

Jimmy Robert
It's not lame...it's Lamé,
2015,

REPORT Dance and Art

And yet she moves

2015 was the year of a new crossover:
in Tino Sehgal
and William Forsythe's slipstream,
young dancers are taking over contemporary art
– and artists are celebrating dance

TEXT ELKE BUHR

To start off, there's beer in the entrance hall and small snacks are handed around. The audience is sitting on sofas and cushions in between lush rubber trees; specially designed fragrances permeate the air. At the centre, the hostess is standing behind her laptop, microphone in hand, friendly greeting the crowd. Isabel Lewis calls her evenings "occasions", because they're more than just regular performances. She plays her own music, throwing a few beats in on the spot, and talks philosophy, Plato, love and the art of dialogue. Now and then this woman with her open smile sings too, and now and then she dances. Three to four hours later, the energy in the room reaches a high and people join in.

The Dominican-born American citizen began her career as a dancer and choreographer in New York. In 2009 she moved to Berlin and redesigned her work completely. "At my 'occasions' people can come and go, as they would at an exhibition", she explains in the interview. "I design everything myself: the content of the performance, the setting, the food, the sound, the smell. I want the crowd to feel good, to relax. And I want a new form of participation. All too often, crowd participation formats push the audience into prefabricated containers. I want to seduce my audience. They can join in if they want to, but they don't have to."

Her "occasions" have caused Isabel Lewis to very rapidly become one of the most sought-after performers on the scene – and even of the whole art scene. The past two years have brought performances at venues such as the Frieze Art Fair in London, the Liverpool Biennial, the Kunsthalle in Basel and the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. At our meeting in Berlin, she had just returned from her performance at the Gothenburg Biennial; her biggest project for 2016 will be at the Dia:Beacon in New York. "I can give the art scene something it's missing", she says. "Art is visual. I expand the experience to all senses."

These days, Isabel Lewis isn't the only dancer showing contemporary art what it's lacking. For quite some time now, dance has been more than just the live element on the side that people liked to book for their vernissage. Dance has ridden the wake of the performance boom and taken over the art scene. In 2014, MoMa PS1 in New York held a



ABOVE
Isabel Lewis at the Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art

BELOW
A visitor in the installation "The Fact of Matter" in William Forsythe's retrospective in the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst

retrospective of French choreographer Xavier Le Roy and in May 2015, his compatriot Boris Charmatz transformed the whole of London's Tate Modern, from the Turbine Hall all the way to the exhibition rooms, into a "Musée de la danse". In Germany too, dancers took over major institutions: William Forsythe's large solo exhibition "The Fact of Matter" at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt had the audience climbing through a forest of gymnastic rings or wriggling their way through swinging pendulums. The legendary choreographer uses fairly traditional artistic mechanisms in his "choreographic objects": he makes visitors move, but what he shows are objects. By contrast, Tino Sehgal's showcase in the Martin-Gropius building, at one of the most important art events of the year in Berlin this summer, proved that even a museum doesn't need any objects at all: it can be played just with living people. Sehgal's ensembles are a breeding ground for the younger dance-art crossover generation. Isabel Lewis was there as a performer in the Martin-Gropius building, for example. And her colleague, Andros Zins-Browne, born in New York in 1981, danced in Sehgal's celebrated production "This Variation" at dOCUMENTA(13).

"The experience was extremely intense", the dancer and choreographer, who now lives in Brussels, says in an interview. "When you're working with live performances in a visual arts context, time span is one of the main challenges.

