

## The Body and the Scene. Territories of the Aesthetic-cognitive Experience in the Artistic Practice of Dance<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The discussion about the subject of Sublimation is articulated, complex and rigorous. These pages deliberately address the issue indirectly in the attempt to add useful elements to the critical analysis from the point of view of who, as choreographer and performer, is devoted to the artistic practice of dance. My observations therefore concern the two constituent elements of the choreographic act: the body and the scene. The 'body' as territory of the creative and cognitive experience of the dancer-choreographer: here I try to render, from my personal experience, that which is intimate in the creative and generative process of the choreographic act. The 'scene' as territory of the aesthetic-cognitive experience of the spectator-witness: the attempt here is to provide, as careful observer of the performative act, reflections about the role of the spectator in the performative dialectics. Both perspectives investigate the relationship between dance and thought, and, incidentally, between the body and the mind.

**Keywords:** *aesthetic, art, body, choreography, dance, performance, scene, sublimation, symbolic, theatre*

I am completely body and nothing outside of it, 'soul' is only a word for something that is body.

Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a powerful emperor, an unknown sage – he is called Self. He dwells in your body, it is your body.  
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

### An introduction. Dance and Philosophy

First we need to define what dance we are talking about. The word 'dance' evokes its manifold manifestations related to culture, place and time. These pages take into consideration what is called 'new dance' (today also called 'research dance') as artistic practice. From the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, philosophy, literature and poetry rethink the body and its relationship with thought, and begin to turn their interest to dance. Dance also participates in this reflection on corporeity by rethinking itself and the place it occupies in the arts and in history. Choreographers and dancers find in the thought of some philosophers something that suits well the epistemological needs of dance while at the same time the references and contributions to dance of poets, thinkers and philosophers multiply.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of my participation to the International Conference *Sublimazione. Analisi critica dell'ultima frontiera del simbolico*, PAN Palazzo delle Arti di Napoli, 14-15 March 2017 and was first published as *Il corpo e la scena. Territori dell'esperienza estetico-conoscitiva nella pratica artistica della danza*, "Kaiak A Philosophical Journey" (2017), <http://www.kaiak-pj.it/images/PDF/rivista/kaiak-4-sublimazione/Riccio.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See Caterina Di Rienzo, *Pensare il corpo in movimento come tensione etica all'oltre* (Le reti di Dedalus, 2011), [http://www.retidedalus.it/archivi/2011/dicembre/filosofie\\_presente/2\\_filosofia.htm](http://www.retidedalus.it/archivi/2011/dicembre/filosofie_presente/2_filosofia.htm), accessed 20 January 2017; and Gaia Clotilde Chernetich, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty e la danza. Un accenno* (Teatro e Critica) <http://www.teatrocritica.net/2016/06/maurice-merleau-ponty-e-la-danza-un-accenno>, accessed 20 January 2017.

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Dance – as Paul Valéry already observed – is thought at work. And just like all contemporary art, dance itself is something that makes us think. It makes us think not only on something, but on the modality of thought itself. Dance then manifests at the same time as art and as meta-art of art.<sup>3</sup> Among the authors that more directly and more widely dealt with the relationship between philosophy and the different artistic practices, Deleuze extends the territory of philosophy to the territory of creation, assuming philosophy as the practice of creating concepts<sup>4</sup> and highlighting that “the encounter between two disciplines does not happen when one begins to reflect on the other, but when one realizes that it has to solve on its own and with its own means a problem similar to that which arises in another”.<sup>5</sup> Instead of ‘solve’ here I would rather say ‘interrogate’: to resolve is precisely the task of science; to question, to undermine, is the territory of the arts. The matter that the artist touches coincides with that object of philosophical or scientific thought, but he or she does so in a different way: by eliminating the safety distance, the artist confronts the matter in a hand-to-hand and becomes invested in the process in first person. In this sense I cannot recognize a primacy to dance with respect to other artistic or thought practices. The dynamics of the relationship between body, movement and thought in the creative and sensitive experience are present in all forms of art and writing: I can clearly see the strong presence of an author’s body in the ‘gesture’ of those who write, sculpt, paint or play, a gesture that in its movement leaves a trace. In the same way, dance is strongly nourished by thought, yet arriving in a certain way to overcome it in its own practice. This work ‘beyond thought’ should not be misunderstood: choreographers and dancers are well aware of the aesthetic choices they make – the subtle work of the dancer on instant, instinct and intuition should not be confused with spontaneity. For the dancer there is rather a ‘failing of thought’, a ‘de-thinking’ in the sense to which Carmelo Bene referred.<sup>6</sup> When Vaslav Nijinsky writes in his Diaries, “I am a philosopher who does not think. I am a philosopher with sentiment”,<sup>7</sup> what he actually means is that dance is philosophy articulated in the material of the sensible.

