

OF
POSITIONS

AND

half **POSITIONS**

having several

MARKS

at

once

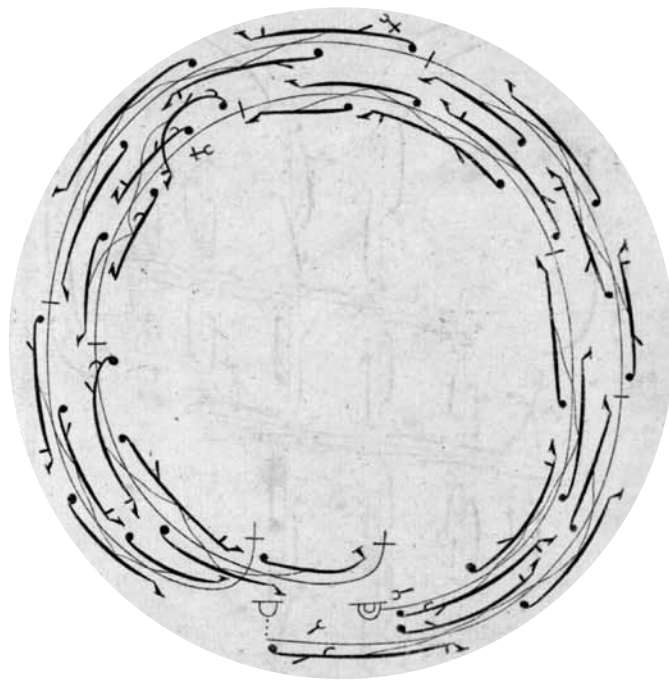


Diagram illustrating *The Bretagne*,
from Weaver's *Orchesography* p.114, 2nd ed. Printed for, & sold by Ino. Walsh
[ca. 1715]

i. Of Positions and half Positions having several Marks at once

In 1705 English Dancing-Master John Weaver's *Orchesography* or *The Art of Dancing by Characters and Demonstrative Figures* was first printed. This text sought to explain the whole art of dance, with tables of steps and rules for the motions of the arms so that anyone could learn various dances. "Of Positions and half Positions having several Marks at once" is a chapter heading taken from this publication.

Weaver (1673-1760) choreographed many ballets and pantomimes, some of which were performed at the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane. A series of lectures given by Weaver in 1721 were one of the first attempts to base dancing and dance instruction on anatomy and knowledge of the body.¹ Importantly, *Orchesography* is "an exact and just translation from the French of Monsieur Feuillet." Raoul Auger Feuillet (1653-1709) put into print the *choreography* or dance notation invented by Pierre Beauchamps (1631-1705) dancing master to Louis XIV (1638-1715). This text marks the birth of choreography, linking indelibly body, space, and printed symbols.²

For Feuillet, all dancing was comprised of a small number of essential motions and his system created a planimetric representation of the dancing body, emphasizing possible directions and the paths it may take in space, as well as the motions of the feet and legs. Such a path was notated by a line, and steps or positions by embellished characters on either side. Each symbol or character represented direction, timing and spatial orientation of the performing body to be varied and recombined in infinite permutations to produce any and all dances. This system taught dancers to adhere to a single directional orientation as they moved through space, envisioning a bird's eye view of their own path. Feuillet's notation standardized dancing, assimilating all possible movements into a unified system of universal principles and placing all dancing on a plane of pure geometry.

Thus, from its beginning, choreography was synonymous with geometry, manipulative strategies and the control of bodies. This organization extended throughout the gardens, architecture and court of Versailles so that no-one could challenge the rank or prestige of the divinely-appointed king. Epitomising the majesty and splendour of the royal court, ceremonial court dance included the presence and participation of Louis XIV himself. This meant that the king's absolute authority was evoked and enacted, and the movements of his dancer-subjects were heavily codified, demonstrating hierarchies and subjugation to order. From the 1650s Louis XIV was the lead dancer at court balls and ballets, appearing at the apex of the pyramid of French society, leading members of the royal family and highest nobility in the curved, linear formation of the *branles* as well as the *courantes*.³ The king was a superlative dancer and his natural skill in dance was said to infuse all of his actions with majesty and grace. As the archetype of the danseur noble, Louis XIV was an example for courtiers and professional dancers to aspire to, therefore dancing-masters such as Weaver took pains to impart to their students his legendary gait. In court ballets, the king featured as the leading dancer in majestic *entrées graves* or solemn entries created for him by Pierre Beauchamps. The king made his entrance displaying a measured, imposing and graceful gait in the role of Apollo, the Sun or other suitably royal and godlike subjects.

