



All pictures in this article  
are of *Tetris* by Noa Dar,  
photographer: Tamar Lam

# Fringes at the Center: *Tetris* by Noa Dar

By Henia Rottenberg

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In the dance *Tetris* (2006), the choreographer Noa Dar and the plastic artist Nati Shamia-Ofer collaborate in a dialogue generating a unique performance space in which the viewers observe the occurrence from the place where the dancers' feet meet the dancing floor. Shamia-Ofer created a special structure – a raised wooden floor, in which openings were made. The viewers stand under the surface, insert their heads through the openings and watch the dancers' movement. In *Tetris* the viewers do not hide in the darkness of the auditorium, but penetrate the performance by sticking their heads through the holes ruptured in the surface. On the one hand, the dancers move above the viewer's heads, being exposed and naked to their penetrating looks, yet on the other hand they can use the great vicinity to seduce or threaten the audience. This extraordinary relationship created in the dance is not necessarily friendly; it is deterring and may even be menacing, and as such it undermines the traditional and common balance between the viewer and the performer. This extraordinary space removes the audience from the secure theatre auditorium, allowing it to participate in a different and challenging occurrence, constituting an integral part of the dance design.

*Tetris*, the dance I wish to examine here, deals with "a renewed examination of the viewer/performance/space relationship" (quoted from the programme and translated by the author). In these relationships movement, material and space are involved. The manipulation of the holed stage enables Dar to break the safe and familiar distance between the performer and the viewer and its accompanying conventions. The location in an unfamiliar territory enables the *Tetris* viewers a fresh dance observation experience. They can see from very close the skin surface and the sweat, but they can also focus on observing the dancers' various body parts without seeing the body move as a whole. This article will examine

how the holed stage and the intimacy imposed on the viewers challenge the viewer-performer relationship thus affecting the tension created between closeness and distance, between fixation and movement, between alienation and involvement in the common experience.

In the context of *Tetris*, the term "Fringes at the center" outlines the dance boundaries between two distinct domains: between the avant-garde fringes and the repertoire center. This dance was in fact ordered by a framework aspiring to belong to the fringes, the Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre 2006 – and was even awarded for its innovation – however this discussion does not engage in the artist's position in the avant-garde fringes, nor in the repertoire centre or in the space between them. This article also does not engage in geographical fringes and center, despite Dar's position as an artist in the "center" and despite the tension accompanying the need to reach a certain space in which she chooses to present the work (the studio), in order to watch *Tetris*. The article also does not engage in the question of social fringes and center and the relationships between them and does not relate to the artist's political involvement or to the social assertion that might emerge from this work. This article will engage in the esthetic expression of fringes and center in *Tetris*. It will present the innovative conceptions, in which the dance artists of the avant-garde, thriving in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in New York, engaged in. In relation to that I will discuss the manner in which Dar chose to handle the issues that were presented as part of the fringes and the way she transfers them to the heart of the institutional theatric dance.

## The stage shape and the viewing experience

The affinity between the stage shape and its affect on the viewing experience developed with the first theatrical dance

performances in the West, which started thriving in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These performances, which preceded the invention of the proscenium stage<sup>1</sup>, were put on in extensive halls in which most of the audience was seated in raised balconies surrounding the dance floor from three sides. Since most of the viewers saw the performance from above, their attention focused mainly on the configurations and formations created on the floor by the dancers, amateurs of the aristocratic class.<sup>2</sup> The invention of the proscenium stage in Italy (1580), by Andrea Palladio, has quickly spread in the western world and its imprint on the development of theatrical dance is marked to date.<sup>3</sup> The auditorium shaped hall emphasized the strengthening of the professional dancer's status, the frame and the picturesque illusion on the stage, but most of all it brought about the separation between the viewer and the performer. In performances taking place on a proscenium stage the viewers sit in a darkened hall, a situation allowing distance and non-involvement in the occurrence on the stage. As a result of this separation social alienation has developed between the viewer and the performer.

Ever since it was invented, the proscenium stage has been considered the centre of the theatrical essence in the west. In most traditional theatres the auditorium was firmly determined as a theatrical form, in which the artists are on the stage and the audience sits and watches them from the hall. Criticism on institutional dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the ballet and the modern dance – has led to the change in the way the performance space is perceived by the artists. In 1952 the composer and theoretician John Cage (1912-1992) together with the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) organized a multimedia event at the Black Mountain College.<sup>4</sup> In this event the viewers were seated in a square arena demarcated by diagonal passages into four triangles.



Cunningham was improvising a dance in the aisles, on the ceiling a movie was being screened sliding down onto the walls, Cage was reading a text on music and Zen Buddhism, and David Tudor was playing a tuned piano (Goldberg, 1996). In Black Mountain College a new paradigm was generated.

