

## RESEARCH

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### BODY NARRATIVES: DANCE AS CREATION OF SENSE

#### *Narrativas corporales: la danza como creación de sentido*

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*Dance is first of all communicate, come together, meet, talk to each other  
in the depths of one's being.  
Dance is union, union of man with man,  
of man with the cosmos, of man with God.  
Maurice Béjart*

#### ABSTRACT

Since the origins of humanity, dance has resented the permanent need to define itself as art. Its lack of codes to read it, its absence of legitimacy in powerful circles, the emergence of contemporary dance -which broke the parameters set by classical ballet-, have made it difficult for it to be approached by the great disciplines: the definition that has been provided for it by Philosophy, Anthropology or History would not be enough to give dance its true depth today. That is why a multidisciplinary research trend is emerging that is still searching for its roots to consolidate itself, and which has as its specificity the very practice of dance: dance research. What is dance? What does a dancing body transmit? How does dance communicate? From a historical journey of the emergence of contemporary dance, we will answer these questions by examining their narrative forms. Our conclusion -which is far from being closed- will establish that dance has to do with the body, memory, emotion, perception, otherness. With the creation of sense, a concept we took from Aude Thuries, PhD in dance research. A proposal that we could call "linguistics of dance".

**KEYWORDS:** Communication; Body; Contemporary dance; Semiology; Linguistics; Perception

#### RESUMEN

Desde los orígenes de la humanidad, la danza ha resentido la necesidad permanente de definirse como arte. Su falta de códigos para leerla, su ausencia de

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legitimidad en los círculos poderosos, la emergencia de la danza contemporánea – que rompió los parámetros fijados por el ballet clásico–, han dificultado su acercamiento por las grandes disciplinas: la definición que de ella han aportado la Filosofía, la Antropología o la Historia no sabría ser suficiente para darle hoy a la danza su verdadera profundidad. De ahí que esté surgiendo una corriente investigativa pluridisciplinar que aún busca sus raíces para consolidarse, y que tiene como especificidad la práctica misma de la danza: la investigación en danza. ¿Qué es la danza? ¿Qué transmite un cuerpo que baila? ¿Cómo comunica la danza? Desde un recorrido histórico del surgimiento de la danza contemporánea, responderemos a estos interrogantes examinando sus formas de narrativa. Nuestra conclusión –que dista de estar cerrada– establecerá que la danza tiene que ver con el cuerpo, la memoria, la emoción, la percepción, la alteridad. Con la creación de sentido, concepto que tomamos de Aude Thuries, Doctora en investigación en danza. Una propuesta que podríamos denominar una “lingüística de la danza”.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Comunicación; Cuerpo; Danza contemporánea; Semiología; Lingüística; Percepción

## **NARRATIVAS CORPORAIS: A DANÇA COMO CRIAÇÃO DE SENTIDO**

### **RESUME**

Desde as origens da humanidade a dança ressentiu a necessidade permanente de definir-se como arte. Sua falta de códigos para lê-la, sua ausência de legitimidade nos círculos poderosos, a emergência da dança contemporânea que rompeu os parâmetros fixados pelo ballet clássico, foi dificultado sua aproximação pelas grandes disciplinas: a definição que dela foi aportada pela filosofia, antropologia ou pela história não poderia ser suficiente para dá-la hoje em dia sua verdadeira profundidade. Daí, está surgindo uma corrente investigativa multidisciplinar que ainda busca suas raízes para consolidar-se e que tem como especificidade a prática da dança, a investigação em dança. Que é a dança? Que transmite um corpo que baila? Como comunica a dança? Desde um percurso histórico do surgimento da dança contemporânea, responderemos a estas interrogantes examinando suas formas de narrativa. Nossa conclusão – que longe de estar fechada – estabelecerá que a dança tem a ver com o corpo, a memória, a emoção, a percepção, a alteridade. Com a criação de sentido conceito que tomamos de Aude Thuries, doutora em investigação da dança. Uma proposta que podíamos denominar uma linguística da dança

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Comunicação; Corpo; Dança contemporânea; Semiologia; Linguística; Percepção.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The theoretical reflections that have accompanied the exercise of the narrative have been circumscribed in general and traditionally to verbal language; however, they increasingly gain legitimacy in reference to other fields (such as that of images, such as that of fabrics, such as that of spaces, such as that of clothing, such as that of dance, precisely). That dance (our priority field of interest) develops a *sui generis* narrative should not be surprising, especially after semiology burst the field of the study of meaning, occupying other spaces and objects other than strictly verbal. The premise of this article, then, considers dance to be a field the writing of which is done through narratives traced by embodied bodies that dance on stage. Because it is then a language, it has its specific characteristics and rules under the dictation of which it must develop. Although, without appealing to words, dance works like any discursive construction, responding to particular codes that are based on the symbolic. Dance has then to do with perception. Through dance, the power of the body is vindicated as an expressive resource; but this medium generates a sense in spite of the fact that in contemporary dance there is not a narrated story. The problem being posed this way, we are without doubt in the very heart of the processes of significance<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this article is to advance an inquiry about the nature of the corporal narratives expressed in dance and its ways of communicating. In the search for this main objective, this article aims to achieve other objectives, this time subsidiary but essential, in relation to these narratives of the body: the differences with respect to verbal language; the particularities when compared with other body languages (such as speech paralinguistics -gesticulation, moves of the arms, body, torso, head-); significant differences between the narrative of classical ballet and that of contemporary dance; the nature of the interpellation to the spectator; differences between technique and dance; the body as a significant vehicle.

