

Write With Dance or We Are Lost

The Art of Movement as Practice as Research

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MOVEMENT IS WHAT BRINGS NEW KNOWLEDGE²

This paper focuses on dance research as a combination of creative processes that integrate the practices of education, performance and writing. In this interdisciplinary context dance practice becomes the foundation for a research mode that »encompasses a diversity of knowledge where the sensory, cognitive, motor, affective and spiritual domains mingle with different emphases.« (Fortin 1999: 40) The combination of embodied knowledge exposed in this paper is a somatic perspective grounded in the work of both Rudolf Laban and his disciples, particularly Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis, Authentic Movement³, and Bausch's *Tanztheater*.

Attempting to integrate these three somatic and performative practices in an academic research environment I have developed along the last ten years a contemporary research approach based on Laban's Art of Movement which I named *Somatic Performative Research*. This framework consists of an Artistic Practice as Research (PaR) mode of enquiry. I have worked with this integrative approach together with graduate students and performers of my *A-FETO Dance Theater Collective* at the Performance Laboratory at the Federal University of Bahia in Brazil. In the present text I expose the aesthetic influences and research backgrounds which have grounded this somatic-performative perspective. In order to illustrate such framework, I also present a set of principles, phases and procedures as samples to clarify its practice.

1 | English revision by Melina Scialom.

2 | »For Irmgard, movement, not more pondering, was what brought new knowledge.« (Hackney 1998: 3).

3 | Authentic Movement is a dance therapy method created by Mary Starks Whitehouse, based on her training with Mary Wigman and the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. For more information on this somatic method, see Pallaro 1999.

Rudolf Laban was one of the first artists and thinkers to structure a system that associates creative dance practice with research, education, and therapy. In his investigations he pointed out three main applications for body movement: Research, Recreation and Rehabilitation. In Laban's work these three activities are grounded in the practice of movement principles, in concepts that imply transitions and gradations, such as the dynamics between light and strong, high and low, ascending and descending etc. Theory comes from dance practice so that research and writing are rooted in the volatile and relational nature of movement. Laban had already proposed an answer to the key contemporary question of dance research: »What does it mean to write with dance?« (Lepecki 2004: 133) rather than simply *about* dance. How can scholars write (and notate, teach, research etc.) in a way that dance is not reduced to an object of scrutiny but rather becomes itself »the way in which we form things«, as choreographer Pina Bausch (zitiert in Servos/Weigelt 1986: 239) suggests? In other words, how can we »not only place [dance] practice within the research process, but to lead research through [dance] practice.« (Haseman 2006: 2–3)

Although dance is primarily a field of artistic practice, dance research has not necessarily involved similar physical practice or lead its enquiry through that physical exploration. There is still a gap between a practice – be it pedagogical, artistic, therapeutic etc. – and the research itself which most of the times is based on methodologies from other fields of knowledge, especially the humanities. Our excuse for that appropriation of extrinsic methodologies is that we are a recently developed research field which needs to refer to previous historical developments. The debt that dance research has to human and social science methods does not justify the fact that we are denying our own historical background on research. In fact, this *modus operandi* has been running parallel to most research in spite of the exclusive and invalidating academic context. If we insist on using only quantitative and qualitative frameworks and other fields of knowledge as base ground of our own research we will multiply the denial of our own historical background and our exclusion of widely recognized academic research contexts.

Although we are part of a transdisciplinary academic context, our research must be grounded in our own practice. We have to accept the fact that we create and build knowledge in a very distinctive manner which cannot be based on non-dancing frameworks and procedures, although it can definitely dialogue with them. As dance researchers we are not only doing an inquiry in a general context, but we must precisely add up our specific contribution to this context. That contribution consists of the dynamic mode of creating somatic wisdom (Hartley 1995) while also making use of different types of knowledge. The unique contribution of dance to Practice as Research is to question the dichotomistic ways in which we have learned to (re)produce knowledge as abstract ideas separate not only from artistic practice but from

embodied creative practices. If movement, not more pondering, is what brings new knowledge, then dance is fundamental to the concretion of the practice turn in this millennium.

Dance's volatile nature creates dynamic modes of knowledge that integrate physicality and thinking coherent to life's ever changing flux. »Change is here to stay« (Bartenieff, quoted in Hackney 1998: 16) as advised Laban's former pupil Irmgard Bartenieff. In a world of »constant change« (1998: 17) Bartenieff's pupil Peggy Hackney instigates us to elaborate ways of living through stable mobility and mobile stability. Researching today consists of learning how to deal with this paradoxical state of existence discovering and exploring stability in mobility and vice-versa as two complementary forces in a spiraling dynamics. This contrasting dynamics constitutes all practical matter present in dance, performance, life, action (including writing, reading, teaching etc.), as well as concepts such as performativity, gender, politics, sustainability etc. This basic constitution combines art and life as an integrated research, which operates within a »dramaturgy of contrasts« (Schmidt 2000: 8) between mobility and stability rather than opposing dichotomies.

