



PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

BETWEEN AND WITHIN CHOREOGRAPHIES: AN EARLY CHOREOGRAPHIC OBJECT BY WILLIAM FORSYTHE¹

BY: *Anna Leon*

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EDITOR FOR THIS ARTICLE: Tone Pernille Østern (Dr. of Arts in Dance), NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

PROOF-READER: John Shepherd, Vasa, Finland. DESIGN: Trine + Kim Designstudio, Oslo, Norway. LOGO: Tintin Rosvik.

ABSTRACT

In 1990, William Forsythe created *The Books of Groningen – Book N(7)*, an installation commissioned by the Dutch city of Groningen and architect Daniel Libeskind. This early *choreographic object* is composed of a water canal, a series of willow trees pulled by wires in order to grow in arched shape and a bush hedge. At a time of marked interest in *expanded* choreography as it develops in conjunction with choreography's links to visual art, as well as in choreographic history, this article considers *Book N(7)* in relation with diverse historical conceptions of choreography – as dance-making, as an organisation of moving bodies, as notation and pre/scription. This analysis shows that the installation negates certain aspects of choreographic history while exemplifying and perpetuating others, therefore situating itself between different historical construals of choreography. At the same time, it points to the ways in which *Book N(7)* defies the possibility both of complete ruptures and of smooth continuities with the choreographic past, engaging in a negotiation which reworks this past in the present. Framing this analysis of *The Books of Groningen – Book N(7)* by references to certain of Forsythe's ulterior works, this article presents the installation as a part of the artist's long-lasting, shifting engagements with the notion and history of choreography.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anna Leon is a dance historian and theorist based in Vienna. She studied Psychology and Philosophy in Bristol and Philosophy of Art in Paris, before completing a PhD in the Dance Studies department of the University of Salzburg. Her doctoral research, titled *Multiple Stories. Expanded Choreography and Choreographic History*, was supported by the NEON Foundation (Greece), the Leventis Foundation (Switzerland/Cyprus), and the Marie Andessner Stipendium of the University of Salzburg. She has held/will hold teaching engagements at the Universities of Salzburg, Vienna and Bern, as well as SEAD - Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance and the Institut Français. In parallel with her research, she holds cultural mediation workshops (e.g. Tanzhouse, PNEU, Sommerszene festivals) and occasionally works as a dramaturg.

Keywords: *Expanded choreography, history of choreography, William Forsythe, choreographic installation, plant choreography*

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, while the Dutch city of Groningen was preparing to celebrate its 950th anniversary, figures of the city's public life envisioned a large-scale urban project that would mark the city's boundaries in order to also mark its anniversary. The architect Daniel Libeskind was commissioned to prepare a *masterplan* according to which nine further architects, thinkers and artists² proposed installations – called *markers* or *tokens* – to be erected around the city. Libeskind's *masterplan* – or, as he has (as cited in Grassmuck, 1992, unpaginated) called it, his “critique” of a masterplan – took the name *The Books of Groningen* and was organised around the city's appellation as it appears on the oldest surviving handwritten document – CRUONINGA – (Libeskind, 1990, p. 5) with each marker corresponding to one of its letters. Each installation was to be placed at a route entering/exiting the city (one more, by philosopher Paul Virilio, is found in the town centre).

One of the artists invited to design a marker was the choreographer William Forsythe, at the time director of Ballett Frankfurt. Completed in 1990, it is still situated in a field at the fringes of urban Groningen and consists of a straight, approximately 400-meters-long canal excavated in the field, parallel to which a series of willow trees was planted. The trunk of each willow is looped by a strap attached via a metallic wire to a concrete pillar in the canal; the wire pulls the trunk towards the pillar, bending the tree in an arc-like form (Figure 1). An S-shaped hedge made of hip-height bushes crosses the canal (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1

Detail of William Forsythe's *The Books of Groningen* – Book N(7). Photograph: Emma Villard.



FIGURE 2

Aerial view of William Forsythe's *The Books of Groningen – Book N(7)* (Google Maps, 2020, May 29). Ruischerbrug, Scale: 50m. Google Maps [online]



The work, referred to as *The Books of Groningen* with the specifier *Book N(7)*, is characterized by Forsythe (n.d.-b) as a *choreographic object*, a notion that would become central both in his theoretical work (cf. Forsythe n.d.-a) and his choreographic production (for an overview, see Gaensheimer & Kramer, 2016; Groves, 2018). It is also presented as being co-authored with Libeskind, pointing to the marker's wider interdisciplinary traits: through its inscription into the landscape, its use of natural materials, its intervention in the shaping of the environment and its situatedness in the locality of the city, the marker – conceived seven years after Joseph Beuys' *700 Oaks* (1982) – relates to land art, environmental art and site-specific installations. It can thus be placed in the framework of exchanges developing between dance and the visual arts since the 1960s – notably through the work of the Judson Dance Theatre – while connecting those to a reflection about the very definition of choreography.

Indeed, the interdisciplinary nature of *Book N(7)* is paralleled by Forsythe's long-standing engagement with an expanded notion of choreography, not strictly associated with the creation of dance. "Choreography happens everywhere, all the time" writes Erin Manning (2009, unpaginated) in a text on Forsythe's choreographic objects; and indeed, the disengagement of choreography from the teleological function of dance-making, from a theatrically or institutionally framed performance situation, as well as from the medium of the moving human body, has, in the years since the marker was erected, installed itself in – to a great extent European – choreographic practice, discourse and theory. This diversification of choreography is evident in works staging non-human entities – in *The Books of Groningen*'s decade, Christian Rizzo and Caty Olive's *100 % polyester, objet dansant n° (à définir)* (1999); more recently, Clément Layes' *Things that Surround Us* (2012) or Mette Ingvartsen's *The Artificial Nature Project* (2012) are only a few examples. It is also manifest in the use of the term *expanded choreography* (e.g. Bulut & Linder, 2014; Spångberg, 2012) and in a focus of theoretical interest on choreography

beyond its dance-making capacity (e.g. Basteri et al., 2012). These developments were accompanied by a focus in Dance Studies on the history of choreography (see e.g. Foster, 2011, pp. 15–72; Klein, 2015, pp. 17–49) as distinct from – albeit intimately connected to – the history of dance.

