

## The dancing body as living archive *(lecture performance 20 mn)*

### **Part One**

*Part One tells the story of the Shadow Dance through the body*

*[While dancing]*

- Where does this gesture come from?
- Does it come from my own body?
- Is it *My* body that generated this gesture?
- Who does this gesture belong to?
- Is it actually *My* gesture?
  
- Of course, it is my gesture...

But:

- I had to be trained in contemporary dance to be able to perform this gesture
- I had to spend a lot of time in dance studios that it comes so naturally out of my body
- I had to be taught by dance professionals
- I had to be transformed by others
- I had to let others shape my body
  
- Of course, it is my gesture
- But a gesture made of others
- A gesture composed of other gestures
- Of other times, of other spaces, of other stories
  
- Maybe you see me alone on stage
- But I am not dancing alone
- My body carries out the shadow of other bodies who left traces on my body

*Shadow dance [for publication: insert a video-link?]:*

My teacher Gerald taught me how to move on the floor. He taught me how to roll on the floor, continually staying in contact with it. I can change direction, but I never lose connection. Finger tips brushing the floor, although I am rolling on the side.

I created this solo- *the Shadow dance*- reminding Gerald's training. I created this solo knowing that some other people- not trained contemporary dancers – would learn it and perform it. I composed this sequence of movements as a kind of silent dialogue with Gerald. This dance is a response to his teaching. In remembrance of Gerald's training, his movements, my body

created a choreography inspired by his dance. The *Shadow dance* calls back Gerald's aesthetic. It calls back my past encounter with Gerald.

But the *Shadow Dance* also opens up to a future event. As it was created for other people who would perform it, it already carries traces of a future event, that has not taken place yet. An event that will take place. As I knew which dancer would perform the *Shadow Dance*, I created the sequence for specific persons. I created the choreography for them. For their bodies. For their movement aesthetic. This dance coming just now out of my body, is a silent dialog with Gerald. This solo is calling back the past (Gerald's training), meanwhile announcing the future, because it will be reactivated/reenacted by other dancers. Therefore, this solo is *not* a solipsist act. It is *not* an individualist act. This solo tells stories. It tells my story, as well as the story of others. The *Shadow dance*.... A dance resonating from one body to another one in a cascade of resonances...

But it also tells my own story.

This dance coming out of my body illustrates my own biography.

Can you recognize all the different dances that inhabit my body? Can you see all dance techniques I learned over the years? West African dances... Hip hop... Modern jazz... Ballet.... Salsa... Contemporary dance

(I lived in so different places. I lived in different cultures. I learned to express myself in different languages. My passion for dance started as a child on the back of my mother while she was performing traditional steps with other African women in a remote village in Cameroon.

So many things changed in my life. But dance remained.

In the end, the *Shadow Dance* is more than just the story of Gerald, the other dancers and the performance event.

This dance also tells the story of my ethnographic fieldwork among professional dancers. It narrates eight years of intensive training. This dance carries out a story of bodily changes and transformations: a loss of weight, an accumulation of muscles, a gain of flexibility.

I still can't make the large gap. My body was already shaped as I started dancing ballet as an adult. I should have accepted to go to the ballet class when my mother suggested it when I was ten. At that time, I thought ballet was ridiculous and too "girly". I preferred dancing wildly on hip hop music and improvising for myself.

This *Shadow Dance* also carries my life story. It encapsulated a biography made of different places, different times and dance techniques. A lot of stories are intermingled in this dance. )

## **Part Two**

*Part Two tells the story of the Shadow of Others through pictures and questions the issue of history making*

The dancing body tells stories of encounters: when a soloist dances on stage, he is dancing with the shadows of all the other bodies he met, danced with, touched, was taught by (Vionnet 2018). In the previous example, it is the memory of Gerald that shows up through my own body. The dancing body embodies all past encounters with others. It is a body made of others, made *by* others.

I will argue that the body is a living archive, because what you see in a dance is more than movement and choreography. The whole biography of the dancer reenacts: stories of encounters, places and times are coming out of his body when he is dancing.

*[Start powerpoint]*

But can the body be an archive? A book can be an archive. A bookcase. A library. The Duncan library of Aberdeen is material, tangible: 2,200 tonnes of steel, 760 glass panels, 4,700 lights, 24 kilometres of shelving.

An archive can be a picture. But a body? The body is still in movement, continually in transformation into new forms of being. A choreography is never the same. Each enactment of a gesture is a new event, although based on past souvenirs.

Imagine a dance performance combining books, library and bodies. A choreography in a library. Living bodies playing around with the material available: rolling on the carpets of the library, hanging at balconies, taking out books of the bookcases, lying on chairs, standing on tables, going up and down the building using the three lifts.

The pictures you can see just now tell the story of the performance *the Shadow of Others* held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 at the Duncan Library of Aberdeen in Scotland. The music was broadcasted in the whole building, giving a sense of unity between the different actions happening at the different floors of the library. The music fulfilled a function of connection. It was the red thread connecting the dancers rolling on the different floors of the library and audience's members at the very last floor, watching the performance from the top balcony.

