



Researching Dance in the Wild

Brazilian Experiences

Christine Greiner

The increasing complexity of artistic experiences in Brazil after 1990 has raised questions regarding our very understanding of the dancing body, which radically changed as dancing crossed genre boundaries and moved closer to performance art. Many artists and scholars have been working along these borderlines, asking how thinking about the body is also thinking by means of the body and challenging written texts to expand that which we understand as embodied knowledge. Around the same period, studies in the cognitive sciences explained that what we are capable of experiencing and how we make sense of what we experience depends on the kind of bodies we have and on the ways we interact with the various environments we inhabit (see, for example, Johnson 1987; and Varela, et al. 1991).

Some of these theories outside the scope of traditional dance theories (see Hanstein and Fraleigh 1999; and Alter 1991) have impacted the creation of choreographies. It is important to introduce some of the ideas proposed by scholars who have been studied by those Brazilian

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choreographers I am discussing—choreographers who are more interested in creative processes than in results. By investigating how the body works and how it can communicate without sending “expected messages,” these artists creatively explore distinct levels of interactions between bodies and environments. To delve more deeply into some of these issues and explore choreographies enacted by radical experiences, it is fundamental to research dance “in the wild.”

This proposition was inspired by cognitive anthropologist Edwin Hutchins’s *Cognition in the Wild*, published in 1995. Hutchins proposes the breaking of some of the rigid boundaries set in place by previous anthropological paradigms based on classical dualisms such as nature-nurture and body-mind. His aim is to locate cognitive activity *in context*. It is important to clarify that, for Hutchins, context is not a fixed set of surrounding conditions, but a wider dynamic process of which the cognition of an individual is only one part. Therefore, “cognition in the wild” refers to human cognition in its habitat, very different from a laboratory, where cognition is studied “in captivity.”

This may sound a bit bizarre for the field of dance. Nobody actually dances in laboratories except those who are developing very specific experiences, such as the choreographer and media artist Johannes Birringer. Since 1999, he has led the dance and technology program at Ohio State University and the Environments Lab. In his case, dance actually does occur in a scientific laboratory. But inside or outside a science lab, captivity in dance is a philosophical and political question. An ontological grounding for better understanding this relationship is connected to three of the most common paradigms that have been constructed by philosophers to explain what human nature is: the blank slate, the noble savage, and the ghost in the machine. By denying explanations of human nature that claim it is a unitary and unchanging thing, some Brazilian choreographers have reinserted important political issues into the dance field. The most important is the recognition of diversity, which means there is neither *a* human nature nor *a* dancing body, only human natures and dancing bodies. Using the plural, they place a needed emphasis on diversity, which is very often the main subject of the contemporary world in a broad range of discussions.¹ I shall discuss these three paradigms by giving some examples of Brazilian dance experiences.

White Paper, Empty Body

Experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (2002) suggested that the above-mentioned paradigms are logically independent but, in practice, often operate together discursively. “Blank slate” is a kind of loose translation of the Medieval Latin term *tabula rasa*, which means scraped tablet. It is attributed to the philosopher John Locke, who stated that we are born with a mind that is void of all characters, without any ideas, like a blank sheet of white paper. In terms of dance, for many centuries the dancing body was described exactly like this: a blank slate that should be built carefully through physical training. According to this view, all dancers potentially can dance similarly if they learn the same technique and are subjected to the same disciplinary project.

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1. Over the past 10 years, several events, books, and projects have been discussing the relationship between dance and cognitive science, for example: the Choreography and Cognition Project, directed by the choreographer Wayne McGregor since 2003, resulting from a partnership with the Cambridge University Department of Neuroscience (www.choreocog.net); the international symposium on “Dance and the Brain,” organized in Frankfurt in 2004, by the choreographers William Forsythe and Ivar Hagendoorn; the Médiadanse Lab directed by Armando Menicacci since 2001, in Paris; the Digital Cultures Lab organized in 2005, in Nottingham (www.digitalcultures.org); and BodyMedia Studies and its Political Consequences, which is a project I have been developing since 2000 at the Catholic University of São Paulo with Professor Helena Katz.

Figure 1. (facing page) Projections from Marta Soares’s O Banho (The Bath), Sesc Belenzinho, São Paulo, 2004. (Photo by João Caldas)

Since 1994, Alejandro Ahmed, the choreographer of Grupo Cena 11, has been developing in the capital city of Santa Catarina state in Southern Brazil, Florianópolis, a methodology to better understand the task of experimentally analyzing many of the most complex and vexing problems of behavior and transmission of body actions. His performances deny the blank slate paradigm by explicitly showing that even when subjected to the same disciplinary project, dancers are not “exactly the same.” Ahmed and his group (Adilson Machado, Anderson Gonçalves, Karin Serafim, Cláudia Shimura, Letícia Lamela, Mariana Romagnani, Marcela Reichelt, Gica Allio, Marcos Klann) are well known for their amazing physical strength and endurance, their original costumes and spectacular scenic elements, and for mixing punk, pop, and video-game references. However, most important to Ahmed’s research is his starting point, his personal history.

