Liora Malka Yellin

To Perform Nascent Knowledge: Perceptual Constructs and Meanings in Sankai Juku's *Shijima*

The focal point of this article is sensory perception in terms of action and experience. Perceptual constructs are both physical and cognitive acts that carry meaning in themselves, thus being a vital element of expression in performance making. Liora Malka Yellin's theoretical discussion here draws on J. J. Gibson's information-based model of perception and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, relating aspects of their thought to that of theatre practitioners and their practice. At the centre of these reflections are references to the shifts undergone by Butoh since its beginnings in the 1960s, and an analysis of *Shijima*, a dance-theatre work by the Japanese group Sankai Juku, based in Paris. This analysis of the perceptual constructs embedded in the configuration of bodily movement directs attention to what can be called corporeal narrative. Liora Malka Yellin is a Lecturer in Theatre and Dance Studies in the Department of Theatre Arts and the Interdisciplinary Program in the Arts at Tel Aviv University.

Key terms: Butoh, perceptual actions, experience, embodied processes, space, corporeal narrative.

THE IMPORTANCE of sensory perception in establishing a theatrical experience is widely acknowledged. Its roles and functions within the processes by which this experience is created are, however, debated, particularly in regard to its involvement in conceiving meanings. Sensory research has recently become of increasing interest in theatre, dance, and performance studies.[1] However, sensory perception rarely takes centre stage in theatre studies; and, even when scholars draw attention to the perceptual dimension of performance, they usually do not focus on the properties and the workings of perception.[2] The reason for this, at least in part, appears to be that 'perception' is generally understood in terms of rough and imprecise sensation or feeling, and, therefore, as something that does not present an adequate basis for analysis other than that of its effect or affect.

In this article I take the theme of sensory perception in performance as focal point, starting with a theoretical discussion that proposes both an analytical frame of reference and a methodological apparatus. An analysis of the first episode from *Shijima* follows: a dance-theatre work by the Japanese group Sankai Juku. It serves as an example of the ways in which perceptual constructs may be worked out and obtain meanings on the stage.[3] My aim is to make a case for the conception of perceptual constructs as 'meaningful units', which are not perceived merely in terms of indistinct sensations or feelings but as actions that bear meanings in themselves. Such constructs thereby establish a certain perspective that creates the foundation of the performers' poetic world on the stage. Perceptual constructs can then be analyzed as part of those performers' actions on the stage that function as a type of self-referential act, pointing first and foremost to the performers' poetic utterance of experience in the making.

Traditionally, sensory perception has been perceived as a passive mechanism, reacting to external stimuli and transferring raw materials (sensory data) for processing in the brain. Sensory-data perception, understood

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in this way, thus has no meaning in itself but functions merely as a channel in the processes by which meaning is created. In contrast, J. J. Gibson differentiated between sensation and perception as two distinct processes, and explained the latter in oppositional terms: 'We shall have to conceive the external senses in a new way, as active rather than passive, as systems rather than channels, and as interrelated rather than mutually exclusive.'[4]

Perceptual Actions and Performance

The perceptual system, Gibson elucidated further, is aimed at seeking information, actively inquiring into and studying the environment.[5] Perceived in this way, it is a dynamic, initiating, and intentional system capable of tuning, orientating, and orchestrating. Perceptual constructs are thus a complex of anatomical as well as cognitive structures, and carry meanings in themselves.

A key difference between the sensory-based theory of perception and the information-based theory of perception as exemplified by Gibson is that, according to the latter, meaning is discovered *in* experience rather than added *to* experience, inferred from the former. In short, according to Gibson's model, perception is not a modality of impressions but a way of acting and of discovering meanings within experience. As action, rather than general sensation, perception is thus acquired and can be developed through learning and practice in the same ways that performative actions are learned and practised.[6]

This approach has significant implications for performance studies in general and for how the work of performers can be perceived, in particular. If perceptual actions can be learned and designed, then part of the performers' training should indeed include developing and crystallizing their perceptual abilities to an artistic degree. Performers may thus be seen as 'masters of perception', who are not only conscious of the work of perceptual systems, but also practise the modes of articulating and manipulating perceptual constructs as expressive actions. On the stage, the composition of their bodily movements and actions also bears the perceptual constructs that they have conceived and that take part in the creation of their poetic world. In fact, creating a world is the very function of perception, as argued by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory.

Merleau-Ponty, like Gibson, rejected the sensory-based theory of perception and, despite the important differences that separate them, he contended, as did Gibson, that perception is an active system that reveals meanings in experience. For Merleau-Ponty, however, a theory of perception is also a theory of the body, and perceptual actions are the very fabric of the lived body, which constantly constitutes itself and its world through experience, while interacting with its environment.

