Singular, Moving Geographies

Trisha Brown *Newark* (1987)
Photograph by Geneviève Stephenson

an interview with **Hubert Godard** *by* Laurence Louppe

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We attribute the dance of the 1980s with the merit of having brought to light imaginaries that were singular, new, powerful, capable of communicating their particular emotive impulses with an unparalleled intensity. None of it could have occurred without the vast field of resources fostered by contemporary dance over a long period of time. Above all, within fairly narrowly circumscribed historical limits, there is, in filigree detail, a wide range of body work which still remains to be considered, and re-considered again and again: today more so than ever.

Dancers' words on the body remain virtually unknown, and virtually unheard, for they rarely correspond with the different discourses of which the body is the object. Hubert Godard is developing another way of thinking: dance brings into play a body-vector which does not define itself in terms of its structure, but in terms of the ways in which it organises intensity and intentionality. — Laurence Louppe

What's unsettling in psychoanalysis, as in any practice of the moment – art, poetry, or the simple event of meeting – is that the structure is provided in the energy of an actuality that is always precisely new.

— Claude Rabant[1]

A certain disarray in the face of the rise of a consensual formalism is provoking one whole wing of dance to search in philosophies of the body for the reasons for what it does, reasons of which the dancer sometimes feels dispossessed. It was in the light of this that the colloquium *Autres pas (autres corps, autres lieux, autres danses)*[2] aimed to respond to the large number of latent calls for help. Although they don't always make it into the glare of media attention, these calls reverberate in the world of contemporary choreography in a very significant and irrepressible way.

It is in this context, moreover, that Trisha Brown's trip to France, to work within La Compagnie Bagouet,[3] acquires its potency, as both example and symbol. Firstly, in the fact that a choreographer and a team, distinguished for the demands and the artistic quality of their work,

should endeavour to bring their own research into play in order to try out other revelatory body states. And this at the very moment when Trisha Brown is engaged in a journey to the sources, not only of her own itinerary since the 1960s, but of the actual generation and production of contemporary dance. A search which is continually renewed by those underlying strata in which the body's imaginary is elaborated, and to which the Judson Church had already (re)turned. A search for movement as initial impetus, without conscious will trying to control successive precipitations. A 'back to zero' in which, in a suspended temporality, Brown involves a few select French dancers, chosen to try out the experience; others still hope. There's a thirst for the essential. Just as there's an aspiration to escape from the purely conjectural field of creative work overdetermined by the ravages of historicist discourse. Besides, nothing here is really peculiar to dance; connections with other practices, other artistic philosophies are implicated. The originality of the dancer here is in finding what is essential, not through references of stable value, but on the contrary through a fundamental, and foundational, imbalance.

Such factors, which constitute the very fabric of modernity in the domain of dance, are still difficult to convey in discourse. Firstly, because the problematic of dance brings into play a body of continuous functionality; the dancer can only work from a body-vector, which does not define itself in terms of its structure, but in terms of the ways in which it organises intensity and, as we'll see, intentionality. Before all else, the dancing body is a multi-directional geography of relations with oneself, and with the world. It's a matter of keeping it living, open, sensitive. [...]

It is impossible to approach, let alone resolve, the problematic of the body through a univocal discourse. All we can do here is propose a perspective that is particular to dance and to the questions it asks itself currently, at the heart of its practice, using one of its most pertinent discourses today. Kinesiology is appropriate for this practice. It is concerned with a study of movement based on the actual givens of dance. Although it requires a considerable sum of diverse knowledges, kinesiolgy can only be approached by a dancer. Which means it avoids pasting onto the dancing body cognitive grids and frames that are foreign to its project. Hubert Godard, who teaches kinesiology at the University of Paris VIII, agreed to the following interview.

Laurence Louppe: The different discourses of which the body is the object can be evoked by elimination. The conception of an absolute, transcendental body doesn't interest us. We are much more sensitive to the idea, developed by Michel Bernard, of a 'corporeity'; essentially this means body as experience and not as topology.