Ahmed was born with *osteogenesis imperfecta*—a disease that literally means “bone imperfectly made from the beginning of life.” This genetic disorder is characterized by bones that break easily, often with no apparent cause. To cope with this problem, he developed an extremely violent dance technique called “physical perception.” The technique is based on the attempt to control the most out-of-control situations, like a violent fall or a crash. The exercises he derived with his company strengthened Ahmed’s bones while eliminating the risk of injury. However, the risk was not completely eliminated: through the audience’s eyes, the movements still seem very risky and dangerous. They never know, for example, if one of the dancers will have an accident during a violent fall. This ambivalence is an important aspect of Ahmed’s technique. The training also includes walking with prostheses and orthopedic instruments to experience different constraints and their resultant movements. Ahmed has studied classical ballet and jazz but there are no explicit references to this training in his physical perception technique. While he is developing a movement vocabulary, the main objective of the technique is not the systematization of movement patterns but the sensorial process between the instruction and its resultant action. Indeed, this is the physical perception of body movement in the dancer’s body. All of Ahmed’s pieces—*Respostas sobre Dor* (Answers to Pain, 1994), *O Novo Cangaço* (The New Cangaço, 1996), *In’ perfeito* (In’perfect, 1997), and *Violência* (Violence, 2000)—deal with the effect of gravity on the body, the body’s limits, and the dynamics of puppets and robots to better understand physical action under control and the transmission of information between animate and inanimate bodies.

In *Skinnerbox* (2005), Ahmed questions whether different dancers with singular bodies—and even a dog onstage with them—can enact similar movement patterns by following the same instructions. The title of the piece refers to Burrhus Frederic Skinner, a famous psychologist

whose entire research was based on “operant conditioning.” According to Skinner, the live organism is always in the process of operating in the environment, and the organism’s behavior is always followed by a consequence. The nature of this consequence modifies the organism’s tendency to repeat the behavior in the future. The Skinnerbox is a cage that has a bar or pedal on one wall, which, when pressed, causes a small mechanism to release a food pellet into the cage. A rat bouncing around the cage eventually learns to



Figure 2. Marcela Reichelt in Alejandro Ahmed’s *Skinnerbox*, Sesc Vila Mariana, São Paulo, 2005. (Photo by Cristiano Prim)

press the bar so that a food pellet falls into the cage. What Skinner calls the “operant” is the behavior just prior to the stimulus, which in this case is the food pellet. Onstage, for 80 minutes, the dancers simulate games among themselves and with the dog, following movement instructions (to cross the stage several times repeating the same trajectory; to hold a partner until he or she says “let it go,” and the body is released to crash to the ground). These instructions are analogous to a stimulus initiated in order to observe the bodily consequences and how the consequences modify in each dancer the tendency to repeat the action in the future. Sometimes, the stimulus is a bar of steel that falls down on the stage, sometimes a little remote-controlled four-wheel robot crossing the stage.

As theoretical background, Ahmed and dramaturge Fabiana Dultra Britto studied some of the ideas of Ilya Prigogine, who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1977, and those of philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel C. Dennett, who pointed out that automatic processes are also creations of great brilliance and their genius lies in seeing how to create something without having to think about it. Dennett (see 1995 and 2003) and Prigogine (see 1997) explained how the rate of entropy increases with time. Indeed, life is a systematic attempt to reverse entropy, to create structures and energy differentials aimed at counteracting the gradual death of all systems. It is always a question of time because, unlike the phenomena of time-reversible Newtonian mechanics, thermodynamic processes exhibit an irreversible tendency toward increasing disorder.²

Therefore, when Ahmed organized fresh patterns of movement in different bodies, like a disarticulated jump or a puppet walking, he was trying to explore the singularity of movement organization in each dancer by including entropic processes and acknowledging rather than denying the disorder. Before the premiere of *Skinnerbox*, Ahmed presented several open procedures. During these experiences, he talked to the audience and asked us to answer some questions about what they saw and felt. The objective was to understand how each individual experience communicated different information, taking into account specific circumstances. He was exploring the dancers’ body states at the specific moment, which included the context and connection with the audience’s bodies. All communicational systems (including artistic ones) are not just dynamic, but adaptive. They are self-regulated to suit both the external context, which means the conditions of the environment, and the internal context or the circumstances inherent to the system itself. This is a fundamental theme in Ahmed’s work that has resulted in the creation of a methodology and several patterns of movement. The way the dancers’ bodies crashed against each other and against the floor during the performances is a strong image illustrating his main starting point: the idea of a body as matter, and the inevitable risk of being alive and in motion.

