Puentes

Ghostly bodies

Victoria Pérez Royo:

What are you currently working on? It is a reconstruction of a dance piece?

Fabián Barba: This january I started working on a new project, *A personal yet collective history*. The starting point was to reflect on how through my education I've been put in contact with the history of dance and how I have internalized a part of it. Instead of looking for a flow of information from the outside to the inside - from the archives to the embodiment as in the case of *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* (AMWDE)- I wanted to look for that which was already (in) there (learnt techniques, images, ideas, pleasures) to put them later in relation with a larger dance history (out there). In that sense reconstruction doesn't seem so far to be the most appropriate methodology, though it's too early for me to know for sure.

VPR: In this sense you are working with a notion of the body as an archive of learnt and embodied techniques and movement languages, which could be related to Paul Ricoueur's *habit-memory:* that memory created by repetition and which works in a kind of pseudoautomatism, as when one recites a text or a poem one has learnt as a child. Because of this automatism this kind of memory, opposed to the imaginative one, in principle does not allow critique. It is very interesting that it is precisely this memory to which you apply consciousness, maybe in order to open it to critique and reflection. It is in this sense that you refer to collective history? Or are you rather tempting to approach the issue of collective memory it from the point of view of a wider understanding of dance, one which embraces also everyday movement and social dances, such as disco, for example? This social or even anthropological perspective could also portrait a certain 'collective history' of a generation's movement.

FB: I think I refer to a collective mainly in the first sense you propose. My interest lays on dance made for theatre, so not so much on everyday movement or other kind of social dances. Or, these other kind of movements and dances could be considered only insofar they have somehow played a part in the consolidation of different stage-dance traditions. To be a little more specific, I think that the relation between this personal and collective history can be tracked down largely in at least three aspects:

1. Talking with some ex-classmates, I noticed that while at PARTS we were confronted with variegated and different dance trends, currents and styles, and that our challenge was to find a way of navigating through all that rich and at points overwhelming amount of information. One of my classmates once used the metaphor of feeling he was a kitchen-mixer: just trying to blend all this inputs without really getting to fully master any of them. The overall impression I have from this experience is that me and my contemporaries (that is, my ex-classmates) have learned to move within an heterogeneous field, that we have tried and learned to embody different physicalities and different ways of thinking our own bodies. This plurality for me might be a first entry point into that 'collective', that 'plurality' our education had put us in contact with.

2. The second approach to a collective history is a little more questionable because it invokes a certain ghostly presence: the collective being formed by the 'other dancers that have danced before me', that is the dancers from the past, dead dancers. I'd like to escape whatever mystic or animistic hint this proposition might bring along. How to? For more than a year I've been thinking that in dance there are ideas that shape our conception of dance and our conception of the body. Although those ideas can be formulated verbally, they're at a first moment built through an artistic body practice. I'm convinced that one could track and study this history of ideas, which I repeat, are a composite of abstract notions and world-views and the material bodies of the dancers. Well, I guess that I'm more interested on this history of ideas than on the actual dancers that promulgated and embodied them. I do also suspect that many of those ideas that have appeared during the last century are still operating on different ways and with different degrees of intensity on the dance productions we can see these days in different theaters. If there are ghosts hunting our danc e production, they're not the ghosts of Wigman or Cunningham, but the ideas they developed about dance.

3. These ideas, which I think operate many times without us even noticing them, affect not only dancers but also the audience. The audience would be the third way in which the collective is integrated. Not only because a

> dance audience is itself a plurality, but I would also argue that this history of ideas of dance operates differently in every audience member, determining different tastes for dance and different ways of relating to what they're observing.

