

# Collaborative Effects:

Building, Contemporary Dance and Structuralist thought

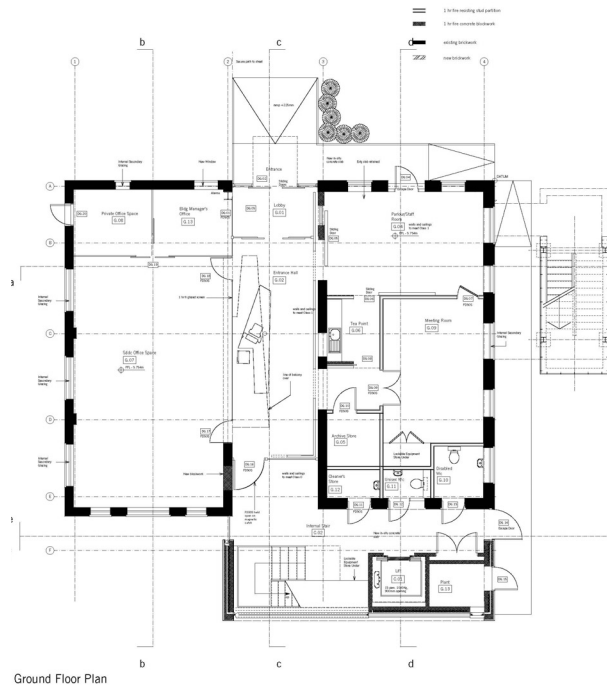
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Integrated Design in Architecture K12AH2

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The 2006 RIBA award winning, *'Siobhan Davies Dance Studio'*, designed by Sarah Wigglesworth, and situated at Elephant and Castle is a prime example of where collaboration between architect and client with full user engagement has led to a truly bespoke architecture. The reception, office and amenity spaces nestle within the existing late Arts and Crafts school building, while the studio spaces sit above at roof level and are visually articulated as distinct from the historical building below. The RIBA describe the "re-use of a Victorian school...straightforward, robust, and unsentimental, with rooms stripped bare".<sup>1</sup> Built in 1898, the redundant school annexe does not hold listed status but its use was restricted by Southwark borough council planners to education. From the outset, this notion of an existing structure as a force from which to draw inspiration would play an unavoidably key role in generating the design; whether the architect chose to contrast, juxtapose or blend the new proposal with it:

*We began designing by thinking about how both dancers and architects use their bodies to describe space, how the body has always been a scale by which we measure space and how both bodies and buildings work in an environment subject to gravity. We were excited to make use of an existing structure because it gave us something very tangible, tough and muscular to work our ideas against.*<sup>2</sup>

As Martin Krampen suggests in *'Semiotics in Architecture and Product/Industrial Design'*, "we cannot perceive our environment without perceiving our self within it"<sup>3</sup>, for this reason it is important to keep in mind the primary function of the building as a place for the creation of dance works in its analysis. This article is interested in how the pre-existing school building, and "the dancer" as both collaborative client and building user have shaped the architectural design, it seeks to uncover the underlying concepts of the completed project from a Structuralist reading, in doing so ad-

