

Struggling with the Louvre

De Keersmaeker, Beyoncé, Jay-Z

Christian Grueny

I

“Modern dance loves a wrong place,” writes David Velasco, “a church, a rooftop, a plaza, a street, or a gallery.”¹ The “wrong” places he lists recall work from the 1960s and 1970s, especially by members of Judson Dance Theater. Since then, a lot of dancers and choreographers have moved out of the theatre temporarily or permanently and being out of place has long ceased to be wrong. Still, Velasco’s list calls for a closer look: by placing public spaces next to art institutions, he suggests that the situations and challenges they present for dance are basically all the same. This is obviously not true, and we have to consider the specificity of these various places.

Moving into public spaces involves what we could call a de-framing: leaving the theatre means foregoing the established institutional and architectural markers of dance as an art form. Of course, this does not mean that the frame is lost entirely. What dance and performance in public spaces show is that the frame of art in general and of the performing arts in particular is portable, as it were. Discursively and institutionally, this frame is so clearly established that it can be actualized even in the absence of any physical indicators.

Moving to the gallery, however, is a different story. Instead of a de-framing, the move of dance performance to an institutionalized gallery space is clearly a re-framing, a transposition of an artistic practice to a space that is governed by a different set of spatio-temporal constellations, norms, and expectations. When dance enters the museum today, it can hope for increased public attention and cultural capital, while the museum is happy to host events that animate its spaces. If MoMA, which is the institution that Velasco is writing about and for, is still a “wrong” place for dance, it is so in a completely different sense than the roofs and galleries were sixty years ago.

The Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker has been part of the recent move to the museum from the very beginning. In a sense, her work is the epitome of choreographic sophistication, and is decidedly modernist in its focus on form, precision, and virtuosity. When she was invited to develop a piece at the Louvre in 2022, it may have seemed that if anyone could take on this juggernaut of a museum, she could. The result was *Forêt*, choreographed by De Keersmaeker and Némio Flouret and danced by her company Rosas, with a musical montage by Alain Franco, which premiered in November 2023. In order to approach this work, it is helpful to contextualize it by briefly recalling some of her earlier pieces and taking a more extensive look at other contemporary cultural events at the Louvre, the most prominent of which is the music video *APESHIT* by Beyoncé and Jay-Z. Comparing *Forêt* and *APESHIT* may seem unlikely but promises to shed some light on the question of how contemporary work can deal with an overwhelming and problematic cultural heritage.²

In 2015 at the art center WIELS in Brussels, De Keersmaeker presented *Work/Travail/Arbeid*. The piece was a revised version of *Vortex*, a choreography based on *Vortex Temporum* by French composer Gérard Grisey. De Keersmaeker had taken the original choreography apart, isolated and extended different layers, in that way creating a sequence of situations that lasted several hours rather than the sixty minutes of the original. The musical ensemble Ictus performed Grisey's music within the choreography rather than remaining in the background.

In this case, the museum is close to being a blank space. There are no other works to compete with but the spatio-temporal setup is clearly that of the white cube: large, open rooms with no internal structure, opening hours that do not define any internal temporal structure. Brian O'Doherty and others have reminded us that the white cube of the gallery hides its institutional and discursive determinations; for the dancers the white cube is obviously not a neutral but a clearly defined space whose characteristics come to the fore precisely because it is so different from the stage.³ However, this particular venue is neutral in the sense that it represents the modern museum in its purest form, allowing the choreography to interact exclusively with its formal properties.

