'Meta-Choreographies' Between the Desktop and the Stage

Ariadne Mikou

Since the burgeoning of appropriation art in the 80s, the mixing and the re-contextualization of existing objects, images, and sounds have gained recognition as a legitimate practice with the potential to produce counter-narratives, institutional critique, political and cultural subversions. Furthermore, the advent of the internet around the 90s, besides radically changing the communication and information sharing processes, had a profound impact on the culture of distribution, archiving, accessing and often appropriating the content of pre-existing audio-visual material through free online circulation or even pirate techniques. In the field of performing arts, social media and video sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo have turned into storage places of audio-visual artefacts changing how dance can circulate, be promoted and travel across time and distant geographic locations. Archival footage, trailers, full-length and excerpts of dance performances and choreographies adapted for the screen or dance films, documentaries and music videos, all inhabit the public online space. Dance classes found on the internet as well as choreographic routines and tutorials for executing specific dance steps or movements trouble further the body-to-body transmission of dance by circulating dance from the screen to dancing bodies and vice versa. This digital library [^1] of audio-visual material is the toolbox and the point of reference for a number of artists including the Italian choreographer, performer, educator and filmmaker Jacopo Jenna, who engages with it through a practice of creative and playful appropriation.

I first came across Jenna's work towards the end of the first quarantine back in 2020 through an online view of the outcome of the educational workshop *Lo Spettacolo Più Bello del Mondo* [^2]. I immediately appreciated his skills of creatively assembling into an uninterrupted audio-visual conversation fragments of existing discourses as well as found footage, movement material purposely made or adapted in response to it and excerpts from the workshop that took place entirely through the video communication software zoom. The choreographic thinking and the research process that are exposed in *Lo Spettacolo Più Bello del Mondo* have been refined in *Some Choreographies* (2020) [^3]*,* a two-part solo performance with the contemporary dancer Ramona Caia who builds a dialogue with an audio-visual material of found choreography and footage projected on a big screen. A section of the screened work may also stand independently under the name *Found Choreographies* [^4] and together with *Some Choreographies,* especially its first part that exposes more clearly issues of choreographic authoriality – as I will analyze later in the text –, are the main works that I will focus on here.

<Image 1: Ramona Caia re-producing a tutting sequence from a tutorial in *Some Choreographies.* Credit: Photo by courtesy of Jacopo Jenna.>

Kinetic experiments: Found Choreographies and Some Choreographies

The creative technique behind *Found Choreographies* lies in the association of fragments from found moving images of different dance styles and genres, movement "languages" and movement-based practices, that are linked into a continuity of movement; into a "kinetic matter" as Jenna claims (online). The footage is composed of excerpts that derive from early modern dance pioneers (for instance, Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn) and several postmodern choreographers. It is combined with ballet, ethnic and popular dance forms, and it expands into emblematic scenes from cinema and recent footage from the pandemic. These moving images are juxtaposed through association and continuity and they build up through a visual escalation that begins with a hand gesture from Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona* to gradually and fluidly pass into the primordial collective pattern of circularity and human sculptings before reaching an energetic sequence of movements. It ends symbolically through the transportation of the lying body in the savasana pose and the rituals of death (mourning, procession and cremation).

The well-organized bricolage of *Found Choreographies* highlights striking similarities between different dance genres or choreographies. This *quasi* universality of movements, evocative of Alan Lomax's controversial ethnographic film *Dance and Human History* (1974), may be considered a result of both the limitations and the richness of the imagination and the moving body as well as a repercussion of the *body techniques* [^5] that are unconsciously inherited through social, cultural and digital interactions and nowadays are enabled and expanded through social media. In *Found Choreographies*, the movement progresses from one clip to another and

from one body type and identity to another – identities of gender, race and ethnicity and bodies with different levels of acquisition of a dance technique. As a consequence, cross-cultural and cross-genre influences are revealed between aesthetically distant dance genres that are usually considered in friction with one another (theatrical dance versus commercial dance or ritual practices). This becomes more evident, for instance, through the sequential and almost provocative association between Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and voguing through the connection of flexed hands and angular arms. As Jenna claims, in the editing process, there is also an ethical side that questions "how to build associations without offending a culture, a community or an individual by the very act of association?" (Jenna, personal communication).

