

Dancing on the Threshold of Sense

Four Practices and Two Conclusions

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In the following text I will describe four practices from my own recent research in the project *Movement Material* and a series of site specific choreographic works entitled *How to disappear #1-4*. The text is based on a lecture, which was a form of walk and talk, in the sense that I was speaking about what I was doing while doing it. The transformation into written text will surely leave out some layers, but might just as well add some other.

First some thoughts on the threshold of sense: Historically, and still today, the dancing body has been closely related to the sens-prefix: Sensorial, sensitive, sensual, sensational etc. However, and strangely enough, the most common meaning of sense (as in making sense) is less referred to. Quite on the contrary, dance is instead commonly placed in opposition to sense, when understood as the rational and as language. Dance is then positioned to counter the rational and made out to represent the body and that which words cannot express. This unspeakable can take the form of emotion and affect, or a reflection of the soul or spirit. At some time, the dancing body gets to represent the animal side of the human and at other times purely geometrical aspects of a body's physical extension in space. In some way this text also sets up a division between sense and sensibility, by claiming that there is something sensorial beyond language. I would like to emphasize that the form of dance that I am advocating, as the title suggests, happens at the threshold of that divide. The dichotomy that is put in place is a way to create an interface rather than a separation.

Four Practices

I do believe that the moving body produces other forms of intelligible knowledge than what languaged thinking does and the following four practices are frames for such knowledge production.

Warming up without Warming up (WupWoup)

This practice was born out of two concrete reflections of mine. The first one came through physical practice, as I was, for a period in my life, running quite a lot. Once, before going for a run I decided to warm up by doing squats. Later the same week I wanted to do some squats but thought I should warm up first and started to run around the studio. It became clear that the warm up part and the actual exercise part could swap place and could both function as warm up for the other. The second reflection came from the work I was doing with the group *The Swarm* that I put together during my PhD studies.

At the start of our working day we would always take a movement to warm up, although we had no clear plan of what we were warming up for. So how to prepare for something when you don't know what you are preparing for? The warm up became a ritual in itself and we wanted to challenge it by giving ourselves time to warm up, but avoid doing anything we would usually do to warm up. So, *Warming up without Warming up*. This paradoxical task quickly evolved to the question of whether one can do something without knowing what it is. As soon as the conscious mind identifies an action as such and provides definition for it, names it, the action gets lost in its definition. The practice turned into a form of trying to move outside the reach of naming, outside of definition, and constantly transform any definition that showed up. This state of being, of mind and of moving, is not sustainable. It is destined to fail continuously. To be transparent with this failure we decided to announce our failures as they took place, by uttering one of the words: *Here/Now/I*. We chose those words as they are shifters, in the sense that it is their utterance that constitutes them. The *I* is the subject that utters it. The *Here* is the place where the utterance takes place and the *Now* is the moment it is uttered. We experienced that these verbal markers were related to the failure of sustaining the un-named. It was when there was an experience of *Here*, of *Now* or of *I* that the more (self)conscious faculty was at work.

Inside Touch

This practice was also developed during the doctoral research and in collaboration with *The Swarm*. Touch is mostly understood as the sensation one gets when putting a surface of the body in contact with an external surface. *Inside Touch* aims to subvert our experience of touch by proposing that touch also can take place inside the body. When I move I can feel my own movement. What if this kinesthetic sensation is considered as tactile? Similarly to how I can feel the grass by letting the surfaces of my body and the grass meet, my sensation of movement can be understood as feeling different internal surfaces meeting. The practice thus simply consists in shifting one's perception of movement to the tactile domain. Next to the feeling of touch there is the feeling of that which one touches and many times the object that is touched is assigned the qualities of the experienced sense. Instead of saying that I experienced humidity when touching the grass, I will say that the grass is humid. When I feel my arm moving, what are the qualities of the materials that are in touch? I can focus on different material qualities in my body, such as bone, connective tissue or skin, and produce very different perceptions of my movement. This perception of a certain material in turn affects how I move, so that the material sensation I have becomes a movement quality. The movement becomes bone, makes the movement bony, the skin makes it skinny.