This dance, which actively participates in the dialogue among the arts, provides a glimpse of a possible path for the renewal of the entire contemporary scene, furnishing material for reflection on a theatre that takes distance from the centrality of text and begins to move towards a centrality of the body and a dramaturgy made by signs on stage: from Antonin Artaud up to Romeo Castellucci (thinking of his edition of the Venice Biennale in 2005 *Pompeii. Il romanzo della cenere* – often defined as a biennial of bodies – with a relevant presence of choreographers and dancers).<sup>8</sup> As theatre has been moving away from text, so over the years dance has been freeing itself from the image of the technical-virtuoso dancer, taking more and more possession of ordinary bodies with all the ethical, aesthetic and political implications that may follow. Today we are aware that the boundaries between dance, theater and performance are mobile, blurred, increasingly difficult to outline.

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<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Elia, “Foreword” to Paul Valéry et al., *Filosofia della danza* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L’image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Qu’est-ce qui l’acte de création?* [1987] ed. by Antonella Moscati, *Che cos’è l’atto di creazione* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2013), 29.

<sup>6</sup> See Vincenzo Cuomo, Maurizio Zanardi et al., eds., *Sulla Danza*, (Napoli: Cronopio 2017); <http://www.kaiak-pj.it/images/pdf/teatro/recensionedanza.pdf>, accessed on 3 July 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Vaslav Nijinsky, *Cahiers* (Paris: Actes Sud 1995), *Diari. Versione integrale* (Milano: Adelphi, 2003), 54.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between dance and theatre based on Antonin Artaud, see Maurizio Zanardi, *Dal regno dei morti*, in Maurizio Zanardi et al., eds., *Sulla danza*, (Napoli: Cronopio, 2017) and Alain Badiou, *Inestetica* (Milano: Mimesis, 2007).

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## 2. The Body

The process of research and creation proper of dance is realized as a complex practice of relationship and exchange between several subjects: the dancer-choreographer, the other co-creators (dancers; video, light, scene and sound artists; dramaturges) and the viewer, who I deliberately insert as a participant in the process of the performative act. The creation is generated by the relationship between different unconsciousnesses, by an open attitude to the encounter with the Other, welcoming the possibility to be modified by it. Dance is body in act, in movement, and it involves the relationship of the body with time and space. Therefore three are the founding elements of dance: body, time, space.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce qui l'acte de création?*, 12.

A peculiar trait of dance is that its 'matter' is the same for the maker as for the observer: the body, conceived of as inseparable corporeal (with its mechanical, physical and biological laws) and psychic. Dance is the art of anti-dualism.<sup>10</sup> However there is a difference: talking about 'the body' is not equivalent to talking about 'the body that dances'. The body that dances is a powerful instrument, a bearer and keeper of sense.

<sup>10</sup> Di Rienzo, *op cit.*

The performative act is an autonomous language that can not be translated in any other way. I prefer to use the term 'act' instead of 'gesture' or 'movement': to the 'act' I recognize the proximity to action as generator of the event; to the 'gesture' a greater proximity to the sign; while 'movement' emphasizes its relationship with time and space. I am interested in a non-affirmative dance, a dance with no defined boundaries, permeable to perception and the power of space,<sup>11</sup> that can, to the extent possible, conquer a distance from language. The work of the dancer moves away from an affirmative and didactic gesture. Notwithstanding, we are spoken by language: we are born and grow up in a context that generates conditionings. This is even more evident when a dancer learns one or more techniques that in themselves carry a given of culture, history and aesthetics. The dancer's task is to work to overcome these conditionings in a constant attempt to let go of the strong patterns dwelling in us, so to listen to what is revealed, to what manifests in an ever-present tension towards the authenticity of the act. The body – every body – carries a huge amount of information. For this reason I try to work in the most objective and elementary way with respect to its physical qualities and its reference to space and time.

<sup>11</sup> See my choreographic notes to *K.i.s.s.#1—about fragility*, <https://gabriellariccio.it/k-i-s-s-1-about-fragility-en/>, accessed 1 February 2017.

The starting point is a 'question' that is generally formed before starting work in the studio. The question condenses and manifests itself autonomously: there is something that – given an articulated series of conditions, coincidences and chances – presents itself as 'more urgent'<sup>12</sup> and asks to be investigated. At this stage the work is completely open: sometimes what rationally seems a foothold fails and the work in the studio takes a direction to which I can only surrender. Much of the dancer's work has to do with this surrender: not a defeat, but an

<sup>12</sup> On the urge see below note 41.

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<sup>13</sup> Massimo Recalcati, discussion at the International Conference “Sublimazione. Analisi critica dell’ultima frontiera del simbolico”, Palazzo delle Arti di Napoli, 15-16 March 2017.

ability to listen beyond what the mind rationally tries to impose. This way “to give form to a force is a process of sublimation that is realized when we establish a relationship of friendship with emptiness and nothingness”.<sup>13</sup>

The dancer develops and constantly practices two attitudes: the one is an intuition, understood as the ability to react in the most immediate (non-mediated) way to a need that arises in the succession of the events generated by the body in time and space; the other is a peculiar form of attention, that the dancer and pedagogue Dominique Dupuy defines a ‘de-concentrated concentration’, a delicate and very fragile threshold. The mind contributes to the creative process, it is not excluded from it. Yet it is present with different degrees of intensity and modalities: at certain moments it is more present and aware; in other moments – when it is more distant – it ‘notices’ something that emerges through the body by chance, error, or an accident. In the initial phase of the research the mind is left behind, in the background, far and distant: the work in the studio makes room for chaos, for the irrational, for the involuntary. At times the mind contributes: it observes, analyzes, coordinates, identifies connections, associations, juxtapositions, fragments. In developing the work, the mind is gradually more present, it is more of a rational creative activity. The composition tends in some way to condense, to find relevance among multiple plans that interact with each other.

