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A Practice for Trust: Dance Improvisation Actions in Choreography Classes for Adolescent Girls in Israeli High School Dance Programs

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Improvisation is a common practice in choreography classes in Israeli high school dance programs. According to the national dance curriculum, "the use of improvisation in choreography classes develops creativity, movement study and self-awareness, solving problem skills and decision making". Dance teachers explain that improvisation enables dance students to devise "their own movement language".

However, in this lecture today I would like to talk about a different dimension of dance improvisation – a social dimension of the moving body, hoping to contribute to the relatively unexplored terrain of the ethical body.

Based on ethnographic research- that is, observations and interviews, I will strive to show how the moving body becomes an active participant in constructing its social environment. I would like to show how embodied social relations of mutual trust evolve among girls who dance and

improvise together. I will argue that the basic conditions of improvisation which are, uncertainty and risk, operate as active factors in this process and that they induce physical sensations of reciprocity, and thus contribute to an embodied and tightened collective.

My research was done between the years 2004-2006 in three dance programs in high schools in the tel aviv area.

In Israel today, there are more than 80 dance programs in middle schools and high schools all over the country, in which more than 1500 students, most of them girls, are active. In these schools, the dance curriculum for matriculation exams is considered to be the most demanding and difficult among all arts, offering between 13-20 weekly hours of mandatory study and practice, on top of the general study program.

Most of the programs were initiated during the 80's and 90's and, many of them are located in what I call - "regular schools" –to differentiate from high schools for the arts, in which the orientation is semi professional.

The growing numbers of adolescent girls, who strive to dance through high school without necessarily aiming at a professional career in dance, is an interesting phenomenon.

This, and being myself a teacher in such a program, made me want to further understand the social meaning of dance and the moving body for them. In that perspective I was interested in looking at the active body, following the philosopher Merleau Ponty's concept of the lived body and to ask: what does the body do, how does it operate? what kind of moral and social order does it produce, if any at all?

The subject of morality is huge and deeply discussed in philosophy, philosophy of education and sociology of education. However, to clarify: when I'm speaking of morality here, I want to look at the essence of "the good" in reference to what is called in the literature "Prevailing Values" such as empathy, reciprocity and notions of collectivity and solidarity.

Now, going back to the body:

Theoretically speaking- it is safe to say that there are two main concepts that look at the body in the social sciences. Both can be identified as having a direct influence on dance research. The first assumes that the body is a passive entity, socially and culturally constructed¹. This line of thought can be found in Foucault's ideas of the disciplined and tamed

Douglas, 1970; Shilling, 2003 ¹

'docile body'², or Bourdieu's³ concept of habitus – which is explained as an unconscious logic of practice of the body which is enforced by social class and culture.

In respect to dance research, feminist scholars who followed these ideas tended to describe the oppressive aspects of dance practices⁴. Although some of them did show that historically dance was considered a liberating site for women,⁵ most scholars insist that in a patriarchal consumer society, where the feminine body is controlled, and treated as an object of self supervision, self surveillance and self management - dance practices reproduce these feminine problematic qualities and enhance obedience and passivity⁶; therefore, young dancers are at risk of especially eating disorders⁷.

In contrast, the phenomenological approach⁸ views the body as a 'lived body', which is central to the existential experience. This approach emphasizes active embodied aspects of human subjectivity, and examines the ways by which the body integrates with thought and action. It is this point of view that

1977²

1990³

Bordo, 1993, 1998; Hall, 1997⁴

see Hanna, 1988 and McRobbie, 1984, 1991⁵

Thomas, 2003⁶

Gvion, 2008; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994; Dotti & others, 2002⁷

Merleau-Ponty, 1945; 1992⁸

I embrace, as I mentioned before, in looking at improvisation and examining its embodied foundations of social action.

In order for you to understand what I'm talking about I would like to show a short dance improvisation. Unfortunately I don't have a documentation of the impro' classes I myself watched, but still I think it's important for you as an audience to have a kind of bodily somatic experiencing even only by watching someone else move and dance. We will be looking at a short improvisation session done by a couple: a woman and a man, in Vermont in the US.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wgZkUapAiw

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AKfRiOihQ>

Basically I observed very similar sessions of improvisation. Usually there were about 12-15 girls in the room, and the teacher would ask them to find a partner and start moving from there. The directions would be:

- "STAY CLOSE, FIND A WAY TO TOUCH EACH OTHER AND LET GO OF YOUR BODY**
- GIVE YOUR BODY PARTS TO YOUR PARTNER, GENTLY**

- **PASS YOUR FULL BODY WEIGHT TO YOUR PARTNER'S BODY AND LISTEN TO THE MOVEMENT**

The action of improvisation is described in literature as a playful activity which is based on the ability to spontaneously react without pre-planning; an action that is performed in the moment and from one moment to the next.

Cynthia Novack, one of the founders of the American movement of contact improvisation explains that the action of dance improvisation which is based on touch and physical sensations of transferring weight from one body to another – requires a constant embodied reorientation and change in time and space.

