PERFORMANCE

ARTIST'S CHOICE

JÉRÔME BEL

MoMA DANCE COMPANY
“The nicest is when I’m offered a context that I wouldn’t have sought out myself.”

—Jérôme Bel

The choreographer Jérôme Bel (French, born 1964) probably never imagined that he would participate in an Artist’s Choice project at The Museum of Modern Art, but, then again, Bel often follows the path of most resistance. Inaugurated in 1989, Artist’s Choice is an exhibition series in which contemporary artists are invited to organize installations drawn from MoMA’s collection. When he was asked to be the first choreographer to participate, Bel started to investigate the collection. The more he interacted with MoMA staff in the course of his research, the more aware he became of the community of MoMA employees and their work in maintaining and presenting the collection. He decided to shift his focus to the staff, and he became interested in how they relate to specific artworks, to the institution, and to dance. Eventually, Bel decided to turn his Artist’s Choice exhibition into a performance: MoMA Dance Company.

MoMA Dance Company brings together staff members from different departments to perform twice a day in The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. Bel invited all interested Museum employees to create a brief solo dance. Although MoMA Dance Company is based on conventions such as the soloist and the corps, it subverts traditional notions of what a dance company should be by rejecting uniformity—in terms of costumes, movements, and body types—and virtuosity. Few of MoMA Dance Company’s participants have had dance careers; most are amateur dance lovers. Nonetheless, they proposed their own music, costumes, and choreography rather than realizing the vision of the choreographer, as in a typical dance performance. The solos reflect each dancer’s background, experience, and preferences: one used to be a ballet dancer, one practices martial arts, another has decided to tap dance as a reminiscence of his childhood. Each participant shared his or her solo with the rest of the group; this way of experiencing dance collectively eclipsed the standard model of a single choreographer providing instruction. The piece was inspired by Bel’s recent performance company company (2015), which is part of the larger work Gala and involves mostly amateur performers of different ages, physiques, and backgrounds, and in which the spectator is confronted with a variety of simply executed “domestic” dances.

Bel emerged in the early 1990s as one of a generation of European choreographers (which also includes Boris Charmatz, Xavier Le Roy, and, in a visual art context, Tino Sehgal) who have been labeled “conceptual.” Even if many of them have not accepted this label, their intentions do overlap with the concerns of the Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s in emphasizing the importance of the artist’s idea over the work’s form, engaging with language and everyday movement, and critiquing authorship, virtuosity, and institutions. Bel’s use of language is particularly relevant in challenging conventional choreography and foregrounding the role of the performer within dance systems and institutions. These themes are evident in MoMA Dance Company and in other pieces by Bel that are being shown in New York in conjunction with the French Institute Alliance Française’s Crossing the Line Festival, including Véronique Doisneau (2004), presented through an eponymous film, The show must go on (2001), and Jérôme Bel (1995).

Invited to create a piece for the Paris Opera Ballet in 2004, Bel decided to stage a kind of “theatrical documentary” about and performed by Véronique Doisneau, a dancer in the middle ranks of the company’s corps de ballet, close to the retirement age. Doisneau stands alone on the imposing stage and chronicles her personal and professional story, tracing her career inside the institution. “Good evening. My name
is Véronique Doisneau. I am married and I have two children,” she states in her opening lines. The autobiographical solo not only reveals the story of an individual dancer, but, as the narration continues, opens up the institution from the inside, revealing its backstage, its strict rules, and its constraints. Through this deconstruction, Véronique Doisneau parallels institutional critique in contemporary visual art.

In Bel’s signature piece Jérôme Bel, which has its United States premiere at The Kitchen this month, four naked performers appear on an empty stage, lit by a single bare bulb. One of them breathily sings a melody from Johann Sebastian Bach’s Goldberg Variations. In this work, Bel reduces a dance performance to its constitutive elements—bodies, light, and music—while rejecting conventional choreography and virtuosity and abolishing any theatrical illusion. The title, Jérôme Bel, emphasizes the subjective view of the author/choreographer.

One of the few times that Bel has been asked to present a piece outside a theater context was for Some sweet day, a dance series organized by the artist and choreographer Ralph Lemon at MoMA in 2012. Bel opted for a shorter version of The show must go on, originally staged in theaters, in which a group of amateurs and professional performers interpret the lyrics of pop songs through their movements. The first few bars of The Beatles’ “Come Together” play as the group forms. This work exemplifies Bel’s attempts to move dance away from expertise and elitism by engaging amateurs, by employing ordinary forms of movement, and by “de-skilling” professional dancers of their knowledge, prompting a similar question to the one raised in art by Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made: is it dance? Lemon matched six artists to make intergenerational presentations, and Bel was paired with the American choreographer Steve Paxton, who, as a founding member of the radical Judson Dance Theater in New York in the early 1960s, pioneered the use of commonplace gestures borrowed from everyday life. Paxton’s piece Satisfyin Lover (1967) was performed in the Marron Atrium together with The show must go on. In Satisfyin Lover a group of amateurs followed a very simple score: they walked across the Atrium, stopped, then started walking again or sat for a moment in one of the three chairs that were the only set elements.

