

The choreographic path of the beginning (and the end) of the body

The three days of the Interchange Festival (10th, 11th and 12th of November 2017) were marked by discussions about the idea of beginning. The idea of beginning as a place of origin; of where we come from and of where artistic practices originate from. Most of the artistic practices that were presented during this weekend were originated from places related to the artists own personal physical conditions or issues related to their cultural heritage. For this reason, I would say that many works originated from the influence of involuntary and innate conditions imposed on the artists bodies.

In the workshop *Verbal Limbs: Describing Your Dance*, the participants were invited to share with the facilitator Sarah Houbolt, a member of the non-sighted community, a practice around the idea of dance description as a tool for improvisation. “*What do you see?*”, Houbolt asked the group, while requesting us to be standing in front of each other. The idea was that we should describe what we saw by looking at the partner’s body as objectively as possible. Trying to describe objectively, without being influenced by pre-concepts and interpretations, belongs to the main challenge of this exercise.

Following the same principle, we worked in duos and in trios, describing each other’s movements. In a trio constellation, A was moving, B was describing A’s movement and C was moving following the description of B. When movements are faster than thoughts, through which aspect should we describe them? What do you want to take in and what do you want to leave out of this translation from visual-sensorial perception into words? How much do you co-choreograph as someone who describes situations? These questions still resonated with me long after this experience had ended.

While the idea of perfectly functional bodies still dominates the dance scene, Bill Shannon proved to the audience during his presentation how limitation can be the key to an extraordinary movement technique. Since he was diagnosed with a physical disability that effects his ability to bear weight on his hips, Shannon developed a movement vocabulary that is inspired by his innovative use of crutches. His work is strongly influenced by Hip Hop and Skate culture, as well as by visual and performing arts. His unique and interdisciplinary artistic work comes from the place where the body shows its capacity of reinventing itself. The origin of Shannon’s and Houbolt’s choreographic path started in their innate physical conditions, i.e., the beginning of their bodies.

Behind the question “*Where are you from*” one can find the search for the feeling of cultural belonging. Cultural identity walks side by side with the capacity to identify oneself within a group which shares a common ground of history, experience and memory. How does our cultural identity influence or define the way “artists put things together”?

Perhaps it was this question which mostly framed the works performed during the Interchange Festival. The need of sharing one’s roots and to contextualize one’s history with one’s own artistic practices were the motto of the Friday evening presentation, which was curated by Victoria Hunt and Thomas

E.S. Kelly. The performances of that evening were reminding the audience about the conflict of living between two worlds and of integrating one world into the other. In their practices, we could find characteristics of contemporary western performance placed side by side with traditional and ritualistic elements, transporting the audience to a time where the ground had no owners.

The social need for belonging can also be observed regarding artistic matters. Where does my work belong and how can one contextualize it, are two of the questions that artists are constantly occupied with. It can be because of reasons concerning the art market or due to reasons related to their artistic identity; the point is that artists frequently have to deal with the experience of defining what they do. This discussion topic was proposed during the breakfast session facilitated by Raghav Handa; a dialogue about the contradictions within the constant effort of defining and labeling artistic work. On the one hand, it is an action of finding oneself's identity and a place inside a group of many faces; on the other hand, there is the danger of confining artists to pre-concepts related to what each category should be.

But artistic processes are not just originated from involuntary conditions or moved by the search of one's identity. In Philippe Blanchard's work, the choreographer is dealing with the concept of democracy as a condition of the process of living together in society. Through a practice which involves sessions with a group of a big number of people, Blanchard gets the participants to experience situations where one has to constantly negotiate with others. By sharing a narrow space or being always attached to each other, we experienced the need of agreeing to a common physical ground as a group.

By agreeing, disagreeing, giving and taking space during the improvisation, people are stimulated to deal with the constant situation of living together and of generating a non-verbal sensorial dialogue. A beautiful example of how concepts put bodies in movement and how this movement moves ideas in philosophical discussions. It is when concepts become a door for imagination, rather than be transformed into a static castle of certainty.

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