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INTERVIEWS

# 1000 WORDS: SPENCER FINCH

**WILLIAM FORSYTHE'S** Ballett Frankfurt may have disappeared last year, a victim of government budget cuts, but in its place the choreographer has created an even more flexible and transdisciplinary creative unit: the Forsythe Company, an eighteen-artist ensemble (based in Dresden and Frankfurt) whose productions will leave traditional notions of ballet behind, with site-specific performances, interventions in public spaces, and audience participation. For its first creation, *Three Atmospheric Studies*, opening at the Bockenheimer Depot in Frankfurt on April 21, the group teams up with New York-based artist Spencer Finch, who is known for catapulting viewers to historically and geographically distant places through the sparest of means: electric lights and color filters. For example, in *Eos (Dawn, Troy)*, 2002, he traveled to the site of ancient Troy and precisely measured the color and intensity of light as the morning sun first began to rise—and then re-created that exact light condition in New York's Postmasters gallery using fluorescent tubes filtered with colored gels.



*Three Atmospheric Studies*, for which the artist will reproduce tones depicted or described by J. M. W. Turner, Isaac Newton, and Cranach the Elder, is only the first of several collaborations he has planned with Forsythe to investigate the phenomenology of light. I met with Finch last month in Frankfurt—he now shuttles between the United States and Germany, armed with a huge traveling bag full of lighting equipment—to discuss these projects, including a work in progress slated to open this fall in Dresden with an artificial “cloud” floating among dancers.

—Daniel Birnbaum

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## SPENCER FINCH

Last August Bill and I were spending time in different parts of Vermont. When we spoke on the phone, we inevitably slipped into flinty New Englander personas and discussed the weather, sometimes at great length. Now, a lot of people think that discussions about the weather are superficial at best and Freudian sublimation at worse. But I tend to agree with Roland Barthes, who said that conversations about the weather can be a pure form of language. Bill would tell me about the rain in the forest or the wind he experienced during long hikes, and I would describe what I saw from my exquisite vantage point, a hammock suspended between a pear tree and a chicken coop. Usually I saw clouds, which in Vermont are frequently superb. Nothing is as pleasurable as the shadow cast by a passing cloud when you are dozing in a hammock on a summer afternoon.

That fall, I started a project that would precisely re-create the effect of a passing cloud in the backyard of Emily Dickinson's house, and I hit an impasse. When Bill came to New York, I hectored him to help me. He has this amazing knowledge about lighting, using it in unorthodox ways in his work, and I hoped he would have some suggestions for revamping an installation that was becoming increasingly complicated, technical, and unpleasant. We spent several hours in the studio playing around with different lights and filters and creating maquettes for a room with a cloud. It was really a blast working with him. I suppose he is used to collaborating because he's a choreographer and dancer, whereas I am used to banging my head against the wall. At one point he crumpled one of the theater gels. That doesn't sound like much, but it was the breakthrough. There happened to be a clothespin in the studio hanging from a string; he clipped the crumpled filter to it, and at that moment we both knew that this was the answer. I'm embarrassed to say that the three-dimensional possibilities of filters had never occurred to me. But for Bill—who for previous projects had stuffed gels into a trash compactor—such experimentation was natural. The crumpled filters made a cloud sculpture. When I installed the piece, I used one hundred fluorescent tubes of three different color temperatures, from warm to

cool, to precisely duplicate the effect of daylight. Illuminated by these lights, the cloud sculpture produced the exact light conditions of a shadow cast by a cloud in Dickinson's backyard.

Working on lighting projects for Bill's new performances is, I guess, a kind of payback. But mostly it's just a fantastic opportunity to work with lighting in a different way. For *Three Atmospheric Studies*, I use filtered fluorescent lights to create a specific light composition and condition for each of the three acts. The first act is based on a painting of clouds by Turner and re-creates the color of daylight passing through clouds. The second is based on Newton's visual spectrum and works as sort of a reverse prism, with the light filtered by violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red gels, all joining together to form daylight. The third is based on some scary-looking clouds from a Cranach painting in Munich that Bill became obsessed with.

The dancers are also already practicing with a version of the crumpled-filter cloud for a later performance in Dresden. This cloud is a shadow machine. It does what a cloud does optically—that is, it changes the intensity and color of light. It's made of about five hundred feet of theater gels in eleven different colors, all crumpled up and held together by superstrength clothespins of my own design. I am really not concerned with the cloud becoming a "prop," because Bill is known for activating the experience of the audience, going so far as to bring them onstage. It was really important for me that viewers walked around the cloud to experience changing light conditions, because it really is more an "optical" cloud than a "physical" one. So it makes sense that the dancers are moving around it. While I've been trying to do cloud pieces for a number of years, this is the first one that worked. Clouds are such a cliché; it's dicey territory.

But ultimately the sun is always the impossible goal of my work—always the goal, always absent. This nineteenth-century obsession with understanding the sun, which preoccupied people as different as Turner and Dickinson, is very compelling to me. If I weren't such a chickenshit I would stare into the sun, burn my retinas out, and retire to the south of France. The sun is all colors, total energy, everything, and even a cloud's shadow is a reduction of some part of that energy, and that is where color slips in. For the record, the sun is not yellow, nor is it orange. It is, as Turner said on his deathbed, god.

William Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt may have disappeared last year, a victim of government budget cuts, but in its place the choreographer has created an even more flexible and trans-disciplinary creative unit: the Forsythe Company, an eighteen-artist ensemble (based in Dresden and Frankfurt) whose productions will leave traditional notions of ballet behind, with site-specific performances, interventions in public spaces, and audience participation. For its first creation, *Three Atmospheric Studies*, opening at the Bockenheimer Depot in Frankfurt on April 22, the group teams up with New York-based artist Spencer Finch, who is known for catapulting viewers to historically and geographically distant places through the sparest of means: electric lights and color filters. For example, in *Eos (Dawn, Troy)*, 2002, he traveled to the site of ancient Troy and precisely measured the color and intensity of light as the morning sun first began to rise—and then re-created that exact light condition in New York's Postmasters gallery using fluorescent tubes filtered with colored gels.

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—DANIEL BIRNBAUM

## Spencer Finch

TALKS ABOUT COLLABORATING WITH WILLIAM FORSYTHE

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Opposite page, top: Spencer Finch, lighting for *Three Atmospheric Studies* (April 22, 2005, fluorescent lights and filters, 40 x 3 x 3"). Center: Spencer Finch, lighting for *Three Atmospheric Studies* (April 22, 2005, fluorescent lights and filters, 40 x 3 x 3"). Bottom left: *Rehearsal for untitled work in progress*, Frankfurt, 2005. Photo: Christian Hoeniger. Bottom center and right: Spencer Finch, *Swirlight in an Empty Room (Shining Cloud for Emily Dickinson)*, Amsterdam, NL, August 28, 2004). 2004, fluorescent lights, theater gels, and clothespins, dimensions variable.