Technically speaking, the editing process is a reminder of Maya Deren's choreographic editing based on movement continuity between different locations, as exemplified in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), which is also included as a fragment in *Found Choreographies.* Following this paradigm, the editing takes advantage of shared gestures among different dance styles and the continuity that may emerge in terms of the flow of dynamics, energy, space transitions, floor patterns and group formations. Jenna does not merely place different clips one after the other, but he probes an inquiry into the uninterrupted flow of movement both visually and corporeally. Creating continuities between video fragments enables him to compose a choreography for the stage that is afterwards given to the dancer to be embodied; much like Merce Cunningham used to do with the Lifeforms software or the 16th-century choreographers in France, who were using signs to write movement on paper that dancers had to consequently interpret [^6]. In Jenna's choreographic process for *Some Choreographies*, which constitutes a performative approach to *Found Choreographies,* the dancer verifies kinetically the feasibility of the choreographic sequence, initially composed on his desktop, by transforming a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional spatial experience, and if necessary the editing is updated.

<Image 2: Ramona Caia replicates Mary Wigman's *Witch Dance* (1926) in *Some Choreographies.*
Credit: Photo by courtesy of Jacopo Jenna.>

In *Some Choreographies*, video excerpts on the projected screen and their incorporation by the single dancer interplay with each other. The screen provides information; it is the mirror to reproduce and embody a form, a movement or a gesture that is inscribed on its surface. In this process, the projected material stands as a reminder to the expert eye and at the same time as a source of information to the lay spectator. Both recognize the moving images stored in our collective memory, and the continuity and the connection of the flesh body on stage with the immaterial bodies on the screen as the solo dancer embodies and transforms in (an uninterrupted) choreographic sequence the information depicted on the screen. The dancer becomes the site of fusion between different dance traditions, cultures and visual landscapes. She reenacts them by transgressing spatio-temporal limits and gender binaries while on the screen unfolds a sort of an *exquisite corpse* [^7] in the form of a kinetic sequence of discrete clips that gets materialized through uncompleted gestures that gradually build into a whole. The dance performer with her back on the screen offers a neutral interpretation of a nevertheless challenging process that entails failure and success in the practice of imitation that, in turn, reveals the human side of not being able to reproduce with precision what is depicted on the screen.

Although both *Found Choreographies* and *Some Choreographies* exhibit creativity in choreographic association and motion, as well as aesthetic and cultural values, the work, as I will analyze next, may introduce legal issues when seen through the lens of copyright protection laws.

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Just a Second! Are We Talking About 'Stealing'?

Copyright protection laws usually shape a legislative framework for the arts to operate within and, inevitably, inhibit and complicate the practice of appropriation art, especially in view of economic profit and visibility. *Found Choreographies* and *Some Choreographies* involve up to a certain degree risks related to author- and owner-ship. Jenna's work, based on 'stealing' – to put it in a raw manner – of other artists' choreography and its documentation as intellectual property, is enabled by the availability, circulation and accessibility of the digitized material. Besides this, the 'stolen' or the 'borrowed' fragments are extracted from a cohesive whole and they get disarticulated from their original context. They are also embodied by a professional contemporary dancer who nevertheless has a limited affinity to most of the popular and entertainment dance genres and styles depicted on the screen. Therefore, on a closer look, issues both in relation to performance as well as dance and filmmaking become evident as the artist extracts (cuts-and-pastes), manipulates and detaches a part and an instance of a whole choreography reproduced in film [^8]. In other words, the choreography fixed in film or video enables the copyright law protection to be applied and through this lens, Jenna's creative approach raises issues of appropriation in the practice of appropriation as art-making.

Collage and photomontage, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, Andy Warhol's re-use of consuming products and Guy Debord's ideas about détournement are often considered precursors of appropriation art, the art form that creatively combines pre-existing material. Since then, numerous projects have operated within the framework of appropriation art. Significant examples of moving images include the durational works of *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) by Douglas Gordon, *The clock* (2011) by Christian Marclay and the feature film *Final Cut Ladies and Gentlemen* (2012) by György Pálfi – all works that are entirely based on films directed by others [^9]. For those who have the possibility to watch the Italian state TV (RAI 3), *Blob* is another influential example of audio-visual and satire-based appropriation that depends on the re-use (re-editing) of fragments from TV news, broadcasts and footage found on the web. Since 1989, it has been a daily part of Italian TV, and its founders are a group of well-known cinema critics, such as Enrico Ghezzi and Marco Giusti. As these examples point out, the *meta art* (author's emphasis), the art that comes after, "depends upon some previous work of art – and thereby implicitly or explicitly stands in a citational relationship to that earlier work" [^10]. Without disregarding that the film industry holds strict copyright rules, metacinema and metatelevision – audio-visual genres that gradually gain visibility as theoretical discourses –, are dependent on the appropriation of pre-existing material.