Perception is thus understood as immanently woven into the work of the body as being-in-the-world (Heidegger's notion, which was adopted by Merleau-Ponty and reconfigured into his theory of the body), rather than a bodily reaction to external stimuli:

> For, seen from the inside, perception owes nothing to what we know in other ways about the world, about *stimuli* as physics describe them and about the sense organs as described by biology. It does . . . present itself . . . as a re-creation or re-constitution of the world at every moment.[7]

Perception thus has its own view and engenders its own world, which is a perceptual world, or an 'inter-sensory world', in Merleau-Ponty's words; and it is dynamically created through the concrete actions and interactions of the sensory-motor body, which always acts from a particular position and a specific intention towards its environment. Perception is, in addition, an intersubjective world, since the mark of perception is that of direct and personal contact. Moreover, a significant attribute of the lived body is that it assigns liveliness to the objects around it, and, through perception, it reveals objects as beings.[8]

In this notion lies the 'ontological turn' in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception: while

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adopting principles of Gestalt psychology, which he named 'psychology of form', he understood perceptual actions as constructed forms; and for him, as Zaner noted, a form is both 'a meaning and a being' in the sense that 'every perceived object, every "sensible", in so far as it is inseparably connected to my body, is a certain expression of what I am and how I am'.[9] Merleau-Ponty thus turned Gestalt theory into an ontology of human existence, and conceptualized perceptual systems in terms of meaningful actions as well as modes of being.[10]

Performers and Perceptual Actions

This view promotes a particular perspective on the performers' work. Neither their role nor their embodiment of ideational or cultural values is the focal point; the latter lies in how they form their expressiveness as the marking of their (poetic) existence on the stage. Given that the performers' work together with the stage design present and represent a multi-dimensional universe having manifold meanings, the main strategy (when this point of view is adopted) is to extract the perceptual actions that are embedded in the performers' physical interactions with their staged environment. Body and space are thus not perceived as separate elements but as an extension of one another, as both Gibson and Merleau-Ponty have maintained.

Gibson approached the issue of interconnecting relations conceptually, and noted that: 'Abstractly, every organism is in one sense continuous with its environment across the boundary of its skin, exchanging matter and energy.'[11] For Merleau-Ponty, the unity of body and space, as well as that of body and soul, is the hallmark of phenomenological existence and its world. Indeed, in action, these categories are woven into one and the same act, and, as Merleau-Ponty asserted, the distinction between body and space, and body and soul, as separate categories is not effectual since it is the outcome of conceptual thinking and not of experiencing.[12] Furthermore, this perspective, which focuses on action and experience, emphasizes states of becoming, and considers the body in the relational terms of dynamic processes rather than as a formed object. That is, the body is not a property but a doing of a person; nor is it a product but a producing entity.

Action and experience are also key concepts in theatre practice and theory. Indeed, theatre practitioners, notably Appia, Stanislavsky, and Laban, have revealed a similar approach regarding interrelations between body and space. Appia focused on promoting a method that makes the body its central criterion for working out and designing a performance, asserting that it is the performer's three-dimensional and living body that imparts meanings and grants effectiveness to a performance.[13] His critical point was centred on the presumed separation between body and space as working in different, mutually exclusive, keys; as Richard Beacham has noted, for Appia: 'The scenic elements were not to be thought of as setting or background for the drama, but rather as an extension of the actor himself.'[14]

Stanislavsky accentuated the importance of experiencing on the stage, and made it a central principle of his system: 'living the part' is founded on the technique of living processes, which is based on perceptual actions that establish the actor's relations with the objects around him.[15] Significantly, Stanislavsky described these relations metaphorically as 'communion', pointing to the intimate bond that the actors form with the objects and entities in their environment, absorbing from others, whether objects or entities, and investing themselves in others.[16] In other words, perceptual actions are a main path by which to constitute living processes and to impart liveliness to objects on the stage, operating as the associative elements between body and space, and the actors and the stage (and so also between the actors and the spectators).

Laban, the pioneering choreographer and movement theorist of modern dance, coined the term *Raumkörper* – the spatial body – which refers precisely to the interrelations between body and space, indicating how the dancer's body is woven into space, and vice

versa, in a dynamic process of creating one another, and, eventually, the dance itself. The spatial body is not confined to the skin boundaries of the physical body, but is extended to include the surrounding spatial fields it activates while moving. Space thus becomes a plastic partner for the modern dancer in contrast, as Laban's critique puts it, to the indifferent environment for the classical ballet dancer.

The spatial body is, furthermore, a kind of crystallized field, enabling the dancer to achieve a 'total perception' not only in quantity – realizing the ambient field surrounding his body – but also in quality, which is the act of experiencing the crystallization of phases and transitions of matters, colours, forms, and so on – that is, the transformative processes by which objects and their features are shaped and created.[17] The dancer's body thus does not merely move in space, but also creates space; it does not simply act but also becomes a sentient body. The significance of movement is thereby acknowledged and realized, without which, Laban contended, theatre is dead.[18] The 'living process' paradigm is thus equally at work in Laban's theory (and practice) as it is in the thought and work of Appia and Stanislavsky, and to a great extent in modern theatre generally, dance included.

These three examples, although not comprehensive, are nevertheless indicative of two central issues: first, the apparent correlation between the above-mentioned theories of perception, and the study (both practical and theoretical) of the performer's art in terms of action, experience, and living processes; and, second, the insights this correlation may bring to understanding the significant role that perceptual constructs can play in the processes through which the performers constitute their own (poetic) subjectivity on the stage.

Perceptual Constructs and Communication

Perceptual constructs have thus far been discussed in terms of the personal experience that establishes the groundwork of subjective modes of being and knowing. Yet they also encompass another, highly significant aspect for theatrical interaction: this is the communicative aspect, as indicated by Merleau-Ponty. Although perception is marked by the personal and the subjective, it nonetheless functions concurrently as a basic communicative act due to its interactive aspect, which is founded on the direct contact through which the perceiving body gets in touch with the perceived object or person.[19]

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty maintained, every perception is already communication.[20] As such, it also constitutes the primary drive for inter-personal communication, motivated by the 'will to share percepts' and an interest in the ways by which other bodies interact and experience lived processes.[21] Theatre and performance is the metaphor that Merleau-Ponty draws on when describing this will to share percepts, pointing to the theatrical and performative disposition of lived perception and its tendency to display the processes by which it is worked out.[22] Perceptual action is thus personal but communicative, intimate but also performative, and establishes the aim as well as the (basic) content of communication and interaction.