Against this background, I propose to read *Book N(7)* as a work that encapsulates a double movement, interweaving an art-boundary-crossing expansion of choreography with a reactivation of choreographic history. After providing a brief introduction to the historical reference points that this text will be concerned with, I will examine the relations that Forsythe’s installation develops with aspects of choreographic history. Drawing from a personal visit to the marker, a series of discussions with employees of the municipality of Groningen having worked on the installation, and Forsythe’s ulterior collaborators who have experience of his installations, as well as the municipality of Groningen’s archives on the project, I aim to disentangle the ways in which, more than performing a clear rupture from or a smooth continuity with a uniform choreographic past, Forsythe’s installation positions itself between different choreographic models and modulates its position within each of them. Framing this reading of *Book N(7)* with references to Forsythe’s further research on choreographic objects, I present the marker as an interdisciplinary expanded choreography co-constituted by its negotiations with choreographic history.

CHOREOGRAPHY IS CHOREOGRAPHIES

Choreography is not a stable notion, and the term may refer to a multiplicity of meanings. This is manifest in the variety of definitions present in contemporary dance professionals’ discourse – as evidenced by the answers given to the question “What does ‘choreography’ mean today?” in a 2007 survey by the website CORPUS – but is also to be found in choreographic history. It is important to remember, for instance, that it was from the 19th and towards the 20th century that the main meaning of *choreography* came to be *dance-making* (cf. Brandstetter, 2014, p. 54; Foster, 2011, pp. 40, 43; Le Moal, 1999, p. 543 on ‘*chorégraphe*’ [choreographer]). It was, furthermore, chiefly in the 20th century that dance-making and by extension choreography became essentially bound to a moving human corporeality (cf. Foster, 2011, p. 44; Lepecki, 2006, pp. 3–4). When Doris Humphrey (1959/1997) claimed that “the first mark of the potential choreographer is a knowledge of, or at least a great curiosity about, the body – not just his own, but the heterogeneous mixture of bodies which people his environment [...] I have never heard of a choreographer who achieved even moderate success, who did not have a physical skill in moving bodies” (pp. 20, 25), or when John Martin (1933/1989), *The New York Times* dance critic and key figure in the development of modern dance in the United States, wrote of modern dance choreographers’ “discovery of the actual substance of the dance” – movement – “the most elementary *physical* experience of *human* life” (pp. 6–8, emphases added), they were not only reflecting a 20th century bind of dance and choreography with moving corporealities, but were also contributing to the formation of that bind (on the *body-movement bind*; see also Cvejić, 2015). The related definition of choreography as an organization or arrangement of moving bodies in time and space, based on its association with the medium of corporeal movement, irrespective of the

adherence to a norm of dance, is also historically situated in the 20th century. The term *choreography* itself, however, first appeared in the title of French dance master Raoul-Auger Feuillet's 1700 treatise *Chorégraphie, ou L'Art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* [Choreography or the art of describing dance through characters, figures and demonstrative signs]. Within Feuillet's treatise, in its context and for several decades thereafter, *choreography* literally signified the writing of dance, i.e. dance notation. Dance, the human body, movement and writing are central both in historical and contemporary views of choreography – and it is mainly on these that the present text will focus. But these meanings of choreography are not exhaustive: Foster (2011, pp. 43, 226), for example, also identifies certain 19th century uses of the term referring to the teaching and learning of dance. Choreography, then, rather is choreographies: it is not reducible to a singular meaning or practice but constitutes a network of historically situated, distinct, albeit interrelated ones. The diversity of this network allows for further shifts, including boundary-crossing connections of choreography with other art forms.

This plural choreographic history is not composed of a linear series of discrete paradigms replacing one another. Rather than forming a sequence of singular models, different construals of choreography may coexist; rather than pursuing a unidirectional chronology, they reappear at different historical moments, transforming in response to their diverse contexts. For example, choreography as a notational project reappears in the writings of modern dance artist Rudolf Laban (1966), coexisting with further definitions as dance-making; as kinetography, it integrates the 20th century's focus on movement in the conception of choreography as writing:

[c]horeography, means literally the designing or writing of circles. The word is still in use today: we call the planning and composition of a ballet or a dance 'choreography'. For centuries the word has been employed to designate the drawings of figures and symbols of movements which dance composers, or choreographers, jotted down as an aid to memory [...] My study of some hundred different forms of graphic presentation of characters of the different alphabets and other symbols, including those of music and dance, has helped me with the development of a new form of choreography which I called 'kinetography'. (Laban, 1966, p. viii)

Choreography as notation – a writing that pre/scribes the future performance of motion – has been reactivated in contemporaneity as well. André Lepecki (2007, 2006; cf. also Siegmund 2010), for instance, refers to Thoinot Arbeau's 1589 treatise *Orchesography* (Arbeau, 1589/2012) – which also includes notations, and whose title prefigures Feuillet's term – in his theorization of choreography as a practice of ruling the body and/or dance: as an *apparatus of capture*. In this way, the historical association of choreography with a notational project contributes to a contemporary link between choreography and the disciplinary control of the embodied praxis of dance. While not explicitly referring to notation, Mårten Spångberg (2017) also expresses a contemporary view of choreography associable with its historical being as writing: as, in its signification of notation, choreography allows the repeatability of motion – its removal from the realm

of the ephemeral, towards a sustained existence in time through its script – Spångberg (2017) sees choreography as “an organizing capacity; it structures, and structures have sustainability. [...] Structures are capacities that makes it [*sic*] possible to return, to retrace, and do something again” (p. 367). What these examples show is that historical conceptions of choreography are neither fully erased nor uniformly perpetuated, but are partially transformed and re-adapted.

Different construals of choreography are moreover to be seen as engaging in frictions with the practices they are surrounded by and which they aim to describe. For example, while Feuillet’s pre/scriptive notational project is consistent and contextually associated with the aim, institutionalised through the foundation of the Académie Royale de Danse, to centralize power over dance matters in order to “perfect and correct the abuses and defects” (Louis XIV, 1663, p. 8, my translation) in dance, certain contemporary historians suggest that the *Chorégraphie* may also have, perhaps inadvertently, offered a possibility of resistance to the control of dancing bodies (Glon, 2014, p. 219). Similarly, the 20th century’s focus on bodily motion as the primary characteristic of both dance and choreography was defied by scenographic, musical and textual inputs in multimedia choreographic work or by the dephysicalization of movement through its technological mediation. Choreography may also allow the taking of position with respect to specific *kinds* of practice, privileging some over others. Thus, in the 19th century, August Bournonville (1860/1999) argued that “the choreographer who only composes according to a given programme is no more advanced than the musician who only orchestrates others’ melodies” (p. 58), implying that ‘just’ developing dance steps is less worthy of choreographic work. Likewise, in the early 20th century, while *choreography* meant *dance-making*, it could be used to refer to specific genres that were negatively viewed – the writer Fernand Divoire (e.g., 1924, p. 34), for instance, used the label *choreography* to refer to classical ballet, which he looked down upon.