The mind helps – to select, to order, to put in sequence – but it can also be an obstacle. The mind tends to be reasonable: it is afraid of not being able to understand. This fear pushes the mind to continuously try to intervene, even before having had the experience: in this attempt it blocks the flow. The dancer trains him or herself to work suspending this form of interference of the mind equivalent to a form of *epoche*, of suspension of judgment: everything is allowed, anything can happen. The attention to the present moment, to the unavoidable here and now of dance, corresponds to an order of sensitivity, to a form of care that seeks to objectify as much as possible, to see what is really there, what is revealed beyond thought, or perhaps in thought beyond judgment. This form of attention does not require not thinking at all, it requires not thinking too much: to try not to anticipate judgment, otherwise it is impossible to listen, because I put many other questions between me and ‘the thing’. To achieve this form of attention, which is a form of sensitivity, I start from the real data of ‘perceptions’, the evidence of acts that occur in the studio (events). I focus on the real sensations because these are always in the continuous flow of the present moment. I pay attention to every little clue that concerns me, my body and my perceptions: breath, forms, sounds, smells, colors, lights, temperatures, sensations, associations, visions. The dance and the scene are played continuously in the present, this is a plan that can never be betrayed: even when the writing (the choreography) is defined, it is always crossed by a present that is never the same and the quality of the dance depends on how we let vibrate in us that present moment in that specific writing.



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The work of creation is a process. It takes time and it is formed by stratifications. Every element and every detail can become writing. The context in which the work is born, the place, a meeting, a book, a sentence, the people I have chosen and who have chosen to participate in the creation, the coincidences that randomly strike me at a certain moment, all these elements take on meaning and I let them interfere with the process. It is not about being autobiographical, yet the personal experience is present with its echoes, resonances, memory. In this sense Rancière referring to Novalis's 'everything speaks' recalls "the Freudian rule that there are no insignificant 'details'..... There is no episode, description, sentence that does not carry within itself the power of the work. Because there is nothing that does not carry the power of language. All things being equal, equally important, equally significant".<sup>14</sup> Dance is not about representing or communicating: the gesture is undefined, a silent language that does not represent, yet manifests a specific sensitivity.<sup>15</sup> In the studio I try to bring out evidence through the knowledge I have of the instrument, the body, using systems of composition that generate events: sets of rules that cannot be but at the emergence of exceptions. This attention recognizes connections, focus points among some events. Emerging evidence connects in a structure, a form that becomes the creation. If there is a rational work, it is never in the direction of an idea of what the creation should be or say.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, *L'inconscient esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Massimo Villani, *Politica: il risalire dell'osceno*, in Jacques Rancière, ed., *L'inconscio estetico*, 17.

Paradoxically, by forcing attention to a maximum effort, focusing on perceptions and on complex rules within the systems, the mind is freed in disorientation: the mind is too busy observing and managing the flow of events to be able to interfere with judgment. This way the real can arise and manifest. This is the lesson that Western dance learns from the East, the study of the relationship between mind and body: to tame one's reason by a work of observation of the body and of reality. For me, the creation is condensed into a structure based on an articulation of micro systems that generate events articulated in qualities, spaces and durations. Within this structure where I have found firm points, the work largely maintains a degree of non-definition that is necessary for me so that the play is always in the present moment. The present moment relates to 'presence'. Presence on stage appears when the dancer becomes thoroughly permeable to perceptions, to the point of being able to reach a maximum exposure on the threshold of fragility and authentic vulnerability. I therefore keep a dose of risk within the work that the dancer must be able to take on and support on stage. I have a deep interest in improvisation and instant composition since they are connected to that form of intuition and attention mentioned above. Amid improvisation, instant composition and choreography (the creation) there is an infinite range of possibilities, different degrees and levels of definition: their boundaries are extremely blurred. When I get to the creation, its structure of qualities, spaces and durations is defined in a very articulated way. Yet the single steps are not defined: I work by outbreaks, intensities, rhythms, rules and

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exceptions, to allow sense to manifest.

The question of sense is closely linked to the cognitive, thought, language and symbolic. Frederick Nietzsche recognizes dance as a metaphor of thought in the becoming, in its active power, its intensity. At the same time he defines ‘vulgarity’ as the fact of being forced to react and obey every impulse, unable to resist an stimulus. Alain Badiou observes how dance for Nietzsche is not vulgar because it is “the bodily manifestation of the disobedience to an impulse”.<sup>16</sup> Badiou in his careful analysis of Mallarmé’s essay provocatively states that:

<sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou, *La danse comme métaphore de la pensée*, in *Danse et pensée: Une autre scène pour la danse* (Sammeron: Germs, 1993), 14.

