Chapter 9: Creation, imagination, paradise: lettrism's excursions into choreography

August 1945. Jean-Isidore Goldstein, young and resourceful, leaves his native Romania and arrives in post-war Paris under the name Isidore Isou. Goldstein/ Isou enters into contact with Jean Cocteau, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, and Gaston Gallimard (of the publishing house) – among others – and prepares to trouble the Parisian art scene. He starts attracting other young artists, and together they form a movement that came to be called *lettrisme*. Lettrism marked its presence with scandal-provoking actions – such as interrupting a theatrical piece by Tzara and publishing texts that bore the assertive mark of the manifesto – starting with a journal aptly-titled *La Dictature lettriste* [The lettrist dictatorship].[1] Isou's movement was inscribed in the context of the aesthetic, civil, and cultural transformations of post-war Europe; it reflected the deadlocks of a binary abstract-figurative paradigm in the visual arts,[2] the social pressures that progressively took form in the May 1968 protests, and the media consciousness that surrounded the beginnings of computing and the virtual. Notably, lettrism reflected such tendencies through an association with *pre-war* European modernity. Isou considered lettrism to be a – or, rather, the last – movement of the avant-garde; contemporary historians agree, by considering the movement a post-war avant-garde.[3]

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1   For a brief overview of these beginnings, see Girard, Bernard: *Lettrisme: L'Ultime avant-garde*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel 2010, pp. 7–20.

2   Cf. Fabrice Flahutez's argument is quoted in the conclusion of this chapter.

3   Flahutez, Fabrice : *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel 2011, pp. 47–48; Simone, Cristina De : Le Lettrisme dans l'après-guerre: Oralité poétique et soulèvement de la jeunesse, in : Collective : *Fragments pour Isidore Isou*, *Perspectives inactuelles* 2, Paris : Art Book Magazine/ENSA Limoges 2017, p. 24; Blanchon, Philippe : Apprendre d'Isidore Isou, seul, à travers l'hypergraphie, in : Collective : *Fragments pour Isidore Isou*, pp. 43, 56. Fabrice Flahutez titles his book on the movement *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde* [Historical lettrism was an avant-garde], while Bernard Girard titles his above-quoted study *Lettrisme – L'ultime avant-garde* [Lettrism – The last avant-garde].

Lettrism primarily started its course in poetry; proclaiming the destruction of the word, Isou suggested that poetry was based on the letter, a unit which the lettrists used both phonetically, in letter-based poems to be recited – their sounds included, but were not limited to, existing phonemes – and later, visually – in images containing letter-signs. Therefore, while it does not fully overlap with any of these practices, lettrism is associated with concrete poetry, visual poetry, and Dada typographic works. Lettr ism also invented concepts that went beyond the primacy of the letter, and soon widened its scope to encompass multiple art forms – including, but not limited to, painting, music, film, architecture, theatre, and choreography. It continued to develop as a diverse movement, whose members did not always agree. Thus, the movement should not be confused with the position of its founder – even if the unavoidable figure, discourse, and concepts of Isou cast a shadow over the writings of most lettrists.

Isou did not always hold dance in great esteem – he wrote of it as a "derisory" art.[4] Nonetheless, he dedicated considerable attention to it, by writing about it and making (and sometimes performing in) his own dance works. His productions, and those created by other lettrist artists, were performed both in theatrical spaces and galleries.[5] Lettrist choreography included absurd actions, provocation, audience participation, increased floor contact, reciting text, prolonged immobility, and absence of performers from the stage. Through several of these traits, lettrist dance can be associated with certain manifestations of post-modern dance – forming a figure of a European post-modern dance – and is strikingly relevant to contemporary dance practices in Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, its work remains largely unknown in Dance Studies[6] and, consequently, is not seen as an important part of European contemporary dance's genealogy.

Lettrist choreographic creations were accompanied by notions theoretically and historically framing dance, elaborated by the lettrists themselves. Lettrism constructed its own theory about the historical evolution of the arts – including dance – by envisioning consecutive art phases that encompassed or even led to

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4   Isou, Isidore: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, in: Lemaître, Maurice: *La Danse et le mime ciselants, lettristes et hypergraphiques*, Paris: Grassin 1960, p. 39.

5   Isou, Isidore: *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, Paris: Roberto Altmann 1965, unpaginated introduction.

6   An exception to this in contemporary dance studies is Frédéric Pouillaude's essay that presents lettrist dance in relation to French contemporary dance, as background to the analysis of Olivia Grandville's 2011 work that restaged certain lettrist dance pieces, *Le Cabaret discrépant*. Pouillaude, Frédéric: To the Letter: Lettrism, Dance, Reenactment, in: Franko, Mark (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment*, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 165–176.

lettrist work. Indeed, the movement was carefully defined through abundant, (ir)regular internal publications, in which members *of* the group took the role of historians and theorists writing *about* the group; in this way, lettrism acquired a past and a present, a goal and function, a heritage to the future and a nomenclature. (Isou – a pseudonym – was, to a great extent, a staged figure; Goldstein not only wrote *as* Isou, but also *referred to* Isou within Isou's texts in the third person singular.[7]) This writing of lettrist history has been read as one of the lettrists' artistic endeavours;[8] like Isou's created personage, the movement's historical definition of itself may be seen as an artistic project. In lettrism, theory and history do not just explain, analyse, interpret, contextualise, or critically assess artworks – artworks are also the *result* of theory and a theoretically-construed history.[9] Understanding lettrist dance, then, relies on understanding lettrist choreographic works as well as lettrist dance theory and history; this chapter therefore focusses on several works and texts as a *system*. The primary sources available on lettrist dance and choreography – those drawn on here – include scores, images, and descriptions of works, as well as dance history/theory texts in books, journals, and informal publications written by lettrists. In these sources, lettrist choreography refers to both ballet history and dance modernity – modern ballet and modern dance artists of the pre-war period.

Lettrist dance, history, and theory reveal a complexity in the movement's view of choreography; diverse conceptions of choreography emerge in the lettrists' texts about dance and in their stage works. Isou and his colleagues adopted the 20th-century association between dance and choreography by insisting on making dances, despite their works being unconventional. They also exemplified the 20th century's association of choreography with a moving human corporeality, proclaiming dance to be '*l'art des mouvements purs ou géometriques du corps* [the art of pure or geometrical movements of the body]'.[10] But, lettrism challenged its own views by proposing works in which the body, movement, or both were absent; therefore, lettrist dance also contains an expanded concep-

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7   According to the editors of the 1953 *Revue musicale* issue to which Isou contributed an article, Goldstein-Isou wrote in the first person when making personal and subjective, non-absolute claims. Isou, Isidore: Manifeste de la danse Isouienne: La Danse ciselante, in: *La Revue musicale, Numéro special "La musique et le ballet"* (1953), p. 111.

8   Flahutez : *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde*, p. 15.

9   Roland Sabatier notes that artworks must be understood in relation to the theories of the framework in which they were conceived. Sabatier, Roland & Blanchon, Philippe : Quelle exposition pour le lettrisme ?, in : Collective : *Lettrisme : Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis*, La Seyne-sur-Mer : Villa Tamaris Centre d'Art/La Nerthe 2010, p. 32.

10   Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 7.

tion of choreography, by widening dance and marginalising the moving human body.

This chapter explores the dance-historical and -theoretical framework proposed by lettrism and the works that emerged from it – mainly focussing on pieces from the 1950s-60s – to argue that the different conceptions of choreography active within lettrism are a crucial part of the movement's historical inscription. Their multiplicity allows lettrism to position itself among its dance-historical "concurrents". At the same time, this variable synchronous inscription crosses a transhistorical one, in which lettrist choreographic expansions respond to earlier – like Raoul Auger Feuillet's early-17th century [Chapter 2] – and later – like Mathilde Chénin's early-21st century [Chapter 4] – choreographic histories that differentially multiply choreography's (im)material substrates. Thus, lettrist dance – and lettrist history of dance – appear as territories of at times contradictory conceptions of choreography, contributing to lettrism's positioning within dance history – and thereby commenting upon how that history is told.

Neither Diaghilev nor Graham, but Isou

Lettrism associates dance and choreography with the corporeality of the dancing medium – the human body. For Isou, the '[l]'art chorégraphique ne peut pas se déprendre, comme les domaines abstraits, spirituels, de la matière unique dont il se forge [choreographic art cannot, like abstract, spiritual domains, separate itself from the unique material out of which it is made up]'.[11] Based on this interest in the body, lettrist dance countered choreography's exclusion of certain body parts in favour of others (e.g. the legs) and of general movement.[12] Isou argued against neglecting the neck, torso, and head – and their subparts: forehead, mouth, eyebrows[13] – and suggested a dance of turning thumbs, smiling, spitting, and body-fragments.[14]

> Je veux retrouver un sourire sans aucun sens au delà du plissement des lèvres. [...] Je veux que la danse redécouvre en deçà de ses grossièretés actuelles des nuances et des riens [I want to find again a smile without any meaning beyond the folding of the lips [...] I want dance to rediscover, short of its present coarseness, nuances and nothings][15]

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11 Isou, Isidore: *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, Vol. II, Paris: Centre international de création kladologique 1970, p. 218.

