Not-knowing: mobility as a state of unrest

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Movement is always there. It is a flow you can tap into, and the taps are many: you play some music and dance. You stand with your eyes closed and you observe every postural adjustment, as breath and weight inflect the alignment of your bones in Steve Paxton's *Small Dance. S*till with your eyes closed, you attend and respond in movement to the spontaneous impulses that arise from your inner self in Mary Whitehouse, Janet Adler and others' *Authentic Movement* – or else, you let another person's words turn your bones into sea sponges with Joan Skinner's *Releasing Technique*. These are but a few of the many taps dancers have devised to access the undetermined flow of movement, and each of them determines some properties of the movement they enable: articulate, expressive, effortless...

Is movement an effect of physical forces acting upon you, or is it an effect of language? Is it an expression of your interiority? Does it reveal the impact of exterior forces? Be they mechanical, psychosomatic or poetical[1], each invites a quite different understanding and use of your self, thus revealing a different understanding of what a self might be at all. Each emphasizes a different understanding of movement's nature, and thus a different understanding of what a mover is. Each formalized practice reveals its own ideology and practicing it consistently might inflect how you conceive of yourself. It might transform your subjectivity.

Many contemporary dance and movement trainings emphasize the dancer's emancipation from her ingrained physical patterns. Education and habitual use of the

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1   In the examples above, mechanical forces are gravity and skeletal support, psychosomatic forces are the sensorial/affective/imaginative processes happening in the dancer, and poetic force is the impact of linguistic images onto the dancer's use of her body.

body are understood to pre-determine and limit one's movement capacity[2], and techniques are devised to gain freedom from these predeterminations. As techniques, they aim for improvement: overcoming limitations, gaining agency, to be able to wilfully choose which capacity to use in each moment. Dancer and teacher Chrysa Parkinson speaks about "being able to navigate some patterns."[3]

In this text, I would like to spend a moment with movement practices that affirm uncertainty as a possible motor for movement and that approach not-knowing as a physical sensation. Such practices go against dancers' desires for immediacy and unimpaired ease in their relation to movement. Instead, they promote hesitation and search for possibilities to simultaneously immerse oneself and hold back. The dances I will present are generated by scores which trigger processes of un-doing in the dancer. They foster an unstable, processual, possibly dispossessed or alienated subjectivity. They reflect a desire to invent alternatives to a modern idea of the subject, that would be self-contained, coherent and autonomous. On another hand, I must observe that such a subjectivity is also typical of a contemporary condition in which individuals are demanded ever more flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness, at the expense of social bonds. Contrary to the solitude of isolated workers in constant competition, the dance practices I look at are also social practices. By distinguishing the dancer from the dance, they allow for experimentation with relational qualities within "solo" practice. By being practiced together, they are chances to observe which ways of being with each other, which social conditions permit that each individual take the risk of undoing her sense of self, without dissolving. Taking these contradictory readings in consideration, I want to probe the role such dances give to alterity and contingency, and to the states of doubt and precariousness they foster, in order to consider how our movement researches might also be chances to research the value systems and the demands of precariousness today.

2 Cf. Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Skinner Releasing Technique, etc.
3 Interview for Audiostage with Jana Perkovic and Bethany Atkinson-Quinton on April 30th, 2016
    http://audiostage.guerrillasemiotics.com/chrysa-parkinson-the-value-of-dance-as-practice/

Dancing is ... / obstruction

Stockholm based dancers and choreographers Zoë Poluch and Stina Nyberg developed a practice since 2011 called *Dancing is...* It consists of dancing for a pre-determined period of time, keeping in mind that "dancing is neither training, performing, nor choreographing". These negations are materialized on pieces of paper on the floor. After this period of dancing, each writes a definition, starting with the words: "Dancing is...". The definition is based on their immediate experience, accepting that this would be a temporary and experience-specific definition. Participants then gather in smaller groups to compose a common proposition for what dancing may be, based on everyone's drafts. Another round follows, in which the provisory definition is practiced.