VPR: I like very much this notion of the ghost you're using in your explanation. One of my methods of research is based on finding metaphors that help me think about the issues I am concerned with, which in this case is choreography relating to its past. I would suggest to think about it using the figures of the ghost, but maybe also of other fictional characters: the vampire or the zombie. For example, the latter, unlike the ghost, has a materiality, a concrete (rotting) body. It is a body which have had its life, its functioning and its way of relating to the environment. But once dead, it is brought to life in a different context. On the one hand, it is a starving body, which needs other bodies -in the case of dance, it needs other bodies embodying it- to continue in this margin between life and death. But its way of relating to the environment is completely other: it is not able to properly perceive it and react to it; they are clumsy and move akwardly. It seems that they do not entirely fit in the new context and that they produce a certain strangeness, as it usually happens in dance reenactments; the parameters to watch them and think about them have changed, so that between this two historical moments there is a kind of gap that could create this akwardness. Could you elaborate a little bit on this metaphor of the ghost or others you may consider adequate?

FB: Yes, the ghost is a keyword for me. It works as an image through which I can refer to anything that has a split presence, that is there and it's not there at the same time, or to something whose existence can be felt by the way it affects or modifies its environment, but not because of it having a concrete body we can put our hands on: a presence whose attributes are difficult to define but that we can try and deduce out of what it produces.

The voice is another metaphor I like thinking about. Maybe it has in common with the ghost that it has no materiality, that seems not to have a physical presence. When I think of the voice I think of it dissociated from its source of emission: I couldn't say where it comes from. Most of the times this voice doesn't say anything concrete, something that could be easily transcribed into words. This voice behaves precisely like the humming of a ghost: its source and its meaning are of a nature as evasive as that of the ghost. Yet the voice is not a single one, there are many and they get all mixed up, like different radio frequencies caught by the same antenna. These voices overlap, sometimes making harmonies, sometimes contradicting one another. These voices sometimes are flickering and soft as ideas-butterflies, sometimes they're hard and tyrannic like injunctions and prohibitions; you might hear them, but you won't be able to record them or prove they're there.

The third image is that of the ventriloquist. The ventriloquist has a body and a voice of her/his own. The ventriloquist doesn't utter her/his voice whit her/his body — or, the ventriloquist's body utters the voice of the ghost. It's always her/his body, her/his voice, but s/he ventriloquizes the ghost. How much is said by the ghost, how much by the ventriloquist? That pitch of voice we hear, whom does it belong? Does it express the self of the ventriloquist or the self of the ghost? The very terms on which these questions are formulated are misleading. Yet I can say: the ventriloquist is not possessed by the ghost, she is doing her/his job with the skills s/he has acquired for that.

VPR: This image reminds me of the film *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott. There is a touching moment, in which Rick (Harrison Ford) reveals to Rachel that she is actually a replicant and not a human being. This dramatic fact is clear when he starts narrating a series of memories in perfect detail… which are not his, but her experiences, which actually she has told to no one in all her life. There's no doubt, she's a replicant, a robot with implanted remembrances. Nevertheless, her reaction towards this revelation is deeply human: she has an ambivalent feeling of shame and insecurity, feels a sharp pain and escapes. I could find a certain link between this idea of implanted feelings in the replicants and the fact of reenacting previous dances, of making own some very personal ways of moving and of feeling movement; somehow it could be described as a way of 'implanting', assuming other private images of the body. It's a way of embodying others' feelings.

FB: That's curious, I haven't seen the film but your description makes me think of Freud's text about the uncanny. One of the figures he describes is that of automatons or puppets that seem to have a life of their own. I could maybe say that to produce an uncanny experience was one of my few clear aims, I'm not sure how much I succeeded on that. The uncanny I was working with came from the apparition of something that was familiar and strange at the same time -in my relation to Wigman, the familiarity came about due to my dance education in Ecuador while the strangeness was marked by a clear historical distance. Implanted feelings as both foreign and genuine might have something uncanny as well. In *A personal yet collective history* there's something similar operating in the sense that 'my own' way of dancing is questioned as being produced and made possible by the work other dancers have done before me; as if 'my own' dancing could only be possible thanks to those other dancers.