At MoMA, where the piece was re-performed in 2017, the situation was different. While the white cube is also its standard form of presentation, MoMA is obviously neither empty nor neutral. The piece took place at the Marron Atrium, a semi-open space that diffuses attention by its very setup. Here, the dancers and musicians had to deal with visitors walking by, talking, sounds coming from the hallways, the bookstore, and even the other floors of the museum. While these architectural problems certainly posed a considerable challenge, it was the confrontation of different disciplinary traditions that was particularly interesting. The choreography did not relate to this confrontation directly; rather, it just took its place, settled into

the slightly uncomfortable situation and proceeded. The performance asserted its autonomy by largely ignoring its own situatedness in the midst of this crowded place, much like a work of visual art would do. In the disciplinary sense, dance may still not be completely at home in the museum, but aesthetically De Keersmaeker's work is very much in the right place here.

II

The Louvre is another matter entirely: it is one of the most culturally charged spaces in the world. It is one of the centers of European cultural heritage, including the inevitable colonial loot. Unlike all the other spaces where De Keersmaeker worked, the Louvre does not contain modern or contemporary art. Its most recent exhibits are from the 1850s. Being invited to perform here may seem like the ultimate accolade, the cultural equivalent of knighthood, but it also creates a host of problems. Any contemporary artistic activity that takes place at the Louvre will have to relate to the art, to the building, and, maybe most importantly, it will have to hold its ground in the face of the cultural status of the museum and what it shows.

Unlike at MoMA, Rosas's performance took place in the galleries themselves, in front of French paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Italian paintings from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. De Keersmaeker and Flouret went straight into the lion's den. Even though they limited themselves to a few galleries in the Denon wing of the museum that contain some of its most iconic paintings, including Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and the centerpiece of the whole museum, the *Mona Lisa*, these spaces are vast, and the sheer number of paintings formidable. Spatial concentration and temporal extension in the midst of the constant flow of visitors was not really an option here. They decided to turn it around: limit the performance to a long but defined two and half hours after closing time, admit only an audience of five hundred, and spread the action through the whole space. Spatial dispersion was complemented by a clear dramaturgical temporality: a quiet beginning with performers and props lying motionlessly scattered throughout the galleries, episodes with smaller groups in various places followed by a few passages that involved all dancers, ending with everyone assembled in front of the *Mona Lisa*.

The music played a peculiar role in all of this. In contrast to De Keersmaeker's usual way of working, *Forêt* was not based on a musical piece but reacted to the space and the paintings, so the music could and had to be developed in parallel. Alain Franco created a musical montage that served as a counterpoint to the dancers' movements but was drawn into the dispersion: it played from two large portable speakers that Franco himself carried through the galleries, always moving and following his own path, sometimes intersecting with the dancers, sometimes on his own, making the music into an independent agent. Franco's montages are sophisticated attempts of

deconstructing historical pieces and questioning their contemporary significance. He does this by cutting the pieces apart and juxtaposing them to contemporary and popular pieces and field recordings. This approach is closely related to the questions the choreographers found themselves confronted with, and his solutions had the potential to challenge the choreography. The independent movement of the music, however, made it difficult for the audience to follow Franco's concept and to directly relate it to the dance, and there was little indication that the choreography itself reacted to or interacted with the music.

The choreographers' starting point was determining geometrically defined paths and varied speeds for the dancers, but this formal device that was almost impossible to grasp for the audience. More obviously, dancers related directly to the paintings by reenacting, animating, continuing, or exaggerating poses, and sometimes creating contrasts. Since the audience was also dispersed and constantly on the move, trying to find the action, some of these episodes started in the midst of a crowd and some in relative isolation. In these instances, the audience quickly gathered around the dancers. Towards the end of the piece, the topic of (environmental) disaster was introduced: one of the dancers read aloud a text by Leonardo da Vinci on the representation of a deluge, accompanied by the others loudly slapping pieces of clothing onto the floor in a slow rhythm.

Overall, the piece was not dominated by De Keersmaeker's formal virtuosity, which may have had to do with Flouret's influence. In an interview, Flouret spoke of his and De Keersmaeker's way of working as "*ralentir le temps, réduire les artifices, revenir près du corps humain*"—slowing down time, reducing the artifices, returning to the human body, and thus creating a counterpoint to the overabundance of (painterly) virtuosity all around.⁴ This produced powerful scenes, especially when dancers were moving through the crowd or acting in sync, and rather forced moments, like when they tore off their clothes and started running. Nakedness can be read as another reference to the representation of bodies in many of the paintings, but it is also an all too easy signifier of transgression.