12 Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, pp. 29–32.

13 Ibid., p. 30.

14 Isou: Manifeste de la danse Isouienne, p. 113.

15 Ibid., p. 115.

he wrote, suggesting that his goal was to strip choreography down to a non-instrumental interest in the human body itself. Isou's work *14 petits ballets ou Somme chorégraphique, ciselante, destructive, hypergraphique et infinitesimale* (1960) illustrates how these interests were translated into practice. His ballet included a score – prescribing performer actions – and a script – recited alongside the live action. The corporeal score included movements of body parts that Isou felt were neglected in conventional choreographic practice: opening the mouth, dilating the lips, smiling, chattering one's teeth, winking, flapping an eyelid, lifting a pinkie finger... Isou's text draws attention to these actions and their significance, in order to critique choreography's habitual use of the body in motion:

> *Regardez mes lèvres tandis qu'elles vous invitent à une nouvelle danse. Indifférents au reste du corps, soyez attentifs aux nuances gesticulaires produites par cette parcelle unique du danseur [...] cette bouche, pour la première fois inscrite comme figure essentielle dans la danse, jusqu'ici réduite aux positions grossières des jambes et des bras, cette bouche nous découvre qu'elle est riche en éléments utilisables, comme les deux lèvres, la langue et les dents, et que les combinaisons purement esthétiques, non-significatives, pures, de ses éléments sont aussi infinies que les positions des jambes [...] Il y a tant de virtualités inexplorées dans chaque main que je m'étonne de la rapidité grossière avec laquelle les chorégraphes jusqu'à présent ont sauté directement à l'ensemble du corps et ont négligé l'essentiel* [Look at my lips while they invite you to a new dance. Indifferent to the rest of the body, be attentive to the gesticular nuances produced by this unique fragment of the dancer [...] this mouth, for the first time inscribed as an essential figure in dance, until now reduced to crude/vulgar positions of the legs and arms, this mouth reveals to us that it is rich in usable elements, such as the two lips, the tongue and the teeth, and that the purely aesthetic, non-meaningful, pure combinations of its elements are as infinite as the positions of the legs [...] There are so many unexplored virtualities in each hand that I am surprised by the crude/vulgar rapidity with which choreographers have until now jumped directly to the totality of the body and neglected what is essential].[16]

This turn towards the body-medium was accompanied by an organisation of choreographic practice and knowledge through a system of body analysis and research into the '*particule anatomique de base* [basic anatomical particle]'.[17] This

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16 Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, pp. 13–16.

17 Lemaître, Maurice : *La Danse, le mime et l'art corporel d'avant-garde*, Paris : Centre de créativité 1982, p. 15. It is also in this systematic analysis of the body that the lettrist dance joins the movement's interest in the letter: '[o]*n ne peut pas dire que la danse possède des phonèmes ou des vocables purs* [...] *Il faut donc se débarasser des* phrases *afin d'atteindre les termes* élémentaires; *plus loin, il faut saisir les* phonèmes, *les particules les plus minimes de l'art corporel* [we cannot say that dance possesses pure phonemes or terms [...] We must then get rid of *phrases* in

system was meant to allow an understanding of all, and any, existing, or yet-to-be-discovered, choreographies, regardless of historical context;[18] it went beyond the specificities of Western dance history to embrace '*les enseignements des écoles du monde entier* [the teachings of schools of the whole world]'.[19] To do so, lettrism divided the body into non-pliable or "inert" sections (such as the heel or toe) and pliable or "motor" sections (such as muscles or genitalia)[20] – a process that, Frédéric Pouillaude suggests, paralleled Rudolf Laban's movement analysis.[21] In this way, corporeal mobility became a criterion for the organisation of choreographic practice.

While some of their dance works focussed on the movement of "marginal" body parts, the lettrists were also interested in internal – and therefore invisible – corporeal motions, in a radical turn of choreography towards the body medium; for Isou, the organs, mucous, and liquid body parts could dance.[22] Correspondingly, Maurice Lemaître's series of *Chorées surprenantes* (published 1965) included a ballet in which muscles were tensed, as if to perform visible motion but never actually doing so; a ballet where an apparently-immobile dancer was juxtaposed with a film showing their wrinkles' micro-motions; and a third ballet in which staged spectators touched an immobile dancer to verify their internal dance.[23] In his *Le Ballet du cerveau* (1968), an immobile dancer was accompanied on stage by a film that purportedly showed the images and sounds crossing their mind, and by a second performer who explained the internal movements of their "dancing brain":

> *Comment pourrait-on en effet résister à l'appel des névroglies, ces mystérieuses et enchanteresses névroglies, dont la croissance et la multiplication mêmes sont des gestes purs, dont le rythme et l'anti-rythme, le saut et l'anti-saut, la vitesse et l'immobilité progressive, poussée jusqu'à la mort et le retour au minéral, graveront à jamais dans vos propres névroglies le souvenir inoubliable de ce spectacle rare* [How could we,

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order to attain the *elementary* terms; further than that, we must grasp the *phonemes*, the most minimal particles of corporeal art]'. Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 35.

18   Cf. Lemaître : *La Danse, le mime et l'art corporel d'avant-garde*, p. 15.

19   Isou, Isidore & Lemaître, Maurice: Danse: Le Ballet ciselant, in: *Front de la jeunesse* 11 (1956), unpaginated. This text was presumably co-written with Robert Estivals, Gabriel Pommerand, Vasco Noverraz, and Roland Vogel, as their names are crossed out in the consulted copy at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

20   Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 36.

21   Pouillaude : To the Letter, p. 168.

22   Isou: Manifeste de la danse Isouienne, p. 118 ; Isou, Isidore : *Œuvres de spectacle*, Paris : Gallimard 1964 [1961], p. 192.

23   Lemaître, Maurice : Chorées surprenantes, in : *Lettrisme* 4 (1965), pp. 10, 15, 18.

indeed, resist the call of the neuroglias, these mysterious and charming neuroglias, whose growth and multiplication are themselves pure gestures, whose rhythm and anti-rhythm, jump and anti-jump, speed and progressive immobility, pushed to death and the return to the mineral, will inscribe forever in your own neuroglias the unforgettable memory of this rare spectacle].[24]

This focus on the body in dance and choreography is consistent with the lettrist perspective on art history, wherein each art goes through phases termed *amplique* and *ciselant* ["amplic" and "chiseling", respectively].[25] The former, considered the starting-point phase of each art form, entailed works and creative approaches that referred to elements "extrinsic" to the art itself – such as textual narration or figurative depiction, or the use of the body's motions and gestures to tell stories. The *amplique* phase was, in time, replaced by the *ciselant*, in which the lettrists saw arts turn inwards, working on their "own" forms and elements – in the case of dance, the body itself. The use of the body as a medium to be explored "in itself" also distinguished dance from other artistic bodily practices. For example, Isou believed mime and dance were initially bound together, but dance differentiated itself in his eyes because it uses corporeal gesture without meaning.[26] Dance thus became the art of '*les expressions corporelles pures* [pure corporeal expressions]'.[27] This insistence on "purity" is paralleled by Isou's negative evaluations of previous dance paradigms that were defined through a specific context; for instance, he criticised ballet's positions as merely pointing to their social origins – such as the reverential bow or the posture of combat.[28] In these ways, an insistence on the body's non-instrumentalised importance in choreographic practice contributed to dance's medium specificity and potential "purity". These points are further related to Isou's compartmentalised, modernist[29] view of the arts leading to a strict division between artistic practices

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24 Lemaître, Maurice : Le Ballet du cerveau : Ballet infinitésimal, in : *Lettrisme* 2 (1972), unpaginated.

25 Cf. Lemaître, Maurice : *Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme?*, Paris : Fischbacher 1954, pp. 151–152; Pouillaude : To the Letter, pp. 167– 68.

26 Cf. Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 10.

27 Sabatier, Roland: La Danse, undated, https://www.lelettrisme.org/danse--pantomime.html (August 2020).

28 Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 29.

