

Sharing Dancing

Two Distinct Models that Promote and also Limit Dance Exchange

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When dancing is shared among the dancers performing in a work or among dancers and audience members viewing that work, what kinds of things are passed from one person to another? Do dancers share the exuberant feeling of coming into unison with one another's bodies? Or the fact of grooving together to the rhythms of the music? Or the effort of working collectively to achieve a goal? Do they share a bodily knowledge, such as technical understanding of how to perform a movement or aesthetic sensibilities that have been insinuated into the body's posture as well as its ways of moving? Do they share a fervency, excitement, pride, dedication, or devotion to moving, expressing, and communicating? Do they offer a model for collective action? Do they labor to share the dance's meaning with its viewers? Do viewers unite in their common awareness of watching something together? Do they feel the dancing in their own bodies? Do they leave the performance carrying some part of the dancing with them? Perhaps dancing involves the sharing of all these things?

This essay examines two contemporary works – *Gala* (2015) by Jérôme Bel and *Huddle* (1961) by Simone Forti – that develop distinctive models for sharing dancing, both among the performers themselves and with the audience. Both dances develop out of scores for the danced action, and both have been performed multiple times with different casts in different places. The essay compares the different structuring principles through which each dance operates, analyzing assumptions about what is shareable and what is not. It also considers how the act of sharing in each dance builds and imparts a sense of community, but also what kinds of sameness are required of the

dancers as members of that community. It thereby probes some of the limits of what can be shared and with whom.

Jérôme Bel's *Gala* is organized around a sequence of tasks which feature twenty or more dancers, with highly diverse amounts and kinds of training, performing to the best of their ability: each dancer attempts a pirouette, also Michael Jackson's "moonwalk," moving backwards across the stage, followed by a sequence of grand jetés moving forward on a diagonal. Other tasks include copying the dance style of various members of the cast whose skills in jazz, baton twirling, hip-hop, or ballet are challenging for those coming from different backgrounds. The piece seems intended to delight by showcasing the authentic devotion to distinctive forms of dance felt by their ardent practitioners, regardless of their level of expertise, thereby allowing performers to share with each other and the audience their love of dancing and of learning new skills. In contrast, Simone Forti's *Huddle* calls for seven or eight people to form a well-connected huddle of bodies, that is to say, a circular web of bodies, standing with their arms interwoven. One at a time, a single person will disengage from this mass and slowly crawl up and over it, reintegrating into the huddle on the other side. As the dancer progresses up and over the dome, the entire group must continually sense what is called for in terms of creating support, given the size, shape, weight, and movement style of each climber. This process continues for an indeterminate period of time, creating an emblem of collective sharing based in the giving and taking of weight.

Gala and *Huddle* thus provide contrasting approaches to sharing, that, considered together, help us to understand what the process of sharing entails. *Gala* encourages dancers to share their enthusiasm for dancing with each other and the audience, and also to share the backstage labor of producing the dance. At the same time, *Gala* strictly specifies the kinds of diversity of dances that will be included, leaving dancers with little opportunity to initiate a collaborative process of sharing on their own and with one another. *Huddle*, in contrast, focuses intensively on how dancers can support one another in sharing the burden of another dancer's weight, thereby offering viewers a model for collective collaboration. However, even as *Huddle* invites intense collective action, it tacitly requires dancers to bring to the dance very similar histories and skills in dancing. Its model for sharing thus requires a high degree of similarity among all participants. With the rest of this essay, I hope to flesh out these differences in more detail so as to probe the politics that each dance develops.

Before proceeding, however, I want to comment on what I will not address in this comparison: the significant difference in the premiere dates and what that means in terms of the performance history of each piece. *Gala* has enjoyed a limited run compared to the sixty-year history of *Huddle*, and this holds strong implications for how both the performance and reception of *Huddle* have changed over time. A full analysis of these changes would necessarily include a reckoning with differences in bodily appearance and training across this time span as well as radically changing aesthetic valuations of the role of pedestrian movement in art and even changes in assumptions around what can take place in public space. Instead of offering this historical assessment of the two pieces, I focus on them as prototypes of social organization that could yield different potentialities for collective engagement.