In dance, however, the long history of cultural appropriation [^11] – that has benefited the already privileged and has marginalized invisible and traumatized communities and individuals –, and the push of the market for originality and

innovation have created contradictory connotations to appropriation as both a phenomenon and as a conscious, yet rare, artistic practice in conceptual dance [^12]. Furthermore, the embodied transmission in dance creates specific hierarchies and restrictions and up to a certain degree advantages in the process of acquiring a style, a technique or a practice that are omitted when a movement is reproduced through the screen. The corporeal transmission through the body-as-archive has enabled dance forms to survive across time both ontologically and economically. In addition, the institutionalization of the repertory by dance companies, choreographers and their trustees who can afford to operate within the economy of protection as possessing, imposes various degrees of control over who is eligible to embody past works and under which circumstances. Although there are notable differences in the licensing of the embodiment of the choreographic archive in cases such as the Pina Bausch Foundation, Martha Graham and Trisha Brown dance companies and the Merce Cunningham Trust – whose materials have been included in *Some Choreographies* –, the corporeal transmission from dancers with first-hand experience in dancing and working closely with a company choreographer remains predominant. Considering this frame that strives for originality and lineage and where the video archive serves mostly as an aide-memoire, Jenna challenges in *Some Choreographies* the hierarchical ways of knowledge transmission that are based on inter-corporeality, thus the physical exchange and interaction between bodies. In this way, he destabilizes the foundations of corporeal dance transmission by promoting an unauthorized screen-to-body transmission.

Let's be Honest: We all 'Steal' From Each Other

Dance is usually transmitted by a master to a pupil even in its most exploratory or commercial forms, and repetition through imitation is a fundamental way of learning through the activation of mirror neurons. Nevertheless, rupturing the corporeal transmission by the body-as-archive [^13] and taking advantage of the dance transmission through the screen, thus learning through copying and imitating a rather intangible body, is part of a growing practice that aims to democratize contemporary dance and its archive(s). For instance, the *f*ABULEUS Rosas Remix Project [^14], as well as the NELKEN-Line project, promote re-interpretations of key moments from Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker's *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1983) and Pina Bausch's *Nelken* (1982) by encouraging the embodiment of the choreographic material by anyone through copying from the screen. *Some Choreographies* also builds on the accumulated experience of Jenna in facilitating the educational project *Désir Mimétique* (2017–2020), which explores imitation as a practice of building knowledge. The tendency in contemporary dance of copying through the screen also grew during the recent pandemic with the shift of dance from the physical site to the online social space. On these occasions, the screen serves as a medium to support choreographic transmission in distance through imitation as a point of departure. However, this practice that gradually gains popularity and dominates the visual experience while minimizing sensorial and most importantly tacit ways of learning dance, is not entirely new. Historical reconstructions promote a dance like

the one portrayed in the video archive and not long ago, first the VHS and later the DVD used to serve for watching a performance at home and with some practice in imitation to even learn and perform a dance from the classic repertoire. The music channel MTV, established in Europe at the end of the 80s, was also crucial in assisting in learning choreographic sequences from music videos. Last but not least, the act of mimicking has been predominant in the culture of videogames in which the video players reproduce the movement depicted on screen.

Pina Baush / Café Müller (1978)

<Image 3: *Désir Mimétique* (2017–2020). Credit: Photo by courtesy of Jacopo Jenna.>