When I first practiced this score, as music started playing, everyone in the room seemed to agree on the possibility to dance "as in a party": energetic movements following the beat, repetitive and mostly simple movement sequences, sensual loops established themselves as the main common vocabulary. Yet these conventional moves were constantly being obstructed by the three barred words "training," "performing" and "choreographing." I found myself watching my own activity, evaluating and redirecting it constantly. How can I make sure I am not training? What does training mean? Maybe training means exercising in order to improve a skill, in which case one should make sure not to try too hard to execute a movement very well, or at least not to repeat it so as to avoid the possibility of progress? What does performing mean? Maybe performing means exercising one's awareness of how one's own activity may be perceived, which is a difficult thing not to do, when committed to perceive one's own activity as precisely as possible. Can one focus on one's own dance while ignoring its possible perception for an outside viewer? How wide is the gap between these two perspectives? What does choreographing mean? Is this the activity of making decisions on the composition of movement? Does choreographing

begin when we make compositional decisions according to other parameters than immediate satisfaction? ...

The task demands that you simultaneously dive into the flow of dance, and observe this flow so as to divert it from certain paths. One does often dance in situations of training, performing and choreographing. But what is dance, when it is none of these? Three simple obstructions produce a state of unrest as they force the dancer to distinguish dance from habitually related activities. They instigate active doubt and experimentation, activating a process that can be compared to F. M. Alexander's inhibition (cf. *The Use of the Self*, 1932), whereby habitual behaviours are wilfully suspended in order to allow for other pathways to be found out. The "findings", though formulated in affirmative mode, are meant to remain provisional and subjective, and attention is kept mobile - in a state of disquiet.

Dance of companionship / dis-identification

The *dance of companionship* is a practice I've been developing, dancing and guiding people through since 2014. It is also an improvisational practice, framed by simple propositions for companionship (between dancer and dance, sensation and dance, form and dance, ...) and poetic images that inform possible qualities of relationship (such as that between a nurse in night watch and a sleeping patient, between toddlers engaged in parallel play, or between silent hikers). Named after the ancient employment of lady's companions, the dance is an exercise in attending an improvised dance, without identifying with it. The basic premise is to dance in order to keep oneself company and to keep the dance company. Observing the companionship between dance and the dancer's sensations (tactile, kinetic, visual, auditory), between dance and the dancer's thoughts, between dance and the movement's formal qualities, the score gradually undoes the coherence between dance and every element one knows as being part of dance, or part of the experience of dancing. It opens a series of questions: if dance is not what I perceive, not the way I move, not what I imagine

with my body, then what is dance? This process increases the dancer's attention to the various impressions which constitute her activity, at the same time as it establishes distance between these and the dance. As she focuses with ever more detail on her experience, dance – the companion of that experience – continuously moves away as that which exceeds the dancer's own doings. Dance is a horizon and a companion; a partner that remains unknown, whose unknowability obliges and displaces.

Similarly to *Dancing is...*, the *Dance of companionship* invites a double movement of immersion and detachment from the dancing that is happening. Where the previous example showed a dancer observing her own activity in order to try to understand what that might be, here her attention is called upon her relation to that dancing that is happening. As a metaphor for the dancer's relation to a dance which actively employs her skills of attentiveness, responsiveness and distance, the lady's companion figure points to the dancer's labour as one of attention, perception, entering a relational mode that hosts not-knowing and blind approximation as necessary efforts. Such relation to dance is a precarious one, which needs to remain so for the dance to exist. It implies a separation from the dance, a gap never to be bridged. Again, usually known elements such as timing, weight and alignment are named as distinct from "the dance". Positing a distance between dance and what is often perceived as one of its constitutive elements (and which, as dancers, we're trained to attend to) means disjointing our perceptions from the dance. Obstructing the analogy between active perception and dance calls for a heightened attention to perception, in the same time as a loss of intimacy with the dance. The more I know what I'm doing, the less I know what the dance is. The posited relationship in return disjoints all perceptions. These are but symptoms of the dance and of my engagement with it. As the dance's identity recedes into the unknown, all sub-events I attend to must continue floating, entangled in changing relationships to that vanishing point.

Interlude / wondering

"Wonder is the motivating force behind mobility in all its dimensions."