The structure for Jérôme Bel's *Gala* reflects two principal motives: one, to embrace a diversity of dance genres and styles along with the diverse people who practice them, and two, to feature the joy and enthusiasm that dance inspires regardless of one's level of training. As part of its tacit agenda, it also forces a reconsideration of viewers' expectations concerning what can or should be performed within the context of a professional proscenium theater. The piece progresses from a sequence of simple tasks, including the pirouette and "moonwalk," to longer periods of dancing in which all the dancers attempt to copy one another in dancing jazz, baton twirling, hip-hop, or ballet. Because these different genres are challenging for those coming from different backgrounds and training, the audience watches as soloists in the front proudly indulge in dancing their favorite style while the dancers attempting to follow them scramble to keep up, eagerly trying to learn what is being shared by their fellow dancer.

Gala grew out of a workshop for amateurs conducted at St. Denis. Not unlike his method of developing other works, such as *Véronique Doisneau* or *Lutz Förster*, in which Bel conducted interviews with the dancers that were then shaped into the actual composition of the dance, *Gala* originally benefited from the time the dancers spent collectively in the workshop, getting to know one another, exchanging ideas, and developing rapport. Keen to present the idiosyncrasies of movement manifested in amateur performances, Bel devised the simple structure of *Gala* so as to focus viewers' attention on the differences among bodies.

Subsequently, *Gala* has been franchised, as a portable structure, capable of being re-staged in various locations internationally. Bel's assistants

have generally done this staging, spending approximately 5-7 days in each locale rehearsing the dancers prior to the performance. For a recent staging of the work at UCLA, I received a message from one of the administrators of our arts presenting organization, asking for help in finding certain kinds of performers, specifically the elderly, and “a young adult or adult with Down Syndrome.”¹ Other categories of performers who seem regularly to appear include people of color, a baton twirler, an adolescent girl, and sometimes a person in a wheelchair. Whoever Bel’s designated assistant is must work with members of the local community to find the properly diverse assortment of bodies and experiences. Using this casting process, Bel’s assistants then work to realize the main goal of the piece, which according to the publicity is “[...] about building a community by gathering people as diverse as possible.”² It is striking, however, that the building of community begins with the specification of a set of types that need to be represented, that is, types that need to be found and then slotted into the performance. Rather than originating in sets of connections that people might develop over time,

1 The email from Todd McQuade read: “*Gala* presents a cast of people all of whom have their own relationship to dance. Some are professional dancers, some are dance enthusiasts, for others dance is a stranger. Below are some of the kinds of people that we are looking to cast as well as information about *Gala*:

Seeking:

- Actors

- Professional Dancers who perform from any tradition

- Youth 6-17 years old with a desire to be on stage (amateurs, non-professional)

- Seniors/Elderly with a desire to be on stage (amateurs, non-professional)

- A young adult or adult with Down Syndrome

Perhaps you have worked with or know someone that might be interested in this project?

If so, we love to know about them and thank you sincerely for your thoughts.”

2 The email from McQuade also included the following description:

“Show Synopsis: *Gala* offers a different approach to dance. In this collective art form, choreographer Jérôme Bel brings together dance professionals and amateurs of diverse backgrounds. The diversity of the acts never calls on us to pass judgment, but they reveal the way in which each person’s cultural repertoire involves him or her in a singular relationship with that desire for something else other than dance – joy, accomplishment, transcendence perhaps?” It continued: “The principal idea of this show is to bring a group of twenty very diverse people together onto the stage: dancers of course, some actors, but most of all amateurs among whom are children, teenagers and senior citizens. The main goal of the performance is about building a community by gathering people as diverse as possible.”

as the original workshop did, the franchised versions of *Gala* assemble the appearance of a diverse community. Dancers become entities suitable or not to fulfill designated assignments. The list thus enforces, rather than cultivates, diversity.