Thus, the dancers (or movers) explore their movement jointly from one moment to the next. They don't know where they are going and what will happen in the next minute. Hardly using words and sometimes with not using their sight, they are forced to secure themselves on kinesthetic senses and on a mutual reciprocal body support; They have to be present in their material body in order to support themselves and each other physically, through an ongoing and becoming embodied relationships based on mutual response.

In this process a certain physical and mental risk is embedded, and it is in these moments, where there the is acting in uncertainty, I want to suggest, - trust is produced.

The literature points to a theoretical link between trust and risk in two arenas of sociology studies: one is the study of organizations and the work place, and the other is the discourse of late or high modernity as they call it. Both offer an understanding of the mechanism of the structured linkage between trust and risk. I will refer here only to the first, the study of organizations.

In that respect scholars such as Yamagishi and Cook (1998) show that the probability of growing trust is located in conditions of uncertainty. TRUST, they explain, is produced as a reaction to unstable and at risk situations. The scholars distinguish between actions that operate in conditions that are based on well known and anticipated systems of rules and regulations – as actions that produce safety; to actions that operate in situations of uncertainty where the future (close or far) is unknown. These situations, they say, have a potential to produce a notion of trust that will always depend on the prospect of a continuing relationship.

Using this logic it can be said that if the genuine conditions that movement improvisation establishes are situated in uncertainty and risk, an embodied active trust can be produced.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body, the "lived body" investigates, explores and learns about the self and others through its actions in the world. The body exercises and acquires cultural schemes not in a mechanical automatic sort of way, but rather through producing what Nick Crossley (1995) calls "motorized meaning". A meaning that is created through our embodied actions in a mutual open space in which we share notions of inter-corporeality and inter-subjectivity.

The body, therefore, is perceived here as a subject in motion who is always engaged in and with the world. The dancing girls experience a range of encounters, notions, emotions and thoughts that are available for them while there are in this process.

Being in sync in movement, not knowing what will happen next requires a co-production of a shared social experience. Since the action is synchronic and reciprocal it may be suggested that both dancers hang on to each other's bodies

creating a joint power of trust which keeps on moving them in space.

The ability of the girls to embrace embodied vulnerability (VULNERA is the Latin word for: to wound), and their ability to react to each other's movement, produces therefore, a social fabric based on physical relationship of response-ability (in its double meaning). According to Levinas (1981), an empathy and responsibility to the other that reflects a sensual moral order.

Thus, the ongoing continuity of these corporeal relationships in motion, re-create and re-design mutual flux of embodied moral and social order that can be defined as strongly collective . This is a social order that is created from, and in the body by its lived action, a concept that counterpoints the common western Cartesian order in which the body is subjugated to the mind, and therefore social order is doomed to be created by it. Moreover it challenges the constitution of modern ethics only in rationalist terms and the assumption that "to see is to know" as says Irigaray (1994), who claims that ethics can and should

appropriate other senses such as touch, which she defines as the primordial of all senses.

At this point, I would like to elaborate the meaning of trust for the dancing girls. I will do so by looking at what they said in interviews, and offer two contextual perspectives: one from a gender point of view, and the other from an educational point of view. This will help us look at the potential of such embodied environment, and to further understand if and how such an embodied trust is transferred to other social locations and arenas in their lives.

When asked about the experience of improvisation, the girls offered various interpretations relating to what was happening in the dancing studio, and also outside of it.

For example, they said that the embodied intimacy and the feelings of empathy, trust and commitment that are produced during improvisation, enable them to "to get to know each other better"; That the very action of improvising based on trust moderates expressions of competitiveness between them; That they developed an ability to be more attentive to others; to give others more space to move, and to voice ideas, opinions and thoughts; and that they can safely function within their group, talking and showing openly their

weaknesses and vulnerabilities. There was also some expression of frustration – one girl for instance said that because she is committed to the group she feels she often has to "lower herself" and consciously avoid showing-off her good dance abilities and skills. This tells us that there may be personal profits and losses to this process.

However, one major profit is definitely the fact that trust that is produced on and from the practicing body, establishes within a regular high school a unique feminine group in which its members hold on to a precious social asset. A closed embodied community of young women who derive their social strength from their dancing experience within a larger, rather masculine high school framework. A community that emphasizes body based collectivity where trust becomes a fundamental social factor, which, so it seems - is translated to ethical practices of responsibility and reciprocity.

To conclude:

There are extended rewards to dance improvisation that go beyond artistic creativity. The girls experience their own bodies as active subjects that are created and re-create a shared public space in which the ethical moving body is dominant. This is a significant point in the lives of adolescent

girls, since dance improvisation embraces for them a practiced potential to challenge cultural gender oppression, and to legitimize themselves as embodied subjects, active and valuable. And I will close citing Rachel Russel (2000) : "love, touch, morality, the body and community are the key players in making moral citizens".