29 Lettrist art history particularly expresses a conception of art associated with modernism, as presented by Clement Greenberg when he writes that 'the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.' Greenberg, Clement:

and their media. This was made manifest in his separation of theatre into textual, corporeal, and material/scenic branches; and his concept of "discrepance" which – in a Cunningham-Cage-like way – suggested the causal dissociation, juxtaposition – and, therefore, autonomisation – of different media within a single work.[30]

This theory was transferred to the lettrists' dance-historical narrative in particular, and diverse, ways. The first of these concerns ballet, with which the lettrists had strong links. For example, members of the movement often used the term "ballet" to describe their works. Certain lettrist dance pieces directly referred to material from the ballet tradition; Isou's history of dance was punctuated by references to widely-known figures of European ballet – including Marie Sallé, Marie-Anne Camargo, Jean-Georges Noverre, and Marius Petipa – as well as modern ballet figures – such as Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes or Maurice Béjart. Based on this affinity, Isou recognised ballet's contributions to dance as an art form. For the lead lettrist, "pure" choreography began in Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* and Pierre Beauchamp's five ballet positions; similarly, the 1581 court ballet by Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx *Le Ballet comique de la Reine* acquired a privileged place in lettrist dance history because it displayed abstract combinations and a 'purificatory analysis'.[31] Thus, in certain respects, the lettrists were aligned with ballet-proponents André Levinson and Lincoln Kirstein, who associated medium specificity and anti-representationality with the genre of ballet. In some ways echoing Isou, Levinson complained that

> [p]ersonne [...] ne se préoccupa des caractères propres de la danse, ni ne tenta d'élucider les règles spécifiques de cet art considéré non plus à travers les autres genres, mais dans sa réalité intrinsèque [nobody [...] was concerned with the traits that are proper to dance, nor attempted to elucidate the specific rules of this art, considered not through other genres anymore but in its intrinsic reality];[32]

while Kirstein argued that it was not until Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet innovations that movement was conceived 'simply as movement [...] used for the sake of

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Modernist Painting, in: Frascina, Francis, Harrison, Charles & Paul, Deidre: *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Harper and Row/Westview Press 1987 [1960], pp. 5–6. Following this association, here the terms "modernism" and "modernist" are used to reflect this association with "purity", a focus on an art's "specific" medium, and aesthetic autonomy. For a wider definition of "modernism" in the theatrical arts see Hulfeld, Stefan: Modernist Theatre, in: Wiles, David & Dymkowski, Christine (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2013.

30   A typical example of discrepance is Isou's film *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, presented at the 1951 Cannes film festival, in which sound and image are made distinct.

31   Isou: *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, Vol. II, pp. 216–217.

32   Levinson, André: *La Danse d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Duchartre et Van Buggenhoudt 1929, p. 180.

its own interest alone'.[33] On the other hand, the lettrists also diagnosed ballet's failure to accomplish the precepts of the *chorégraphie ciselante*. The lettrist critique of ballet (and other dance forms) is partially based on it having submitted '*à des idées ou à des anecdotes extérieures à l'art des gestes* [to ideas or anecdotes external to the art of gestures]'.[34] In other words, in Isou's eyes, while certain ballet works contributed to a conception of choreography based on "purity", ballet history countered this by embracing a choreography associated with narrative and non-analytical uses of the body. These features of ballet place it in the *phase amplique* of dance, the timespan marked at one end by Beauchamp and, on the other, the neoclassical ballet figure of Serge Lifar – Isou's contemporary in the Parisian scene. Indeed, Isou's treatment of modern ballet artists – notably those associated with the Ballets Russes – suggests he was doubtful about their capacity to make dance enter the *phase ciselante;* he argued their contributions to dance (history) were limited to stage design and music.[35]

Isou's critique of ballet aligns with modern dancers' and modern dance writers' critique of classical dance; but lettrist views are also mirrored in modern dance discourse. Reflecting the lettrists' willingness to liberate dance from the potential-storytelling aspects of the *amplique*, Mary Wigman insisted that '[t]he absolute dance is independent of any literary-interpretative content; it does not represent, it is'.[36] Reflecting the lettrists' focus on the body and their universalist tendencies, Martha Graham wrote: '[i]n its essentials, dance is the same over the entire world. These essentials are its function, which is communication; its instrument, which is the body; and its medium, which is movement'.[37] Reflecting the attraction towards an ideal of "purity" that lettrist dance-related discourse exemplified, Roger Copeland considered modern dancers, like Graham, to be 'reject[ing] modernity', as it was Merce Cunningham (and bal-

33   Kirstein, Lincoln: *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing*, New York: Dance Horizons 1977 [1935], p. 284.

34   Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 10.

35   Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, pp. 16–17. The lettrist critique of ballet and its conventions was, at times, translated into works literally staging an attack on classical dance and including, in certain cases, the performance of aggression. For instance, in Isou's *Essai d'anti-ballet*, classical dancers were teased, blocked from acting, or even had aggression thrust upon them. Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, pp. 37–39.

36   Wigman, Mary: *The Mary Wigman Book*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1984 [1973, trans. Walter Sorell], p. 108.

37   Graham, Martha: A Modern Dancer's Primer for Action, in: Cohen, Selma Jeanne (ed.): *Dance as a Theatre Art: Source Readings in Dance History from 1581 to the Present*, Princeton: Dance Horizons 1992 [1941], p. 137. (However, Isou would consider the function of communication as incompatible with the *ciselant*.)

let choreographer George Balanchine) that 'exemplified Greenbergian purism'.[38] Crucially, however, Isou did not consider artists associated with modern dance as having achieved the *ciselant* either. His overview of dance history mentions that Isadora Duncan attempted to liberate dance from academic constraints and had a revolutionary dimension, although it evaluates that she did not manage to go beyond dilettantism and a negatively-construed simplicity; similarly, Isou refers to certain modern dancers from Europe (e.g. Kurt Jooss) and across the Atlantic (e.g. Graham), but considers them followers, in their expressionism, of romanticism's tendency towards anecdote.[39]

Susan Manning has pointed out similar concerns, regarding the realm of, and discourse about, post-modern dance[40] – especially the Judson Dance Theater, which was chronologically and, in certain cases, stylistically closer to lettrism. Isou's focus on the corporeal medium and his avoidance of anecdote thus mirrors the words of Sally Banes, when she wrote that it was

> in the arena of post-modern dance that issues of modernism in the other arts have arisen: the acknowledgment of the medium's materials, the revealing of dance's essential qualities as an art form, the separation of formal elements, the abstraction of forms, and the elimination of external references as subjects.[41]

Once again, however, post-modern dance is not used as a reference point for developing the *ciselant* in lettrists' dance historical narrative – perhaps out of lack of familiarity with their work.

The lettrists' body-focussed, modernist view of choreography can therefore be put in relation – in some cases, by the lettrists themselves – with (modern) ballet, modern dance, and post-modern dance, revealing commonalities – all, in certain manifestations, respond to a Greenbergian/modernist ideal – that proponents of these genres may not admit. In this way, lettrism replaces a genre-specific view of choreographic modernism with a more-complex one that has overlapping layers. At the same time, lettrism's lack of acknowledgment of its commonality with these genres – themselves synchronously coexisting

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38   Copeland, Roger: *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*, New York: Routledge 2004, pp. 102, 105.

39   Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 16; Isou: *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 9. Here, Isou mistakes Jooss' name for "Karl Joss".

40   Manning, Susan: Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric. A Response to Sally Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, in: *TDR – The Drama Review* 32/4 (1988), pp. 32–39; see also Burt, Ramsay: Undoing Postmodern Dance History 2004, http://sarma.be/docs/767 (August 2020).

41   Banes, Sally: *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-modern Dance*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press 1987 [1977], p. xv.

but also institutionally and aesthetically competing – situated the movement in an external position. Indeed, while Isou admitted that a non-lettrist artist, Maurice Béjart, displayed aspects of the *ciselant*, he also claimed that Béjart only falsely achieved it and drew from lettrist ideas.[42] Isou thus formed an alternative to dance history's conventional "chapters", replacing their dialectic with a third option: lettrism. Counter to what some modern dancers/dance writers claim, ballet for him was not just succeeded by (post-)modern dance; rather the *amplique* – encompassing ballet history, modern ballet, *and* modern dance – was succeeded by the (lettrist) *ciselant*. The lettrists' discursive and practical performance of chiseling choreography exemplified and perpetuated modernist aspects common with these genres, while simultaneously embodying their succession.[43]

Although the lettrists appeared as purveyors of a modernist body-focussed choreography, they also staged multiple excursions beyond these choreographic principles. While the lettrist *ciselant* classified the body into mobile and inert sections, this organisation was counterbalanced by disorganised dance.[44] The *ciselant* troubled dance, exploding its perceived fixations: the lettrists elaborated various ways of upsetting previous dance paradigms – for example, by valourising the a-rhythmical or focussing on crawling (instead of elevation and jumps).[45] Similarly, while discrepance contributed to an autonomisation of different arts, it also disorganised resulting works, whose elements were out of synch. By the same token – despite their focus on corporeality – the lettrists produced choreographic works which questioned the treatment of the moving body as dance's primary medium. In doing so, they challenged their positionality as both successors and continuators of a heterogeneously-construed 20th-century dance modernism – and foregrounded their relations with former, and later, expanded choreographic paradigms.