As a result, pressure is placed on the rehearsal process itself to set the parameters within which the dancers can get to know one another and actually learn to trust and share with one another in order to forge a community. Rehearsals are kept very simple and follow the score for the dance. After organizing the spatial pathways and rehearsing the single actions representing the diverse dance genres, certain dancers are then selected to perform solos, presented front and center with the rest of the cast behind, following as best they can. Dancers are told to show off their strengths and to follow others as faithfully as possible, while also knowing they will fail.³

There are also directions for backstage costume changes in which dancers give parts of their outfits to one another. The logistics of this backstage choreography of sharing in transitioning from section to section becomes a central focus of the rehearsal process, and it has the effect of bringing the cast together in order to collaborate on how to accomplish a single project. The group coalesces around this pragmatic, task-oriented set of directives that must be learned, and a sense of community is forged through the urgency created by the short amount of time they have to prepare a performance that will be shown to a large audience. One professional dancer who worked on the Los Angeles project noted in a personal communication, “it was great to get to work with types of people I would not normally dance with.” It is unclear, however, how many, if any, of the connections dancers made to one another over the course of the week might endure.

Furthermore, as Lily Kind (2016) argues, *Gala* presents a diverse cast of performers, but it also displays them as interchangeable, one with another. That is, Bel does not investigate each of the dancers’ abilities and then create choreography that reveals their unique capacities, but instead presents all bodies doing the same thing as best they can. A few of the performers get to

3 Attala, Bel’s Los Angeles assistant, continued by explaining that the ability of the rehearsal process to forge community occurred through “learning with each other and learning to support one another.” They don’t practice getting better or practice learning how to do something; they just put the show together, learning all the transitions, entrances and exits, costume changes, so the emphasis is on “imagination, technique, music” and each performer being connected to all three at all times. (Sheila Attala 2019: n.p.)

showcase their unique talents as soloists, but most are consigned to following those soloists and executing their versions of standard steps such as the pirouette. Nor does the choreography change depending upon the local customs and aesthetics of the locale in which it is performed. Kind argues that the parade of difference is thus “colonialist while pretending to be populist.” (Kind 2016)

Presented as part of the season’s offerings at theaters known for their productions of classical and experimental works of art as opposed to more commercial genres of entertainment, *Gala* reaches out to a certain class of viewers in a way that perturbs the very distinction between “high” art and entertainment. Because it features vocabulary from both classical and popular genres, and also showcases amateurs along with professional dancers asking them, at some point, to perform in a dance genre with which they are not familiar, it fails to deliver the standard requirements of virtuosity, harmony and grace, or powerful dramatic impact. Instead, it asks viewers to reflect on their assumptions about what dance is. It poses the question, “what can dancers give to viewers in performance?” *Gala*’s answer seems to be that dancers can share a demonstration of unabashed love of dancing. While this answer puts forward a strong message of hope and affirmation of the body, it also rekindles stereotypical associations to dance as childlike, frivolous, and thoughtless, that could negatively affect the dance’s impact by framing it as mere entertainment.

If *Gala* offers certain opportunities and limitations to participate in sharing dancing, Simone Forti’s *Huddle* approaches the exchange of dancing in a way that makes evident very different aspects of what can be shared. Where *Gala* focuses on the visual appearance of movement and the abilities of dancers to imitate the look of one another’s dancing, *Huddle* emphasizes dancers’ haptic capacities and their ability to give and receive weight.⁴ The experience of

4 The full score reads as follows: “‘Huddle’ requires six or seven people standing very close together, facing each other. They form a huddle by bending forwards, knees a little bent, arms around each other’s shoulders and waists, meshing as a strong structure. One person detaches and begins to climb up the outside of the huddle, perhaps placing a foot on someone’s thigh, a hand in the crook of someone’s neck, and another hand on someone’s arm. He pulls himself up, calmly moves across the top of the huddle, and down the other side. He remains closely identified with the mass, resuming a place in the huddle. Immediately, someone else is climbing. It is not necessary to know who is to climb next. Everyone in the huddle knows when anyone has decided to be next. Sometimes two are climbing at once.

connectivity and mutual responsibility is built into the very fabric of the piece, since all participants must sense the weight distribution across the entire group and also adjust themselves to meet the needs of group support as each climber pursues their journey. Each time a new climber crosses the huddle, the entire group experiences a new sequence of reactions and a new sense of how the group can sustain support, allowing each member of the group to deepen a sense of commitment to the project and intensifying the experience of kinesthetic responsiveness. As the climber, each performer must continually sense how the weight of different parts of the body distributes across the group, and as members of the huddle, they must also sense what is called for by each climber, given their distinctive size, shape, weight, and movement style. (D'Amato 2022) Throughout this process, one's kinesthetic and haptic perceptual systems become acutely sensitized, whereas vision plays a far lesser role in navigating the demands of the piece.

