

Moreno Perna

Reviving the
body in motion

02

Reviving the body in motion¹

by Moreno Perna

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Problems of archiving Dance² and possible future solutions

¹ I would like to thank Angela Linssen for suggesting me for this paper. In occasion of this year's closure of the MTD department at the ATD, I also want to thank her for her work as an Artistic Leader and for always being a mentor for all us students and alumni.

² In this essay, Dance is capitalized when talking about the art form of Dance. This is a conscious choice of mine to elevate the importance of Dance and its artistic value. However, choreography, as the organization of Dance, will not be capitalized.

It was June of 2012 and finally my school schedule gave me some time to wander in the library at the then so-called “de Theaterschool” at Jodenbreestraat 3 in Amsterdam. I found a great number of DVDs of choreographies as well as the recordings of past performances from the students of Moderne Theater Dans (MTD), the department I studied at. Just two years earlier, the students learned a repertory piece and reproduced it in the theater of the school.

It was *Melody Excerpts* by the American choreographer Lucinda Childs.³ While watching it, I became very excited: the students learned the choreographic score from Ty Boomershine, a dancer and assistant of Lucinda Childs, and now I was able to experience it through a video recording. This choreography survived passing from choreographer, to dancer/teacher, to students, to the video-camera, and then onto a DVD that I could access. Anytime a past choreographic score is archived intact is an incredible event, something to behold. Dance is a volatile art form: it appears on stage as quickly as it disappears without physical traces, and only the memory of it remains in the minds and bodies of the spectators.

Beauty and dilemma of dance

This is the beauty and dilemma of Dance at the same time: it only lives in the time-space frame of dancers

³ See the video performance accompanied by animated score on the Pew Centre for Arts & Heritage on vimeo.com/111468894.

⁴ John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975).

⁵ Meta-kinesthetic is defined as: “supposed psychical accompaniment” (Martin, J.) to physical movements; On the Merriam-Webster Dictionary meta-kinesthetic is defined as “dance movement with psychical overtones”, Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “metakinesis”, accessed on June 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metakinesis>.

⁶ western is non capitalized on purpose, as a personal choice under the understanding that western and non-western are of the same importance.

⁷ Fernau Hall, “Benesh Notation and Choreology,” *Dance Scope* 3, no. 1, Fall (1966): 30-37.

⁸ Hall, “Benesh Notation and Choreology,” 30-37.

performing in front of an audience. On stage, movement becomes “a medium for the transference of an aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to another”⁴ and passes through some meta-kinesthetic⁵ information, such as emotions, feelings and sensations that can only be felt within a live performance. Can these elements survive within a recording of a live performance? Before answering this question, we need to discuss the ways that Dance can survive beyond the time-space frame.

The ephemeral nature of Dance

The ephemeral nature of Dance itself makes it very difficult not only to record or notate choreographic scores, but also to reproduce choreographies faithfully. This dilemma is omnipresent in modern western⁶ dance tradition, since the beginning of ballet, “for ballets which have in them choreography worthy of the name suffer very badly in transmission.”⁷ From the choreographer to the dancer, the Dance is adapted and modified. Even when a ballet role is passed over from one dancer to another; moreover, the changes are cumulative, “so that after a few years the choreographer (if still alive) can hardly recognize his handiwork.”⁸ In addition, unless a choreography is extremely bi-dimensional and robotic, writing down a choreographic score for archiving purposes is extremely difficult. Different systems of writing notations have sprouted throughout history, even before the appearance of ballet. From the early use of symbol substitutions, like in Arbeau's *Orchesography* published in 1588, to “track drawing” methods made popular by Raoul Feuillet in the early 18th century, to last century

renowned systems such as Labanotation by Rudolf von Laban or Benesh notation by Joan and Rudolf Benesh, many authors tried to record both ethnic folk dances and choreographies made for the theater.⁹