When informed by this view, theatrical interaction may be perceived in terms of 'the will to share percepts', at least in its most basic phenomenological aspect or ontological dimension. It might thus be said that the basic motivation for theatrical interaction is aimed at experiencing perceptual interaction and the sharing of lived percepts. In other words, not only can performers be seen as 'masters of perception', but performance itself aims at activating this process of the sharing of percepts; further, audience participation can be constructed on the basis of lived experience and perceptual constructs. In this light, more can be added to Martin and Sauter's findings, on both empirical and theoretical grounds: when sensory communication fails, 'the whole theatrical event falls short of its meaning'.[23]

The following analysis of *Shijima* is informed by these perspectives and focuses mainly on the first scene as a test case, showing how perceptual actions constitute

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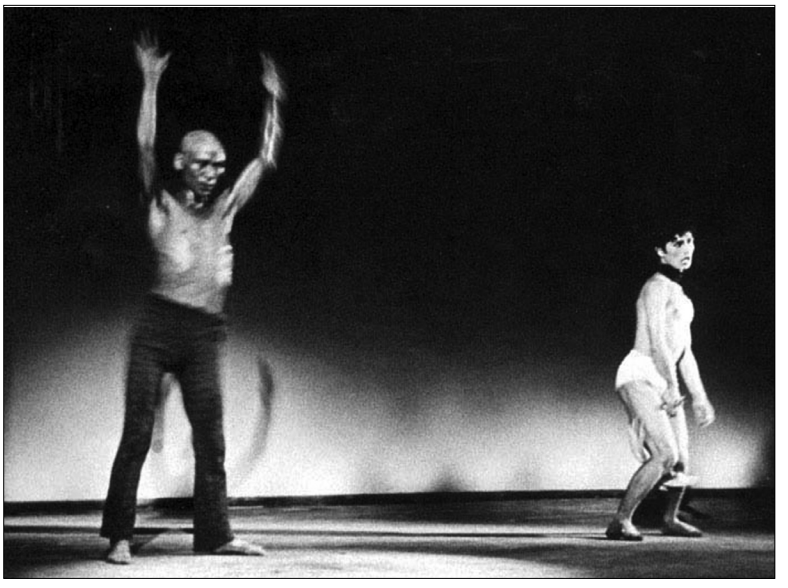

Performance of *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colours*), 1959, with Tatsumi Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno – considered to be the first manifestation of Butoh,'the dance of darkness'.

meanings as well as the performers' poetic world on the stage.[24]

Butoh and the Sankai Juku Group

Shijima is a highly abstract dance with no plot and no characters to represent a fictional world. But although no fictional world is depicted, images are there never the less to suggest corporeal narrative rather than a plot as such. The dance is centred on the stage actions. Due to the dancers' impressive physical work (composed of the most basic acts that accentuate physicality and bodily expressiveness), the dance seems to be focused on the phenomenological dimension of performance and its living processes and lived experience.

Shijima thus presents a striking example of how perceptual constructs can be conceived and worked out in order to generate a direct theatrical interaction between bodies that are motivated by the will to share percepts. These perceptual constructs function here as a path along which the corporeal narrative unfolds, as can interpretation-analytical description. Description is possible in two main ways, first, as a component of performance analysis, which is necessary to establish the analysis's object of reference, and second as a hermeneutical device that, informed by the phenomenological method, aims to explain and theorize human experience.

The Sankai Juku group was founded in 1975 by the dancer and choreographer Ushio Amagatsu. It comprises five dancers whose lead dancer and artistic director is Amagatsu. Amagatsu trained in classical ballet and modern dance before turning to Butoh – a form of avant-garde dance-theatre founded in post-war Japan in the 1960s by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno.[25] The first manifestation of Butoh, also called 'the dance of darkness' (Ankoku Butoh), is considered to be Hijikata's *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colours*, 1959), a duet he performed with Yoshito Ohno (Kazuo Ohno's son). The title, *Kinjiki,* was taken from Mishima Yukio's novel (1951), while the content was inspired by the provocative world of Jean Genet's novels.[26]

The intertwining of Japanese and Western cultural elements is at the root of Butoh, and is apparent in both its ideational and practical aspects, as most of the Butoh artists were trained in various Western and Eastern dance forms. The name 'Butoh' itself, which was given by Hijikata to this new dance form in the late 1960s, echoes its intercultural aspect. Literally, 'Butoh' means 'stamping dance', but it carries various meanings including references to Western dance, such as ballroom dancing.[27] When Hijikata coined the term 'Ankoku Butoh' he thus both relied

on and also subverted the established meanings of Butoh and its connotation to various dance traditions, by attaching 'utter darkness' (Ankoku) to it.

