



Dis-identifying: dancing bodies and analyzing eyes at work. A discussion of Vera Mantero's "a mysterious Thing, said e.e. Cummings"

Isabelle Ginot

► To cite this version:

Isabelle Ginot. Dis-identifying: dancing bodies and analyzing eyes at work. A discussion of Vera Mantero's "a mysterious Thing, said e.e. Cummings". *Discourses in Dance*, 2003, Vol. 2 (n° 1), p. 23-34. hal-02292394

HAL Id: hal-02292394

<https://univ-paris8.hal.science/hal-02292394>

Submitted on 25 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**DIS-IDEN
TIFYING:
DANCING
BODIES
AND
ANALYSING
EYES AT
WORK**

Isabelle GINOT

**A DISCUSSION OF
VERA MANTERO'S
A MYSTERIOUS
THING SAID
E. E. CUMMINGS**

Article paru dans
Discourses in Dance, volume 2 n° 1, Lon-
dres, 2003.

DIS-IDENTIFYING: DANCING BODIES AND ANALYSING EYES AT WORK

Isabelle GINOT

A DISCUSSION OF VERA MANTERO'S A MYSTERIOUS THING SAID E. E. CUMMINGS

Article paru dans
Discourses in Dance, volume 2 n° 1, Londres, 2003.

«Exaspérante corporisation d'un malaise qui, comme on sait, commence toujours par être un non-savoir que faire avec le corps.» (Melo 1996) ('Exasperating incorporation of a disease which, it is known, always begins by being a «not knowing» which engages with the body.')

Contemporary dance performance analysis (i.e. dance works analysis) has always been the focus and my interest in dance research. By 'performance analysis', I mean a problem rather than a given.

While I believe that a methodology for performance analysis should be redesigned for each new piece, aiming at an 'emerging methodology', I also try to take into account some more general questions, which I use not so much as a methodological framework, than as a background of 'positive anxiety'. Among those questions is the nature of the discourses we are constructing for performance analysis. When we 'use' performance analysis for other purposes, as in cultural or feminist studies, for instance (where we take dance works as 'examples' or illustrations of our arguments), what is the weight of the methodology we apply on the pieces themselves? In that respect, I observe that cultural and feminist studies mainly use approaches derived from semiotics, allowing a fluid transfer from 'the discourse of the dance onto the 'discourse on the dance'. But could we think of a different way where dance pieces, rather than being assigned to 'support' our theoretical discourses, could be allowed to endanger them, complicate them, trouble them? In other words: what do discourses do to dances (what do we do to dances and dancers)? What do

the dances do, or what don't they do, to our discourses? Another aspect (and this is not to close this list of questions) has to do with the circulation of signification, understood as an economy, and possibly a market, and the status of the dance scholar and of theoretical discourses within that market.

Context

The following discussion of Vera Mantero's solo, a mysterious Thing, said e.e. cummings* (1996) exemplifies these questions. It raises issues about identity that have to be taken in the French context, where identity theory (along with feminist, gender and cultural studies) has been, until very recently, almost absent from scholarship. Yet, performance analysis, as I understand it, meets with issues of identity at almost every moment or level of its process. In fact I draw a parallel between the identity (of the subject) and the categories (of the discourse): piece and process, choreographer and dancer, etc. Part of the following list might seem quite redundant or evoke a sense of *déjà vu* in an English speaking reader; yet, I've listed here issues that seem to me extremely active and productive within the dance world in France. The first level of 'identity' relates to the status of the 'work of art', of the 'dance performance' in this case. That status has a strong and political history in France.

Contemporary dance developed powerfully during the early 1980s, and was supported by the State and other local public institutions. This period, which was also a time of self-definition in the young dance milieu, crystallised around the status of the choreographer 'as author', following up the French concept of 'cinéma d'auteur' from the 1960s and 1970s. The legitimisation of dance was intricately merged with the legitimisation of the choreographer, whose status was constructed simultaneously as author, manager (thereby responsible for the public funds he was attributed), company head and boss (responsible for hiring and paying dancers and other employees), mediator with the State's representatives, and, last but not least, local political figure and instrument¹. The definition of 'a dance piece' was implicitly informed by that definition of what it is to be a choreographer (or vice versa), and also implied a strict distribution of tasks between 'choreographer', 'dancer', 'manager', 'producer', etc. Those constructions of the 1980s were the target of sharp criticism in the 1990s, that started by a revaluing of the status of 'the dancer' and developed into a global criticism of the system, through a return to values of performance, collective, rejection of virtuosity, etc. This most recent stage has, obviously, borrowed many of its new values from the US avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s, or at least to the narrative about them that has been privileged in France.

