

CONCERNING *K.O.Ж*

Made in 1988, *K.O.Ж* was perhaps the choreography that most clearly reveals Chopinot's proximity to certain media images, just as it shows the way she exploited them for her own purposes.

For this choreography inspired by boxing, Marc Caro, in the role of designer, invented a large, elevated ring which turned upon a base. Gérard Boucher did the lighting, Jean-Paul Gaultier made the costumes. The music was to be devised by the group of the then up-and-coming Rita Mitsouko, but the collaboration collapsed after a few months.⁶⁹ It fell to André Serré to compose the sound-track, over which the soprano Marie Atger sang, live, various melodies by Ravel, Wagner, Verdi and Handel, with Denis Dubois at the piano.

It was while watching the relay of a fight on the recently inaugurated Canal +, that Chopinot got the idea of making a choreography out of boxing.⁷⁰ That she should be inspired by a sports programme isn't as unlikely as it might seem. As the historian Laurent Gervereau reminds us, sport was one of the crucibles in which television's aesthetic was forged, rooted in a "vivid ballet of multiple points of view."⁷¹ To a much greater degree than cinema, televised sport has contributed to the dumbing down of those effects (zoom, close-up, slow-motion, freeze-frame) which today intimately

69. Michèle Prélonge, who danced for the group, explained the degree to which the musicians were driven up the wall by the way the dancers jumped between ideas, images and rhythms; in their eyes there was never time for anything to develop.

70. Established in 1984, Canal + was the first pay-channel in France. It gave over a lot of time to the diffusion of musical clips as well as sports broadcasts. From 1984, Chopinot discovered she had a passion for "corridas, which were always superbly filmed, although [she] could never manage to watch the killing (...) Boxing bouts generated the same feeling of attraction/repulsion", which she finally overcame. "In the end I got really hooked on Canal +'s KO, to the point that I got mad if I missed one." (Chopinot, quoted by Bernard Mérigaud, in *Télérama* « Combat de *KOЖ* et autres histoires », 25 May 1988, p. 17).

71. In *Histoire du visuel au xx^e siècle*, Seuil, 2003, p. 420.

“dress” how we perceive the body in movement. By combining “extreme close-up and wide-angle, action and reaction, by snaking lines between the centre of an image and its marginal detail (using travellings),” television has made familiar “the time-space collisions” that lie at the heart of an image.⁷² In choosing to make a show whose raw material was the film of a bout, Chopinot treats this “dressing up” of vision as a condition out of which movement is born. The choreography was to be mediated by the televised image, a fact that took nothing away from the pains taken by the dancers in their physical preparation for *K.O.X.*

In order to develop the dance vocabulary of the piece, Chopinot and her dancers abandoned their habitual training methods and adopted those of boxers. For nearly two years, Régine Chopinot, Poonie Dodson, Lee Black and Joseph Lennon (who had defected from Merce Cunningham) attended an eminent Parisian boxing gym to take lessons with Zoubid Ben Hamou, coach to Jean Bretonnel’s team. For Chopinot, boxing, “with its lacelike interweavings,” irresistibly suggested the “techniques of ballet.”⁷³ At a more fundamental level, the ‘noble art’ in Chopinot’s view, relied, like classical dance, on a training schedule that made extreme demands. In the boxing mirror’s reflection—an effect reproduced by the palindromic Ks in the work’s title—dance came face to face with its own violence; for there is, Chopinot said, a “violence in both techniques. To get something so difficult from yourself, you have to go to the limit.”⁷⁴ Ben Hamou made no bones about it: “dancers are disciplined, they know how to work. They know how to suffer too, and suffer they did (...) In three months they reached a level of fitness that it would have taken an average amateur three years to attain.”⁷⁵

72. Gervereau, *ibid.* The variety performance was, according to Gervereau, the other formative influence on television’s aesthetic.

73. Press release for *KOX*, company archives, BARC collection at the CND. “At the outset I dreamed of plagiarising one of the great classical ballets—I thought to borrow a whole choreographic outline from Petipa and subvert it with movements out of boxing,” Chopinot recalled in an interview with Jean-Marc Aldolphe (BARC collection).