Expanded choreographic excursion one: media crossings

Lettrist choreography's display of expanded aspects is exemplified, in the first place, by the movement's distinction between what they termed aesthetics – the

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42 Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 25.

43 Susan Manning, to whose writings this chapter owes a lot, developed a comparable argument when she described the similarities between modern and post-modern modernist dance writing. Manning: Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric.

44 Cf. for instance Isou: *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, Vol. II, p. 243.

45 Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 18.

"forms" (e.g. painting, poetry, novel) and styles (e.g. classical, romantic, symbolist) of art – and mechanics – the type of medium or material (e.g. paper, film, people, objects, paint) used in art-making.[46] Creativity in the field of mechanics took the form of *méca-esthétique* [mecha-aesthetics] – where artistic focus was on the choice and/or use of the medium/material – and *anti-méca-esthétique* [anti-mecha-aesthetics] – in which the medium/material was purposefully subverted and altered.[47] This framework allowed artists to widen the mechanics of their practice:

> *L'artiste peut utiliser l'intégralité des ressources existantes ou à inventer, dans le cadre de la "méca-esthétique intégrale". Ainsi, un réalisateur de films peut concevoir une oeuvre dont le support serait le cosmos, un végétal singulier, une fourmi ou une comète* [the artist can use the entirety of existing or to-be-invented resources in the framework of "integral mecha-aesthetics". Thus a film director can conceive of a work whose medium would be the cosmos, a unique plant, an ant or a comet][48]

– like how an expanded choreographer can conceive of a choreographic work whose medium is a book, video, code, or installation. In effect, the choreographic activity of the lettrists – like that of Chénin [Chapter 4] and to a certain extent Feuillet [Chapter 2] – is associated with an expansion that distinguishes between choreographic practice and the bodily-kinetic medium.

The first way in which this distinction operated was by considering the body as simply one-among-many possible media and materials of the mecha-aesthetic framework.[49] This explains how the body may be used both as the habitual mechanics of dance and as subverted, unexpected mechanics of other types of artistic expressions. Indeed, the body was extensively present in lettrist art in general – from the very moment when poetry became an art of the letter. For lettrists, a letter-based poem was not to be individually read, but recited and listened to, as part of a corporeal act shared with the spectator. The poem became a score for live performance and the body became an instrument of sound; the voice was opposed, in Isou's early writings, to the '*inhumanité mécanique* [inhuman mechanics]' of musical instruments.[50] In further

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46   Cf. Isou, Isidore : *Introduction à l'esthétique imaginaire et autres écrits*, Paris : Cahiers de l'externité 1999, p. 48; Devaux, Frédérique : Untitled, in : Satié, Alain (ed.) : *La Méca-esthétique lettriste*, Paris : Salons art, vidéo, cinéma et écritures 1996, p. 7.

47   Sabatier, Roland : Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, in : Collective : *Lettrisme. Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis*, p. 18.

48   Devaux : Untitled, p. 8.

49   Cf. Isou, Isidore : L'Art corporel lettriste, hypegraphique & esthapeiriste, in : Collective : *Lettrisme. Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis*, p. 190.

50   Isou, Isidore : *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, Paris : Gallimard 1947, p. 229. Isou was also doubtful about mechanical means of recording the live

experimentations, the lettrists produced "a-phonic" poems, in which the body silently and entirely replaced the text.[51] This corporeal tendency of lettrist poetry was elaborated in a field Isou termed '*art corporel* [corporeal art]', in which the lettrists created installations that contained living creatures, orchestrated strip-teases, offered their body as a public canvas, and offered medication to their audience.[52] Thus, it shared several points with body art, performance, and happenings.

Additionally, the lettrists used the body medium in non-dance practices *within* the choreographic field. The music in Roland Sabatier's 1965 dancework *Omega 3* was partly performed by a soloist improvising step arrangements; the weight, speed, and texture of their steps contributed to the work's soundtrack.[53] Interestingly, choreographic works themselves contained the body as a subverted mechanics, bringing choreography close to the letter. The body was envisaged as a canvas, and lettrist works were painted on dancers' costumes or directly projected onto their bodies.[54] Without the intermediary of the costume, the dancer folded their body or manipulated props to form letters and signs [e.g. Figure 31, in the work of Sabatier], their motions mediating particles of text.[55] Lemaître gave another example of this in his description of one of his *Chorées*, where the body's actions were to spell out the phrase '*qui veut danser doit penser* [one who wants to dance must think]' [Figure 32]; the body represented letters and words visually – e.g. standing erect to form an "i" – and phonetically – the word "*doit* [must]" was represented by raising a finger ["*doigt*", phonetically identical with "*doit*"].[56] Here, the audience was invited to read corporeal motions and positions as text, processing them at different linguistic levels (sound, letter, word). The 1965 work's title, *Prose hypergraphique gesticulaire* [Hypergraphic gesticular prose], explicitly pointed to a choreographed version of a literary form. In this way, lettrist dance was associated with hypergraphics – a field

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voice/performance; see Girard : *Lettrisme*, p. 92. Cf. also Flahutez : *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde*, p. 105.

51   Isou, Isidore : *L'Art corporel lettriste hypergraphique et esthapéiriste*, Paris : Psi 1977, p. 8.

52   Ibid., pp. 20, 24. For Lemaître's stripteases see Lemaître, Maurice : *L'Anti-sexe : Spectacle de strip-teases ciselants (1967)*, in : *Lettrisme* 10 (1972).

53   Sabatier, Roland : *Omega 3*, Paris : Editions Lettrisme et hypergraphie 1966, unpaginated, BnF. In other cases, the body as mechanics was used to create works referring to the universe of painting; Jean-Paul Curtay proposed representing Mondrian's canvases in the form of *tableaux vivants* – horizontal lines embodied by women, vertical ones by men. Isou : *L'Art corporel lettriste hypergraphique et esthapéiriste*, unpaginated.

54   Lemaître: *Chorées surprenantes*, p. 7.

55   Sabatier : *Omega 3*, unpaginated; for a related *chorée*-mime see Lemaître: *Chorées surprenantes*, p. 21.

56   Lemaître: *Chorées surprenantes*, p. 22.

in which multiple media become carriers of the letter, and the moving body becomes material for a universal practice of lettrist scripture.

Figure 31: Detail from Sabatier's Omega 3. *Source: Sabatier, Roland:* Omega 3, *Paris: Editions Lettrisme et hypergraphie 1966, unpaginated. No re-use without permission.*
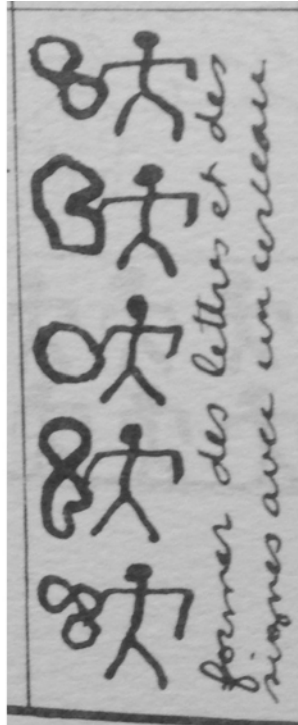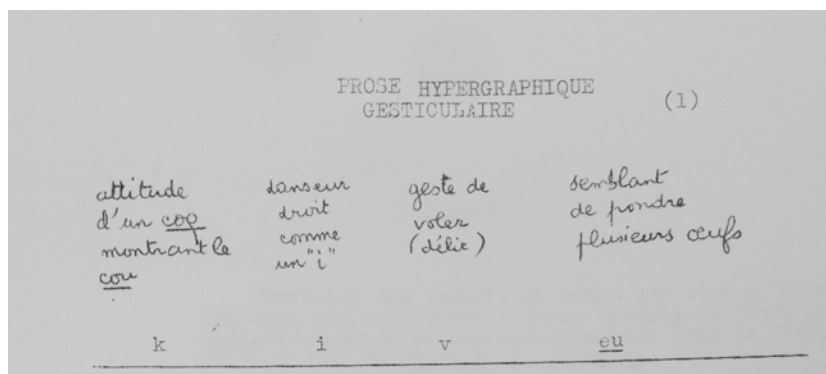
Figure 32: Detail from Lemaître's Prose hypergraphique gesticulaire. *Source: Lemaître, Maurice: Chorées surprenantes, in: Lettrisme 4 (1965), p. 22, Courtesy of the Bismuth Lemaître Endowment Fund. No re-use without permission.*

