

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Social Choreography*
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Social Choreography by Julia Paoli

“But dance is never untethered from the real”¹
–Paul Chan

My main interest in curating the exhibition *Social Choreography* is to question the aesthetic and political potential of ‘movement,’ both in the sense of political movements and the movement of a body through time and space. Taken from cultural critic Andrew Hewitt’s book of the same name, the show’s title suggests that choreography is linked to organization, and can intricately demonstrate and interrupt the ways people relate to and interact with one another. For Hewitt, social choreography is “a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm and seeks to instill that order directly at the level of the body.”²

But *Social Choreography* also prompts us to consider whether and how choreography can become

symbolically and symbiotically connected with political movements: as a response to political happenings, a means of political speech and the performance of political struggle. Following from this consideration, the exhibition pursues several lines of inquiry: How might choreographic thinking reflect political ideologies or social conditions?³ What might Hewitt’s framing of choreography offer in examining the potential of art to provide models for social organization?⁴ How might artistic practices that employ this methodology articulate and shape social organization? How does organized political action affect the past and future of public spaces? Together, the works in *Social Choreography* are an attempt to think through these provocations.

I first conceived of this exhibition after encountering Emily Roysdon’s work at New York’s Art in General. The show was a culmination of three commissioned projects Roysdon produced in 2010 and 2011. Upon



Emily Roysdon with MPA, “Untitled” from *Sense and Sense*, detail, 2010.

entering the gallery I was drawn to *Sense and Sense*, a project based in Sergels Torg, a public square in Stockholm that in part functions as an assembly space for planned political protests. Sunken beneath street level, the square's architecture allows the elevated observer to witness the action below. Roysdon assumes this privileged vantage point within the iconic square documenting New York-based artist MPA's site-specific performance. The diptych video installation captures MPA traversing the paved black and white triangles covering the lowered area of the plaza. The first channel frames MPA labouriously mapping the space with her body, attempting to mimic a natural walk while lying on her side. The second channel is shot at a greater distance, depicting the relationship between MPA's body and the full scale of the square. If we understand the essence of protest to be the improvised use of public space, then MPA's laboured movement reflects the tension between this improvisation and the expected or the planned use of Sergels Torg.⁵ Together, both channels offer MPA's movement as representative of the struggle that marks the square. Juxtaposed with the video is Roysdon's sculptural installation comprised of fifteen pedestals arranged in three descending groups. Atop each plinth is a photograph depicting the black and white triangles found at Sergels Torg. Together, the photos reflect a still image from the aforementioned diptych video; however, Roysdon has rearranged the pieces and offered a deconstructed version of the square. In so doing, she seems to suggest that just as the square's functionality can be repurposed for changing cultural contexts, so too can the events it hosts.

Roysdon's *Sense and Sense* project led me to question

how the lived, everyday momentum of Sergels Torg might compare with the movements that unfold there during times of social unrest. Can we abstract this question and map it onto similar politicized spaces? Sergels Torg is not unlike other public squares in urban centres that function as a meeting point for political protest. Roysdon's practice is marked with strategies of collectivity and collaboration; however, her political intention does not rest on representing or speaking for a single group of people to a wider audience, but is grounded in bringing people together in a shared discursive space. Sergels Torg abstractly demonstrates a similar gesture, where individuals with shared beliefs and ideas may come together to think through forms of resistance. It would seem that Roysdon's work is far more attuned to this type of struggle and questions how movement is represented?

Roysdon builds upon this thinking with the series of silk-screened images *If I Don't Move, Can You Hear Me?* Each image depicts single figures captured in portrait-like poses, their movement deconstructed and layered, to appear as though they are moving through a set of actions. Roysdon's emphasis on singular figures and fragmented perspectives hinder the viewer's attempt to see the whole picture. This points to the tendency for a group or collective of demonstrating bodies to be represented by one gesture, one figure, one action. Roysdon's work acts as a kind of lens, helping us to see that reducing the events that take place within the public sphere to one or a few individual actors and actions, is a distortion that obscures more than it reveals. In attempting to narrativize—to interpret and understand—we often look for a leader to interview



Emily Roysdon, *Sense and Sense*, detail, 2010.



Emily Roysdon, *If I Don't Move, Can You Hear Me?*, detail, 2010-2011.

or a spokesperson to debate. But do we merely do so in attempt to impose order onto a chaos we cannot understand? Exhibited together in *Social Choreography*, Roysdon's projects point to the representation of bodies—both contextualized and abstracted—in relation to political movement and public spaces. How do we move, individually, collectively, in these times of struggle? How do we see the movement of others?