Born to Be Wild

The second paradigm for understanding body-mind relations that Pinker finds still present in our daily lives (and thus, by extension, we can find it operating also throughout the history of dance), is that of the “noble savage.” It was elaborated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and inspired by European colonists’ discovery of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Africa, and Oceania. It encapsulates the belief that humans have an untroubled and peaceful natural state, and that blights such as anxiety and violence are the by-products of civilization.

The work of choreographer Marta Soares unequivocally denies both the tabula rasa and the noble savage paradigms. It is not explicit in her projects but by challenging the assumption that

2. According to Prigogine in *The End of Certainty*, “Indeed, time, as described by the basic laws of physics, from classical Newtonian dynamics to relativity and quantum physics, does not include any distinction between past and future. Even today, for many physicists it is a matter of faith that as far as the fundamental description of nature is concerned, there is no arrow of time [...] We believe that this is no longer the case because of two recent developments: the spectacular growth of nonequilibrium physics and the dynamics of unstable systems, beginning with the idea of chaos” (1997:1–2).



Figure 3. Marta Soares in *Les poupées* (*The Dolls*), *Ballet Stagium*, São Paulo, 1997. (Photo by Gil Grossi)

there is a natural body she reinserts a political discussion into her dance experiences. Since 1995, she has developed a dance experience in São Paulo that reveals in-between spaces among several cultures and different ways of thinking.³ There is no “natural state” nor “blank body”—only constructed bodily states and an interesting ambivalence between singularity and universality.

For *Les poupées* (*The Dolls*, 1997) Soares was inspired by the corporeal anagrams created in the early 1930s by the German artist Hans Bellmer. Bellmer proposed a rearrangement of the parts of the body through more than a hundred drawings, paintings, and photographs of distorted and dismembered female dolls. His work was considered, by some art historians (see Lichtenstein 2001) as a protest against Germany’s Nazi regime, but mainly an expression of erotic feelings. After studying these images Soares sought another movement form to further investigate the fragmentation of the body. She received a Japan Foundation grant to train for one year with butoh master Kazuo Ohno in Yokohama. Just as Bellmer’s dolls were transformed through fragmentation, the butoh work allowed Soares to explore the possibilities of the metamorpho-

sis of the body. In response, Soares started deconstructing patterns of movement that she had been incorporating into her own work throughout her dance studies in São Paulo, London, and New York,⁴ and this process became an efficient starting point for the re-presentation of

3. The idea of “in-between spaces” was proposed by postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha: “Cultural globality is figured in the in-between spaces of double-frames—its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred ‘subject’ signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the ‘present’” (1994:309).

4. Soares completed the one year course at the Laban Center for Movement and Dance in the UK, holds a BA from the State University of New York, and is has her Movement Analyst certification from the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Research, Susan Klein School. She also studied and performed with Obie-winning theatre director Lee Nagrin, a former member of Meredith Monk’s group, *The House*.

Bellmer's dolls in her choreography. The choreographic experience was focused on the possibilities of the articulations and disarticulations of the body. Specifically, she was inspired by Bellmer's *Petite Anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'Anatomie de l'Image* (Small Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious or the Anatomy of the Image, 1957) and his very notion of a "dictionary of the image." In her choreography this can be observed when she presents a fragmented dancing body. Sometimes we just see a body upside down with legs moving like arms, or a woman in a 1950s ballroom dress transformed into a headless man with trousers, wearing shoes on her hands. At the end of the choreography, Soares sticks her head into an old oven. This complex metaphor for the acephalous body comprises a flux of voices and images teased from the work of several authors. One of them was George Bataille, who published the *Acéphale Revue* in Paris from 1936 to 1939 and has discussed the idea of the formless as evidence of a pervasive insistence on form, itself a means of imposing limits. For Bataille:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. (1997:7)

