Eyes in Movement

José A. Sanchez

I

In Alcalá de Henares an old semi-ruined church has been renovated and converted into a performance space. As the audience enters this emptied-out space where sitting is forbidden, three performers come out to meet them. In one corner of the transept stands the sound and video desk. Somewhere between the pillars which divide up the nave, choreographer Olga Mesa watches. Once the doors have been closed the performers quietly set about their work; measuring the space with their own bodies, allowing themselves to be astonished by the articulation of their limbs, by the infinite possibilities of self-observation without reaching that point of entry where gaze and being come together. Meanwhile, Olga Mesa watches. The audience looks on; bodies sometimes upright, sometimes naked, sometimes stretched out on the marble floor, sometimes retreating towards what remains of the altar, where they seek to enter into intimate dialogue with a tiny camera. The images of those faces in close-up, the bodies in the public space of the church, are caught on Daniel Miracle's hand-held camera.

Some months later, *Más público, más privado* [More Public, More Private] (2001) was performed in Madrid at the Círculo de Bellas Artes Theatre in honour of the last edition of *Desviaciones*. The ecclesiastical experiment had become a theatrical event. Nevertheless, the performers continued watching. Sitting among the audience, they waited their turn to intervene. They approached the stage serenely, immersed themselves in a period of solitary reflection and returned to their place in the audience. This process does not take long. At a certain moment, the four of them (on this occasion the choreographer joined the performance) occupied the stage and improvised on the action of falling, tumbling, bumping into each other and apologizing. Later on, naked, they deliberately ignored the viewing public, who scrutinized their every movement and intention, a public gaze which even extended beyond the stage thanks to a surveillance monitor which transmitted images from a hand-held camera: grimaces, laughter, body fragments, skin . . .

By making the audience aware of its role as voyeur, Olga Mesa managed to escape objectification of herself, preserved her own gaze from objectification and forced the audience into an intellectual/emotional stance beyond the gaze which became an element of, rather than the goal of, the performance. This is something she had begun to explore in *Daisy Planet* (1999), a short solo piece where for the first time she used the 'Neokinok', a sort of portable television monitor designed by Daniel Miracle which allows for live-editing of images. From the outset of the piece, the audience sees that it has been captured on film by a minicam at the back of the stage and is then displayed on a monitor by the proscenium. The choreographer could move downstage and with her back to the audience, present them with a close-up of her face on the monitor, separating out facial (mediated) expression from (immediate) corporeal expression, and thereby making manifest the complexity of a body/being in full possession of the power to look.

As Lisa Nelson writes: *I think with the eyes as mobile elements. I think with sight . . . I think with movement and with sight.* And a natural consequence of the relocation of thought within sight is the incorporation of the camera into the choreographic

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•Olga Mesa. *Le Dernier mot* (2003). Photo: Daniel Miracle

process. Incorporation here means to convert the camera into a body part, and to adapt movement to this new mode of seeing which is controlled by the hand. *I noticed that my body changed its shape according to the function of the camera I was holding, just as a baby's hand is formed by the shape of the cup it holds.* Nelson confessed: *From time to time the needs of my body took on the role of film-maker.*

Already, in the course of making *Más público, más privado*, Olga Mesa acknowledged her interest in incorporating the cinematographic gaze into her work. Whereas previously she had used film to create distance from her body through an exercise in observation/negation – *Esto no es mi cuerpo* [This is Not My Body], now she was interested in reaching a point where body and observation become one.

> *I am making work which reminds me of the movements of a camera. I am thinking about the body as a generator of different times: retreating into the past or being in the future. Using the body to bring action to a halt, to carry on talking, to not talk and carry on acting with the body, to use time and word at the same time, to repeat. It's no longer simply a question of conscious observation, but rather of working on the development of sensation.*

She took this to a new level in her last solo piece, *Le dernier mot (second version): au fond tout est surface)* [The Last Word (second version): deep down everything is surface], which was performed in Paris in February 2003. As with *Daisy Planet*, the image of the audience was constantly projected on the white walls of the stage alongside close-ups of the choreographer whose gaze was directed

alternately towards the spectators and the cameras. Dance is always an exercise in observation, and the disjunction of looking and moving reaches its limit when the dancer removes all her clothing and walks out into the street. While the back wall still retains the frozen image of her gesture of departure next to the open door, the audience, left behind, can listen to an account of what she sees on her way around the theatre and a description of the physical sensations of a body in performance on an ordinary freezing night.