Thus the whole system of categories that sustains not only dance pieces, but also dance viewing and, even more, dance criticism, is set to be redefined. The slowness (or maybe the powerful resistance) of institutions to adjust to the fluidity of categories combined with the lack of dance theory in France, has made those issues strongly political, because, for example, dismantling the usual distribution of labour between choreographer and dancer, the distinction between dancer and non-dancer, process and product, and the introduction of improvisation on stage, have problematised the whole system of production and subsidies. The same institutional rigidity makes the issue of 'transdisciplinary performance' problematic: a company's

¹ This is particularly true for those now considered 'mainstream' choreographers, who were named, throughout the eighties and nineties, as heads of 'Centres chorégraphiques nationaux' based in the main cities of France and equally co-subsidized by the State, the City and the Region or Department.

application has to fall into the categories of dance, theatre, music, etc. to be eligible for most kinds of subsidy. The creation of a new category, 'transdisciplinary', which is open, with difficulty, to multidisciplinary and technological projects, only highlights the fraught relationship between performance practices and institutional concepts. The same causes have created a strong separation between artistic 'genres': high art, avant-garde, and popular culture. The organisation of a State-subsidised network of public theatres - initiated early in the twentieth century - distinguishes theoretically between 'private theatre' (supposedly commercial and profit-oriented) and 'creation theater' (supposedly creative and therefore producing deficits; the 'necessary' deficits being both the proof of the 'creative' quality of the productions and the reason for public funding). Dance has only developed within the infrastructure of public subsidy, and is therefore assigned to the problematic, yet operative, criteria of 'creative art'. Last, but not least, the category of subject 'identity' (sex and gender, ethnical and cultural identity, etc.) is profoundly repressed in France where the ideology of 'integration' covers a strong denial of those issues ... particularly in the dance field.

It is with all those issues in mind that I want to approach the 'case study' of Vera Mantero's solo and interrogate various strategies of analysis. Mantero is a Portuguese choreographer, and certainly her piece should be analysed with regard to Portugal's context rather than to France's, but my own reception belongs to the French context; plus, in recent years in France, this piece, and Mantero's work in general, has become an important point of reference for dance and her work is presented regularly on French stages.

'A mysterious thing...'

a mysterious Thing, said e.e. cummings was commissioned by the Theatre Culturgest, Lisbon, in 1996. Along with solos commissioned from Mark Tompkins and Blondell Cummings, it was meant to be an 'homage to Josephine Baker'. I have chosen this piece because of its ambiguous effect upon me: seeing it in 1998, in a theatre in a Parisian suburb, I found myself unable to 'identify' what my feelings, understandings and opinions were. What was the nature of that event, and how could I 'think' about it? The following discussion is based on the study of a video, which has left untouched this primary experience². Its purpose is not to offer an 'absolute analysis' of the piece or to attempt any deciphering of a supposed intentionality of Vera Mantero. It is rather to try to observe the solo as something detached from the choreographer's subjectivity, in the context of what I call the dance market, in which I include not only dance pieces and practices, but also dance criticism, production, etc.

The solo opens with a very slow fading up of the lights that hardly reveal the face of the dancer, while can hear a murmuring that will progressively turn into discernible words. As the piece goes on, the dancer's body, centre stage, facing the audience, almost still, will be revealed as a hybrid character. While the face is excessively made-up, white with spangles, fake eyelashes, etc., in a caricature review style, the rest of the body appears more or less naked - actually entirely painted in brown, the darkness and her relative stillness making it difficult to see if she is actually naked, or covered with some kind of transparent net. And although it is equally difficult to see, her apparent instability and the discrete sound of her balancing steps throughout the whole piece is due to her feet being encased in clogs which resemble cloven hooves

² Unfortunately, none of the three video versions I've collected from various sources mention dates and place of capture. It is not the purpose of this paper to offer a comparison of the various versions - which show major differences - but it is true that 'performance analysis' still has to problematise the difference between 'the work' and its actualisation in one performance. Working on video fixates the analysis on that specific performance, and shouldn't be generalized to an analysis of 'the work'.