Asignificant contribution to the discourse regarding the space concept in relation to the perspective, which found expression in this event, was related to the pioneering work taking place even earlier at the Bauhaus School in Europe (1913-1933). It was introduced to the Black Mountain College in the fall of 1933 by the artist Josef Albers, a former teacher in the Bauhaus, who invited Xanti Schawinsky (1936) to extend the stage experiments, relying on the initiatives of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in the Bauhaus.<sup>5</sup> These engaged in creative relationships stemming from the separation between the stage and the viewer. Moholy-Nagy claimed that in order to create stage activities in which the viewer would not be a silent partner, but would participate in the action, new mechanical means were required, which would replace the act of voyeurism towards the stage (Moholy-Nagy, 1961). Later on Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus director, designed the Total Theater, a building composed of stages in three different shapes. Each could be used with a simple mechanism, and on each diversified performances could be put on (drama, opera, cinema and dancing), according to the director's requirements (Gropius, 1961, p. 12).

The multimedia event in Black Mountain College and the ideas of the type performed in it had a distinct affect on the Judson Dance Theatre artists' group, operating in New York in the 1960's. The experiments and inquiries of this group of artists – Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti and others – challenged the way dance was comprehended till then, the conventional training methods in the field and the institutes in which it was

being taught (Connor, 1997). Space was one of the radical issues to which the artists related to in the Judson Dance Theatre, in the sense of its use within the dance and everything regarding the terms such as the location and the viewing experience.<sup>6</sup>

Among the performances created by artists in unconventional sites we may note Simone Forti's first works, *See-Saw* and *Rollers* (both in 1960), presented in an art gallery. The use Forti made in a different space broke the conventional concepts in modern dance but also diverted the dance activity from the dance world to the world of



art. By this mere action she placed the choreographer next to the visual artist, whose status was considered more serious. Meredith Monk, another choreographer, demanded from the audience that came to watch her work *Vessel* (1971) to move from one place to another during the performance: from the Guggenheim Museum to proscenium theatre, and from there to her own attic. Trisha Brown, on the other hand, created *Roof Piece* (1971), in which dancers, located on twelve building roofs in Manhattan, tried to repeat with maximum accuracy the movements

of their colleagues. These works, performed in unconventional sites, had real effects on the choreography concept and the viewers' observation experience. Yvonne Rainer deserted the viewer's voyeuristic gaze in her work *Trio A* (1962), in which she focused the viewers' attention on movements based on carrying out an assignment. Another creator, who undermined the position of the narcissist performer, was Trisha Brown. In the dance *Insider* (1966) she challenged the viewers, looking straight at them while she was moving to and fro on the edge of the stage.

Judson Dance Theatre had in fact a faithful audience – artists, intellectuals and people neighboring on the church – but in the first years of the group's activity the critique inclined to ignore it (Banes, 1987, p.13). Similar to other avant-garde movements, the affect of the Judson Dance Theatre on the dance world was marginal at the time. The group gained its appropriate esteem only *post factum*. The movement experiments of Judson group, which were excluded from the main stream due to their being part of a marginal avant-garde movement, relented with the years and permeated into the dance main stream. They did much more than that. These experiences changed the way the art of dancing was perceived and opened a window for the choreographers enabling them a free choice in the choreographic, styling, space and other performance aspects, as is seen in *Tetris*.

*The boundaries of intimacy*

The viewer in *Tetris*, a game-performance<sup>7</sup>, faces the viewing experience upon entering the studio. As in a secular ceremony, each one of the viewers – all together 69 – passes through a narrow gate where he/she are required to take off their shoes, their height is measured and respectively they receive stools in various sizes. The viewers, led by the dancers, are seated on the stools in front of the raised

stage. This way, already upon entering the dance site Dar breaks the solidarity of the way of looking by actually drawing the viewers' attention to the extraordinary stage and focusing their attention on the notion of the physical-mental distance between the viewer and the performer.

After all the viewers have gathered, a voice asks them to get under the raised stage and place the stools in the marked places. The voice continues instructing them to cautiously mount the stools and push their heads through the open holes in the raised dance floor. The scenery revealed to the viewers is a field of "decapitated" heads, without a body, with pairs of eyes looking with embarrassment and mouths laughing with uneasiness. The embarrassment intensifies when the seven dancers<sup>8</sup> start moving between the heads, to the original music of Uri Frost. They crawl and move among the heads, which are protected by a metal lattice around them, or stretch themselves over them. The movement, taking place at the viewers' eye level and in close proximity, is an extraordinary perspective for a dance. It enables the dancers to see the reaction of the viewers who are riveted to their places, and create a direct, but also a manipulative contact with them.