74. Manuscript, 1988, company archives, BARC collection at the CND.

75. Ben Hamou, quoted by Isabelle Galloni d’Istria, «L’entraînement chez Bretonnel», *Pour la danse*, December 1988.

Less obviously maybe boxing brought home to Chopinot what she expected of dance and what, at the time, she worried she might have lost sight of.⁷⁶ A boxer's training requires that you go to your limits to summon the necessary mental and physical resources. Beyond that, Chopinot suggested, you awaken "the extraordinary intelligence that comes with automatism."⁷⁷ It goes hand in hand with a "capacity to be void," a state of utter openness and interior emptiness. It's the source of the dazzling precision of a boxer's movements. "That capacity for relaxation that allows you to focus your energy in a fraction of a second and discharge it so fast that it's like throwing a switch ... It's that that I'm looking for in dance."⁷⁸ The choreographer might have been speaking of Eugen Herrigel's⁷⁹ Zen archer, but Oriental traditions didn't enter Chopinot's practice until later, and then not by this route. For the time being, the choreographer found in boxing the particular space in which her dance sought, always intuitively, to work—a throbbing space caught somewhere between "the clouds of knowing and unknowing."⁸⁰

There is within dance another form of violence that its links with boxing make apparent. "Dance—the ancient business of putting bodies on display—has always contrived to eliminate the brute aspect of a hand to hand combat" wrote Hervé Gauville in 1988 of *K.O.X* "But when a body encounters another in full view of everybody, the contact is conditioned by it. The question of violence can't be avoided."⁸¹ There's no fundamental difference between this and the *play* of a circus act or the stage: in both, the spectacle is charged with eroticism and potentially fatal. At the same time as she immersed herself in boxing, Chopinot enthusiastically followed televised recordings of bull-

76. With regard to this she recalled the parties and night-clubs (Le Palace, Le Rex ...) where cocaine circulated freely—a whole night life which overlapped with the world of art during the decade, and in which Chopinot found herself submerged, at the cost of her physical training.

77. Chopinot, in *Les Chopinotes*, n° 3, October 1988.

78. Manuscript, 1988, company archives, BARC collection at the CND.

79. Cf. *Zen in the Art of Archery*, introduction by D.T. Suzuki, New York, Pantheon, 1953.

80. *Ibid.*

81. In *Libération*, 8 November 1988.

fighters. Boxing and bullfighting “have in common an arena (...) plus the fact that one of the two partners must die. A KO, isn’t that a sort of death, little but spectacular”?⁸² the choreographer mused, exploiting a vocabulary that puns on the *petite mort* of orgasm. In a corrida as in a boxing match, as indeed also in a game of chess (a game in which Chopinot took an interest when creating *ANA* in 1990), the contestants are always seeking to ‘mate’ each other. And as the choreographer pointed out, the verb *matar* in Spanish means ‘to kill’ giving rise to the expression *mata-dor de toros*, killer of bulls. It’s also the etymological source of the slang word ‘mater’ –to spy on/stare at without being seen, that is, to adopt the voyeuristic position of the spectator. The shadow of such violence –such violation– sometimes gentle, sometimes less so, was cast over *K.O.X* like that of a hawk.

In spite of the deep-rooted affinities that linked boxing to dance in Chopinot’s eyes, she encountered a resistance when she tried to go back over the bout that had so struck her on television. With her dancers she “took to pieces, image by image” a video of the legendary contest between Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvellous Marvin Haglar in Las Vegas in 1987. “We worked with slow motion and then at the right speed,” Chopinot explained, “but in three months we only managed to cover one minute thirty seconds. It was awful. It was a huge let-down to be unable to re-enact the gestures of those two men (...) I realised that a boxing match is a one-off. It’s impossible to reproduce or transfer –quite the opposite of a ballet (...) where everything’s prescribed and there’s not one jot of improvisation.”⁸³ Chopinot decided she would have to “make up the rules of her own combats,” keeping to the structure of twelve rounds composed of short sequences. The aim was “to make something which, so far as the imagery and emotional content was concerned, was neither dance nor boxing.”⁸⁴

82. Chopinot, manuscript, BARC collection at the CND.

83. Interview with Jean-Marc Adolphe, «À propos de *KO.X*», *Sigma* 24, November 1988.

84. Interview with Gérard Lefort, «Chopinot le cas OK», *Libération*, 23 January 1989.

Undergoing a boxer's training altered the disposition of Chopinot's body. No longer presented front-on to the audience, it was offered instead from any angle within the playing space; her arm movements seemed rooted in her back which itself seemed more alive and powerful, while the chest cavity seemed softened. Boxing broke the classical seal that had been stamped on her sense of the vertical. Sudden shocks and waves of energy, in movements new to her vocabulary, sent shivers through a body which at this time became more flesh-bound, denser than in her preceding pieces. If her joints remained clearly articulated, the muscles and skin began now to come to life, sculpting the surrounding space. In *K.O.X* you could see the freedom of the head, the precision of the weight in transfer, the rhythmic interplay between the dissociated head, arms and legs –all characteristics that Chopinot's vocabulary of movement shared *a priori* with boxing– but the techniques of the 'noble art' equally led the dancer in new directions, most obviously towards contact. *K.O.X* remained above all a choreography of dodges, stylised thrusts and dancers meeting face-to-face, but it left room also for a whole range of forms of contact (holds, bear hugs, carries, sways ...). Not since the enormously prolonged kiss that riveted Michèle Prélonge to Phillipe Decouflé in their memorable (and scandalous) duo in *Délices* in 1983, had Chopinot brought such intimacy into a choreography. Nonetheless, whilst they assumed a densely carnal quality, the bodies in *K.O.X* appeared vulnerable. Any number of times they seemed to get tangled in the ropes of the ring or would collapse to the ground –ground that wasn't merely the surface from which the dancers could rebound, but also that which received them when they fell. For the first time in Chopinot's work, the effort that went into making the dance was exposed undisguised. The dancers seemed beaten; they gasped for breath. The end of the decade, as it would be hard to forget, was marked by the ravages of Aids. To ignore the impact of the epidemic that spread with such stealth would be impossible.⁸⁵ The dance world was shaken to its

