Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object

ANDRÉ LEPECKI

To give oneself as a thing that feels and to take a thing that feels is the new radical experience that asserts itself on contemporary feeling.

—Mario Perniola[1]

To be moved by some thing, rather than by oneself.

—Yvonne Rainer[2]

If there is a distinguishing trait of recent experimental dance, it is the noticeable presence of objects as main performative elements. Examples can be found in numerous works of the past three or four years. German choreographer Thomas Lehmen's recent *Schrottplatz* (Scrapyard, 2010) is a fifty-minute solo piece in which Lehmen interacts with a lamp, chairs, a microphone, a hammer, a tomato, and a newspaper, among other items, attempting to explain to one object the function or nature of the object next to it. Exploring the elusive yet inescapable referentiality of objects, *Schrottplatz* probes the limits of signification, as it displays language bouncing against the opaque surface of matter. In Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero's group piece *We Are Going to Miss Everything We Don't Need* (2009), we also encounter an investigation of what Mantero calls the "rebound effect" between an "object of the world" and the word that signifies it, the ambiguous movement between an object's sheer presence and its semantic resonances. As Mantero writes in the program notes for her evening-length piece, such a rebound effect between bodies and objects, mediated by language, opens the possibility for "touching the other side of things."

But the recent choreographic move toward objects is not only concerned with exploring the gap between referentiality and signification. In *My Private*

1. Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 1.
2. Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 269.

OCTOBER 140, Spring 2012, pp. 75–90

Himalaya (2009), by Amsterdam-based choreographer and visual artist Ibrahim Quraishi, seven performers interact with 500 objects—including mannequins, lamps, one plastic rabbit, all sorts of medical paraphernalia, flowers (plastic and organic), a replica of *Star Wars*' R2D2, different kinds of furniture (old and new), household cleaning products, glass bottles, bouncy balls, and a huge bust of Aristotle. By accumulating all sorts of stuff on, under, or around the performers, Quraishi slowly reveals the overwhelming saturation of contemporary life by what Jean Baudrillard once called "the system of objects." Objects, understood now as vectors of subjectivation, can also be found in Brazilian choreographer Marcela Levi's *Em volta do buraco tudo é beira* (2009) and in several of the recent works by French choreographer Christian Rizzo (particularly *Christian Lacroix Seen by . . .* , 2007–08, and *My Love*, 2008).

Object-invested experimental dance echoes somewhat the concurrent resurgence of the object in recent philosophy (for instance, in Graham Harman's *Tool Being* and *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Mario Perniola's *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, and Silvia Benso's *The Face of Things*), literary studies (Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things*), critical theory (Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter*), critical race studies (Fred Moten's *In the Break*), and in some curatorial projects (*Part Object Part Sculpture*, Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005; *Not to Play with Dead Things*, Villa Arson, 2008; *Thingly Variations in Space,* Mokum, 2010). Of course, objects have always been present on dance stages. Indeed, it is the history of this presence that has shaped the vivid dialogue between dance and the visual arts over the past century, most significantly after World War II. As Rosalind Krauss noted in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*,

> a large number of postwar European and American sculptors became interested both in theater and in the extended experience of time which seemed part of the conventions of the stage. From this interest came some sculpture to be used as *props* in productions of dance and theater, some to function as *surrogate performers*, and some to act as the on-stage generators of scenic effects.[3]

The recent redefinition of the status of the object in experimental choreography, however, deserves some scrutiny, for it moves away from the terms utilized by Krauss to describe postwar uses of sculpture in dance stages. Indeed, in all the works mentioned above, and in the four works I analyze in this essay, choreographers are not using sculpture created by visual artists—neither as "generators of scenic effects" nor as "surrogate performers." Instead, these choreographers bring *stuff* onto stages and into rooms and galleries in a procedure that is quite different from the one described by Krauss: objects are picked up, brought into a place, and then, most of the time, just left alone alongside dancers' bodies. But isn't letting an object be—i.e., opting not to manipulate it as a "surrogate performer," nor to affirm it as "art," nor to use it to create "effects"—already a provocation in the

3. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 204.

object of a substantial transformation? Isn't letting be already a move toward de-objectifying the object, a move that turns the object into a mere *thing*—if we understand that "a thing is neither an instrument, nor a utensil, nor a means," as Mario Perniola, closely following Heidegger, reminds us in *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*?[4]

If the concept of object (as opposed to the concept of thing) is ontologically tied to instrumentality, to utility, to usage, to means, then it follows that objects exist in a symmetric relationship regarding subjectivity. In this relation, objects are always "an endless reproduction and confirmation of the *manipulative abilities of the subject*," as Silvia Benso has remarked.[5] In dance, the figure of the "manipulative subject" is powerfully linked to the authoritative figure of the choreographer, to his or her authorial function in dictating steps, controlling gestures, and directing moves to the minutest details. To control and to dictate, and then to be obeyed with precision: this is why choreographer William Forsythe once described choreography as "an art of command."[6] Within this system, quite often a dancer's moves are perceived as being little more than the immediate (or sometimes even unmediated) and obedient expression of a choreographer's will. Within this specific choreographic economy, the dancer's subjectivity is seen as always ready for manipulation, as a mere means or as an instrument. It is in this sense that a dancer might be assimilated to an object—the dancer becomes merely a tool used by the choreographer. It was this problematic "political unconscious" defining the choreographic project that Yvonne Rainer so lucidly identified, and was so openly against, in her famous essay written in 1966 (but only published in 1968), when she defended the need for dance to be moved by "some *thing*" rather than by "oneself."[7] Given that "self" names a particular mode of subjectivation, predicated on manipulative and instrumental intentionality, which Rainer could no longer accept, a "thing" would be that a-personal, subjectless matter, that noninstrumental entity that would liberate a dancer's moves into a field of nonhierarchical, horizontal interactions. The task (ontological but also political, aesthetic but also ethical) was to create a choreographic logic where any links between "manipulation" and "subject," "utility" and "object," would be bypassed—so that other possibilities for things could come into being.

Once objects and subjects symmetrically co-determine each other, it follows that "if the status of the object is profoundly changed, so also is that of the subject."[8] In this light, the change of the object's status in recent choreography raises a pressing question for subjectivity: once an object surrenders (or is evacuated from) utility, once it is removed from the realm of instrumentality, from relations

4. Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, p. 109
5 Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2000), p. xxxiii.
6. Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera, eds., *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 16.
7. Rainer, "A Quasi Survey," p. 269.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), p. 20.

of subordination in regards to a subject that manipulates it—in other words, *once an object becomes no longer an object but a thing*—then what does a subject become? Specifically, what does the subject who dances become? In the co-constitutive symmetry obtained between objects and subjects, the subject follows the path of the object: the subject involutes, becomes-thing.[9] But, if this is indeed the case, what does this involution actually perform, in the realm of the choreo-aesthetic as well as that of the choreo-political?

These questions frame the affirmation of the thing in recent experimental dance, and they inform the four works I consider here in detail: *Rubbish City* (2008) by Chinese visual and performance artist Yingmei Duan; *Tickle the Sleeping Giant #9* (2009) by U.S. choreographer Trajal Harrell; *Este corpo que me ocupa* (2008) by Portuguese choreographer João Fiadeiro; and *Solo . . . ?* (2008) by Spanish choreographer Aitana Cordero. Going one step further than Rainer's pieces, these very different works share one common trait: they not only proclaim, and perform, the need not to be moved by a self, they bypass even the desire to be moved *by* a thing—since this would still cast onto things a hint of instrumentality, of a thing's being *used* a necessary *means* to an aesthetic *end* (things would move a dancer and thus become representatives or substitutes of a self's will). Rather, these four works propose how to move as thing and how to become-thing.