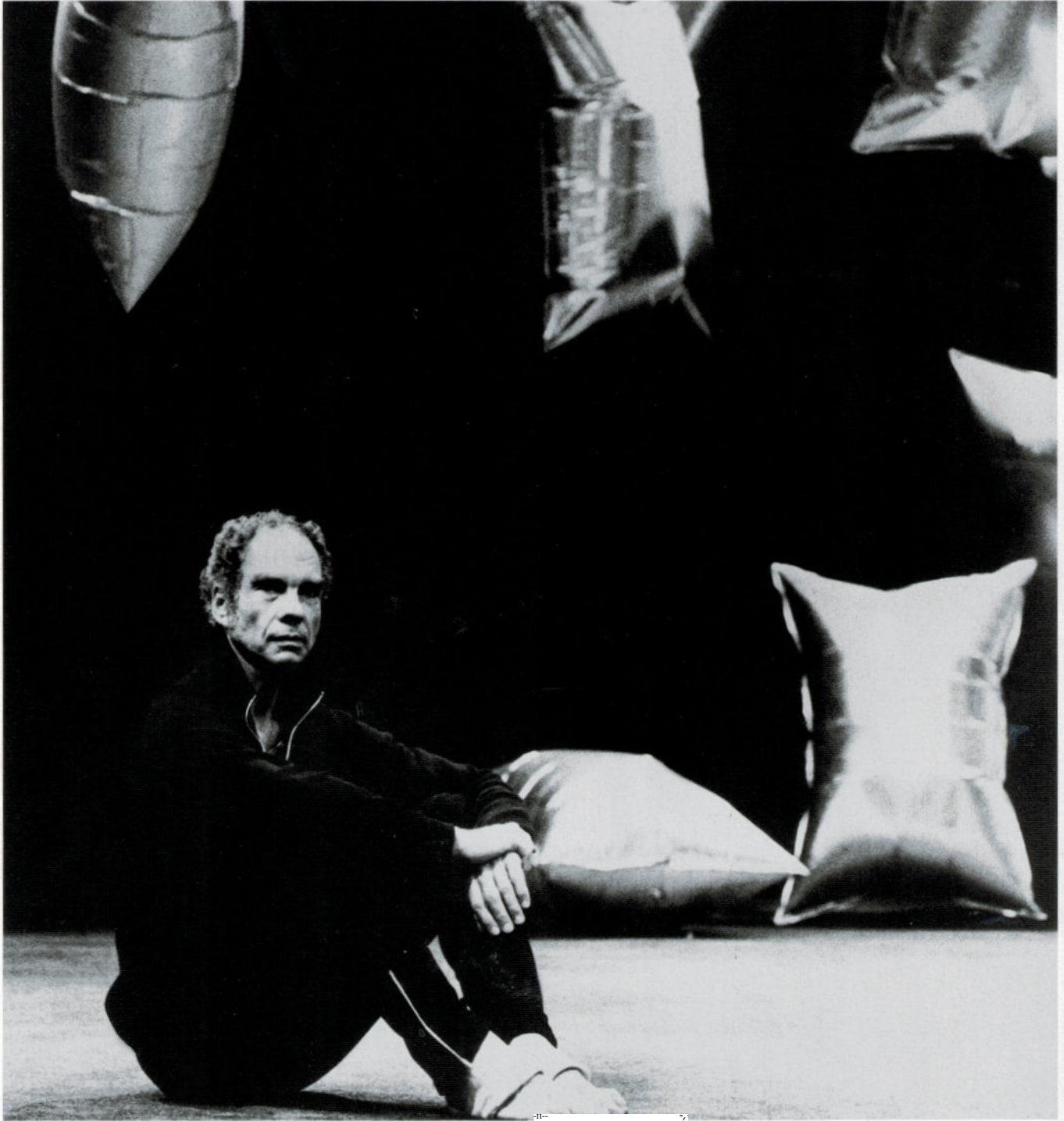
Delivering a ten-hour performance for a hundred days straight is easier said than done." Zins-Browne's own work "Welcome to the Jungle", which he staged on the occasion of the re-opening of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, was also more installation than it was performance: visitors had to feel their way through a mirrored labyrinth, confused by strange winds, fragrances and mists, and encountered children, enticing them to a game of hide and seek.

The close union between dance and the visual arts started at the beginning of Modernism, with the Ballets Russes, where choreographers such as George Balan-



Isabel Lewis at an "occasion" at
"Tanz im August" in the Berlin
Hebbel am Ufer in the summer of
2015





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chine and dancers such as Vaslav Nijinsky laid the groundwork for modern ballet in Paris in 1909 and collaborated with artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque for costumes and scenery. Later on, artists kept on producing spectacular stage sets. Merce Cunningham, for example, the most important innovator of modern dance,

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LEFT PAGE

Merce Cunningham with Andy Warhol's silver pillows that he used in 1968 for the stage set of his piece "RainForest"

ABOVE

Andros Zins-Browne

CENTRE

Andros Zins-Browne in his performance "Atlas Revisited"

BELOW

"Welcome to the Jungle" by Andros Zins-Browne

had his dancers perform among large inflated silver pillows, which he had discovered at an exhibition by Andy Warhol, in his 1968 piece "RainForest". Robert Rauschenberg gathered ready-mades on Cunningham's stage and Jasper Johns built him a replica of Marcel Duchamp's "Large Glass".

