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Time to Put Choreography Back on Its Feet

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WHEN two performers barely move while staring into each other's eyes for nearly 90 minutes, as Maria Hassabi and Robert Stejn did last spring in their collaborative duet "Robert and Maria," conventional notions of dance dissipate like phantoms.

Mesmerizing and dense, this nonvirtuosic-virtuosic act, staunchly rooted in performance states, knitted a choreographic picture with nearly imperceptible movement and sculptural clarity. While it wasn't necessarily dancing, for me it was a dance; the umbrella I use to consider the art form is golfer-size.

There will always be choreographers who care about steps, music and classical forms. But for many experimental artists, the word "dance" alone can't begin to hold it all in. So what are we talking about when we talk about dance these days? Artists may say that labels don't matter, but they do — at least when it comes to all-important grant applications, which critics are sent to cover a show (and what section of a publication a review appears in) and audience expectations. While none of this should influence the art itself, it has everything to do with how it is disseminated.

It used to be that in dance and performance the word contemporary was a sterile if functional way to describe work that wasn't traditional modern dance or ballet; it was the progeny of postmodern dance. But lately the term, vague as it is, has come to represent — in especially its darker moments — a style, as in Mia Michaels's choreography on television shows like "So You Think You Can Dance."

This brand of contemporary dance is no longer an artistic movement but a way of dancing that generally includes unison formations, swift kicks, rolls to the floor and cheap sentimentality. The formula has to do with speeding up movement when the music is slow and drawing it out when a song picks up its pace. As a term related to anything involving experimentation, "contemporary dance" is ruined. It's just another class at Steps.

While contemporary dance is being marginalized on television, Crossing the Line, the fall festival now in its fourth year (running Friday through Sept. 27) and hosted by the French Institute Alliance Française, produces the opposite effect. Programmed by Lili Chopra and Simon Dove, it features not just dance but also performance, theater, visual art, music, film and even food. Sometimes when the safety net of genres is pulled away, the world opens up. Crossing the Line dismantles labels by rendering them meaningless. No art form is the star; ideas are. On this stage the lack of classifications is something to celebrate.

And beginning Sept. 22 Danspace Project offers another important destination for dance and performance with a new installment of its Platform series featuring works selected by a guest curator. In the latest, which runs nearly six weeks, Trajal Harrell proposes "certain difficulties, certain joy," a search for joy in experimental dance, which on the surface might not necessarily exude bliss. Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud, for instance, explore extinction and rebirth in "Sylphides" while wearing sensory-deprivation body bags. The series, which strives to build context around art and the world in which it is created, provides another way of upending the notion of dance as a traditional choreographic endeavor.



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been a food element; this year, the focus is urban agriculture. Over the years the festival has made a point to regard chefs as artists. (While the intricacies of performance might be baffling to some, everyone has an opinion about food; the performance is a dish.) Part of the charm of Crossing the Line is that it is always a touch more playful than esoteric.

But as artistic worlds mingle and the art of performance undergoes a renaissance — perhaps this point was most profoundly made by Marina Abramovic's packed run at the Museum of Modern Art — where does this leave what we traditionally think of as dance? Just as audiences are starved for a real experience, choreographers want recognition and remuneration, or at least a seat on what they perceive as the gravy train available to visual artists.

As a result many dance works have become more intimate affairs — gallery ready and personality driven — so that they're not locked into dance-specific homes. Often the dancer has moved beyond muse to become such an integral centerpiece of a work that the choreography is practically reduced to second billing.

Part of the shift is pragmatic: Large studio spaces are harder than ever to come by and, for many, impossible to afford. Trained dancers are becoming more rare, partly because of the expense of technique classes, but also because when given the choice they're choosing yoga, Pilates and other conditioning options. That changes what you see onstage and is absolutely for the worse as far as dances are concerned. You can only carry personality so far.

Recently experimental choreographers like Mr. Harrell and Beth Gill have professed the urge to buck fashion — or perhaps remake it — by creating dances once again. While their aim isn't as simplistic as it sounds, it's slightly confusing. Many recent moments of full-out dancing seem tossed in with little consideration for integration. This is not to imply that a dance should appear seamless or fluid. But nowadays extended movement passages often appear earnest and sophomoric; like a snippet from a music video they recall a familiar lesson in dance: What feels good doesn't always look good.

At times it seems as if the dance world is in a period of reconstruction, both shaky and ripe with opportunity. With few taboos left to break, artists are reshuffling elements to suit their taste. With his Platform, Mr. Harrell, offering a serious wink, is addressing the difficulty of expressing joy in experimental work: Is joy a result of boisterous movement or standing around? Is joy fat or thin? Is it political? Can a contemporary dance make room for joy?

For experimental dance artists the answer has to do with choreography, which is the only word that really holds it all in: the questions, the craft, the imagination, the design, the multimedia and, finally, the showbiz. Choreography may be the last loaded term in dance — a little musty, a bit Doris Humphrey around the edges — but it shouldn't be cast aside. It moves beyond dance and performance to represent the most expansive way to think. It's time to reclaim the word before someone else gets a hold of it. It stands for too much



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Raimund Hoghe, left, and Faustin Linyekula in "Sans-titre."

Crossing the Line avoids themes yet manages to create a moment — or a burst of moments, as there will be 20 events in 18 days. Two returning choreographers are Jérôme Bel, who takes an autobiographical look at a dancer's career in "Cédric Andrieux," and Raimund Hoghe, collaborating with Faustin Linyekula in "Sans-titre," which deals with political borders. The title means "without papers," but it also questions outsider status. Mr. Hoghe, formerly a critic and a dramaturge, uses his spinal deformity as a way to examine what normal means.

This malleability between forms and subject matter sums up the way Crossing the Line views a modern artist. Traditionally there has also



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Ashleigh Di Lello in "So You Think You Can Dance."