

WILLI DORNER

WORDS BY
AILIDH MACLEAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALESSANDRO RAIMONDO



ANONYMOUS
B O D I E S
I N
U R B A N
U T O P I A

As I speak to choreographer-street artist Willi Dorner, Milan Fashion Week is in full swing. New York and London have run their part of the mighty marathon and the following week, the baton will be placed in the presumably manicured hands of Paris. It's the French capital's offering where Simon Porte Jacquemus will go on to show his Jacquemus collection, for which Dorner's work stands as a central beacon of idyllic inspiration.

“I go for the marginal spaces, spaces that people normally don’t look at, on the ground, in the back of a building or spaces between buildings or higher up close to the roof. At the same time by placing the bodies in these ‘overseen’ spaces in all these different height levels I widen their viewing spectrum.”

As if having one of his interventions influence the concept of the collection wasn’t enough, Dorner worked with the French fashion favourite for a campaign that set social media alight with its refreshing cultural overtones. The visuals were bathing in stimulating references – that even if you weren’t aware of Dorner’s work, you could still appreciate –, and had this almost comical take, literally flipping fashion on its pretty little head. Not too shabby for a man who had no intentions of being so embraced by the fashion sphere – a world that can so often be misunderstood by those who don’t feel welcomed into its designer-clad arms.

Although the fashion field is throwing all kinds of praise at Dorner – and he’s open to humbly accepting it – reactions from the worlds of architecture, film, photography and fine art all preceded this. It was in the Austrian countryside that Dorner, as a young boy, recognised his desire to move and his need to test the limits of his own physicality. His chosen output was dance. With interdisciplinary work that straddles a range of creative disciplines, there are three very simple but vital pillars that hold his work together: perception, spatiality and the body itself. In projects like *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, the performers create a moving trail that has toured the world, positioning and stacking themselves in the nooks and crannies of a city’s infrastructure before moving onto another. Works like *Living Room* and *Set in Motion*, amongst others, continue to play with the ideas of the body and awareness of space through a resulting sculptural dialogue that encompasses cinematic chains, exhibition showings, books, short films and outdoor performances.

His positionings take their shape with little more than a troop of willing bodies. No gregarious props, backdrops, costumes or outlandish accessorising objects. It isn’t even a stunt that holds any kind of permanence – the nature of the projects being temporary in that the only proof of their happening lies in the mere memories

that observers hold dearly and the odd photo here and there. It’s a simplistic idea executed in a charmingly simplistic manner.

There’s a particular phrase that Willi uttered and echoed through my mind in a slightly haunting but impactful way: the concept of ‘anonymous bodies’. Explaining that the face carries our identity, the performers are stripped of this and positioned so that their identity is lost in the sea of bodies that are obscured together. Willi’s point is that in the urban environment, we’re all so tightly packed together, doing our jobs and living our lives within the set limitations of spatiality and functional structure. We are all anonymous bodies in the urban environment.

Ailidh MacLean: First and foremost, I want to ask you about growing up in Austria in the sixties. How did you find the art scene?

Willi Dorner: In the sixties I was a young boy and it wasn’t until maybe the eighties that I found out about the art of the sixties – I was already in my mid-twenties by that time. I wasn’t so much touched or inspired because I was mostly into dancing. I wasn’t really into body, space and installation work, I was really in the fields of dance. More than ten years later, I actually turned my focus on fine arts, in particular on the work from the sixties.

AML: Were there a lot of opportunities in the country for young creatives at that time?

WD: I think it wasn’t such a big topic at that time. In the early eighties, it didn’t have this hyped stigma and it was only really in the last ten years or so that this started happening.

AML: Was an interest in this kind of interdisciplinary artistic work something that matriculated from a young age for you?

WD: To be honest, I was into fine arts and

I wanted to study fine arts but then I had a lot of energy and this huge desire to move. At that time I couldn’t combine my physicality and my interest in my physicality with fine arts, so I focused on dance. Now, after decades of dancing, my desire for fine arts actually came back again so it seems like I had to get rid of all my energy. And it sounds strange but maybe it was like that.

AML: Were you part of any subculture while growing up?

WD: I grew up in the countryside and didn’t get in touch with Vienna until I was seventeen years old. I was a country boy, our revolution was long hair and wearing jeans. It was very simple.

AML: Do you think that this countryside upbringing affected your work in some way, perhaps even subconsciously?

WD: Yes. In the countryside, what I experienced was the kind of roughness that exists. I have a lot of friends who were farmer’s boys in the late sixties and seventies and in a way it was still quite a poor and rough life. The big step for me was that I asked my parents to go into secondary school, which is a different level from the normal education. This is where I got in touch with art and with theatre. We were taken from the countryside to the theatre in Vienna and this impressed me a lot. I had a teacher for painting in school but he was a fine artist, not really a teacher. He taught a few lessons because he needed the money but he was interesting to many young students. It was through him that I got interested in actual fine arts as he took me to see shows in Vienna privately – we went to see Pina Bausch in the late seventies and this was a kind of shock for me, almost. He took me to galleries where I saw Cunningham dances in Vienna in the late seventies; they did a gallery performance and this impressed me a lot. Then I started to take dance classes and he took me to Vienna for

the classes when I was seventeen. I started very late for dance, but beforehand I was a gymnast so I was always into movement. I had a strong desire to do something with my physical energy.