(Irigaray, 1984)

In her *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray elaborates on Descartes' notion of admiration, or wonder. As the only passion that does not involve judgement, actually as the passion characterized by the suspension of judgement, wonder arises in the encounter with an other (object, person, …) whose otherness opens up the admirer's identity. Resisting existing systems of categorisation and evaluation that would confirm one's modes of relating to the world ("before and after acts of opposition," p.77), the admirable thing summons a movement towards it, an attraction that does not have a goal yet. As long as this movement remains undetermined, as long as it isn't resolved in a gesture of understanding or appropriation, as long as grasping or theft is suspended, admirer and admiree can move infinitely, sustaining between them a magnetic field that consists of directionless mobility.

Dancing is... and the *Dance of companionship* each ask of the dancer to suspend what they think they know about dance, in order to enter a reflexive mode of embodiment, giving dance a body, giving her body to the dance while entertaining the possibility to never quite know it. Attending her own experience, paying attention to the nature of her activity, the dancer is engaged in a process of distinction: analysing what's happening, and comparing it with conceptions that precede it. Yet the activity itself demands that the dancer engages her whole capacity to sense, feel and think in action. Diving in and dissecting, directing movement and following movement. Both practices start from the call to dance, as if this was a given that anyone would know how to do. Someone says "dance," and the dancer is set into motion. What the injunction contains is an infinite set of ways that have been passed before.

In the schism between knowing (tapping into movement as available) and not knowing (dis-identifying dance and dis-identifying from dance, deliberately not acting as though one knew or merged with it), a space opens. As they resist measurement, proximity and distance enter a dynamic interplay.

Dancing is then an approximation process: attending as closely as possible, without ever closing the gap between one's attention and the object of attention. So that the dancer's work might be strictly described as attention, sustained through time. Moreover, as much as the dancer moves away from any stable identification, she also moves away from a posture of knowing, or mastering, the dance, instead ensuring the possibility for the dance to emerge from her perceptive unrest.

In the face of uncertainty / speculation

In the first of his lecture series on the work of Deborah Hay last year[4], dancer and choreographer Laurent Pichaud began with mentioning the position of a dancer who doesn't know what the dance means. He presented this situation as one of loss (of mastery) as much as an acceleration of the dancer's responsibility, a situation that creates the obligation to invest dances with one's own creativity rather than with the intention to understand them, to "get" them. Interpretation (which in French means performance as much as reading) becomes a site of fabulation and speculation. Fabulation, when the meanings you create exceed logics or likelihood. Speculation, when you draw consequences from uncertain notions. Divested of the possibility to "know for sure", the dancer enters a mobile territory. Such territory offers no stable coordinates, but a set of horizons to move towards – a magnetic field with multiple and varying poles. It is revealing that Pichaud would address the suspension of comprehension as introduction to Hay's work.

Hay's choreographies are composed of verbal instructions and perceptive riddles meant to bring the dancer's attention in a state of embodied doubt and speculation. Offered as tools to work with on the score, these riddles in the form of what-if questions are like a user's guide to the instructions. Hay describes them as: "1) unanswerable, 2) impossible to truly comprehend, and, at the same time, 3) poignantly

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4 *Performer la recherche : 5 séances sur Deborah Hay,* Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, 2017

immediate."[5] These striking impossibilities have a clear function, which she calls the un-choreographing process, or the effort to "uproot behaviour that gathers experimentally and/or experientially"[6], opening the dancer's perception to more possibilities in each moment of dancing. This opening process actually opens a gap, the questions suspend usual comprehensions. They loosen prehension as a mental and sensorial relationship (of holding and stabilization), bringing the dancer into a state of admiration where the only possible approach is indeed approximation: moving "closer" to a mysterious task, without certainty (as to its true meaning) or assessable exactitude.

 As a counterexample of what she would expect from the dancer's performance, Hay describes a "singularly coherent choreographed body". Giving oneself over to the demands of the score, letting her attention be manipulated to the point of dis-identification, the dancer should instead appear as a constantly re-forming entity, unstable and in process[7].