(goat's hooves, to be precise), that reduce her surface of support and fix her ankles in a very demanding position³. A shiny cabaret face with goat feet, a naked-but-not-naked, and white-but-black-body, all of that in a troubling darkness that makes her presence both shiny and obscure (none of the above elements can be clearly identified), and isolated (borders of stage don't show). She talks through the whole solo, reciting a list of words: 'a sorrow, an impossibility, atrocious, atrocious. A sadness, an unwillingness, a fall, an absence, atrocious, atrocious...' This ongoing spelling out of 'non words' goes along with upper body gestures: head, arms and torso accompany the words with movements which seem to have an endlessly shifting relationship to them: gestures might repeat when words repeat, or not; they may be clearly miming the words, or not; their dynamic may tune with the voice dynamics, or not. All this happens while the legs try to maintain balance, as if striving to keep still while the agitation of the upper body, combined with the uncomfortable support of the clogs, increasingly endangers stability. The text is organised as a circular catalogue (recalling repetitive music) where repetition is not absolutely regular and still lets new elements (new words) appear progressively. It ends with a slight change of content: 'An atrocious will. An atrocious tenderness. A joy.'

There is no development towards a climax in the piece, just an increasing tension generated by the balance problem. The modulations in voice and gesture range, tone, intensity and dynamics, don't lead to a perceptible shape (climax-resolution, for instance). Yet, if the text and the movement vocabulary are fixed, there are important variations in range, strength, energy and intensity from one performance to the other.

Hybrids

The body appears as hybrid at first glance because of its visual aspects: between human and animal (due to the clogs) but also between sophistication (the hyper-made-up face) and roughness (the clogs), and ambiguously between whiteness and blackness. Are we seeing a white dancer painted in black? Or impersonating a black dancer (Vera Mantero as Josephine Baker)? Is it Vera Mantero dancing or Josephine Baker, or some other subject? This first series organises possible links between stereotypical significations: high (head)/sophistication (make up)/human/white oppose down (floor)/roughness (clogs)/darkness/animal/black. The equivalence with Josephine Baker's life and work (a 'not-too-black' American dancer making a career in colonialist France by accepting, or manipulating, the French stereotypes about blackness: blacks as wild animals, coming straight from the jungle, etc.) is obvious, as well as the reference to Portugal's history of colonialism, since Vera Mantero is Portuguese.

Another area of ambiguity is that of authorship: it is not clear from the programme notes if the words are actually by Vera Mantero, or e.e. cummings, or any other source⁴. The 'mysterious' asterisk collated at the end of the title is an ambiguous indication, calling for this footnote: 'What Cummings really said about Josephine: «A mysterious Thing, neither primitive nor civilized, or beyond time, in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic»⁵.' What kind of authority/authorship is given to Cummings over the piece by the

³ The clogs do not have any heels so that her own heels neither touch the floor nor the shoe, which means that the ball of her foot, and her toes, are supporting her full weight.

⁴ In fact, among the various material provided by the company, only one document, the 'technical requirements' 'for the piece, mentions the text which is by Mantero.

⁵ The quotation is the only information given about the role, or place, of cummings in the piece; it is retranslated from the French.

presence of his name in the title? Would it be a piece 'by', or 'about' Cummings? And what is the status of Josephine Baker, whose name actually hardly appears?

'I'm not a dancer, I don't want to be a dancer, I want to do whatever I feel like doing, I want to do whatever is necessary to do. It's not obvious to me to make dances in terms of theatrical, composed dance... I don't make dances. I make performances,' Mantero says⁶. Against, or according to such a statement, the solo proliferates references to dance genres. The clogs force Mantero to be on her toes, although she maintains her legs parallel rather than turned-out. The virtuosic legs of this visibly ballet-trained dancer are locked into weight-bearing and balance maintaining. No legs, no dance'? Further, the excessive face make-up and its contradiction with the rest of her (its?) appearance, the lighting style, the frontality and the centring of the dancer on stage also connote music-hall and its peculiar female body exhibition style. Add to that the fact that she seems to talk more than dance, and a second chain of ambiguities is completed: is this dance, or not-dance, is it dance about dances (ballet, music hall, etc.) or is it theatre or music-hall? Are we sitting in a music-hall theatre or facing an avant-garde stage? Is this high art or popular entertainment?