Hubert Godard: I agree absolutely. Michel Bernard has pretty much contested the idea of a positivist body that one could ever entirely encapsulate, even using a number of different approaches and grids.[4] One can only take up position in the area of phenomenology, and talk of corporeal moments. In numerous discourses which, as you have said, extend from avant-garde plastic arts to laboratory contexts, the term 'the body' is used, which suggests a definable whole. I would opt for an 'accumulation of corporeities'.

Let's turn to the Lacanian vision of a body which can only exist in terms of the language that enunciates it. This is one of the most difficult areas, but nevertheless much more interesting.

If I had to point out to you a way of getting to a particular place in the city, I would have two options; I could either situate it with the help of a map and spatial orientations, or I could indicate a route to you: turn right, then after the post office turn left, and so on. The second option necessitates language, and you can't reverse two propositions without getting lost (chronology). This kind of orientation – by means of directions, routes – is that of the theatre writer, as well as of the historian and the psychoanalyst, all of whom are looking to reconnect a thread of events.

On the other hand, a dancer operates more like a geographer, accumulating maps, intra-corporeal dispositions, geographical situations which subsequently produce a history. Given that language (the route) is not the primary necessity, a quality of wandering is created, a nomadism which perhaps partly escapes the history's determinism. The effect is particularly striking in the work of Pina Bausch: narratives of intense personal experience are in fact held at a distance as they unfold, for the dancer is moved and determined first of all by spatial configurations.

Undoubtedly dancers are the only ones to consciously weave permanent connections between body and imaginary, and to inhabit these connections; consequently they lay themselves open to being called organicists.

In the example of the child's access to autonomy, it's often described how there are successive stages of reaction to the mirror (at four months, six months, a year), which symbolically construct the emergence of an identity and of an autonomy. Now each one of these stages is in fact preceded by marked evolutions in the gravitational system, a system which is equally responsible for organising the future character of this autonomy (sitting, walking on all fours, standing up). The way in which the child is carried (in spatial terms) will have as much influence as the child's relation to the carrier. In the United States, J. Kestenburg has made successful interventions into certain serious early childhood disorders through modifications in maternal holding, taken in the direction of dance (contact, supported dance). Certain gravitational variations can modify the course of a history, just as they never stop modifying the history of dance.

So is the thought that the body can develop its own imaginary impossible?

Without getting into the sphere of phylogenetics, one can talk of a plastic corporeal memory, a 'geography' that is shaped by everything that is lived. This memory is not inscribed by neural circuits, it's in the plastic modelling of the tissues that generate the tensional organisation of our bodies. Obviously I'm thinking of the role of the *fascia*, the muscle sheaths rich in collagenic fibres (and not innervated), and which produce memory. The play of our own verticality will be entirely memorised by the plasticity of these tissues. Could one call the bodily *habitus* 'innocent' when confronted with the unconscious?

One of the most weighty interdictions on this discourse emanates from the positivist tradition.

One must situate it on two levels. Firstly, contemporary dance is based on an idea of quality, and not at all on what could be quantifiable, or directly identifiable in spatial or morphological terms. Secondly, and perhaps coming out of this, to the present day it remains almost impossible to name, and therefore to describe, what is peculiar to dancers. There's a semantic 'void' there, an empty space that provokes the elaboration of the dance.

And on the other hand there's the authority of bio-mechanical discourse; this is based on what's measurable, which is extremely highly developed today – thanks in particular to electromyography, which enables us to locate and quantify the movement of electrical impulses in the body. Moreover this discourse is so inflated that any articulation of the essential realities of movement, of what moves us (and what's moving to us) is impossible. In what is largely a very grounded book about walking,[5] Michel Bernard locates what's operative in walking uniquely at the level of the legs and the pelvic bowl; the arms are relegated to an exclusively balancing role. All of this is accompanied by violent denials with regard to the claims that 'starters' essential for walking are located in the upper body in relation to the thorax. Now, data from electromyographic experiments cited in support of the non-intervention of the arms even went so far as to disregard the shoulder-blades. When one knows that the quality of movement, its poetic, is a function of the way in which scapular attachment is fixed and lived, this omission seems hallucinatory in itself. Often these experiments are conducted in laboratories, where everything's askew because patches are stuck on subjects who are told to 'walk three paces'. Which obviously produces a way of walking devoid of finality, emotion, projection, and which necessarily will always be limited to the legs.