However, it was the general appearance of the piece as a series of spectacular attractions that made the most lasting impression. After entering the building, coming up the steps and passing the Nike of Samothrace, visitors were faced with two signs pointing in opposite directions, both saying "Forêt." From the very beginning you had the feeling of being part of a kind of treasure hunt where you had to prowl the galleries on your own or in groups, encountering dancers or missing them, following them, moving with the crowds, or finding your own route; in many performances, there was a Pied Piper moment when a group of younger visitors decided to follow Franco. This unusual way of moving through the Louvre was exciting but also created a certain degree of frustration because you always had the feeling that you were missing something. Even if there hadn't been things going on in different

places simultaneously, it would have been almost impossible for any visitor to see everything. You had to resign to contingency and incompleteness.

The frustration was mitigated by the spectacular character of the event, which the choreography never disturbed or challenged. Most visitors seemed to have a good time, it was stimulating and fun, and the question whether the choreography was artistically convincing could be suspended for most of the evening. Doubtlessly, De Keersmaeker and Flouret didn't *aim* at creating a spectacle but attempted a serious confrontation with the space and the paintings. It was the setting that produced the spectacle, being a spectacle in itself. In this sense, the artists inadvertently and maybe inevitably performed a service for the museum: providing it with a spectacular event with contemporary high art credentials that promised to bring in a different kind of audience.

The description of *Forêt* on Rosas's website reads: "Which positions can be taken with respect to the Louvre?"⁵ That is indeed the crucial question. It didn't seem, however, that the choreographers had come to terms with this problem; instead, they ended up focusing on matters of form and on specifics. In fact, this runs like a thread through many of the interviews they gave: after posing fundamental questions, they retreat to matters of formal relations.

III

The weight of the Louvre's tradition and cultural status can overwhelm any contemporary artistic activity within its walls. How did others deal with this problem? There is one obvious reference: Flouret himself running through the galleries recalls the protagonists' race through the museum in Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 film *Bande à part* (and its reenactment in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* from 2003). Even though this run is of minor importance for *Forêt* as a whole, the reference is illuminative: in *Bande à part*, the point was the irreverence of using the museum as a stage for a race. This should not be mistaken for indifference. Running through the Louvre acknowledges its cultural position precisely by treating it with disrespect. De Keersmaeker and Flouret cannot afford to be irreverent in the same way; in fact, they chose not to be irreverent at all. Finding themselves in a wrong place, they tried to do everything right, which in their case meant applying their sophistication and intelligence in order to formally relate to what they found.

Somewhat closer to the questions *Forêt* raises was *The Foreigner's Home*, curated by Toni Morrison at the Louvre in 2006. This was a multidisciplinary series of events that included discussions, films, and video installations, focusing on the topics of colonialism, migration and displacement. On one of the evenings, there was a slam poetry session in front of the *Raft of the Medusa*, a painting that provided an obvious reference point for the program as a whole. Géricault's painting depicts