Directly linked to that second chain of ambiguities, is a third one, on the nature of the dancer's nakedness. Neither really naked nor covered, her nakedness eludes various stereotyped significations, each of them associated with identified dance or performance genres: she is not naked to free her 'natural' or 'organic' body from the corruption of civilisation; neither is she naked in order to 'reveal' (as opposed to conceal) a true body, or some kind of original truth - two 'genres' of nakedness with which early modern dance can be associated. But her naked body is not codified through eroticism, as in music-hall, or even pornography, nor is she naked in an ironic and critical relationship with those body-exhibiting styles. And finally - since this paper reflects a reception of the solo in the 1990s and 2000s, her nakedness neither reveals a 'body-as-matter', nor body-as-waste or scrap, body as ugliness, as a new generation of choreographers-performers have recently exposed (Boris Charmatz, Jerome Bel, Xavier Leroy, for example).

Such a catalogue of ambiguous significations seems to suggest that this solo is an obvious piece through which to raise issues concerning identity; in particular, it seems to open a field of crossed-significations: how does it channel together signifiers of animality, femininity, blackness, exhibition, and dance? Thus the solo would be a perfect 'object' for cultural or ethnic, gender, or 'choreographic genres' analysis. Those possible interpretations, working out the issue of 'who she is' (how is she performing or not-performing stereotypes of gender, race, dance styles?), would focus on the above description of the -semiotics of the solo (or its semiotised surface, I should say): the colour of the skin, the significations and references of the make-up, of the movement style, and so on.

Resisting semiotisation

Yet, those directions of analysis, positioning the solo within the economy of signification, would imply the denial of the experience of my first perception/reception. And it would also depend upon a very partial, limited kind of observation. In fact, most of the 'signifiers' listed above are close to undecipherable:

⁶ Quoted in Ploebst (2001, p. 54).

⁷ Mantero was a former dancer of the Ballet Gulbenkian, and she said about an earlier piece created in 1989 as a farewell to the company, *About The Four Little Fairies of the Apocalypse*: 'After 5 years of leg-throwing, I decided to create a piece where the legs disappear'. Ploebst 2001, p. 40.

the status of Cummings, the writer, is not clear from the programme notes; the nature of the piece's relationship with Josephine Baker is no clearer. Moreover, the darkness of the lighting design renders undecipherable many visual aspects: the colour, and even the nature of the body make-up isn't so clear. (Is it brown? Is it make up or some kind of net?). The 'clogs' so clearly identified as 'goat clogs' in this text aren't quite readable as such. The actuality of what can be seen, let alone how it could be interpreted, is uncertain. The network of relationships between cosmetics and nakedness, animality and sophistication, glamour and ugliness, upper body and lower body, fabricate a hybrid body or, rather, a puzzle of fragments of numerous corporealities, whose reciprocal relationships are not readable, just as the relationship between those fragments and the text being recited is not readable: 'a mysterious Thing', as Cummings said.

It is this resistance to semiotisation - through invisibility, but also through other devices that I'll discuss further - that I want to distinguish from ambiguous signification (or polysemy). The following discussion evaluates the pertinence of applying interpretation to this solo, against its apparent overload of signification.

A first aspect of this paradoxical resistance is what I call 'fugitive rhetoric'. Through the deep darkness of the stage (of the solo?) ghosts of various stereotypical public female figures appear and disappear. The overexposed hands and face and the 'opaque nakedness' of the central body focus the viewer's attention on the 'rhetorical body' and its communicative gestures, just as it does in music-hall (think of the use of 'follow spot' in music-hall and revues). The posture is typical of a star performer or a cabaret singer (or more contemporarily of a fashion model: high heels (here the clogs) force the knees to bend and push the pelvis forward, while the chest withdraws backwards). Another ghost is that of a female TV announcer: the vocal timbre, the emphasis and moreover the cohesion between gestural and vocal dynamics recalls or even mimics a stereotyped public speaking style. All these 'ingredients' should produce an efficacious communication; yet 'it doesn't work', and the gestural rhetoric attached to such female figures seems to elude itself while it is being produced. What is opposing or contradicting a 'normal' communication here?

