within the performance or artwork is not an unanchored fiction, but potentially has a real and substantial effect upon reality.

Risk as a postmodern discourse

Postmodernist approaches to risk are less celebratory; rather, they suggest that risk is banal, trivial and inevitable. This is partly due to the notion that all performance is inherently risky:

The unfolding in real time of a performance and the promise, inherently expected in such a preformed situation, of its successful

completion, qualifies it as a risk-taking activity. At the very moment when the decision to perform is made, a plunge into the unknown is taken, no matter how many times the resolution of this very moment has been rehearsed. (Harari, 2009, p. 174)

According to postmodern perspectives, all that can ever be truly risked in performance is the revealing of the constructed nature of performance; of the codes and rules on which performance is established (Etchells in Harari, 2009, p. 177). These concepts have been explored by choreographers from as early as the 1960s, and more recently, by artists such as Jerome Bel and Franko B. Bel's work *The Show Must Go On* (2001) is cited by Harari as an example of a postmodern piece which flouts the notion of risk as a strategy for redemption. By presenting a work in which very little in the way of 'dance' (as we recognise it) occurs, Bel questions and challenges the grand aspirations of modernist risk practitioners, suggesting that by its nature, risk is present in all performance, banal as it may be, and therefore is perhaps a meaningless or trivial concept.

The banality of risk-taking through a postmodern discourse is accentuated in Fabien Prioville's account of the work of Pina Bausch. Despite the many descriptions of Bausch as a choreographer of risk, her classification as such is not without contention. Speaking from personal experience, Prioville argues that the dancers in Bausch's company take no risk beyond the ordinary risk invoked by the 'liveness' of performance. What appears to audience members to be a risk-induced authenticity is actually, in Prioville's opinion, a carefully controlled and constructed choreography, the result of precise and practiced rehearsal: "Even when we literally play with fire on stage, there's no risk because it's so clear what each step is" (personal communication, October 2, 2010). According to Prioville, it is Bausch, as creator, who takes the (often conceptual) risks. For the performers, "it's just work. Yes, to generalise, we take risks because we are dancers and it's our body and you never know what will happen. You take a risk as soon as you step on stage because you are exposed and vulnerable" (personal

communication, October 2, 2010). Because this risk is so inherent, in the view of postmodern theorists, it is rendered impotent.

In terms of actual, voluntary risk, distinct from this inherent and unavoidable risk, Prioville believes that what appeared to be risky in Bausch's work was so preconceived and constructed that the authentic risk had been removed through the process of rehearsal (personal communication, October 2, 2010). He recounts one of the few cases in which he did feel legitimately at risk in a performance, describing a performance of Bausch's *Kontakhtof*, during which an unsatisfied audience member walked onto the stage in protest, denounced the performance, and proceeded to empty a bucket of water onto the stage and the dancers. Describing this instance Prioville determined that "that is a real risk, when something foreign comes on to the stage. Everyone is at risk because the performance is not safe. You don't know what they will do" (personal communication, October 2, 2010). If this view is subscribed to, then, for theorists of postmodernism, 'reality' – unpredictable and unrehearsed - is more risky than the constructed performance.

This example highlights the importance of the performer's (and, perhaps, choreographer's) perception of the limits of their control in shaping the way they view and engage with risk. Macbeth illustrates this issue, providing the example of the culture of sea cruising as a means of disengaging with risk:

the risk ... is seen more as a challenge to one's own skill and competence, and within the realms of personal control. This is in contrast to the random risks that individuals face from crime and from cars within the everyday life of modern cities ... Cruising is a choice individuals make to remove themselves from an environment where they have little control but face a multitude of external and random risks. The choice places them in an environment where they have, or believe they have, more control and fewer externally generated, random risks. Concomitantly, the external risks associated with modern society are only occasionally encountered and so do not dominate the cruising lifestyle. (Macbeth in Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, pp. 226-227)

Voluntary risk, such as the risks encountered in performing contemporary dance, could similarly be viewed through this framework as an actual minimisation of risk, if the performer believes they are safer in an environment where the risk is left to them to control and deal with, as opposed to an external risk over which they have no control. In this sense, perhaps taking a risk in performance is in effect a 'safe' option. This dilemma brings to light the self-reflexive nature of postmodern dialogues on the banality of risk.