Today, for the first time, it's the other way around: dance is taking over museums and infiltrating art. And many see the fusion of dance and art as self-evident, much like the younger generation of artists who are combining means of expression freely instead of wasting too much thought on what exactly it is that they're practising – whether it's performance, video or painting. "The artists are far ahead of the institutions", Andros Zins-Browne explains. "In theatres, for example, everyone still wants a piece to have a beginning and an ending at a set time. Museums make a hassle of setting up the infrastructure needed for dance. The Stedelijk, for example, has built in an extra performance room in its new building – only the door is far too small to bring in stage sets."

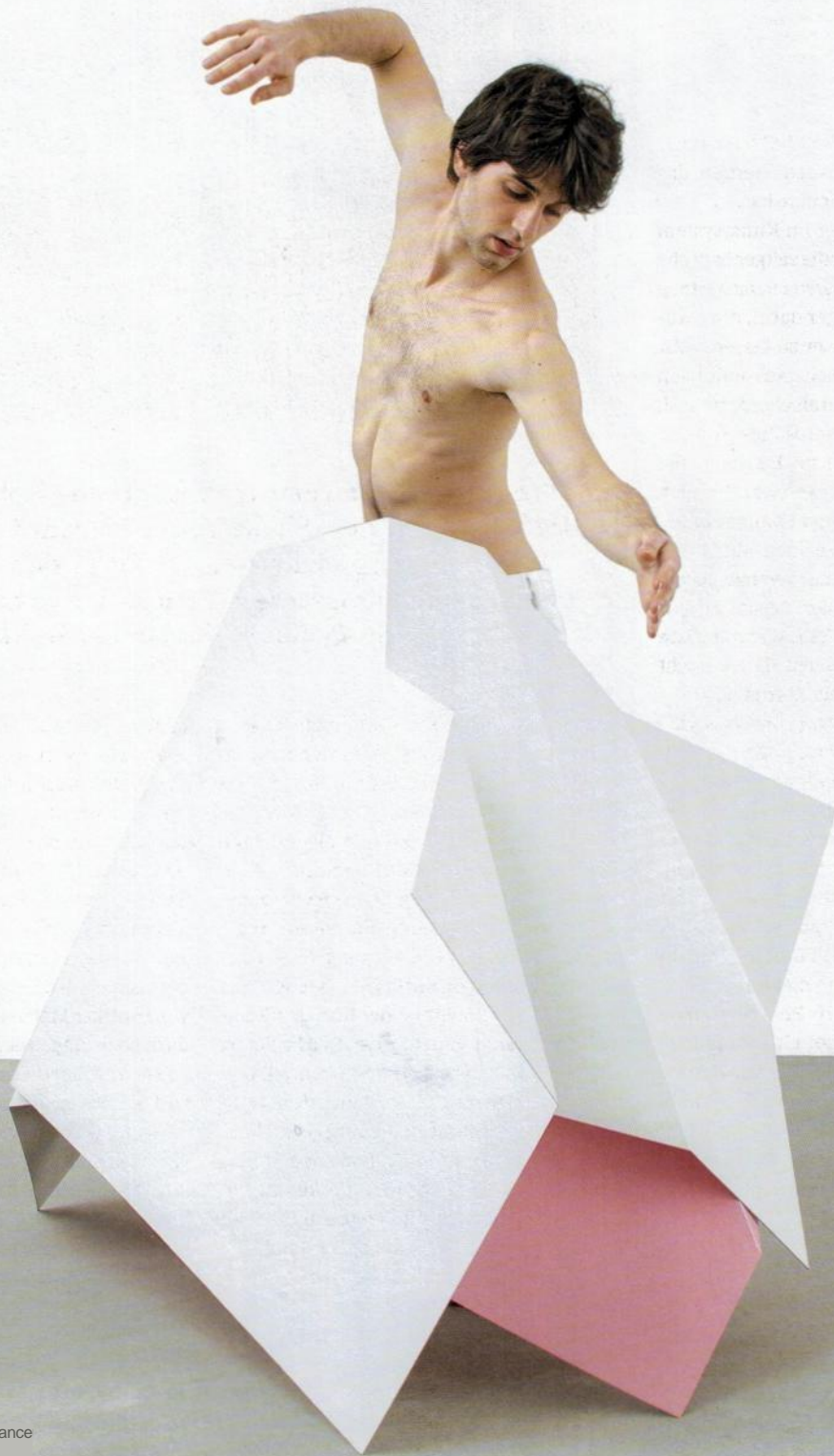


The switch from art to stage performance and vice versa is often an effective way to push not only the media, but also the institutions to their limits. At Isabel Lewis' rare theatre performances, she often surprises staff by wanting to arrange not only her own performance, but the whole hog, from ticketing to the foyer. Zins-Browne, in turn, irritates visitors with an open ending in his latest work "The Middle Ages", on show at the Berlin Hebbel am Ufer in November. After the piece takes on a chronology of dance routines since the Renaissance, it arrives in a future dominated by social media and the dancers repeat their movement meme in potentially endless variation: it becomes installation.