Beyond depicting letters or signs on/through the body's motions, the lettrists also organised choreography through principles of literature and text. In Lemaître's works *Fugue mimique no. 1* (1959) and *Sonnet gesticulaire* (1959), the body performed movements that were organised based on poetic principles of versification or 'physical rhyme'.[57] Lemaître clarifies how this was realised in his construction of a choreography in the form of a sonnet:

> *14 vers, divisés en deux strophes de quatre vers sur deux rimes, et une de six vers sur trois rimes. Mes "vers" chorégraphiques se composaient de "syllabes" constituées par une attitude (danse) ou un geste significatif (mime), les rimes étant naturellement le retour d'une même attitude ou d'un même geste.* [14 verses, divided into two stanzas of four verses with two rhymes and one of six verses with three rhymes. My choreographic "verses" were composed of "syllables" constituted by a posture (dance) or a meaningful gesture (mime), the rhymes being naturally the return of one and the same attitude or gesture].[58]

The piece was performed by three interpreters; the corporeal gestures and motions of each corresponded to the syllables of a choreographic poem, and, combined, they formed a composition of three sonnets. Here, while the choreography used the body in motion, its construction was literary and the audience was invited to approach it as a poem. Indeed, although presented as a "ballet",

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57 Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 22; Lemaître : *La Danse et le mime ciselants, lettristes et hypergraphiques*, p. 60.

58 Lemaître : *La Danse et le mime ciselants, lettristes et hypergraphiques*, p. 60.

its title refers to it as a sonnet. Like Chénin's works that illustrated a choreography adaptive to multiple media and penetrated by their different logics [Chapter 4], lettrist expansions introduced the moving body into choreographies that were conceived in literary and textual ways.

These hypergraphic/expanded choreographies undo the non-instrumental, "pure", non-representational corporeal movement that the *ciselant* implicated; against the idea that dance's corporeal medium should refrain from external reference, the moving body is used to transmit a message or follow a textual form. Indeed, Isou refers to '*un nouvel amplique, l'hypergraphie, grâce à laquelle chaque particule corporelle représente un signe et dont le ballet devient un message en lettres* [a new *amplique*, hypergraphics, thanks to which each corporeal particle represents a sign and whose ballet becomes a *message in letters*]'.[59] Therefore, despite lettrism's serial, sequential view of dance history between the *amplique* and the *ciselant*, this linearity is troubled by loops where previous phases re-appear in new form; the lettrist history of art includes a post-*ciselant amplique* phase, in which hypergraphics were referential. This loop, by admitting commonalities with the past, casts doubt upon genres – (modern) ballet and modern dance – as consecutive "chapters" in an ever-progressing history. It also complexifies lettrism's own position as a *ciselant* "successor".

The use of the body as a form of mechanics to produce hypergraphic-like artworks was paralleled by the lettrists' integration of the non-human in choreographic work; "corporeal art", in this sense, was not restricted to "human corporeal art". The movement introduced animals and non-organic elements to the choreographic stage. For example, in Sabatier's *Omega 3*, movements of (human) dancers' fists, thumbs, tongues, eyes, cheeks, and eyelids were accompanied by a turkey circulating in the performance space, a fish in an aquarium, an electric fan, trickling water, and a choreography of cigarette smoke.[60] These works were concurrent with a progressive acceptance of non-human and even non-organic sounds – such as sirens – in live lettrist poetry performance.[61]

Such an interest in non-human elements on stage introduced a second way in which the division between the mechanics and aesthetics of dance helped develop a lettrist expanded choreography – in which the moving body was not the privileged, or sole, mechanics. This is discernible in Sabatier's score for *Omega 3*, where bodily-performed gestures are both described and illustrated; as the score progresses, illustrations dissociate from textual explanation, and the action or movement is communicated by the image-sign. Through such

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59   Isou: La Danse et la pantomime de l'antiquité aux lettristes, p. 18.

60   Sabatier : *Omega* 3, unpaginated.

61   Flahutez : *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde*, p. 208 note 4.

replacements, and by writing that *performs* on paper what it is meant to convey
– for instance, squiggly writing for the word "trembling" [Figure 33] – Sabatier's
score appears as a means to provoke corporeal action in performance *and* an
image-based performance of his work – a kinaesthetic document. Lemaître also
manifests the possible forms of expanded choreographic works in non-corporeal
media – or, to use lettrist vocabulary, mechanics:

> *Je veux qu'on représente désormais les mimes et les ballets par des peintures, que ces
> peintures, ces romans, ces poèmes ou ces oeuvres dans tous les éléments de toutes les mé-
> caniques possibles (sauf le geste du corps humain) soient considérés eux-mêmes comme
> des morceaux gestuels. On filmera ensuite ces oeuvres […] et ces combinaisons nouvelles
> de leur reproduction seront des ballets ou des mimes inédits. Que les balletomanes ou
> les fanatiques du mime se réunissent pour offrir des textes joyciens qui seront autant de
> pantomimes ou danses originales. Des sculpteurs installeront des blocs de granit taillés
> qui seront applaudis comme des danses inconnues* [I want that from now on we rep-
> resent mimes and ballets by paintings, that these paintings, these novels, these
> poems or these works in all elements of all possible mechanics (apart from the
> gesture of the human body) be considered themselves as gestural pieces. We
> will then film these works […] and these new combinations of their reproduc-
> tion will be original ballets or mimes. May ballet and mime fanatics unite to
> offer Joycian texts which will be original pantomimes or dances. Sculptors will
> install carved granite blocks which will be applauded as unknown dances].[62]

This programmatic wish is followed by Lemaître's three *Chorées* from 1963,
taking graphic forms: one is composed of four lines of non-meaningful words;
another is a small drawing that includes non-letter signs; the third includes
a meaningful phrase, non-meaningful text material, and drawings [Figure 34].
Following the preceding argument, these letters, signs, and drawings are not
a score leading to corporeal action. Here, the moving body's performance of
a textually- or poetically-construed choreography is paralleled by works whose
choreography resided in non-corporeal media (be they granite blocks, film, or
text) – as also illustrated by Chénin's tripartite works [Chapter 4].

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62   Lemaître : Chorées surprenantes, p. 4.

Figure 33: Detail from Sabatier's Omega 3. *Source: Sabatier, Roland:* Omega 3, *Paris: Editions Lettrisme et hypergraphie 1966, unpaginated. No re-use without permission.*
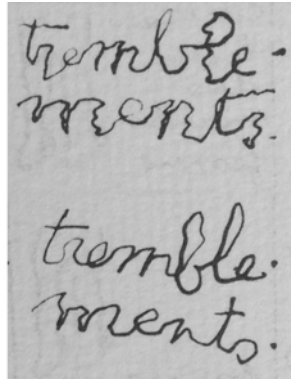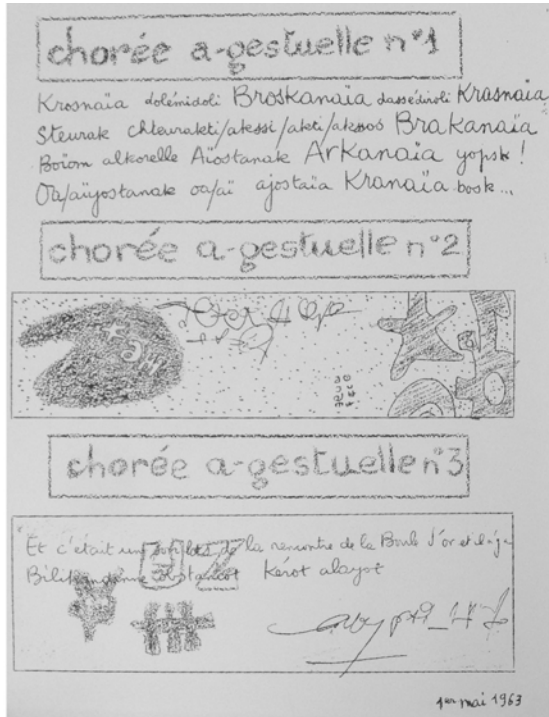

Figure 34: Detail from Maurice Lemaître's Chorées surprenantes. *Source: Lemaître, Maurice: Chorées surprenantes, in: Lettrisme 4 (1965), p. 5, Courtesy of the Bismuth Lemaître Endowment Fund. No re-use without permission.*