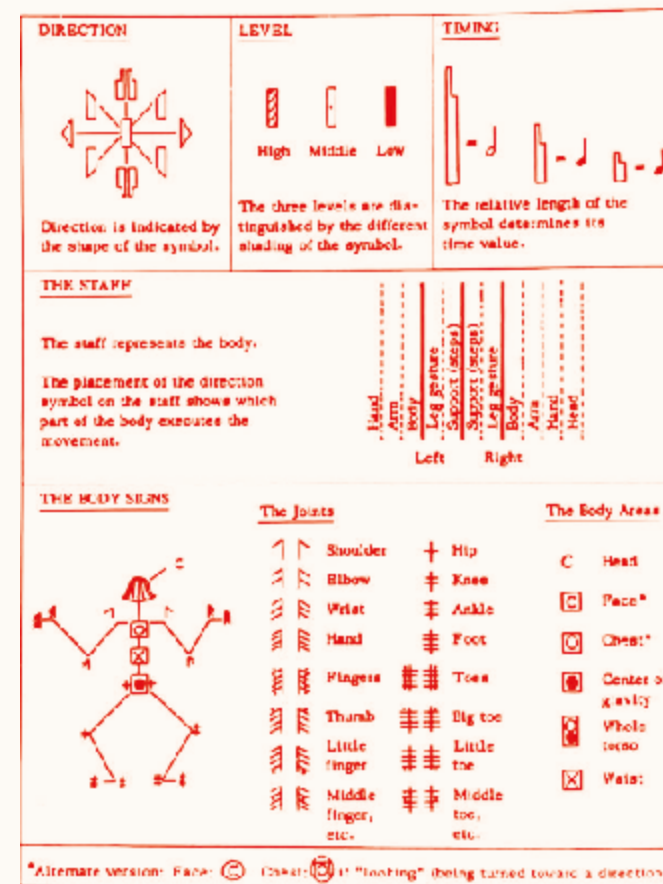
As interesting as they look, they seem to be more like pieces of art themselves than useful tools to retrieve information about choreographies. Furthermore, they lack clarity of three-dimensionality, nuances in gestures, expressions of the face and the body, and an overall description of dynamics in the movements. Some post-modern and contemporary choreographers, who are not interested in perfect precision, have released their own personal notes, drawings or interpretive texts for dancers to be able to interpret and re-enact them as they please. As a contemporary dancer and lover of postmodernism (as a philosophical concept), I wish that cultural institutions would facilitate this: collecting as much media directly from the artists' hands can give a great understanding of their body of work, but these very institutions could be the source of re-interpretations in so many renditions that could fill up theaters for the next century. One step forward has been that of dance companies, which have shifted from "notation" to "annotation" that "operates without symbols and uses language as a complement to images".¹⁰

It has been clear that writing scores is not a complete understanding of choreographers' works, so within the past four decades video-recordings have become the main tool for preserving choreography. This is a good method, especially if accompanied by annotations and drawings as in the beautiful example of Anne

⁹ See: Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977; Huddersfield: H. Charlesworth & Co., 2002).

¹⁰ Desiree Hoving, "The Memory of the Dance: An interview with dance researcher Suzan Tunca," *ICK Amsterdam Blog*, February 26, 2019, <https://blog.ickamsterdam.com/research/the-memory-of-the-dance/>

The Anthropology of Dance

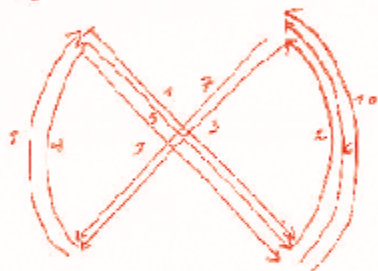


3. Labanotation symbols for direction, level, and timing of movements and symbols for body parts. From Hutchinson, 1954. Used by permission of the Dance Notation Bureau, New York

In variation ten the cross pattern rotates 90° and thus appears as a figure 8. The characteristic movement for this variation is an extended jump from crouching as low as possible to jumping high.

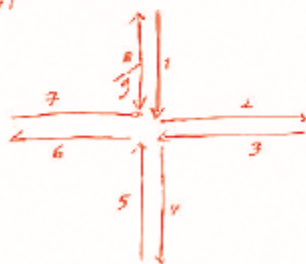


Variation 10



Variation eleven moves along the lines of a cross, perpendicular to the audience. I move only by spinning.

Variation 11



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From A Choreographer's Score, page 34

Teresa De Keersmaecker's revival and recording of her first four pieces ever created.¹¹ However, it still does not transmit the essence of Dance. I'm not only talking about the sweat of the dancer, the warmth of the lights in the theater or the feeling of excitement shared by the audience or the dancers in a live setting, but to that mass of meta-kinesthetic material, which I previously mentioned. Audio-visual materials transfer a tridimensional performance to a flat screen. Both in written scores and in video recordings, the sensorial is lost. We could argue that without the sensorial, Dance cannot exist. Moreover, by erasing the sensorial in archiving Dance, western dance theorists have indirectly pushed a flattening of ballet and modern dance techniques. This flattening is rooted in western aesthetics: for the sake of clarification, dance techniques have been canonized and simplified to be able to be written down on paper and diminish their awareness and knowledge into stylized, flat steps. Dance is more than that: Dance lives in the way a finger is flickered, it lives in the "dancer's ability or inclination to use the overtones of movements to convey his intention",¹² it lives in the eye contact between a mover and an audience member. It sounds tragic for the work of dance archivists, doesn't it? How can we shift our western prospective to be able to include the real essence of Dance when archiving it?