On the other hand, the viewers, who are confined to their places, see the dances from very close and experience the proximity sharply. They notice their effort, their sweat and even the bruises on their body. Moreover, the penetration into the dancers' intimate space – the physical and the mental – exposes the viewers to the manipulation of twisting bodies touching each other with passion, the

sensual wiggling movement of thighs or dancers trying to undress each other. The movement of erotic ingredients builds up till it reaches its peak and falls apart with the sounds of foot stamping threatening the wooden floor, when bodies jump up in the air and almost touch the ceiling, or when the dancers jump and skip between the heads which feel unprotected. The viewers can indeed choose whether to watch a female dancer taking off her outfit, pouring water on herself and crying, or to look away; but the great proximity and the blurring of the safe distance boundaries between the dancers and the viewers raise questions engaging in the encroachment of the personal space, and the tension generated from the excitement and the temptation



evoking due to the physical proximity. Dar and Shamia-Ofer trap the viewers in a unique space, but also enable them to decide whether they want to get away or when to return to the occurrence. The viewers, who decide to slide down beneath the stage surface for a short rest from the intensity of the performance, face a no less surprising surrealistic scenery – a world bustling with a passive movement of "decapitated" bodies. If previously the viewers and the dancers tackled with heads separated from the bodies, now they tackle with headless bodies. The separation between the “thinking” head and the “feeling” body exhibited as a peel intensifies due to the passivity of

the viewers' hanging bodies separated from their heads as opposed to the active and moving dancers.

A video, filmed during the performance without the viewers' knowledge and screened on a huge screen empowers the head detachment experience from the body. Eshel (2007) describes it by saying, "The passive bodies which remained under the ceiling/stage recalled meat suspended on hangers at the butcher's or a cemetery of torsos and limbs". After the viewers watch with embarrassment the video film exhibiting their facial expressions, where exactly they are looking or how they feel, also become aware of their body movement and the movements of the other performance viewers beneath the stage. A lifted leg or a scratching hand is part of the flabby and passive body movement captured by a candid camera. Beyond the stripping exposure, watching the video film raises also a complex network of looks: of the viewers looking at themselves watching the dancers and the other viewers, and of the dancers looking at the viewers and the other dancers. Dar conducts them all by operating the camera and directing the lens. Furthermore, observing the performance through the video film emphasizes the common experience to both the viewers and the dances, but at the same time also enables them to observe the occurrence from a distance.

The last part of the dance is apparently of a traditional nature. The viewers leave their places under the stage and move to watch the dance, seated on stools facing the stage. But then, when the viewers are back to the safe and secure space, they watch the dancers squeeze through the openings, through which the viewers' heads have emerged, and move between the two spaces – above and underneath the stage floor, and particularly on the bottom part of the



stage. Like bats hanging on the tree's branches they dance in an upside-down world, their legs in the sky and their heads close to the floor.

To sum up, in *Tetris*, by means of the dialogue with the visual art, Dar engages in extending the dance boundaries when she investigates the issue of the performance space and its viewing experience. She says, "What we have here is the breaking of boundaries and testing at every given moment how far this boundary can be taken (Yudilevitz, 2006). If in avant-garde the criticism drawn by the art is directed towards the functional definitions of the art establishment in a bourgeois society, in *Tetris* Dar tones down the avant-garde ideas and presents them as part of the mainstream dance. Like in the avant-garde, Dar rejects the voyeurism act as part of the viewing experience in a dance performance and demands total involvement of all the action participants. She also turns the space between the performance and the audience into the central occurrence arena. By means of this inquiry, *Tetris* extends the boundaries of the world of dance as a theatrical art.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Proscenium stage is a rectangular shaped elevated stage, extending at the end of the hall from wall to wall. The proscenium arch is a quadrilateral opening in the wall separating the hall from the stage –the imaginary "fourth wall" – through which the audience watches the occurrence on the stage.

<sup>2</sup> For elaboration on the Ballet de cour see Rottenberg, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Teatro Olimpico was first built in the city of Vicenza in the years 1580-1585.

<sup>4</sup> Cage was inspired by the theatrical ideas of Antonin Artaud, by the use Marcel Duchamp made of chance procedures and the Zen philosophical doctrine of the non-development.

<sup>5</sup> Moholy–Nagy was an abstract painter, who started engaging in artistic design in the Bauhaus.

<sup>6</sup> Banes (1987) claims that the other important subjects the avant-garde group related to were: history, new usages of time, space and body; and problems of defining dancing.

<sup>7</sup> *Tetris* is a name of a computer game, in which the player has to direct shapes falling slowly from the screen's upper part and arrange them at the bottom of the screen without any spaces. The name of the game is derived from the Greek name "Tetra" meaning "four", because the shapes in the game consist of four squares.

<sup>8</sup> Creating dancers: Lilly Ladin, Oren Tishler, Irad Matzliach, Adaya Fershkovsky, Nahshon Stein, Coralli Ladam, Shira Rinot.

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