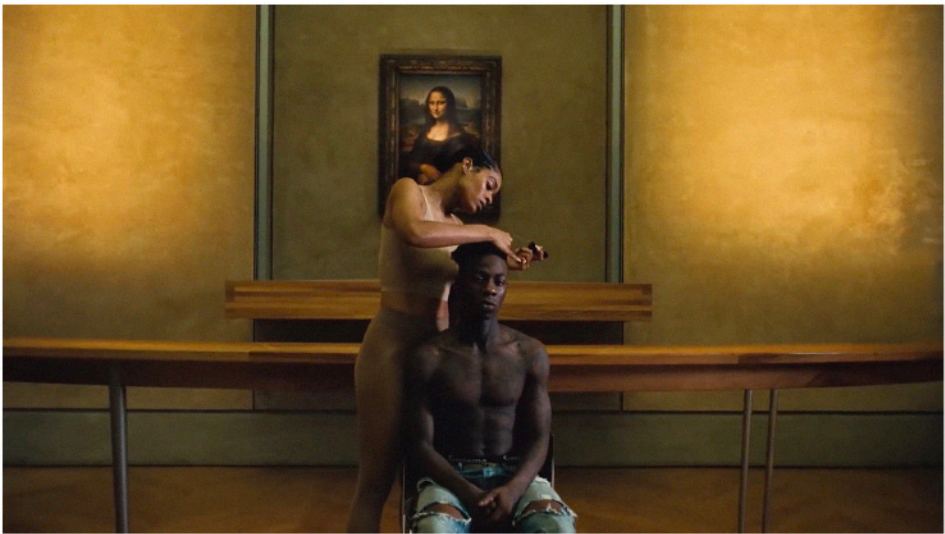
Rosas, *Forêt*, Louvre, Paris. Dancers appear in front of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) with Alain Franco on the right. Photo: Anne Van Aerschot. © Rosas.



An image from *The Foreigner's Home*, a 2018 documentary by Rian Brown, Geoff Pingree, Jonathan Demme, and Ford Morrison. Slam poet D' de Kabal appears in front of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. Photo: Courtesy Ice Lens Pictures.



"We belong here." The Carters in front of the *Mona Lisa*. Screenshot from the video for *APESHIT* (2018).



"...so do we." An unnamed couple appear in front of the *Mona Lisa*. Screenshot from the video for *APESHIT*.

the survivors of the shipwreck of one of the ships of France's colonial forces sent to Senegal in 1816. When the ship ran aground, one hundred and forty-nine people were put on a raft and set adrift because there was not enough space in the boats. Only ten of them survived. The huge, powerful painting and its complex story provided an ideal background for slam poets D' De Kabal and Hocine Ben who could explicitly refer to it and comment on its relation to their own situation.⁶

While *The Foreigner's Home* also focused on artistic reactions to the Louvre, it had a clear discursive dimension. Morrison's event wanted to make a point, and it did. It related to Géricault's painting not by simplifying a complex situation but by relating its complexity to ours. Even though the *Raft of the Medusa* is one of France's national treasures, it is not hard to wrench it from national representation and ultimately from its context at the Louvre and point to the critical power it had in 1819 and may still have today. But this has to be made explicit. Letting dancers reenact the positions of some of castaways on the bench in front of the painting, as De Keersmaeker and Flouret did, does none of this. In this situation, insisting on the position of dance as one of prediscursive physicality seems like a retreat that shirks a responsibility it can hardly deny.

In *The Foreigner's Home*, Morrison ignored the *Mona Lisa*, most likely because she felt that there was little the painting had to say about the contemporary cultural and political situation and little to gain by engaging with it. It is, however, at the center of my third example, which is much more well-known and poses a completely different challenge: the 2018 music video *APESHIT* by Beyoncé and Jay-Z (as The Carters).⁷ The differences between *APESHIT* and *Forêt* are numerous and obvious—media, length, cultural register, etc.—but the common ground is just as obvious. The song and video are rich and complex, and there is a lot to be said about them; I will limit myself to a few remarks relating to the question of how they related to the Louvre.