85. A few newspapers were already referring to an Aids epidemic at the beginning of the '80s (the *New York Times* from 1981, *Libération* in 1982...), but its reality came up against denials and the truth of it took hold slowly.

core and Chopinot's *entourage* wasn't spared. The spirit of gay abandon so characteristic of the age was in the process of being snuffed out. Reading between the lines, *K.O.X* gave voice to a painful, nearly tender emotion, underscored by the presence of Marie Atger whose singing lent an air of sombre lyricism to the entire second part of the show.

It's already been said that the vocabulary of movement employed in *K.O.X* borrowed freely from television, playing with freeze-frame effects, slow motion and telescoping. The rhythm of the whole derived from the juxtaposition of short sequences. At certain moments, however, the figures on stage existed together in a sort of collage, as if emerging from a different time and space. The referee – a role assumed by the actor Jean-Hugues Laleu – hurtled around the ring while Chopinot and Dodson enacted a very slow wrestle. At another point, Dodson and Black froze, immobile as if for a photo, while Chopinot, Lennon and Laleu developed a rapid trio.

This sense of heterogeneity was reinforced by a diversity of references. If the burlesque of Buster Keaton was irresistibly suggested in the mimicry of the referee, the four other protagonists came from quite different universes, while Gaultier's costumes wiped out their own tracks with a storm of detail. The boxer-dancers' names – legible on their vests, shorts or robes – borrowed from the humour of strip cartoons.⁸⁶ Whilst the costumes certainly took their inspiration from boxing, their patchwork character, plus the variety of materials used (leather, jersey, satin, velvet, false fur, strass ...) and the proliferation of motifs (stripes, spots, stains, squares ...), undercut any understanding of them as functional, with the exception of boxing gloves.

It was only in the middle of the decade that the full extent of the epidemic became evident. Information campaigns and policies of prevention were launched at the same time as militant associations such as Aides (founded in 1985) and Act Up (1989) sprang up. The decisive therapeutic turning point however only occurred after 1995-96, years in which the first multitherapies were practiced. The following year "mortality was reduced by 80%" according to the immunologist Alain Sobel, former director of the *Conseil national du sida* (cf. « Le sida en 2004 », *Repères*, Biennale de danse du Val de Marne publication, March 2004).

86. Chopinot was « Poids-chiche [chickpea] », Joseph Lennon « Alonzo Plumard », Lee Black « Archie Black », and Poonie Dodson « Boo Bull ».

Gérard Boucher's lighting, intermittently invaded by smoke, played with contrast. Varying between pale overexposure and the sepia of old photos, it seemed to hover uncertainly between the sense of a brutal present and that of a mildly retro flash back.

The soundtrack too played a highly significant role, running through a gamut of references: the excited hubbub of a boxing crowd, the crackling of a scrambled tv signal, synthesised noises, the classical singing of Marie Atger ...⁸⁷ But whether foregrounded or in the background, imposing or engaging, the sound consistently modulated how the images were seen. Time seemed to buckle in the same way as the ropes that set the variable limits of the ring.⁸⁸ Sometimes the transformed sound of a gong, as if rising from the bottom of a lake, gave the spectator the impression of sharing a dancer's 'collapse', or of being KO – a feeling of presence vanishing into an indefinable distance as if it were being sucked up. The rotating ring allowed you to see everything from every angle, but equally effectively limited the view. Made ambiguous by the ring's bulging which – unlike televisual space – offered no pre-selected point of view, the spectator's position became unclear.

If television gives the illusion of things happening live, *K.O.X* used a truly live performance to make the integrity of the dancers' bodies seem an illusion. Sometimes brutally close, sometimes nearly floating, the bodies seemed unsure of themselves, of their presence, constantly fluctuating between incarnation and apparition. Neither substance nor image, the dancers circulated, forever in transition between two worlds, unstable, paradoxical.

87. To which were added some tangos and milongas from the '30s in the video version of *KOX* that Chopinot made in 1988.

88. Cf. Julie Perrin's analysis in « Percevoir les espaces : l'exemple de Régine Chopinot », electronic publication of the *actes des premières rencontres internationales* « Arts, Sciences et Technologies », 22 to 24 November 2000.