While Roysdon's work subtly points to the way political movements are represented, Igor Grubić's video installation *East Side Story* offers a markedly different approach, highlighting the violence that may occur when movement is enacted in public spaces. In the corner of the room the two channels of the video meet and the sound floods the gallery. The video on the left presents found documentation from the first Gay Pride marches in Belgrade (2001) and Zagreb (2002). At both events, a hostile crowd surrounded the parade route, leading to brutal attacks against many of the marchers. The cruel verbal and physical assaults are difficult to watch, inciting an agonizing bodily reaction. It seems fitting that Grubić reacts to the documentation by returning to the body. The video's second channel depicts dancers Grubić commissioned to respond to the actions and gestures found in the documented imagery. Moving in the same public spaces in which the parades occurred, the dancers perform choreography that recalls both the stance taken by the marchers and the violent backlash from the oppressive crowd. Curator Helen Molesworth articulates the dancers' gestures as an "attempt to obliterate or erase the hate speech and physical violence, while nonetheless insisting that they somehow be memorialized."⁶ Their channel is silent, dominated by

the audio of the attacks. The effect is jarring and strange, but simultaneously powerful as Grubić positions dance as a means of communicating traumatic histories.⁷

In Molesworth's catalogue for the ICA Boston's exhibition *Dance/Draw*, she speaks to artist Paul Chan about the rising interest in performance art. He posits that, "the return to the body is a response to social tumult, a response to the military, economic, and political trauma of the past decade. When we return...to the body, we want to believe we're returning to something that is directly under our control."⁸ However, is the same operation at play in Grubić's work? It would seem that his return to these public spaces is an attempt to assert the freedom of 'movement' that was silenced in the original documentation. The dancers' movement offers an aesthetic resistance to the prejudiced backlash in the Belgrade and Zagreb parades. However, the work poses an interesting dichotomy between lived and enacted experiences, as the dancers attempt to represent the chilling documentation it directly juxtaposes. This made the curatorial decision to install *East Side Story* a difficult one. Not only because of the disturbing nature of the hate speech, but also because removing this footage from its native context represents what seems to me to be a risky act of contextualization and possible misrepresentation. Grubić's video provides a lens to view both the potential and the problem of representation developing out of a specific place and context and moving into the space of the gallery. Ultimately, it is the work's ability to probe the troubled relationship between politics and aesthetics that drove my decision. Consider Carrie Lambert Beatty's reading of the work: "cornered, the viewer of *East Side Story* almost cannot help but



Igor Grubić, *East Side Story*, two-channel video installation, detail, 2008.



Igor Grubić, *East Side Story*, two-channel video installation, detail, 2008.

watch the political action aesthetically and the dance politically.”¹⁰ Perhaps my hesitation to exhibit the work in the context of TPW is grounded in this dilemma: *East Side Story*’s aestheticization of politics appears suspect given the traumatic events that took place in Belgrade and Zagreb. Does aestheticizing the violence risk diminishing the trauma felt by the marchers in both parades? Installing Grubić’s work in *Social Choreography* aims to address these complexities and work through the paradox of aesthetics and politics in the context of an exhibition.

In both Grubić and Roysdon’s work, the body acts as a medium by which the artists articulate and reflect on relations of power. Performance artist Francisco-Fernando Granados offers his body in a series of choreographed instructions that consider the political and performative possibilities of movement in public and private spaces. Each gesture is first a set of instructions displayed on the gallery wall that are later performed by the artist in a series of live events. At once the texts are visible traces of Granados’ performances and an invitation for the audience to participate in these gestures by enacting the instructions themselves. The first of these texts articulates a duality of balance that reflects and elaborates the duality of ‘movement.’ Granados offers:

touch the ground with bare feet
lift the other leg

hold

notice a destabilizing force

sway

sway

sway

In his performance, Granados will stand on the gallery floor barefoot, lift one leg and attempt to keep his balance for the duration of the exhibition’s opening reception. While it is tempting to view the work as grounded in endurance, the durational component is not the focus of the performance. Rather, it is a starting point that will set the tone for Granados’ *movement study*, a gesture that subtly reflects on our physical relation to the works installed within the space and our personal position within social relations of power. The duality of ‘balance’ emerges as both the balance of the body in space and time, and the always tenuous balance of political power that suffuses our lives. The body is the “destabilizing force” in both cases, leading us back to the duality of ‘movement.’

In Granados’ second text, he lays out instructions for queer cruising in public areas.

notice shifting shadows
moving between trees



Igor Grubić, *East Side Story*, double channel video installation, detail, 2008.

approach the shape
cast by the light

sense the space between

meet eyes
run fingers down the abdomen
pull
pull. gently

watch out. shift apart

approach the shape
cast by the light

sense the space between

meet eyes
run fingers down the abdomen
pull
pull
pull

The instructions position cruising as choreographed social organization, allowing us to reflect on bodies and the ways power writes itself in lived experiences. The distilled physicality Granados describes is made possible by an exchange of gestures that communicate the potentials and impossibilities of organization. Moreover, the interplay between bodies allows us to reflect on the ways in which power inscribes itself in lived experiences. In this sense the gestures as 'movement' are the very essence of social choreography, an act which both identifies and brings together.