Jenna, both a filmmaker and choreographer, exposes the existing tendency of copying through the screen by placing video fragments as citations and their embodiments at the center of his practice [^15] and, in particular, of *Some Choreographies*. As noticed by Isabelle Launay in speaking about the inherent paradox in the disassociation of the citation from its origin, the citation in dance "is both a site at which a transmission takes place and the site of transmission's impossibility" [^16] since the inter-corporeal relation is absent. This paradox in the citation as a fragment with an explicit origin, is, therefore, what allows the transformation of the original source and the pre-existing material, which also enhances its evolution, relevance and adaptation to the present. I understand the use of citations as a network of (movement) thoughts that serve as points of entrance to the intellectual universe of others and remind us that we do not operate inside a vacuum; thoughts and ideas are recycled, expanded, disappear and re-emerge. The citation is what allows a discourse to be enriched and grow and, in the case of Jenna's accumulative citation technique, it deprives the work of copyright implications or at least it places it in a discourse of fair use and meta-art as it suggests a creative and playful bricolage where the origins of the work are traceable. As suggested by David LaRocca in his introduction to *Metacinema* (2021),

> Instead of encountering a stand-alone work of art, meta-art opens
> up a museum; rather that reading a novel, metafiction insists on a

library; quite apart from watching a single film, an audience for metacinema is directed to consider the full expanse of cinematic history.

Through this lens, Jenna encourages the viewer to recall the various references that comprise his work and to trace the threads of his *meta-choreographic work* (author's emphasis) into the history of dance and cinema. Therefore, the point of his *meta-choreography* becomes that movement material is recycled and recontextualized against modernist beliefs that aim to confine creativity in the myth of originality.

Final Thoughts Instead of Conclusion

Closing this brief analysis that has attempted to place Jenna's practice into the lineage of appropriation art and to free his (meta-)choreographic bricolages from potential copyright and ethical implications, it is important to make a few final observations by posing the following questions:

- What kinds of artistic, cultural and aesthetic values did the moving images in *Found Choreographies* have before getting connected to each other, specifically referring to distinctions of "high" and "low" art in dance?
- What values do they gain when placed one after the other through kinetic continuity on the screen and as a performance and a meta-choreography?
- What values do these fragments give back to the *original* works (author's emphasis) and the singular artists?
- What values do these fragments obtain when we re-see them in their full context either live or in their documented version? Do the fragments of the meta-choreographic prompt us to re-discover their original context?

The contribution of the specific artist as well as the practice of re-choreographing the archive lies in the potential subversion or re-evaluation of the canon in dance history. As the Greek dance artist-scholar Stella Dimitrakopoulou affirms, "contemporary choreographers [...] through remix take the writing of history in their own hands and thus become curators of dance and dance history" [^17]. Through this lens, the practice of appropriation art has the potential to shift conventions taken for granted and power dynamics that are implied in the archive as a fixed entity. Exploring, choreographing and performing the archive, both as an educational and artistic practice, helps to increase the value of the invisible or the marginalized through a network of new continuities and affinities that re-attribute new values as long as they operate from a perspective of respect and care. As Jenna states through the title of one of his recent works "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" [^18]; copying, using and citing existing material is an honest way to express admiration and honor an artist. Dancing with the archive offers a model of building knowledge of dance as a cultural manifestation both for the doer and the viewer who attest to an existing pedagogical and performance practice that is based on the reconfiguration, re-use and embodiment of the archive.

into his choreographic process. More information about his work can be found at the following link: http://www.jacopoj.it/

Writer's Biography

Ariadne Mikou is a Greek dance artist-scholar based in Italy. With a background as an architect and choreographer, her research is focused on the social forms that emerge from the crossover between corporeal, spatial and screen-based arts. She publishes interviews and reviews; contributes to academic journals and book anthologies that explore screendance issues and expanded choreographic practices, community making and site interventions and she also creates choreographic scores. She is co-founder of futuremellon/NOT YET ART, an art collective that enables her to expand her choreographic and curatorial explorations. She also holds a PhD in interdisciplinary choreographic research that was fully funded by the University of Roehampton (London) and a Master of Fine Arts in Dance from The Ohio State University (USA) supported by the State Scholarships Foundation of Greece (IKY/Erasmus/Erasmus+) and a Graduate Teaching Assistantship. In 2021, she was awarded a Research Grant for the Creative Europe project *Dancing Museums-The Democracy of Beings* from Ca' Foscari University of Venice where she is also a Research Assistant for the SPIN project *Memory in Motion: Re-Membering Dance History* (2019–2022). She is also a selected artist for Creative Europe's *Migrating Artists Project-Challenging Dance and Cinema across Europe* (mAPs).