Even within the nucleus of his heliocentric court, the movement of Louis XIV was restricted and dictated by protocol. In royal ballrooms and theatres, decorum was of the utmost importance. Even the king was expected to refrain from excessive displays of virtuosity and only skills which seemed to be natural graces were to be displayed. Nevertheless, dancers proficient in such movement were said to appear to unfold and grow in size before their audience.

ii. OF: How you can't be nothing

In 2007, New Zealand-based artist Liyen Chong (b. 1979) launched an exhibition and website entitled *A Humid Day*, consisting of re-worked graphic ephemera from the daily life of the artist. Just as Weaver took pains to provide an “exact and just translation” of the French of Feuillet with his *Orchesography*, Chong replicated every nuance of the appearance of her subject matter, replacing only its content with lyrical, idiosyncratic, erudite and multi-lingual reflections. Thus a teabag tag promises “an elixir of a thousand thoughts,” a facial cleanser is labelled “deep reality wash” and a packet of pencils “tools for embedding substantiality.” *A Humid Day* exhaustively crafts the quotidian, ranging from the intimate and domestic to the public, institutional and commercial. It includes a taxonomy of scores of objects and signs from diverse milieus, from the artist’s bathroom, to a bus-stop, to the museum. The clamour of the everyday is probed, as is the self as an object among scores of multi-vocal objects. Investigating the boundaries of the self, antibacterial soap and safety warning signs are reproduced and reinterpreted. Chong interrogates what counts as the inside and the outside of ourselves, unfolding the liminal moments when we let our eyes and minds take in language and messages, or our skin absorbs substances – moments when we let things inside of ourselves and excrete back words, ideas and activities. There is an opening and closing, an awareness of not only what we assimilate but also what we live our lives around and within, the very boundaries of our being, the *what-ness* of the everyday.⁴

Continuing the artist’s interest in the boundaries of the subject, another prong in the past practice of Chong is her meticulous embroidery with human hair. As a material, human hair is personal yet peripheral, existing at the extremities of the

body, growing, yet also dead, sprouting on the very edge of the self. By drawing with her own hair, in a sense Chong sews fragments of herself, blurring artist and object. Even the subject matter of these pieces continues the theme – one series was based upon the artist’s photographs of medical models of foetal skulls, a pre-person in the very act of becoming. Chong has also embroidered a skeleton from her own hair, an Ouroboros consuming itself, pearly-moon like bowls crafted from the white hairs of a friend and the plan of a hedge maze which renders the self isolated and lost.

More recently, Chong created a series of works combining performance, photography, printmaking, painting and ceramics. These installations involve rings of found ceramic bowls, each of which holds swirling black shapes, photographic prints of the artist fired into their centres. Liyen Chong folds into a circular shape, draped in black with her long hair swimming behind her. There are circles within circles as the bowls are arranged into auspicious mandalas; the body is reduced to a shape, a dark gesture, a diagram or symbol. Just as Weaver reduced dance to lines, patterns and hieroglyphs, here the artist is reduced to a swish. By viewing these works from above, Weaver’s bird’s eye view of the dancer and her path in space is repeated. Here the artist is a black and thickly painted brushstroke or a written, calligraphic character. Chong resembles enso, a symbol used in Zen Buddhism as an expression of movement that also signifies infinity. The circle is without beginning or end and as Chong’s oeuvre can testify, although not infinite, the beginning and end of the self is almost impossible to identify. Its boundaries are fuzzy, problematic, constantly changing and challenged, commingling inside and outside, folding and unfolding.

right: *Untitled* 2010, glazed and painted ceramic bowls with photographic decals



iii. bad identity art



above: *Enter* 2011 (variable media)
far right: *IMG_2966*, 3rd June 2010
(electronic file)

In 1971, Adrian Piper made a series of photographs of herself standing in front of a mirror, documenting the physical and metaphysical changes which took place as she fasted and read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Ten years later these images were published and entitled *Food for the Spirit* (private loft performance, 1971).⁵ Secret performances such as this can lie dormant, with only the performing artist knowing of their slight existence. It is only when they manifest themselves within documents that they can be shared, made public, scrutinised and incorporated into art history. However the very act of documenting the initial performance suggests an intention by the artist to share and for it to be viewed by others sometime in the future.