As a result, the relationship between mobility and stability is the core of any means of generating innovation – be it in education, research, therapy etc. There is, at the very core of Laban's work – and consequently of most of its developments – a radical merger of practice and theory into an open-ended self-multiplying structure that stimulates unpredictable unfolding following the dynamic nature of movement itself. This means that his work is constantly renewed and up to date.

WHAT MOVES US HAS A MOVEMENT IN ITSELF

Pina Bausch once said »I am not interested in how people move, but what moves them.« (Servos/Weigelt 1985: 15–16) This emphasis on »what moves people« refers to that motivating force which Laban emphasized as the spring of movement, the inner attitude or *Antrieb*. This word has been translated as *effort* or *dynamics* in English. It can actually be associated to Freud's *Trieb*, which was misinterpreted as »instinct« but in fact means »driving force« (Mills 2004: 673,675).

Bausch's emphasis on that force was present throughout her creative process. But that not necessarily meant a disregard towards form itself (the »how people move«). In Bausch's perspective, along with dance theater's tradition, movement is necessarily meaningful but not as a conveyer of an *a priori* or separate content. In *Tanztheater* the body is not an instrument to tell other stories or illustrate abstract concepts and theories. Reflecting Laban and Jooss's heritage, Bausch's works reveal movement as the convener of its own nature in a critical reflexive manner. In other words, that which moves people is not an *a priori* abstract idea

or feeling but a moving entity in itself. We are moved by a moving driving force. Content can only exist as a form of driving force.

Applied to research, its themes and contents can only exist as moving forces in dynamic space, rather than abstract isolated concepts and ideas. A research in this context explores and discovers the body's own modes and pathways as a creator of unique stories. The research has a movement in itself and moves the researcher into the dynamic space. Laban's *Art of Movement* offers numerous and at times unpredictable possibilities of research which allows the researcher to reject established protocols and expectations imposed on an objectified body and on a controllable research object. Unpredictable possibilities of research are what we have experienced at the Performance Laboratory at the Federal University of Bahia where artists from different backgrounds and research themes come together to move and be moved by their individual inquiries. To trigger their explorations during the Laboratories the question I often ask is »How does ›what moves us‹ move itself?« (Fernandes 2012) turning Bausch's saying into a spiralling reflexive format. That instigates us to explore movement coming from a live research with its own unique journey. After all, to research is to bring about a unique contribution, especially in an artistic context. But for that we need to let ourselves be moved by the research. The double meaning of the word *moving* has led me to call us *moving researchers*, integrating what moves us and how we move.

Classes usually last over three to four hours and sometimes include fieldtrips and public performances. The activities are based on procedures and principles of three main approaches – *Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis*, *Authentic Movement* and *Tanztheater* – but also dance improvisation and performance art. The combination of these practices resulted on procedures which include open structures, poetic suggestions and stimuli, questions and inter-artistic answers. Sometimes classes might look like *Tanztheater* scenes, although that is not really our concern or goal. It is important to follow the flow of the moment and adapt initial plans as well as to respect individual rhythms to unfold and complete the explorations as much as integrate moving and witnessing.

Along the last ten years specific principles emerged out of this dance practice, composing a complete set of twenty Somatic-Performative Principles. They are organized into three sets, according to their function in the whole approach: four founding, twelve thematic and four contextual principles. They were gradually organized in crystalline forms as in Laban's *Space Harmony*: two sets of four (two tetrahedrons or one cube), one set of twelve (icosahedron) and altogether a set of twenty (dodecahedron). Although separated into twenty principles, they all work as an entire picture of different nuances and intensities according to each research project. For example, it is impossible to experience Spatial pulsing (first thematic principle) without working on Energy, flow and

rhythm (forth thematic principle). But these are different concepts which can be emphasized differently according to the interest, phase or need.

The twenty principles are organized following an order of growing priority and complexity within the research process. It is necessary to validate and consider the first four founding principles prior to experience the twelve thematic ones and to finally perceive and apply the four contextual ones which are more relational and open. The four founding principles emphasize the artistic process as main axis of the research. They consist of key strategies to pursue research through artistic practice. They support the artistic process in assuming the control of the research in any procedure or phase. The four founding principles are as follows:

1. Art of/in Movement as axis-element – the research takes us in its own move;
2. Processes and studies have live and integrated constitution – *Soma*;
3. Being guided by inner impulse of movement;
4. Performance and inter-arts as (anti)method (e.g. performative data collection, recording, observation, analysis, reading, writing, oral defense, lecture etc.).