This expansion away from the corporeal-kinetic medium counters lettrism's focus on the body's "pure movements" as a guarantor of choreographic specificity – and therefore casts doubt upon that purity as the artistic aim that defined the dance field's "progress". Indeed, while medium "purity" is, for the reader of lettrist writings, associated with progress, the ultimate end – in the teleological sense of the word – of art is an altogether-different notion for lettrists: creation. Isou was unequivocal on creation – construed as innovation, invention, and discovery[63] – writing that it is *'le seul droit à l'existence qu'un art possède* [the only right to existence that an art possesses]'.[64] According to contemporary lettrism theorists and historical members of the group itself, creation characterises lettrism more than a sole focus on letters and signs.[65] Isou relatedly notes that (artistic) systems are not necessarily destroyed by subsequent ones; rather, all systems may find their own death by exhausting themselves[66] – in other words, if they are no longer capable of producing creation. He writes that

> *[l]'applatissement (couché par terre) et l'exécution des mouvements dans cette position remet sur un plan différent toute l'histoire des figures de la danse. Les envols, les pirou-ettes, les arabesques, les entrechats, acquièrent un milieu différent et une dimension inusitée* [flattening out (lying on the floor) and the execution of movements in this position puts the whole history of dance figures on a different plane. The jumps, the pirouettes, the arabesques, the entrechats, acquire a different milieu and an uncommon dimension].[67]

Thus, crawling and contact with the floor are expressions of a system that – rather than annulling and replacing the classical dance of elevation – provides dance vocabulary with new margins of creation. Similarly, replacing the moving body with other media widens the kinds of materials and forms with which choreography may work, thus broadening its creative potential. If the hyper-graphic "new *amplique*" introduces loops into an only-apparently-linear dance history, the notion of creation replaces the singularity and unidirectionality of (modernist) progress with the possibility of multiple, creative endeavours functioning together – indeed the lettrists simultaneously produced chiseling, hypergraphic, and other types of dance works.

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63   Cf. Girard: *Lettrisme*, pp. 55–56, 59; Sabatier: Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 11.

64   Isou: *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, p. 232.

65   Sabatier: Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 11; Girard: *Lettrisme*, p. 78.

66   Cf. Isou, Isidore: *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, Vol. I, Paris: Bordas 1953, p. 214.

67   Isou: Manifeste de la danse Isouienne, p. 117.

Through works using the body as a mechanics for non-dance-related expressions – be it images or texts – the lettrists allowed their choreographic art to turn its gaze away from its medium and become, once again, expressive. In this way, the expansion of lettrist choreography allowed lettrism to counter a linear history which – crucially – it had partially adopted. Through choreographic works using media other than the body – image, text, or anything else – the lettrists dissociated themselves from an essentialisation of the moving body as the primary choreographic material. In this way, lettrism performed an elegant twist, replacing the corporeal medium specificity of dance – on whose purity lettrism insisted – with a focus on the ever-widening scope of creation.

These expansions of choreography, which complexify lettrism's own choreographic position, also influence its positionality in the dance historical landscape. Such expanded lettrist choreographic practices parallel works created by other artists within the lettrists' historical context. For example, Lemaître's organisation of choreographic pieces based on poetic structures recalls Robert Dunn's experiments with future-Judson choreographers, in which the structure of Erik Satie's musical compositions became the basis for composing dances.[68] These parallels are a useful reminder of the development of this type of experimentation outside of the New-York scene, and suggests lettrism be considered European post-modern dance. But, the lettrists employed their own terms (*ciselant-hypergraphique*) rather than the modern/post-modern dialectic; similarly, their dance history's loops and non-linearity subvert the successive replacement inherent in the notion of "post". Through expanded hypergraphic choreography and choreographic works in non-corporeal media, the lettrists upset the linearity and forward-directionality of a (modernist) history that they also partly adhered to – potentially casting doubt on (modernist) historiography itself.[69]

Along with their association with post-modern dance, these expansions turn lettrism into a field that exemplifies and solidifies the 1950s and 1960s (European) dance field's interdisciplinary links with performance art. But, beyond allowing for intra- and inter-disciplinary connections, these expansions present lettrism as being comparable with other historical practices that doubt the exclusivity of the relationship between corporeality and choreography. The lettrists' transformations of choreographic mechanics performed a media and ontological pluralisation of choreography, which is also discernible in Feuillet's late baroque period [Chapter 2] and Chénin's contemporaneity [Chapter 4]. These transformations are not akin to Feuillet's system of translatability between body,

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68   McDonagh, Don: *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*, London: Dance Books 1990 [1970], p. 50.

69   For different visions of modernist historiography see Manning : Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric (in dance); Hulfeld, Stefan: Modernist Theatre, p. 16 (in theatre).

writing, and sign, or Chénin's extraction and transfer of choreographic information; rather, they can be read as a 20th-century reconfiguration of choreographic multiplication manifesting modernity's quest for limitless creation.

Expanded choreographic excursion two: imagining choreography

Some of the aforementioned works in this chapter replaced the moving body with other choreographic media. The lettrists also produced pieces in which this body disappeared and was replaced by nothing at all. The progressive elimination of corporeal movement from the lettrist dance stage developed in works where actions were deliberately made unavailable to the audience; movements were invisible due to the darkness of the stage, and steps were only (at times) heard.[70] The removal of bodily action was further elaborated in pieces of complete immobility, where the apparent lack of movement was not an indicator of an internal dance, but, rather, embraced dance's absence. Thus, Lemaître's *Chorées* included a ballet of total stillness – a naked solo performer, standing in a neutral position and trying to avoid all movement, even controlling their breath – titled *La Mort du ballet* [The Death of Ballet] (1964).[71] In other works, the body was not present at all; for example, Isou's *14 petits ballets* included a section where the ballet was reduced to a text read from backstage: '[a]*u fond, vous avez entendu un grand discours et vous avez vu très peu de danse* [in the end, you have heard a grand discourse and you have seen very little dance]'.[72]

Exchanging the body for nothingness, choreographic expansions did not only take the form of an absence; choreographic mechanics also included non-physically-existing media. In other words, the moving body was not, strictly speaking, replaced with nothing, but with something that was not or could not be there.

> [M]*ême si un artiste ne peut pas immédiatement accomplir une oeuvre sur un astre ou sur une pensée; de même qu'il ne lui est pas aisé de trouver comme support un tigre ou un crocodile, une fleur rare d'Océanie, une flotille de Spitfire; j'ai dû envisager ces éléments de l'outillage* [even if an artist cannot immediately accomplish a work on a star or on a thought; just like he cannot easily find, as a medium/support,

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70   Lemaître: Chorées surprenantes, p. 17.

71   Ibid., p. 11.

72   Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 22.

a tiger or a crocodile, a rare flower from Oceania, a flotilla of Spitfires; I had to consider these elements of equipment][73]

writes Isou, noting that any such medium – even if not readily available – can be a valid mechanics. If, however, an artist's envisaged medium does not exist, it is part of the realm of the imaginary, and resulting works are also part of the imaginary.[74] While this quotation does not refer to dance in particular, imaginary or inconceivable artworks – termed "*infinitesimal*" by the lettrists, as a new "chapter" of their artistic history – were represented in lettrist (expanded) choreography.

"Infinitesimal" art – dance, but also music, poetry, theatre – existed only in the domain of the imaginary or the virtual, according to lettrist nomenclature. Like how Chénin's videos [Chapter 4] adapt to materially-existing media – a camera filming to produce a video on a screen – and the virtuality of code, lettrist choreography also expands to the immateriality of the imagination. A 1967 *Ballet de poche* by F. Poyet illustrates this: a performer, having announced that the work is taking place in their pocket, turned the pocket out and made the inside of the pocket visible. They thus transformed a "hermetic" ballet – one in which actions are merely concealed from the audience – into an infinitesimal one;[75] the visible lack of action pointed to a virtual ballet. Isou and other lettrists theorised that in infinitesimal dance anything actually presented should make the viewer think of other, imaginary – even nonexistent or inconceivable – choreographic elements. Certain infinitesimal choreographic works presented no physical input at all; Isou explains in his introduction to his *Recherches pour un ballet infinitesimal* (1965) that

> [l]a chorégraphie est ici proposée par des éléments étrangers à la chorégraphie habituelle, basée couramment sur les mouvements du corps, car mon oeuvre est formée de paroles qui composent la dimension transcendentale de l'art gesticulaire [the choreography is proposed here through elements foreign to habitual choreography, commonly based on the movements of the body, because my work is formed out of words that compose the transcendental dimension of gesticular art].[76]

His ballet then unfolded through a scenario about the unlikely adventures – involving a mutilated corpse – of a character named Pierre de Montfargue, whose actions were narrated by a person on stage or, in the complete absence of a body, through a loudspeaker. Like the "*nouvel amplique*", this infinitesimal

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73   Isou, Isidore: *Pour une connaissance plus précise de la méca-esthétique et de l'esthapéirisme*, Paris : Psi 1976 [1972], unpaginated.