So the dancer is caught between two discourses: one of them denying the existence of the body, the other (let's call it medical discourse) denying the imaginary within it.

Not all of the medical milieu reacts in this way. For my own part, I'm currently involved in a very rich experience at the National Centre for Cancer Research in Italy. My responsibility there is to research a protocol of corporeal reading which would enable the development of more effective rehabilitation, in terms of the gravitational support peculiar to each subject in movement. The point of view, the

doctor's gaze towards the other, is often limited by his/her own functional organisation; therefore our starting point was to analyse the organisation connected with each doctor during movement sessions and in the therapeutic act.

Having undergone an ablation of the minor pectoral, and after classical rehabilitation, according to conventional tests a patient will recover their strength and full articulation. However, a very detailed movement analysis allows us to notice a qualitative modification in the way the body is managed. What was surprising was to discover subsequently that in general this impairment was already present before surgical intervention. What produces this instability in the 'body image': the illness working on the corporeal structure, or the fact of knowing oneself to be ill? What do we know of the relation between immune system and body image? With questions like this, bio-mechanical knowledge sheds little light on what moves/is moving. In actual fact, it's this fault, this gap in knowledge of bodily organisation that contemporary dance incessantly opened up: not in search of a model, but of a profoundly original gesture, breaking with the previous cognitive order and semantics.

Recently you helped produce a film about the operative elements of movement,[6] *the 'starters' – perhaps connected to what Cunningham calls 'pre-gestures'.*

One inevitably goes back to the mystery of what happens before the movement: what body image (connected to what plasticity)? what geography? what history? and above all, what intentionality? The pre-movement is an empty zone, with no displacement, no segmentary activity. And yet everything is already played out there, the entire poetic charge, the tonal colouring of the action. A brief passage, a low pressure trough corresponding to this wholly founding moment: the gestural anacrusis.

Isn't anacrusis an essential figure in both rhythm and thought?

Because of the notorious difficulty of 'naming', there is no way of foretelling the gesture which could found dance as a science. In spite of the extreme richness of methods of learning and of contemporary implementations, the dancer's knowledge remains of a technical order, in other words a transmitted know-how. But, when one considers the preliminary phases, there's a blossoming of words and references; one sees that José Limon invites movement in the upper-body, the thoracic cage and the arms. Whereas with Cunningham, on the other hand, everything is played out in relation to the floor, with the supporting leg as generator of a philosophy of displacement.

How do you explain the difficulty of moving outside medical, bio-mechanical discourse, without getting oneself accused of mythologising, or even of mysticism. For a lot of non-dancers, the organic (paradoxically) becomes assimilated with the fusional, the religious. And, doubtless through a rebound effect, a certain mysticality can serve as theory for choreography.

Well, quite simply that's what happens when one wants to economise on the lengthy period of work necessary in the maturation of an expressive form. With all of those who made something very strong emerge – Cunningham, Trisha Brown,

a few French choreographers – they all have in common this immensely long period of work with the dancers: a daily working regime by means of which the philosophy of the dance gradually infiltrates the symbolic circuits, and passes into the deep strata of the non-verbal. Failing which the choreographer's or teacher's only resource consists of multiplying the metaphors: either to try to invent a movement starting from a projection (reliving an event, etc.), or to effect a 'frame drift' by working from a privileged corporeal component (skin, gland, etc.). It's utterly illusory to think that this can produce a unity of style. What's most serious is the absence of triangulation, which will always be missing from subjective support frames: the third term, aesthetic thought, a common philosophy of the body, to which one can refer and within which one can understand one another. Without this, choreographic work can only be based on an act of faith.