First, all the spoken words are organised around denial, refusal, absence and lack: 'a sorrow, a sadness, an unwillingness, a fall, an absence... Atrocious, atrocious... .'; the lack of syntax leaves the words without destination. This floating is a first aspect of 'non space', supported by the lighting where perspective, directions and potential partnership are erased: lights are strictly directed around the dancer's proximal space, leaving the rest of the stage in darkness, making the borders, background and frame of the stage invisible.

The movement remains insistently in flexion, or in a concentric space (in Laban's terms), closing space around the dancer rather than opening it towards the audience. Or, when extension happens (for instance when she opens her arms horizontally), it is through a dynamic of impact, closing the phrasing of her gesture in a clear-cut ending, preventing it from travelling through space.

The dancer's eyes float; if she looks straight at the audience, onto parts of her own body or towards undefined directions, her change of focus does not seem to affect her experience; her peripheral rather than focused gaze doesn't discriminate between audience, herself and emptiness. This peculiar use of the eyes is a key to the 'non construction' of space, disrupting the usual effects of frontal relationship to the audience: while Mantero never gives up her frontal position, her floating gaze, along with the concentric space, disables perspective, address and communication. All those elements, and maybe particularly the last, contribute to 'disable' the actual signifiers she maintains, and her presence escapes the various performing modes that could appear as references (music hall, avant-garde scenes, modern dance, theatre), as

well as the various public female stereotypes that I described as the 'ghosts' of her presence.

This construction of a 'non space' - or perhaps the dissolution of space - is one aspect of this 'fugitive rhetoric' and 'dis-identification' that I want to pursue further. If all the apparent signs of rhetoric (gesture, dynamics, words, etc.) are present, what is disabling them from operating as signifiers?

Her gesture is precise, sharp-edged, but doesn't operate as such because it floats over a 'non-support': the clogs inhibit the possibility of finding adequate support from the floor, and the more dynamic the upper body gets, the more unbalanced she becomes. Her posture, much constrained by those clogs, pushes the pelvis forward and the thoracic cage backward, yet, as opposed to the expected direction of weight, her thoracic cage is not only moved back, but also, suspended. Such a contradictory organisation of weight seems to force the dancer to stop breathing, while her whole body, lacking support, becomes overwhelmed by the rhetorical gestures. This disconnection from floor support destroys any efficacy of communication; any affirmation in the upper body is denied; while the words repeat impossibilities with a quite authoritative tone, the body support is constantly endangered, made to hesitate and stutter. Signification is simultaneously initiated and disabled, eliciting not so much a lack of meaning than, it seems to me, its failure. Thus, and against the apparent continuity of speech and movement, her corporeality is split; between her rhetorical upper body and her destroyed supports stands a 'mysterious Thing': the belly zone, recurrently designated by the hands and fingers which come back to it as if to point a 'non place' within the body itself. A non place, because it is where the circulation of signification is arrested, locked by the conflict between the upper and lower body; held in, excluded from breathing, it is also excluded from the puzzle of references and significations that compose this body: not a 'goat belly', not animal, not eroticised as the upper parts could suggest, it is a place surrounded by signification and left out of significations, right in the centre (of the body, of the stage, of the gesture); and it is to that 'non place' to which hands and arms keep pointing.

a mysterious Thing, said e.e. cummings although apparently invaded or covered by signifiers, resists signification, and I think of it from a point of view of resistance, rather than from its 'obvious' surface. In other words, this solo apparently works on a tremendous production of significations that are denied by the tonico-postural background. I'm borrowing here a distinction offered by movement researcher Hubert Godard: because any movement is always related to some gravitational adjustments, and because the construction of verticality is only possible for each individual through both gravitational and relational learnings, 'posture' is for every subject the moving reflection of their affective as well as mechanical and gravitational history. Thus any visible movement is anticipated by a gravitational response (I can't move my arm without re-adjusting my postural organisation to keep balance), and that 'pre-movement', colours the movement of its affective, or expressive, resonances⁸. Being essentially produced through imaginary activity, this 'pre-movement' is both the result of the dancer's history and of his/her imaginary activity during the performance. Therefore, says Godard, movement can only be perceived in its double face: the actual visible movement (or the figure), and its expressive background (the pre-movement). Godard proposes that we should differentiate between 'movement', that would be a non-expressive displacement of segments in space and time (objects and machine produce movement) and 'gesture', that is including the pre-movement aspect in the subject⁹. As in any other category (sound, image, etc.) the relationships between those two aspects of movement are fluctuating.

