

Interview with Boris Charmatz about [terrain]
By Gilles Amalvi, July 2020

After directing Musée de la danse for ten years, you launched [terrain] in January 2019, with the idea of bringing together dance and public space, of intensifying the relationship between this art of the body, of movement, and the city—as an open space, with no walls. Referring to [terrain], you have expressed the need for a “new culture” aware of the social and ecological issues affecting society. Does this project stem from an awareness of the need to make art differently in a world in crisis?

I consider myself first and foremost an artist—this is where my drives and desires come from. I would like to have revolutionary ideas to save the planet, to create more equality among individuals, but I decided to make art: art not just as culture, but art as a social bond, political and ecological art. It is this position that allows me to speak, to work, to explore, to meet scientists, philosophers, architects, artists, landscapers. It is as a dancer that I take a stand; this is not an attitude of closure or withdrawal from the social world—quite the contrary... This is my springboard.

It so happens that over the ten years spent molding Musée de la danse we had ever more opportunities to research the public space. It became our field of investigation. During this period, I wondered how one would go about inventing a new type of public space for dance—one that could dismantle the separation between studio and open air, between dancers and the public. If we were to construct a Musée de la danse independent of the Centre Chorégraphique, what would it look like as a building, in terms of its architectural form? You could say that, in a sense, the event *If Tate Modern was Musée de la danse?*, which took place at Tate Modern in 2015, was a way of testing such a space. It was an opportunity to see whether such a museum could come about, if it could take place in an architectural space designed to host artworks, material objects. Of course, it wasn't about fantasizing about a building as big as Tate Modern, but it allowed us to test the limits and possibilities of such a space.

The breakthrough for me was the first edition of *Fous de danse*, in Rennes, on the Esplanade Charles de Gaulle, a large empty square, free of walls; a place of passage exposed to the vicissitudes of the weather. I realized that the absence of a building was actually the ideal architecture. A building is a place that protects, that shelters; whereas the fact of being out *in the open air*, unprotected, subject to changes in the weather, to noise, to traffic—conditions that dancers tend to avoid usually—gave consistency to an idea, and this idea was *already* a space. In that place, we were able to create human architecture, choreograph the crowd, transform the space in real time, act on the displacements based on the configuration of the events happening there—the duos, the Soul Train, the warm-ups, etc. Everything was in place. The hypothesis of a place without walls, right in the street, began to take shape. Rather than a brick-and-mortar dance studio, shouldn't we invent a *terrain*: flexible, fluid, responsive, receptive? A terrain where to dance; a green space, a field with no roof, subject to the moods of the city. Of course, this breakthrough about the conditions of dance—conditions of production, invention, and reception—implies being connected to society; putting oneself in the urban landscape means being linked to whatever goes on in the society, being directly in touch with the crisis, the pollution, the modes of transportation, the demonstrations. So I would say that at the origin of [terrain] there was no desire to chase ecological problems, but to be, by virtue of our situation, directly in the midst of all the activity.

One of [terrain]'s founding principles is embeddedness in the city space. Many artistic movements were based on their desire to break away from the city as a way of working in isolation. How do we interpret your urban DNA?

Even if cities are indeed increasingly becoming spaces of intersection, we continue to think of the “city” in opposition to “nature” or to the “countryside.” This dichotomy has been commonplace among artists and dancers since the beginning of modernity—be it Monte Verità or the Black Mountain College... On the one hand, the city is identified with chaos and disorder; on the other, nature is seen as a return to the roots. For me, “the city” is not opposed to “nature”; cities are laboratories of biodiversity, as well as of cultural, subjective diversity. As a result, there is a need to rethink the city as a space of entanglement, circulation, and intersection at the level of artistic practices and modes of production. By way of illustration, rather than dreaming of having a *theater*—which would be equivalent to having a car in the city—I dream of having a terrain, which is more like having a bicycle. I like the analogy between the [terrain] project and a bicycle: it's just bodily energy, you light your way with the help of a dynamo and with the energy and light of the city.

Today, [terrain] exists as a name, a laboratory of ideas. Is the idea, in the long run, going to occupy an actual terrain?

We chose this name both for its polysemy and its very generic aspect. I launched the association [terrain] with the idea of one day coming up with the *institution* [terrain], which would imply having a real, physical space somewhere in a city where to start working. Before opening, before launching [terrain], I feel that we need to engage in an in-depth reflection on dance, on the city, a reflection nourished by researchers from multiple disciplines. I want to stir up these ideas as part of the Portrait that will take place during Festival d'Automne in Paris, notably through a *Poster Session* at Centre national de danse (CND). This event involves a protocol used within the framework of the ephemeral school Bocal, reprised by Musée de la danse at Festival d'Avignon, and which consists of using the medium of the *poster*-like at scientific conferences—to formulate hypotheses, present them, and then perform them live. The *Poster Session* at CND will focus on the idea of inventing a choreographic green space by joining forces with architects, gardeners, landscapers, artists, dancers, and curators. There will be seven of us, so it will be a busy, intense period of time. It's going to be both a performance and a way of moving forward with this project. We have already taken a first step in Zürich, in the summer of 2019, with "Un essai à ciel ouvert." Over the course of three weeks, we took over a space, a lawn by the lake, and held non-stop actions with daily public warm-ups, "spoiled" dances on the grass, a symposium, and performative workshops...

In your work we encounter the idea of dance as an ecosystem, a medium plugged in to other mediums, that allows the dancer to speak, write, sing. Can this terrain carry over into other terrains: into the field of pedagogy or landscape?

We would need to take over a green space or an urban wasteland, for example in Lille, Paris, or Brussels... Rather than building a foundation on this land, we would occupy it and make it grow with a multitude of initiatives: with 5% of a museum construction budget, we can plan ten years' worth of human architecture projects! This terrain should be in a city. From there, we would work on whatever is possible to do in situ, in collaboration with local residents. We often think that a school needs walls, buildings—because it's raining, because it's cold... Why not an outdoor school? Or a place where schools would come and work a week at a time. Schools usually offer green classes—in the mountains, on a farm—and that's great. But why not a week in an everyday urban environment? You have to set up different conditions to make different art. It's not just a matter of becoming a dance company with 0% greenhouse gas emissions, but of rethinking the ecological conditions and the conditions of production of our art form. It seems important to me not to place a moral imperative on art, demanding it produces a more just, more social, more ecological art, while the existing conditions do not allow it; rather, this equality should come from within the artistic project itself. This requires that we think about new institutions, new ways of operating, financing, moving... We know that there are no more isolated ecosystems—everything is interconnected; and so the project [terrain] tries to put this circulation of various ecosystems at the heart of its own development. In the city, there are more and more community gardens, rooftop beehives, soft-mobility and urban-reforestation projects... This must accelerate!

But I am also firmly convinced that, in the same way that we are constructing Europe poorly if culture is not the catalyst, the future ecological city will totter if it excludes the most urgent, the most free art from participation.

I may be a dreamer, but I believe that a green space headed by a dancer can become a tipping point that brings new desirable paradigms to both art and the city.