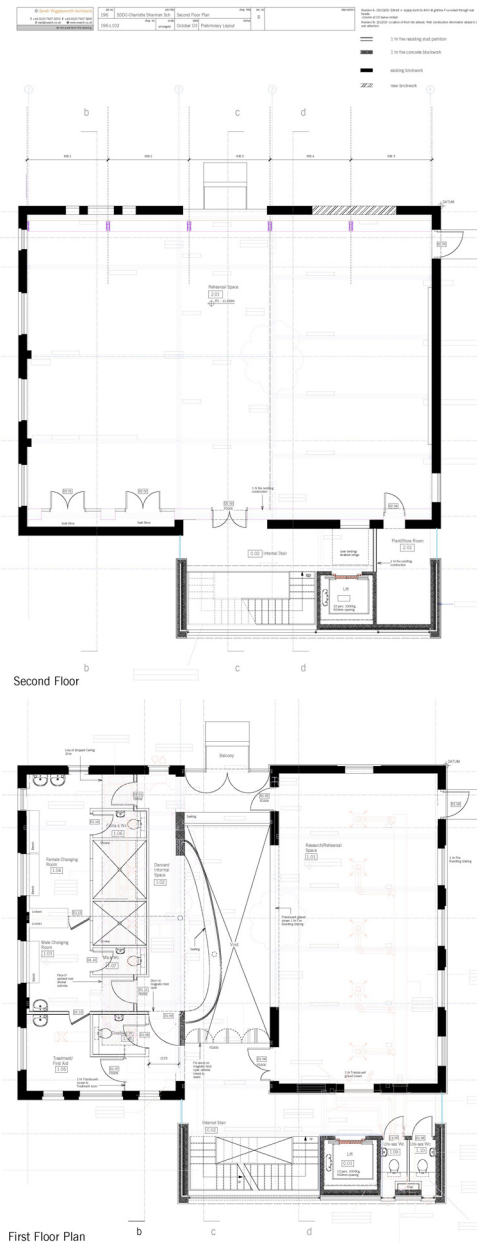
COOK Peter, n.d. *Siobhan Davies studio north*. [image online] Available at: <http://www.siobhandavies.com/bigdance2010/wp-content/gallery/openstudios/0001-Peter-Cook.jpg>[22 April 2013]

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005) Ground Floor plan [layout plan drawing]

<sup>1</sup>*Siobhan Davies Studios London SE1*: Royal Institute of British Architects, 2006 [21 March 2013]. Available from: <<http://www.architecture.com/Awards/RIBAAwards/Winners2006/London/SiobhanDaviesStudioLondonSE1.aspx>>

<sup>2</sup>WIGGLESWORTH Sarah. *Building* [online]. London. [21 March 2013]. Available from: <<http://www.siobhandavies.com/studios/about/building.html>>

<sup>3</sup>KRAMPEN Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 March 2013]. Available from: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>>, p128



Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005) First Floor plan [layout plan drawing]

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005) Second Floor plan [layout plan drawing]

addressing the case for inter-disciplinary, collaborative design process and occupant participation as key contributory features to a complete reading of the architecture.

The origins of structural thinking as a linguistic theory lie with Martin Heidegger, as he wrote about issues of free will and determinism, claiming that language is the “master of man”<sup>4</sup>. Transposed to an architectural discussion of language, this deterministic outlook would mean that the “writing”, or design of the “text”, or building is purely within the parameters of existing language established by precedent architecture. Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure went on to develop some of Heidegger’s ideas about language, founding three principles which paved the way in Structuralism as a linguistic theory in his 1966 *Course in General Linguistics*. The first principle lays out the deep governing structure of *la langue* against *la parole*, the ways in which we express ourselves within it; a counter-Existential concept dispelling ideas of *genius-loci*, as Heidegger had also done. The second announces “the arbitrary nature of the sign”, allowing more focus on the syntax of language than the semantics of what is meant; starkly contrasting with Phenomenology in approach. The third principle distinguishes between diachronic and synchronic analyses of language, favouring the synchronic as it focuses on the linguistic “moment” rather than the history of language. From Saussure’s founding work on linguistics, it became possible to develop Structuralist concepts to encompass some of the complexity in the field that his theories had not addressed. Thinkers such as Roland Barthes and literary critic, Terry Eagleton brought Structuralism to broader contemporary contexts as an overriding “system of signs”<sup>5</sup>.

Krampen also discusses how German psychologist, Kurt Koffka’s concept of ‘Demand Character’ that “objects tell us what to do with them”<sup>6</sup> suggests some link between the object, and the function of it; in Saussure’s terms, the Signifier and the Signified.