Dance is not an art, since it is the sign of the possibility of art inscribed in the body.... Spinoza said we try to know what thought is, when we do not even know what a body is capable of. I would say that dance is exactly what shows the body is capable of art and the exact measure in which, at a given moment, it is capable of it. But to say that a body is capable of art does not mean making ‘an art of the body’. Dance indicates this artistic ability of the body, without therefore defining a specific art. To say that the body, as body, is capable of art, is to show it as thought-body. Not so much as thought imprisoned in a body, but as body that is thought. This is the task of dance: the thought-body showing itself under the evanescent sign of the capacity of art. Our sensitivity to dance comes from the way dance responds to Spinoza’s question in its own way. What a body as such is capable of? It is capable of art, that is to say that it shows itself as native thought.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

In this direction also moves Jacques Rancière: for the author, “the things of the art are things of the thought”.<sup>18</sup> Recalling Baumgarten’s Aesthetic and his idea of ‘confused knowledge’, Rancière states that “it is about the identity of a knowing and a not-knowing, a sensitive knowledge as the confused intelligible opposed to the clear and distinct knowledge of logic.... Not at all an inferior knowledge, but more precisely a thought of what does not think”.<sup>19</sup> This is the revolution of the symbolic order Rancière refers to, which allows us “thought outside of itself”.<sup>20</sup> Thought manifesting itself as such in the dimension of the sensible, in which it does not think. In this sense also Merleau-Ponty on non-philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Rancière puts in relation analytic thought and aesthetic thinking. For the author, the figures of the works of art serve to prove that:

<sup>18</sup> Rancière, *L’inconsio estetico*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> Villani, *Politica: il risalire dell’osceno*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> On the theme of non-philosophy as a state of crisis of thought but also as its overcoming in art, literature and psychoanalysis see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *È possibile oggi la filosofia? Lezioni al Collège de France 1958-1959 e 1960-1961*.

There is some sense in what seems to have none, there is enigma in what seems to go by itself, a load of thought in what appears to be an anodyne detail. These figures are not the materials on which analytical interpretation proves its ability to interpret the formations of culture. They are the evidence of the existence of a certain relationship between thought and non-thought, of a certain mode of presence of thought in the materiality of the sensible, of the involuntary in conscious thought and of meaning in the insignificant. Briefly, if the physician Freud interprets the ‘anodyne’ facts neglected by his positivist colleagues, if he can make these ‘examples’ serve his proof, it is because they themselves

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testimony the evidence of a certain unconscious.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Rancière, *L'inconscio estetico*, 50.

Therefore “if the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious is formulated, it is because outside the properly clinical terrain already exists a certain identification of an unconscious mode of thought, and because the scope of the works of art and literature is defined as the privileged domain of this unconscious”.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, however, he points out that Freud “seeks the matrix phantom of artistic creation, not the unconscious figural order of art”.<sup>24</sup> In his discourse Freud wants to make triumph a hermeneutic vocation, he wants “to intervene on the idea of the unconscious thought regulating the production of the aesthetic regime of art, (he wants) to bring order into the matter where art and thought about art articulate the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge, sense and non-sense, logos and pathos, real and fantastic”.<sup>25</sup> In this way – for Badiou – Freud “is asking art to testify in favor of a profound rationality of ‘fantasy’, to support a science that somehow aims at bringing imagination, poetry and mythology inside the heart of scientific rationality”.<sup>26</sup> This discourse partly takes us away from a psychoanalytic interpretation of art, especially when categorizing a psychotic or neurotic art, which at times seems too artificial. Certainly there is an activity of the unconscious in all the manifestations of our lives, to which art is no exception. Therefore an activity of sublimation exists, to which even art is no exception. At this point it would be necessary to articulate these observations in the light of recent discoveries and studies in the field of neurophysiology and neuroscience. Whoever carries out a certain artistic practice is endowed with or develops the analogical associative mind: lateral rather than linear thinking.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 81.

Often what seems more interesting is what can affect us because it intervenes as a rupture of a given order of the aesthetic and cultural terms. Every time this cut or laceration occurs, it presents itself as a gesture by its nature insane, since it contradicts and puts in crisis the norm – doing so as a refined protest instead of being an act out of control. This madness, that we associate with the genius of the artist, is a conscious rupture – as critical as it is incisive and precise – of what is the discourse of the Law.<sup>27</sup> Coming back to Nijinsky, the dancer – in his genius – is perfectly aware that the gesture of his Faun is an intentional rupture with all previous tradition of ballet. Michel Foucault states:

<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between dance and politics see Pierre Legendre, *La passione di essere un altro. Studio per la danza* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1979).

There is no madness but the supreme instant of the work, and the latter rejects it indefinitely at its borders. Where there is the work there is no madness. Yet madness is contemporary with the work, since it inaugurates the time of its truth. The instant in which the work and madness are born and accomplished together marks the beginning of a time in which the world finds itself cited in judgment by this work and is responsible for what is before it.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “La folie, l’absence d’oeuvre”, appendix to *Historie de la Folie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); “La follia, l’assenza di opera”, appendix to *Storia della follia nell’età classica* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2015).

