

Improvise not to automate: an encounter between contemporary dance and improvisation in phenomenology

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Talking about improvisation is not an easy thing. It is a feature often used as a way of unlocking creative workshops or dance studio for creating surveys, but this can also be seen in some shows or as the composition itself. The dictionary of dance² defines dance improvisation as: “execution mode sequences dance it without prior preparation”. Linked to the notion of “now and the unforeseen”.

This research started when I was finishing my degree in Psychology, along with my research about the relationship of memory-bodily-affective-defined by Cassia Navas and Lenora Lobo in the book "theater of the movement".

This research continued deepening and resulted in two complementary dissertations : one in philosophy in which I used the phenomenological theories according to the two French philosophers - Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Merleau Ponty - to understand improvisation as a phenomenon. And the other in dance, in which I made the speech analysis of Simone Forti from the understanding of improvisation as a phenomenon. So here I will present very briefly what has already been researched, and what - and how - I intend to continue developing this research.

This work focuses on the area of improvisation developed inside the American post-modern dance, whose main representatives are: Simone Forti (1935), Yvonne Rainer (1934), Steve Paxton (1939), Ruth Emerson, Trisha Brown (1936) David Gordon (1936), Deborah Hay (1941), Childs Luscinda (1940), Douglas Dunn (1942), Carolee Schneemann (1939). The choice of this period can be explained by the choice of referential speeches to be analyzed here: texts by Simone Forti, and speeches given by Claire Filmon, who worked with Simone Forti and Julyen Hamilton, English improviser resident in Spain, who works from this line of research to create his performances as well. As I am also an improviser, I

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² LE MOAL, Philippe, « *Dictionnaire de la danse* » Larousse, Paris, 1999.

used my personal experiences, especially the experiences of learning experiences with improvisers recognized Julyen Hamilton and Claire Filmon, so that their ideas always inspire me and end up appearing implicitly or explicitly in my research.

Current dance that appeared during the 1960s in the United States, the American post-modern dance developed in the late 1970s. It appears as a refusal of its previous, modern dance, and introduces himself as "revolutionary" because it replaces esthetics coded by the use of everyday movements thus claiming a place between life and art: "*No matter which movement and no matter which bodies are acceptable as a materials of dance.*"³ The dance comes out of the domain of the spectacle to come at a critical moment: not only the dance criticizes itself as it becomes the way to a political and social reflection. So improvisation does not invent a new move, it reconstructs the meanings of these. Improvise is to deconstruct the mechanics of a movement learned and provide a new direction. It is a new way of creating and positioning for the artist in front of his art where life and art are mixed.

This practice engages a different relationship to creation, because it is no more the form of movements that is researched, not esthetics need. The creation here is in the order of choice: without premeditation, the dancer must choose at every moment a gesture, then another and so on, creating a dance. So that the creative act coincides with the choice. But which gesture, which move to choose? How is it possible not predict and get to choose the moment? This position in relation to the unpredictable poses a particular state of the body, a vulnerability to the unknown that is to come.

A reflection on the possibilities of the instant action opens the imagination of the dancer to a myth that does not correspond at all to reality: the myth of full freedom. But why is it a myth? Because improvisation is possible to do everything, but you can not do anything. As already mentioned, you need to improvise to make choices and that there is a consciousness that is needed: awareness of the present moment, the position of the occupied space and the possibilities of action.

³ FONTAINE, Geisha « *Postmoderne danse* » in : http://mediatheque.cnd.fr/?+-Pionniers-modernes-et-postmodernes-&id_menu=0#

So, one of the observations that can be made about the practice of improvisation in contemporary dance is: the dancers tend to repeat certain gestures and movements that they dominate, but these gestures and movements end up becoming automatic. The proposal is then to promote a reflection about what is needed to prevent these automatisms maintaining and even deepening the expressive potential of this practice.

For this work I start from the fact that improvisation can be divided into: good and bad improvisation. A bad improvisation can be considered as a perceptual gap, the automatic execution that means a purely mechanical movement regarded here as "empty", without sense. The dancer is not in the state of being open to perception to complete a good improvisation and a good improvisation can be considered as one that promotes the expansion of the vocabulary of gestures. The key factors which result in a good improvisation are related to the refinement of the perception and development of motor intelligence that allow the evolution of the dancer as an improviser. What is essential is to discover what may allow expansion of motor vocabulary, the motor potential, the range of possible choices through the learning of new skills, the development of the action potential, the awareness of other possible ways of responding to what is happening.

To answer these questions we used the phenomenological theory. Phenomenology studies the perceptual field of the human being which she considers as the starting point of all philosophical reflection. Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is actually the starting point of any knowledge. According to this author, phenomenology is an attempt to direct description of the experiences from the whole body-mind. She witnesses the experiences of the subject from the body itself, at which time he perceives the world. The relationship between man and the world is then determined by what was experienced by the body and not by an intellectual reflection.