Somebody told me that she thought *AMWDE* was an 'anti-Wigmanian' performance. I agree with that, precisely because I don't so much assert a personal and individualized expression, but its doubling, its implantation so to speak.

VPR: I relate this uncanny feeling to the notion of 'extrinsic interruption' by William C. Wees in the context of film recycling, in which the phenomenon of appropriation has been widely discussed. In this frame, Wees detects two kind of interruptions in found material: the first one, would be an intrinsic interruption, which consists in altering the structure of the found film or mixing it with other materials. The second one, extrinsic, is the operation of locating the found material in other context in which they are not 'perfectly natural', what produces a confrontation of these materials with a different ideological paradigm which reveals certain underlying values and ideologies which weren't so obviously visible in their original frame. In this case the work with Mary Wigman's solos represents evidently an interruption of this materials by

placing them in a new historical context. Which reading do you think that this bracketing of Wigman's dance produce? Maybe that is why they produce this uncanny feeling about which you were talking about?

FB: When I started working with these dances I was still studying at P.A.R.T.S. and I had a very defined target audience, my classmates. I knew that presenting these dances to them would be somehow out of context – thus enacting the second kind of disruption you just described. My initial intention was to produce for them the uncanny experience I had while watching the Wigman dances on video. As they had not trained in a branch of modern dance influenced by Ausdruckstanz, I tried to produce the uncanny by showing in our familiar context of student showings something foreign to it, by showing dances that were historically distant from us in a live format. When I started showing this work outside of the school, I noticed that many other readings and relations were possible, all of them depending enormously on the personal history and education of each audience member. To preset these dances within a frame that could be described as some sort of bracketing had then another function, to say: this is a theatrical illusion, let's imagine these are the 20's, once the performance is over, the illusion has to be over. Then, in that bracketed space every audience member could find a way to relate to that historical material; I wanted to let it up to them. However, some people didn't notice the brackets and then the work was read as a coming back to a past and better time, re-appropriated in a project to save and give new vitality to a debilitated dance tradition –I have to say I'm not so happy with that.

VPR: This interruption, or bracketing as you name it, means that this materials are still able to speak. Mary Wigman's dances are not an exhausted discourse, but a past which is still in a position to tell something to the present, or, as Agamben may have put it, it is a living language which has not said yet all which it had to say. What does it contribute to the present situation? In which way does it illuminate the present parameters for understanding dance or historical development of dance?

FB: My impression is that the drive for newness and innovation in dance is predominantly related to a notion of history as a single linear vector, history as continuous progress and development. However contested this notion might be, I think it keeps an enduring and operative presence within the dance field.

One of the consequences is that the past is perceived as something we have overcome, something we have already done and seen, something we know and the only thing left for us to do is to move forwards to what will come up next. We know expressionist dance, we know Graham, we know what all that was about. Inasmuch as we know what those dance traditions were and what they meant, their materials appear as meaningful: we can place them in their proper cultural context and deduce their seemingly intrinsec ideological import.

But, do we really know these dance traditions? or, what do we know about them? I think I could even ask, what do we imagine about them? In that sense these historical materials are not meaningful, or their meaning is not set univocally once and for all. If what they mean, what they stand for and the way they operate is something we partially know and partially ignore, then the question appears: what did they mean by then and what can they mean now? Maybe that's the question that historical materials make present through performance. Maybe by articulating this question these materials can trouble the notion of history that I briefly described above, i.e. something we know and have already overcome.

VPR: In this sense, your approach to history is not directed towards a particular past, from wich you extract and expose some ideologies attached to it or some subyacent way of understanding reality (a practical critical approach). It is rather oriented to the current understanding of history. It seems to me a very interesting and critical approach, as far as it allows for a revision not only of the history of dance, but particularly about the way we understand history and historiography today. A praxis that has as an effect, as you describe it, 'to trouble the notion of history'. As you point out, it disturbs the conception of history as a linear and unidirectional development. But it also affects to an understanding of writing history which is still attached to ideas such as authenticity and preservation. These ideas are disrupted by different factors: on the one hand, there is this "mediation by the ghost of its past" you have metioned in our access to past dances, which signals that there is no way of claiming any sort of authenticity or fidelity in working with hostorical materials. I will tackle the notion of preservation later, because first I would like to ask you concretely about the way this ghost of Mary Wigman has affected your working with her choreographic material and the understanding of it by your audiences in this project.