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### 3. The Scene

For what concerns the relationship between the scene and the spectator – as De Marinis points out – it is necessary to reverse perspective: “from the show as product-work to watch-analyze-read, etc., to the scene as set of processes and practices – productive and receptive – to experience-investigate-understand”.<sup>29</sup> For the dancer-choreographer, the work of research and creation through the body involves the mind in a total cognitive process through thought, the senses and experience. In the same way, for the spectator the scene operates on these three levels in a dynamic relationship with his or her mind. The strength of the performative act – as a “designed transit of impermanence”<sup>30</sup> – lies in its being undefined. In this sense the scene opens up, from sense to non-sense, to the “fertile power of the misunderstanding”.<sup>31</sup> The diaphragm between what manifests on scene and the viewer works like the joints of our body keeping bones connected yet allowing them to articulate in multiple directions. I conceive of the scene as a perceptive device that has to do with the cognitive and that does not let itself be tamed by language and the symbolic, thus breaking the protective barriers of shame, good and beauty to approach the place of incandescence that is the real, “that meaningless and senseless real that terrifies us”.<sup>32</sup> Here dance can enter the territory of the unspeakable, trespassing on lands to which one is otherwise not allowed to enter. Human, all too human, the body that dances challenges the limits of matter in an unreachable tension to the beyond, to be understood not as an elevation but as a trespassing of the ultimate border of the real, a limit that constantly shifts and eludes. My beginning as choreographer – passing from the dancing body to the challenge of creation – was fortuitous. Until then, my work as dancer – feeling a certain discomfort I was not really aware of – was at the service of the idea of the choreographer. When asked to create my own work, I discovered that this position – asking to take on more responsibility for the scene – was more congenial to me. I felt the need to establish a strong relationship with the viewer by involving him or her directly in the performance device, demanding a spatial proximity, asking to act in the first person within the device. These early works are a search for new formats experimenting with different ideas of space and of the performative relationship. This is the case of *Watch/Touch* (2003) and *Körpersprache* (2004). Then the tension with the viewer moves from space to time through research on systems of composition with *K.i.s.s.#1 – about fragility* (2005) and *Mensch – über Schönheit* (2006) – this last work conceived as a triptych, was more often on stage in its *solo* form. I could define these first experiments most markedly conceptual works.

*Watch/Touch*<sup>33</sup> is a series of *solo* performances for a *solo* spectator. Here the spectator is invited to enter an aluminum box of 4x4 metres where the performer is waiting and where he or she is guaranteed not to be seen from the outside. The

<sup>29</sup> Marco De Marinis, *Il corpo dello spettatore. Performance Studies e nuova teatrologia*, Report at the conference *Le scienze cognitive in Italia. Bilanci e prospettive* (University of Messina, 28-30 November 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Silvia Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto nella pratica performativa di Habillé d'eau* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2012), 23.

<sup>31</sup> See my choreographic notes to *La follia*, 2016, <https://gabriellariccio.it/la-follia-en>.

<sup>32</sup> Massimo Recalcati, *Lavoro del lutto, melanconia e creazione artistica* (Bari: Poiesis, 2013), 23.

<sup>33</sup> See my choreographic notes to *Watch|Touch*, 2003, <https://gabriellariccio.it/watchtouch-en>.

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structure has only two entries, one to watch and the other to touch, yet the spectator will be allowed in only once, being forced to choose only one of the two modalities. The performance questions the usual way dance performance is accessible: the most bodily of the arts, usually enjoyed only from a distance and only through the sense of sight. *Watch/Touch* is an investigation into perceptions, touch and sight, and the role these play in our personal experience. At the same time it is a work on risk, courage, vulnerability, challenge, intimacy, authenticity. The duration of each *solo* is about 7 minutes for a total duration of the performance of up to 180 minutes: usually the *solo* ends when the viewer starts to lose spontaneity, putting forward a game he or she already knows. This first work allowed me to directly meet a large number of bodies, largely non-dancers with their authentic gestures. Those encounters left traces inside of me: rich material that emerged in the works that followed. *Watch/Touch* is an invisible work in the sense that there are very few captured images, and those that do exist are thanks to a consenting viewer and therefore obviously not truly representative of the performance. A more authentic track of the spectators' experience remains in the guestbook where they were invited to leave a comment at the exit of the performance: strong, intense comments, in a mix of emotion and transformation: entering the box meant to come out touched and transformed. They made me notice how in *Watch/Touch* the performance already begins before entering the box when in the *foyer* the spectator has to choose whether to enter the box to watch or to touch. Aware of the role it plays in the performance, I have attentively taken care of the waiting area, carefully instructing a performer who acted as a membrane between the people outside and me inside the box. To be inside the box is at the same time – both for the performer and for the spectator – a dimension of protection and of total vulnerability and exposure (Fig. 1). In this regard Silvia Rampelli is very lucid and precise about the onset of the phenomenon that takes place on the scene and its effects on the perception/attention of the spectator:

The performative relationship is an open experiment on the modality of the experience. Seeing, feeling, being there is an occurrence that the spectator – the locus of the experiment – acts, suffers, dismissing the grammatical opposition. That which can be directly experienced in theatre, its entirely sensorial matter, gifts evidence: the expansion of perception is expansion of consciousness.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 104.