This historical background of choreography – one characterized by plurality, coexistence, change and friction – resonates with the way in which Forsythe himself refers (n.d.-a) to choreographic history:

To reduce choreography to a single denotation is to not understand the most crucial of its mechanisms: to resist and reform previous definitions. There is no choreography per se, at least not that can be understood as a particular instance representing a universal or standard for the term. Each epoch of choreography is, ideally, at odds with prior determining incarnations [...].

It is therefore against such a background that I will read Forsythe’s installation in Groningen, in order to suggest that its contemporary position is related not only to visual arts paradigms but also to a choreographic history of variability, partiality and negotiation.

BETWEEN CHOREOGRAPHIES

The Books of Groningen – Book N(7) defies the expectation, developed through the historically constructed association of choreography with dance-making, that work by a choreographer would necessarily lead to the creation of an easily identifiable *dance* product. While publications on the Groningen project (e.g., Hefting & van Winkel, 1990, p. 168) mention dance as Forsythe’s discipline, the marker is symbolically disconnected from dance: in Libeskind’s *masterplan*, in which each marker was linked to – among other elements – a Greek muse, Terpsichore, the muse of dance, was attributed not to Forsythe as the only invited choreographer, but to architect Gunnar Daan. *Book N(7)* may thus be seen as a prefiguration of early 21st century affirmations of choreography’s distance from its historical association with dance-making, reflecting the words of Spångberg (2012):

[t]he future belongs to choreography but only if it acknowledges its potentiality as an expanded capacity. Choreography is not the art of making dances (a directional set of tools), it is a generic set of capacities to be applied to any kind of production, analysis or organization. (Spångberg, 2012, unpaginated).

Forsythe (n.d.-a, unpaginated) himself has programmatically noted that “[c]horeography and dancing are two distinct and very different practices”. The installation also opposes human performers as the privileged agents embodying choreographic work, replacing them by elements of nature, wires and pillars. Moreover, since the marker is not presented in a tightly controlled – and theatrically framed – performance venue, but in a peri-urban field, its non-human components branch out and incorporate further elements: the soil towards which the trees’ and hedge’s roots extend to absorb nutrients; the air and humidity that the plants’ pores are open to; the sunlight to which their leaves turn; the insects and birds nesting in the trees; the wind among their branches; the animals feeding from and in the ground; the plants growing in the canal; the wild grass surrounding the hedge, as well as the small trees that have appeared around the willows, all inscribe the installation into a macroscopic scale involving a variety of non-human agents. This replacement of the human has also been encountered in later works by the choreographer: in 2014, *Black Flags* put the title’s flags in motion, via choreographic instructions to robots manipulating them; *Aviation* (2013) also choreographed trees, by fitting them with electronic devices producing sound vibrations that moved their branches.

Forsythe’s (n.d.-a) engagement with the non-human is relatable to his reflections on the notion of *choreographic objects*: critical towards the sole association of choreography with corporeality, he questions whether it is “possible for choreography to generate autonomous, accessible expressions of its principles – ‘choreographic objects’ *without* the body”. This detachment from exclusively bodily performance is bound to his appreciation of choreography as a domain of thought and knowledge production, neglected because of Western culture’s contempt for the body (Forsythe, n.d.-a; see also Groves, 2018, pp. 77–78). Several of the artist’s ulterior works respond to this

▶ issue by developing objects that engage their users in motion, allowing them to grasp “choreographic ideas”: “[a] principal feature of the choreographic object is that the preferred outcome is a form of knowledge production for whoever engages with it, engendering an acute awareness of the self within specific action schemata” (Forsythe, n.d.-a). For instance, the inflatable *White Bouncy Castle* (1997, with Dana Caspersen and Joel Ryan; cf. Groves, 2018, p. 81) prompts a play with weight, rebound and balance; *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* (2005–2015) is a collection of pendulums to be avoided in a task of coordination and kinetic adaptation. *Book N(7)* partially corresponds to the Forsythian idea of choreographic objects as proposals for physical-kinetic participation by human users: the field in which the marker is found is more than 400 metres long, with no high altitude point from which the installation’s three components could be appreciated together, so visitors are incited to enter the field and walk within it, the installation provoking movement as a response to its design and placement in space. Nevertheless, the installation does not have the interactive qualities of ulterior works, not engaging visitors in co-evolving “mobile architectures” (Manning, n.d., unpaginated), but rather maintaining them in the position of spectators of the vegetal performance. While it does provoke experiential involvement, and even kinesthetic self-awareness through the situatedness and presence of the body within the work – that is also characteristic of certain installation artworks (cf. von Hantelmann, 2014) – *Book N(7)*’s primary users are, countering humans’ historically acquired centrality in choreography, the trees themselves.

Book N(7) also takes a distance from the centrality of motion in choreography. The non-human elements composing it do not perform any evident movement: apart from an occasional wind swinging the branches of the trees and hedge into slight motion, the installation presents itself as a largely still environment. Even if visitors may walk within it, the marker is also demarcated from objects – like the above-mentioned *White Bouncy Castle* and *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time*, or the room full of gymnastics rings to be crossed without using the support of the floor in *The Fact of Matter* (2009) – which move in response to, or parallel with, their users. Nor does *Book N(7)* fully resemble objects – such as *A Volume within which it is not Possible for Certain Classes of Action to Arise* (2015), an empty cube whose dimensions make the user experience limits imposed on their movements – which, while remaining still, incite towards motion and physical understanding. In Groningen, the visitors’ motions are only the means for a contemplative experience of an apparently immobile landscape and one’s presence within it. It is notable in this respect that the marker was completed one year after the publication of Peter Sloterdijk’s *Eurotaoismus* (1989) and its critique of modernity as a project of ever-increasing, self-perpetuating hyper-mobility, that influenced Dance Studies through Lepecki’s reference to it in his 2006 book *Exhausting Dance*. Neither prioritising movement as a mode of engagement for its users, nor accepting the necessity of performing any perceptible motion itself, the marker counters the centrality that motion has held in conceptions of choreography since at least the 20th century.