Soares was interested in experiencing the forms her body takes as she moves it by means of external impulses and inner images. By creating this dangerous and perverse self-portrait (formless and acephalous), she is also inspired by the photographs of Cindy Sherman (*Untitled #261*, 1992; *Untitled #342*, 1999; and *Untitled #250*, 1992), who created her own fragmented dolls. In the work of Sherman and Soares the female body is always a testimony to a haunted memory. There is no actual person but rather a self-fabricated fictional one. The archetypal housewife, prostitute, and depressed woman are all there but in a very unique and ambiguous way. This research on visual images of the body continues in Soares next choreography *Homem de Jasmin* (Man of Jasmine, 2000). For this piece she explored the poems of Unica Zurn, who was married to Hans Bellmer. Taking off from Zurn's writings, Soares choreographically tests the fragile boundary between life and death. Here Soares moved with difficulty inside a glass box and sometimes appeared to be barely able to breathe. It was a fragmented and fragile communication between the internal and the external environment, and the battle was being waged for her survival. In addition to Zurn's poems, Soares was inspired by the artist Francesca Woodman and her research on formless bodies and metamorphosis—as Woodman explored in the photograph series *Space and House* created from 1975 to 1976 in Rhode Island (see Leach 2006:17, 51, and 133). Woodman's photographs constitute an empathic identification of her body with inanimate objects (walls, houses, doors, windows, etc). In some works we cannot perceive the frontiers between her body and the objects or places. It is a successive embracing and enveloping of the external world. Soares gave movement to Woodman's photographs not by copying them but by exploring the potential movement of the body positions in the images, which can be better recognized during the performance in the long moments of apparent pause.

For *O Banho* (The Bath, 2004), Soares researched the life of Dona Yayá, a rich Brazilian woman who, after being declared insane in the early 1920s, was locked in her home until her death in 1960. Based on her previous research on Bellmer, who was very interested in Jean-Martin Charcot's writings on "hysterical" women, Soares decided to use the metaphor of the bath, referencing the long baths used as therapy at the Salpêtrière to "calm down" allegedly insane women (see Didi-Huberman 2003). For the premiere of Soares's performance at the Vermelho Gallery in São Paulo, the bath was located on the first floor and the audience could see both the dancer's slowly rolling over inside the bathtub for one hour, as well as the DVD projection of Dona Yayá's house, which was screened on the second floor. The DVD was a poetic edition of the three months of Soares's creative process at Dona Yayá's house, generated through Soares's empathic sensation of Dona Yayá's history and her house. The projections of Soares's body in a glass solarium both duplicated and juxtaposed with the garden relate to the



Figures 4. & 5. *Marta Soares in O Banho (The Bath)*, Sesc Belenzinho, São Paulo, 2004.
(Photo by João Caldas)



ephemerality of the body and to the passage of time in the house. According to Soares's description of her piece: "Inside the bathtub-house the performer moves in limited space and limited time, as if suspended by the point in which finds itself between life and death" (2004).

These philosophical and visual references—Bellmer's fragmented body, the butoh body, and the formless body of Bataille—converged in a singular dancing body reinvented in São Paulo, Brazil. The appropriation of foreign information can demonstrate in a complex way an original dance technique as a mediation between body, environment, and all sorts of cognitive operations, including unconscious ones. Yet Soares's sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon her moving body, and in a very particular way it can be also understood as a political matter. In her pieces, categorization is not purely an intellectual matter; it always occurs after experience because the formation and use of categories is the very stuff of experience. The recognition of this mutual influence between rational thought (like the capacity of categorization) and bodily experiences denies both the noble savage paradigm—which implies the possibility of a natural and pure state of being outside rational rules—and Rousseau's social contract whose terms suggest that when the individual alienates himself totally from the whole community he does this together with all his rights.⁵ Therefore, Soares's, even without being explicitly political, reinserts a kind of revolutionary view of consciousness, memory, and life in social groups that resonates with notions of hybridity as a performativity of difference, and consciousness as a communal effect articulated by both postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha⁶ and the winner of the 1972 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, Gerald Edelman.⁷ I can conclude by comparing the arguments of these authors that the core of this discussion is that by learning more about how the body-mind-environment connection works it becomes clear that passivity and submission are not innate aspects of human bodies.

Living Ghosts

To complete this brief description of the three paradigms of human nature, as identified by Pinker, I turn now to the "ghost in the machine." This was the name given by philosopher Gilbert Ryle to the doctrine of René Descartes, which explained that every human body is in space and is subject to mechanical laws that govern all other bodies in space; but minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. This means, according to Descartes, that there is something inside bodies that has a different nature: a ghost that haunts. Transposing this conception of the "ghost in the machine" to the field of dance, the dancing body was interpreted as an instrument of the mind or even the soul. Many metaphors have been developed by dance teachers such as the body-house, the body-machine, the body-vehicle. For example, Renée Gumiel, a pioneer of modern dance in Brazil, spoke to a whole generation of Brazilian dancers about the body as a powerful *vehicle* of the soul.

In a very particular way, Lia Rodrigues, from Rio de Janeiro, denied Descartes's statement in three different pieces: *Aquilo de que somos feitos* (That of Which We Are Made, 2000), *Formas*

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5. According to Rousseau's social contract (1992) the conditions will be the same for everyone only when each individual gives himself totally to society; therefore no one will be tempted to make that condition of shared equality worse for other men. This returns to become one of the starting points of several kinds of nationalism, including the discourse of a political unified body as one national body, and the resulting spectacles of communal identities.
 6. As Bhabha writes: "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet or tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation [...] The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress" (1994:3).
 7. As Edelman writes: "Consciousness arrives as a result of each individual's brain and bodily functions, there can be no direct or collective sharing of that individual's unique and historical conscious experience" (2004:6).

