**Dancing Through the Crisis**

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**Abstract**

The financial crisis jeopardized life with unbridled risk. A radical imagination would require shifting what we would risk together to gain something altogether different. Dance can be mobilized as one medium in which this body of possibility might be realized.

**Crisis**

Crisis comes bearing gifts. Some are keepers. Others must be returned. The departed trillions suddenly brought their equivalent number out from hiding. Where was all this wealth? What else might be done with it? The anxiety of declaring crisis couples uneasily with the eagerness to declare it over. Repay the debt. Get back to business. Blame the failures. Regulate the excess. Resume normalcy. Yet other voices, pictures, sensibilities are also provoked by crisis. To what ends might our mutual indebtedness be put? What more can we get from abundant wealth? Where else might we intervene when fates have become so intertwined? Surely the “we” in question is shifting, no longer the familiar one that invokes the interest of many, the executioner of alternatives who asks for calm, the restoration artists who proclaim all is good as new. In the din of crisis the standard means for reckoning what can pass as true and good become disordered and disorienting.

The gifts that remain are the possibilities that surface, the bodies that make themselves felt, the presence of difference already to hand. While green shoots may fill the dreams of those who hope for recovery of same, radical imagination also sprouts where so much trouble has been unearthed. As much as the task of critique is to bring such prospects to notice, how those emergent possibilities are borne and sustained in the world is a problem and pleasure persistently occupied through critical practice. For what comes as a slap in the face, such violence must be refused, but it is not enough to stand on already scorched ground. Movement is essential, ways and means to go elsewhere must be devised, dancing through beckons and overtakes us. Such, at least would be the promise of a release from this collective incarceration toward a housing boom of the imagination.

The stages of mourning (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) echo in the post-mortems of the global financial crisis. “They were the smartest...”

ones in the room, why couldn’t they see it coming? Why couldn’t their tremendous expertise stave off disaster?" All the facts and insights assembled by the best and brightest were insufficient to master the situation. The story that the economic rockets launched by finance come crashing down the earth is oft told and soon forgotten as market-makers prepare for the next ascent. Rather than passively awaiting better motives or sharper minds perhaps this is a good time to notice what eludes intelligence altogether. Might we be able to detect in this great failure of knowledge a different sensibility that resides in our body politic? A move in a different direction than the incessant urge to repetition? The sounds from board-rooms have captured public attention. The impact of their thinking has been disproportionate to their number. To divine what else stirs in our midst we can instead focus on the innovative movers, those who assemble to create something hitherto unseen and disclose a different basis of incorporation. For this purpose, I turn to dance. Not that dance is any one thing or resides at any one address. An exploration of what bodies can do together when left to their own devices, dancing cuts across the devotions of the professional and public passions. It occurs in tiny rooms and public arenas, streets, stages, kitchens, studios. Assembling all that dance has to offer provides a report on what sensibilities connect and disperse people through a physical culture. Taken together, dance supplies a record of where we have been and where we’d like to go, of how we move together and apart, of how we create the environments we inhabit and what we aspire to make of them. When official registers fail to provide an adequate account, dance may prove a suggestive alternative from which we can orient ourselves to what we should value most when the standard reckonings have gone bankrupt. Dance is sometimes dismissed as a minor art form, academically and aesthetically marginal, underfunded, poorly attended. And yet dance, in the expanded field, is actually a pervasive feature of everyday life, especially as it links to our general condition of embodiment. At the same time what is exceptional about dance, its profound sentient intelligence, may be just what is needed when the standard measures of smartness have come up short.

Risk

For a world purportedly run by specially trained managers and professionals, their inability to rule their respective domains speaks of a larger, deeper crisis than a few missing trillion. Autonomy of professionals to perfect their trade has been placed in the service of demands for ever greater performance. In the past thirty-years, when so much faith has been placed in the command of information to advance human interests, public policy has encouraged various forms of self-management in areas of security once reserved for the state. Pensions, housing, education, healthcare would be seen from the vantage point of investments with variable returns based upon contribution, rather than

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entitlements with defined benefits. Whether in finance or personal affairs, risk was no longer something to be avoided and protected against, but embraced and fostered.

More risk, more opportunity, more gain, greater risk. Risk would be understood not simply as a calculus of unexpected gain, but as a somatic condition. The gauge used by financial planners for a person’s risk tolerance in an investment portfolio was whether that body could sleep at night. Experimental dance of the time also became interested in risk as an approach to creating new movements. Dancers explored various improvisational techniques that placed them in precarious states, entangled positions, delicate and unstable balances that could prove thrilling. Even sudden crashes and collapses were grist for further inventiveness. Both finance and dance engaged the arts of motion, of crafting environments and tempos in which bodies would be made to perform, but dance provides a more precise language by which to grasp these transformations.

The elaboration of risk into a way of life forges a particular sense of time. The instruments of finance designed to control and profit from calculations of risk were the very vehicles by which risk overwhelmed calculation. Each such investment is a bet on what will come to pass that makes a potential financial outcome tangible in the present moment. Yet this vantage point on time would no longer be reserved for financial professionals. A homeowner could withdraw cash through a second mortgage on the assumption that they could bank today on what the price increase was expected to be tomorrow.

The future had moved into the present. In the old dreamscape of ever-better times just over the horizon, the future would deliver us to another place— to utopia. The loss of these utopian prospects has led to no end of disenchantment. Certainly this immersion in the immediate is fertile ground for proliferating risk—for better and ill. The body absorbs and generates the anxious state of unknowing, the expectation of ever-expanding performance by standards of universal accountability, the transient, ephemeral condition of incessant comparison without underlying value.