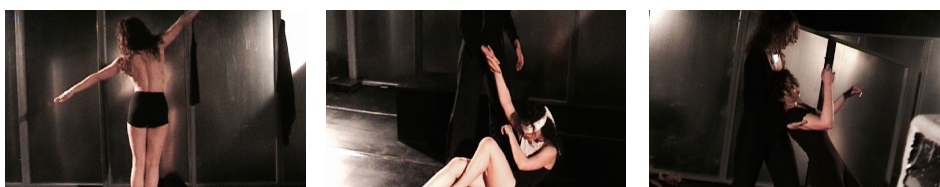


Fig. 1: Gabriella Riccio, *Watch/Touch*, 2003. *Première* Parco Viviani, Maggio dei Monumenti, Napoli. Stills. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

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<sup>35</sup> See my choreographic notes to *Körpersprache*, 2004, <https://gabriellariccio.it/korpersprache-en>.

*Körpersprache*<sup>35</sup> also explicitly requests the spectator to assume an active role in the performance: to take the microphone and give directions to dancers. Without this necessary input the performance would not take place or could stop. Apparently simple, the system is conceived in such a way to first install a mode where dancers meekly follow the given instructions. As time passes, the spectator gets used to this agreement with the dancers: the implicit rule “I say, they do”. Once this system is established, the dancers gradually start to break the agreement by more and more evident acts of disobedience. In some cases, the spectators have gotten to the point where they were screaming into the microphone, convinced that the sound amplification did not work or that the dancers could not understand the command. This is the moment when the performance reveals its true nature: *Körpersprache* is only apparently a research project on the possibilities of the choreographic composition through the translation of words into movement. Actually it is a work about power and loss of power, obedience and disobedience, freedom and constraint, responsibility and respect, risk and trust, action and reaction, opposition of the individual and of the group. At first, a form with some indications leads the spectator into the system to help him or her provide neutral indications related to the body, time and space. Then he or she is given the chance to freely suggest words. For the company, the work involves great risk and high exposure. The audience shows a certain timidity as it perceives a limit that cannot be exceeded. Nevertheless, in every performance we have been challenged by the boldest spectators: some commands given could be offensive or obscene. Each dancer was left with the utmost freedom whether to seize the challenge – if he or she wanted to – or to stop in a clear way as an explicit sign of rejection or protest, to show that the limit beyond which he or she was no longer willing to cooperate had been crossed (Fig. 2). In Lacanian terms: the device of the performance – through the dancers’ avoidance – arises in the spectator a question that remains unanswered by the Other that is missing; however, only when the possibility of the encounter with the Other is missing, the possibility of the act emerges, permitting the name of the Subject to be regained. Referring to the sensitive cognitive dimension of the performance, Rampelli observes:

The spectator is the apex of the cognitive passage: perceiving – in fact – he subjects the flow of multiple impressions to unity, naming the entity-event in the unity of the name. The moment of perception reveals the spectator to himself – who perceives that he is perceiving – and reveals him as the constitutive polarity of the performative relation.... To know is to recognize: actualize the form, bring the multiple to the one. In this sense the theatrical relationship carries the exemplarity of the cognitive experience *tout court* and of the mythological representation of the cognitive experience itself: the logical transit from chaos to order as principle, category, law, language.... The immersion in the fact – not in the code – actualizes primary pre-linguistic responses.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 92, 103, 104.





Fig. 2: Gabriella Riccio, *Körpersprache*, 2005. Nuovo Teatro Nuovo, Napoli. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

*K.i.s.s.#1 – about fragility*,<sup>37</sup> *Mensch – über Schönheit*,<sup>38</sup> *Echo Resonance and Memory*,<sup>39</sup> are works that respectively interrogate the concepts of fragility, beauty, memory. The first two works question again the dimension of the ‘danced dance’: the first juxtaposes the gesture of the dancers to that of six blindfolded non-dancers who move in space on the basis of a random system made of quotidian movements that continuously interfere with the choreography (Fig. 3); the second presents three performance environments through which the viewer can transit. Here the composition systems are the same but the qualities of the movement are different: a very technical dancer, another presenting a poetic gesture, two dancers working on the extreme limit of the body. Being allowed to transit from one to the other, the spectator experiences how he or she resonates with the three modalities (Fig. 4).

<sup>37</sup> See my choreographic notes to *K.I.S.S.#1-about fragility*, 2005, <https://gabriellariccio.it/k-i-s-s-1-about-fragility-en>.

<sup>38</sup> See my choreographic notes to *Mensch - über Schönheit*, 2005, <https://gabriellariccio.it/mensch-uber-schonheit-solo-en>.