The premiere of *Kinjiki* has become a major signature of Butoh. Presenting a violent struggle with a live hen and blatant homosexual eroticism, it provoked such scandalous outrage that Hijikata and Ohno quit the event, which was organized by the All-Japan Art Dance Association, and broke from the Japanese modern dance world.[28] Although *Kinjiki* differs from the Butoh we have come to know, it still exemplifies the avant-garde attitude and rebellious orientation that intended first and foremost to 'wipe out all art and culture', in Hijikata's words, by looking for, and working with, the body as raw, uncultured, material 'in order to discover a new physical expression'.[29]

This orientation towards the 'raw body' has become a vital mark of Butoh and its fundamental aim to seek the expression of 'bodies that have maintained the crisis of the primal experience'.[30] Despite all the differences between Hijikata and Ohno, they shared this attitude towards the primordial body and primal experience. Thus Ohno stated, referring to one of his signature dances (*My Mother*, 1981): 'The movement motifs of *My Mother* came from what I thought I was doing in my mother's womb.'[31]

Experience stands at the core of Butoh, for, in order to evoke the 'dance of terrorism', as Hijikata stated in 1960, 'dance for display must be totally abolished'.[32] In other words, in contrast to representing the body as it is (according to Hijikata), in dance for display, 'where the body is used as a kind of triggering device', the Butoh dancers are required to live and experience their primal bodies – an experience that is rooted in 'the sacred domain where form consists only of shouts and cries'.[33] Via the image of 'cutting the fat', Hijikata described this baring of the body as the ideal: 'From the start, my Butoh has had no use for cumbersome fat or superfluous curves. Just skin and bones, with a bare minimum of muscle – that's the ideal.'[34]

In practice Hijikata's performing body does, indeed, look like a skeleton, a body of 'skin and bones' that evokes an image of death and locates the situation at the interface between life and death to which Hijikata aspires: 'That moment of life which intensely desires death . . . is the original form of dance.'[35] Thus, the baring of bodies, and of the stage, is not a mere metaphor but is practical. Other Butoh artists, for example, often perform naked, their bodies covered with a white powder; and it reflects the deep aesthetic, ideational, and ethical roots of the various forms of Butoh.

Hijikata's skeletal performing body.

Perceptual Actions in Sankai Juku's *Shijima*

Generally speaking, the Sankai Juku style is rooted in Butoh aesthetics, focusing on the language of the body in search of a primal expression, although not in a frenzied and hectic fashion. Amagatsu has formed his own Butoh style, characterized by a meticulous and highly stylized composition along with elegant and impressive bodily movement, creating a monumental and spectacular vision even when presenting dark and tragic situations.

Amagatsu thus positions his works at the midpoint between darkness and light, and death and life. His main tendency is to evoke basic human situations, especially since 1981, when the group began to work and perform regularly in the West. As Amagatsu has repeatedly stated, for example in an interview in 1999:

> One of the themes that I have continued to pursue inside myself since we started performing overseas is the fact that the body is a base that is

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common to all human beings. No matter what country a human being comes from, in terms of viewing the individual, life begins with birth and ends with death.[36]

Shijima was created in 1988 in a co-production with Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, the group's Western 'home' since 1981. The work was performed as one act composed of seven titled scenes: 'From the motif of silence'; 'Sakihai – through a rose of the sand'; 'Picture in the ears'; 'Monads of the winds'; 'Polarization'; 'Desire for rebirth – toward a rose of the sand'; and, the seventh, 'To the motif of silence'.

As these scenes' titles and organization show, despite its episodic structure the dance evolves while creating a cycle 'from the motif of silence' 'to the motif of silence', which confers upon the dance a ritualistic pattern and forms an indirect and non-linear association between the scenes. This crossing of cycle and progress, of repetition and change, shapes the basic compositional principle, and positions the dance at a crossroads in which beginning and end, creation and destruction, and order and disorder meet in a recurring ripple of rise and fall.

Apart from the first and the last scenes, in which all the dancers participate, each scene is performed either by a group of four dancers or as a solo by the lead dancer, and is composed of a series of repetitive movements begun in a remarkably slow rhythm that gradually becomes intensive motion. The dancers perform with faces and bodies painted white, in the familiar Butoh fashion, masking individual features and assigning an archaic, primordial, and sculptural appearance to the dancers and their movement. Such an appearance confers on them an aesthetic distance, intensified by their extremely detached, self-focused attitude, and creates the impression of a movement that evolves introspectively in a meditative manner. None the less, due to the dancers' powerful physicality and their magnetized bodily motion and expression, the aesthetic distance also generates dialectic closeness.

As to set design, the stage floor is covered with moist sand.[37] The scenery is a construction of rectangular white plates joined together to form three high white walls enclosing the stage on three sides. Each plate features a plaster-relief imprint of the dancers' backs. As the performance progresses, one begins to comprehend what the scenery reflects, with the development of the dancers' actions creating an interrelation between scenery, light, and movement. In a slow process of understanding, I begin to see the body-moulds imprinted again and again on the walls.

Opening Sequence

The first scene comprises three sequences, with each sequence creating a different perceptual structure. The stage is dimly lit and flooded with shadows. The sound of the wind accompanies the dance in a hypnotic rhythm. Gradually, four dancers are revealed on different parts of the stage. They are supine, head and feet raised, and back pressed against the ground. Each dancer contracts and releases his body repeatedly in a slow movement of alternate contraction and extension.

Although all make the same movements, each dancer works at a different pace and in a different phase. At a certain point each dancer seems to draw energy, rolls to the left (towards the audience), and lies in a foetal position. Slowly, he then rises to a kneeling position with his upper body bent towards the ground. During the next phase, the dancer stands on his feet while maintaining his torso bowed, gravitating to the ground.