In these ways, the installation counters both choreography’s exclusive alignment with dance as an autonomous artistic discipline, and its modernist construal as a ▶

▶ medium-specific practice bound to the corporeal and the kinetic. It thus contributes to choreography's migrations across artistic disciplines, facilitating its association with the forms of visual art highlighted above. In this sense, *Book N(7)* interweaves an expansion beyond entrenched historical conceptions of choreography with connections to other artistic fields. In effect, Forsythe's critique of choreographic disciplinary specificity – "to prohibit or constrain this process of terminological migration across fields of arts practice artificially delineates a frontier that serves no cause" (n.d.-a, unpaginated), he writes, presenting the notion of choreographic objects as a tool for "the proliferation of choreographic thinking across wider domain of arts practice" (n.d.-a, unpaginated) – was accompanied in his subsequent career by collaborations with institutional frameworks of the visual arts including museums (e.g. ICA Boston in 2018–2019) and galleries (e.g. Gagosian gallery in Paris, 2017).

While choreography's associations with dance, human bodies and motion may be rejected by *Book N(7)*, other aspects of choreographic history seem to be perpetuated by it. The process of the marker's creation indeed points to a historical conception of choreography construed as writing. The archives of the municipality of Groningen include designs made during the preparation of the installation, which contain information ranging from the spatial arrangement and size of the marker's projected components (in aerial view reminiscent of Feuillet notations' birds-eye perspective) to depictions of the mechanism curbing the trees (Figure 3 and 4). These documents, which comprise both text and images, formed a space of dialogue during the choreographic process: it was in fax exchanges *on* these designs – and not in any instance of embodiment – that decisions such as the degree of the installation's curve, or the hedge's height, were communicated³. Based on these documents – and on the fact that maquette-like projections of the marker also exist (e.g., Hefting & Van Winkel, 1990, pp. 170–171) – one could consider that *Book N(7)* undoes the 19th and 20th centuries' shift of choreography towards dance and moving corporealities, in favor of an anterior definition of choreography as writing. This focus on inscription as a mediator of choreography, countering its dependence on the time-bound, ephemeral medium of the body (cf. Groves, 2018, p. 78), has been a recurring presence in Forsythe's career, notably through the invention of forms (also at times referred to as choreographic objects) allowing the graphic visualization of choreographic and improvisational principles and structures. These range from *Improvisation Technologies* (1994) – a collection of videos offering verbal and visual explanations of the mechanisms underlying Forsythe's kinetic practice – and *Synchronous Objects* (2009) – a website developed by an interdisciplinary team, hosting digital models or *objects* translating data drawn from his work *One Flat Thing, Reproduced* (2000) in various forms – to the Forsythe company's *Motion Bank* (2010–2013), including an online collection of choreographic scores. ▶

FIGURE 3

Preparatory documents for William Forsythe's marker – Book N(7) from *The Books of Groningen – Marking the city boundaries, 1990*. Groningen Municipality Archives (Folder 1.855.1 – RO/2118).

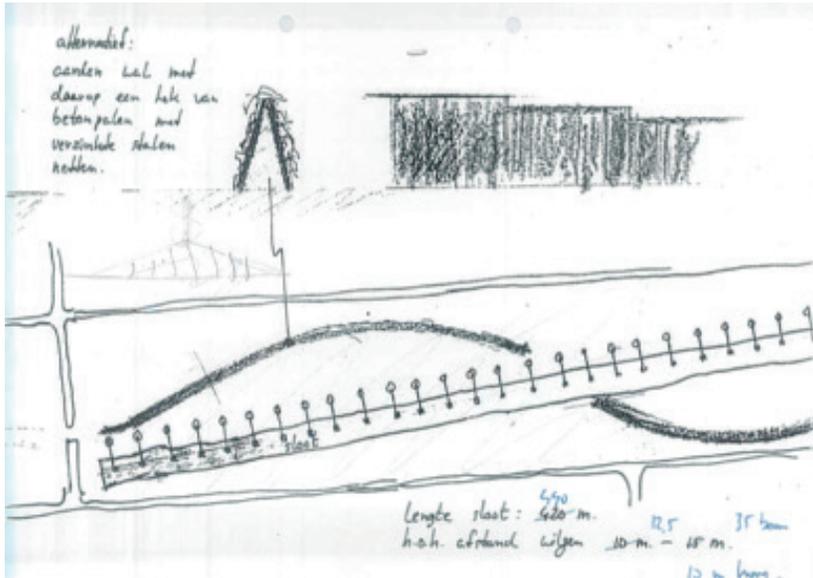
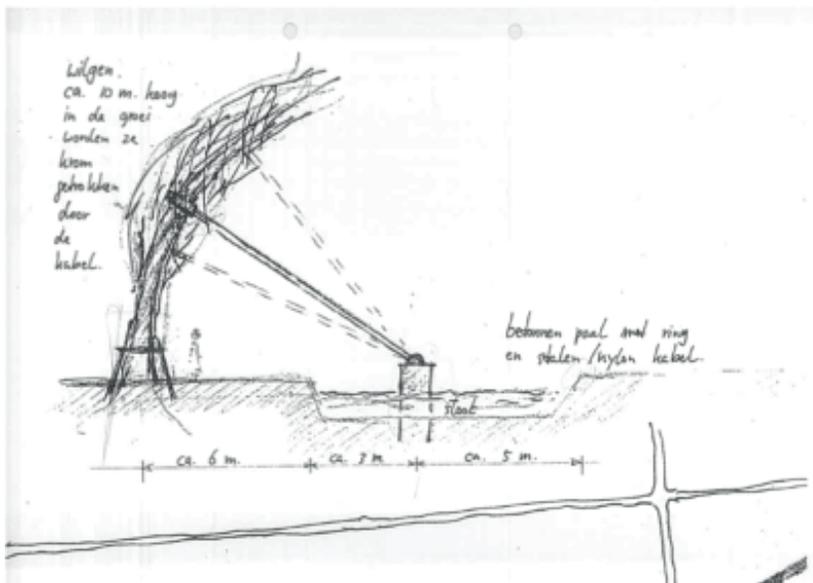


FIGURE 4

Preparatory documents for William Forsythe's marker – Book N(7) from *The Books of Groningen – Marking the City Boundaries, 1990*. Groningen Municipality Archives (Folder 1.855.1 – RO/2118).