¹¹ See: Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Cvejić Bojana, *A Choreographer's Score: Fase, Rosas danst Rosas, Elena's Aria, Bartók* (Brussels: Rosas, Mercatorfonds, 2012).

¹² Martin, *Introduction to the Dance*.

Rolando Vázquez, teacher and decolonial thinker at the University of Utrecht, seems to come to our aid with the concept of “decolonial aesthetics” in opposition to western Aesthetics:

Aesthesis is not focused on the object, but on the reception of the senses. In this way, it is more of a verblivity not focused on the object of perception and its qualities, but rather on the practices of perception. Thinking through aesthesis enables us to move from the logic of representation to the verblivity of reception.¹³

For Vázquez, the arts and their institutions need to pass “monocultural Eurocentric canons” and, in doing so, exiting the parameters of our modernity:

Decolonial aesthetics is about exploring ways of contesting the impoverishment of experience, ways of delinking from and exiting modernity. It is about reaching ways of earthing, of we-ing, of re-membling, in order to recover the freedom of joy, of mourning, of being in relation.¹⁴

The moment we can decolonize our practices of archiving Dance, then we will be able to understand different perspectives and open to new ways of including senses in Dance archiving. So, first and foremost I call upon dance and arts institutions such as theaters, schools and their libraries to open up to non-western dances and their

¹³ Vázquez Rolando. *Vistas of Modernity – decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary* (Amsterdam: Publication by the Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 14.

¹⁴ Vázquez, *Vistas*, 8.

cultures through classes, lectures and archiving. I would also acknowledge the importance of including so-called “popular” dances from rockabilly to locking, from break dance to voguing, from tektonik to shuffling, and more. Decolonizing our arts and archives asks for a change in standards and in abolishing the division of “high” and “low” arts.

Returning to the discussion at hand, senses are not all that needs to be included in a complete archiving of Dance. Dancer, scholar and professor of Dance at the Oberlin College and Conservatory of Ohio, Ann Cooper Albright explains that in relation to Loie Fuller’s dance material¹⁵, touch is a fundamental aspect. She felt the need to re-enact Fuller’s performances to truly understand her work, the way she used fabrics and lights, her body-mind system when turning on her axis. By embodying the dances, Cooper Albright could touch Loie Fuller herself:

Moving from traces to tracing incorporates the tactile, and thereby refuses the traditional separation of object from subject. Reaching across time and space to touch Fuller’s dancing means that I allow myself, in turn, to be touched, for it is impossible to touch anything in a way that does not also implicate one’s own body. [...] As I touch Loie Fuller through my historical research, both textual and physical, I am touched in return.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ann Cooper Albright, “Tracing the past: writing history through the body,” in *The Routledge Dance Studies. Second edition*, ed. Alexandra Carter and Janet O’Shea (New York, Routledge, 2010), 101-110.

¹⁶ Cooper Albright, “Tracing the past,” 103.

By re-interpreting a historical dance, the author could cut the time and space gap between body of the artist and body of the dance recipient. Though, I need to clarify that the experience of watching a live performance as an audience member could never be replaced by a re-enactment of the dance. In the latter, we do not only miss the direct contact between dancer and public, but also the connection between the audience members. "The public cannot recognize its status as collective entity", which enables those "physiological mechanisms of identification and suspension of disbelief"¹⁷ and catharsis, which are intrinsically of the theater space. However, in the case of dance fruition through an archived dance material we can only find ourselves in a solitude situation, a one-on-one connection between our body-mind systems and the score, writing, drawing or video in front of us. This is the (beautiful) nature of a library or of an archive: being a space for the lonely, curious one.

Experience sense and touch

The real question is: How can we experience senses and touch of a choreographic work in a non-theatrical context, like a library? Some experiments have recently been done to find solutions. The contemporary dance company ICK Amsterdam have been on a journey using technologies in order to collect dance data, still with a freedom of experimentation, with their traveling Choreographic Coding Labs in collaboration with German institution Motion Bank.¹⁸ This is an interesting step into what the future of archiving dance could be, at a theater and dance library: the collaboration with computers, A.I., virtual reality and technology at large. To some, it is unbelievable

¹⁷ Riccardo Notte, *You, Robot* (Florence: Vallecchi, 2005), 110..

