

## DÉ-POSITION.

### Research on the Body's Agency

By Noémi Solomon



How might we think of the “body’s agency,” its capacity to affect and be affected, in the midst of negotiations and social protests, crisis and political upheavals? What can choreography do in the light of the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, or the most recent events sweeping Turkey and Brazil? How can we imagine the body’s response to, or prompt for, such situations, through its movements and velocities; its quickness to act and stillness to affirm?

These were the guiding questions raised by the artistic-theoretical research project ‘dé-position’ that was initiated and directed by Sandra Noeth and Lejla Mehanovic as part of the Dance Congress. Already in September 2012 a preparatory research stay in Beirut took place with the eight participants (the choreographers/directors Antonia Baehr, Claudia Bosse, Janez Janša, the dance/theatre scholars Lejla Mehanovic, Sandra Noeth, the architects Tony Chakar, Adrian Lahoud and the philosopher Jalal Toufic). In the frame of the thematic focus ‘Intervene/Participate’, the group then presented in a two-part salon during the Congress a number of case studies, propositions and testimonies on the themes of agency and urgency, freedom and movement, intimacy and collectivity. Here, through several photographs, books, films, gestures, architectures, theories, stories, and legends, the participants brought – or “deposited” – singular events onto the common ground of the table. Enacting many shifts in positions or gaps in perspective, these depositions echoed the diversity of the panelists’ backgrounds and approaches. What was shared was precisely this diversity, as the discussion outlined an affective, temporary community at the limits of different disciplines and practices. The question of the body’s “agency” thus emerged through this singular “agencement” – or assemblage – of bodies around the table, a “disposition” of sorts that offered a timely contribution on dance’s implicit and explicit functions in broad areas such as conflicts research, human rights, or the making of new artistic, social, and political landscapes.

The first session, held on the Friday afternoon, examined the relation between performance and public spaces, questioning the role of the body in situations of crisis, protests, and demonstrations. How can dance mobilise bodies and shape public spaces? What kind of space, and what kind of time, do moving bodies choreograph?

**Janez Janša** opened the discussion by positioning dance as a crisis, calling attention to the ways in which dancing bodies can generate social and political disturbance, and thus prompt forceful reactions from authorities. How does dance provoke a crisis? What can its forms and actions tell us about the relation between performance and the law, agency and subjection? Janša brought to the table the case of the 1518 dancing plague, which was initiated in Strasbourg on the 14th of July of that year – an uncanny historical and methodological precedent to the French revolution. As the work of the historian John Maller has shown, a woman began spontaneously to dance, without stopping, in a street of the city. Within a few days, some 30 others had joined her, and nearly 400 at the end of the month – a huge number in proportion to the local population of the time. Janša stressed the ways in which authorities reacted to such a situation: that is to aestheticise the event. Indeed, they set up a large stage in the middle of the city, encouraging more dancing as a way to get rid of this “natural disease” – labeled the Saint Vitus’s dance – until the bodies exhausted themselves, some until death. By pushing them to performing on stage, along with professional dancers and musicians, the authorities turned the movement into a large-scale performance. Throughout this kind of durational performance, the dancers were “taken to a

shrine to beg for mercy," as iconography of the time shows. Here, dance is exposed through the restless, constantly moving bodies: it is mobilised as a crisis that needs to be hospitalised. Conversely, Janša described the actions of contemporary demonstrations where stillness stands as protest. As a form of "peaceful protest" or "passive resistance," these formations of bodies enact motionlessness that too generates a crisis. In this case, authorities do not hospitalise, but criminalise: they penalise through fines or jail sentences. Janša thus emphasised dance's close affiliation with crisis, as it performs either too much or too little movement, thus prompting hospitalisation and criminalisation, in turn.