Huddle thus cultivates acute tactile awareness of what is happening in the entire group and of one's responsibility in supporting the task of providing group support. Performers must be sensitive to who has crawled across the top and who has not and allow a sharing of roles, and they must be conscious not to violate people's personal space by grabbing sensitive or erotic areas. No one body can or should take on the role of solely supporting the crawling body, so the notion of collective sharing among bodies is literally enforced, and everyone gets a chance to experience the activity from multiple perspectives: as crawler, as direct supporter, and as adjacent supporter.

In addition to these ostensible rules, *Huddle* requires various forms of unspoken self-censorship: no movement can be rugged, jagged, or sudden, which rules out all behavior that is rowdy, boorish, or crude. Everyone must move slowly and cautiously, sensing both what their weight will give and what the group is ready to receive. Also, everyone must pretend that no parts of the body are more intimate or specially coded in any way. The piece therefore requires that participants obviate or repress histories of intimacy, violence, kinship, frailty, disability, and abnormality.

That's O.K. And sometimes sounds of laughter come from the huddle. The duration should be adequate for the viewers to observe it, walk around it, get a feel of it in its behavior. Ten minutes is good. The piece has also been formed in such a way that, as it ended, each of the performers found six other people from the audience to get a second-generation huddle going, until six were happening simultaneously." (Simone Forti 1974: 59)

Given the limited range of sponsoring organizations – colleges and universities, art galleries and museums – it is likely that participants are self-selected, coming from backgrounds in dance that would embrace Forti as an important pioneer in creating new approaches to improvisation and choreography. That is, they would only know about the opportunity to perform in *Huddle* through having been schooled in classes that promote certain kinds of training. Typically, this training focuses on the capacities and limitations of the body's anatomical structure and on its capacity to sense the interface between its surface and its surroundings. In the last forty years of its existence, dancers would also most likely have practiced various techniques of weight transfer such as those cultivated in contact improvisation and other somatic training techniques. Underlying these forms of training is the assumption that the body can become a neutral thing. Its cultural and personal histories can be stripped away in order to produce a malleable, sensate, responsive, yet object-like entity.

However, as a number of dance scholars have observed, this corporeal transformation is much easier for white middle-class dancers. (Stanger 2021; George 2020; Dixon Gottschild 1996) Because of their relative comfort and privilege, these dancers tend not to come with histories of trauma, violence, or deprivation. Their cultural identity has never been marginalized so they are not heavily invested in maintaining histories of dancing deemed central to the preservation and survival of that identity. Thus, even though Forti's score seems to make an open appeal to any and all to participate in the huddle, it not only requires specific training of the skills necessary to support the group's efforts, but it also relies on months or years of other elite training that enable dancers to turn the body into a purely physical vessel. It does not mandate diversity in the way that *Gala* does, but instead, asserts an open invitation to all that functions to mask over its exclusivity. Instead of embracing and showcasing the different ways that a body can be trained in dancing, it presents what appears to be a more primal body, one that has only trained to be efficient and economical in responding to the changing circumstances around it.

With its performance history spanning so many different locations and contexts, *Huddle* has frequently asked viewers to consider what dancing looks like and where it should occur. When performed in art galleries, it offers a moving sculpture that contrasts the mostly stationary and inert art works that otherwise populate the space. When performed on street corners

or other public spaces, it offers passersby an event that is out-of-place. Not at all threatening, it nonetheless inserts itself into the pedestrian world as something entitled to be there. Pedestrian itself in its task-like appearance, it seems both to blend in as a casual proposal for how bodies might interact and to stand out as a self-contained unit demonstrating social cooperation. This enacting of accommodating one another – the sudden shifts in what is required, the tentative trying out and then pursuit of a path of action, the group supporting the individual – is perhaps what *Huddle* most shares with those who are willing to watch for a while. Not having contracted to watch it through the purchase of a ticket, other passersby could easily dismiss the piece as inappropriate silliness or a presumptuous and hence annoying prank.

