

Causal Machine or My Body Is Ultimately Engaged

by Branka Zgonjanin

There were two main reasons for initiating my research, realized in the frame of the Amsterdam Master of Choreography program (2009-2011). The first was my need for integrity in all artistic methodologies, tools, strategies, approaches and modes of operating, and consequently, forms and contents which I was employing until then. The second reason for this research was a particular interest in the performer's body and what it contains. The premises were: *Everything that happens to the body can be a dance artefact; We have many different bodies; Everything that a dancer does consciously can be a dance.*

Exploring the first premise, it was proposed to perceive the body as a container which stores memories of all the events which the body has directly or indirectly witnessed or experienced. The body was also treated as a permanent receptor –a sensual machine which can feel and re-produce feelings that are peculiarities of places, objects or events. Looking at the receptive characteristic of the body would enable a researcher to tackle the layers of the body and to reach and explore those different bodies that comprise the second research premise: *We have many different bodies.* These two proposals regarding how to treat the body in this research were aspects of the choreographic approach. Regarding the performer's view point the proposal was to treat the body in a completely opposite manner –where the body is perceived as a *tabula rasa*. This meant total openness for all the obscurities and depths of the research process, as well as an absolute self-observation and self-detachment (*Everything that a dancer does consciously can be a dance*). These opposites were the strategic core of the research process and over time they have become more clear and articulated.

Political Body –receptacle physicality

The initial subtitle of my research was *My Body Is Ultimately Politicised*. I had started from the notion that every body is extremely politicised, drawing inspiration from the writing and the concept of *habitus* by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977). In short, the concept of *habitus* speaks about the individual embodiment of social practices. I assumed that an active expression of the relation and tension between the inside and the outside of the performer's body would reveal the embodied social and personal practices of the performer. The fundamental artistic questions were: how to dance one's own political scars, inner-tattoos and broken body? How to dance the subtle clashes between the inside and the outside? And, consequently, how does one create a choreography that will reflect on or answer these two questions?

On the path to answering my questions I found that I had to invent a choreographic practice that will enable me to transform these abstract ideas into material choreographic artefacts.

Double Body –the threshold to the new

The first step that took me towards my new practice was a moment in which, in front of all of my mentors and peers, I let myself be questioned under a state of not knowing. As a result of a risk, the first answer came –the concept of *Double Body*(Zgonjanin, 2012). At first, this concept was just a way to frame the frustration from the perception that there are two bodies in me as a performer. One body was the ideal, desired body which I want to achieve with my performance, and the other body was the real one, the one I have. Between these two bodies I noticed a tension. The tension exists because of the gap between them. The gap is created out of a desire for a definite transformation of the real body into the ideal body. Exposing this naïve desire in front of my respectful surrounding, helped me to better understand what my real interest is. I am actually interested in the third body, the body that exists in-between the first two. While the real body is striving to become the ideal body, the third body emerges. The third body is always in a process of becoming.

To help develop these notions, I invented and started using the method of distraction and the 'paradoxical tasks'. Distraction is a method which I use to make the performer very busy and to disable her from drifting away regarding attention and presence. Usually I give the performer two contradicting tasks, which are in a way almost impossible to achieve. They correspond to the well known practice of *zen koan* and I named them 'paradoxical tasks'. In practice, I am searching for what is missing in the performer's presence, and then I give a task that drags this person to the farthest opposite end to what one person is doing too much or very little of. For example, once I gave a task to a performer to shout out as in a passionate political speech her subtle emotional expressions about the song she wanted to dance. This came as a solution to her blockade to physically express emotions and to create a material from them. The result of this task was her subtle dance miniature that was truly revealing the atmosphere of the song which the audience can't hear.

Naming –focusing the mind through dual attention

I noticed the discrepancy between making and talking about making and I decided that this is a place where I should practise the task of integrity. I accomplished this by undertaking the simple task of verbally expressing the activity I was performing at that moment. Being able to say what I am doing at the moment of doing it gave me a double perspective, sharper attention and more presence. The conclusion was that mind and thoughts are identifiable to the speech. The mind is based in the language(s) and needs language to focus. On the other hand, the mind 'becomes more physical' when it is performing the double task of talking while in parallel directing the body; where the content of the words relates directly to the content of the movement. Naming the sensation while you are sensing it generates double attention and higher bodily awareness because of the tautological relation between body and mind.

***The Grid* –from concept to practice**

The understanding of the importance of naming caused the discovery of my main methodology kit –*The Grid*. I have invented this system of methods and as far as I am informed, this system doesn't refer to any other existing system. Therefore, I am writing a glossary of this system in order to be able to develop it fully and to share it with others. Some units of the glossary are already published (Zgonjanin, 2012). Applied, *The Grid* becomes a practise and performance at the same time. It works with two opposite forces –inner and outer. The inner force is employed by a simple action of measuring one's own body and noting its measures in the form of grids of various scales. Measuring is an act of putting one body part, for example forearm, to lay on the black dance floor and then drawing, with the other hand, two dots with the chalk, one at the beginning of the length of the body part, the other one at the end –to express its length. This action is repeated several times with the same body part in order to create a grid of dots that are equally distanced from each other (the length of that body part), then start over with a different body part. A grid would then be created from sections of nine or more white dots on the surface of the black dance floor. I would do this continuously for about 26 minutes each time I was practising/performing it. The duration and the fact that I would always measure different body parts, enabled me to create the grids (squares) of different sizes (scales) all over the dance floor. These notations stay on the floor as a text or a drawing during and after the performance.

The activity of measuring drags the performer's focus and gaze into herself. This activity is somewhat similar to knitting or drawing -a person has to look down at what she or he is doing. This activity would be totally awkward and autistic on stage, had the performer not been doing the second activity at the same time. The second activity is to simultaneously talk while she is measuring. She would talk about her currently measured body part, from the memory stored in it or its current sensation, or some other related association. This activity is outer because the speech is directed to the audience. Therefore the speech transcends the body, it breaks the autism of the measuring and reaches the audience in a direct way. The content of the speech touches the audience through empathy, due to its personal nature and the universally human relationship people have with their various body parts.

Conclusions

The Grid came as an answer to my questions expressed at the beginning of the research. It has also assimilated and integrated the three premises I started with. Moreover, by discovering and shaping *The Grid* I have enabled myself to create a performance that works with the inner-outer dialogue in a transparent and simple way. In this performance, called *One Double Body* (Zgonjanin, 2011), I achieved matching the body of a performer with the performed body. This means to perform what the performer is, while taking the audience to a place that is not necessarily related to the performer as a person, but rather to more general and generous questions about the reality we share or want to understand.

Through time the initial subtitle of my research, *My Body Is Ultimately Politicised*, changed to the subtitle *My Body Is Ultimately Engaged*. This is a consequence of the use of the distraction method and the 'paradoxical tasks' where the body never stops engaging, never stops changing and proposes to be the body of awareness that (re)creates itself through dedicated and exhausting, yet joyful work.

This article is based on the final presentation/piece: *ONE DOUBLE BODY/Conversations with the Fish* at the Amsterdam Master of Choreography programme (which does not require a written thesis) at the Amsterdam Hogeschool voor de Kunsten, 2011.

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