“When I saw Satisfyin Lover for the first time in 1996 at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, I thought I should have done this, I should have thought about this. It should have been mine,” Bel said in a 2012 conversation with Paxton. “Satisfyin Lover minimizes the movement to simply walk[ing], but nobody walks in the same way. There is something irreducible to every human being, a simple thing we do every day. This is very moving. The ready-made in dance is never the same, because the performers will never repeat the movement in the same exact way.” Bel pushed this claim even further with company company and, eventually, with MoMA Dance Company. By working mainly with amateurs in both pieces, Bel stresses the Latin roots of the word amateur in amare—“to love.” He explores the love for dance and the democratic potential in valorizing the unconscious and intuitive absorption of knowledge and movement.

Like other museums internationally, MoMA has organized many exhibitions and commissions with dance artists, thereby participating in a larger discussion about the relationship between art and dance in the postwar...
period. Questions have been raised regarding conventional conceptions about art institutions and contemporary dance, museological or theatrical codes of representation, the white cube versus the black box, and the different durations of performances and exhibitions. Bel’s invitation to MoMA staff is an invitation to the institution to embody these issues: it alters the time-space coordinates of the exhibition apparatus, shifts the Museum’s relationship with the public, brings another idea of authorship, challenges the established economy, and exposes the Museum’s human infrastructure. MoMA Dance Company reveals MoMA’s large, but usually less publicly visible, community of employees, whose labor is intimately tied to the functioning of the Museum and to the care and presentation of the collection.

By creating MoMA Dance Company through an open invitation, Bel emphasizes that the desire to dance is democratic, one that has brought together senior and junior staff from different departments across the Museum, temporarily questioning and changing workplace hierarchies, fostering connections between people who might not typically interact, and creating a new, albeit ephemeral, dance community. The staff who answered the call embody the tension between work, play, and performance, suspending their usual professional relationships and working time through joint movement. “Theater is the art of time. . . . I make time visible,” Bel has stated. Remaining faithful to the conventions of theater time rather than to the opening hours of the Museum, MoMA Dance Company’s performances last around thirty minutes. For the rest of the day, Bel leaves the Atrium empty, but visitors can still stop and walk around the space, even when nothing is happening, when the performers are back to being behind the scenes of the Museum.

Notes
2 Jerome Bel, in a conversation with Steve Paxton, Ralph Lemon, and Sabine Breitwieser at MoMA, October 20, 2012, presented as part of the dance series Some sweet day.
ARTIST’S CHOICE

JÉRÔME BEL
MoMA DANCE COMPANY
The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium
Thursday, October 27–Monday, October 31
12:30 and 3:00 p.m. daily

Related Programs

At The Museum of Modern Art:
Conversation with Jérôme Bel, Ana Janevski, and members of MoMA Dance Company
October 30, 4:00 p.m.
Marron Atrium
11 West 53 Street, New York

Other locations:
Screening of Jérôme Bel’s film Véronique Doisneau, followed by a conversation with Bel and Ana Janevski
October 17, 7:30 p.m.
FIAF Florence Gould Hall
55 East 59 Street, New York

The show must go on
October 20–21, 8:00 p.m.
October 22, 2:00 and 8:00 p.m.
The Joyce Theater
175 Eighth Avenue, New York

Jérôme Bel
October 27–29, 8:00 p.m.
The Kitchen
512 West 19 Street, New York

Presented on the occasion of FIAF’s Crossing the Line 2016, in conjunction with related programming at The Joyce and The Kitchen.

Organized by Ana Janevski, Associate Curator, with Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art, and produced by Lizzie Gorfaine, Performance Producer.

The Artist’s Choice exhibition series is made possible through The Agnes Gund Artist’s Choice Fund endowed by lara Lee and George Gund III, Lulie and Gordon Gund, Ann and Graham Gund, and Sarah and Geoffrey Gund.

Additional support is provided by the Annual Exhibition Fund.

The artist gratefully acknowledges the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States and the Institut français.

The company R.B. Jérôme Bel acknowledges the support of the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles d’Île-de-France, French Ministry for Culture and Communication. The artist acknowledges the coproducers of Gala: Dance Umbrella (London), TheatreWorks Singapore/72–13, Kunstfestivaldesarts (Brussels), Tanzquartier Wien, Nanterre-Amandiers Centre Dramatique National, Festival d’Automne à Paris, Theater Chur (Chur) and TAK Theater Liechtenstein (Schaan), TanzPlan Ost, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, Théâtre de la Ville (Paris), HAU Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin), BIT Teatgarasjen (Bergen), La Commune Centre dramatique national d’Aubervilliers, Tanzhaus nrw (Düsseldorf), and House on Fire with the support of the European Union cultural program.

For more information, visit moma.org/jeromebel.

Cover: The show must go on. 2001. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 20, 2012, as part of the program Some sweet day. Left to right: Jenny Schlenzka, Will Rawls, Sally Silvers, Joe Stackell, and Janet Panetta.