An act of faith is a rather fragile base for the authenticity of the work, and a very threatening one for the autonomy of the dancer. In fact once again that takes us back to a denial, or a reduction, of the poetic mystery of the body in movement, by tying it to a transcendence outside of itself.

It's often tied to an unacknowledged anatomistic vision. Connecting the birth or the quality of a movement to an internal organ, to a zone of the body, goes back to a privileging of the structural at the expense of the functional. There is no central point, because properly speaking there is no centre. You could always dissect a body, but you won't find its centre of gravity. (*Laughter*). The centres of movement are not structural centres. The entire body is organised around certain points, which can vary from one individual to another ...

And from one culture to another ...

Of course. However I prefer to refer to the idea of gravitational line. When one starts to move, the centre of gravity organises itself in an open network in relation to supports or losses of support. The interest of considering movement with gravity as the starting point is of thinking the body around and with the movement itself. In addition, that's where true memory is elaborated, the subject's most ancient memory: the memory of what I have managed and organised through my postural balances. The tonic muscles, which specialise in gravitational responses, are the very first memory, and perhaps the first language: what has been called the 'tonic dialogue'. That of the child with the mother – its range of spasms and contractions are already an exchange. An emotional language, like any language probably – a source of growth, comprising imperceptible emotional channels loaded with essential information.

For a dancer, everything is played out around these muscular and emotive zones that produce memory. The essential task of the tonic muscles is to inhibit falling, to maintain one's verticality. In order to make a movement, these muscles have to release. And it's in this release that the poetic quality of the movement is generated. The movement will be invested with authority in a way that is more or less moving, depending on the greater or lesser degree of tonic inhibition.

Trisha Brown, who remains faithful in this regard to the deepest thinking in contemporary dance, has consistently worked on this way out of inhibition through release.

In Trisha Brown's work, the dancer moves freely in a continual flux around their own gravitational axis. Movement is never made against or in spite of gravity, but always with it. In her work one sees an extraordinary quality of undulation, what I call 'motility', a way of authorising movement without restriction, or at least without initial recourse to the 'tensors'. This kind of dance is bewildering because it is located at a point of extreme radicality which eliminates all tension and all force. It's also a point beyond which one can't go; Trisha Brown knows this and takes it into account.

A total renunciation of tonicity can indeed lead to an impasse. We saw this at the time of the Judson Church theatre in the 1960s and 1970s, when certain dancers, like Simone Forti, wanted to rediscover a body of pure flow, of pure molecular circulation, with no supports – like the body of a new-born child, not yet constituted in gravitational terms, and as a result willingly assigned to the vegetative.

On the other hand, the tonic muscles which hold me upright, constitute an awful threat. If I didn't release, they would prevent me from making any movement, they could force me into a state of vertical catatonia. On one side, there is Charcot's hysteric, paralysed in a state of mortal tension. And on the other, there is the subsidence and collapse of the tensors, concerted or otherwise, which would disallow the elaboration of the gravitational axis. We only live because we are able to move freely between these two poles. And this permanent interplay is our entire history. That is why what I'm looking for is a value which can only be one of *hesitation*, a certain suspension of being, body and thought.

Is this like what Doris Humphrey has said before, that we only realise and fulfil ourselves in unsteadiness and uncertainty?

Yes, and again it's the anacrusis which is receptive to this state of hesitation.

It's not necessarily a matter of individual decision or bias. Locating oneself on the scale of tonicity is also constituting oneself as a body in history.

Evidently. On the one hand, one has what Daniel Dobbels calls the 'armed body'. And on the other, there is Trisha Brown's profoundly 'disarmed' body. Disarmed to the point of fading away. Undoubtedly it is a utopian body in its refusal of violence. I'm not saying that that's what she is trying to give rise to; although she does bring this to light.

It seems to me that, since her penultimate 'cycle' as she calls them, the one from 1986 to 1990, she has found ways of bringing rocking, and then stopping points, to bear in her work.