Rubbish City

Rubbish City was first performed at the Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden, in 2008. In 2009, as the curator of the festival IN TRANSIT at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, I invited Yingmei Duan to re-create the piece in the building's larger gallery space. Duan, along with her artistic team and the technical crew of HKW, built a haunting environment made out of five tons of Berlin's "clean trash," turning the main gallery space at HKW into a temporary trash center. In this labyrinth of rubbish, the audience (only ten individuals at a time) roamed through a narrow, winding path, stepping on thousands of objects covering the floor and negotiating piles of stuff as high as three meters: battered washing machines, torn curtains and rugs, hundreds of cardboard boxes, piles of paper, half-broken or miraculously intact plates, cups, and glasses, a stove, TV sets and electronics, a door, mattresses, planks of wood, old toys, rags, books—all in different states of preservation and decay. In a dim light, the audience also encountered in the labyrinth five ghostly presences. Three people stood in three different spots: a girl of about twelve years of age idling on the floor, amidst the

9. "Creative involution" is the expression Deleuze extracts from Bergson, changing its original denotation in Bergson (involution as the arresting force countering the *élan vital*) to signify the minoritarian vector of becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "Involution" must "in no way [be] confused with regression. Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 238. See also Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson–Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the Thought of the Virtual* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2008), p. 42.

stuff; an older male actor sitting on a wooden stool mumbling repetitively half-lost memories; a piano player striking half-broken melodies from an out of tune upright piano (also found in the garbage). Two others roamed about: a silent, tall, mysterious man in a tuxedo and the naked, silent figure of Yingmei Duan shuffling along the path carved out of rubbish. The whole environment was pierced by the acrid smell of dust and mold and by the rancid smell of soiled garments and dirty linens, and the whole experience sutured by the clunky, melancholy sound coming from the out of tune upright piano.

A mix of installation, butoh dance, theater of objects, endurance performance, social sculpture, and social choreography, *Rubbish City* is an overwhelmingly harsh, overwhelmingly sad, and deeply sensorial experiment. Straddling a predetermined path, feeling our way in the dim light, trying not to trip or bump into the rubbish, attempting to engage or, more often, to avoid the self-absorbed, solitary performers, one cannot help being struck by a sudden realization: how recent, how *contemporary,* all that trash is. Moving within the rubbish city, blending with it thanks to the darkness and the stench, our hesitant steps resonating with Duan's own shuffling, we realize that all those discarded goods are not relics of a distant past. Rather, all that stuff was thrown away because such is the short-term destiny of all commodities in a society of intense consumerism. *Rubbish City* offers a kinetic-political, as well as affective-political, epiphany about our own condition as participants, accomplices, witnesses, and makers of a catastrophic, yet apparently unstoppable, culture of mass production that necessitates (and is predicated upon) a symmetrical, also catastrophic, *mass rejection.* In the context of the rejection of what once had been objects of desires, of what not too long ago had been used and useful, a true Benjaminian "dialectical image" flashes, provoking a moment of political-historical discernment. Benjamin noted that "every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it."[10] In the phantasmagoria of *Rubbish City,* the playing out of the fore- and after-history of discarded stuff in the present instant of the performance appears as the revelation of how, by the mere fact of being no longer in use, of having been discarded, all those objects endured what Deleuze and Guattari call an "instantaneous incorporeal transformation."[11] By the simple (f)act of having been discarded, they had passed from the realm of utilitarian commodities to the realm of useless stuff; they had stopped being objects and become mere things. And yet, emptied out of all instrumental use, the carefully choreographed rubbish evoked another kind of possibility for being in the world: the thing's.