FB: When I started working on AMWDE, I thought of Wigman as of a forgotten ghost. Naively I thought nobody cared about her anymore. It was a surprise when later I noticed the amount of attention the project received. As far as I know there are no witnesses to Wigman dancing herself. So there's no one that could say how she danced, and that creates a void. Having me dancing these dances might be actually operating on that: our desire to imagine how it could have been. But even if none of us has seen Wigman dancing, sometimes some people say that I look like a sort of reincarnation. Even though I don't like that image, it points to the impression those people have of watching something as it could have been in the 30's. If these audience members can say 'it could pretty well have been like you're doing it' it's because they have a certain knowledge about these dances and this period. But I cannot describe yet what kind of knowledge I'm referring to here. There is maybe some collection of images about Wigman that resonate the moment we watch AMWDE. Maybe that collection of images, that form the ghost of these dances, is the knowledge these audience members have and allow them to 'judge' the dances.

VPR: And coming back to this idea of a praxis disrupting the notion of preservation of documents as one of the main activites of historiographical work, and also relating to the notion of the body as a document we have refered to previously: this activity of embodying memories is primarily a creative act, an active task of appropriating and rearticulating these movement materials. In this sense it is also linked to

the deep transformation that our understanding of culture is undergoing in the last decades. It refers to a transition of culture understood as accumulation of information to the current 'inhabiting' culture, and to knowledge as the activity of navigating through intertextual subjectivities. Culture is seen not as something received and transmited, but as something which is done, created and conformed.

It is something that maybe could be approached with the Lyotardian activity of finding one's way within the multiples discourses of postmodernity, but which definitely is strongly related to the vast possibilities of access to information that we enjoy nowadays. In this context working with dance history cannot be understood as knowledge transmission, but as a space for creativity and for experience. Culture and knowledge are understood not as a place for transmission, but as a space for production of subjectivities.

F: The idea of 'knowledge as the activity of navigating through intertextual subjectivities' which resonates with 'finding one's way within the multiples discourses of postmodernist' is very nourishing, I guess that's the kind of knowledge that I try to make operate in the work I'm doing. Precisely maybe because these subjectivities and these discourses of postmodernity have a history of their own.

The problem for me appears the moment that this history is considered as a single linear progression and thus disavows the contemporaneous presence of different historical traditions. When I started working on AMWDE, I equalized the past of Europe with the present of Ecuador by saying that Ecuadorian contemporary dance has a strong familiarity with Ausdruckstanz. There is a relation between the historical and geographical axes. The way this relation is presently set is (politically?) problematic. Maybe that's what I'm trying to find out.

VPR: In this sense your approach, as well as that of many of the other dance pieces working with materials of the past I've been watching in the last years are assuming the place traditionally reserved to historiography and the authors of these pieces the role of the historian. These works have a clear function (although not exclusive) of a tool for knowledge and experience; the artists develop working methods which allow them and the audience to gain a different understanding of the history of dance, but also, and more importantly, create new ways of historiographical research. Among them, one of the most relevant procedures that we have pointed out in this conversation constitutes the fact of considering the body as a historical document; the body as an archive of movement patterns and of a certain presence which is able to give a physical existence to history, to embody a historical event, so to speak.