While practicing *Inside Touch* we discovered a certain risk of disappearing into sensation and into the body. To counter this introvert tendency we gave ourselves the task to imagine that what we perceive takes space in the space, rather than in the body. This task completed the flipping of touch that the practice proposed. The touched surface was moved from outside the body into it, and the felt sensation was projected into the space rather than felt in the body.

Follow the Movement

This practice developed out of the previous one: *Inside Touch*. It was the main practice in the research project *Movement Material*.¹ While experiencing inner surfaces sliding on each other, it gave me a feeling of being able

¹ Carried out 2016-2018 at the Danish National School of Performing Arts, Copenhagen, and funded by the Danish Ministry of Culture. More info can be found here: <https://ddsks.dk/da/projekter/movement-materia>

to follow the movement by following those surfaces. Almost like sliding your hand along the wall when walking through a dark room, orienting yourself through touch. Using the word “follow” presumes that there is a movement to follow. Instead of producing movement, my movement follows a movement. This meant that in order to start moving I needed to locate the presence of a movement present. I would access this present movement through the tactile kinesthetic sensation from *Inside Touch*, almost like when you through touch manage to feel someone’s pulse by placing your fingers at the right spot. This tuning into sensation of movement and letting it guide my movement became the practice of *Follow the Movement*.

The Expressometer

Also, this practice had a predecessor from the doctoral research in which *The Swarm* was working with a tool we called the *Performometer*. Most performers have some sort of *performance persona* meaning that something happens to you, physically, when performing. Something is turned on, and we wanted to see what happened if that was regulated as a dimmer and not as a switch. What would it mean to perform just a little bit? To turn something on, but just a little bit and regulate its intensity. The *Expressometer* is the later version of the *Performometer*. It is the same idea, but here it is expression that is regulated. It was inspired from a quote in an online lecture by Timothy Morton saying “The minimal level of activity is to allow oneself to be affected”.² My interpretation into practice of this was a relation between impression and expression. The minimal level of the *Expressometer* is to bring my attention to how I’m affected by the current situation I’m in: To allow it to affect me. Jacking the *Expressometer* up is then simply a way to turn that impression into an expression and regulate its intensity.

You make yourself sensitive to the input and play with the level of output. This, however, should not be confused with self-expression. There is no self at the core, longing to find its way out, there is just impressions moving through me and back out again.

2 I’m afraid I’m paraphrasing from memory here, as the quote came from an online lecture posted on YouTube and that I’m unfortunately not able to find back.

Two Conclusions

Moving on to the latter part of the subtitle, the conclusions presented here are understood as results that came out of practicing the above. One can see them as results of the research, although they do not answer an original research question. They result from asking questions to and through practice. The first one is *suspension as a state of doing*. The term suspension had been present during the entire research project *Movement Material* and it is explained in detail in published articles but briefly accounted for here.³ In the practice of *Follow the Movement* there was an experience of a space created between the happening and the experience of the happening. Almost like a slight out-of-body-experience. An observation from afar, yet present in the observed. In that sense the practice produced a different bodily experience, which in a way means a different body.

The second conclusion relates to the title *Dancing on the Threshold of Sense*. It is an experience of making sense through movement. In the beginning of this text I describe what I experience as a lack of recognition of sense-making in dancing. My experience in all of the above mentioned practices was that they were proto-tools for sense-making. A form of balancing – or dancing – on the threshold of sense. In the place where sense emerges and is about to become articulated. In an effort to connect the two conclusions I would say that the balancing/dancing is a form of suspension: Staying suspended on that threshold of sense-making, watching sense emerge, without bringing it to definition.

3 Both articles can be found on: <https://ddsks.dk/da/projekter/movement-material>