Perniola wrote: "our ignorance and our contempt for things is such that they

10. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1999), p. 470.
11. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* pp. 80–82.

are generally considered only and exclusively in a relation of subordination with respect to our subjective will or to our desires."[12] Yet, through the experience of roaming Duan's path and of brushing our bodies against piles of things and anonymous figures, *Rubbish City* proposes a reversal of this "subordination" in order to affirm what could be called a proximal aesthetics with things—an alongsidedness without identification. Thus, if the audience experiences physical proximity to the performers, the performers never relate to the audience, refusing even a simple eye-to-eye exchange. And if the spectator steps on a landscape made entirely of familiar daily objects, it is only to see those objects existing far away from their intented purpose. Finally, if the spectator breathes in dust and mold from all that discarded stuff, literally inhaling particles of history, it is only to be overtaken by a sudden desire to cough, sneeze, or puke—thanks to a very real incorporation of the vapor of things. These carefully choreographed tensions between proximity and incorporation, distancing and excorporation, which hold the affective atmosphere and dramaturgical consistency of Duan's artwork, reaffirm the proximal yet nonrelational mode of being with things. In words that are resonate with the experience of roaming in *Rubbish City,* Silvia Benso proposed the development of such an ethics of things that would promote the development of ecological and

Yingmei Duan. Rubbish City. *2008. Photographs by Elin Lundgren.*

12. Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, p. 109.

political awareness: "Only if things are recognized in their own peculiar alterity which does not submit, because it cannot be submissible, to the categories of the subject, can any ecological project be grounded on something more profound and fundamental than the fortuitous occurrence of subjects of good will."[13]

In *Rubbish City*'s apocalyptic environment, it becomes clear that good will is not enough. Yet the piece also gives us a possible line of hope: once objects and subjects are both stripped of instrumentality, functionality, value, and identity, what they can find proximally is the actual possibility of simply *tarrying alongside*, as thing next to thing. This may not seem much of an accomplishment. But let us recall that alongsidedness, which is always a yielding to the nonhierarchical appeal of things, is one of the necessary preconditions for an ethics of becoming, not only in Deleuze and Guattari (becoming molecular as the necessary nonanthropomorphic political and ethical movement), but already in Heidegger's insight that "just tarrying alongside" is the mode of being which allows "a holding-oneself back from any manipulation or utilization."[14] Holding oneself back, holding back the very mode of subjectivation called "self," is nothing more than to initiate a becoming thing by giving space (within objects and within subjects) to things.

Tickle the Sleeping Giant #9

In the opening moments of his 2007 piece *Showpony*, choreographer Trajal Harrell sits on his spectators' laps as if on chairs. Positioning his audience in two parallel rows of chairs on both sides of an empty catwalk, Harrell walks into the space and then methodically moves from spectator to spectator, sitting on everyone's lap, as the catwalk remains empty. Humorously redefining what a lap dance might be, Harrell's repetitive gesture has a slow cumulative effect that gradually creates a sense of generalized discomfort, as the sensual, embarrassing, funny, and intimate physical interaction reveals how easily anyone can be turned into an object. Transforming subjects into objects, the opening of *Showpony* intensifies the impact of such an act thanks to the inescapable racial inflection given by Harrell's brown skin. As Fred Moten has suggested, black performance is informed by a onto-historical force he called "the resistance of the object." This particular mode of resistance is one where objecthood and blackness inscribe upon each other a whole dynamics of (in)visibility and (silenced) aurality characterized by a "deictic-confrontational field."[15] In this confrontational field, subjects resist and persist, perform and act, despite a history of having been reduced legally, politically, and affectively to the status of objects for use and trade: the history of the Middle Passage, of slavery, and also of capitalism; a history where entire populations have been, and continue to be, reduced to the status of commodities, machines, or tools.

13. Benso, *The Face of Things*, p. xxxviii.
14. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1996), pp. 88–89.
15. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 233.

