

# ARTFORUM

## Tere O'Connor

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Publicity still for Tere O'Connor, *Rammed Earth*, 2007. From left: Heather Olson and Matthew Rogers. Photo: Paula Court.

*For over twenty-five years, New York–based choreographer Tere O'Connor has been actively agitating for a nonnarrative, philosophical, and exploratory approach to dance and dance-making. O'Connor is also known as a mentor in the community and a frequent curator of dance at venues such as the Kitchen and Dance Theater Workshop in Chelsea. Here he discusses his reprise of *Rammed Earth* (2007), which runs September 24–28 at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York.*

**RAMMED EARTH** is an iteration of my idea that there are elisions between dance and architecture. Coming to terms with a piece of architecture is a temporal experience, even though the structure itself is a solid, finished thing. The reverse—or parallel—in dance is that you experience something through time, and in the end, the way you come to terms with it is by building a little finality from images you take from it; the human body gives its own sort of architectural information. I think sometimes of dance as spraying dust on invisible possibilities—or histories—in the space.

The title comes from a technique for building a house in which you lift dirt from the place and mix it with water and clay and then tamp it back it down to make the most solid walls possible. (It's being used a lot in green architecture right now.) I love the metaphor—it's not just a metaphor that's poetic but an *active* metaphor. You begin, you go through a choreographic process, and something is born right from the place you're working. Dance is something that just happens; it doesn't translate preexisting ideas. The specific way that you *exit* that idea is the closest you can get to

“meaning.” If I were doing a piece called *Kitty Cat*, the piece would look very different, but it wouldn’t look like a kitty cat—it would look like the experience of moving away from that idea.

*Rammed Earth* isn’t a depiction of something architectural. I’m not making works that are semaphoric—the imagery isn’t a *signal* for something, it is the result of a process. I refer to someone like Zaha Hadid; she looks at the systems that are going to be in a building, or she looks at the traffic patterns, and the building is created from that—it’s not something that she sees that she then forces all of that into. I’ve also been inspired by Martin Kippenberger; he really supported the idea of not having a signature form. I don’t necessarily want there to be a “Tere O’Connor style.” It’s just this investigation that I’m in the midst of, and it’s nice for people to peek into it once in a while.

The piece itself is just this dance, and it’s like water; if you put it in a bowl it fills the bowl, if you put it in a shoebox then it will fill the shoebox. It has what I call liquid space: It’s fixed dance, but the dancers can snake around and interpret the choreography according to the specific space in which we’re performing. They can do duets close together one time and duets far away from one another the next time. The idea of touring the work at different kinds of sites is really the most exciting one. You’re re-informing each space with the dance. The audience isn’t just seeing dancing, it’s seeing architecture brought into evidence.

At the beginning of the piece, the audience is in the middle of the space and the dancers are dancing around them; this brings a sense of dimensionality not inherent in pieces presented *before* an audience. The second section will fully switch from an immersion to just such a proscenium setting, but I hope that the sense of dimensionality remains. People often just read the front information of dance. The experience of feeling these different levels of space will hopefully lead the dance to being understood in a more embodied way.

I think dance has been somewhat crippled by the fact that people want to language-ify it. They want to find meanings that are finite and act like writing or film—things that I love, but that I think dance doesn’t do very well. I see attempts to force these elements together, trying to make this form—which I believe is abstract and philosophical—mimetic, as a way of saying “I’m a swan now.” It’s silly and at the same time it just doesn’t reach the possibilities that this form has. Choreography has its own system, and I don’t want to get in the way of that. One of the most important things in that system is tangent—it provides an aspect of depth during the chronology of making a dance. It suggests a whole different value system outside of the “good/bad” paradigm.

At one point, some people in my life had cancer, and they were receiving radiation treatments, but they were also having to go to work. And I thought, how inelegant of me or even cruel of me to go in and choose “good” and “bad” and be able to cut one out. They can’t cut the “bad” out. I started to think of editing as an inclusive idea. For my work *Baby* [2006], I tried keeping everything, including this cowboy who comes up in the piece, which is something I don’t like—I had to find a context for it. So that’s what I learned—to look at editing not simply as cutting but as a kind of recontextualization of the material that you have. It’s about being the “nurse” for the piece as opposed to the “doctor.” It’s about not bringing to bear what we could call “intelligence” on an editing system, but to let the thing itself show you its systemic rules. It’s a pluralistic interpretive system—it’s a basket for everyone to throw up in.

— *As told to David Velasco*