



Thoughtful ... Lucinda Childs' work Dance at the Venice Biennale. Photograph: Andrea Avezzu

A naked woman punches her body repeatedly against a wall, her expression hidden by the dark fall of hair covering her face. A pale, serious youth dances a solitary path through a crowd of onlookers, his limbs floating, warping and buckling to low-level electronic music. A middle-aged man in a knitted cap and lifeguard's jacket sweeps the floor, talking all the while about the urge to cleanse his life.

There is nothing new about visual art that blurs into performance, or dance that verges on installation, but at Venice this year the question of categories feels interestingly loaded. [Daina Ashbee's Unrelated](#) and [Benoît Lachambre's Lifeguard](#) are the first and third events described above, yet while they feature in the programme that has been put together by the dance biennale's new artistic director, [Marie Chouinard](#), neither work embraces traditional modes of choreography. The dreamy street-dance solo, meanwhile, comes from Anne Imhof's [Faust](#), a five-hour event that is drawing the largest crowds at the art biennale and whose language is heavily predicated on dance.

The agency of the body is a key theme of Faust, often because its cast are forced into situations of unsettling passivity. Imhof has transformed the interior of the German pavilion into glass chambers within which individuals or small groups of performers are confined. As we walk past or even above them, we can observe these young men and women engaged in their own variously listless, hostile or sexual activities, as if they were laboratory specimens or animals in a zoo.

Those glass walls and ceilings start to feel like an absolute divide, turning us into voyeurs and the performers into objects - even when they're exhibiting signs of threatening behaviour. It comes as a shocking reversal of power when the performers are periodically let out of their cells and allowed to dance among us, taking sudden command of the space and asserting their primacy over our awkward, self-conscious bodies.



[i](#) Dreamy street dance ... Anne Imhof's five-hour Faust. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian



The body as object, as weapon, as provocation and sensual canvas are themes that occupy other artists showing in this year's dance biennale. [James Richards'](#) film *What Weakens the Flesh Is the Flesh Itself* is a disturbing, claustrophobic piece in which dreamily eroticised footage of wrestlers is juxtaposed with dancing skeletons and images of bodies distorted by tattoos, genital piercings and the ritualised trappings of S&M.

Richards layers the body with so much obsession, projection and artistry that it's a breath of fresh air to watch [Mark Bradford's](#) mesmerising short video that shows, on a slowly diminishing loop, a black teenager walking down an inner-city street, his easy loping stride punctuated by a confident skip, a sudden turn of the head. The boy is caught at a moment of uncontested, easy ownership of his body and the street around him. He is flukily beautiful and alive, even if the future he walks towards is unknown.

There are also films of bodies in the dance programme - although typically they come with far fewer curator's notes and far less glossy publicity material. [Dance](#) and art may collide in interesting ways at Venice, but there is never any doubt about which of the two takes precedence in terms of money, politics and profile.

But considered on its own, away from the razzle of the art biennale, Chouinard's debut dance programme is a thoughtful take on the current scene. Her own choreographic tastes are evident in the predominant strand of works with a strong conceptual twist, led by a revival of the 1998 solo with which [Xavier Le Roy](#) became established as one of the leaders of the "non-dance" movement in France.

*The Self Unfinished* is an outlandishly strange, rigorous and witty work in which the ordinary structures and functions of the body are investigated and inverted. The lone dancer (João dos Santos Martins) starts out in robotic mode, vocalising a grinding, whining accompaniment for himself as his body crosses the stage in rigidly articulated blips. With his shirt covering his face he turns into a kind of insect: balanced upside down and walking on his hands, his skinny legs and feet waving with a disconcerting expressiveness.

Eventually, stripped of its clothes, Dos Santos Martins' body undergoes even more radical changes - scrunched into a seemingly random configuration of muscle, skin and bone, or twisted into shapes that resemble a chicken or an alien. It should come as no surprise that Le Roy started out as a microbiologist - there's a puckish imagination at work in *The Self Unfinished*, but also the brutally unflinching logic of a scientist.





Twinned elegance ... Mathilde Monnier and La Ribot's *Gustavia*. Photograph: Marc Coudrais



The other major strand in Chouinard's programme is a celebration of female choreography. There are works by Louise Lecavalier and [Lucinda Childs](#) - recipient of the 2017 Golden Lion award - and the festival closes with an excellently varied evening from [Robyn Orlyn](#), Mathilde Monnier and La Ribot.

Orlyn creates salty, transgressive, colourful dance provocations in which she tackles corruption and repression in her native South Africa but also celebrates the nation's culture and its artists. In *And So You See ...* Orlyn gives the stage over to Albert Silindokuhle Ibokwe Khoza, a performer of physical opulence and outrageous charisma who sails through this piece like a glorious flagship for the LGBT community.

To the grandly sacred choruses of Mozart's Requiem, Khoza slowly divests himself of a white shroud and embarks on a series of bullying,

wistful, shocking and enchanting manoeuvres. He snacks on a bowl of oranges, his near-naked body rapt in orgasmic quiverings of delight as juice runs over his flesh. When he orders two audience members on stage to wash him down, the collapse of the performer-spectator divide is far more deviant than anything in Imhof's *Faust*. But beyond the rampant display, the breaking of taboos, there are political messages in this piece.

For one section, Khoza lovingly dresses up as a Nubian queen preparing for a hot date with Vladimir Putin, whose dancing image appears on a screen. As Khoza undulates gracefully in front of an awkwardly jiggling Putin, he makes mocking taunts about the president's homophobia. More affecting, however, is his segue into a gravely traditional solo, which he performs with two ceremonial whips that he coils in the air around him as he moves. How much better it is, Khoza says to the trapped image of Putin, to be able to dance with your weapons than kill with them.

The last event in the festival is a magnificent double act of French choreographer and dancer [Mathilde Monnier](#) and Spanish dancer and performance artist [La Ribot](#). In *Gustavia*, the two women are twinned as supremely elegant middle-aged blondes, dressed identically in black leotards and high-heeled Mary Janes. They look spiky, slender and assured as they pick their way across a black draped stage but rapidly begin to act in ways that run entirely counter to that image. There's a crude (but exquisitely timed) duet of Laurel and Hardy slapstick in which La Ribot, hefting a huge black plank, keeps knocking Monnier down. There's a pin-up calendar of a dance where the two women replace poses of leggy glamour with sardonically flexed biceps and kickboxing moves.

*Gustavia* culminates in a quickfire verbal exchange in which they throw out dozens of ways to describe or categorise themselves as women. Wry, funny, beautifully controlled, this is work that might stray into clowning or performance art, but it's one that could only be performed by dancers like Monnier and La Ribot - with years of training behind them, and with a vintage physical intelligence.