It was an event made of books, architecture, people, costumes, sounds, dancing and movements.

During the dance play, we were filmed by a photographer and a filmmaker. Both were characters in the play. Their task was to follow us in order to capture movement, to record traces of our dance. They had access to all seven floors, contrary to the audience who only had a bird perspective from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> floor. The filmmaker and the photographer had the mission to create memory of the event. They had to keep trace of this ephemeral event which would disappear after the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2017. The filmmaker and the photographer. Both producers of archives.

But a photograph freezes the body. Susan Sontag writes that photography “turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time” (Sontag 1979). Indeed, a photograph freezes the dance. In the photograph, the living body becomes a static gesture of a past event. Sontag writes also that “photographs actively promote nostalgia (...) all photographs testify a time” (Sontag 1979: 15). In Sontag’s opinion, photography is essentially related to the past. It is the freezing of an action. When we look at a photograph, we feel the past movement. But the photograph is just a second of a broader event. Our imagination can fill the gaps. We can only imagine all the other seconds in-between. Finally, “after the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality” (Sontag 1979: 11).

How many stories does a library tell? How many souvenirs are stored in the shelves of a library? How many epochs and spaces are encapsulated in the books?

The dancer Valeria picked up a book on her way toward the audience, in the middle of the shelves’ rows: *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This book calls back the memory of a remote island at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It narrates Malinowsky’s fieldwork in Melanesian New Guinea. Valeria opened up the book and put it on the next shelf. She randomly picked up another essay: *L’existentialisme* of Jean-Paul Sartre. As soon as the title is mentioned, we have images bumping into our heads: in that case, the hectic political French postwar context.

Meanwhile, the dancer Imogene was choosing another book at the upper level: The *Ethics* of Spinoza that brings us back to the Dutch philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the whole body-mind question.

These books are called “knowledge”. They are the historical sources we can rely on. They are the official *archives* of our modern history. Archives allow historians to restore facts and make history. They produce our western history. It is official knowledge.

But other cultures have other ways of producing “knowledge” (Gehm, Husemann, Von Wilcke 2007). They have other ways of making history, of creating memory.

The long history of colonization and decolonization reveals the way western epistemology imposed its hegemony on other cultures: it pulverised other forms of knowledge production – like embodied practices – which were not considered with the same value. Dance scholar Diane Taylor wrote that embodied practices - as forms of history, identity, memory - were banished by colonizers (Taylor 2003: 21). The written was opposed to the embodied and the oral. But Taylor argues: "modes of storing and transmitting knowledge are many and mixed (Taylor 2003: 22). In her opinion, performances played a role in keeping traditions, preserving alternative forms of knowledge.

I can illustrate this with the following example. When you dance with a west African dancer, he will explain to you the meaning of his gestures. For instance, he will perform the gesture of "planting seeds". Or, he will perform the steps of social ceremonies like funerals. Of course, from my western perspective, I don't see the act of cultivation, nor the march behind his dancing. I don't wear the right lens to interpret the gesture on a common ground. But like the book, the body tells stories. It tells the story of people. It is oral history.

Therefore, a dancing body in a library is more than just a body moving. It is more than just an aesthetic shape. A body is marked by a gender and a culture. The sex reflects the history of the struggle for gender equality. The skin color mirrors a cultural story...

A dancing body is never neutral. In fact, a dancing body tells stories. Because it embodies memories and souvenirs.

I do not really appreciate the notion of embodiment. As dance philosopher Maxine Johnstone wrote it, embodiment is linked to rigidity, fixity, statics. The body embodies knowledge: it is as knowledge would be encapsulated in the body, perceived as a close container. We know that it is more complex. Body and knowledge are continually in transformation. But embodiment is an heuristic tool. It helps expressing some ideas.

### ***Part Three***

*Part Three tells the story of the Shadow of Others through video and deals with the notions of archive, anarchiv and repertoire*

Can the body be an archive?

Or the body as an *anarchiv* to borrow Erin Manning's expression? The philosopher says: "The anarchiv is a repertory of traces of events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of

potential. They are reactivable [into] a new event which continues the creative process from which they came, but in a new iteration”<sup>1</sup>.

In Manning’s opinion, the anarchieve is a *repertory of traces* of collaborative research-creation event, mostly connecting to possible future events. It is not about documenting the event. It is about remembering what moved an event into taking form, in a way that might set the stage for a next event to occur.

However, Manning does not get rid of the archive. She sees the archive in connection with the anarchieve: “the anarchieve [still] needs documentation - the archive - from which to depart and through which to pass. It is an excess energy of the archive”<sup>2</sup>.