The installation is also consistent with aspects of choreography explicitly related or indirectly relatable to its conception as writing: the disciplinary pre/scription and control of embodied motion and the possibility of stabilizing it in a repeatable form. The idea of control over the marker's non-human performers is prominent both in Forsythe's references and in the discourse surrounding the installation. Its three components all refer to ways in which nature has historically been modified by the inhabitants of Groningen in order to facilitate their living conditions and work: the canal points to the multiple artificial canals present throughout the city; the bending of the trees results from the reproduction of a traditional technique used in the area in order to obtain wood adapted to ship-making; the hedge can be seen as an artificial dike, an elevated ridge used in the Netherlands to protect from rising sea levels (Lourens et al., personal communication, August, 2017). Consistently with this viewpoint of choreographic control, the explanatory sign at the entrance of the field notes that the marker "represents the way in which mankind has made changes to the natural world for centuries in order to survive". It is in this way, too, that the installation has been received by theorists: for Ruth Wallach (2008) the willows form "a forced canopy over the canal" (p. 290), while for Nancy Stieber (1992) "Forsythe's trees in bondage bow gracefully to human control, in elegant but tortured tension" (p. 13). In this perspective, *Book N(7)* appears to display yet another difference from ulterior choreographic objects that provide a generative basis for co-action and co-motion with users (cf. Manning, n.d.). In opposition, in Groningen Forsythe ensured the resulting form's sustainability by giving instructions about the way in which the wires were to follow the trees' growth, suggesting that the position of the strap should be changed to curb resistance, and that branches be trimmed to avoid the trees growing vertically upward (Breunis, personal communication, August 18, 2017).

Forsythe's marker thus seems to refute historically entrenched associations of choreography both with dance-making and with moving human corporealities – as well as the discipline specificity that they imply – while inversely exemplifying a conception of choreography as notation, perpetuating its – historically constructed and diachronically adapted – association with disciplinary pre/scription. In other words, the installation operates a rupture with certain historical conceptions of choreography while confirming and continuing others. *Book N(7)* thus performs a negotiation *between* choreographic models, reflecting choreographic history's own frictions. As much as this negotiation may be an important aspect of the work, I would, however, also argue that clear breaks and continuities do not fully grasp the marker's positionality in relation to choreographic history: this position may also be understood as a negotiation *within* choreographic models, a *transformatory appropriation* added to choreographic history's own transformations.

WITHIN CHOREOGRAPHIES: INCOMPLETE RUPTURES

While the natural elements that compose Forsythe's choreographic object in Groningen replace human performers, the installation encompasses human agents both as

ephemeral visitors and as participants in its development. A visit to the marker involves the use of one's own body walking along the field, smelling and touching the plants, using one's senses in an encounter with the choreographed natural environment. More crucially, the marker results from a combination of the plants' own growth patterns with human actions – the field in which the installation now stands was just a grass-filled space surrounded by other fields and roads before, upon the choreographer's instructions, a canal was dug from scratch and the willows and hedge were planted. The maintenance of the marker's form is similarly a combination of human and non-human acts. It relies on the labour of the Groningen city maintenance department that mows, trims and, every three years, cuts the branches of the trees; but it also depends on the choreographed nature's remarkable capacity to self-regulate – the installation has not suffered from pests or insects, while soil nutrients and abundant rain fully replace watering and fertilising. Damage to the marker is shared as well: while its form may be troubled by the growth of the plants and unpredictable factors that may be implicated therein, the installation is also at risk of human-caused damage, particularly affecting lighting and the accompanying electricity circuits (for all information regarding construction and maintenance; Lourens et al., personal communication, August 18, 2017). In this perspective, *Book N(7)* can be seen as a complex macro-system made of heterogeneous but interrelated agents, in which human beings are included but not dominant, prefiguring the importance that processes of forming relations, assemblages and ecologies between diverse elements would acquire in early 21st century choreographic theory and practice (e.g. Laermans, 2015, pp. 230–231; Manning, 2009; Sabisch, 2011, pp. 7; Ölme, 2014, p. 29). As such, the marker counters the human/non-human binary that choreography's attachment to a specifically human materiality and agency can foster. Simultaneously, it opens the possibility of widening the notion of 'body' away from its tacit exclusive association with humanity: rather than negating a choreographic model exclusively bound with human corporeality, it diversifies the types of bodies choreography can work with. While the marker may be seen as a non-anthropocentric choreography, it also acts as a reminder that anthropocentrism may be linked to a specific – autonomous, unitary, mesoscopic – conception of *anthropos*; and that choreography can, beyond replacing the human, blur its limits.

Book N(7) can incite similar reflections concerning its relation, as a *choreographic object*, to dance. Una Bauer (2008) has noted in a discussion with Jérôme Bel:

[t]o say that your work questions the medium of dance is a very accurate statement, but when you try to support it, one gets lost in assumptions – a rather dogmatic set of assumptions on what dance is and how questioning functions. Because, paradoxically, one has to stick to a very conservative idea of what dance is, in order to be able to say that your work is questioning it. (Bauer, 2008, p. 45).

Similarly, while it may be intuitive to place the Groningen installation on one side of the dance *or* not dance dichotomy, this dichotomy implicates a range of assumptions about what *dance* may be – assumptions that in their turn have a crucial role to play in

▶ the classification of a choreographic practice as falling – or not – under the *dance-making* definition of choreography. As Spångberg (2017), commenting on Humphrey's 1959 *The Art of Making Dances* – a book that amalgamates choreography with dance-making – has noted,

Humphrey forgets to define what dance is, but instead it seems like choreography is the art of making dances as we know them. Or choreography is the art of making conventional dances and reversed, conventional dances are what you make with choreography as the apparatus. (Spångberg, 2017, p. 359).