The demand that all be risk capable or be deemed “at-risk” failed states, places everyone in the position of expert decision-maker that spreads skepticism toward what experts say. Doctors, politicians, scientists of various stripes can no longer hold sway over their specialized domains when all are called upon to cast judgments to enhance their positions. Uncertain of means, results would speak for themselves. The winners, we are told, were far more productive than anyone else, their excellence was manifest. Those populations who could not navigate these shoals of decision for personal gain (immigrants, the poor, dispossessed, persecuted) not only placed themselves at risk but posed a danger to others. And a global war on terror was crafted on the notion that a
bad risk could be well taken and targeted volatility could disrupt whole societies.

Risk focuses attention on the ripple effects of small movements that spread across a vast terrain. When the future is coming toward you, action must be preemptive, potential occurrences quickly become actualized. Special forces in forward deterrence. Arbitrage to exploit negligible variations in price. Derivatives bundled attributes of commodities and traded them by risk profile. For such an economy to operate it must stay in constant motion, even accelerate. The worth of something does not await its completion but is established in real time. Mission accomplished. Trade complete. Transaction successful. Arrest movement and there is a sudden loss of value. The ephemerality of the moment is exposed.

Dance

All this is not an easy situation to get one’s mind around. The inner workings of dance can provide some orientation to how the world is put together and moved in familiar and strange directions. Dance is a practice of perpetual motion, even in stillness it collects what has been swirling in its midst. Thinking and feeling the world through dance sidesteps the fallen structures for an ongoing accomplishment of embodiment. The economic models that skewered the markets assumed short-term and fixed coordinates of time and space to create the reality-effect of a free-floating graph of commodities values. Dancing bodies in fluid motion do not so much advance along pre-existing lines but generate their own sense of space and time, density and openness. Dance provides a sense of how movement is made in the moment by focusing enormous productive capacity on what can be done with the stark emptiness of the stage, and these insights can be extended to other kinds of spaces.

A dance performance reminds us of what remains tantalizing and often frustrating in the demonstrations organized by a political or social movement. Both raise questions of durability and efficacy. The energies required to assemble the bodies in attendance disappear in the event, which is fragile, ephemeral. And when it ends and everyone goes home, it is hard to say what lingers. Both protest and performance are commonly haunted by a sense of insufficiency. If only a few more folks had shown up, perhaps we would get our due, maybe we would have achieved the impact we sought. Yet in both cases the dispersion of bodies at the event’s close also produces the desire for more such activity. The mere possibility that so much effort spent organizing bodies to arrive and move in a particular place suggests an abundance of capacity where we thought lay only scarcity. Bodies can move against the odds, through unexpected pathways, uncommon mutual reliance, arresting delivery—all of which countervene the claim that none of it mattered at all. Dance is an

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intervention into what is, one that shows how it can be made otherwise, a hint at utopian becoming that flashes through the present.

Dance also makes legible the social kinesthetic, the shared physical sensibility and context we join as we rumble and tumble together. Global physicality has expanded in scope and diversity after the Holocaust and Hiroshima, during the arduous process of decolonization which has left so many lands scarred, nominally free even if seldom left alone to develop on their own terms. This forging of a third world or global south has disrupted the western-centered claims to be at the center of culture. In movement terms this historic shift has opened a larger de-centering in expressive forms. Capoeira, break-dance, surf-snow boarding have begun to circulate around the world with a shared sensibility of moving from off-center, of turning the body upside-down so that the hands do what the feet might once have.

Ballet and modern dance vocabularies have been profoundly affected by this vernacular. These techniques also place value on bodies in risky predicaments, in contact, immediately dependent on one another for their continued motion, their sustainability. Risk here is not a cruel calculus of winner-take-all, but an intricate interplay of taking and being taken, of getting more back from putting something in, a kind of self-appreciation through explicit interdependence with others. At a moment when we have suffered from mutual indebtedness and many have paid the price for a few, this other logic, also running through our lives, should not be overlooked.

Dance here provides an immediacy of the social. It takes up the question of what we can make together. It sends our imaginations back to the intimate rooms where all those dreadful decisions were made based upon failed intelligence and asks what smartness can be for. Contrary to the ongoing drone that scarcity is our natural condition, the sudden availability of hundreds of billions to bailout banks gives license to a conversation about what to do with the incredible wealth that is to hand. The run-up to the meltdown showed a massive consolidation of holdings without seeming purpose. Monetary expenditure, like military intervention has become discretionary. Those with the means can intervene anywhere for any purpose (or none).

The opening afforded by the collapse seems quickly to be foreclosed as the victors get back to their ways, but it is more difficult than ever to imagine this route delivering the promises of old. Instead finance redux is the bearer of a more general disenchantment. We might then look to dance to make momentarily legible the social body that materializes before our eyes, where making more of itself, deepening its encumbrances, amplifies the pleasures of risks taken together. These ends, the perpetuation of the social for itself, draws together our abundant means to make more of our moments and movements.
together that might just lead to a re-enchantment of a socialism thought long departed from the stage. With the trillions now deployed, to lay so much to waste opens a horizon that can be moved steadily toward the present. Dance, born of an imaginative leap as to where we are headed, returns the desire, the will and the means to continue getting there.

Endnotes


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