Drawing on Manning’s conception, should we consider embodied practices as anarchieves? A dance performance is based on previous “archives”, that can be materials (record of another performance, objects, costumes, notebooks, captures of improvisation) and immaterials (souvenirs, feeling, gestures). There is a production of archives during the creation process. But the dance performance is more than a reminder of these different archives. Archives are impulse givers: they create stories. They are performative.

But maybe it is better to get rid of the term *archive* to what concerns body practices, and doing so, preventing from any confusion with the idea of past storage?

Diana Taylor differentiates the *archive* from the *repertoire*. The archive refers to a material (text, document, building, bones) and the repertoire is made of embodied practice, spoken language, dance, sports, rituals. She says that the archive does not change compared to the repertoire. It is static (although also changing slowly over the years in my opinion). For instance, bones remain more or less the same. On the other hand, the repertoire is only a matter of process, transformation and changes. Taylor writes that the stones (archive) might be the same, but the storytelling (repertoire) about the bones, may change.

Taylor does not consider bodily practices as archives, but as repertoire, to distinguish the material from the immaterial.

Following Manning, bodily practices could be anarchieves.

Following Taylor, bodily practices are repertoire.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source : <http://erinmovement.com/the-colour-of-time-anarchieve/>

<sup>2</sup> Source : <http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/anarchiving/>

Keeping in mind the ideas of these two notions, I will consider the dancing body as a *living* archive.

*[Show excerpt "Shadow Dance" of the performance The Shadow of Others and explain the process of creation] [insert link]*

The first part of the excerpt shows the choreography *Shadow dance*, performed by all dancers spread across the different levels of the library: two dancers on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, two on the 4<sup>th</sup>, one on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, one on the second and three at the bottom. All the dancers were facing the same direction but the space between them was different, according to the architecture of the library. We were all performing the same sequence, but in time postponement. From the top to the bottom, each gesture was repeated a few seconds later. This performative act was a claim to illustrate the idea of resonance between bodies. The same gesture was flowing from one body to another one, falling down from one balcony to the other one. The color of the carpet was reinforcing the idea of cascade as there was a phenomenon of shaded tones between the black carpet of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, to the light gray of the second floor. Physical bodies and a built structure were expressing the idea of postponement, (de)gradation, resonance and cascade. The movement was passing from one balcony to another, from one body to another, reuniting the different dancers around the same dance. The gesture was travelling within the building. It was an individualistic gesture each time, as well as a collective gesture.

Therefore, when the three dancers were performing at the bottom floor, they were repeating a gesture that has been performed already five times. Their dance was a new variation of the *Shadow Dance*, as well as a reenactment of a past gesture. When the three dancers from the bottom floor were performing, they were dancing "with the shadows" of all these previous enactments of the *Shadow Dance*.

Later in the performance, we all gathered at the bottom floor and performed *The Shadow Dance* together: the same movements in the same flow, in the same breath. This expressed the tension between the individual and the collective in another way than the one with the cascade of bodies. The same gesture was performed by one and others at the same time. This collective act concretely expressed the idea that a dancer is never alone on stage but performs with the shadows of other bodies. A body is "always more than one", wrote Manning.

This video is an archive of the performance held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May. It is a "performative archive" (to draw on Susan Melrose's terms): it is "not an archive that conserves something that would otherwise be lost. It is not an archive that comes *after* the artwork itself has been completed" (Hoogenboom 2007: 88). It is an archive that generates something: thoughts as I had to prepare this talk. The video helped me in thinking and generating hypothesis. It created today's lecture performance. It is an archive that led to a new creative process and

could even lead to a new artwork. The present time of the archive is transitory as it unites past and future events.

Here, the term archive is not understood in the sense of dead repository. The body is a living archive, because it is changing, growing, transforming, always becoming more. It provides history, memory and knowledge, according to Taylor. And drawing on Manning's ideas, the archive has a performative function: it activates potential for a future event, still to come. Therefore, I will claim for the dancing body as a living archive that recalls past experience, that transmits knowledge and memory, but at the same time, that is an impulse for future experience, first in term of imagination, secondly in a concrete event.

## **Bibliography**

Gehm Sabine, Husemann Pirkko, and Von Wilcke Katharina. *Knowledge in motion. Perspectives of artistic and scientific research in dance*. Bielefeld: transcript. 2007.

Hoogenboom Marijke. "Artistic research as an expanded kind of choreography using the example of Emilio Greco/PC", in Sabine Gehm, Pirkko Husemann, and Katharina von Wilcke. *Knowledge in motion. Perspectives of artistic and scientific research in dance*. Bielefeld: transcript. 2007. p. 81-90.

Manning Erin, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*. 2013

Manning Erin. *Anarchiving*, <http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/anarchiving/>, consulted on the 7 May 2018.

Sontag Susan. *On photography*. London/New York: Penguin Books. [1977] 1979.

Taylor Diane. *The archive and the repertoire. Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham/London: Duke University Press. 2003

Vionnet Claire. *L'Ombre du geste : le(s) sens de l'expérience en danse contemporaine*. Thesis, University of Lausanne. 2018