Contrary to this, a distinction between dance and choreography may not constitute a refusal of dance, but a critical engagement with specific assumptions about it. Forsythe's own (n.d.-a) differentiation between choreography and dance in his programmatic theoretical work is indeed, as we have seen, directed to a particular view of dance, posited as a physical, body-oriented, denigrated practice. *Book N(7)* may in this reading not constitute a negation of dance as a generic concept, but a distantiation from a specified and entrenched, physicalised view of dance. It may, therefore, constitute less a break from choreography's association with dance(-making) than a utilization of choreography as a way of navigating among potentially limited models of dance.

A similar point may be made about the installation's relationship with motion – and choreography defined by reference to it. Indeed, while, as noted above, at the mesoscopic scale of the human viewer the marker appears immobile, this does not imply a full negation of choreography's motional project (for a critique of such a "kinetic project"; see Lepecki, 2006, p. 3). In the process of the plants' embodiment of the installation's form, and in their constant regeneration of this form, movement is performed at the level of cells, increasing in size and multiplying: the micro-motion of microscopic entities (for an explanation of micro-displacements within plants; see Lloyd, 2015, p. 947). But movement is also performed at the macroscopic level of the installation's ecology: trees towards the pillars, branches towards the sun, hydrophilic plants in the canal. These motions are inscribed in a lengthened timescale that corresponds both to the monumental nature of the municipality and Libeskind's project – aiming for the tokens to relate to the humanly experienced cycle of the "24-hour day, but also to millennial time, based on a 1000 year measure" (Libeskind, 1989, p. 15) – and to the plants' own growth rate. The installation's vegetal motions are performed in a high intensity of slowness, which makes its actions imperceptible to human observers; it is over a number of years that this extremely durational movement alters the size, form and thickness of the plants. The trees' embodiment of an arc and the dike's embodiment of a curve thus happen incrementally, through the cumulative effect of a multitude of microscopic events. In this way, the marker refuses any spectacular performance of movement and defies visible locomotion while retaining a micro/macroscopic and durational kinetic practice: the installation retains a motion-bound view of choreography while disengaging movement from its availability to the human gaze.

▶ The work also allows to envisage motion in a way that decentralizes the importance of displacement as such. Indeed, a sole focus on actually realized movement – on the accomplishment of displacement in space – may not fully grasp Forsythe’s choreographic installation(s). The artist (as cited in Millqvist, 2017, emphasis added, unpaginated) has noted about his objects that “physical engagement is the means to understanding *the class of actions* to which each choreographic system refers”; but this entails neither that every action within that class will actually be performed, nor that the actions not performed are less relevant to the object. Rather, all the potential movements that a user may do in a choreographic object, even if no user has performed them, as well as all the potential states of the object itself, even if it has not exemplified or will not exemplify them, can be considered parts of the object. In other words, a choreographic installation can be seen, drawing from Gilles Deleuze’s thought (1966/1991, pp. 96–97), as including multiple potential, virtual options along with its actual one(s): its apparent lack of activity is filled with the presence of potential motion contained within it (on virtual kinetic potentials; see also Laermans, 2015, p. 53). Dana Caspersen (as cited in Spier, 2011), notes of choreographic objects:

These are situations where, unlike in traditional performance, the choreographic principles are visible and persist over time. The public enters into the choreographic environment, and their bodies, trained or untrained, and the decisions that each person makes, become a perfect expression of the environment. However, *the choreographic principles exist and are visible independent [sic], of those bodies and decisions.* (Spier, 2011, p. 140, emphasis added)

If these points are transferred to *Book N(7)*’s trees and their range of potential motion, the marker can also be seen as questioning the actual performance of movement as a necessary trait of choreography; and doing so not by embracing stillness – in opposition to a 20th century kinetic choreographic tendency – but by doubting the relevance of the movement/stillness binary. Interrogating rather than rejecting choreography’s historical relation to motion, *Book N(7)* once more prefigures ulterior theorizations of choreography from which movement is not excluded, but that “refutes a representational image of movement, according to which only the physical display of locomotion and displacement and the application of a dance code is validated as danced or choreographed movement” (Sabisch, 2011, p. 92). This questioning is further reflected in works like *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze* (2013), a feather duster which people are invited to hold absolutely still, only to stumble upon the paradoxical presence of motion in willed immobility.

In these ways, Forsythe’s marker troubles its own apparent refusal of choreography’s association with dance, motion and human corporeality. Nevertheless, its de-essentialisation of choreography’s link with them does not fall into a dualist opposition or exclusion that would render them irrelevant. The marker’s contribution to relations between choreography and the visual arts is therefore not the result of a negation of dance or the corporeal/kinetic medium, but an expansion beyond their exclusive specificity. The Groningen marker indeed does not transpose choreography from the ▶