Gala and *Huddle* thus provide contrasting approaches to sharing dance, that, taken together, help us to excavate each piece's underlying assumptions. *Gala* creates an opportunity to bond with others in the group through the specific task of organizing the show's logistics under the time pressure of the short rehearsal period. Everyone has their assigned roles and must learn to weave them effectively and efficiently into the whole. They are not asked to collaborate with each other on the making of the show but rather on filling out what has already been designed. *Huddle*, in contrast, focuses precisely on how bodies might learn to assist each other as they collectively author the dance. They must improvise their individual solos and also work together to support one another. The task is outlined for them, but they must create their unique version of it.

But does *Gala* or *Huddle* promote any long-term connections or practices of sharing amongst their cast members? Because of the remarkably short period of time people work together on *Gala*, it is possible that one or two new friendships might form, but these would likely be grounded in other more sustained overlapping interests and habits. Similarly, *Huddle* might deepen friendships that had already formed or kindle new ones, but again, these would be sustained through other kinds of pursuits and pastimes. If the practice of performing *Huddle* was continued regularly and dancers agreed to work to bring new people into the practice, how successful might they be in attracting participants outside a narrow range of experience and understanding of what dance is?

If no individual performance of *Gala* or *Huddle* instantiates the conditions for long-term sharing amongst participants, might these works, even

if they do not offer immediate results, suggest models for how to encourage and build the sharing of practices over a much longer period of time and in other institutional contexts? And do these models allow for the equitable sharing of dancing or do they activate and sustain power imbalances that implicate dancers in unequal relations of status or expertise?

Bel's structure for *Gala* is reminiscent of the institutional regulations practiced frequently by U.S. universities regarding admission of new students. Not precisely quota systems, these institutions recognize the value in bringing together students from diverse backgrounds, and consequently, they actively seek out students from a wide range of geographic, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. However, the practice of putting on the show, which in the university context translates as attending four years of school, does not necessarily result in the building of diverse connections. Studies have shown that students, while expanding their understanding of diverse groups, often remain tribal in their close personal affiliations. (Pike, Kuh, and Gonyea, 2007) If four years of college fails to augment the diversity of one's shared sociality, how would an eight-day rehearsal process accomplish it?

Does *Huddle* offer a more viable strategy for constructing sharing amongst a variety of people? Its score implicitly entails people coming together and committing daily and weekly time over many months and sometimes years to reorient and recalibrate their bodies in order to achieve neutrality and become more sensorily aware. Then they are coached in the specific skills necessary to construct and perform a system of support. And this system must be flexible, adaptable, and transportable. Sounds promising. However, we must consider more carefully exactly who is drawn into this practice and how diverse they really are. The assumption underlying *Huddle* of a body that is detached, asexual, and without a history, a body that shares in common with all other bodies the universality of its anatomy, does not promote a diversity of backgrounds and histories. Instead, it coerces bodies into sameness. Its performance can only be shared among like-minded bodies.

If neither *Gala* nor *Huddle* offers a model for long-term sharing of dancing that embraces a diversity of participants, do they perhaps give something more sustained to their viewers? At this point in his career, most prospective audience members of Bel's work would know to expect something unexpected when the lights go down and the performance begins. Still, some might

be surprised by the contents of the “gala,” a term referring to the final celebratory concert of the retiring star of a ballet company. Is it possible that they would take the set of provocations *Gala* offers to the next performance and the next, thereby creating a continual questioning of what art and dance can be? Similarly, could *Huddle* prompt passersby, in the gallery or the street, to reconsider their assumptions about the kinds of behavior that are permissible or acceptable, and could that lead to a more long-term reconsideration of what public space can hold? If Bel or Forti had any desired outcomes for these pieces, perhaps changes of this kind in the audience’s perception of dance would be among them.

Gala and *Huddle* represent only two of many, many ways that dancing can be shared, yet taken together, they illustrate key facets of the act of sharing dancing, and some of the structures and limits that such sharing involves. Nothing in dance is universally shareable, and any sharing that takes place occurs within specific conditions that influence its shareability. Both *Gala* and *Huddle* aspire to share dance among diverse groups of dancers and diverse audiences. Comparing their approaches makes evident just how much hard work is required to realize that goal.

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