Dear Dancers and Choreographers, Artists and Movement Lovers,

This letter to you began with an invitation to a project page and then the suggestion/cheer: “Make it radical! You can do it!” The illusiveness of this letter has remained the same: Make it radical! This letter began its many incarnations when I rediscovered this photocopied image from a 19th century French ballet about Jeanne d’Arc.

Vaincre ou Mourir (“conquer or die”), reads the ballerina’s banner. With their swords and shields the ballerinas remind me of the immediate kinesthetic sense of action which presses against the front of the body, when I think of “beingradical”: A desire to do, change, reject, create, fight. And precisely because it is the first impulse; is it really what leads to a new, fundamental, split?

This letter to you was informed by Žižek’s three faces of violence described as a loop keeping us embedded in a world of violence. In Greece the leftists march with sticks and motorcycle helmets during demonstrations. I’ve been told most of the time it is a spectacle, a theater of the potential of violence that exists around us. They are illuminating two of the violations Žižek writes about: the obvious subjective violence—what happens if the protesters and the cops battle—and the objective systematic violence we live in is the repercussion of global capitalism. We’d go mad or at least become extremely miserable if we could calibrate and calculate the destructive violences behind every aspect of our lives. It’s very suspicious, the energy one gets from a protest, as there is a tone in protesting that is all encompassing. Alongside the risk that the cops could shoot rubber bullets or tear gas, there is the risk that we will simplify the complexity of our anger, frustration, and rage into a slogan. A personal favorite of mine was just prior to the invasion of Iraq—in Portland, Oregon, when thousands of people chanted “George Bush is a son of a bitch!” for hours outside of the President’s hotel. Here we have Žižek’s third form of violence: The objective symbolic violence embedded in language or social domination reproduced in speech. It was electrifying to be in a crowd calling the President a son of a bitch and right there, in this electrifying disobedience, the domination of patriarchy locates itself in language. Žižek contends that we can be aware of “The objective symbolic violence embedded in language, the objective systematic violence, and the obvious subjective violence” one or two at a time, but because of their elusive nature, rarely are we able to escape the loop of the three. Violence ends by proposing:

The threat today is not passivity, but pseudoactivity, the urge to “be active,” to “participate,” to mask the nothingness of what goes on... If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, when I rediscovered this photocopied image then, crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough. Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.

As movers we are familiar with doing less to create a shift. In release techniques and somatic approaches we find the opposite of the immediate kinesthetic rush to action. Perceptions become more subtle when we experience the whole of the body, the backside, the inside, working with ourselves rather than against. By experiencing the whole of the body, doing less, more is possible. This feels most true when I take ballet. I love ballet simply because I love it. It can be a beast, and the culture that has been bred around it is symbolic of much of what is sick in our society, yet I find myself returning to it again and again. I experience the radical potential of ballet in the simultaneous emptying, total awareness, and precision it asks in order to free oneself to find the movement. During one of the final classes at Janet Panetta’s studio she said, “Don’t be afraid to move. Jumping should be fun, it’s the closest thing to flying you can do.” With this approach ballet class becomes a meditation on noticing how much unconscious internal patterning is blocking the experience of joy, momentary freedom, and the archetypal dream of flight.

I have to question Is Žižek’s statement that doing nothing is the most violent (aka a radical upheaval of the basic social relations) thing to do appealing precisely because it feels like we are in a quagmire in which there is nothing to do? Are release techniques popular because they confirm an ideology?

This letter to you is also influenced by a conversation I had on Thanksgiving with my friend Ana Matronic. In the midst of a conversation about how depressing Thanksgiving is, with the story of the Pilgrims ignoring the story of genocide and land acquisition that followed, the conversation shifted to feminist cyborg theory. With the idea of the cyborg, part human, part machine, the possibility to fracture from human history exists. A new being, a new history, continually shifting as technology speeds forward. One could say we’re already cyborgs, humans modified by technology, with our vaccines and our attachments to our phones and computers.

“Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborgs politics insist on noise and advocates pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of ‘Western’ identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind.”

- Donna Haraway, Cyborg Manifesto

As dancers we know the potential in what we do, but there is always the fear that this life is next to impossible or totally pointless given the continually escalating events of the world. Perhaps we are inundated with a worldview that justifies its continuation by implying that there is nothing to do, that the troubles of the world are too big for us, but we mustn’t forget the second part of the invitation/cheer: You can do it! The Jeanne d’Arc corps de ballet danced with physical swords in the Tarot the suite of swords represents the element of Air, matters of Communication, and the Intellect. May we dance with Air, Communication, and Intellect cutting through the tyranny of fear, the culture of scarcity, and the feeling of impossibility. We, as everyone who has ever lived, live in confusing times so, I pass the invitation/cheer on to you, dancing cyborgs and ballerinas. Make it Radical, You can do it!

Love,
Elizabeth Ward