74   Ibid., unpaginated.

75   Poyet, F. : Œuvres, in : *Lettrisme* 28-30 (1974), p. 12.

76   Isou : *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 51.

choreographic expansion points back to codes of narrative dance-making – again forming loops in lettrist choreographic history.

Such disappearances of physically-instantiated dance were related, in Isou's view, with the notion of purity. In his *Somme chorégraphique*, for instance, while a dancer stood immobile on stage, a spoken text expressed that

> [s]*'il est vrai que la danse obéit à une certaine intention ou à un certain idéal, il est naturel que l'idéal finisse par* détruire le corps et la danse pour s'exprimer dans toute sa pureté [if it is true that dance obeys a certain intention or a certain ideal, it is natural that the ideal will end up *destroying the body and dance in order to express itself in all its purity*].[77]

After this text was recited, the dancer disappeared completely, leaving the stage empty. Just as lettrism pursued modernist tendencies that aimed to purify the choreographic medium, it also introduced the possibility of fully "purifying" choreography by removing its physicality altogether. But once again, lettrism's tendencies towards purity and abstraction are complicated by lettrism itself. Infinitesimal art could indeed be anchored in the real and have effects within it, despite its ideality.

If infinitesimal works activated the imagination as a realm in which art – in this case, dance – could be produced and/or perceived, then they constituted a space in which choreography could expand by adapting to the largely-solipsistic – but potentially-linguistically-shareable – and ephemeral medium of imagination. In this construal, the physical inexistence of infinitesimal works – or the indifference for their physically-present "springboards" towards the virtual – does not necessarily imply an escape from mediality, but a further expansion of choreographic media to include the non-physical. Sabatier implies that issues of infinitesimal art mediality were of interest to the lettrists; he notes that this new aesthetic paradigm led to questions about the perceptibility and sensibility required to experience infinitesimal art.[78] While, then, infinitesimal art does not need the justification of concrete reality in order to acquire meaning or purpose,[79] this does not suggest it does not mediate real experiences. Mirella Bandini agrees with this reading:

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77 Ibid., p. 22, emphasis added. Roland Sabatier also associates infitesimality with a '*beauté à l'état pur* [beauty in a pure state]'. Sabatier : Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 19.

78 He specifically considers *télésthésie* – or sensation at a distance – as a candidate for sensory access to immaterial, imaginary media. Sabatier : Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 19.

79 Isou : *Introduction à l'esthétique imaginaire et autres écrits*, p. 12.

> *Dans le cadre de l'exploration immatérielle de l'art, les lettristes sortent de la dimension du tableau et du livre pour s'approprier une nouvelle réalité comprenant l'existant, l'imaginaire et l'idéal, sous forme de retour à l'immédiatété, aux perceptions physiques, sensorielles et esthétiques inscrites dans l'indicible, l'inconcevable et l'impossible* [In the framework of the immaterial exploration of art, the lettrists leave the dimension of the painting and the book, in order to appropriate a new reality containing the existing, the imaginary and the ideal, under the form of a return to immediacy, to physical, sensorial and aesthetic perceptions inscribed within the unsayable, the inconceivable and the impossible].[80]

Ballets that took place on no stage, as mental acts of their spectators, had their own reality. Infinitesimal art also had an effect on the real. For example, Sabatier writes of the

> *glissement du signifié habituel vers un signifié complétement idéal, iréel, in-existant et inimaginable. En cette occurrence, elle [la beauté transcendée de l'art infinitésimal] s'affirme comme la forme la plus perverse et la plus discrépante du réel. On met un nom là où il n'y en a pas, là où aucune réalité n'existe et sur laquelle nous ne pouvons pas mettre de nom* [shift of the usual signified towards a completely ideal, unreal, nonexistent and unimaginable signified. In this case, it [the transcendental beauty of infinitesimal art] affirms itself as the most perverse and most discrepant form of the real. We put a name where there is none, where no reality exists and on which we cannot put a name].[81]

This suggests that infinitesimal works do not describe or refer to an existing part of reality, but name the nonexistent as an act of intervention *in* the real. Indeed, infinitesimal works were acts and products of creation; this holds for the lettrists' privileged field of letters and signs – the movement considered "potential" letters; Isou theorised about lettric infinity, widening the creatability of letters to an endless virtual field[82] – as well as their imaginary works in other domains. Infinitesimal works, then, may display an ideality that, in its turn, is associated with purity; but they complexify this ideality by being parts of a non-physical yet very-much-experienced reality, and by generating effects in the real.

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80   Bandini, Mirella : *Pour une histoire du lettrisme*, Paris : Jean-Paul Rocher 2003, p. 32.

81   Sabatier : Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 20, emphasis added.

82   Isou : *Introduction à l'esthétique imaginaire et autres écrits*, p. 11; Sjöberg, Sami : *The Vanguard Messiah : Lettrism between Jewish Mysticism and the Avant-Garde*, Berlin/Boston : De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2015, p. 41. On the relationship between imaginary aesthetics and creation see Theodoropoulou, Vanessa: Isidore Isou, entre nominalisme, réalisme et conceptualisme, in: Collective: *Fragments pour Isidore Isou*, p. 103.

The capacity of infinitesimal art to enter reality further depended on its spectators, whose imaginations became artistic territory as they participated in infinitesimal creation. Infinitesimality has indeed been associated with the lettrist field of the "supertemporal"[83], which implicates – often long-lasting – artworks, open to successive appropriations and interventions by viewers [Figure 35]. The lettrists combined audience participation with the imaginary realm, resulting in works that audiences contributed to, but that never actually existed. For example, in *Manifeste de la danse aoptique ou de la danse-débat* (1961) Isou proposed that a discussion about nonexistent dance would replace physically-instantiated performance, calling for dance lovers to *'se réunissent et réfléchissent ensemble dans un silence profond sur les conditions d'un chef-d'oeuvre inexistant et invisible* [unite and think together in deep silence on the conditions for a nonexistent and invisible masterpiece]';[84] he called on them to contribute to creation even though they were not creating something material – and, thus, implicated them in a non-technologically-mediated virtual reality. By proposing such works, the lettrists point to potential shifts in choreographic authorship through its collectivisation with spectators and by refusing the necessity of producing a tangible, visible, uniformly-perceptible result.

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83   Melin, Corinne: Esthétique imaginaire et tendances conceptuelles, in: Collective: *Fragments pour Isidore Isou*, p. 82, Sabatier: Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 20.

84   Isou: *Ballets Ciselants, Polythanasiques, Hypergraphiques et Infinitesimaux*, p. 48. Maurice Lemaître's 1982 *'ballet romantique supertemporel' Et la Sylphide?* proposed – as a framework for audience activity and as a physical presence leading to mental associations – a photograph projected on a screen and a dancer in a tutu and *pointe* shoes, inviting the spectators to reflect on Marie Taglioni and her genre. Lemaître: *La Danse, le mime et l'art corporel d'avant-garde*, unpaginated.

Figure 35: Ballet to be completed by viewers, by Maurice Lemaître. The text reads: 'And you, do you have something to bring to this ballet? Well then, put it in this frame!'.
Source: Lemaître, Maurice: La Danse, le mime et l'art corporel d'avant-garde, *Paris: Centre de créativité 1982, p. 91, Courtesy of the Bismuth Lemaître Endowment Fund. No re-use without permission.*
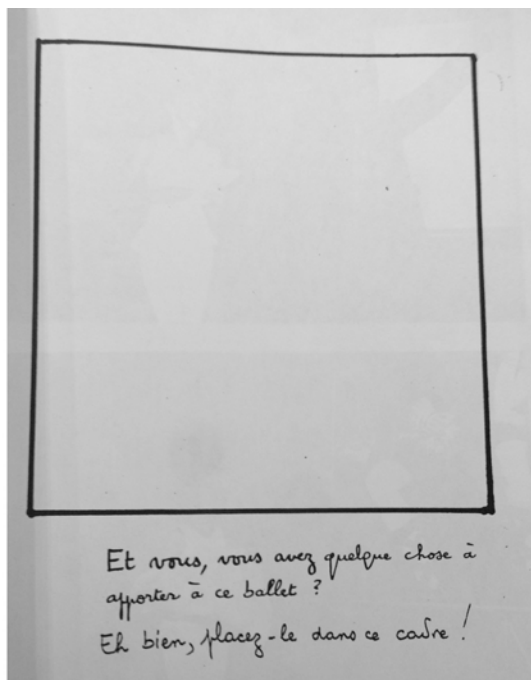
Implicating audiences is associated with the lettrists' desire to bring about change in the world around them – despite Isou's refusal to equate art with everyday life.[85] Indeed, social change was a general principle of the movement's artistic practice, with the ultimate goal of creating a *'univers paradisiaque* [a heavenly universe]'.[86] In this idyllic world, the act of creation was generalised to a community of creators:

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85   Isou: *Fondements pour la transformation intégrale du théâtre*, Vol. I, p. 32.
86   Sabatier: Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis, p. 11. Isou's willingness to form a utopian society based on creation may be the result of his Jewish origins and cultural background. For such a reading see Coadou, François: Lettrisme, mystique juive et messianisme chez Isidore Isou, in: Collective: *Fragments pour Isidore Isou*, pp. 113–132.