This sequence presents the connection and the fusion between the dancers' bodies and the ground, and powerfully expresses the feeling of gravity and its effect on the body. The relation between the dancers' bodies and the ground is presented in two positions – supine and rising.

In the supine position, body and ground are intimately connected and, despite being different elements, they are not distinctly separated. In this position of maximum orientation towards the earth, the body sees and feels purely through its relation with the

The Butoh dancers of Sankai Juku performing *Shijima*.

ground; touch is the dominant percept and, while (literally) getting in direct touch with the ground, the body generates its world. With each repeated series of contraction and release, the body, in very slow moves that press the dancer's back to the ground in changing spots and with varying intensity, seems to gather strength and energy.

'Magnetized' to the ground, the body none the less does not resist its gravity but manifests its dependence on the ground, while drawing its nourishment and power from it. The dancers seem to experience their bodies as part of the ground while moving in synch with its beat: rhythmic, slow, and prolonged pulses. A lived dialectic is thus created between body and earth, reflecting two facets of one and the same experience. The lived body is thereby manifested as a concrete experience, which is a mode of being as much as it is a mode of nascent knowledge.

In the rising position, this action presents the process of disconnecting the body from the

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ground, and is carried out at different heights, going up to a stooped standing position. Throughout the course of rising, the interrelations between percepts shifts: while the contiguity between body and ground is reduced, the dancers' vision increases when their eyes can look down on the ground. Seeing and touching now act complementarily and confer additional monitoring potentialities upon the body. The body's ability to detach itself from the ground is embodied as the outcome of its learning itself as part of the ground, and vice versa.

In rising, however, its position in respect of the ground changes, and the body has to learn itself anew. This process is manifested through the measured movement configuration, in which the act of rising seems to be born out of the preceding swaying motion. Thus performed, the previous experience is displayed as an imprinted foundational layer in the body that now bears a new experience. The body is revealed in its dynamic and vibrant making.

Although rising positions open up new spatial possibilities for the body to explore, to learn, and to internalize, the perceptual constructs are still mainly influenced by the relations between the body and the ground. This time, however, the dancers' experience seems to be a composite of both their powerful connection and the effort invested in the act of detachment, made apparent through the power relations imprinted on the body between the pull of gravity and the desire to rise.[38]

Second Sequence

The four dancers walk towards the back wall. Each moves at his own pace, while making groping and searching movements with hands and feet. As they approach the back wall, the lighting suddenly increases and illuminates the entire stage. The music changes, and the dancers turn towards the audience in an abrupt movement. At the same time, a spotlight focuses on the back wall, clearly revealing a fifth dancer hanging from it. The sequence is based on the connection and relation between the body and the space in which it moves, as well as the conjunction of the individual dancer with the group. A dimension of movement in space is thus added, as the dancers fill the stage area while performing movements investigating the environment.

The slow movement towards the back wall from all areas of the stage creates a dimension of depth and imparts volume to the stage space. The body acts in a three-dimensional zone, and it is through establishing the body–space relations that the dancer appears to become familiar with his own movements, and manipulates them skilfully. The motion is slow, and seems to be in search of stability through an exploration of the space around the body.

A relation between up and down begins to emerge; the body straightens up but is still connected to the ground through the groping movement of the dancer's feet in a hesitant fashion before each step. Through the movement of his feet the dancer appears to gather energy from the ground and pull his body upwards with his raised hands. The previous tension between immobility and motion is now transferred to the relations between the limbs and the centre of the body. The body is at the threshold of two forces: the ground pulling down and the air pulling up. The tension between these two forces acts on the dancer's body and endows it with both weight and lightness.

The development of the sequence moves from the actions of the individual to the formation of the group, and as the dancers associate and coalesce into a compound, the relation between the whole and the parts is constituted and shapes their experience. As a group they also stand in relation to their environment, and another element, the back wall, is added to their space. Although the dancers do not touch the wall, a connection between their moving bodies and the wall in which body moulds are imprinted is created, while their white painted bodies integrate with the white wall. The tension between the live body and the body-mould on the wall will become clearer and more powerful in the next sequence, when the hanging dancer enters the action.

Third Sequence

The hanging dancer gropes with his hands along his body and around him. At the same time, the dancers below him act as a group, while also performing groping movements in the same pattern of searching and learning as before. The dancers then slowly exit the stage, moving as one body to the left, in the same pattern of movement. The hanging dancer remains alone, and the second scene begins, where he continues to explore, with the same pattern of groping movements, his body and its surrounding white wall.

The simultaneous composition and the focus on the relations between the group of dancers down on the ground and the single dancer clinging to the wall expands the stage space, imparting an additional level of height, and intensifying the tension between up and down. Although all the dancers repeat the same patterns of movement, exploring and learning their bodies within their surroundings, a contrast between the group and the individual is created: he is suspended in the air, with his back to the wall, while they stand on their feet on the ground; he emerges as a moving body from within the white wall, while they emerge from the moist sand on the ground. Furthermore, his white painted body is perfectly assimilated into the white wall, yet his movement seems less stable than the motion on the ground and imparts a sense of danger. Compared to the powerful magnetic bond between the dancers below and the ground (or earth conceived as an image of a womb), the connection between the dancer and the wall limits his ability to move and a sense of a fragile relation is created. Thus a dual relation, that of assimilation yet also of danger and fragility, is established between the raised dancer and the wall.