⁸ Hubert Godard 1995, p.235.

⁹ An analogy could be made with Roland Barthes' notions of 'obvis' and 'obtus'; this perspective resonates with other movement theories that have been tracking the same 'mystery' of movement, sometimes from radically different ideological perspectives: Rudolf Laban's 'region of silence'; John Martin's 'metakinesis'; Moshe Feldenkrais' 'thinking without words', etc.

Stasis, a political move in the free-trade of signification

In Mantero's solo, it seems to me, the relationship is one of conflict and contradiction; while apparent movement is offered to interpretation, pre-movement keeps undermining the production of signification, thus demanding a repositioning of the critic. By producing an interpretation of the solo, critics could ignore the question 'What is it?' Implying as a premise that 'it is a dance piece about... (gender, cultural, colonial identities, for example)', they could use the solo to construct and solidify their own status as critics. Conversely, if we acknowledge that it might not be a dance piece, or that it might be a non-piece; and acknowledge the disarming of signification that it engages, then what does that piece do to our discourses, how does it disqualify them rather than enable them?

Following the negative rhetoric of the solo itself, I would like here to open a reflection on what it 'doesn't mean' and what it does perform, or doesn't perform, particularly from the perspective of the relationship to language and discourse, since the solo itself engages that issue through the materials involved. To come back to a previous point of this study, the performer's body is constructed as a hybrid body, accumulating signs of heterogeneous corporealities. It could open to an analysis of the identity discourse of the piece, including identity as ambiguity, and assign the piece to a political agenda. But the paradox of such a focus on the semiotics of the work, by translating its identity political discourses, is that it might obscure its political efficacy. In other words, this piece seems to me working at undermining traditional identity categories, opening up spaces where, if 'dancing' or 'performing', as well as 'identifying', seems impossible, the power operations of 'dancing, performing, identifying' are also disabled.

When discussing this solo with students or presenting it in seminars, I have found that many shared a compulsive need to 'solve' the enigma of its ending: after the long catalogue of negative words, the two last lines, immediately covered by the final black out, seem to open to a completely opposite positive field of meaning: 'An atrocious will. An atrocious tenderness. A joy.' I feel it is important not to interpret that moment: if the words seem to show a radical change in what's happening, that change doesn't print or affect the body. The circular and catalogue-like repetitive series of words seemed up to the end without climax or intensity variations, thus preventing any drama to take place; when, very close to the end, that change in the words happens, this 'event' seems to be calling for interpretation. But, given the contradiction that her dancing body raises against that 'language event', should we then give priority to the words (and resolve the enigma of the ending by interpreting it as an opening piece, for instance) or should we give priority to the body forces and states, and so conclude that the piece remains in stasis and that there is no change, or evolution, or resolution with the end of the piece. Or, by more tightly attaching 'the work' to 'its author', should we see that ending as a metaphor for the cathartic status of this solo in Vera Mantero's artistic history? She describes the creative process of that piece as a long deposition of dancing. She started with lots of historical research on Josephine Baker, then produced a lot of movement material, to find out that 'she was disappearing behind Josephine' and gradually came up with that non-dancing material that she considered to be 'just what she had to do' (Mantero 1997). Should we then take the final 'joy' as the opening for new dances to come again, or as the end of the dance?

Those various 'solutions' to the solo would all reframe it within a narrative (political or identity narrative; autobiographical narrative or biographical - from Baker's point of view etc.). By occulting the performance of non-signification, analysis would reify the solo to install it in the market of signification, and

sustain the critic's status and production. Signification becomes the circulating goods of an actual market (we write papers, get recognition, possibly fees, and finally positions...