¹⁸ see: The Forsythe Company, "Motion Bank," 2013, <http://motionbank.org>.

or unacceptable to talk about computers or even robots in connection to a human bodily form of art such as Dance is. However, this is nothing new. Robots and dance have already had a long history together. If robots are simply "automata", to borrow a term from Ancient Greece, puppet theater is an example of collaboration between human and robotic bodies. Around 2000, New York artist Adrienne Wortzel and engineering professor Carl Weiman at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art collaborated in an Art and Robotics Engineering study that progressed in the "Data Dynamics" exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. They experimented with the idea of "a telerogetic site that functions as an online theatrical space for robots and actors, a remote space that can be manipulated from remote locations via the web".¹⁹ This seems to be a type of theater we were obliged to take part of during the last Covid-19 pandemic, but possible virtual spaces could actually be purposeful solutions to improve archiving Dance in the future.

Imagine entering the library at Jodenbreestraat, putting on your virtual-reality-set in a safe room and being able to enter the work of a contemporary choreographer, for instance William Forsythe, and interact with digital dancers around you, learning the dance steps and embodying the choreography. Feeling the dance on your own body, you would fill up the historical gap between you and the choreography, through touch and with your own experience. At the future library, A.I. would help amateurs and non-dancers learn movements and understand the dance better. In this possible future, even humanoid robots would be able to reproduce and show

¹⁹ Notte, *You. Robot*, 109

²⁰ The question and fear of extinction of dance made by humans due to the growing consciousness and awareness of non-human moving bodies need to be the subject for another essay.

²¹ De Keersmaeker, *A Choreographer's Score*, 8.

choreography.²⁰ We should start working now on the creation of these possibilities by incrementing experiments of dance technologies, gathering data, creating digital archives, connecting libraries all around the world through the web. All is possible, if we understood the necessity of archiving Dance and the importance of investing in the library as a center of culture and art. We need to believe in the historical and cultural importance of Dance, as well. To quote Bojana Cvejic: "in order for dance to be 'taken seriously', it needs to take itself seriously".²¹ ○

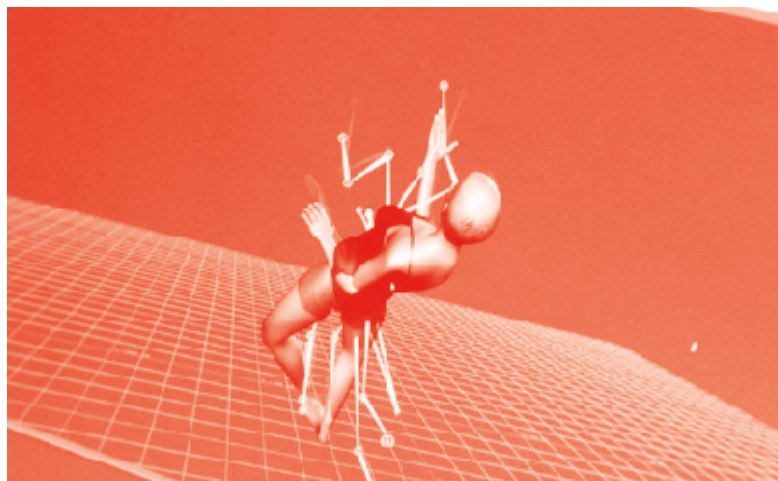
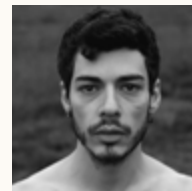


Image from a Choreographic Coding Lab organized by ICK Amsterdam.
Photography: Jeanne Charlotte Vogt.

<https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/academy/peers-researchers/choreographic-coding-labs-33>



Moreno Perna

Opleiding
Moderne Theaterdans

Lichting
2015

Moreno Perna is a dancer, choreographer and teacher. He began his dance studies at an early age with Hip-Hop and urban dances, participating in individual and group competitions with success. He then continues his study of ballet and contemporary dance, and has work experience for TV and advertising in Milan. He was accepted to the Academie voor Theater en Dans in Amsterdam, where he graduated in Contemporary Dance in 2015. He continues his career as a dancer for theater and as a teacher for regular classes and workshops between Amsterdam, Brussels, and Tel Aviv. He creates dance pieces for theater between 2016 and 2020 under the wings of the production companies Dansmakers Amsterdam and ICK Amsterdam (Emio Greco). In 2021 he moved back to Italy where he continues in teaching Hip-Hop and Contemporary Dance, as well as Communication and Marketing for dance and culture.