According to Merleau-Ponty⁴, freedom is always an encounter between the inner and the outer world so that the path between the sensible world and the expression is characterized by a path built by a perceptual motor impregnated with psychology, history and affections. According to Merleau-Ponty, the existence affects every living space perception. The body is an emotional experience: "The spatiality of the body is the deployment of its being of the

⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, « *Phénoménologie de la perception* », Gallimard, 1945, p. 290.

body, how it is realized as a body.”⁵ The spaces are woven of intersubjective and personal affects, emotions that determine the perception of that world. Through the body and how to "live" space (posture, gestures, movements) manifests subjectivity of danseur. C is spatiality that allows the perception of an object distinct from itself: the signifying space is constructed in the light of experience. Through what was experienced by the body, the human being determines his relation to the world and with others. This relational link evolves so that at each new improvisation brings new content. The movement is born of resonances relational subject with his way through to be able to consider the body as a system of possible actions on the world.

Automatism re-born from the loss of the ability to perceive and connect to the world around, and here Deleuzian concepts that help to understand the process of repetition in the context of dance.

The term "to repeat" assume several acceptances which differ in essence. This work will be used in a specific sense. According to the previously cited improvisers, the movement born from a moment of crosses borders sensations that can not be repeated. Repetition is an attempted to revive this moment, in some sensation. An attempt to fix the gesture in time and prevent it from transform, despite the passage of time.

For dancers, past the learning phase, we see the internalization of certain actions that require more reflection for their execution are often mastered these gestures tend to return repeatedly during improvisation. Sometimes, in fact, that beyond any psychological blocks , improviser feel short gestures, so that, to avoid breakage of the movement, the dancer comes to resume gestures that control. This sense of " empty gestures" is echoed in the text of Deleuze⁶: We see that repetition is a necessary and based conduct in relation to what can not be replaced. We can talk in the context of dance, lack of resonance space, gap perception. The lack of availability of space limits the scope of the improviser , so it must rely on what they already know. The dance was fluid, spontaneous, hardens, separates from the sensations of the dancer and becomes devoid of meaning. The fixation becomes an

⁵ *idem*

⁶ DELEUZE, Gilles, « *Différence et répétition* », PUF, Paris, 1968.

automatism: the gesture motion is roots in the field of esthetics breaking up of any sensation.

However, repetition is necessary for kinesthetic awareness and indispensable to improvisation. Thus, this kind of practice implies a further acceptance of repetition: in research, it is expected which the dancer make variations on the same theme. It appears here that the importance of production for several good improvisation. The fact exhaust all possibilities to give latitude to the improviser at the time of the show, you can make your choices with full awareness of what is being done.

Insofar where repetition is the affirmation of difference - according to Deleuze's theory - every gesture can be conceived as an affirmation of difference between the starting point and end point of the study. It is an attempt to assert itself in the world. It appears here that for Deleuze, the difference seen as moving between two extremes exists: "Even if the difference tends to be distributed in various way to go, and standardize the various it creates, it must first be felt, as it gives the different feel. And it must be thought of as creating the various".⁷ Only through repetition, so the difference can not be understood without repetition. Hegel tries to solve the problem of the difference by saying it is only caveat: for example, in terms of colors, black is different from white because it receives more black which confirms its quality (darkness), but suffice it gets a little white to be less dark. Thus, it is an affirmation of the object in its land quality that captures the contrasts, the light is brighter because it receives more light, the darkest dark because it receives less light, so that the "light" element determines the difference between these two realities. Therefore, the difference appears to be the development process between rehearsals, dehiscence between two levels. Similarly, the repetition is between two differences between remembering the past and projection into the future. Far from being rerun of a generality, repetition is mainly an attempt to claim the difference and singularity. The risk of repetition continues of your automatization.

Phenomenology allows to understand the automatism as a lock on a single perceptual mode, a single point of view on the world, which limits the field of action. So it is necessary for

⁷ DELEUZE, Gilles, « *Différence et répétition* », PUF, Paris, 1968.

the dancer to break the deadlock, to develop their presence to sensory experiences in order to change the world's perception et be able to assign meaning to their gestures. Despite the difference between the thoughts of these two philosophers, they address the issue of automatism under a common point: considering the perceptual automatism as a hole.

The principal hypothesis for this question is that without a framework, improvisation is lost in a vacuum, without freedom it loses its purpose, its primary meaning: spontaneity. The node to improvise is to reveal this puzzle: In terms of improvisation, how to guide finely continuing consciousness absolutely free and detached from what may appear?

