

Alexandra Bachzetsis' *A Piece Danced Alone* and the paradox of autonomy

Monika Szewczyk

Beginning with an act of self-profiling, a kind of spoken cv of the dancer as an overachieving young woman – "...I was born in 1978...started dance and acrobatic training at age 4...toured Asia with Cirque du Soleil...went to DAZART in Amsterdam...danced with the Wooster Group...etc." – Alexandra Bachzetsis' *A Piece Danced Alone* highlights the contemporary desire for self-profiling, self-disclosure, self-measure, for confessions spoken, no longer to priests, but to cameras. At the outset, Bachzetsis, dressed in a boyish ensemble of grey jeans, grey button-up shirt and white sneakers, walks past a television monitor placed on the left of the stage and sits (in profile to the audience) at a table on the right side, facing one such camera. The set-up is minimal, evoking the studio but also the interrogation room. The closed-circuit signal feeds the close-up of her face to the monitor on the left. And as she frankly discloses the details of her formation as a dancer to arrive at the introduction of the premiere of her new work, several slight, but well-timed, smirks pass across her face, signalling that not all is true here: we can discover (by looking at Bachzetsis published cv) that she is actually born in 1974 and may come to doubt that she actually toured Asia with the Cirque du Soleil. But "objective truth," "the *real* slim shady" is not quite the issue, here. Rather, the introduction to camera highlights the fact that the construction of the self passes through an apparatus, which cannot be reduced to the equipment (camera or monitor), but has much to do with the mental and physical recording and repeating of gestures to a point of delirium.

To underscore this, not one, but two perform this construction. Another dancer, a blond foil to Bachzetsis brunette (Anne Pajunen), dressed in the same boyish clothes, enters the stage after Bachzetsis performs her first dance alone – a virtuoso display of her signature serpentine jives that decode hip-hop erotics even as they raise pole-dancing moves to a form of sublime skillz. The blond repeats a similar retinue of achievements to camera (several, but not all, overlapping with Bachzetsis'), and then introduces the premiere of *her* new work: *A Piece Danced Alone*. Afterwards, she too dances, introducing her own language of more staccato jives. They continue to perform alone, switching places on stage. At times, one finishes with a flourish, which is exactly matched by the other, who steps up behind, replacing the dancer on stage. Here, we might recall the eerie switch between two actresses (Carol Bouquet and Angela Molina) playing the same part of a poor but sexy Flamenco dancer in Luis Bunuel's *That Obscured Object of Desire* (1977). Or the more recent *Black Swan* (2011), which plays on the psychological dialectic between Nathalie Portmann and Mila Kunis, both vying for the same part in *Swan Lake*, which already demands that one dancer inhabits the roles of both the angelic White Swan and her demonic double.¹ Note that both films focus on dancers—and, it could be said that both trade on the particular neurosis, which can develop when one spends day-in-day-out, repeating the same moves in front of mirrors, scrutinizing every gesture. Bachzetsis' most existential creation to date is also, somehow, her most personal.

¹ It should perhaps be mentioned that *A Piece Danced Alone* stops just short of the Hollywood kitsch transition between female competition and friendship that inevitably results in (a fantasy of) lesbian sex, though the electric charge of attraction and competition between two women, who grow strangely sensual inside their boyish clothes, remains.

The second set of confrontations with the camera – about halfway through the performance – plays on the expectation of the live feed (which would double one dancer), but enacts the more uncanny fusion of the two women. First, Bachzetsis sits in front of the camera and, as the monitor shows her semi-transparent face super-imposed onto that of Pajunen, her voice (no longer emanating from the image on the monitor) asks: *Where you a blond?* More such searching questions echo above the quickened pace of a metronomic beat, which raises the pulse. Following this, the blond dances to Joy Divisions *She's Lost Control* and the brunette follows with her solo set to Michael Sembello's *She's a Maniac* (of Flashdance fame). Is the loss of self-control promised in the act of dancing—and don't we all aspire to such unselfconscious perfection?—the opposite of the loss of self experienced in the subconscious daily rituals of mentally/physically recording/repeating gestures? These two impulses (as with the bodies of the two dancers) exist side by side and finally overlap in *A Piece Danced Alone*.² Paradoxically, one attempt to construct the mirage of an autonomous self must pass through another.

² In the last movement, both blond and brunette perform a duet in unison – an interpretation of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russels' duo from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) a wink at that crucial difference between the two imperfectly interchangeable dancers – before a final adjustment of clothes by four arms, with Bachzetsis standing directly behind her blond double.