Two years later, Harrell further blurred the fine line between object and subject with *Tickle the Sleeping Giant #9*. This time, Harrell moved closer to the proximal aesthetics and affective politics of things. Turning the dancing body as much as possible into a thing, *Tickle the Sleeping Giant #9* was presented at the main foyer of Haus der Kulturen der Welt in June 2009 also as part of IN TRANSIT 09. The piece gathered six dancers, all of whom had taken the sleep-inducing drug Ambien. Harrell having surrendered authorial and choreographic control, neither the piece's duration nor its choreographic and gestural score was commanded by Harrell's will. Indeed, they were not even directed by the dancers' wills. Instead, the piece was composed entirely by pure (a-subjective) metabolic velocities, as each dancer's body interacted with Ambien's active hypnotic chemical ingredient imidazopyridine. The piece's length was approximately eight hours, dictated by the average duration of the drug's effect. The six dancers took the drug at around noon, and laid on five rectangular white foam frames on the cold stone floor of HKW's main foyer. In terms of movement, bodies supposedly to perform the supposedly distinctive trait of dance as an art form (movement across space) remained mostly inert—only occasionally twitching, trembling, or turning according to physiological forces.[16]

A "thingly zone" was thus defined and produced according to specific anti-choreographic concerns. If the subject that defines dance as an autonomous artistic discipline within the "aesthetic regime of the arts" (to use Rancière's expression) is a kinetic, disciplined "being-toward-movement" (to use Peter Sloterdijk's expression[17]) always ready to perform at the slightest command of the choreographer-author, then once a dancer becomes incapable of fulfilling such a task, he or she risks losing all aesthetic "utility" and identity. But if a loss of kinetic proficiency within a choreographic system of obedience threatens the onto-aesthetic grounds of what is usually referred to as dance, it also opens up the possibility for thinking movement otherwise. Rather than movement as macro-displacement, we have small perceptions. Rather than spectatorship, we have caring as a mode of being alongside unconscious bodies—bodies that have given up intentional animation to just let be. Finally, in the case of Harrell, choreographic authorship is replaced by a kind of attending. In Berlin, throughout the whole piece, Harrell sat discreetly behind a column a few feet away from the sleeping dancers, definitely "off-frame" but still there. Later, he told me that the urge to be there, next to the dancers, for eight hours, had derived from an irresistible sense of feeling responsible for them; an inescapable need to ensure nothing would happen to them throughout their slumber. Harrell's description of this impulse, which has nothing to do with autho-

16. For a critique of dance as an art of "movement in space," see my book *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006). See also chapters 1 and 2 of Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009); and chapter 3 of Petra Sabisch, *Choreographing Relations: Practical Philosophy and Contemporary Choreography* (Munich: epodium, 2011).

17. For a discussion on choreography and Sloterdijk's notion of "being-towards-movement," see Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

Trajal Harrell. Tickling the Sleeping Giant #9. *2009. Photographs by David Bergé.*

rial oversight but everything to do with an ethical imperative of caring, made him less a choreographer than an attendant. Yet Harrell's version of the attendant is not the one that Deleuze defines in *Logic of Sensation*: "An *attendant* is not a spectator but part of the Figure." It is "a constant, or point of reference in relation to which a variation is assessed."[18] Harrell's presence does not belong to the regime of the "Figure" since his off-frame presence never allows him to become a "point of reference" in the piece's overall plane of composition. Instead, his attending care suggests the particular erotics Mario Perniola assigns to the mode of being he calls "a thing that feels," a mode predicated on the fact that

> the discovery of the essence of things goes hand in hand with the dismissal of any desire and individual cupidity. Therefore when I give myself as thing, I do not mean at all to offer myself to the exploitation and the benefit of others. I do not offer myself to the other but to the impersonal movement that at the same time displaces the other from himself and allows him in turn to give himself as thing and to take me as thing.[19]

18. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 14.
19. Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, p. 109.