Breves (Brief Forms, 2003), and *Encarnado* (Incarnate, 2005). Through these pieces, she introduced the very nature of our embodied minds (without inner ghosts) and also the classic nature-versus-nurture dilemma to the discussion of the body-mind relationship. Her performances suggest that an efficient way to avoid the old dualism is to explore simultaneous levels of bodily understandings, which include not only an alliance between biology and culture, but also the recognition of nonhierarchical mediations. Once information is internalized by a body, the organism has no possibility of knowing whether the information came from a natural or cultural source, and will certainly never classify it as such. This idea is proposed as an important political posture in Rodrigues's research. In 2005 she moved her company, Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Dança, founded in 1990, to the Favela da Maré (one of Rio de Janeiro's largest shantytowns), and since then she has conducted important social work there. This community work began with the presence of the dance company at the Casa da Cultura da Maré, which is a kind of warehouse located just beside the Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré (Center of Studies and Solidarity Actions of Maré [CEASM]), a nongovernmental organization. The building has no doors so people can come in whenever they want. During the rehearsals, three young members of the community asked to participate and were included in Rodrigues's company (Allyson Amaral, who was the first, and has been dancing with Rodrigues for four years; Leonardo Nunes Fonseca; and Gabriele Nascimento Fonseca). Some of the company dancers offer free workshops to the community. While Rodrigues is touring with her company, another choreographer, Paula Nestorov, occupies the space with her own company and continues the work with the community workshops. Funding from Europe⁸ to develop *Encarnado* was mostly used to improve the warehouse by creating a set (in this case only flooring) for the performance and making it a proper space for the community, with a good roof, ventilation, and a restroom. Several choreographers, including Jérôme Bel with his piece *Isabel Torres* (2006), have premiered their work in the warehouse.

Rodrigues has no official (federal, state, or municipal) support in Brazil. If she decided to create a dance school for the poor children of Maré she would probably find a sponsor; however, as an artist, she prefers a different approach, one that does not concern itself either with community service or entertainment. The effort is toward an artistic experience that is politically involved through its reflection on the meaning of being human and the unbearable conditions of precarious lives. Rodrigues is inspired by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark's proposition of the "collective body." Clark created several performances between 1964 and 1981, focusing on the dissolution of boundaries between artists and audience. Rodrigues made a connection between Clark's work and Susan Sontag's discussion of the modern understanding of violence and atrocity in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004)⁹ to consider empathy in relation to the performer/audience connection and the feeling that, for a brief moment, someone can be in the place of another. Testing a collective empathic body in a shantytown like Maré is a huge challenge. How can a well-educated choreographer born into a rich white family empathize with, much less feel like, an inhabitant of Maré? Rodrigues and her dramaturge Silvia Sotter are very aware of this barrier. They don't pretend there are no social differences between the artists and their audience/community. Quite to the contrary, the artistic research starts with the awareness of differences and seeks a possible exchange of singularities. Therefore, it is also important to recognize a political strategy in the way she organizes her dance, a strategy that is

8. Rodrigues's funding for *Encarnado* came from Centre National de la Danse, Festival D' Automne, La Ferme du Buisson, Maison de La Danse de Lyon, and Tanzquartier from Vienna.

9. Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of the Others* reverses the terms she sets out in 1977 in *On Photography*. Arguing instead for an interpretation of images that reveals their ability to inspire violence or create apathy, she evokes a long history of the representation of the pain of others—from Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–20) to photographic documents of the American Civil War, WWI, the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi death camps, and contemporary images from Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and New York City on September 11.

inherent in the dance itself—not just in the structure of her organization and its relation to the community and its location.

In *Aquilo de que somos feitos*, for example, words lose their social identity and ordinary sense, in order to assume another meaning related to what is corporeal in speech, resisting and confounding the very norms by which speech itself is regulated. This was her first work inspired by Clark, who explored in greater depth the perception of the body and its relationship with objects in works like *Objetos Relacionais* (Relational Objects, created from 1976 to 1981); or the body within a group, as in *Baba Antropofágica* (Antropophagic Drool, 1973). *Baba Antropofágica* was part of Clark's body of work entitled *Arquitetura Orgânica ou Efêmera* (Organic or Ephemeral Architecture, beginning in 1969). Each participant placed in her or his mouth a spool of colored thread; the end of the unwound thread was in the mouth of another participant who was stretched out on the floor. This event was inspired by Clark's dream of an unknown material endlessly flowing from her mouth, material that was actually her own inner substance. *Objetos Relacionais* attempted to relate therapeutic practice and artistic experience. These were created in the last phase of Clark's work, in which she developed a vocabulary of relational objects for the purposes of emotional healing. She continued to approach art experimentally but made no attempt to establish boundaries between therapeutic practice and artistic experience, and at this point she was no longer interested in preserving her status as an artist. She started using the relational objects on the bodies of audience members/patients by stimulating connections among the senses in order to awaken the body's memories. The objects were made of simple materials such as plastic bags, stones, and sand, which acquired meaning only in their relation to the participants. The physical sensations stimulated by the relational objects as Clark used them on a patient's body, communicated primarily through touch, stimulating connections among the senses and with the body's traumatic memory.