The notion of structure implies the fact of structuring something. In this case it is not only a practical structure, or part, more structuring also the dancer even as improviser. The structure implies an organization of the elements around the relationships that will be established. This structure will then be constitutive of the practice, it will build the subject and your body in this specific time. The end point may be unknown, but the improviser will not get lost in his dance the starting point is clear in its intent and that it is not lost in the gestures. The sensuousness will then guide the intention over improvisation. This is not a job only on the physical body, but work on awareness, attention on a paper about the experience.

Improvisation as a process of differentiation:

"However, the way we stand to move the world itself determines a relation to this world".⁸

Improvisation can be conceived as a means of authentic expression of the dancer, in the sense that it is he who decides the movement by which it will communicate and express themselves in a spacetime specific. The observation of an improviser can analyze the relationship he establishes with:

- Himself: through image building by themselves and for themselves.
- Others: which shows a narrative capacity, substantial, or the connecting body.

⁸ « *Cependant, la façon dont nous nous positionnons pour bouger dans le monde détermine un rapport propre au monde.* » IN: LOKYER, Tonya « Les langages des sens » p. 60 in Nouvelles de danse 48/49, Vu du corps : Lisa Nelson, Mouvement et perception. Ed. Contredanse 2001.

- Space: here it is the medium in which it is inserted: scene, workshop or any other space in which it exists and express through their dance. The space will appear as a factor structuring improvisation.

So, in improvisation, as a gesture is consecutive to an action, but is not an end in itself. According to Simone Forti, as a result of a gesture inside the building from the relationship that is established with the world, starting from an intelligence motor which is developed through the experiences, what allows conduct the dance that this improviser calls as "state of dance"⁹.

In fact, improvisation is simultaneously perception of the world, self-perception and creation of movement. Therefore, the choice of movements in the moment narrates the perception of the subject. Improvisation is a harmony between body and mind, and it allows the improviser to be closer to his feelings and perceptions through movement, but more because of the mind-body integration, it is possible to say that thinking is as the body moves. During the time of improvisation, the dancer lives in the present experiments already experienced registered in his body: his muscles, bones, and cells.

Improvisation can allow the subject to free themselves from an oppressive reality that away from her own physicality as his emotions. Dancing allows everyone to express themselves and show their identity, while immobility freezes fatigue on the body, which reduces the ability of expression. Exhausted but short movement, the dancer takes refuge in automation. Thus, improvisation can be a way of awakening the forgotten or repressed perceptions.

To conclude, we can say that the dancer becomes an improviser only after he is able to recognize and experience with the various body materials. He developed his driving intelligence to continually renew its "becoming" improviser and attempt to access the feeling of a "good improvisation". This motor intelligence, based on a decision of kinesthetic awareness, achieves "the state of dance " state of intense pleasure that serves as an anchor point for tuning between movements and sensations, since the form gestures appears as the result of an inner construction. Insofar improvisation involves a perpetual

⁹ État de plaisir intense qui tient lieu de point d'ancrage à l'accordage entre mouvements et sensations ; dès lors la forme des gestes apparaît comme le résultat d'une construction intérieure. In : FORTI, Simone ; KUYPERS, Patricia. Pré. ; Benoit-Trader, Agnès. Trad. « *Nouvelles de danse 44-45, Manuel en mouvement* », p. 153, Contredanse, Bruxelles, 2000.

renewal and sensory sign, there is every reason to evoke the notion of "repetition" . Repetition renewed perception, it is a door that leads to perceptual opening improviser in the good improvisation. But if the repetition becomes "automatic ", it can conversely induce a perceptual closure and cause the "bad" improvisation.

It is therefore necessary to dissolve the rigidity of the body and dissolve the rigidities reports with matter to be tuned. This is the action to dissolve the dancer who will become an improviser, awareness of this event being aware of a balance of forces, a body and its expression. According to Deleuze, art, capturing forces incorporates the feeling in the material, and consolidates the work in the expressive strength of the material and those of affect. Learning to be guided by the intelligence of his own body, is - in my opinion - the basic essence of the work of expanding the gestural vocabulary.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the space does not exist in itself. It can only exist in a perceiving subject, so that it is the body of the subject that will feed the world through the connections it makes to him and vice versa. For Merleau-Ponty, space is first motor, because the subject can not discover the many facets of objects that have in the world that is moving in space and putting them in perspective. Thus, it is the presence of the subject and his movement that the world will be seen as it is moving in this world that the subject will discover the different facets and can get an overall picture. However, if the dancer focuses only on his own body and his own feelings, it will contain in itself and does not happen to be a whole. It remains in its own bubble without connecting to the environment in the world. It will be a unique material to work with, but nobody managed to collect unrelated to the world, so it can not produce diversity, there is still the same, on the same field empty, meaningless, because the meaning is the result of perception.

Improvisation is a way to make non-conscious emotional content emerge. By this "content" we mean the feelings, blockages, cravings, desires or fears, that is to say, the emotional and affective aspects that characterize each person and will provide a basis for the perception of the surrounding world, as well as oneself's position in the world.

