

# The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

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The controversial new Jewish Museum in Berlin is an impressive sleek structure with a gray zinc facade punctuated with broken crosses and irregular shards of windows that seem to explode like a shattered Star of David. Situated in an inauspicious old Jewish neighbourhood, the bold design looks imposing like an impenetrable mausoleum concealing irreconcilable truths. It makes you want to get inside. Something that can be difficult until you find the "invisible" entrance in the adjacent baroque Berlin Museum, where you descend into the new structure beneath street level. Above ground, the contradictory autonomy of the buildings is retained. This ambiguity is part of architect Daniel Libeskind's plan to design a building that embodies a complex and difficult history.

Inside, the building rises from a base whose line is frequently broken. The floor plan looks like a lightning bolt; long gray corridors zigzag off three central axes. One leads to the exhibition halls. A second leads to the *Garden of Exile*, an outdoor forest of concrete slabs where no surface is horizontal or vertical to create a destabilizing effect as if they will topple on you. The ground seems to slip away as if you are on a ship--a physical sensation of how unsettling it is to be culturally adrift, in exile. The

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

third axis is a dead end that leads to the 27-metre-high concrete Holocaust Tower. The unheated shaft is cold and dark. A delicate shard of light penetrates the darkness. It is a chilling expression of hopelessness.

A straight line of five empty spaces--voids--transverses across the corridors. Visible, yet cut off from the viewer, this elegant backbone of vertical shafts stretches from the basement to the roof. Textured patterns of light illuminate a sense of loss, an absence for that which has vanished, but which must still be made present. Far from being a mute space, the architecture speaks of the specialization of history.



1. INTEMPCO, 1998. *DIASP*

The design concepts in the Jewish Museum are similar to those in the work of Canadian choreographer Benoît Lachambre, who was in Berlin (along with performers Robin Poitras, Diane Leduc and Genevieve Pepin) in residency at Tanz Werkstatt in the Podewil-Centre for Contemporary Arts. I was in Berlin to see his new

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

creation "L'aberrations des traces" where I also managed a sneak preview of the Jewish Museum, which opens to the public in October 2000. Central to the design of both the architectural space and choreographic space is the notion of absence, or disappearance, leading to a sense of destabilization. It is a realm that attempts to give voice to something unspeakable.

Lachambre tells a story of how after his father died he dreamed he had to eat him to keep him alive. "L'aberrations des traces" is a longing for the person who isn't there, in the same way that the Museum honours the disappearance of the Jews in German history. Lachambre is also inspired by George Pérec's *La Disparition*, a novel written entirely without the letter "e" as metaphor for the absence of an extinguished tribe. In "L'aberrations des traces" Lachambre's innovative approach to movement rubs out traditional dance convention to reveal what lies beneath its muscular surface. The moment you enter the theatre it is clear this is not a traditional dance piece. Gone are the ritualistic rows of seats, the proscenium arch, and the use of frontal presentation. Gone is virtuostic technique performed by superhuman bodies. Spectators inhabit the same performance space as the dancers.

We climb inside an interactive site-specific installation, *Somnolence*, designed by visual artist Julie Andrée T, and navigate through a maze of taut string to view the performance from any perspective. The piece begins almost imperceptibly with three performers moving in different parts of the set to Laurent Maslé's soundscape of industrial and natural sounds. We are free to sit on

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

pillows strewn about a white cotton quilted floor or move throughout the space. There are moments of incredible intimacy, and stillness, where spectators breathe in harmony with the performers, until it suddenly becomes necessary to move out of the path of a flailing dancer who seems to thrash unpredictably through space. There is a continual negotiation of personal space on both the spectator and the performer and it becomes increasingly more difficult to know who is the "doer" and who is the "viewer."



2. INTEMPCO, 1998. *DIASP*

Well-known in Europe, Lachambre is a bit of a rebel in the muscle-bound Quebec choreographic milieu for his "release technique" approach to movement that challenges classical notions of controlling the body. Ballet and modern dance techniques tend to be built around the musculature system with an emphasis on holding the body up against gravity. Lachambre asks his performers to sink to the ground.