Rodrigues did not intend to reproduce these experiences but to explore in her own way the breaking of barriers between life and art, artists and audience. To demonstrate this, *Aquilo de que somos feitos* was divided into two parts. The first part explores nudity and different configurations of the body. The audience is asked to move around the performance space to see from different points of view the nine dancers (Micheline Torres, Marcele Sampaio, Amália Lima, Jamil Cardoso, Sandro Amaral, Thiago Granato, Allyson Mendes, Celina Portella, and Francini Barros) as they construct living sculptures. They expose their bodies in a radical way, moving very close to the audience, while experiencing a metamorphosis. Two or more dancers will connect their bodies, embracing and arranging their bodies to create new physical forms. A dancer may appear with two heads or without limbs in grotesque and unrecognizable forms. In the second part, Micheline Torres quotes popular phrases from commercials such as “the Marlboro World” or political slogans like Che Guevara's “*Hay que endurecer sin perder la ternura jamás*” (Let's get tough without ever losing tenderness). The repeated phrases are gradually transformed by the moving bodies of the dancers as they mingle with the audience; the well-known meanings of the words are changed until they are like a foreign substance, a kind of poison in the dancing body. During the 80-minute performance, there is a tension between what we already know—common knowledge and popular imagery—and the way this ordinary information is expressed in a very crude way by the dancing bodies, which allows the movements to offer different meanings for the words. The movements also reorganize traditional dance steps. For example, Torres's body, very well trained in ballet, becomes completely transformed during the performance through different tonus and axes of equilibrium.

In her next piece, *Formas Breves*, Rodrigues was inspired by Oskar Schlemmer's drawings and projects for the Triadische Ballett (Triadic Ballet, 1923). Schlemmer was interested in figures in space. His costumes for the Triadische Ballett suggest controlled movements and emphasized the shapes of cones, tubes, hoops, and spheres to constrain the possibilities of body actions: one woman wears a bubble, a man appears to be a puppet without strings, and so on. Rodrigues's dancers, of varying body types, begin by testing patterns of movement from yoga,



Figure 6. Marcela Levi in Lia Rodrigues's *Formas Breves* (*Brief Forms*), Sesc-Consolação, São Paulo, 2003. (Photo by Lucia Helena Zaremba)

aerobics, gymnastics, classical ballet, and Schlemmer's body drawings. In order to demonstrate this, the dancers present small solos. In the very beginning, for example, Marcela Levi replicates fragments of Schlemmer's movements. The choreography is not supposed to be a new version of the original piece—Rodrigues is not concerned with historical reconstitution. Rather, it is an attempt to experience the translation of drawn movement into live movement. In a second solo Micheline Torres develops a sequence of movements and at the same time she describes (verbally) every detail of what she is doing and feeling. In one moment, for example, she says: "now I am trying to balance myself on one leg, and now my leg is shaking". After completing the scene she repeats the movement sequence without the verbal description. Both duration and skill change in a radical way. The second version

is faster and more fluent. It became clear that Rodrigues and her dancers—as Schlemmer proposed years ago—were dealing with the various possibilities of movement (re)presentation in singular bodies and situations.

The other important source of *Formas Breves* was Italo Calvino's book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1986).¹⁰ Following Calvino's nonlinear narrative that speaks primarily of invisible and unexpected nexus of different events, there is no linear sequence among the scenes, only fragmented solos; the dancers ask through their movements: How can someone describe embodied action, replicate the trajectory of a movement through muscles, nerves, and bones, to create an embodied speech? According to Rodrigues, both Schlemmer and Calvino were thinking about the future and that's why she chose to bring them together. Through his original costumes and scenic objects, Schlemmer anticipated the experience of dancing bodies with technological apparatus. He was looking toward the future of human bodies completely melded with functional objects. Calvino was wondering about the future of literature, and he concluded that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. In this sense, Lia Rodrigues is working on something unique to corporeal projects; like Calvino, she is reflecting on the singularities of her art. Other authors have explored the idea of corporeal projects. Michel Foucault, for example, is one of the most important thinkers who has reminded us of how the body is constitutively unstable "always foreign to itself—an open process of continuous