Theatrical photography is frequently used as a medium with which to perform the self, resisting or parodying inscribed and conventional notions of body image and identity. In *Food for the Spirit*, Piper, an artist identifying as African American, records her experience as she reads an immensely dense and seminal philosophical text. By fasting during her reading and photographing herself naked, she renders an intellectual journey physical and performative, additionally she challenges the pre-conceived notion of a philosopher as a white, middle-aged man. *Food for the Spirit* bridges reading, research, body art, philosophy and spiritual practices. As part of *Eye Body* (1963) another American artist, Carolee Schneemann, wrote that she wanted her "actual body to be combined with the work as integral material – a further dimension of the construction." Here the artist is no longer a mere image-maker and just as Weaver highlighted the relationship between anatomy and dance, Schneemann began to explore flesh as material and the body as "marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture."⁶ Many female artists embarked upon a similar journey, making themselves the very material of their art; Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke, and Cindy Sherman all performed their identities and imaged themselves through performance and photography.

New Zealand artists have also participated in their fair share of self-imaging through performative photography, often using it as a means to explore and manifest multiple identities. In the wake of government policies trumpeting biculturalism, the early 1990s saw a peak in identity art and artists such as Shigeyuki Kihara and Yvonne Todd expressed a myriad of identities, positions and orientations. Currently, in Auckland, identity art has in some ways become the elephant in the contemporary art space, considered by some as out-moded, juvenile, cringey or labelled as "one-liner" art.



This caution or hesitancy may be due to the fact that New Zealand identities seem as multifarious and amorphous as they have ever been, perhaps even more so as the country plays host to multiple generations of an ever-expanding suite of nationalities, and online communities enable identities to be fluid, pliable and ever-changing.

Like Piper, Chong created a private performance which she photographed herself using a ten-second timer on her camera. During the performance she moved playfully within a small space, posing before cutting her long black hair. Chong also kept these photographs aside for a certain amount of time before deciding what to do with them. They are now exhibited as part of *Of Positions and half Positions having several Marks at once* and were also used for her ceramics and a series of light-boxes. Chong has expressed distaste for “bad identity art,” yet ribboning throughout her oeuvre is an exploration of her very self-ness. There are traces of her experience of moving to Christchurch via Shanghai from Malaysia within her dragon motifs, and multiple meditations upon different languages and the politics of translation. At times Chong’s practice seems even more affected by her education than it is by her place of birth, including both her formal study of literatures, psychology and graphic design and her informal investigations into Theravada Buddhism, Tai-Chi, phenomenology and fashion design. In of *Of Positions and half Positions having several Marks at once*, Chong dances in-between media and evades fixity, part-painter, part-pixie, part-performer.

iv. www.lookbook.nu



above: *Top Piece, Oblique Flying.*
(electronic files)

Thousands of people all over the world post images of themselves on lookbook.nu. Just as the full-length mirrors of the *galerie des glaces* enabled Louis XIV and his courtiers to view themselves and their sumptuous costumes in their entirety, digital cameras allow the fashion conscious to stage themselves in their finery for all the world to see. With the help of social networking sites, self-imaging has been taken to an entirely different level, becoming even more public and prolific. Identities are performed with the help of fashions, locations, captions, tabs and clever titles such as:

“nothing gets better”

“chains and ruffles”

“it’s not garbage, it’s my DIY blouse”

“07062011”

“and everything I told you was stolen from a book”

“light as a feather”

Selfhood is consciously constructed and tested in response to multiple narratives, trends, celebrities, movies, blogs, art movements or novels. The self has become pliable and a matter of very public trial and error with the inter-subjective space of the internet replacing the royal court. Here technology is used as a prosthetic to extend self-imaging, sometimes defying or at other times slavishly following inscription and prior ideas about acceptable behaviour. As with the court of Versailles, such egocentric pageantry demonstrates vanity and displays status through wealth, beauty, ingenuity and, above all, youth. Yet there is also a strong sense of agency, a conjuring and confirmation of the existence of the subject as she performs herself for all the connected world to see.