IV

APESHIT is "a surfeit of Euro-formal, stoic-funky, Afropunk-era Instagrammable negritude fabulosity," as scholar Jason King puts it.⁸ It places the Carters in some of the most iconic rooms of the museum, with a different outfit for each of the locations, often accompanied by a group of Black dancers. There are some formal relations to different paintings as well, but they are clearly not at the center of attention. The video is less about the Louvre than about *being at* the Louvre, confronting it directly and juxtaposing it to scenes of Black everyday life. Where De Keersmaeker and Flouret seemed to disregard their own question which positions can be taken with respect to the Louvre, the Carters had a very clear answer: they encountered it on a level playing-field. After an opening shot of a Black man with white wings crouching on the steps outside the Louvre and a few shots of differently lit ceilings and details from various paintings, we see the two standing in front of the

Mona Lisa looking directly at the viewer (or at least Jay-Z is; Beyoncé is facing the camera without quite looking at it). In this image, the Carters exude complete self-confidence. We see no defiance, no struggle, no arduous attempt to hold their ground, no aggressive takeover. "We belong here," they seem to say, "this is ours."

Critics noted the tension between Beyoncé and Jay-Z's status as privileged billionaires and the video's gesture of claiming recognition for Black culture. There is no easy answer to this. The video returns several times to the *Mona Lisa*, and two of those scenes express slightly different relations. First there is a shot of another young Black couple, the woman gently combing the man's hair, transported from the domestic setting that we had seen them in before. This is the clearest indication of the video's aim to introduce Black bodies and Black everyday culture into a very White museum. The Carters here act as provisional stand-ins, opening a door that would otherwise be closed. Who else could have done this than two of the most famous Black musicians? (Interestingly, they seem to be at a loss what to do with the *Raft of the Medusa*, which is used as backdrop for some of Jay-Z's appearances.)

The second of these scenes returns to the beginning with the Carters silently facing the viewer. When the music ends, they slowly turn towards each other and then towards the painting. This could be interpreted as a gesture of deference, but this is not what their posture suggests. Rather, when they finally look directly at the *Mona Lisa*, it is a relation between equals. Once they have settled into this position, the video switches to an empty, off-white screen, which is held for four seconds. This is difficult to interpret; in my view, it marks an open ending, a way of saying: this presence of Blackness now our reality. But there are other layers of meaning.

The video started with five seconds of black screen and ending it the same way would have clearly framed it as a work of art, a fiction. The black screen is the standard way of dividing moments in film, be it separating individual scenes or the ending of the film from the everyday; its code has no obvious relation to Black skin. In this case it is the off-white that marks a difference. Four seconds of off-white screen does indeed suggest a relation to Whiteness that relates directly to the scene that comes before it: turning to the *Mona Lisa*, we are once again in the presence of White skin, in fact in its very territory. But now this appears as marked rather than neutral and its blandness contrasts with the Black exuberance that came before.

If this reconstruction is correct, the ending would be doubly coded: it is a return to normal, to a reality that no artistic statement can easily change but also a signal of openness, a way of saying that *APESHIT* refuses to designate itself as *nothing but* a work of art that is clearly set apart from this reality. To complicate this, in the final half-second before Whiteness takes over, we see motes and scratches on the screen as if this were an old film instead of a new video. This is already history, it seems to say, and it cannot be undone.

Forêt ends at the same location as *APESHIT* with a similar confrontation that has completely different connotations. After some energetic episodes, there is a quiet, intimate scene in front of Leonardo's painting with the whole audience assembled. A single dancer faces the painting and sings the chanson "La Joconde" (i.e. the *Mona Lisa*) in a strange doubling or reflection: a song speaking from the perspective of the *Mona Lisa* is addressed to it, or rather: to her. What this naïve gesture purports to address is not the painting in its role as cultural icon but the figure it depicts. It suggests an immediate relation from (White) young woman to (White) young woman, an intimacy that can afford to ignore the cultural load. The moment is touching but also ideologically charged. *Forêt* spatially revolves around the *Mona Lisa*, so it makes sense to confront the painting directly in the final scene, but the way the choreographers approached this can be read as a confirmation of their refusal to engage with the Louvre as a cultural and political entity.