<sup>4</sup>HALE Jonathan A. *Building Ideas: An Introduction to Architectural Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 27 March 2000, p2

<sup>5</sup>HALE Jonathan A. *Building Ideas: An Introduction to Architectural Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 27 March 2000, p2

<sup>6</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p128



BUCKLAND David, 1997. *Sphinx*. [image online] Available at: <<http://www.siobhandavies.com/bigdance2010/wp-content/gallery/open-studios/0001-Peter-Cook.jpg>> [2 April 2013]

*To primitive man each thing says what it is and what he ought to do with it: a fruit says, 'eat me;' water says, 'drink me;' thunder says, 'fear me;' and woman says, 'love me'." But even for modern man the handle "wants to be grasped".<sup>7</sup>*

This introduces a physiological aspect of interpretation firmly into the discourse. In doing so, linguistic theory is more widely applicable to architecture than in Saussure's earlier, more abstract explorations. The discussion of Siobhan Davies Dance studio in relation to Structuralism begins here, acknowledging the notion of the occupant's physiological interpretations of form and function and the structures which govern them.

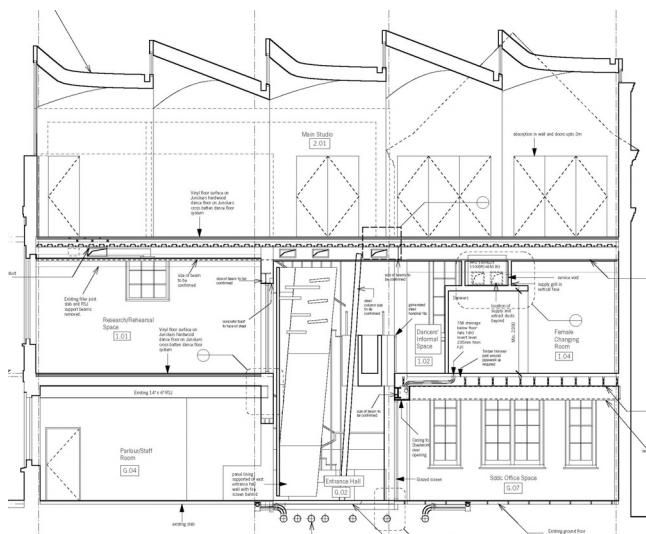
Contemporary dance practice began in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and its development coincided with Structuralist thought and Post-Modern movements in art and architecture from the 1960s particularly. As a reactionary movement against the formal rigidity of ballet and modern dance theatre, new technique grew from the natural alignment of the body and its choreographic themes borrowed from a larger pool of multi-media stimuli. Compelled to expand the communicative scope of the art and to open up social, political, and even sexual discourse, contemporary choreography echoed the rhythms of most other emerging creative practices catalysed by modern industrialisation and its links with Structuralism became apparent in the thought behind the new movement languages<sup>8</sup> created. These motifs and patterns tend to arise from the study of or response to very specific "moments" or "conditions" such as in one of Siobhan Davies' earliest works, 'Sphinx' 1977<sup>9</sup>. Referring to Saussure's principle of *la langue* governing *la parole*, we can see that Siobhan Davies emphasises the need for governing structure by creating one of her own for each dance piece; the piece is an exhibition of a syntactic analysis of movement as opposed to the semantics of narrative. Contemporary dance has established itself as a body-mind practice, and research organisations today such as The Choreographic Lab "provide a forum in which choreographic issues, creative methodologies, and individual goals can be examined, explored and experienced"<sup>10</sup> with a counter-Cartesian sense of holism. Directors, Dr. Jane Bacon and Dr. Vida Midgelow in their performative

<sup>7</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p126

<sup>8</sup>By "movement language" I refer to physical motifs and patterns forming a structure which is then explored, interrogated and manipulated to develop the piece.

<sup>9</sup>The basis of 'Sphinx' was the difference in weight distribution and movement of the human body on all fours, the newly acquired knowledge of the way the body defined itself on the ground was then transposed to the upright body of the dancer, creating a unique vocabulary of movement.