Leduc falls backwards into space like an angel, suspended in a parachute harness from a vertical shaft, until she eventually

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

descends to the floor to flagellate herself with velcro straps. Poitras sinks to the floor with the same kind of suspended weightlessness, then led by her solar plexus, floats up to a horizontal position before sinking down again. Her body seems stripped of external strength and relies on some mysterious inner energy field as the source for movement. Without any recognizable movement vocabulary, these performers use their bodies in a way that speaks from personal experience, rather than from training. The movement reveals an emotional integrity that expresses the more disturbing aspects of the human psyche.

Not all the movement is slow. What begins as a placid solo with yoga-like movement set against a white shag backdrop is soon whipped up into a frenzied pagan prayer. Only visible episodically under a strobe light, Pepin's wild gestures suggest a shaman struck by lightning. Poitras appears like a ghost intuitively tracing a path along the strings of the visual installation that seem to pass through her like shafts of light embedding some mysterious genetic code into her inanimate body.

The most intriguing image is "skin folding." Pepin sits in a chair, grasps hold of loose pockets of skin, and stretches it in such a way as to pull her entire body through space. At times, she places the hand of a spectator on her skin. Skin becomes the impetus for the movement, as if it has eyes, or some strange intelligence. There is an undeniable sense of mortality in the flesh that reminds us of aging and decay; controversial issues in the dance world where youth and beauty are still the reigning aesthetic. For Lachambre,

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

movement is not about composition. It is a living matter.

Just as physical convention is erased from the body, Lachambre tries to strip logic from the mind. In a primordial scene, Pepin pulls on a pair of soaking wet men's suit trousers and sloshes water across the set while Poitras speaks of a man who is coming to torture her and how she will trick this tormentor and cut out her tongue before he can. Throughout the speech, her thoughts become progressively more fragmented, as if she is shaking her mind free of the corset of language. Sentences are deconstructed in such a way that the movement of thought becomes a physical act. This process of destabilization of mind and body allows the performers to inhabit a place of vulnerability necessary to speak of loss.



3. INTEMPCO, 1998. *DIASP*

On the surface, both the Museum's deconstructivist architecture and Lachambre's danceworks can be perplexing and difficult to understand. Like the "invisible" entrance to the Museum, it is difficult to know how to enter Lachambre's piece. "L'aberrations des traces" is an aberration of meaning in the logical sense. There

## The Absence Drinkers

Heather Elton

are many different readings of history; many stories to tell. What is important is the experience the audience gets out of it; of how the work kinesthetically affects the senses.

Ultimately, both artists are less interested in finding answers than in intensifying the mystery in life. And why not? The Age of Reason is over. No one person is going to make sense of the increasing complex age we live in. Not even Derrida. Thank god because we can see the results of where rational thinking has led us in the name of reason-genocide, oppression and destruction of the spirit.

For Lachambre and Libeskind, the architectural and choreographic spaces they create function like a spiritual domain, a realm that cannot be visualized, an area of invisible presence that deals with the unspeakable. They are places of healing and symbols of hope for the future.

"L'aberrations des traces" premiered at l'Espace Tangente in Montreal (Feb. 3-6, 2000) and was presented in Regina as part of *Dance In Alternative Spaces and Places* by New Dance Horizons (in association with the MacKenzie Art Gallery) on February 24-26, 2000. It will be performed at the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa in June.

## The Absence Drinkers

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Heather Elton lives in London, England where she works as a freelance writer/editor/photographer. She was the editor of *Dance Connection*, Canada's magazine for contemporary dance, and *Last Issue*, an interdisciplinary arts magazine. As Editor of the Banff Centre Press, she published *Chinook Winds*, a chapbook on contemporary Aboriginal dance, and *Why Are You Telling Me This?*, an anthology of creative non-fiction. More recently, "All in the Family," her memoir documentary on adoption, was aired on CBC Radio's *Ideas*.

### Photo Credits

1. *DIASP: Dance in Alternative Spaces Project: 1999*,  
Choreography: Benoît Lachambre and Tedi Tafel,  
Performer: Robin Poitras, Photographer: Douglas Walker.
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Choreography: Benoît Lachambre and Tedi Tafel,  
Performer: Robin Poitras, Photographer: Douglas Walker.
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Choreography: Benoît Lachambre and Tedi Tafel,  
Performer: Leduc, Photographer: Douglas Walker.