V

This reading may seem harsh, just as comparing the two pieces may seem unfair. After all there is no way that De Keersmaeker and Flouret could have staged a similar scene as the Carters do in *APESHIT*. It is Beyoncé's (less so Jay-Z's) status that enabled this: if the relation between the Carters and the *Mona Lisa* is indeed one of equals, it is because Beyoncé has attained and systematically cultivated the role of a new type of contemporary cultural icon. Beyond the status of pop star, she has managed to fuse extreme popularity with political credibility into a figure of Black feminist representation. Questions of authenticity can hardly be addressed to this figure: it is all pose, and it is all real. Similarly, the distinction between pop and high culture becomes problematic: her shows, the documentary *Homecoming*, and *APESHIT* are all spectacle, products of the culture industry through and through, but so sophisticated and reflective that they demand to be taken seriously as art.

In contrast to *Forêt*, which is a spectacle despite itself whose artistic qualities and sophistication lie elsewhere, Beyoncé fully embraces the spectacular character of her work and puts all her sophistication (and that of countless others) into the creation of the spectacle. In a way, this intertwining of spectacle and sophistication, of high art and pop culture has its analogue in the cultural position of the *Mona Lisa* itself. This position is what the Carters can and do relate to, not the formal qualities of this or any other painting. In light of this position, the fragility and immediacy of the single dancer at the end of *Forêt* whose name we don't even learn (unless we ask: her name is Solène Wachter) are as much of a pose as anything the Carters do, but a feeble and ineffectual one. The scene, which most of the audience and many critics loved, is neither grand nor particularly subtle.

If contemporary relevance depends not only on being able to relate to one's own time but also to productively confront tradition, the scenes I analyzed raise some uncomfortable questions. Of course, taking on the Louvre is not the inevitable

consequence of dance moving into the museum, and maybe it's not a smart thing to do. But who would refuse this kind of invitation? Returning to the idea of framing and re-framing, we could say that the Carters succeed in turning this relation around: rather than their performance being re-framed by the powerful cultural space and the art it exhibits, they re-frame the space and effect a kind of détournement. For De Keersmaeker and Flouret, on the other hand, this is impossible, no matter how much they struggle. It seems that they notice too late that they have been framed and there is no getting out.

NOTES

1. David Velasco, preface to *Ralph Lemon*, ed. Thomas J. Lax (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 7.

2. The confrontation between De Keersmaeker and Beyoncé I am staging here is not the first one: In 2011, Beyoncé appropriated a series of dance moves from two pieces by De Keersmaeker, *Rosas danst Rosas* and *Achterland*, for her video *Countdown* without obtaining permission. It was a complex situation that involved issues of copyright, the relation between high art and pop, between cultural and economic capital, and between different racialized traditions. As one scholar put it: "In appropriating the white avant-garde, Beyoncé reverses the racialized logic of property that has helped underwrite the development of choreographic copyright in the United States." Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264. Unsurprisingly, De Keersmaeker did not quite agree and sued the record company.

3. See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

4. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Némó Flouret, interview by Thomas Birzan, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.rosas.be/data/public/dataset/file-field/7/717.docx>.

5. Rosas, "Forêt," accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.rosas.be/en/productions/954-foret>.

6. Part of this is documented in *The Foreigner's Home*, a 2018 film by Rian Brown and Geoff Pingree. See also Christian Bourgois, ed., *Toni Morrison: Étranger chez soi* (Paris: Musée de Louvre, 2006).

7. Beyoncé, "The Carters—APESHIT (Official Video)," June 6, 2018, <https://youtu.be/kbMqWXnpXcA>. For a detailed analysis, see Carol Vernallis, "Tracing the Carters through the Galleries," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30, no. 4 (2018): 25–40.

8. Jason King, "Stuck in a Time-Loop: Notes on APES**T," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30, no. 4 (2018): 15.

CHRISTIAN GRUENY is a philosopher and critic based in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. He is a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt and teaches at the Technical University Darmstadt.