It is difficult not to read Chong’s latest series, *Of Positions and half Positions having several Marks at once*, in the context of a contemporary self-imaging epidemic. Initially she photographed the private performance in her home studio using natural and found light so that herself and her domestic environment became part of the artwork. Chong strikes poses and assumes positions and half positions, performing herself before the camera with simple, synthetic, material aids, properties and costumes. Chong twirls, turns, gingerly steps, signals, strides and flees. At times she artlessly adjusts her position, hair and costume. Chong’s appropriation of a title from Weaver’s *Orchesography* also playfully adopts its didactic nature, her series may be read as a twenty-first century extension of his instruction book, with her hybrid photographs as extra illustrations or possible dances.

Chong's investigation into packaging was evident in *A Humid Day*, and extends to fashion or what encloses the self in this current series. The artist's costumes were created according to her own designs from black and white cotton knits and polyester mix fabrics that were purchased cheaply from Nick's Fabrics on Dominion Road. Monochromatic veils are captured draping, covering and obscuring vision. Another important element of the performance is again the circle, a generic shape Chong constructs in fabric as well as reflective mylar (the kind bought at indoor-plant stores). These circles lie on the ground, are stuck to the wall and at one point Chong holds one in front of her face – they are sometimes masks, sometimes points, and sometimes holes.

Once the photographs were printed, Chong made marks upon their surfaces, painting, re-performing, and leaving altered traces upon documents of prior performance. Similar to the mylar circle, she creates patterns, prints, typographical miscellany, brackets, lines, drips, squiggles and dashes upon them. Just as the characters and embellishments stood for potential movements and positions in Weaver's *Orchesography*, within Chong's series painted forms and symbols are evidence of acts of painting. This painting of almost arbitrary pearlescent shapes slightly disturb the viewer as simple readings of the images and artist are interrupted, drawing attention to the surface of the paper and resisting pictorial depth. Born-again circles become polka-dots, bubbles, beads, doughnuts, drips, dominoes, die and milky galaxies. Drifting in space, Chong's painted marks include an asterisk, a loaded, painterly cross, harlequin prints and a lozenge of many-coloured diamonds. A party mix of Modernist favourites such as Suprematist geometric forms, Abstract Expressionist drips and ubiquitous grids also make guest appearances. Monochromatic images act as supports for an uneasy palette of painted colours ranging from pretty pastels to garish fluorescents and an indiscriminate collection of media including spray paint, liquid graphite, acrylic, gouache, ink, glazes, gold pigments and silver leaf.

This is an exuberant staging of an eclectic self through elements of painting, photography, printed text and gesture. Chong consciously performs her unique identity with all its particularity and creativity, side-stepping manipulative strategies... assuming positions, half positions and made marks all at once.



above: *IMG_0039*, *IMG_0041*,
IMG_0045, 30th May 2010 (electronic
files and variable media)

Victoria Wynne-Jones

- 1 Leslie du S. Read, 'Weaver, John (1673–1760)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/view/article/28912>, (Accessed: 25 July 2011).
- 2 Susan Leigh Foster, 'Choreographing Your Move' *Move. Choreographing You. Art and Dance Since the 1960s*, Stephanie Rosenthal (ed.) London: Hayward Publishing, 2010, pp. 30-37.
- 3 Fiona Garlick, 'Dances to Evoke the King: The Majestic Genre Chez Louis XIV' *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Papers from the Dance to Honour Kings Conference (Winter, 1997), pp. 10-34. Edinburgh University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1290886>. (Accessed: 24 July 2011.)
- 4 www.ahumidday.info
- 5 Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, London; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 162.
- 6 Carolee Schneemann, 'Eye Body' (1963) in Amelia Jones and Tracey Warr (eds.) *The Artist's Body*, London; New York: Phaidon, 2002, p. 197.

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Having lived in various cities in both New Zealand and Australia, Victoria Wynne-Jones has a background in French studies, philosophy, theatre, film and dance. She moved back to Auckland in 2009 to study Art History and is currently working on her Masters thesis at the University of Auckland. Her central research concerns are: installation, performance, dance, the body, contemporary New Zealand art, art theory and curatorial practice.



Having grown up in both Malaysia and China, Liyen Chong migrated to New Zealand in her mid-teens and completed her MFA in Design in Christchurch. She moved to Auckland in late 2005 and since then has exhibited widely in New Zealand and Australia. Her work is present in public collections such as the Chartwell Collection and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. For further information please visit: www.liyenchong.com

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