The thematic principles clarify specific terminologies relevant to performing arts research from a somatic-performative perspective. They are not abstract concepts but rather thematically organized modes of dynamic experiencing. These twelve principles point out complementary states, aspects and emphasis which work simultaneously in interrelationships within research projects. The twelve thematic principles are as follows:

1. Spatial pulsing or inter-relational autonomous intelligences;
2. Somatic attunement and sensitivity;
3. Somatic wisdom or cellular intelligence – body as both matter and energy experienced from within and with/in the environment, in a dynamic and integrated whole of feeling, sensation, intention, attention, intuition, perception and interaction;
4. Energy, flow and rhythm – stir and stillness – move and being moved;
5. Quantic *spacetime*, simultaneity and sincronicity;
6. Crystal patterns, *repaterning* and decolonization;
7. Creativity, unpredictability and challenge;
8. Connections – fluid borders between differences;
9. Association and sense created through sharing affection (e.g. interchange and overlapping of mover-witness roles);
10. Internal coherency and/in inter-relation;
11. Somatic-performative image;
12. Incarnated spirituality – Sacred *soma*.

Contextual principles place performing arts research in a broader perspective and provide a parameter of relevance. This contextualization validates performing arts research as a field of unique contributions to contemporary developments. The four contextual principles are as follows:

1. (G)Local integration and awareness;
2. Participative openness and poetics of difference;
3. Deep ecology and body environment merger;
4. Art as axis of dialogue between different fields of knowledge.

Based on these twenty principles the Laboratory meetings generate an environment that combines somatic and performative influences. The integration between movement and thinking creates a performativity founded on the Art of Movement, rather than on words. While John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1961) demonstrates the performativity of words, our performativity explores how to move and be moved by things and words. In this creative context we deconstruct Descartes' saying »I think, therefore I am« into more and more somatic modes of identity such as »I feel, therefore I am,« (Damasio 1994, 2006) »I move, therefore I learn with the environment«, »I perform, therefore I research« etc. Consequently, we do not divide activities into theoretical (round tables, lectures, conferences) and practical (performances, technique classes, workshops) but we rather call every activity a *somatic-performative merger*.

Photo 1



Graduate students Cátia Martins, Leonardo Harispe, Carlos Ferreira, Alex Cerqueira and Thales Branche in Evolving Exploration phase at the Performance Laboratory. Salvador BA, Brazil, 2012. Photo by the author.

PHASES AND PROCEDURES

In the following paragraphs I will briefly describe one sample activity in order to illustrate what we do at the Performance Laboratory. Classes are usually organized in four phases which follow somatic procedures and terminologies within a performative context. These phases are not organized linearly and rather evolve smoothly from one into another in a back and forth rhythm according to the moment:

1. Arrival – inner rhythm; gaining space from within; stir and stillness; let the research be.
2. Moving and Being Moved – reciprocal exchange and creative merger between research and researcher, self and other, subject and object, body and environment.
3. Evolving Exploration – let the research take me; familiar unknown, unpredictable belonging; reciprocal exchange and creative merger between dancing and writing, movement and meaning.
4. Balance and Integration – balancing things out, dynamic alignment of different levels; coming together, sharing.

The following class sample uses the Basic Neurological Patterns, one of the many *Bartenieff Principles*. Along three hours we grow gradually from cellular breathing into navel radiation and head-tail connection to homologous (upper/lower) and body half (right/left) up to contralateral body organization. Along these developmental phases we also go from a more personal inner focus into a duet until growing into complex relationships with the environment and objects in contralateral shaping, integrating all previous phases in creative movement and sharing.

These phases run simultaneously at somatic and research levels. Gradually, as we experience and explore these phases in our bodies, I start bringing up the research/researcher merger calling up on the research's autonomy as a moving being. The research is born little by little and grows into its own right from a cell into head-tail etc. In this developmental framework – which is only one example of a wide range of possibilities within somatic work – we start exploring how the research expands to collect information and comes back to center to gather it all in a meaningful way (navel radiation), what is the core of the research (core support, pelvic floor), what is the main axis of the research (head-tail), what is the main motivation / question of the research and how does it take you into space (movement initiation and sequencing), what are the two main aspects/features of the research, which work together to strengthen the central axis (body half, the lizard usually played in duets), what are the odds and

problems of the research (as we feel uneasiness in some body parts or on their relationships) etc.