> *La Créatique ou la Novatique révèle la méthode par laquelle les individus peuvent se transformer en explorateurs de l'inconnu, de l'inédit, afin d'atteindre un niveau plus élevé de savoir et pouvoir, en devenant des génies cohérents et profonds, destinés à remplacer les dirigeants actuels, réactionnaires et abrutis, productifs, justement afin de transformer leur monde et même leur galaxie en un Paradis de Joie infime* [*La Créatique ou la Novatique* [these terms refer to notions developed by Isou in a book of the same title] reveals the method through which individuals can transform themselves into explorers of the unknown, of the original, in order to attain a more elevated level of knowledge and power, by becoming coherent and deep geniuses destined to replace the present leaders, reactionary and idiotic, productive, precisely in order to transform their world and even their galaxy into a Paradise of minute Joy].[87]

In this perspective, lettrism was a movement of the avant-garde because of its historical affiliations – dadaism and surrealism were recurring (criticised) reference points – and because of its insistence on bringing about social change through artistic acts. Through its necessary implication of the spectator, imaginary expanded choreography allowed lettrism to approach the historical avant-gardes' willingness to inscribe art in the social fabric, disrupting the potential purity of an ideal artwork detached from physical reality.

Through infinitesimal, physically-nonexistent, expanded choreographic works, then, the lettrists flirted with an abstraction from reality but ultimately resisted it in favour of the realness of imaginary acts and the possibility of audience participation within them. They approached a "purifying" detachment from physical creation, but deviated from it by insisting on the creative act and its teleological function of rendering the world better. By expanding their choreography to the imaginary, the lettrists reflected purity-seeking tendencies – associated with their modernism – while also resisting the ideal of an art autonomous in its medium and social (non-)inscription – thus aligning themselves with the historical avant-gardes. By doing so, they function as a reminder that a purity- and medium-specificity-seeking modernism was not opposed to the engaged practice of the avant-garde; the two can coexist within the work and worldview of a single artist or movement.[88]

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87 Isou, Isidore: Explication sur la créatique ou la novatique, in: Collective: *Lettrisme: Vue d'ensemble sur quelques dépassements précis*, p. 108.

88 Susan Manning developed a similar idea while analysing German *Ausdruckstanz*, a more mainstream dance form than lettrism: '*Ausdruckstanz* blurs the distinction between modernism and the historical avant-garde posited by Peter Bürger. [...] For Wigman, Laban and their many followers endeavored to conceptualise dance as an autonomous language *and* to reintegrate the dancer's experience of movement into everyday life. Although Wigman was more commonly associated with the modernist project of conceptualising dance

Once more, the infinitesimal and supertemporal expanded choreography that relates lettrism to the historical avant-gardes is paralleled with works by artists active in U.S.-based post-modern dance. Gus Solomons Jr.'s *Two Reeler* (1968) – in which two tape recorders replaced the live presence of a performer – or artists interested in the public's participation – like Anna Halprin – are just two examples. Again, however, the lettrists' relationship with *post*-modern practitioners is counterbalanced by their relationship to the historical avant-gardes, casting doubt upon the successivity of the "post-". In this way, the lettrist history of dance places the movement as a continuation of the historical avant-gardes' work, while the history of lettrist dance links the avant-gardes of the early-20th century and post-modern dance of the 1960s.[89]

Beyond its multiple inscription in its contemporaneous and/or historically-proximate context, the expansion of lettrist choreography to the imaginary necessitates a wider historical perspective on work questioning choreography's materialisation. The lettrist infinitesimal joins Feuillet's *figure* – an ideated representation postulated by the page, embodied by dancers, but reducible to neither – and his system of choreo-graphic signs – graphic designs, but also means for thinking of an only-potentially incarnated dance – [Chapter 2]; it joins Chénin's algorithmic choreography – an inaccessible code whose actions define the potentiality of what can be seen – and focus on choreographic informational content – intangible, invisible *data* that constitute choreographic material [Chapter 4]. Whether in the late baroque's taxonomic, the 20th century's universalist and revolutionary, or the early-21st century's digitised way, an investment in the invisible, intangible, and immaterial can be acknowledged and analysed in its contextually-diverse manifestations *as* choreography – and thus counter the suggestion that the deincarnation of choreography is merely a matter of (bodily) absence.

Conclusion

Lettrist choreography had multiple facets. In some cases, it insisted upon corporeality as the foundation of dance and dance-making; in others, it was closer to expanded visions of choreography that upset the previous one. By expanding

as an autonomous language (absolute dance) and Laban with the avant-gardist or populist project of reintegrating dance into everyday life, I argue that both worked along a continuum between the two projects and that this continuum defined *Ausdruckstanz*. Manning, Susan A.: *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1993, p. 7.

89   On this topic see also Burt, Ramsay: *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, Oxon: Routledge 2006.

choreography and adapting it to literary principles – turning the body into a carrier of letter and text, regaining its capacity to refer to elements beyond itself – lettrism undid its own insistence that moving corporeality marks choreography's purity, autonomy, and medium-specificity. By producing imaginary or inconceivable choreographic works, lettrism flirted with an ideality on the verge of absolute "purity"; however, this expansion undid its own tendencies by inscribing itself in the real and the quest for social change. The introduction of expandedness into lettrist choreography turns the movement's choreographic work into a hybrid that is both progress-based and not, both "pure" and not, both corporeal and not; both affirmative in its creation and distributive in its approach to choreographic authorship; both modernist and with an avant-garde sensibility, complexifying its way of being "modern"; both affirming its autonomy and adopting an interdisciplinary stance, creating links with performance and visual art.

Fabrice Flahutez has argued that lettrist painting is distanced from both figurative – in Isidore Isou's context, associated with the Eastern bloc's realist tendencies – and abstract – the Western bloc's dominant forms – visual art, fitting in neither pole of the dichotomy characterising its era.[90] Indeed, lettrism's distance from the *amplique* and its representative functions allowed it to differentiate itself from figurative art; its transgression of the *ciselant* and its self-reflexive functions allowed it to *also* mark its difference from abstraction. Whether or not lettrism's position as an outsider of 20th-century European art history was due to an insistence on embodying a third alternative, this interstitial position was characteristic of the movement. A similar claim can be made for dance history as well. Lettrism's corporeal/chiseling vision of choreography has commonalities with other dance practices, including ballet and modern dance. But, lettrism refutes the capacity of these practices to fully achieve *ciselant* idea(l)s, and thus appears as a third figure distanced from both. Additionally, through its "expanded" choreographies, lettrism circumvents the very goals it claims ballet and modern dance failed to achieve while – purposefully or not – leaving out accounts of post-modern works comparable to those of the lettrists. Thus, the multiplicity and contradictions of lettrist choreographies – more apparent through an expanded perspective – negotiate lettrism's position among already-competing genres in the complex post-war dance landscape; in both performing and expanding beyond the choreographic *ciselant*, lettrism sculpts a place for its own practice. In this perspective, the movement's relative historical unclassifiability is a constructive way of upsetting the categories lettrism flirts with and simultaneously – sometimes partly, sometimes wholly – rejects.

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90   Flahutez : *Le Lettrisme historique était une avant-garde*, pp. 28–29.

In this process, lettrism carves itself a position in (canonical dance) history, both embodying its accomplishment and exceeding its posited limits. But, lettrism's links with Feuillet's late baroque context [Chapter 2] and Chénin's contemporaneity [Chapter 4] – be it through their media transformations of choreography or their reconfigurations of its immateriality – highlight that Isou's movement is multiply relatable to (an expanded choreographic) history, rather than merely exceeding or subverting its historical precedents. The omnivorous and radical nature of lettrist choreography is therefore a context-specific manifestation of issues inherent, albeit to a great extent unacknowledged, in choreographic history. In this perspective, lettrism – much like contemporary expanded choreography – is not just an exceptional response to a dominant historical narrative, but part of extra-canonical, expanded choreographic histories.