<sup>39</sup> See my choreographic notes to *Echo Resonance and Memory*, 2008, <https://gabriellariccio.it/echo-resonance-and-memory-en>.



Fig. 3: Gabriella Riccio, *K.I.S.S.#1 - about fragility* 2004. Rehearsals and performances at Goethe Institut Neapel and Nuovo Teatro Nuovo, Napoli. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.



Fig. 4: Gabriella Riccio, *Mensch - über Schönheit*, 2005. Première at Goethe Institut Neapel. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

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These works abandon the direct interaction with the spectator: there is still an interest in formats and space, yet the research focuses on time perception. They more directly investigate the duration in relation to the mechanism of the attention of the spectator. In this sense Rampelli:

The degree of opacity of something happening generates a potential question. The viewer responds with an increase in level of attention, which reflects the need for information on the indeterminate to which he or she is assisting... Attention is a state of activity in which senses and intellect are directed around the event or the task that polarizes them.... Attention is proportional to the degree of activity necessary to decipher the information.... Perception is an economic mechanism that proceeds by hypothesis: it is activated when faced with the event that disregards the prediction, it becomes inertialised when faced with the stabilization of the event in habit or norm.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 91, 100, 103.

Since 2008 – with *Echo Resonance and Memory* and *Noli me tangere* (creation 2008, re-enactment 2015) – this research on systems of composition, time and space has become more complex with respect both to technical aspects that experiment with technologies (video interaction or sound-sensitive environment) and to stage writing (moving towards a dramaturgy of bodies and signs on stage). In these works the scene is a complex system that writes through bodies, text, words, lights, sound and objects, where symbolic elements coexist alongside immersive environments.

*Echo Resonance and Memory* explores remembrance. A real-time video composition system captures recently danced gestures, more time-distant ones or anticipates future ones, interacting with the instant composition of the dancer. It is a poetic and evocative work (Fig. 5).

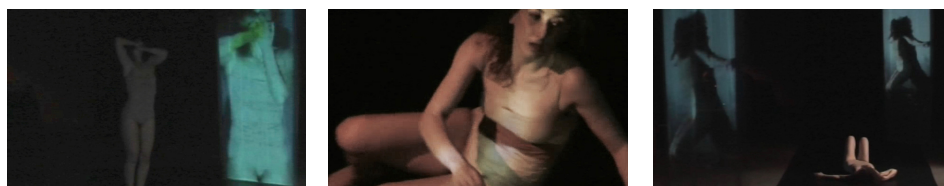


Fig. 5: Gabriella Riccio, *Echo Resonance and Memory*, 2008. *Première* at Il Torchio Somma Vesuviana. Stills. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

*Noli me tangere* represents an important stage of my choreographic journey and I remain particularly attached to this work. My choreographic notes about the idea seem to me today as an unconscious artistic manifesto:

we start from a gap / separating time / unbridgeable space between human beings / time-space discrepancy / distance between the phases of being / lapse / void / interruption / tending to / suggesting a / continuum / noli me tangere / do not touch me / do not hold me back / transfigured Christ

pronounces to Mary Magdalene / impatience / urgency / tearing sometimes / as in the creative act / the performative act / do not hold me back from what I have to accomplish now / because it is ethical for art to be / perhaps even scandalous urgency of this ethics / of discovering / of showing / showing oneself exposed / going towards / an unavoidable action / yet also a taboo / of the contact / of allowing oneself to be penetrated / of allowing breaking in / and contaminating our sphere as individuals / attempt not to change status / renounce the ego / to go beyond / as the renunciation of corruption is sterile / a non-fertile act / the warning becomes therefore lacerating / reminder to follow a path of transfiguration / towards contact with / the impalpable knowledge of oneself / one's duty to accomplish oneself.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See my choreographic notes to *Noli me tangere*, 2008, <https://gabriellariccio.it/noli-me-tangere-en>.

This work stems from an in-depth reading of *Corpus* by Nancy.<sup>42</sup> When first presented as *Noli me tangere – study in progress* (running time 20', 2008), the dramaturgical structure was already well defined in its general outlines. Only later during the second phase of my research I met the homonymous essay by Nancy.<sup>43</sup> Given the strong adherence of this text to the idea already developed in the work, it could not but become part of it and this was developed in the central *duo*. The work presents deep research on touch in relation to a sensitive sound environment that reacts through feedback to the movement of the two dancers, feeding the choreographic composition. Two performers – a man and a woman – dance immersed in a sound box. A complex score marking the duration and nature of the scenes. Piles of books appear on stage: my personal library. The books chosen and ordered according to well-defined criteria are read randomly by the two performers: alongside a 'sound environment', the structure of the performance presents an actual 'literary environment' where philosophical, literary and poetic thought intersect around body, relationship, intimacy, psyche, death, human and divine, everlasting tension between *eros* and *thanatos*, setting the atmosphere for what will follow.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere. Saggio sul levarsi del corpo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).