One of Olga Mesa's major contributions in this piece is the experimental form she calls 'choreograms'. These are pauses from which movement is not entirely eliminated. 'Static dynamics, situated on the surface of time and on the physical skin of space', 'A privileged movement objectified'. It is as if the visual memory of a movement were superimposed on the movement itself; as if the body, rather like photographic paper, were capable of recording the sequence of its own trajectory in a series of fixed moments. This in turn is reinforced by the pauses and the images captured, manipulated and projected onto the walls by Daniel Miracle.

Between one choreogram and another, Olga Mesa sometimes steps outside the performance (or pretends to) in order to look at the audience and ask: 'On continue? [Shall we go on?]' Having just seen itself projected onto the back of the stage, the audience is taken aback by this direct address, by the immobility of the choreographer waiting for a response. For a few moments they are invited to take part physically in the performance. The gaze then coincides with the corporeal, and it takes on responsibility for time.

In order to sustain my new mode of looking, Nelson writes, *my body adopted a hitherto unknown level of immobility.* In Idoia Zabaleta's 2002 piece, *El rato de José* [Joseph's While], the performers stared constantly at the audience. The tension of the gaze set the performance in motion. Idoia had already experimented with this shift from movement to sight in a previous solo work, *La puta inocencia* [Innocence the Whore] (2001). There, the only consistent movement was that of a basketball projected onto the white floor of the dance space. This replicated the action of a collaborator outside the theatre. In response to this action, the dancer does no more than observe, through her eyes and with her body, while removing her clothes one by one until she stands as naked as her gaze. In *El rato de José*, tension reaches its high point during a sequence when almost at the end of the piece the three performers, sitting on the floor, remain motionless for a long period, causing unease in the audience which now bears responsibility for the piece.

But what are the consequences of removing the nucleus of the concept of 'spectacle' (i.e. 'spectare', 'specere' or 'to look') and replacing it with other nuclei like 'to be in', 'to play with', 'to attend' or 'to share', all with the aim of being able 'to continue'? This is only possible at the expense of blurring the lines between the public and the private, the formalized and the chaotic, the admirable and the anodyne or banal. Idoia Zabaleta wrote: *It's odd, I wanted to talk about time and yet I have a sense that I'm talking about love.*

Love was the theme of *Daisy Planet*. Love and Time. References to the texts of Doris Sagan are combined with the much more inconsequential game of pulling the petals off a daisy. 'S/he loves me. S/he loves me not.' The act of looking blends with that of expectation, the dance blends with 'passing the time'. And the spectator, unable to remain aloof from this game of truncated movements and expanded timeframes, of loves

•Moaré Danza. *El rato de José* (2002), choreography Idoia Zabaleta. Photo: Montserrat de Pablo

•Moaré Danza. *El rato de José* (2002), choreography Idoia Zabaleta. Photo: Montserrat de Pablo

recalled and intense absences, cannot help but tumble into this game of gazes.

> *The audience's gaze is like a mirror of my own. There is a specular relationship between the two, as if through the spectator's gaze I could see mine. My gaze is not coterminous with me. It begins with the other. It's as if my body is here, but my eyes are with you. I don't know if I belong to you or you to me, or who belongs to whom. It's as if the gaze constitutes that which eliminates the empty space between bodies.*

II

Night. Somewhere in the middle of the savannah. The camera shows us something the naked eye could only dimly make out. A female rhinoceros accompanied by her baby is being stalked by a pack of hyenas. The predators' intentions are blatant. They slink forward. The female does not seem to react. The baby rhino seeks protection between her thick legs. Only when the circle around her tightens does the mother threaten to attack, at the same time leaving her child exposed. The hyenas take their chance and leap. The mother returns to the baby. From now on the attacks come in waves, each time the predators are more daring and succeed in wounding their prey. The baby rhino seeks protection under the belly of its mother whose size and poor vision impede her capacity for defence. At a certain moment, one of the hyenas sinks its teeth into the little rhino's neck and drags it off. All appears to be lost. The powerful body of the mother proves ineffective in the face of the nimbleness and determination of the predators.

Perhaps she lacks maternal instinct? Has she given up? No. Finally she fights back, and with the aid of a lion which appears in the nick of time, she manages to break through the circle and mother and child head off together towards the dawn. Blood trickles from wounds in the little one's neck, which on some other night out of sight of the camera will probably be its undoing.