**Adrian Lahoud** brought attention to the relation between bodies, location, and the law in performances of protest and human rights. Looking at the Occupy movement, Lahoud reminded us that the first eviction of the Zuccotti park in New York City could only be legally authorised on the basis of sanitation. As if, while exercising their own rights, the protesters had endangered others, jeopardising the public space's cleanliness. And yet, the eviction faced legal difficulty, as the park is a "privately owned public space," pointing to a critical juncture between the private and the public in capitalist societies. Lahoud raised questions around the grounds of this "movement," noting some internal paradoxes (rejecting values of capitalism and sexism soon to be replaced by others, such as "equality," which for Lahoud can be just as dubious), and wondered if part of Occupy lead nowhere but to "empty protests"? Closer to what he envisioned as "political activism", Lahoud lingered on the Forensic Oceanography project, at Goldsmiths, University of London, which investigated the conditions that caused the death of more than 1500 people fleeing Libya in the Spring of 2011. Through a close analysis and mapping of the "left-to-die boat," which was left to drift for 14 days causing the death of some 60 people, Forensic Oceanography was able to take legal actions against NATO's failure to intervene. Indeed, they offered extensive cross-referenced positions of the boat, NATO vessels, and military helicopters, while correlating those movements with interviews with the 9 survivors. For Lahoud, this constitutes a paradigmatic piece of political activism: taking NATO to the European criminal court, the group performed a crucial intervention in the field of human rights, at the intersection of technology and the law; norms and ethics. This practice might also constitute a potent archetype for the 'dé-position': to invent techniques not in order to occupy or invest a space, but rather to enter into a series of relations; to identify a problem and follow it, untangle its many threads and see where it leads us to.

Drawing on the Spinozian question of body and ethics – "what can the body do" – **Jalal Toufic** described auto-mobility, a phenomenon immanent to dance as it outlines its potentialities. For Toufic, the body of the dancer can project another body, slightly different, in another space-time. This "subtle body" holds different characteristics: it is defined by immobilisation, yet is not motionless.

As a kind of silence of dance, or stylised body, this subtle body can be compared to the freeze frame in cinema: by capturing a single frame, which is in turn the foundation of filmic motion, the film allows auto-mobility. Here, it is the ground that is moving – or the shoes. And yet, this projection of the subtle dancer happens through dance: it is something the dancer is experiencing. Looking at 'The Red Shoes' (1948) the celebrated film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Toufic focused on the last scene in which Vicky Page, after choosing dance over romantic love just before the opening night, is carried to death by the red shoes as she jumps off a balcony. And yet, dance doesn't stop. The impresario appears on stage, declaring that Miss Page "is unable to dance tonight nor indeed any other night." They then proceed with presenting the ballet, repeating a dance tableau we witnessed earlier in the film, but this time without the presence of the actual dancer – only a halo of light follows her motions. For Toufic, this scene exposes "the truth of dance." The dancer is not there and yet there is dance. This is the subtle dancer: as dance is projected in this other space-time, we witness a sort of evacuation of the body. How can one reach, touch the dancer? Toufic underscored the aura of the dancer, the way she or he is never fully here and there: the dancer is here, but also elsewhere. In this regard, dance might be one of the last places where Benjamin's aura – this sense of distance however close you get to the object – is possible. As manifestation of the aura, the subtle dancer therefore exposes a forceful reaching toward the community through dance.

**Tony Chakar** began by suggesting that the crisis is not an exceptional state of things: rather, the state of emergency has come to be the rule. How are bodies organised by this state of perpetual crisis? How do conceptual orders represent and reinforce a separation between the public and the private? What kind of imagery and body tactics can dissolve such divisions? Chakar reminded us that the public space itself originated at the Renaissance, as clear lines were drawn between the realms of the public and the private; the outside and the inside. For Chakar, this order of things may be coming to an end – even though we cannot know what the future holds and structures. Chakar lingered on icons, in particular from the Saint Catherine's Monastery in Egypt, and mapped the ways they inscribe representational orders while pointing to their limits. Examining a cross, he underscored the merging of the circle and the square as they open onto four dimensions. As the symbols loop together, not only does this trouble the difference between representation and conceptualisation, but it may indicate a different organisation: another regime of representation that responds to the monumentality of the public space by being monumentality itself. Or, looking at a representation of the Christ, Chakar traced an affective blurring, a subtle heresy, in which the distinction between male and female ends with god. For Chakar, there is a point where all distinctions (male and female; public and private; outside and inside) end. Moving toward performance, he then described a story – or a legend – from Tahrir square at the time of the Egyptian revolution. When the army was sent out to circle the protesters, everyday a woman would fill her basket with mangoes and go to the square to distribute a fruit to every soldier. As she was handing the mango over, she pointed to a protester: this is your brother, she said. In this way, she destroyed the abstract notion of public space. By giving, she unified; she personified that which was anonymous. Here, one might follow the affective dissolution of the private body into a collectivity, through and as many intimate choreographies.