Este corpo que me ocupa

In the first ten minutes of *Este corpo que me ocupa* (This Body That Occupies Me), lines of dialogue between two anonymous interlocutors, discussing haphazard events involving the building and the city where the performance is taking place, are projected onto the stage's back wall. Once the projection is over, João Fiadeiro walks into the stage coming from the audience, crosses it, opens a door on the back wall, and brings in a tall plant in a vase. With care, he lays the vase down on the stage floor and returns to his place among the audience. At the center of the stage, the plant executes a beautiful solo with living creature, inert matter, and imperceptible motions. After a while, Fiadeiro gets up again from his chair, and methodically—never hurrying—proceeds to bring more objects into the scene: three more tall plants, a sofa, a little cart with wheels, an armchair, a lamp, a metal stool, a large TV set, a wooden stool. He places all those objects in ways that are either unusual or explicitly nonutilitarian—the cart, the sofa, and the armchair are all placed upside down; the plants and the unplugged lamp in their sides; and the TV set, also unplugged, with its screen facing the floor. He aligns everything in several parallel diagonals, filling up the stage with a precise composition. Finally, Fiadeiro lies on the stage floor, face down, removes his glasses (which he places on the floor as just another thing among things), and aligns himself alongside the objects.

Este corpo que me ocupa reinforces but also adds another dimension to the concept of alongsidedness understood as an erotics and a politics of becoming-thing. Its title offers a crucial key to the ways objects and subjects co-determine each other. As far as mere matter is concerned, the question of knowing which body occupies another remains a matter for physics or chemistry. However, in the field of subjectivation and instrumental reason, the question of being occupied and possessed by bodies and by objects is *the* crucial question. As Fred Moten observed, "While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses."[20] This dynamics of self-possession, predicated on possessing an object that nevertheless ends up taking possession over subjectivity itself, is clearly demonstrated in the second half of *Este corpo que me ocupa*. After his noninstrumental arrangement of the objects, Fiadeiro performs a choreographed reorganization of them according to their "proper" use. Restoring each object's instrumental mode of being (sofa and stools right-side up; TV and lamp in their proper functioning position and plugged into a power outlet; vases standing vertically), Fiadeiro creates the image of a generic sitting room. Then, with a self-contained energy, he assumes the position of the contemporary subject in regard to those possessions that both possess and distort him: he slouches on a couch to enjoy his domesticity. In this properly set-up world,

20. Moten, *In the Break*, p. 1.

João Fiadeiro. Este corpo que me ocupa. *2008. Photographs by Patrícia Almeida.*

where objects have been replaced back to their functional positions to perform their utilitarian purposes, we see how a whole system of objects invades, takes possession, and defines the very core of subjectivity. We see that the systematicity of this system choreographs to the minutest detail, even at the level of desire, the subject who is supposedly controlling the system. In this mode of usage, an unbearable portrait of contemporary passivity emerges thanks to the figure of the solitary man sitting on a couch, before a TV set, surrounded by tamed, decorative nature. This scene—this image—is held for minutes toward the end of the piece, generating an effect that is not at all the same as when Fiadeiro was lying alongside the matter of the world. What emerges is the realization of how "immersed in the object of enjoyment, the enjoyer is conditioned by what is enjoyed."[21]

At this moment of realization, *Este corpo que me ocupa* resonates deeply with Giorgio Agamben's recent critique of the object. In his essay "What Is an Apparatus?," Agamben describes the object in contemporaneity as an overwhelmingly pervasive system of command. He writes: "I shall call an apparatus literally *anything* that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings."[22]

21. Benso, *The Face of Things*, p. 53.
22. Giorgio Agamben, "*What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 2009), p. 14.

Endowed with the capacity to capture, model, and control *gestures* and *behaviors*, this "any*thing*" matches quite well with the definition of choreography, which can be understood precisely as an apparatus for the control of gestures, mobility, dispositions, body types, bodily intentions, and inclinations for the sake of a spectacular display of a body's presence.[23] As Agamben's lists demonstrate, his conception of the term goes beyond the notion of apparatus as a general system of control, and instead approaches a very concrete, very specific understanding of apparatus as an *object that commands*: "Not only therefore prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones . . ."[24]