Postmodern meditations on risk also highlight its function as a consumable product. Franko B's *I Miss You!*, discussed earlier, frames the performer's bodily risk within a performative, distanced context which alienates the audience's natural instinct to "interfere with the performance and stop it" (Harari, 2009, p. 178). By banalising the risk-taking action in this way, the piece reveals the "somasochistic mechanism of media culture and the entertainment industry, which produce and present risk for consumption" (Harari, 2009, p. 178).

Perhaps this can be linked to notions of a 'culture of risk', which increasingly seeks some sort of meaningful experience through voluntary exposure to high-risk activities such as extreme sports. Despite Franko B's obvious bodily risk in this work, Gardner claims that "this piece is not about risk" (Gardner, 2001, p. 13). By framing the risk in this context, Franko B has banalised it to the point that audiences are desensitised to, and do not necessarily recognise, the blatant risk he takes.

Despite this, postmodern perspectives on risk do not deny its functionality entirely. According to Featherstone, contemporary culture increasingly urges us to seek sensation over interpretation, validating the process of experience as its own outcome. Postmodern culture is saturated by signs and images, and

[i]n response to this cacophony of sensory stimulation, postmodern culture involves an aesthetic of *sensation*, replacing the increasingly

impossible demands of modernity for rational *interpretation* ... the allocation of 'meaning' to risk-taking behaviour is not so much an intellectual process as an affectual one that is based on desire rather than the ego ... *this meaningfulness involves a feeling that participation in the activity is good in itself* [emphasis added].
(Featherstone in Stranger, 1999, p. 270)

Featherstone's point raises two significant questions: does risk-taking achieve anything beyond satisfying the sensory desires of the risk-taker, and indeed, does it need to? The answers to these questions depend almost entirely on whether a modern or postmodern framework is constructed around them. A modernist response might deem the personal sensory outcomes substantial enough to warrant the risk, provided it led to "various efficacies, like catharsis and character-building" (Stranger, 1999, p. 269). However, this in itself does not adequately ascribe the importance of the "experience itself" (Mitchell in Stranger, 1999, p. 269). According to Lash, "emphasis on the body and the physical experience as part of the reflexive self ... enables the sensual and emotional experience to be recognized as inherently worthwhile, without having to be justified in terms of efficacious outcomes" (in Stranger, 1999, p. 269). Mitchell supports this view: "the significance of enjoyment is not trivial. It is vital to the survival of society. In the long run a boring system cannot last" (Mitchell Jnr., 1988, p. 57). In contrast, postmodern practitioners would likely point out the inherent meaninglessness of the personal sensory outcome as proof of the banality and inconsequentiality of risk.

A 2006 forum at the University of Bristol, entitled *Nurturing Risk*, brought together a pool of artists and arts producers to examine the place of risk-taking in contemporary art and performance. A report on the forum cited a comment which succinctly summarises a prevailing view on the contradictions between modern and postmodern attitudes to risk in performance: "When we take an act of ... "professional bravery", we don't necessarily see it as a question of risk, simply that it would be a complete waste of time to not do so" (Russell, 2006). According to this sentiment, risk in performance is vital, necessary, and a constant feature of any worthwhile

art – and therefore rather meaningless, since it is essentially an intrinsic feature of art itself. The risk is not viewed as something to be ‘taken’, but something that ‘is’. Any attempt to manipulate it, therefore, is futile.

Risk and failure

The self-reflexive nature of risk as a postmodern discourse is perhaps highlighted best by Lloyd Newson’s claim that failure has a function. He notes that

I believe that providing I keep pushing myself and do not rely on formula, I am successful. I have learnt some of the best lessons and most valuable information about my craft through works that have been public failures ... To show vulnerability and failure on stage has become increasingly important to me. (Newson, 1993, p. 13)

If this view is accepted and perhaps stretched even further, one can conclude that there are instances in which failure effectively equates to success. While Newson extols the virtues of failure as a learning tool, this perspective demands the question as to whether a risk can truly be classified as risky if failure is accepted as a viable, valid option. Can legitimate risk be truly present if failure is as valuable an outcome as success? This is a key conflict in studies of risk, lending weight to the postmodernist sentiment that risk is both inevitable and also (consequently) meaningless.

This irony is another issue which was raised at the *Nurturing Risk* forum. When discussing the importance of embracing risk-based situations within the art world and the successes borne of them, one contributor applauded the risk-taking which had allowed choreographer Martin del Amo to test his work “until the ‘the artist knows what works’” (Russell, 2006). Russell noted, however, that “In terms of risk this appears contrary: if you continue once you know something works, where is the risk?” (Russell, 2006).