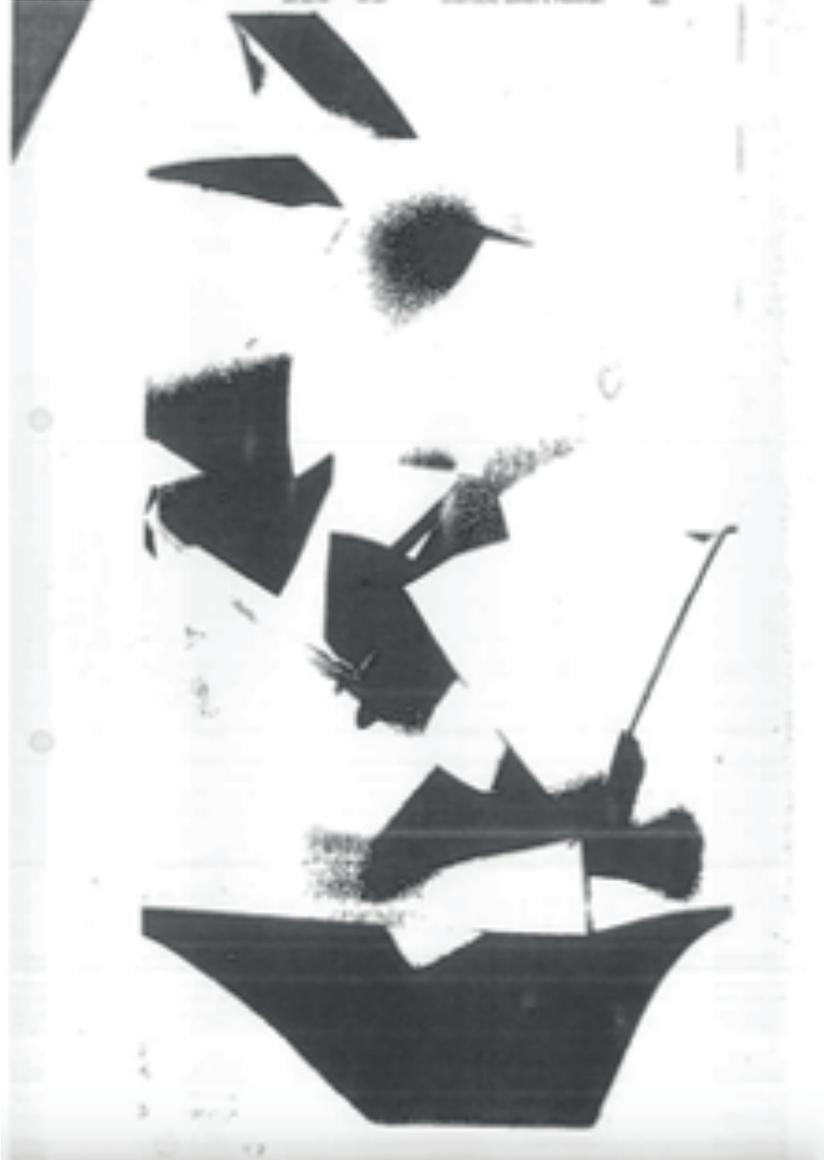
▶ stage into the museum, replacing a time- and performing-arts related frame by one historically associated with the visual arts, but suspends this transposition in a space less marked by discipline boundaries. And if the marker negotiates with and renders malleable the dancerly, bodily and kinetic choreographic models that it appears to defy, it may inversely contravene choreographic models it appears to embrace.

WITHIN CHOREOGRAPHIES: CRACKS IN CONTINUITIES

While the process of creation of the marker pointed to a conception of choreography as notation through the collective use of written and drawn documents, Forsythe also made decisions that defy this association. Publications (e.g., Hefting & van Winkel, 1990, pp. 172–173) about *The Books of Groningen* include models for *Book N(7)* which deviate from the clarity of the designs used in the preparation of the installation. Titled *Three Studies of Preliminary Model for Groningen Project* (Figure 5), these may be read as subverting the notational project of choreography by upsetting its interpretability. Made out of paper and staples using a knife and camera, they consist of abstract shapes, their forms at times angular, at times curved; despite their three-dimensional relief, their scale is not explicitly associated with a physically existing structure; their non-figurative aspect, as well as the fact that they are not connected, as signifiers, to a signified embodied state, makes it difficult to establish how they relate to the installation. This disconnectedness reduces the capacity of the designs to act as documentation; they do not replace the necessity of a viewer's presence in Groningen in order to experience the ephemerality of the trees' growth. The designs thus trouble the marker's alignment with choreography construed as inscription, pointing less to a return to pre-20th century construals of choreography than to a contemporary reconfiguration of choreography's historical notational function, also to be encountered in other contemporary approaches implicating open-ended scoring. Forsythe's own work on scores is consistent with this: both *Improvisation Technologies and Synchronous Objects*, mentioned above, present choreographic principles without producing rigid motion instructions, but rather by underlining the "generative potential" of scores (Manning, n.d., unpaginated). Forsythe has also produced works which *stage* a conflictual relationship with writing, one that performs inscription while blurring its legibility. These include installations like *Choreographer's Handbook* (2011) – a set of wooden beams bearing inscriptions of quotations, whose carving into the wood is, however, not fully legible (cf. Groves, 2018, p. 82) – or performances like *Human Writes* (2005), in which dancers attempt to write excerpts from the Universal declaration of human rights, while bound by choreographically determined constraints that undermine their action and the legibility of its result. ▶

FIGURE 5

William Forsythe, Three Studies of Preliminary Model for Groningen Project, 1990. Groningen Municipality Archives (Folder 1.8551 – RO/2118).



Beyond the choreographer's subversion of legibility, the Groningen installation itself also counters the stability that a scripted choreography may be considered to entail. Even if it is possible to read *Book N(7)* as exemplifying a choreographic control of the performing plant life forms, their embodiment of Forsythe's movement imperative cannot just be

▶ seen as an act of submission. This is evident in the case of the trees, which have not disciplined themselves to a uniform performance of the choreographic instruction, but have reacted in different ways to the wires. Some willows (Figure 6) are less curved than others (in some cases, a second wire has been added to confront the trees' perceived resistance); other trees have formed a full curve towards the wires but have shifted this curve sideways, introducing an unexpected direction to the work (Figure 7). Neither the choreographer nor his script have therefore functioned as all-controlling agents: they have – intentionally or not – allowed internal, situated discrepancies to take place. More than uniformly confirming choreography's disciplinary pre/scriptive potential, then, *Book N(7)* questions the limits of this potential.

FIGURE 6

View of William Forsythe's The Books of Groningen – Book N(7). Compare the first willow's closed angle with the second willow's open one, as well as the first willow's strong curve with the fourth willow's lighter bend. Photograph: Emma Villard.



FIGURE 7

Detail from William Forsythe's The Books of Groningen – Book N(7). Photograph: Emma Villard.



It is furthermore plausible to see in the installation more than a dialectic between choreographic imperative and vegetal resistance. The subversion of full choreographic control not only depends on plant counter-action, but also on choices made by Forsythe and the municipality's team: instead of high-tech equipment or complex control systems, the installation employs straightforward wires and pillars, human surveillance and simple gardening (Lourens et al., personal communication, August 18, 2017). This low-tech setup makes its control over nature only relative: regularly mowing the grass,