Between pens and cigarettes, computers and cellular telephones, it seems that the number of objects controlling our gestures, our desires, and our movements is limited only by availability—particularly in "the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live," characterized by "a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses."[25] In other words, as we produce objects, we produce apparatuses that diminish our own capacity to produce non-subjugated subjectivities. As we produce objects, we find ourselves being produced by objects: "Today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus."[26] Agamben's definition of apparatus, then, is useful for understanding the predominance of objects in recent experimental dance: first, because his notion uncovers a performativity in objects, and second, because it identifies a choreographic force defining and inhabiting objects in contemporaneity—a force securing the relation between subjectivity and objectivity as it mediates the question of obedience, of governing gestures, of determining who determines whose movements. It is no wonder that contemporary experimental dance (but also performance art, thanks to its openly political verve, and particularly its concern with how objects elicit actions) must approach critically the system of objects that defines life today, since objects seem to be governing our subjectivity, seem to be subjecting us, under their apparatus-function. But perhaps there is more to it than just control . . .

Agamben notes that under the force of the apparatus (prison or pen; religion or cigarette; agriculture or cell phone) a "de-subjectifying moment is certainly implicit."[27] The pressing question then is: how does one desubjectify an apparatus, and, most particularly, an object? Agamben's answer is "profanation," what he calls the "counter-apparatus." According to Agamben, profanation is the only

23. For a discussion of choreography as apparatus of capture, see Ric Allsopp and André Lepecki, "On Choreography," *Performance Research* 13, no. 1 (March 2008), pp. 1–6.
24. Agamben, "*What Is an Apparatus?,*" p. 14.
25. Ibid., p. 15.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 20.

action that would lead to restoring "the thing to the free use of men."[28] Yet both the reinstatement of the category of "man" as a countermove and the priority given to the "use of men" as an instrumental force seem odd ways out. A solo piece by Spanish choreographer Aitana Cordero may indicate a means of escaping these capturing and controlling apparatuses without invoking the category of "man" or the need for more instrumental "use."

Solo . . . ?

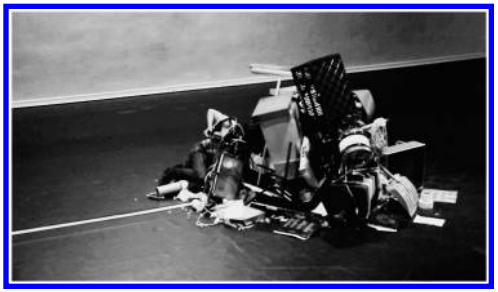
Karl Marx famously noted that if human activity in general is capable of enacting *corporeal transformations* on matter by turning it into an object of use (for instance, by turning a block of wood into a table), under the specific parameters of capitalism, human activity makes objects endure a supplementary, magical, or incorporeal transformation, where anything made for the use of humans turns into "a very strange thing" called a commodity.[29] Guy Debord remarked how, in this peculiar mode of transformation, "we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by *things* whose qualities are 'at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.'"[30] Debord took this principle of domination and used it to define our "society of the spectacle," which is not a society made of spectacles but one where "the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which *the commodity completes its colonization of social life*. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity."[31]

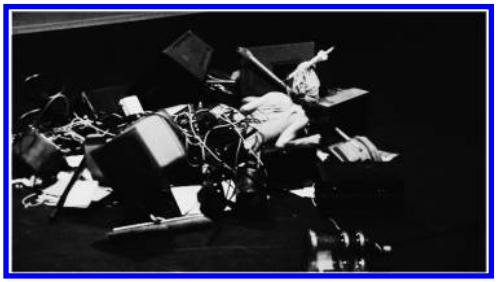
The political destiny of the commodity is, then, to complete its total dominance over social life, including the life of things, but also over somatic life, since the commodity's dominance inscribes itself deeply into both inorganic and organic bodies. Indeed, the commodity dominates not only the world of things (by turning them into instruments of profit, or use, or exchange) but also the realm of what is deemed to be perceptible and what remains imperceptible (or irrelevant), the realm of the sensible and of the infra-sensible, the domain of desiring, the domain of dreams. The commodity governs even the very possibility of *imagining governance*. At least, this is its impetus. Under its domain, humans and things find their shared openness for endless potentiality violently crushed or substantially diminished. Even if the commodity is a material *object*, its power makes sure that neither persons nor things are left in peace. In this way, we can see the link between Agamben's "apparatus" and Marx's "commodity." But what kind of act, gesture, or movement can one perform against such dominance? If Agamben proposed "profanation," Aitana Cordero's *Solo . . . ?* proposes revolt.