Granados' final text is a set of gendered instructions for typical strip search procedures.

empty pockets
remove accessories
place the contents out of reach

take off clothing
article by article
shake out each piece
place clothing out of reach

tilt head down
run fingers through the top of the head

pull right ear forward
pull left ear forward

tilt head back
open mouth. wide
stick tongue out. up
pull down lower lip
lift upper lip

stick hands forward. fingers wide
turn hands over. hands up

spread legs. wide

lift penis. retract foreskin
lift testicles

turn around
lift right leg up. wiggle toes
lift left leg up. wiggle toes

bend forward
spread buttocks
squat
cough

Granados invites his viewers to enact the performance themselves, but the character of the search has a curiously coercive effect; those who take up Granados' instructions are called to imagine the intrusion a forced search of this nature implies. Granados' performance of the search highlights the inescapable character of 'balance,' or of his body's simultaneous vulnerability to and immense ability to act upon relations of power. The viewers of his work, and those who choose to follow his instructions, are thereby implicated in the exhibition's core question: what are the codes that govern our everyday movement? Indeed Granados' instructions and performance alike leave us questioning how our actions (and inactions) have articulated and created these codes. What role do we play in constructing these choreographed realities? And them, in constructing our realities?

Social Choreography is on the one hand, an exhibition that hopes to highlight the transcontextual duality of movement and on the other hand, is acutely aware of the limitations of any such exercise. Here movement is depicted through both still and moving bodies and images. Roysdon's silk-screened work and Granados'

textual instructions both convey aesthetic abstractions. Their projects are removed from a specific political context or site, offering instead a series of gestures and organizing principles that are embedded in governing power structures. These works offer us a deconstructed understanding of social choreography, a series of movements that do not require a specific context in order to understand how they are deployed and how they operate within culture. The moving bodies in Roysdon's *Sense and Sense* and Grubić's *East Side Story* are markedly different, as each artist uses the body to narrate the specific politics they are addressing. Although both works are grounded in the politics of their socio-historical locations, both call attention to the immense difficulties imposed in the attempt to understand particular political spaces and movements void of this context.

Perhaps it is appropriate to end where we began: with a return to the dual meaning of 'movement.' *Social Choreography* articulates what the term might mean in an exhibition space, calling our own movement to the fore and questioning how we enact the choreography that governs our social experience.

Thanks:

My first thanks goes to Gallery TPW for supporting this exhibition and allowing me the space to continue developing my curatorial practice. I am deeply indebted to the ferociously thoughtful Kim Simon, whose insight has encouraged me to ask new kinds of questions. Special thanks to Margaret Dragu and Kelly Kivland for providing me with new points of entry into the history of dance. Marco Paoli and Carly Whitefield for their invaluable role in thoughtfully reading and editing my writing. Mark Pellegrino for his unwavering patience and technical expertise. My thanks to CFMDC and Vtape for their generous support. Most importantly, I would like to thank the artists: Francisco-Fernando Granados, Igor Grubić and Emily Roysdon for the time they afforded to move and think together with me.

Julia Paoli is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto. In 2011 she was awarded Vtape's Curatorial Incubator residency where she mounted an exhibition of work by Aleesa Cohene. Paoli received her M.A. from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College in 2011. Her thesis project included commissions from New York-based artists A.K. Burns and MPA. Paoli was a former curatorial intern at The Power Plant and FAG (Feminist Art Gallery). She is currently a member of the Pleasure Dome Programming Collective.

Endnotes

Helen Molesworth, "A Conversation between Paul Chan and Helen Molesworth" *Dance/Draw* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 2011) P37.

Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (London: Duke University Press, 2005) P3.

Ibid.,6

Ibid.,14

Roysdon has had a long interest with the term improvisation on a conceptual level. In her language: "The emphasis on improvisation in both material and conceptual form is because the work is very much about the dynamics of a lived life, very much about interactions and collaborations with other people and about bringing things into the world. It is a realm in which that kind of interdisciplinary production and thinking is possible." Emily Roysdon, *If I Don't Move Can you Hear Me?* (California: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2011).

Helen Molesworth, "Dancing: Igor Grubić" *Dance/Draw* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 2011) P100.

Molesworth, "A Conversation between Paul Chan and Helen Molesworth" *Dance/Draw* P37.

Ibid.,37

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "The Draw of Dance" *Dance/Draw* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 2011) P28.

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