<sup>10</sup>*Introduction*. Choreographic Lab, [20 April 2013]. Available from <<http://choreographiclab.org/intro.html>>



lecture, *'Closer to the Body, the Aftermath of Dance Writing?'* discussed the semantics of choreographic approaches and articulation strategies which lead to “authentic movement...an iterative process which allows the movement to reveal itself without presupposing language”<sup>11</sup>. The architecture of the studio does the same; it is not free-form but grounded by a set of principles which allow for further interpretation once occupied by the dancer.

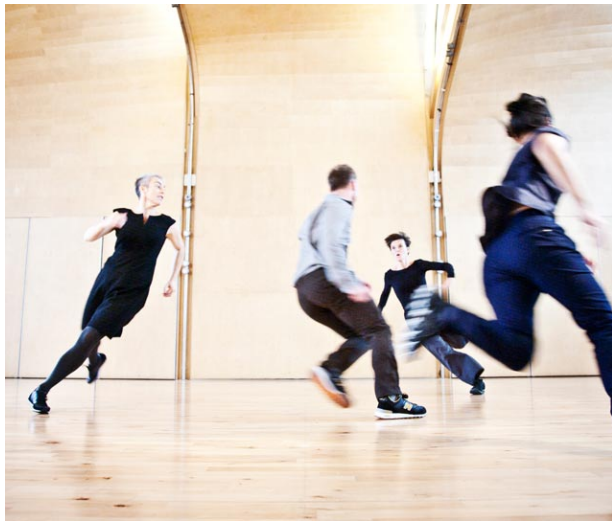
True to Postmodernism in architecture, *'Vanna Venturi House'* signified “home” by referencing forms commonly associated with traditional Western domestic architecture, in contrast to the Modernist steel and glass, flat roof houses such as Mies Van Der Rohe’s *'Farnsworth House'*. Sara Wigglesworth was tasked with the creation of a dance studio which specifically signifies “contemporary dance”. Traditionally dance studios vary from the grandeur of the National Ballet theatre school to a simple hall or warehouse in an industrial park, so there is no unique aesthetic or typological form with which studios are associated. However all are defined internally by mirrors and wall mounted or moveable Barres; Siobhan Davies Dance Studio has neither of these. In his article on Semiotics, Krampen cites Jacob von Uexküll:

*Everything - indeed everything which we get to see is adapted to our human needs. The height of houses, of doors and windows can be reduced to the size of the human figure. The stair fits our gait and the banisters the height of our arms. Each single object is endowed with sense and form by some function of human life. We find all over an ability of man which the object sustains by its counter-ability... We can talk about something being a chair, a stair, a vehicle without misunderstanding, because it is the counter-ability of the human products which we really mean by the word which denotes the object. It is not the form of the chair, the vehicle, the house which is denoted by the word, but its counter-ability. In the counter-ability lies the meaning of the object for our existence.*<sup>12</sup>

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005) Ground Floor Plan [layout drawing]

<sup>11</sup> MIDGELOW, Vida. *Closer to the Body- The Aftermath of Dance Writing? [Performative lecture and discussion]*, Nottingham Trent University, Bonington Gallery, 16 March 2013.

<sup>12</sup> KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p127



Unlike Saussure, von Uexküll goes beyond stating the incongruities of signifier and signified, bringing our relationship with it into the discussion. Siobhan Davies believes that mirrors and Barres “hinder and distort natural movement”<sup>13</sup> but arguably so too does the absence of these. The absence of these two main signifiers changes the behaviour of the dancers, making non-conventional movement a greater possibility. Referring back to Koffka’s statement *that* “objects tell us what to do with them”, part of Jacob von Uexküll’s theory on the counter-ability of objects talks about a “*Function Cycle*” where the object is the counter-structure, Krampen describes this:

*This cycle starts with a counter-structure's perceptual mark which is transformed into a perceptual sign in the organism. Depending on the organism's need, the perceptual sign triggers a behavioural sign which in turn inflicts a behavioural mark onto the counter-structure.*<sup>14</sup>

If the objects or counter-structures are the absent mirrors and barres, the perceptual mark is that these are aids in dance practice, the perceptual sign is that a dancer should dance in that space. For the dancer the behavioural sign triggered is to “dance” set exercises using the barre for support and the mirror to correct their alignment in line with standard teaching ensues. However, where Krampen states that a behavioural mark is inflicted onto the counter-structure (the dancer’s movement is inflicted on the mirrors and barres) he is suggesting that somehow these objects exist in their own right, as if not purpose-made by human beings, which is simply not the case. It is more appropriate to invert the statement to say that the counter-structure imposes on the behavioural mark, in other words, the mirrors and barres impose traditional constraints to a dancer’s movement vocabulary. Such application of the theory explains why in the absence of barres and mirrors, we see a different type of unfamiliar movements in every piece of Siobhan Davies’ work as she is forced to articulate a new lexicon time and time again.

NADERI Pari, 2010. *ROTOR* [image online] Available at: <<http://www.turnercontemporary.org/whats-on/00000000289/siobhan-davies-dance-presents-a-rotor-weekend>>22 April 2013]

<sup>13</sup>GLANCEY, Jonathan. *Leaping Beauty* [online]. The Guardian, 3 April 2006 [17/03/2013]. Available from: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/apr/03/architecture>>

<sup>14</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p128



Between Koffka and von Uexküll there seems a faint and unfashionable, physiognomic implication. However, James Gibson's theory of "Affordance" implies a more connotative meaning of objects or here, buildings, rather than our perception being somehow inherent and relative to our needs. Krampen cites Gibson as he said that "The object offers what it does because it is what it is."<sup>15</sup>, which in the context of design is much more feasible. The main studio space in Siobhan Davies dance studio is as previously discussed, without mirrors and barres and the clerestory windows set between the vaults of the ceiling give soft, non-suggestive natural light whereby the dancers may perceive temporal aspects of the external environment but as there is not a view, no external "events" as such. The room is clad homogeneously in a pale timber with only a stereo unit in a corner to disturb the "blank canvas" intent. As Krampen writes, in respect to Gibson's affordance theory, "a roof is affording protection from rain, snow, and sunlight. The walls protect from the wind. The doorway permits entry and exit."<sup>16</sup> Gibson talks about how "types of surface layouts are the signifiers of our environment; what they afford is the signified"<sup>17</sup>, and in the case of the dance studio the aforementioned elements of the designed "emptiness" are signifiers of contemporary dance and what may be created in that space. For example an absence of views signifies a focussed environment, allowing the dancer to internalise his or her thoughts to generate movement, or to feel the relationship between oneself and other within that enclosure alone more intensely. The tactile, non suggestive timber signifies a natural environment, affording a relaxed state of mind and neutral bodily alignment. An example of "blank canvas" architecture which prompts or affords certain behaviours is Herman Hertzberger's Central Beheer offices built in 1974. In a more recognisably Structuralist fashion, the design is based on a configuration of an arbitrary module and it is intended that the occupation of the spaces provided will define the architecture. Siobhan Davies studio shares a similar intent in providing empty space for the dancers to inhabit, with the Saussure-inspired ideas of the space creating a structure or *la langue* and the dancers exercising *la parole* to colonise it; however the suggestion here is that the structure connotes and implies meaning beyond the architect's control. Krampen's experimental study of *'The Social Affordances of Buildings'* concludes

COOK Peter, (ca.2005). *SDDC04* [image online] Available from: <<http://www.siobhandavies.com/studios/space-hire/image-gallery.html>> 8 April 2013]

<sup>15</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p126

<sup>16</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p130

<sup>17</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p129



Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005). *SDDC05* [image online] Available at: <<http://www.swarch.co.uk/projects/siobhan-davies-dance-studios/>>8 April 2013]