10. When Italo Calvino died in 1985, he was working on a series of six essays to be delivered at Harvard University for the Charles Eliot Norton Lecture series. Calvino completed only five of the essays, which have been collected under the title *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

self-estrangement where the most fundamental physiological and sensorial functions endure ongoing oscillations, adjustments, breaks, dysfunctions, and optimizations, as well as the construction of resistances” (in Banes and Lepecki 2007:1). By reinventing body knowledge through dancing, Rodrigues is creating sensorial realms and alternative modes for a life without false utopias and illusory hopes. This is her corporeal project, which really seems to be more effective than many forms of verbal discourses.

The Sensorimotor Organization of Subjective Experience

The understanding of knowledge as a corporeal project, and a construction of resistances is also related to the understanding of the self, one of the most complex subjects of human nature and the core of artistic experience. Choreographer Vera Sala and dramaturge Rosa Hercoles have demonstrated that the construction and the dissolution of the self can also be a political issue. They live in São Paulo, the biggest city of Brazil and one of the most violent. In three solo pieces—*Estudos para Macabéa*, (Studies for Macabéa, 1999), *Corpos Ilhados* (Insulated Bodies, 2002), and *Impermanências* (Impermanences, 2004)—they were inspired by the work of the neurologist Antônio Damásio. According to Damásio, the self is a collection of images that includes certain aspects of body structure and body operations, which means that the self is a repertoire of possible motions within the whole body and its varied parts. The self also includes identity-defining traits such as family and other personal relationships, activities, places, typical motor and sensory patterns of response. The images that comprise the self have a high probability of being evoked repeatedly and continuously by direct signaling, as happens in bodily states, or by signals arising from stored dispositional representations, as happens with identity and typical response patterns. Therefore, subjectivity would emerge when the brain is simultaneously producing not just images of an entity, of the self, and of the organism’s responses, but also when the brain is organizing another kind of image, that of an organism in the act of perceiving and responding to an entity. It seems, for Damásio, that this latter image is the main source of subjectivity. The neural device that generates subjectivity serves to connect images with the process of life, and this changing of an organism in the act of perceiving and responding to an entity (an external object or an imaginary one) is what contemporary dance is most often about. In Sala’s choreography, for example, her subjectivity is the transformation of her body states in a direct connection with the environment (temperature, audience noise and movement, light, etc.). She is not interested in a collection of symbolic representations or a composition of patterns of movements with specified meanings (the family, personal history, a specific event from childhood) to represent her subjectivity. It is, more than anything else, a complex organization of bodily states—and maybe this will serve as an acceptable definition not only for Sala’s work, but for a whole new trend in choreography after the 1990s.

Vera Sala is a good example because her pieces are so interconnected as to be seen as one single work. She enlarges the idea of choreography beyond visible movement to include invisible movement—thought processes and other internal actions. Through her performances, there are always the same questions about body limits, body perception, and the relationships between self and environment, as well as the radicalization of the same “movement cells,” as she has precisely stated. She experiences the disappearance of the body as self dissolution and the genesis of movement. *Estudos para Macabéa*, inspired by Claride Lispector’s book *A Hora da Estrela* (The Hour of the Star, 1977), shares a continuity with *Corpos Ilhados*. *Corpos Ilhados* was based on a different source, not related to Lispector’s book but also focused on the subject of the disappearance of the body. In this case, Sala was influenced by a brief newspaper notice announcing the burning body of an unclaimed child in the care of Febem (State Foundation for the Well-being of Minors) which is an agency that incarcerates minors accused of crimes. In *Estudos para Macabéa*, Sala explored Lispector’s description of a domestic who often feels the dissolution of her body. This happens when she is lost in the rush-hour crowd on a bus, or doing housework. She represents the tragic meaning of being poor, unable to adapt to the big city, like so many

migrants in Brazil who came to São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro looking for a better life. Macabéa feels she is of no value to anybody. This is translated in Sala's performance through the complete absence of patterns of movement or a priori references. She moves different parts of her body but the audience cannot identify or recognize her gestures as dance steps. Lying down during most of the performance, she appears to be unable to stand on her own legs. In *Corpos Ilhados*, she was moved by the cruelty of Febem, which has been criticized because of the large number of their charges who have escaped, the rebellion within their institutions, and also allegations of torture and mistreatment of the minors. In the context of the migrant and of the abandoned child, the disappearance of a body has become so frequent that often now it is not considered a catastrophe or emergency. To represent this situation, once again, Sala does not give any clue or clear reference to the audience. She concentrates on two points: the birth of bodily action in an individual body and the fragility of life. The disappearance of a body seems to be the loss of the primary sign of life: the capacity to move. Therefore, she intercepts, interrupts, and reroutes the process of movement in her body. If an action starts in the shoulders and would normally continue in the arm, she displaces the movement to another part of the body, for example, the leg, and improvises different qualities of movement.