uprooting all wild plants growing of their own accord, maintaining a completely stable, precise form for the hedge and tree arc, keeping the canal free of insects and plants, would require an enormous amount of labor. If the installation stems from a human desire to control nature through a pre/scriptive choreography, it does not place the human at a clearly advantageous, fully dominating position. This partial control can also be identified in the intervention on the trees' growth through the wires. While one could consider – as the discourse of control surrounding the installation does – that this is a constraint for the trees, imposing a specific form, the wires may also be seen as opportunities: by inviting the trees into an ecology also composed by the wires and pillars, Forsythe allows them to embody a curve that is not attainable by their non-choreographed counterparts. Like a tool as a body extension allows actions that are impossible for human corporeality without it, the willows are invited to explore growth options that they would otherwise not have: what if one grew in arched form?⁴ These options are limited by the choreographer's choices, but the trees/users can – and as described above, do – respond in unexpected ways to the installation as well. This reading of *Book N(7)* is consistent with the fact that ulterior choreographic objects do not fully determine the motions that will arise within them, but open a range of options for the users engaging with them. Forsythe at times refers to his objects as “propositions” towards participants (Roman, personal communication, September 28, 2017), to be responded to in multiple ways: the object is not a physical translation of an exhaustively prescriptive choreographic instruction, but a framework for investigation. Steven Spier (2011) describes *White Bouncy Castle* in a similar way: “[a]t the time of the piece Forsythe was particularly interested in processes that would produce movement that was in accordance with the principles of a work, but not determined by him in detail” (p. 142). If such an approach is transferred to the trunks and branches of the trees, the installation can be seen as fostering the willows' active participation in the choreographic process and promoting a cross-species decentralization of choreographic agency, countering choreography's pre/scriptive tendencies by a framework in which unscripted acts may occur.

But the trees are not *rendered* active by the installation. The choreographic act augments but also taps into their capacity to be active: the installation is possible *because* the willows can embody diverse forms, *because* they are dynamic, malleable beings. Manning (2009) introduces a useful theoretical tool in this respect when she refers to Forsythe's choreographic installations by using the notion of an objectile. Deleuze (1988) has, in his reference to this notion in *Le Pli*, written:

The object is not defined by an essential form anymore, but achieves a pure functionality [...] The new status of the object *does not anymore link it to a spatial mould, that is to a relationship between form and matter, but to a temporal modulation which implies a continuous variation of matter as much as a continuous development of form* [...] It is a mannerist, and not an essentialist object: it becomes event. (Deleuze, 1988, pp. 26–27, emphasis added, my translation)

What I would like to retain from this passage is the idea that the object is not seen as

matter having taken an unvarying form; rather, the object is dynamic, defined by what it can do, how it can unfold⁵, how its form happens. In the case of Groningen, it is possible to see the trees as natural objectiles, containing the ability to re-arrange themselves in variable growth patterns. Looking at the marker in this sense means looking at (and for) a capacity for change, rearrangement and unexpected unfoldings (cf. also Manning, 2009, n.d.). *Book N(7)* thus balances between the artist's incitation towards a constant, homogeneous form and the vegetal performers' changing, dynamic nature: it operates beyond a binary that aligns choreography with sustainability and repeatability and opposes it to ephemerality and variability, rather practicing a choreography constituted by the interplay between scripted stability and deviation therefrom.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Book N(7) breaks with a historically constructed association between choreography and dance, while reminding that the distinction between them may be a way of putting into question tacit assumptions about the definition of *dance*. It counters choreography's equally historically constructed engagement with the moving human body as a primary and privileged medium, but also places human corporeality in a heterogeneous, non-anthropocentric framework and performs motion not reducible to visible displacement. The marker conversely reflects a historically grounded conception of choreography as writing and confirms this choreography's association with a disciplinary pre/scription of motion – while also being mediated by choreographic models that counter the legibility of notation and subverting the exhaustive control of a sustained, invariable form. More than engaging in clear breaks from, or smooth continuations of, historical conceptions of choreography, then, *Book N(7)* illustrates a process of negotiation, of grappling with diverse definitions of choreography, circulating both between and within them, and thus reflecting their own historical coexistences, interrelations and frictions. In doing so, Forsythe's early choreographic object positions itself at a distance from binary formulations – dance *or* not dance, human bodies *or* non-human ones, motion *or* stillness, control *or* horizontal agency, script *or* ephemerality, choreography *or* land art – and introduces fluidity in the terms in relation to which choreography co-evolves. Reflecting the dual tendencies of the choreographic field in the decades after its construction – towards an expansion of choreography on the one hand and an interest in its history on the other – Forsythe's early choreographic object performs choreography as a variable, overlapping, transformative engagement with history's plural choreographies.

If *Book N(7)* re-articulates choreography in relation to its histories, it also constitutes one of the earliest manifestations of Forsythe's research on choreographic objects, and is relevant to his ongoing engagement with choreographic inscription. The marker displays a series of important differences from ulterior choreographic objects: it is neither primarily geared towards interaction with a human user, nor a mode of transmission of a choreographic idea through bodily participation. At the same time, it also illustrates certain features of later objects transposed to non-human agents; in this sense, the very difference of *Book N(7)* from ensuing works can be seen as an expression of a radical

non-anthropocentrism. Similarly, while the Groningen creation process did not involve generative, open scoring practices present in subsequent projects by Forsythe, it is nevertheless associable with his experimentations on writing and the limits of legibility. This position of the marker, in important respects distinct from later works, but also comparable to aspects of them, allows Forsythe's *oeuvre* to be seen as a process of continuous but differential engagement with choreography and choreographic history, operating variable shifts in it.

In parallel with being an early manifestation of Forsythe's expanded choreographic activity, the marker was furthermore created in response to an architect's conceptual prompt, in the framework of an interdisciplinary project involving practitioners from other fields. As such, it is situated at the intersection of choreography with the visual arts, widening its artistic reference points, media, creative collaborators, production context, institutional framework and *locus* of presentation beyond dance. As a pivotal point where an engagement with choreographic history is interwoven with an involvement with other arts, *Book N(7)* therefore also points to the impetus that interdisciplinary choreographic practices can contribute to re-articulations of choreographic history.

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1. This article is based on a chapter of the author's PhD thesis *Multiple Stories. Expanded Choreography and Choreographic History* (2019).
 2. The group included, apart from Libeskind himself, Kurt W. Forster, Akira Asada, Thom Puckey, Gunnar Daan, Heiner Müller, John Hejduk, Leonhard Lapin, William Forsythe and Paul Virilio.
 3. Fax to Frank Mohr on behalf of William Forsythe. (1990). Groningen Municipality Archives (Folder 1.8551 – RO/2118).
 4. This formulation is inspired by Forsythe's rhetorical universe (see, for instance, Spier, 2005, p. 354).
 5. For a consideration of "any object as an unfolding event" see also Lepecki (2013, p. 97).