28. Ibid., p. 18.
29. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), p. 163.
30. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 29.
31. Ibid. (emphasis added).

Cordero's *Solo . . . ?* (2008) is an evening-length piece, in which she brings to the stage a variety of domestic objects, among them a TV set, electric appliances, buckets, fans, electric wires, lamps, shovels, irrigation systems, and desktop and laptop computers. As the solo progresses, the affective atmosphere changes, along with the way Cordero handles the objects. In the beginning, the piece seems to be an exercise in creating a display or archive of everyday paraphernalia. For several minutes, we watch Cordero matter-of-factly carrying on object, placing it on the floor, and through gradual accumulation creating a visual composition of colors, textures, dimensions. As objects start to fill the stage and to saturate the possibilities of display, Cordero begins—slowly at first, then more intensely—to randomly attack the objects, stomping on them, throwing them against each other, against the walls or against the floor, finding ways to destroy each one as much as possible. Then she proceeds to pile it all up. Using white duct tape she draws a straight line on the floor that leads from one side of the stage to the pile of objects, Cordero then goes on all fours and, as a good dancer should, follows the white line with care, as if it were a choreographic notation. As Cordero ever more gently crawls toward the pile, the lights in the theater slowly dim to blackout. Carefully, even caringly, as darkness looms, Cordero pushes her body into the pile of destroyed, no longer use-

Aitana Cordero. Solo . . . ? *2008. Videography by Filip Molski.*





ful objects. She is less a body among objects than a thing among things: a fusion—a confusion—is performed. The piece ends in tranquility, despite, or perhaps because of, all the preceding violence against objects, which now may simply be. Here, I would suggest we have not really a "profanation" of the object for "the use of man" (as Agamben would have said), but a violent revolt, performed by a woman against the domination of things and subjectivity by the gripping force of that colonizing apparatus known as commodity. Different from the three pieces discussed previously, *Solo . . .* introduces a very explicit link between revolt and revolution, where violence emerges not as destructive force but as the necessary action to break free subjects and objects, and reveal a shared mode of being thing, and moving as thing.

*

The paradox of any thingly investment in creating art turns on the fact that even as a work proposes modes of becoming-thing, the work itself remains, obviously, an art *object.* This is the inescapable limit that thingliness places on all representation—it lies at the threshold of objectivity, just as it defines the outer border of subjectivity. And, yet, the current choreographic interest and investment on thingliness is precisely where such a paradox becomes not a dead end but a source for energizing the links

between art and politics, subject and objects, performance and its effects. Within the regime of expectations that representation invokes (a regime immediately subverted by dancers who do not move according to a system of command, and by things that refuse to be merely producers of effects or proxies for human bodies), the disbanding of representation proposed by the thing may be, at last, if only briefly, glimpsed, experienced, or enacted. When Fiadeiro simply lies alongside objects devoid of utilitarian or signifying functions; when Cordero gently fuses with a pile of destroyed commodities; when Duan sutures history, ecology, and politics by using her naked presence and piles of recently discarded stuff in a choreographed mist of dust and mold; and when Harrell presents a dancer's drugged body sleeping in the museum as a mode of being-alongside in an "ethics of things," the bind between objecthood and subjectivity is shaken for a moment. In this tremor, a gap or opening in the field of possibility is revealed and activated. This activation is nothing else than the political effect that a choreographic critique of the object has the capacity to create: the formation of an "impersonal movement that at the same time displaces the other from himself and allows him in his turn to give himself as thing and to take me as thing."[32]

32. Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, p. 109.