On the following afternoon, the discussion moved toward the space of the body, tracing the singular gestures and gaps that arise as minoritarian subjects displace and reenergise the question of the body's agency.

**Lejla Mehanovic** explored the body's capacity for action through a close attention to issues of vulnerability and violence, by looking at a paradigmatic piece of Third Cinema<sup>1</sup>, that is 'The Battle of Algiers' (1966) by Gillo Pontecorvo. As it portrays crucial protests and events that took place during the Algerian War against the French colonial army, this film constitutes an important articulation of revolutionary cinema and urban guerilla warfare; art and mobilisation of bodies. For Mehanovic, its unique language of revolt offers an alternative for a discussion on colonialism and violence; terror and counter-terror; the oppressor and the weak. What kind of bodies and what kind of tactics does this film propose? How might it re-imagine the role of violence and the practice of harm? How does dance participate in the mobilisation and the making visible of a new social body? By staging urban guerilla as "the weapon of the weak," the film acknowledges the vulnerability of certain bodies. Here, violence becomes a tool for the precarious body to imagine and realise new social and political landscapes. Mehanovic stressed that for colonised bodies to exercise their rights, the issue of mobility becomes crucial. Indeed, if the colonial world is a world of immobility, of fixed narratives and statues, of determined positions ever preventing the crossing of borders, the ecstatic dance of the colonised people becomes a tactic for empowering bodies; for channeling and reimagining violence. Third Cinema is said to be prompted by the work of Franz Fanon: "we must discuss, we must invent." In this context, the dreams of the colonised are "muscular" dreams: dreams and hopes of movement and action. Mehanovic reminded us that dance emerges as a potent weapon against humiliation and despair: a protective space, a promiscuous circle, or a space of emancipation. As the film ends with mass demonstrations, it might be said to emphasise dance's role in exposing minorities – raced, poor, gendered bodies – as it empowers and shapes a new collective body.

**Sandra Noeth** brought this discussion of bodies and violence toward issues of care and safeness. How can one remain safe, find protection, when thinking of bodies of protest and human rights? How might we map the search for integrity through a series of singular and intimate choreographic acts? When denouncing violence in public spaces, what kind of violence are we talking about? How can we follow the actions and reactions of bodies that are not "acting out crazily," but performing minute movements, as many gestures of proximity and of invisibility? Moving away from mass demonstrations or performances of protest, Noeth called attention to another form of bodily acts,

motions of persistence that may be closer to that of touch – and of dance. Looking at what she described as “gestures of auto-touch,” Noeth followed some movements that refer back to oneself, imbued with care and attention. Showing close-up images of elderly hands touching themselves, thus blurring what is active and passive; the self and the other, Noeth asked: What kind of violence is this? How can we think of harm and care in those reciprocal gestures?

At the beginning, she cited as an affective and excessive answer Jacques Derrida’s question on touching: When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night? What kind of space – between day and night – do gestures of eyes touching, or self-touching, inhabit? How do these forms of reversibility open onto other logics and other worlds; other modes of affects and of relations? Noeth linked this modality of touching to Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the *caress*: a gesture that doesn’t know what it seeks, a constant recommencement of a movement toward the other, as the self’s return to itself. Here, movement does not operate according to a model of intentionality or contagion; a bonding experience or a turning inside-out of emotions. As they enact an intimate distance, a slight withdraw, a coming together without ever joining, these self-gestures draw a dance of differences. Without making sense or reaching a consensus, dance emerges as a multiple and heterogeneous space, in which resilience is mapped onto the singular space of the body as it gestures, and cares, back to itself, in a practice of self-immunity.