I consider this question of dance praxis taking the role of the historiographical praxis is a relevant concern, specially in our context in which research is arousing so many debates in the academy, the university, the art institution and among the artists themselves. Choreographic approaches to history have in this respect a political dimension, as they are proposing an access to knowledge and discourse to practices that before did not have a voice. These practices could allow to go beyond false disciplinary divisions and to achieve a thorough and more human knowledge. In these sense I consider that these practices, if they are not exposing their own methodologies in the final product, should be presented within a frame that permits a proper understanding of their goals and procedures, in order to avoid mythifying historical materials or to scape from a certain understanding by the audience of this materials having a prescriptive character. I think that your work in this respect was interesting: the information you give about your dance education in Ecuador and its influence on your work on reconstructing Mary Wigman's solos is certainly relevant in order to properly understand your point and to be able to understand its political consequences.

FB: One of my main concerns on working with historical dance material is pointed out in what you've said. I might be resisting the impulse to create something new, but I'm also resisting the impulse to give new meanings to already existent materials. I'm mostly dealing with dance traditions that claimed to be working with pure and abstract movement in their quest for the specificity of their medium. The notions of purity and abstraction meant different things for different choreographers, but a commonality could it be that each one of them were looking for movement that didn't mean anything else than itself -even when emotion was involved, emotion was a constitutive part of the movement and not an 'added meaning' to it.

However, we could argue that even when abstract movement does not have a univocal and fixed meaning, it does articulate social values in relation to their cultural context. It seems to me that a part of the dance historian's work is to study this cultural context and analyze which values a dance tradition might have articulated in that specific historical moment. I'm supposing that the values thus articulated by a specific historical aesthetic are not inherent to that material, but they emerge distinctly in relation to their cultural context. Therefore I could assume that these values are not affixed to this material in a univocal and permanent way.

My work with historical material in this sense comes to testing how the aesthetic experience these dances can propose to a contemporary audience are mediated by the ghost of their past. I call the ghost of their past to the knowledge we have of those dances, the knowledge we have of their historical context and the values they articulated therein. This knowledge for most of us, dancers and audience alike, is not the comprehensive and meticulous kind of knowledge a dance historian might have. I wonder what kind of knowledge we have of this historical dance traditions and how that knowledge affects our perceptions of those dances. I do not want to unveil any original meaning or values articulated by these dances, I want to know whether historical-looking material has become a screen for our projections of what we think we know about history.

VPR: On the other hand, coming back to this notion of the body considered as a document (or archive of documents). It is also transforming the ideals according to which historiographic work has founded its praxis. In this respect, this idea you mention about the difference between the "comprehensive

and meticulous knowledge a dance historian might have" and the one of the dancer, specifically related to the idea of the body as an archive, is very suggestive and indicative of the different epistemology that dance as research is proposing in the field of dance history. A science which places the body at the core of the debate, causing therefore ravages in the historiographical *episteme*. The object of its study is no longer an entity which can be consulted as many times as it is needed, and where is given for granted that it will more or less remain the same. The document of a choreographic praxis is rather an inmaterial entity that, in order to be actualized, must be embodied. Through this incorporation the document is always and irremediably subject to irreversible changes. This fact transforms completely the understanding that western culture has of the document and leads towards a alternative conception of it as one surviving only through transformation. Of course there has been an oral history in western tradition that also worked like this, but I think that the difference lies in the consideration of this praxis as a valid epistemological method for historical and historiographical research, as you and other artists are proposing nowadays.

FB: Working with historical material is not as working with objects. I've come to notice that the way this material is placed or used changes its attributes considerably. Even though this material might seem fixed, recognizable and malleable at a first sight, its colors are actually very sensitive to morphing according to their new environments, so to speak. There is a difficult tension to understand between this dynamism I'm trying to describe and the fixity to which this material is thrown (as historical, as something we already know, something we've overcome once and for all). This difficulty is manifested the moment the body is placed at the core of the debate. The very idea of the body as an archive seems to point out to this question, for the work with embodied memories in my experience could be better described as a creative act rather than the retrieval out of a storage room. But this creative act does not produce something new and fresh, it produces something new that looks old.

References

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