*We identify the different social functions of buildings with a fairly high degree of accuracy if sufficient cues on the surface layout are present. Also, in the course of our environmental experience, we seem to have internalized "stereotypes" of these building types, which serve as "templates" for the recognition of building affordances.*<sup>18</sup>

Krampen's experiment helps to validate and define a link between the signifier and what is signified, in architectural terms. The external façade of the building has two different surface layouts however they afford the same function since the studio borrows part of its façade from the school it sits amongst. According to the results of Krampen's study, the school building is easily identifiable and understood to be a school and thus all the functions associated with it, so by proxy the studio, which appears an infill from the north elevation is relying on an established connotative meaning to convey a message to the public that it is also a place of learning and training. The architect has borrowed the social affordance of the existing structure to help define her scheme. The significance of this in contrast to the blank canvas of the studio space itself can be explained by referring to Roland Barthes' concept of architecture as a cultural "text" as with ideas of an 'active reader'. In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes discusses this further as part of *The Rustle of Language*, "The text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture."<sup>19</sup> Of the writer Barthes says; "he seeks to express himself...he knows that the interior "thing" he claims to "translate" is itself no more than a ready-made lexicon, whose works can be explained only through other words, and this is as infinitum."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design. Design Issues* [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p133

<sup>19</sup>BARTHES, Roland. *The Rustle of Language* [Le Bruissement de la Langue]. Translated from French by Richard Howard. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1989,p53

<sup>20</sup>BARTHES, Roland. *The Rustle of Language* [Le Bruissement de la Langue]. Translated from French by Richard Howard. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1989, p53





Just as linguistically, we derive meaning of words through their common usage not necessarily their etymology, in architecture buildings are quotations of pre-established meaning. The communicative capacity of the building sits within what already exists and therefore understandable, i.e. the architectural lexicon.

Given that the architect has no choice but to work within the established lexicon, in this context of a collaborative design process between dancer and architect, we can see how such collaborations between disciplines can help to expand the communicative possibilities of language in architecture and aid the choreographic process for the dancers. An example of knowledge outside of the established lexicon effecting the reading of the design is the *décollage* style articulation of the foyer walls of Siobhan Davies Studio. It borrows aesthetically from late modernist artists such as Mimmo Rotella part of the rise of consumerism and graphic advertisement of the 1950s. To the reader the stripping back of layers to reveal the strata of history, uncovers a narrative through exposing the material sequence and texture, however Saussure would argue that due to “the arbitrary nature of the sign”<sup>21</sup>, “the quality that is attributed to them is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution”<sup>22</sup>. The textural stratification of the wall could indeed be reference to the geological patterns of the earth, or any number of interpretations, and by Barthes’ principles Wigglesworth’s design intent is redundant.

In the “blank canvas” of the studio space where Wigglesworth purposely does not “write” in any detail, the result is similar to Brecht’s theatrical *Verfremdungseffekt* in which the dancer remains in conscious focus on the choreographic process rather than becoming assuaged by a suggestive building narrative. In *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor says; “John Cage said in one of his lectures that he is not a composer who hears music in his mind and then attempts to write it down...He works out concepts and structures and then has them performed to find out how they sound.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>HALE, Jonathan A. *Building Ideas: An Introduction to Architectural Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 27 March 2000, p3

<sup>22</sup>HALE, Jonathan A. *Building Ideas: An Introduction to Architectural Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 27 March 2000,p3

<sup>23</sup>ZUMTHOR, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*. 3rd ed. Berlin: Birkhäuser Architecture, 21 June 2010,p53



CLAY Felix, 2013. *2 Dancers preform Merce Cunningham choreography at exhibition* [image online] Available at <<http://www.barbican.org.uk/generic/large-images.asp?id=14789&im=16680&af=artgallery>> [22 April 2013]

This type of approach is prevalent in contemporary dance practice. Considering that Sara Wigglesworth observed Siobhan Davies' processes while designing the building, it may indeed have had an effect on the design of the studio. The approach puts the occupant into the design; the architect creates a space where the dancer a "detached object"<sup>24</sup> in Krampen's terms or an "active reader" in Barthes'.