If the viewer is moved by this instance of cruelty in the natural world it is only because of imposing a moral perspective on it, which entails the condemnation of aggression, upholding the rights of the weak and defenceless and the privileging of the mother–child bond. At the same time, the survival needs of the predators, the risks they run in each attack and the hunger that drives them to furious violence all count for nought. Furthermore, what strikes us as unacceptable (and this is something which is lost on the participants in this scene) is the gratuitous cruelty of animals who can survive on the carcasses of the dead attempting to satisfy their hunger with the flesh of a new-born creature, bearer of the future. Does 'the future' exist in the wild? Is the life of the young rhino of greater value than that of its attackers? Is there such a thing as 'the past' in the wild? This documentary extract, re-edited by Nina Bruderman, was used by María Muñoz in her solo *Atrás los ojos* [With Eyes Backwards] (2002). There is something nightmarish about the film, shot in infra-red. This feeling is reinforced during the projection by the disturbing sound effects of DJ Steve Noble at his decks, María Muñoz moving quietly in the shadows, and her eyeless speech towards the end. The solo returns to a theme which recurs in the work of Mal Pelo; the gap that exists between us and the animal, the containment of wildlife within a demarcated space (the documentary, the zoo, the domestic pet) and its displacement towards 'a more and more distant past'. Texts by John Berger are used as a starting-point. María Muñoz cites the following:

> *The eyes of an animal when they observe man are watchful and cautious. The same animal will look at other species in the same way. This way of looking is not reserved exclusively for humankind . . . Other animals are trapped inside it. Man becomes self-conscious when he returns it.*

The interchange of looks, in which Olga Mesa claims to discover her corporeality, implicating the public in this discovery, appears in the work of María Muñoz as something which antedates the performance. Muñoz does not present her conclusions. She does not set in motion 'the final state' of the body. Instead she reconstructs a space under tension which reproduces the conditions in which her search, mediated by the animal's gaze, takes place. Thus, in contrast to Olga Mesa's work, María Muñoz's eyes do not look straight out. They preserve their mystery. They are *turned backwards*.

María Muñoz stands with her back to the audience, facing the back of an empty stage. She speaks into a hand-held microphone. Throughout the piece, projections, dance, spoken text and soundscape (produced live by Steve Noble) constantly interweave in the creation of 'a reflection upon separation and love ', a retrospective (introspective) on a whole series of small encounters which mark out the time of our experience, and which inhabit our memory, although most remain hidden through forgetting.

Muñoz, Noble and Ramis are intent on creating an intermediate space, somewhere between imagination and look, light and invisibility, melody and sounding silence, the domestic and the natural; the light never becomes blinding, nor does the dimness fade into darkness, the melodies never reach a conclusion, nor is the sound resolved into silence, and the domestic space seems to be indicated by nothing more than an armchair and a table, while the natural world is rendered simply by a small tree in a plastic pot and by the external images the video brings into the performance space.

In one of the dance sequences, María Muñoz (visible through an orange glow which slowly transforms into luminous white) seems to be in search of memory in external space, an external space which inhabits the stage through her mobile gaze. With hands joined she seeks out access to it, and from

•Mal Pelo. *Atrás los ojos* (2002), choreography María Muñoz. Photo: Jordi Bover

then on she undertakes a series of rotations, contractions and incomplete unfoldings. These denote a gradual approach to that state of presence in which the echoes of life adhere to the skin, penetrate the muscles. They manifest themselves in a movement which tries to shelter the complexity of the human, the animal, their gaze, the sound traces . . .

Nina Bruderman's video follows on naturally from this sequence. Thus, to 'turn back the eyes' not only recalls the space of memory, but it also shoves us up against an organic interiority from which, as a result of what has gone before, we would be tempted to distance ourselves. If we turn our gaze backwards, we discover a material interiority with a past which takes us back to the simian. Muñoz's body then fragments as it searches out the shapes and gestures of the animal, in an attempt to interiorize that gaze which John Berger talked about in his texts and into which she tries to transform her body.

It's fascinating to watch how animals move the area of their body which corresponds to the centre of gravity. Muñoz points out: *The changes of direction, etc. They move, and they do so because they want to, and that's it.* It is not a question of copying, or mimicking, but rather of occupying the skin and flesh of the animal. As Pep Ramis suggests: *Just imagine that you're a chimpanzee, and you'll see that just through that act of imagination, something happens.*

What happens is a form of behaviour which is much more structured than might at first have been expected, movements which are more clearly delineated than those which emerge from a so-called instinctual approach, a thick line drawing which is more closely related to primitivism than the wild. We need do no more than compare the outcomes of María Muñoz's work with those of Vera Mantero.