As rewards for such intellectual production that is actually based on the labour experiences and expertise of others (often free), academics get tenure, promotions and royalties from books, article reprints, access to special grant monies for scholars... Seldom is such work transformed into active political or cultural strategies¹⁰.

Flow, and particularly free flow, might have turned into ideology (free trade of capitals, goods, meaning...). From a movement point of view, I see the development of 'dance literacy' and 'dance fluency' as founded on a construction of non-conflict relationship between dances 'and discourses on dances. That construction relies on belief in the homogeneity of both; but if this strategy has allowed dance into the market of knowledge (scholarship, universities, 'high criticism'), it might be time to look at its political counter-effects. The remarkable absence of dance performances analysis in dance studies, might be related to this constructed homogeneity. It might be that an actual focus on the dances themselves, their specific operations and functionality, would threaten the power of discourse and language by introducing otherness and heterogeneity in the flow of signification. My point here is not to suggest that dance is beyond language, in a return-of-the-repressed movement of criticism, neither to plead an 'Against interpretation'¹¹ of the 2000s, but rather to consider it from the point of view of 'forces'¹² and of its impact in terms of circulation in this market of signification. In other words, my argument is not so much about excluding signification from dance, but rather, about criticising the hegemony of language and signification - in the field of dance as in other fields. If the concept of 'dance as beyond language' has had as a political consequence to deny dance and dancer any access to (discursive) power, then the reduction of dance to language, as a consequence, denies dance and dancers as power. And it may also maintain the same dualities - language/movement, theory/practice, thinking/experiencing that dance studies have been trying to fight.

Laurence Louppe suggests that we think of the modern dancer's body as the 'battleground'¹³ of forces (of theory, of ideology). She opposes the fluidity of those forces to the crystallisation of signs, that would 'cover the forces' in the dancing bodies of French dance in the late 1990s. She reads this reification and commodification of dance in the freezings of flow, of weight, the disappearance of impulses in the movement of most dancers of that period. If freezing or stasis can be seen as a symptom of oppression, as she suggests, in the internal economy of the dancing body¹⁴, I want to consider the relationship of stasis¹⁵ and circulation within the broad~ system of the dance market. In this system, where 'free circulation' is the dominant ideology, Mantero's solo invites us to re-consider the positivity of stasis. Her presence does initiate a fast and multidirectional circulation of signification between the surface of her body, and spectators, but, just as her gestures point insistently towards a region of stasis in the center of her body, her body itself is

¹⁰ Russell Leong, quoted in Wong 2000.

¹¹ Sontag 1961.

¹² Louppe 1997.

¹³ Banes 1994.

¹⁴ The epistemology of this value of movement and circulation as necessarily positive, within the body economy itself, remains to be researched. It seems to me that it inherits a vitalist conception of the body, that might oppose a structuralist notion, valuing supports and structures within the body rather than flow and movement.

¹⁵ I like to think of stasis as 'the stagnation in the flow of any of the fluids of the body, as of the blood, in an obstruction' (*Random House Dictionary*, New York 1987) as a pathogen element of the market economy. And also as in Freudians' views, an arrest in the flow of libidinal energy, that can cause neurosis, or 'normal behaviors' as sublimation (Laplanche & Pontalis 1967).

a silent zone where all circulation is frozen. Signification fails just as her immobility on stage is made of attempted movement locked into a closed space. Her performance is like a stone shifting or redirecting the flow of signification: it manipulates meaning rather than being manipulated by it, disabling interpretation and inviting dance critics to share that moment of arrest.

Analysing another of Mantero's solos, *A Dança do Existir*, Lepecki has used the term 'still act', borrowed from Nadia Seremetakis, to describe its function:

Mantero enacts sensorial resistance. More important, this sensorial resistance as mnemonic re-organization is then transferred into the audience's bodies. For, after Mantero's body disappears, it is the audience who is put into darkness under a sonic barrage of voices. It is the audience that takes the active role of attentive stillness¹⁶.