AML: Your teacher was obviously a really important figure for you at the start of your career but is there any other creative influence in your work?

WD: There were figures like Bruce Nauman who I discovered through my teacher. When I saw his work I was fascinated by it, in particular by his work in the sixties and his earlier projects. Later on, I got in touch with the Actualism in Vienna. The Actualism itself could never inspire me in the sense of ideas, but I was impressed by the attitude of the Actualistic artists. These days, I’m invited to exhibitions – for example, one in Switzerland with me and Valie Export as a position of the sixties with myself as the contemporary reply in relationship to her.

AML: One of your most famous projects is of course *Bodies in Urban Spaces*. Where did the idea for the project come from?

WD: I’m very much influenced by phenomenology, and in phenomenology there’s a strong interest in perception, spatiality and in the body itself. I started to focus mostly on perception and after years of doing different projects on this topic, I moved on to spatiality. This was in the late nineties. I got really interested in space. During this research I was proposed to do a project, the opening of a new residential building in Vienna – to do different performance work or installations in the residential building. I invited artist friends to join me and we were going to work in empty flats that were waiting for someone to move into them. We worked on different ideas; one of them was inspired by the model of Le Corbusier. I got fascinated with the idea of how to fill up a flat. You have a bathroom with a toilet, a kitchen... But, how many people do you need? I realised that it takes quite a lot of people to fill up a flat or even just a kitchen or bathroom.

I was invited into the homes of some residents who I met in the corridors and who saw me working in these empty flats with performers. I was really shocked because I saw the same flats as the ones I’d been working in, but these people had already moved in and I could see how many things, objects and furniture people put into their flats. It was really amazing to see, coming

from these empty flats into these really full flats. It changed my focus to the spaces in between; the spaces that are left. Then I started to fill up the spaces in between. That is the basic idea for *Bodies in Urban Spaces*: How much space is left for us?

AML: And how much space do you think we really need to live comfortably? Is space a luxury or do we have the right to expect it?

WD: I see these two questions connected: so firstly space is not a luxury. We all need space to live and I see and understand it as a human right. For me it is like with water. We have a right on water without paying and so we have a right on space to live in. For me this is one of the greatest imbalances or injustices that exist in the world, that private persons own space and soil and sell it. They try to make profit by selling ground for horrendous money. Space and soil should be in the hands of a community or a state and then distributed by criterias that were defined before. I know, you might think that I am a communist, but I am not in many ways. I just see this as one of the most important injustices that we face in particular, in cities and the space problem will grow with the growth of the population on earth. There has to come a big change in how we give people affordable space to live in. It can’t be that people do three or four jobs to be able to pay for rent and food.

AML: Do you focus on a specific detail in the urban landscape when you investigate its spatial contexts and/or boundaries?

WD: Yes, I go for the marginal spaces, spaces that people normally don’t look at, on the ground, in the back of a building or spaces between buildings or higher up close to the roof. At the same time by placing the bodies in these ‘overseen’ spaces in all these different height levels I widen their viewing spectrum.

AML: What happened later?

WD: Two years later, I was invited by the technical University in Barcelona to speak about my work and they gave me the opportunity to develop a project. I brought this idea into auto spaces: it was a very short performance but it was the beginning. I worked with architecture students and dancers and it was presented in the frame of a dance festival but it wasn’t so successful. It was in a dance festival, so people expected that the dancers, when they saw them

in the positions, would get up and dance. But of course they didn’t. Many people left because there were big expectations with it being announced as a new project – there was about four, five hundred people and after five minutes, half of the people had left. They were obviously expecting them to get up and dance. But a few people stayed and they really enjoyed and really liked it. One of the people was a presenter from Paris and she invited me the following year to the summer festival in Paris to show this idea and it was a big success. It was like a snowball effect and it just got bigger and bigger following this.

AML: How was it received in the Paris premiere?

WD: People were excited but there were also people who were really shocked and also very aggressive. There’s always this mix that you get.

AML: I read that during a tour around Austria, England, France, Norway, Sweden, Finland and the US, you drew attention from local police who stopped several performances as they thought you were burglars or vandals. Is this true?

WD: People were very aggressive against us, particularly in the US and the UK. Apparently we were teaching burglars how to break into houses – it was ridiculous. There’s a different atmosphere in these different European countries. In the US, there’s so much crime in big cities like New York and Philadelphia. So there’s a lot of fear with people thinking that somebody might break into their house or might rob them. This fear isn’t so strong in Southern countries in Europe – people are more friendly and open and they wouldn’t think of this as a first thought.

AML: Have the dancers who take part in your projects been the same since the beginning or do you switch people in and out a lot? How does it work?