Hay's tools, as well as the diffractive procedures of the *dance of companionship* or the obstruction of *Dancing is...*, are calls for a sustained and multiplied exercise of perception of the dance: speculating on possibilities which would exceed one's accumulated experience, or opening up space for an unmeasured excess within one's own grasp of the dance as it is unravelling. In all three cases, "excess" points to the impossibility to identify the dance, placing it on an ever-receding horizon, while the dancer's effort to approach it keep her in movement. These practices demand commitment and discipline, remaining in the present, not anticipating: loosening the grasp of past and future demands (in the form of habitual and compositional tendencies), resisting from framing or from reducing what is hardly distinguishable to something with hard contours. They ask that the dancer let dance exceed the choreographic frame.

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5   *How do I recognize my choreography?* Deborah Hay, 2007 on www.deborahhay.com
6   Ibid.
7   Such a description resonates strongly with Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, which proposes that the individual is a meta-stable entity, an ongoing process of coming into being through the destabilizations brought about by the relations it is part of.

Teachback / undoing – learning and teaching in the dark

I now want to present a situation that has aimed at undoing the stability of the teacher/author, in resonance with the aesthetics of precariousness such dances lays out. Hosted by Jennifer Lacey in ImPulsTanz, Vienna between 2009 and 2016, TTT (re-named Teachback from 2013 on, when I joined Lacey in holding that space), was "originally conceived as a place where artists who find themselves teaching could meet and explore the creative context of class and their continuing evolving relationship to the roles of student and teacher within the context of contemporary dance study and creation.[8]" Each summer, Lacey convoked about ten peers for a week in order to "focus on teaching as an artistic practice and a form of research, rather than the passing on of preexisting knowledge[9]". Research, in those terms, implied refraining from using our favourite tools, letting go of the methods we had learnt and devised, and groping together so that other ways of understanding dance and teaching might emerge. It meant asking naively: (how) is dancing a form of knowing? And how is this produced: should it be passed on, explained, infused through contagion, ..? The participants' sensibilities and concerns gave prominence in the research process to intuitive, indirect and elusive modes of action.

A correlate of the TTT/Teachback program has been undermining the performance of authoritative postures the position of pedagogue might entail. When the teacher arrives and says honestly: "I don't know" in an artistic context, learning as the accumulation of predetermined information is excluded, for there really is nothing waiting to be found out. Neither teacher or student knows what should be learnt, or if something will be learnt at all. We can only commit and embrace together something that is proposed as a chance to do so. The teacher's role, like the artist's, is to make up situations around a gap, not to fill it with prescriptions.[10]

8   Jennifer Lacey, invitation letter, 2011 http://www.jardindeurope.eu/index.php?id=60
9   Jennifer Lacey & Alice Chauchat, invitation letter, 2013
    http://www.lifelongburning.eu/projects/events/e/teachback-vienna-2013.html
10 During a class I gave in summer 2014, a participant asked : "Can we learn something without authority, and without knowing what we want to learn?". The question remains open.

weak method / a practice of precariousness

TTT/Teachback has been a site of exploration for the resonance between art making and teaching practices. As a host, Lacey brought in her own poetics, and these have coloured most of what happened in that frame. Her work, whether as an art maker or teacher, recurrently hovers on the borders of presence and definition.

For example, as the start of a workshop we led together this summer[11], she proposed that we read aloud some texts whilst the participants do what they do, such as lying down on top of each other, giving attention to their and each other's bodies in the form of massage and other similar activities they were already engaged in. The situation should continue as long as they listen, and should be over once everyone finds themselves doing something else. The task thus seemed rather clear, yet was full of holes for all parties engaged: which texts should we read? How do they make sure to find themselves doing something else? We'd all need to make decisions, yet how these were taken was left open. Such a score is quite typical for Lacey's work. From a clearly described yet excessively open structure to the material reality of its performance, the many provisory and contingent choices that give it flesh necessarily exceed the execution of a task. The structure is there to support and protect the possibility to invest in presence and action of a most fleeting sort. The gaps in the enunciation are calls for intuitive responses, and for investigating the liminal spaces between "something" and "nothing," or to allow what is hardly ever considered to be given full attention.