All the dancers clearly express the same aspects of relationships between the human body and its environment, while presenting them in different situations: the hanging dancer, for instance, displays ambivalent relations with his surroundings, portrayed as an artificial setting, a man-made relief-wall. Where the other dancers imprint their body shapes in the moist sand, he acts in relation to the body-mould imprinted on the wall, intensifying the tension between the live body and the body-mould sculptured in plaster. An obvious contrast is thus formed between the 'earth beings' and the 'air creature', which gives the floating dancer an enigmatic aura.

In the second, solo scene ('Sakihai – through a rose of the sand'), this enigma is fully realized: due to the relation between the body-mould imprinted on the wall and the dancer's own body, the body-mould appears to have sprung to life, portraying the dancer as a man-made entity suffering the experience of being active yet lifeless, animated yet numb. He appears to be located in a kind of limbo, neither human nor inhuman, neither alive nor dead. Indeed the following (third and fourth) scenes elaborate and intensify this contrast.

In the third scene ('Picture in the ears') the four dancers dance in long white robes, performing an introverted movement that seems to spring out of a deep feeling of beauty, flow, and harmony. They begin by kneeling on the ground, creating with their hands petals that they move from one side of the head to the other, in complete accord with the music, which generates a feeling of gentle rhythmical dripping. They then rise in a rotating motion and move towards centre stage, forming a dynamic circle of motion and rhythm in various states. The repetition of rounded movement, with the white robes flowing around their bodies, creates a ritualistic atmosphere that conjures up an association with the whirling dance of the Dervishes. Throughout they seem to experience a delightful tranquillity, rooted in a state of balance and harmony between body parts, and between the body and its environment.

In contrast to this beautiful and pastoral scene, the solo dancer in the fourth scene ('Monads of the winds') undergoes a traumatic encounter while he dances by the right wall, repeatedly and alternately groping at his body and the wall-relief. His touch-centred movements indicate his inquiry and learning of the body-mould and his comparing them to his own body, in a search for

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self-definition and understanding. All he can obtain, however, is a dead end. Due to his enigmatic origin and existence, he is trapped in a volatile situation with no solution. Through his tactile actions the dancer thus expresses an experience of confusion, agony, and endless suffering.

The initial contrast is thus magnified in these scenes into a conflict between opposite modes of beings: while the 'earth beings' constitute balanced bodies-selves through the experience of harmonious and beautifully tuned intimate relations with their surroundings, the 'air creature' comprises a volatile body-self that is alienated, isolated, and suffers an agonizing disharmony. Indeed, at the end of the fifth scene he appears in death: he is lying on the floor and the other dancers carry him to front centre stage. Their procession, with covered heads, evokes association with a funeral.

When they leave, the sixth scene begins, in which the solo dancer is reborn, except that this time he is re-created out of the ground, exactly as the scene's title indicates: 'Desire for rebirth – toward a rose of the sand'. The interconnection between perceptual constructs, experience, and modes of being that is so strongly manifested here crafts the conflict between earth being and air creature and forms a kind of primordial drama illustrating a clash between the (natural) creation of man and (artificial) man-made creation. This clash works throughout the dance, albeit in changing states, and ultimately brings about a catastrophic ending, voiding both sides of the conflict.

The rebirth scene reflects an overall transformation process in which the conflict between modes of beings is altered, and eventually evolves into the total inversion that had begun to take shape at the end of the third scene. This beautiful and pastoral scene ends in a chaotic atmosphere and frenetic moves.

As the group's ritualistic dance reaches its ecstatic peak, a mass of sand is suddenly poured from above – a change from flowing and harmonious movement into mechanical and disharmonious motion. The pouring sand symbolizes a traumatic event that completely alters the interrelations between the body and its environment.

In their fifth scene, 'Polarization', the dancers had a series of restless movements, wandering from one location to another, expressing the experience of a disconnected body in its recurring efforts to re-establish its balance; but all it can achieve is frantic motion in a withdrawn but agitated state. The relations between the group and the solo dancer are thus totally altered in this and the following scene: while the group experiences the vanishing of their balanced body-selves and the agony of a detached body, the solo dancer attempts to reconstitute his body-self in the rebirth scene.

The outcome of such an ongoing conflict is obviously catastrophic and, in the next and last scene ('To the motif of silence') the group dancers appear in death, hanging in the air at centre stage with legs dangling and hands held up by invisible strings, their eyes closed and their heads tilted to the right.

The inversion course reaches its peak in this last scene. While the group dancers are hanging in the air, the solo dancer enters, and, seeing their inanimate state, he walks and then runs around the stage in fragmented lines and movements, his eyes wide open in horror. The configuration of oppositions is still at work, except that the dancers' positions have become completely altered from the first to the last scene: where, in the first scene, he was hanging and they were on the ground, and images of creation and harmonious existence were invoked, in the last scene they are hanging and he is on the ground, and images of death and destruction are evoked.

The dance ends with a powerful act in which the solo dancer bursts into a terrible and prolonged mute scream; his mouth is so widely open that his entire face appears to have become a mouth shrieking in terror, turning his silent scream into a cosmic vibrating, howling, drawn-out cry.