WD: They are always locally cast, so we audition them before we go there to work. I work with three assistants – one in the UK, one in Belgium and one in Austria. My assistant in Austria has been working for me for eight years now and she’s really excellent. She’s currently in New Mexico preparing a trail at a festival there.

AML: You can rarely see a face in the result-



All pictures from *Bodies in Urban Spaces*. Photography Lisa Rastl



ing images and videos of your interventions, as the focus is so specifically on the body and the shapes that bodies form together. What is the intention behind the faceless dancers?

WD: I always stack or pile them so that their faces cannot be seen but if there's a position where you can see their face, I always ask them to cover it with their hands or arms. The intention for me is to show the bodies as anonymous bodies. The face is what gives this element of identity – without the face, they become anonymous bodies, which is what we really are in cities.

AML: How did the photo book on *Bodies in Urban Spaces* project come into publication?

WD: I realised from the beginning that it looks quite interesting if we make photo documentation. One of the intentions of the project is that it's only a temporary intervention. The performers go into position for between two and five minutes and then they leave – it's gone. It's only visible for the people that pass by, and this was the original intention. In the beginning I did not want to have visitors, but of course no festival invites you and will not announce the performance. So we changed the intention, so we do performances without announcing and performances that are announced. I liked the positions, and so I started a collection of moments. It was in 2012 that I thought I should collect them and make a book out of it. I thought we'd maybe go on for another two or three years and then the project would stop but it seems like it just won't stop. Nevertheless, I decided to do this book as a summary to sum up how the project started, how it developed and show all of these positions up until the present. I'm really happy with the book.

AML: The images are stunning. You touched upon the temporary nature of the project. Would you ever consider doing something with it that could be permanent? There are some obvious limitations due to the living people involved, but would you explore further in this direction?

WD: Quite a few friends of mine have asked me that. They suggested that I use puppets. It's funny, sometimes visitors go to the bodies – especially when it's not announced – and they touch the body to find out if it's a living body or not. Even in a live performance. I get very nice emails after presentations where people say "I saw the show and

I still see the bodies there," it's so strongly ingrained in people's minds, and it's actually quite nice.

AML: The brightly coloured clothes worn by the individuals taking part in your interventions are a marvel to the eye. Is there some specific reasoning behind this vivid decoration, as opposed to more sombre clothes?

WD: I realised that I need a contrast. Buildings are grey, brown, dark, and sometimes black, so I ask them to put on bright colour shirts or pants to have a contrast, so that we can see them in a good relation to the building.

AML: Speaking of clothes, I want to ask you about the Jacquemus campaign. Did you see Simon Porte Jacquemus' recognition of your work as some kind of acceptance into the fashion sphere?

WD: I had my first contact with fashion through a photographer working with a big fashion company in Italy, during my first few years. Then I realised that I hadn't thought of this – fashion was not my intention at all. I had a request for a shoot which I did for *Garage Magazine*. Other magazines printed photos of my work, for example this spring *King Kong* magazine presented photos of my project *Living room*. When Simon got in touch with me, I found it quite exciting. He told me that he used a photo of mine of a positioning in New York City for his collection, and that it was one of his main inspiration sources for the new collection that he will present in Paris next week.

AML: I remember the day that the campaign dropped; there was such a buzz in the industry over these new stimulating visuals that mastered this balance of fun and cool. Were you in any way surprised by the reaction that the images attracted?

WD: Through this, you find out how your work is received. Myself, I don't know who sees the photos and who reacts to the photos. It used to be loads of reactions from the architecture and the fine art worlds, now it's the world of fashion that is approaching me. It's an honour, but when you start to work on a project you don't think of that. It just develops.

AML: How did you find it from a collaborative angle? Was it difficult for you to imple-

ment your vision without manipulating the clothes and the Jacquemus aesthetic or did it simply fit and work in its own natural way?

WD: It worked perfectly. When he explained to me further about the collections, I could understand it so clearly. For me, there was no conflict at all. I worked with the models and they're not used to being in such positions. I usually work with dancers and performers who are used to this and they are trained, so the models had a bit of a hard time. But they did very well.

AML: Would you work with fashion brands again if the opportunity presented itself?

WD: If it makes sense, yes. If I could see that it would connect, then definitely. When I saw Simon's work, I understood. My daughter also studies fashion and she was very excited, when I told her that I got an email from Simon Porte Jacquemus, she was like 'wow'.

AML: What projects are you working on at the moment? You briefly mentioned the New Mexico trail before but, what else do you have in the pipeline?

WD: Quite recently I premiered two different projects and another auto work, which is choreography for eight dancers. And I did an indoor gallery work for two performers, which was just premiered in June and July in summer festivals. Just now is a time where I prepare new ideas or new projects. I got a lot of work commissioned for the European Capital in 2018 and I started a new work in Germany that culminates in 2019 but I started this summer. I also got another offer for a theatre in Switzerland. So it's a lot of different offers that are coming in, and I'm just figuring out how to coordinate all these projects.