In Mantero's *Poesia e selvajeria* [Poetry and Savagery] (1999) the eyes of the performers are also *turned back*, although the object of enquiry here was not so much the gaze or the memory as the body itself. Following on from the work begun in *A queda de um ego* (1995) where she had upset the balance (a characteristic of her choreography up until then) between the regulated (the code, the disguise) and the instinctual (the wild, the naked), Vera Mantero set about exploring what happens within the body and transforming that interiority into external forms.

> *We all know that there are a lot of things which we don't allow the body to experience. We know that the unconscious has a life which escapes our scrutiny. But we see it as something related to ideas, images . . . and we ignore the possibility of experiencing that unconscious life from within the body.*

Poesia e selvajeria starts out where the previous work had left off, where the dancers were engaged in the construction of physical and visual sequences without any narrative thread. Through this process of accumulation, they brought about the disintegration of the performance together with an almost unbearable contamination of the performance space. What the viewer was presented with was a succession of group actions, primitive codes, rituals, disguisings, absurd actions, imitations of animals, litanies, processions . . . At a certain moment, the performers started scattering food all over the stage. Their bodies became smeared as they slid across the slippery floor, and it was in the midst of all this confusion that the very driving force behind this piece – the coexistence of the poetic and the savage – could emerge: *We have done the most extraordinary things as well as the most terrible and catastrophic, and in each case it was done with the same precision. Seeing that just leaves me totally astonished.*

III

Night. An open space. Six young men surround a seventh. They push him, they shake him violently, trip him up. The victim tries to run away, but fails to break through the circle of the other six who are determined to see this through. They grab him by the T-shirt, by the arms and throw him to the ground. One starts kicking him in the stomach. Others join in with a series of punches and kicks. There is no sound to the recording, probably filmed by an nondescript, ugly security camera. If the sound were audible, maybe the naked violence, the herd instinct, the fear and pain would be more immediate.

This sequence, re-edited by Toni Serra, was also used by María Muñoz in *Atrás los ojos*. The parallels with *Bebé rinoceronte* are obvious, except that on this occasion the victim is not a child, there is no mother present and no 'lion' in the shape of a policeman comes to the young man's aid. The sequence lacks dramatic tension and therefore it fails to move us. The savagery of the aggression is a far cry from the Romanticism of the Natural, and the same viewer who instinctively feels a sense of protection towards the young animal remains a great deal more indifferent in the face of this disproportionate violence. Why does the violence between animals move us more than the violence between humans? Is it that, perversely, we individualize the baby rhino, whereas the young man becomes just another example of generic youth violence?

Sometimes, in order to see, we need to close our eyes. In *Esto no es mi cuerpo* [This is not my Body] Olga Mesa closed her eyes in order to observe the sequence of her own dream and to transform that dream into dance. And in *Le dernier mot* [The Last Word] she included a sequence entitled *Yeux fermés* [Eyes Closed] in which she asked the audience to close their eyes while she got dressed after her 'paseo nocturno' or night stroll. With eyes closed, the perception of sound and awareness of the body are heightened. Idoia Zabaleta sought to transmit this experience to the viewer by dilating time, confronting them with immobility and the gaze. Vera Mantero developed a different stategy; eliminating the state of rest (the conventional image of the body), thus freeing the spectator from the role of onlooker and providing a means of access to a state of physical experience where no rules apply. What is at work in both cases is an obliteration of the gaze, trapped in its own excess (in the temporal void or in pointless accumulation). Dance has ceased to be a visual spectacle and has been transformed into an invitation to discover those hidden states of the body which hark back to our animal past, the memory of pleasure, the destructive potential or the pain of other bodies which inhabit our own.

In the final sequence of solos, María Muñoz closes her eyes and lets her hands respond to the musical suggestions offered by Steve Noble. These offerings are unstable as Noble is using two decks which alternate constantly with the electronic resources. According to Muñoz; *To achieve a certain depth, I need to attain a degree of fatigue equal to or greater than the one I now feel.* Silence, pain, death, indifference, a small gesture . . . the 'wild' birth of a child.

Olga Mesa, like María Muñoz, struggled to create that intermediate space which is reached through fatigue, the suspension of the gaze and 'the eyes turned back'. She defined her solo as *a documentary biographical poem which deals with the intermediate spaces between memory, its experience and its depiction*, and it is at the intersection between the biographical and the documentary that the opening appears through which the viewer enters. This split between the private and the public allows for reflection on violence and war out of the memory of separation and love. Idoia Zabaleta ended up talking about love when she tried reflecting on the nature of time, on what is lost in our ravaged societies, on the emptiness of our gaze, of our eyes, of our bodies. Reducing the 'spectacular' pressure, confronted gazes. Eyes in movement.

Translation by Ana Buitrago and Jerome Fletcher