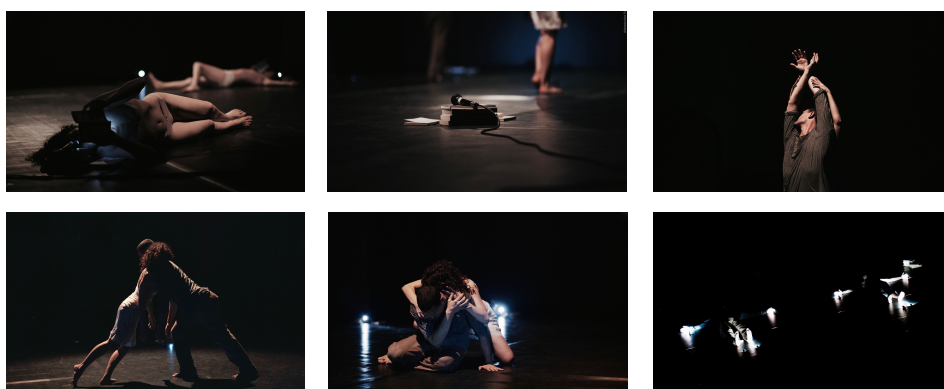


Fig. 6: Gabriella Riccio, *Noli me tangere*, 2015. L'asilo - Ex Asilo Filangieri, Napoli. Photo credit Alessandra Finelli. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

This opening of the *pièce* has for the performers the value of an epiphany: it gives the books the power to indicate a direction. Surprising coincidences have happened during the performances: I remember the Berlin *première* when I found myself lying half naked reading Nijinsky's invective against Nazism (Fig. 6).

This new phase is more distant from purely conceptual works: this dance needs to challenge reality in a more direct way. This aspect also remains in *Magnificat – first study for a better world* (2015) and in *La Follia* (2016): there is a deeper awareness of the political dimension of the body and dance which coincides with my interest – since 2011 – in the Italian artists movement of self-governed cultural spaces such as L'Asilo in Naples.<sup>44</sup> *Magnificat – first study for a better world* is the result of a workshop that began a few days after the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris: facing what the world was presenting it was unavoidable to think about what role dance and the scene can have in our time (Fig 7 and 8).

<sup>44</sup> L'asilo - comunità aperta di lavoratrici e lavoratori di arte, cultura e spettacolo in autogoverno all'Ex Asilo Filangieri di Napoli, [www.exasilofilangieri.it](http://www.exasilofilangieri.it).

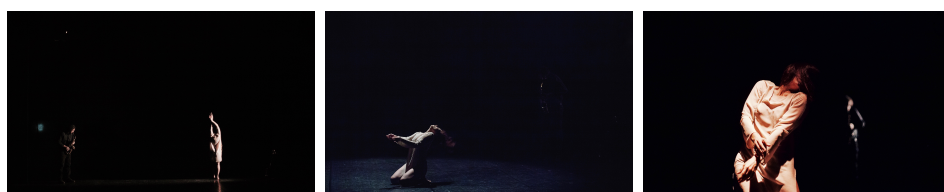


Fig. 7: Gabriella Riccio, *La Follia*, 2016. *Première* Teatro Piccolo Bellini, Napoli. Photo credit Alessandra Finelli. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

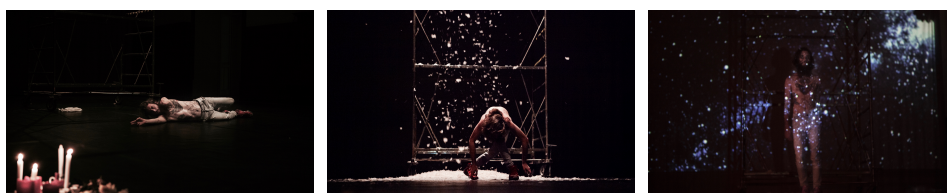


Fig. 8: Gabriella Riccio, *Magnificat - primo studio per un mondo migliore*, 2016. L'asilo – Ex Asilo Filangieri, Napoli. Photo credit Claudia Nuzzo. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

The gaze of the spectator on dance is constantly confronted with contradiction: the visible refers to the invisible, the finite to infinity, the moment to eternity, bodies to the immaterial. But there is more: it is about a properly political dimension of dance and the question of sense with respect to the body that dances in its relationship with the ideas of consensus and dissent. Rancière tells us that:

there is consensus when there are established relationships between images and their signification ... there is dissent when the relationship between sensible perception and signification is transformed, when times no longer have the same effect ... There is art and creation every time this shift of relationships between the sensible and its meaning takes place.<sup>45</sup>

The ethical and political value of dance lies in its ability to rethink and re-signify

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissenso, Emancipazione, Estetica*, (Opervaviva, 2017), <http://operaviva.info/dissenso-emancipazione-estetica>, accessed 7 March 2017.

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relationships concerning body, time and space in the 'common sensible'. Therefore the question of Sublimation remains open: is dance a metaphor of thought, therefore closer to the order of the symbolic, or is it the manifestation of being, an ontological manifestation exposed and commonly shared, therefore closer to the order of the real? Perhaps dance exists precisely within this unsolvable contradiction, ultimate vertigo on the subtle threshold dividing the symbolic from the real.