The founding principles of Relational Aesthetics\* overarch the discussion. It is not that Wigglesworth's design is the full story of the architecture but that the "reader", "detached object" or occupant of the space defines it. The lexicon of architecture may already set in place but "Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the New Realists all relied on the readymade to develop both their rhetoric about the object and their sociological discourse"<sup>25</sup> the architect may treat existing vocabulary as a "ready-made" in the same way.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration became more prevalent in the post-war arts as highlighted in the recent exhibition at the Barbican Centre, *'The Bride and the Bachelors: Duchamp with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns'*. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp, the four artists' endeavours to work within the space between art and everyday life led to greater abstraction and conceptualisation across the Arts, presenting opportunities for dialogue to take place within the blurred boundaries of the separate disciplines in which they had been trained. Still today the Choreographic Lab advocates "collaborative writing as it allows someone else to use your language in different ways"<sup>26</sup>. Choreographer Merce Cunningham, one of the exhibited artists at the Barbican, is responsible for innovations that have indelibly marked all disciplines and expectation in dance; Siobhan Davies was a student of his.

<sup>24</sup>KRAMPEN, Martin. *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design*. Design Issues [online]. The MIT Press. Spring 1989, Vol.5 (No.2), pgs124-140 [11 April 2013]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511519>, p130.

\*Aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt.

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics Glossary* pg 112

<sup>25</sup>BOURRAIUD, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics* [Esthétique relationnelle]. Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland. Les presses du réel, 2002, p46.

<sup>26</sup>MIDGELOW, Vida. *Closer to the Body- The Aftermath of Dance Writing?* [Performative lecture and discussion], Nottingham Trent University, Bonington Gallery, 16 March 2013



Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005). SDDC08 [image online] Available at: <<http://www.swarch.co.uk/projects/siobhan-davies-dance-studios/>>8 April 2013]

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, (ca.2005). SDDC09 [image online] Available at <<http://www.swarch.co.uk/projects/siobhan-davies-dance-studios/>>[8 April 2013]

Considering the legacy which Siobhan Davies is so heavily influenced by and indeed its impact on the architectural sphere, Wigglesworth may have absorbed a fitting critical approach in her design of the studios. It seems however that the main studio space and the ground and first floor levels beneath are somewhat in opposition with each other. Saussure talks about binary opposition giving meaning, and in Wigglesworth's design where the occupant is part of the architecture a dichotomy of "active" and "passive" is established.

The foyer and more public spaces lend themselves to a passive reading as they are more "designed", they rely on the connotation of the Victorian school building and seem to want to organise activity and "tell the occupant about itself", whereas the dancer is assigned an active role in the studio spaces, where Wigglesworth loosens her grip on the meaning of the design imposed on the occupants the identity of the occupant changes between the street level and the threshold of the studio space in terms of both who they are and what their spatial perceptions will be. And it is as writer, musician and curator Morgan Quaintance puts in his 'Art Monthly' article on Participatory Art, 'Private Moments':

*This physical bias has risen from a phenomenological reading of the idea of presence and the necessity to transform a presupposed spectator from passive to active, disembodied to embodied and from apolitical to political...Intellectual participation via the channels of imagination not only opens up new possibilities for the creation of art - and artwork-viewer inclusivity - it also orients attention towards a realm of consideration that is rapidly disappearing in the 21st century: that of private experience.<sup>27</sup>*

<sup>27</sup>QUINTANCE, Morgan. Private Moments, Morgan Quaintance Makes the Case for Imaginative Engagement as a Form of Participation. *Art Monthly*, March 2012,354,10.

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