In her recent pieces, she's really inhabiting a different place. Apparently she felt herself compelled to *affirm*. Suddenly, but without any violent motivation, someone for whom the word 'cut' did not exist (and what a difference there is here from Cunningham, who never stops cutting, directions in particular!), suddenly she discovers the urgency of affirming positions.

You have often spoken, with regard to the beginning of this century, of a disappearance of tactility and empathy. You often cite Freud's decision no longer to implicate himself in the therapeutic act, or you refer to what you call the emergence of the chemical body, treatable at a distance by an ever-expanding pharmacopeia. Is it possible that the continuous movement of contemporary dance, and the rupture-free space it proposes, could be a way of compensating for these tearings in the tactile network?

Yes, undoubtedly. In contrast, moreover, with what one often sees in classical dance: a universe of lines and forms accompanied by a desertion and desolation of the relational. In opposition to this, modernity has suggested approaches that are close to those of Trisha Brown in fact, historically as well as in other ways: contact improvisation, for example, as well as the range of modifications this technique brings, even outside its own field, in terms of the organisation of deep communication between kinespheres. 'Contact' here goes far beyond touch, for one works with the weight of the other, and thus one enters their gravitational system. In this way one 'touches' much more than the skin; one touches the much-discussed tonic musculature of the other, and thus what constitutes their being. It's important to clarify that this is nothing to do with proxemics, which is very entrenched at the moment. Here we're immersed in the infinite quality of corporeal organisation – of singular and moving geographies, comprised of and in flux.

Isn't it precisely in the relations between flows that the poetics of the dance is elaborated?

Why are we moved when someone dances, when they put so much at stake in terms of their stability, when they begin to work on the gravitational axis? Because these activities refer to the history that is wholly inscribed in our bodies, in the very muscles that hold us upright. This history is what has been recorded of the 'tonic dialogue'. It's the eternal history of our relations with the first object of love. And it's this same history which reverberates within us each time that an authentic act of dance proposes drifts and wanderings in terms of balance, falls, recoveries; they create echoes with the deep traces we retain of our earliest contractions. The power of the dance lies in its reaching these sensitive layers which are at the very heart of our imaginaries and our memories, strata that the cognitive material conveyed by verbal language often has difficulty connecting with.

So are we to understand that it is this poetic charge conveyed in the body's states that is of interest in dance, rather than the forms?

Can it be a question of forms when what is at stake can be summarised in the these terms: 'How can I articulate the ways in which I organise myself in my trajectory towards the object of love'? People like Cunningham, Hawkins, Trisha Brown touch us because they have been able to develop decisive perspectives from within this organisation, which always make sense, and always manage to awaken in us this essential reference. Which creates this feeling, connected to the perception the dance provides, of intimacy, mystery and at the same time, of self-evidence. An appreciation which has nothing to do with a universal

community of sensibilities. For it's always a matter of a unique dancer in relation to a unique spectator. Hence the extreme difficulty of choreographic, pedagogic and critical work on dance, since we're dealing with a symbolic field from which all neutrality has been drained.

[Trans. David Williams]

Notes

1 Claude Rabant, *Inventer le Réel*, Paris: Edition Denoël, 1992.

2 'Other steps (other bodies, other places, other dances)'. The conference was organised by the 'Institut de pédagogie musicale et choréographique (Cité de la musique – La Villette)', as part of the *Danse à Aix* Festival, 11-17 July 1992. Its starting point was a consideration of the 'trans-culturality' of body states.

3 Trisha Brown's *One Story as in Falling* was performed as part of the Compagnie Bagouet's 1992 Festival d'Automne programme at the Opéra Garnier, Paris, (24–28 November).

4 Michel Bernard (amongst others), in *L'expressivité du corps: recherche sur les fondements de la théâtralité*, Chiron: Association Dance Sorbonne, 1985.

5 *La marche humaine* (collectively authored work), Paris: Edition Masson, 1992.

6 This experimental film, produced on an INSEP programme, was made with the assistance of the Institut de formation en musique et en danse, and the Institut de pédagogie musicale et choréographique.