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Notes

[^1]: For instance, French conceptual choreographer Jerome Bel has stated that "YouTube is our first library for the performing arts, it's a new dispositif" (Tate 2012).
[^2]: The English translation of the title is *The Most Beautiful Show in the World*. The workshop was devised in collaboration with the Italian choreographer Marco D'Agostin and it concluded with two different audio-visual outcomes that were single-authored by each artist.
[^3]: *Some Choreographies* is made in collaboration with the artist Roberto Fassone, who made a video of non-human choreographies for the second part of the live performance, and the sound designer Francesco Casciaro whose original sonic work also supports the logic of found audio. Both parts of *Some Choreographies* have recently been reviewed by emerging writers who attended this year's Spring Forward festival in Greece which was supported by *Aerowaves Dance Across Europe* network. It is worth reading them on Springback Magazine as they provide a quick insight into the full work.

[^4]: The fact that *Found Choreographies* may stand independently from the performance is evidenced by its circulation in international film festivals such as 40th FIFA – Festival International du Film sur l'art di Montreal.

[^5]: Mauss. These cross-cultural interactions have also been shaped through migration, slavery, cultural appropriation and colonialism.

[^6]: Lepecki 2004.

[^7]: A game and a collaborative technique adapted by surrealist artists. As a choreographic tool, it works as a kind of game telephone for receiving and transmitting a movement message. As a compositional device for the screen, it guides the editing in a sequence in which the beginning of each clip is based on the end of the previous one.

[^8]: Speaking about the trace of choreographic work, Frederic Pouillaude claims that "it is important to remember that video does not document the work as such but only one of its instances (its performance on a given evening, on a given date, on a particular tour, and so on)" (2017: 241).

[^9]: Particularly in screendance, the lineage of appropriation begins with David Hinton who is considered the father of found choreography (Delpeut online) and continues with the work of Miranda Pennell and Becky Edmunds among others. In the field of mixed media performance, *Dying on Stage* (2022) by Cipriot artist Christodoulos Panayiotou is a performance that employs approximately five hours of visual archival material on screen to explore the notion of death.

[^10]: David LaRocca, introduction

[^11]: The meaning of cultural appropriation may be summarized as the borrowing or copying of movements and dance styles without grasping knowledge of the culture, the history and the context from which they derive and operate. Plenty of examples ranges from 19th-century exotic ballets to early modern dance pioneers and choreographers of music videos. Cultural appropriation is characterized by superficial and aesthetic imitation that spices the narrative or a movement vocabulary usually of a privileged individual or institution, and it often involves a lack of engagement with or giving back to the community who 'owns' a specific dance form and it usually remains marginalized.

[^12]: Examples of circulation of choreographic material within the culture of contemporary dance include: *The Last Performance* (1998) by Jerome Bel that includes excerpts from Susanne Linke's *Wandlung* (1978); Mårten Spångberg performing Steve Paxton's *Goldberg Variation* in *Powered by Emotion* (2003); Xavier Le Roy immitating orchestra conductor Simon Rattle in *Le Sacre du Printemps* (2007); *The Hot One Hundred Choreographers* (2011) by Cristian Duarte and Rodrigo Andreolli where Duarte performs choreographic material from one hundred choreographers who influenced him more significantly; Stella Dimitrakopoulou's *Frauen Danst Frauen* (2011) where the two performers try to learn the sitting sequence from *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1983).

[^13]: Baxmann; Lepecki 2010; Bissell and Caruso Haviland.

[^14]: It is relevant to remind the reader that the *f*ABULEUS Rosas Remix Project was initiated by Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker as a response to the videoclip of *Countdown* (2012) in which pop singer Beyoncé is seen reproducing moments from

Rosas Danst Rosas. Back then, Beyoncé's "borrowing" raised a lot of discussion around the copyright implications of such an act.

[^15]: Jenna has also worked with citation as a choreographic device in a previous work called *I wish I could dance like M.J.*. Part of this research includes the video *I was thinking about Merce Cunningham, but I Wish I Could Dance Like Michael Jackson* that juxtaposes videoclips with Michael Jackson with films by or archival footage with Merce Cunningham.

[^16]: Launay, 5.

[^17]: Dimitrakopoulou, 82.

[^18]: Part of "*Choreographies of Time. A Six-Step Survey*", curated by Susanne Franco, commissioned and sustained by the Italian Cultural Institute of Moscow in collaboration with the research project "Memory in Motion. Re-Membering Dance History" MNEMEDANCE.

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