Photo 2



Former doctoral student Líria Morays explores her research in navel radiation, growing and shrinking at a Performance Laboratory field trip. Lençóis BA, Brazil, 2012. Photo by the author.

As we experience contralateral spiralling coming up from the floor and back down the sense of integration of polarities becomes clear: we ground to go up and levitate to go down. A dramaturgy of contrast seen so clearly in Bausch's scenes is actually based on a vivid experience of movement's paradoxical nature. There can only be movement where different forces come into play. Within this framework writing with dance and researching with practice becomes coherent and meaningful.

Towards the end as we improvise with partners, space, words on paper or board and all kinds of objects that are casually or purposely there, I might go around giving a little touch of body paint to stimulate more this merger between dance and writing. And as we approach a mood for presenting what we have so far, it is time to work with performer/audience relationships, merging mover/witness state of consciousness.

Then I tend to ask questions that respond to the context, such as: What is your main purpose? What is your mission? What is your unique contribution to the world? etc. These open questions instigate specific and personal answers and connections through somatic-performative explorations. This leads to a closure that brings us closer together with the feeling of sharing gratitude and careful bidding within an acute sense-perception of oneself.

»DANCE, DANCE OR WE ARE LOST!«

Somatic-Performative Research demonstrates how the work of Laban can be used as baseground for a Practice as Research approach within the academic context. The Art of Movement allows the students to move and be moved by their inquiries – which have specific spatial dynamics, modes of shape change and phrasings – rather than to be the only author, owner, controlling and hegemonic power in the research process. Through the Art of Movement students become co-creators of their research in the process of movement, writing *with* dance from a moving perspective in a relational and creative environment. The object of study becomes a dynamic interactive entity understood and experienced as »soma« (Hanna 1976).

Although taken mostly from Thomas Hanna the term *soma* actually derives from the Vedic tradition described as a sacred drink of eternal life at the »Rig Veda« (Griffith 1896: 368–429). Soma also acts as an inspiration and motivating force. Similar force has been conceptualised by Laban – one of the pioneers of contemporary somatics – who introduced the term *Antrieb*. In Laban's *Eukinetics*, *Antrieb* is our inner attitude towards the four motion factors along gradations between condensing and indulging, with the flow motion factor as its foundation.

Eukinetics is inseparable from spatial trace-forms and relationships understood as part of the *Choreutics* category. The association of *Eukinetics* and *Choreutics* – called *Dynamosphere* – connects inner motivation and spatial context in a form of relevant research. This is not only in agreement with *Practice as Research* but aligns itself with Vedic ancient tradition in a historically grounded somatic research: »Soma in Vedic tradition thus represents essentially a non physical mind stimulant, and drive. The motivating force for intellect and also the store of scientific knowledge from researches that act as source of capability as an enabler of actions for the welfare of the society.« (Hindu Revolution 2013) Both ancient *soma* and contemporary *Practice as Research* encompass an intrinsic association between art and science, personal creativity and social relevance. The *Art of Movement* has this somatic grounding and relevance and connects movement and meaning in integrative and transgressive ways. Human beings, as much as all living forms and any existing matter in the physical world, from micro to macrostructures, can only exist as vibratory waves between »stir and stillness.« (Laban 1984 [1939]) It is not just the human body that is telling its story through *Tanztheater* (Servos 1998: 42) continuously create modes of somatic wisdom through movement. For example, the spiralling movement of plants while in the process of growing demonstrates an advanced mode of living and relating which has inspired choreographers (Mathern 1986) and contemporary philosophers (Marder 2013).

Movement indeed constitutes the nature of life itself, from growing organisms to expanding universes, from senso-perception and personal relationships to social gatherings and pathways, from local flux of people and material goods to planetary and environmental changes. Movement is the very nature of existing, relating, learning, exploring and growing. As the Art of Movement, dance deals creatively with life's basic constitutions and developments. Therefore, dance is a fundamental mode of research that does not need to ground itself in other fields of knowledge to legitimate itself as a field of study, although it relates to all of them from its own perspectives. Dance Practice as Research is proper not only to study dance itself but also to be successfully applied to other fields of knowledge. A Practice as Research that bases itself in dance can validate and enhance embodied processes of exploring and creating knowledge in any field. The Art of Movement is a wide medium of research which reconnects us to organic and inorganic forms towards more equal modes of interacting, creating and evolving. Dance is a fundamental and relevant art form, especially to ground and accomplish the emergent paradigm of Practice as Research as applied to dance itself and to any field of knowledge.

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