 The complexity of Lacey's choreographic procedures is opaque, and their relation to audience's (or students') aesthetic response, mostly indirect (these are certainly qualities she shares with Hay). Her commitment to the preservation of mystery in art can be seen as a cultivation of admiration, in Irigaray's terms: wonder for what is not known, without immediately trying to place it in a manageable place and as active

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11 Amish Cinema, during ImPulsTanz festival, Vienna 2017
    https://www.impulstanz.com/en/archive/workshops/2017/id3504/

resistance to reification. Toward the end of the 2014 session, in a collective attempt at naming the type of procedures we had been fabricating in the Teachback context, the name "weak method" was called. Jennifer embraced the term and taught the following year a workshop under the same title. The formula is an oxymoron. Whereas method promises a certain efficiency, an orderly set of procedures, weakness retracts from the promise. Maybe the method's efficiency is one of sabotage (negative efficiency), one that impairs the evaluation of progress or achievement. Claiming the authority of methodology, it forges a space for the elusive to be valued. Far from relinquishing precision, it engages transversal modes of thought, across language, intuition and sensation. It can't be explained or reproduced but it can be transmitted by activating it together. It is a culture, not a technique. It is social practice engaging un-stable subjects.

… an endless fall into the void? / un-holding together

The examples I proposed here embrace dance as a practice of attention, of commitment and of dis-identification, one that articulates a multiplied awareness and responsiveness to the event, in a constant motion away from individual stability: a practice of precarious subjectivity.

Rather than fortifying the dancer and/or the dance, they lay out an aesthetics of uncertainty, favouring the fleeting, the obtuse, the uncertain, the unresolved, and as much as I love these, I wonder which conditions can keep precariousness from turning into disaster.

When Hay writes about her work requiring a "catastrophic loss" of learnt behaviour, she does not exaggerate. There is a violence in dismantling one's own patterns; these carry value systems around which we construct our selves, conceptual anchors and physical supports. Which scaffolding can we build to replace them? Should we replace them? And if not, what do we need to be able to dance?

Lacey's weak method, as noted by a participant in her workshop, "relies on intimacy and trust." It also relies on a suspension of disbelief, an engagement with the poetry of her instructions, by which participants enter role play without needing to negotiate a strict consensus on the play's outline. The understanding that everyone involved shares in the insecurity allows for it to lose its weight. Without a master who would detain a fixed knowledge and who would be in charge of passing it on, all can let go (even if only for a moment) of the desire for mastery. Together and side by side, we experiment with engaging in the undetermined, maintaining it as such.

Grounding figure for the *Dance of companionship*, the lady's companion is literally precarious[12]. This position was mostly occupied in the 18th and 19th centuries in England by destitute women of the aristocracy, who would be hired by wealthier one to live with them and follow them in their whereabouts. The lady's companion's living depended on someone else's benevolence, which would be given if the relationship between them was both close and distant enough so as to permit a shared privacy.

By their very nature, these practices create the forms of togetherness that they necessitate. Performing, or attending to the performance of these scores means giving attention to the unstable, the weak and the restless. As studio practices, they are semi-public: a space in which everyone performs, the studio excludes the "public" as separate audience. It is a space for encounter and common endeavour; individuals who do not necessarily share anything else than a particular activity, who produce and inhabit together certain conditions, and these conditions are determined with the modalities of art. As a space of art it is also a sheltered space, one that makes possible to experiment with artificial set-ups in order to find out which ones may sustain vulnerability without it being harvested for a stronger entity's good.

Each practice is like a temporary place where we can experiment with ways of living together in doubt, precariously and without verification. Where the habitual need for a stable centre, for a coherent and strong identity, can be replaced with mobile attention

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12 Originally: "depending on the will or pleasure of another." (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precarious)

in a context where we also train trust, care and solidarity. Where fantasies of centred-ness, grounded-ness and interiority can be replaced with the pleasures of multi-lateral dependency, entanglement and responsibility towards more than we can identify. Where we learn to embrace the strange and other in ourselves, in each other, and in places that do not have a name.