As can be seen, the dance focuses on the most basic elements of bodily expression, creating its dramatic and theatrical form out of the articulation and manipulation of

perceptual constructs. A corporeal narrative thereby evolves, forming a kind of basic drama, which is built upon the shifting interrelations between the body and its environment, in accordance with Amagatsu's statement that, for him, Butoh is a dialogue with gravity.[39] The corporeal narrative is thus the form as well as the content of *Shijima*, depicting human experience in its primal position of existence. By focusing on the interrelations between body and gravity, the choreography depicts an existential struggle for lived experience that imparts meanings to human life.

The opposition between earth beings and air creatures that evolves during the dance into a conflict between modes of being that ends catastrophically seems to point precisely to the tragic outcome when these fundamental forces are neglected. The dance's final act, with the terrible mute scream vibrating into the void, is the harrowing act of mechanical existence devoid of human meaning, rooted in the body's power to constitute lived experience and nascent knowledge.

Performance and Nascent Knowledge

As the example of *Shijima* illustrates, looking at the senses in terms of perceptual actions opens up a path to the performer's work with body, space, and movement, which are, indeed, the building blocks of every theatrical performance. This way of looking, moreover, advances our understanding of how corporeal narrative is constructed, and also narrates what Eugenio Barba has termed 'elementary drama', which is based on 'balance in action', manifested as a dynamic intersection between forces, as gravity is embedded in the body:

> Mechanics teaches us that a body's *centre of gravity* is the point of balance of all the parts of that body and that the line of gravity is a line perpendicular to the ground from that point.[40]

Seen in this light, the body itself becomes a cluster of interacting forces, and makes this interaction visible with every formation and re-formation of the ever-changing balance. While this is also relevant to quotidian situations, in the context of performance it becomes enhanced and emphasized:

> The characteristic most common to actors and dancers from different cultures and times is the abandonment of daily balance in favour of . . . extra-daily balance, [which] demands a greater physical effort.[41]

With its greater effort and heightened tensions the performer's body acquires dramatic qualities of balance in action that 'generates the sensation of movement in the spectator even when there is only immobility'.[42] That is, the performer's conscious and deliberate work with the sensory-motor body uncovers the tense interrelations between forces and thereby evokes an elementary drama:

> A balance in action generates a kind of elementary drama: the opposition of different tensions in the performer's body is sensed kinesthetically by the spectator as a conflict between elementary forces.[43]

Drawing on Barba's research into 'the secrets' of the performer's practices thus allows a general view to emerge and to focus attention on the dramatic qualities of the performers' work with perceptual constructs and physical actions.

Laban's notion of effort, which is fundamental to his theory of movement, is also here useful. Laban defines effort as 'the inner impulses from which movement originates'.[44] Effort qualities become visible and apparent through the configuration of the motion factors – weight, space, time, and flow.[45] As such, effort indicates the psychophysical motivations behind any given movement configuration, which Laban understands in terms of a dramatic struggle.[46] Thus, according to both Barba and Laban, a corporeal narrative is embedded in the configuration of sensory-motor actions, which is perceived in dynamic and relational terms of conflicting interaction between forces, particularly in the context of performance and the heightened physical work of performers.[47]

Mark Johnson observes that 'we easily forget that our bodies are clusters of forces and that every event of which we are a part

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consists, minimally, of forces in interaction'.[48] Performance not only allows us to remember and to experience what we may easily forget in quotidian life, but it also allows us to make sense of our experiences and consider different possibilities of understanding and knowing: a path to cognitive processes opens up, focusing first and foremost on how knowledge may emerge from corporeal experiences.

Yi-Fu Tuan, for example, maintains that the ability to learn from experience is an important way of gaining understanding and knowledge:

> To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience.[49]

Johnson takes this one step further, arguing for the vital role of physical experiences in constituting abstract thinking and suggesting that, via image schemata and metaphorical projections, the conceptual is both connected to and dependent on the experiential.[50] In such a process, the structures of force become fundamental:

> In order to survive as organisms, we must interact with our environment. All such causal interaction requires the exertion of *force*, either as we act upon other objects, or as we are acted upon by them. Therefore, in our efforts at comprehending our experience, structures of force come to play a central role. Since our experience is held together by forceful activity, our web of meaning is connected by the structures of such activity.[51]

Recent developments in cognitive studies reinforce the understanding of how knowledge is rooted in experience, as is evident, for example, in notions of embodied or situated cognition:[52] and performance of the kind discussed above exemplifies what this means in bare flesh and blood.

Notes and References

1. See, for example, Sally Banes and André Lepecki, ed., *The Senses in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Stephen Di Benedetto, 'Stabling in the Dark: Facets of Sensory Perception and Robert Wilson's "H.G." Installation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVII, No. 3 (2001), p. 273–84; Stephen Di Benedetto, *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2010).

2. See, for example, Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Willmar Sauter, 'Approaching the Theatrical Event: the Influence of Semiotics and Hermeneutics on European Theatre Studies', *Theatre Research International*, XXII, No. 1 (1997), p. 4–13. Both call attention to the perceptual dimension of performance and clearly note its importance; none the less, perception is not analyzed as a distinctive act bearing meanings and cognitive values in itself.

3. The Sankai Juku Company, *Shijima: The Darkness Calms Down in Space*, premiered at Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, 1988; choreography and design by Ushio Amagatsu; music by Yas-Kas and Yoichiro Yoshikawa; video recording director and producer, Torbjorn Ehrnvall (RM Arts/SVT1 co-production in association with Dansens Hus, Stockholm).

4. James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual System* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 47.