The classification of failure as success necessarily negates any risk-taking definition, as the possibility of genuine failure is an integral component of

any act deemed a 'risk'. Nevertheless, definitions of success and failure are relative, like the definition of risk itself. Therefore, perhaps a 'successful failure' may still be born of a risk, given that when the risk is taken there is primarily no guarantee that the 'failure' will be accepted as a valid outcome, and secondly that what the risk-taker considers success will certainly not be a universally accepted definition. Consequently, it could be argued that *all* success is equally a failure, since human opinion guarantees that one individual's success is another's failure, and vice versa. Again, the self-reflexive nature of postmodern contemplations of risk renders the risk banal and essentially meaningless.

Conclusion

The function and significance of risk, as a performance practice in contemporary dance, is buried in complexities and clouded by conflicting discourses. Modernist and postmodernist theories compete to delineate the impact risk has upon the reality of the world beyond the proscenium arch. The individuals involved in the risk-taking itself – dancers and choreographers, performance artists, theatre makers, audiences – are at odds with each other when describing their personal encounters with risk and the impact this has on their artistic practice and engagement with performance.

Contemporary culture's increasing awareness of and engagement with risk has informed the treatment it receives in contemporary performance, with risk-taking escalating incrementally as an attempt to find meaning in life and deviate from the perceived drudgery of social existence. Gallasch cites the French philosopher Simone Weil "who in 1943 wrote of risk as an 'essential need of the soul,' arguing that '[t]he absence of risk produces a type of boredom which paralyses in a different way from fear, but almost as much'" (Gallasch, 2010).

The psychological studies into risk in dance and performance certainly substantiate Weil's intimation that some degree of risk is vital in invigorating one's artistic practice, sense of personal satisfaction, and capacity to reach the mythologised state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Yet they also detail the potentially damaging aspects of risk-taking to the individual psyche.

Similarly open to debate are the questions of whether risk-taking can truly engender investment and authenticity of dancers, choreographers and their audiences. As intangible as these concepts may be and conflicting as the evidence is, the frequency with which they arise in discussions of risk in performance suggests to me that there is some indisputable connection

between risk and authenticity – though due to the individual nature of risk-taking and its effects, no definitive answer can be given when scrutinising the causal relationship between risk-taking and authenticity. Certainly in my own experience as a performer, supported by the anecdotal evidence of numerous peers, engaging in risk-taking as part of a performance practice is an infinitely more enriching, challenging and authentic experience than one in which the process and outcome is ‘safe’, constructed and predictable.

Nevertheless, the long-term effects of risk-taking as a performance practice remain undefined. While we may speculate as to the benefit or otherwise of risk-taking in terms of the experiential and the individual’s engagement with the present, there is further exploration to be done in examining how risk practices affect the longevity of a choreographer or dancer’s artistic career. Certainly individuals such as Lloyd Newson have sought to define themselves by their risk-based practice and have garnered great success in doing so. Whether it is the risk-taking itself, the associated stereotype or an entirely unrelated factor which is responsible for this success is difficult to quantify. Additionally, because the definition of risk is not finite or categorical, the classification of any individual as a ‘risk-taker’ is problematic and difficult to substantiate objectively. Consequently, the broader implications of risk-taking upon the artform’s development remain ambiguous.

Despite these challenges, Mitchell eloquently summarises the magnitude of risk within contemporary art and performance, asserting that “creative acts of whatever order, in play or art or scientific inquiry, call for a willingness to follow the flight of hazardous processes, to surrender the self to forces beyond one’s control. *Creative life ... cannot be led easily or safely* [emphasis added]. It is demanding, challenging, stressful” (Mitchell Jnr., 1988, p. 57).

To be creative is to be at risk. Creativity holds no success guarantee, the potential for failure categorically rendering it a risky pursuit. Postmodern critics deem this truism to be proof of the triviality and banality of risk-

taking in art. I argue, however, that if risk-taking is the inherent necessity of producing art of consequence or indeed any new, untried outcome at all, then risk-taking is bound up irrevocably with progress. Perhaps, then, to risk is the natural and necessary urge of humankind, with all of our curiosity and inquisitiveness. To embrace it in performance, as a conduit for transformation, debate, change and engagement in art and in life itself, empowers art and performance as a driver of proactivity, and justifies in my mind any challenge of courage and destabilisation of the known that it may require. If risk-taking is a basic human instinct, then employing it within dance, one of the earliest forms of human expression, seems entirely appropriate, leaving little wonder that risk in dance has the power to captivate and engage dancers, choreographers and audiences alike.

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