**Antonia Baehr** examined the self-referential gestures of femininity as these are scripted and enacted across a range of artistic, social, and political phenomena. Through a close examination of the manual ‘Let’s Take Back Our Space: Female and Male Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures’ (1979) by Marianne Wex, Baehr brought attention to the ways in which women are portrayed as unstable and insecure in Western societies. In this book, Wex gathered a series of images, photographs she took in the streets of Hamburg as well as imageries from mass media, in order to present a sociological study on how we perform ourselves. Here, the attitudes and movements appear as conditioned by gender specific codes and hierarchies that are reflected through everyday poses and gestures. Baehr stressed how female gestures of self-touching (as women constantly refer back to themselves, adjusting their bras or their hair) display “the second sex” in a slight withdrawal from public space, enacting the negative space of men. This outlines an uneven, volatile stance for women: for instance, female Greek sculptures would often need a third leg for support. What might be the tactics and strategies for women “to take back our space”? How can choreography, through the methodological binding of scoring and dancing, propose alternative possibilities for performances of gender across the social and political realm? For Baehr, ‘Let’s Take Back Our Space’ constitutes a crucial document for different reasons: not only does it constitute a beautiful aesthetic object, but Wex makes a timely intervention by identifying these poses and gestures in society, and further making a score out of these. The book therefore proposes an acute understanding of the role of corporeality in the social and political fabric, by pointing to issues of performance and passing – and the choreographic as a strategy of passages. How does this call for experimentation and performance to create new regimes of representation, and new modalities of being?

**Claudia Bosse** shifted from the Spinozian question in order to ask: “what can be done to the body?” By looking at a series of “intact bodies,” Bosse explored alternative modes of representation for bodies that are held in between public and private spaces; halfway between life and death. What kind of agency do these bodies have, if any? How are they subjected to power, and to what end? What are the mechanisms of representation at work? Bosse began by showing a photograph of the then Tunisian president, Ben Ali, as he paid a hospital visit to Mohamed Bouazizi, the man who set himself on fire and prompted the wave of protests across the country and the Middle East. In this image, we witness the president along with doctors and nurses, an uncanny anatomical theatre, as they surround the nearly invisible body, a fetish of sorts fully covered with bandaging and tucked under a homemade blanket. What does this *mise-en-scène* of authentic life seek to tell us? What is the function of the victim here, amidst the political apparatus of representation? Bosse also projected the image of the White House’s situation room in which Obama, Clinton, and others are witnessing the operations in Pakistan as Osama Bin Laden is being killed. Bosse argued this image stands as a confirmation of the events, exposing traces of the “ex-intact” body. It further constitutes a score, a moral landscape, that tells us how we should understand, experience this act – with the right combination of

fear, relief, and strength. Here, too, we witness a gender divide in the portraying of emotions: as Clinton is gesturing back to herself, she acts out gender-specific conventions and attitudes, in this case a mixture of care and empathy. For Bosse, these images condition us to the events to come: they set up a political agenda through specific reactions and emotional behaviors. Intact bodies cannot just die or become a corpse; power has to confirm their death, to kill them a second time – a reminder that Foucault's sovereign body might still be active in contemporary societies. Indeed, through an inherent theatricality in the act of killing, and of dying, these intact bodies become instrumental to the ongoing process of "peaceful democracy".

Each session was followed by a discussion with the audience. The various comments, responses, and questions extended the depositions further, as they challenged the very distinction between the public and the private; invoked the affects of performances of race and gender in those movements of protest; questioned the need for dance to venture out in the streets if its politics are already at work on stage; pondered about the agency of the dying or dead body. The question of the dancer as agent haunted those exchanges. On this, one might recall how the discussion ended, that is with a question directed at Toufic: "can everyone be a dancer; or project a subtle body?" The answer was as immediate as categorical: "No." Here, dance's specificities remained as "mysterious, miraculous," and "distant" as the aura of the dancer. But how might dance expose "what can the body do?" if not through a detailed exploration of its minute, constitutive gestures – its manifold affects, velocities, movements? What might be the physical, ethical, political techniques for the dancer to gain agency? In this uncanny, subtle pas de deux, what we are left with might be a way for us to imagine a dance without a body, and the manifold functions thus prompted by this abstract yet forceful choreographic fieldwork.

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<sup>i</sup> A cinematic movement that arose in the political and social climate of the 1960s in several countries of the so-called Third World. Conceived as a revolutionary cinema it portrayed (national) liberation and revolutionary movements with the aim of highlighting the repression of the weak, motivating audiences to get involved and raising the awareness of social and political movements.