

on peter welz

essay by mick wilson, dublin

Peter Welz is a Berlin-based artist, known for his contemporary kinetic refunctioning of the traditional concerns of the sculptural figure. More recently, and in a manner that extends these earlier preoccupations, he has undertaken a series of collaborative works with the world-renowned choreographer William Forsythe. In February 2004 some of the outcomes of this collaboration were presented at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and a more comprehensive exhibition of this work will take place later this year in *Galerie Markus Richter* in Berlin. At the heart of this collaborative work is an engagement with the writing of Samuel Beckett, an engagement shared by both artist and choreographer. This project begins with Forsythe's inscription of the phrase "whenever on on on nohow on" from Beckett's late text *Worstward Ho*. Forsythe inscribes this phrase through a translation into the bodily rhythms, physical movements and performative inflections of the dancer's body. Welz takes this inscription and relentlessly and forensically investigates it through the media of video, photography, drawing and large scale sculptural installation.

Welz's first operation was to record Forsythe's performance by means of a battery of video cameras positioned so as to construct a full and densely three dimensional portrait of the movements inscribed by the dancer's body. As well as placing cameras above, below and around the performer, Welz also positions cameras on the dancer's body thus multiply rehearsing and fracturing the fluid dynamic of Forsythe's performance. The spatial and temporal structure of the dancer's movement becomes available as raw material in the analysis of the sculptor. Welz works with a frame-by-frame analysis of the multiple video streams thus generated, and traces and retraces the linear constructions adumbrated by the movements of the dancer's body. This yields an interim result in a series of photographic images overlain with fluid circular drawings. These drawings were exhibited with a further overlay of projected video in the IMMA show. The layering of imagery and the repetition of the circular linear constructs in both the dancer's movements and in the drawings, generate a strong sense of homology between the embodied action of dance and the embodied action of drawing. There is a further suggestion also of the temporal dislocation of the body's self-knowledge, as something always chasing after itself, fractured across

time by its attempt to remember itself, even in the middle of the most fluid and graceful of movements.

The cadence of the phrase "whenever on on on nohow on" establishes a formal anchor point for both Forsythe's movement and Welz's drawing: the repetition of the syllable "on" and its reversed repetition in "no" provides a structure exploited through formal analogy by both dancer and visual artist. Famously Forsythe has proposed a system of "universal writing" which proposes that the body in its entirety, and not simply in its contours and extremities, may inscribe the linear, cursive and block forms of text. But in Welz's re-appropriation of Forsythe's movements to Beckett's text, there is an attempt to secure a more profound relationship with the Beckett text than simply through formal analogy or re-inscription. This is most apparent in the installation structure designed for Berlin.

In this large multi-channel video installation, the freestanding projection surfaces are sculptural entities in their own right. They create an architectural delimiting of interlinking spaces so as to suggest a movement through a series of rooms: they generate the kinds of spatial relations exploited in interior architectures, as when rooms open up to views of other rooms beyond. These projection surfaces are roughly two metres in height, and scaffold-like in their appearance from the rear, partly suggesting stage sets. They are variations on a strategy developed for earlier video installations such as the Falling pieces exhibited in Cologne in 2003, which juxtaposed images of figures falling blankly on to a neutral floor space, and shot from multiple viewpoints: above, below, head-on etc. In these earlier works the screens were constructed to create a hybrid space between the juxtaposed projection images. This space in front of the projections is hybrid in as much as it is both a physical and a figural space: it is a space occupied by the viewer but also activated by the dynamic of the moving images. This has the effect of implicating the viewer's body in the space of the falling bodies represented in the video images.

This strategy of creating a dialogue and interchange between the viewer's space and the depicted space of the video image stream is taken further in the installation designed for Berlin. In this work the viewer's movement through the architectural disposition of the screens is also a movement across the multiple unstable perspectives of the video streams. The viewer is therefore enmeshed inside the dancer's movements, as they circle through the installation trying to assemble a coherent integration of the image streams to restore the foundational unity of the

dancer's movement. The viewer is forced back to her own bodily movement in space and the strange choreography of spatially and temporally mobile perception. It is this last manoeuvre which re-integrates this work with the semantic flow of Beckett's phrase: "whenever on on on nohow on." Beckett's repeated use of the syllable "on" is resonant with the Greek term for "being" - *on* - and suggests the interminable drift and dislocation of being as becoming. The viewer circles as Beckett's phrase circles; as the dancer circles; as the image circles; as the word circles around the thing but never quite catches it: never quite centres on being, on presence, on getting it right, on all the stuff that's going on and on...

Mick Wilson