Dancers like Zins-Browne appreciate the freedom that the encounter with art offers: "As a child I learned classical ballet, then modern dance, but I quit because I felt that I couldn't express myself that way. It wasn't until I studied '60s Body Art, with Vito Acconci or Chris Burden, that I returned to working with the body, and, therefore, to dance."

Merce Cunningham, who, inspired by his life partner and close collaborator John Cage, introduced the principle of coincidence to dance, best betokens the innovation that modern ballet needs so much, as far as Zins-Browne is concerned – even though he finds the American avant-gardist's abstract, almost robotic movement language just about the strangest way a human being can possibly move. "I want to incorporate that in my next project", he laughs. He has even tried to teach camels in the desert one of Cunningham's choreographies, together with American artist Karthik Pandian. "I think their weird, stalking gait suits





Jimmy Robert's performance
"Metallica" with dancer
Juan Corres Benito at Berlin's
Tanya Leighton Gallery,
2015

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RIGHT

Jimmy Robert in the performance "Abolibibelo" in the Zürich Migros Museum, 2015

BELOW

Opening performance of Jimmy Robert's display "A clean line that starts from the shoulder" in the M-Museum in Leuven

it perfectly." The video is to be the first part of his new piece, "Atlas Revisited", which premieres next spring.

The invasion of dancers in the system of arts comes at a time when contemporary art is testing its boundaries more than ever – and perhaps it even helps to better grasp the ongoing changes. "I notice that there are increasingly more visual art exhibitions which I would consider as choreographic", Andros Zins-Browne says. "Take Philippe Parreno for example: to me, his large display at the Palais de Tokyo in 2013 was performative." When Parreno lights lamps in specific rhythms, plays music and sounds and lets them subside, he's performing a dance with objects: "It's about movement in time. If this dynamic's there, the material doesn't have to be a human body."

Sometimes even a traditional sculpture that's not moving can carry dance within itself. The Frenchman Jimmy Robert is currently proving that in a breathtaking manner: his photographs don't hang flat on the wall, they nestle in corners of rooms, they fold and bend – like in the amazingly beautiful work "Reprise" from 2010, where images of a Japanese Butoh dancer softly flow from a tabletop.

In May, a dancer animated a metal fold sculpture in Robert's Berlin gallery so that it looked as though it were his skirt. And at his most recent opening in the M-Museum in the Belgian city of Leuven, Robert and a female performer conducted a danced dialogue with his works: "It's like an extra language I use,



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to further extend the expression of art", he explains in an interview. This tall man, who has the physique of a dancer and was born in Guadeloupe in 1975, studied art at Goldsmiths College in London and never had a classic dance education. "But I was always interested in all kinds of movement: yoga, gestures, sign language, voguing, ballet. All these techniques have an influence on how we move." To Robert, the body is the point of reference for his art. That's why paper is his favourite material: it reminds him of the human skin, and when he looks at writing, he sees the movement of the hand that writes. Robert consciously wants to use the awkward position of the non-dancer in his performances. To him, all movements are equally valuable: he doesn't need to worry about the hierarchies and over-determinations that classical ballet schooling impresses on a body.

It's almost amusing to see how the people who cross borders always look for what they can't find in that other system. Performing in a theatre once, Jimmy Robert found it wonderful how intensely people can concentrate and to what extent they're able to notice details.

He enjoys it just as much as Isabel Lewis and Andros Zins-Browne enjoy people in their audience coming and going as they please. Zins-Browne, who sees the whole history of modern dance in every movement, perceives the forms of expression in art as less complex. But this idea would appear strange to a contemporary artist such as Robert, who not only alludes to modernism in his installations, but also transposes the fall of the folds in antique painting to paper and, what's more, poses questions about post-colonialism, race and gender.

The prevalence of dance in art is a sign of the new freedom of thought that the new generation claim for themselves. But it's also a sign of a kind of nostalgia taking over every art form that has entered the phase of self-historicizing. Contemporary art longs for the body and it takes it alive. And dance joyfully throws itself into the arms of art, because it's had enough of barre drills.

Exhibitions: "William Forsythe: The Fact of Matter", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, until 31 January. "Jimmy Robert: A clean line that starts from the shoulder", M-Museum Leuven, until 28 February