In *Impermanências*, Sala radicalizes the nonmovements of her body inside a sculpture of wires with no particular form. She presents the first stage of an inanimate body. There is no dislocation, only a tremor and the changing state of a precarious body. The audience is supposed to walk around her, as if they are visiting an art gallery or looking at a homeless person sleeping in the street. This performance has been presented in different cultural centers, as a kind of installation at Sesc Pompéia in 2005 and Itaú Cultural in 2006, but never on a theatre stage.

Clearly some of the main questions proposed by cognitive scientists, performing artists, and philosophers have been changing the dance field in Brazil especially in the last 15 years. This does not mean that all choreographers are studying the same ideas. Some artists turn to political philosophy, literature, sociology, and history. Some are also discussing a recategorization of power and a less hierarchical way of resignifying conventions and rules. This phenomenon enacted by the abandonment of research methods that artificially divorce thought from embodied action-taking is related to a certain understanding of the situation in Brazil through both global and particular contexts. In the past decade, questions proposed by scholars such as scientist Andy Clark (1997) and by Bhabha (1994) have been more useful for the dance field in Brazil than traditional dance theories. Some of the principle questions are: What kind of tools are required to make sense of real-time and embodied cognition? What is the most effective explanatory framework for understanding emergent phenomena, especially those enacted from a system in crisis? Why does the ambivalence of authority repeatedly turn from mimicry to menace?

To create movement in a dancing body, as exemplified by these specific Brazilian artists, is a political posture for surviving in particular communities. These choreographers present history and power embodied in a radical way. To the extent that new theories of the body in the scope of cognitive sciences, politics, and philosophy substantially displace the old ones, there is a reconfiguring of what needs to be explained or questioned. This has been explored through dance experiences from different countries all over the world (see footnote 1). The relevance of the displacement of theoretical paradigms to new understandings of the dancing body in Brazil is that artists like Ahmed, Soares, Rodrigues, and Sala no longer attempt to answer questions about the affiliations of stable dance vocabularies or the creation of different aesthetic models in confrontation with past models. They have been moved by other issues to destabilize the already known by exploring the most invariant aspects of our organism and its interactions with different environments. But they do not deny the past. It is more a matter of reorganization. That is why choreographers and dance scholars have become so closely involved with the work being done in the field of performance studies "where questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturally" (Schechner 2002:xii).



Some of the new theoretical bridges proposed by these Brazilian choreographers have interested them because, besides creating different artistic languages, they change our understanding of cognitive capacities such as memory and learning (Alejandro Ahmed), communication and empathy (Lia Rodrigues), perception and metaphorical constructions (Marta Soares), and the ambivalent distinction between movement and nonmovement (Vera Sala). By dislocating classical paradigms of human nature they offer reflections on some cultural hot-button issues such as violence, gender, and power. This is a polemical debate: After all, is it possible to reinsert a political discussion in dance experiences by challenging bodily nature and the construction of movements, even without being explicit about political issues?



Figures 7. & 8. Vera Sala in *Impermanências* (*Impermanences*), Espaço Ruth Rachou, São Paulo, 2004. (Photo by Cândida Almeida)

Giorgio Agamben, who has extensively discussed the political paradigms of experience (1996) as well as Michel Foucault's thesis on how politics become a biopolitics,¹¹ points out that in the contemporary political debates the very biological concept of life is precisely what deserves to be questioned before anything else: "What is at stake today is life, and what is decisive is the way in which one understands the sense of transformation" (1996:152-53).

11. As Foucault writes: "By biopolitics I meant the endeavor, begun in the 18th century to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race" (1997:73).

The recognition of these different levels of political action in the Brazilian dance field is not a simple task. Brazil was a colonized country, and this can be also observed in the dance field. All pioneers from classical ballet to modern dance were immigrants or studied abroad. And even our first university dance program, the School of Dance at the Federal University of Bahia, was modeled on the ideas and work of the Polish dancer Yanka Rudzka and the German artist Rolf Gelewski. However, all of the above-mentioned artists, among others from all over the country, are trying to recognize dance experiences as possibilities in their own contexts and avoid considering them as mere samples of global movements. As Bhabha figured out when he started his research on the performative ambivalence of colonial discourse:

We may have to force the limits of the social as we know it to rediscover a sense of political and personal agency through the unthought within the civic and the psychic realms. This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin. (1994:93)

In this sense, body studies have become a powerful way of thinking about the relationships among different environments, cultures, and subjective experiences.

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