If, as Lepecki suggests, *A Dança do Existir* offers a criticism of the visible, I believe that stillness or, rather, failure of movement, in *a mysterious Thing...*, offers an opportunity to open the field of dance studies to the non-decipherability of dance. Rather than the instrument and support of an economy of signification that merges with a market of knowledge (dance studies, as the sustaining economy for dance scholars), dance turns into a threat to that economy and its power structures, acting upon dance criticism to undermine it and impose the redefinition of its status and function. Taking the time to actually 'stop by' the dances, rather than using them as the decorative illustrations of fluid theoretical discourses allows one to perceive the dance field as heterogeneous, and to admit that dance, just like discourse, is made of signification but also of 'forces'.

My experience in writing 'about dances' has led me to value those moments when dances paralyse (or suspend) the articulation of discourse. I interpret them as events where what happens resists pre-existing categories in my consciousness, forcing those categories and 'thought-operators' to reorganise and re-define.

Such a process implies that one must include in the dance study the phenomenology of perception of the dance analyst, as a field of work (and a field to be worked). Just as dancers' work is, if anything, a work of perception, dance critics need to take their perceptual activity as part of their thinking, and a part that needs to be worked on. It would imply an acknowledgment of the 'non knowing'¹⁷ of encountering art works. It would imply an admission that the flow of seizing, understanding, interpreting art works is not fluid, but includes white spots, arrests, stasis. These moments of stasis are the location at which the 'forces' of the dance interfere with the discourses, just as discourse and signification are intertwined with dance's forces. This might help to get out of the old duality between experience and articulation; but also, to redistribute power and forces between dancers and theorists, placing 'the knowing' on both sides, as well as the understanding or theorising. It would imply, finally, that we admit that dance criticism and theory might also be able, by renouncing the power posture of signification, to take root in what Laban called the 'land of silence' and that I'd prefer to name, after Didi-Huberman, the 'event of non knowing'.

Isabelle Ginot

Pour citer cet article :

Isabelle Ginot, « Dis-identifying: dancing bodies and analysing eyes at work », *Discourses in Dance*, volume 2 n° 1, Londres, 2003. Cité d'après la version électronique publiée sur le site Paris 8 Danse : www.danse.univ-paris8.fr

¹⁶ Lepecki 2001

¹⁷ Didi-Huberman 1990

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Banes, S. (1994). "Power and the dancing body." *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (pp. 43-50). Wesleyan University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1982). *L'Obvie et l'obtus*. Paris: Seuil.
- Claid, E. (2002). "Standing Still... Looking at you". *Research in Dance Education*. 3(1), 7-19.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (1990). *Devant l'image*. Paris: éditions De Minuit.
- Foster, S. (1986). *Reading Dancing*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1994). "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur", *Dits et écrits I* (pp. 789-809). Paris: Gallimard.
- Freud, S. (1967). *L'interprétation des rêves* (trans. I. Meyerson). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Ginot, I. (2002). "Les Croyances suspendues". *La danse en solo* (pp. 105-113). Paris: Centre national de la danse.
- Ginot, I. (2003). "Un lieu commun" *Repères*. La Biennale du Val-de-Marne.
- Godard, H. (2002). "Le geste et sa perception". In I. Ginot and M. Michel. *La danse au XXème siècle* (pp. 235-241). Paris: Larousse.
- Laplanche, J. and Pontalis J.-B. (1967). *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Lepecki, A. (2001). "Le miroir éclaté A Dança do Existir". *Protée* 29 (2).
- Loupe, L. (1997). "Qu'est-ce qui est politique en danse." *Nouvelles de Danse*. 30, 36-41.
- Lyotard J.F. (1995). *Psychanalyse et Peinture*. Encyclopédie Universelle.
- Mantero, V. & Tompkins, M. (1997). "Dialogue de deux danseurs". *Résidence Mode d'Emploi*, Centre Culturel Tremblay-en-France.
- Melo, A. (1996, May 11). A comunidade que nunca existiu, *Expresso*.
- Ploebst, H. (2001). *No Wind no Word*. Munchen: K. Kieser.
- Ricoeur, P. (1965). *De l'interprétation*, Paris: Seuil.
- Sontag, S. (1961). *Against interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Wong, D. (2000). "Listening to Local Practices: Performance and Identity Politics in Riverside", California. In S.E. Case, P. Brett & S.L. Foster (Eds.) *Decomposition, Post-Disciplinary Performance* (pp. 18-36). Indiana University Press.