5. Ibid., p. 5.

6. Ibid., p. 6.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 207.

8. Ibid., p. 320.

9. Richard M. Zaner, *The Problem of Embodiment: Some Contribution to a Phenomenology of the Body* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 131.

10. Ibid., p. 132.

11. Gibson, p. 19.

12. Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 68.

13. Adolphe Appia, 'Actor, Space, Light, Painting' (1919), in Michel Huxley and Noel Witts, ed., *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 21–4.

14. Richard C. Beacham, *Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theatre* (Berkshire: Harwood, 1994), p. 22.

15. Constantine Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares* (1937), trans. E. R. Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 193ff.; Sharon Marie Carnicke, 'Stanislavsky's System: Pathway for the Actor', in Alison Hodge, ed., *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 18–19.

16. Stanislavisky, p. 195.

17. Katherine Everett Gilbert, 'Mind and Medium in the Modern Dance', in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, ed., *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 112–17.

18. Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement* (1950), (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 92.

19. This is no mere metaphor, since in the phenomenological dimension of existence, as Merleau-Ponty understood it, touching (and not seeing) is the paradigm, and all the senses participate, in one way or another, in the act of 'getting in touch', which Merleau-Ponty went as far as to describe as an act of communion or coition – two powerful metaphors that point to the bond between the lived body and its perceived world. It is interesting that both Stanislavsky and Merleau-Ponty employ the same metaphor of communion in regard to perceptual interaction.

20. Merleau-Ponty, p. 320.

21. Ibid., p. 353.

22. Ibid.

23. Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter, *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1995), p. 79.

24. Due to the necessarily detailed description and the limits of space the other scenes will be discussed only briefly and in general.

25. Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

26. Kazuko Kuniyoshi, 'Two Kinjiki: Diametrical Oppositions', *TDR*, L, No. 2 (Summer 2006), p. 154.

27. Kurihara Nanako, 'Hijikata Tatsumi: the Words of Butoh', *TDR*, XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 12.

28. Ibid., p. 18; Kuniyoshi, 'Two Kinjiki', p. 154.

29. Hijikata Tatsumi, 'Inner Material/Material', trans. Kurihara Nanako. *TDR*, XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 41; Kuniyoshi, 'Two Kinjiki', p. 156.

30. Hijikata, 'Inner Material', p. 41.

31. Noriko Maehata, 'Selections from the Prose of Kazuo Ohno', *TDR*, XXX, No. 2 (Summer 1986), p. 164.

32. Hijikata, 'Inner Material', p. 39–40.

33. Hijikata Tatsumi, 'Plucking off the Darkness of the Flesh: an Interview by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko', *TDR* XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 50.

34. Hijikata Tatsumi, 'From Being Jealous of a Dog's Vein', trans. Kurihara Nanako, *TDR*, XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 56.

35. Hijikata Tatsumi, 'To Prison', trans. Kurihara Nanako, *TDR*, XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 46.

36. Ushio Amagatsu, a discussion with Hiroaki Fujii (President of the Japan Foundation), 13 January 1999, accessible at at the Foundation's website: <www.jpf.go.jp/e/culture/new/old/9903/03_01.html>, retrieved April 2011. Also see another interview in which Amagatsu states that, with all the differences between cultures, 'there grew in me a heightened consciousness that there is a human "universality" that exists in all people, regardless of nationality or culture': interview with Amagatsu, 6 March 2009, at <http://performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/0902/1.html>, retrieved April 2011.

37. This manner of 'floor design' is typical of Amagatsu, and was significantly influenced by the architecture of the Théâtre de la Ville, which is shaped to make the audience look down on the stage: 'My encounter with this theatre changed my way of thinking about the role of the floor surface. Seeing the stage floor of the Théâtre de la Ville spread out before the eyes, I felt a definite consciousness residing in it. After that, I was never able to ignore the role of the floor again, and it became an artistic material that I used very carefully and consciously in my creative process' (Amagatsu, 2009).

38. To the question 'How would you express what Butoh is to you?' Amagatsu answered: 'Whenever I am asked that question, I answer that my Butoh is a "dialogue with gravity" '; and later on he elaborated: 'A body that is completely relaxed is a body that is lying down, right? I begin first of all with this easiest of states and then take the body through the process of sitting up and then standing as the fundamental form of body in dialogue with gravity' (Amagatsu, 2009, ibid.).

39. As expressed in the above quotation, and see also Nadine Meisner, 'Arts: The Aliens have Landed', *The Independent*, London, 15 Jan. 1999, at <independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/arts-the-aliens-have-landed-1073961.html>, accessed May 2011.

40. Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 38.

41. Ibid., p. 34.

42. Ibid., p. 40.

43. Ibid., p. 39.

44. Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, p. 9.

45. Ibid., p. 21.

46. Ibid., p. 13.

47. In this light, it is interesting to note that Amagatsu's conception of Butoh as a dialogue with gravity actually points to a fundamental of corporeal expression, which may be applied to different forms of theatre, dance, and performance.

48. Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 42.

49. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* (London: Arnold, 1977), p. 9.

50. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, p. xii, 38.

51. Ibid., p. 42.

52. See for example: Michael L. Anderson, 'Embodied Cognition: a Field Guide', *Artificial Intelligence*, CXLIX, No. 1 (2003), p. 91–130; Francesca Garbarini and Mauro Adenzato, 'At the Root of Embodied Cognition: Cognitive Science Meets Neurophysiology', *Brain and Cognition*, LVI (2004), p. 100–6.