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<sup>2</sup> Note from the authors: all the original texts in French and English are translated by Alejandra Toro Colanje. Throughout the text, we include fragments of the works cited here for a more vivid approach to dance.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The development of the hypotheses formulated here has been based on the critical reading of texts by various authors (theoreticians, choreographers and dancers), on interviews with active choreographers belonging to different cultures and dance practitioners of different genres (contemporary, hip-hop, flamenco), on the attendance to the presentation of several works and on the analysis of videos with the record of dance works. All these activities have been guided by the fundamental question that gives identity to this article: what are the identifying elements of body narrative, especially when it is manifested through contemporary dance. The contrast and the crossing between different perspectives and approximations have led to a kind of conceptual sedimentation.

### 4. DISCUSSION: BODY NARRATIVES

The word "choreography" is etymologically composed of two Greek roots: *khoreia*, dance, and *graphia*, writing. "Choreography" meant, in its origins, to *trace* or *record* the dance. The masters of dance and ballet have always tried to describe the steps and the figures of dance and put them on paper, in the same way that musical notation is carried out through the scores. That was the sense that the French dancer and choreographer Raoul-Auger Feuillet wanted to give it when in 1713 he published, in Paris, with the publisher Sieur Dezais, *Choreography, or the art of describing dance*, a work that proposed a theoretical annotation system through characters, figures and demonstrative signs. This graphic transposition of the dance movement was intended to create a codified method of annotation for pedagogical purposes and of transmission of classical ballet choreographies and theater dances. The movements, the spatial directions, the figures were represented in diagrams, destined to leave a trace of the choreography to reproduce it in a faithful way. The term "choreography" then made reference to a practice to "draw the dance", but not yet to the art of composing it. However, since Feuillet, the meaning of this term has evolved considerably, making reference today to the activity of creation and composition in dance.

Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian theoretician and dance teacher, continued with the efforts of Feuillet when in 1928 he published a new method of dance notation and choreographic notation. "Labanotation", as it is known today, is a mathematical system of movement notation that allows us to describe in abstract signs its development in space and time. In turn, it helps define which segments of the body should be put into action. Rhythm, directions taken in space, intervention of various parts of the body, "body phrasing", these elements were put in relation by Laban, thus optimizing Feuillet's proposal.

We intentionally qualify the expression "draw the dance". Movement, as an expression of the human body, is composed of a three-dimensional aspect, impossible to trace in the "two-dimensionality" of a piece of paper. How to translate the flow of movement on a page? Its duration? Its intensity? The trajectory on the ground and in space? How to describe the variants of a movement, the singularity

of the dancer, the subtlety of a style? How, finally, to describe or draw *the intention* of the interpreter?

The impossibility of painting the phenomenon is a piece of evidence: these turns, gestures, contortions not only cannot be the object of a discourse but they essentially elude it. The dancer does not cease to erase her gesture, to abstract the trace, each movement annihilates the previous one, burns at every moment like a flame. (...) How to paint the flame? (Montandon, 1999, p. 20).

Verbal language seems therefore not to have a place at the moment of the choreographic creation, without counting on the fact that many dancers express a clear rejection towards the notation of dance, qualifying it as anti-creative and restrictive. It is as if writing castrated the movement.

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote in 1897:

You have to understand that the dancer is not a woman who dances for the next two juxtaposed reasons. Because it is not a woman but a metaphor that synthesizes one of the fundamental aspects of our form, a sword, a cup, a flower, etc.; and she does not dance, thanks to the prodigy of shortcuts or impulses, with a body writing, which would need whole paragraphs in prose dialogue as descriptive, to express, in writing, a poem that emerges from the entire apparatus of the scribe (Mallarmé, 1897, p 173).

This rejection or denial of written (and even oral) discourse in dance is not uncommon in choreographers and dancers. This is corroborated by the French choreographer Mourad Merzouki:

It is not easy to talk about the things that interest us, about the things we love; besides the fact that, when you are a dancer or a choreographer, you do not necessarily have the best words to say what you think or what you feel. Dance is sometimes difficult to explain with words. You live with your body. (...) dance is lived, it is seen; but when you try to put words on it you are not always very clear about what you want to say. We try to do it through movement, we do not have a (language) to express what we feel and that exercise that you ask me today in this interview is to work with an alphabet that I do not have<sup>3</sup>.

We also see it in the testimony of another great choreographer, Georges Momboye, who in an interview with the author confesses to having been a stammerer as a child. "The word came out like an explosion," recalls the African

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<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted in French by the author in Paris, on January 14, 2016 to the choreographer Mourad Merzouki.

artist. It was initially a ritual that his mother made in town what took away the problem. And then dance, where he found "the words" that his body did not have to express himself:

That's why I dance differently from everyone. So it is. I thought that it was a dance that existed, but no, it's really a great mix of everything. It seems to me that, sometimes, with words you cannot say everything. On the contrary, imagine a body that dances, you are requesting a lot of muscles and that is beautiful. The word is only three articulated elements: thought, voice and sound. While dance is everything. It's vibrations that come from everywhere<sup>4</sup>

Adriana Miranda, a choreographer and a dancer of the company Azoe Danza de Cali, also vindicates dance as a fundamental tool to pronounce herself, to the point that dance helps her, as she herself recognizes in a whisper, *to exist*:

I felt, internally, many things when I was a teenager, I was very quiet but at the same time I laughed a lot, until I started to ask myself: why am I sad ?, why am I happy? And there I realized that dance was my mode of expression, there I could have my therapy of happiness and sadness, and I did not go against anyone, but against myself and it helped me a lot to be able to take out my interior <sup>5</sup>, .

"I started dancing because I was afraid to speak", confessed Pina Bausch herself in one of her rare public interventions (Sesé, T. <sup>6</sup>).

This difficulty of using words to narrate dance comes perhaps from the fact that, in contemporary dance, there is no describable history, no clear story as it is evident in classical ballet. Being an heir to modern dance, contemporary dance emerged in France in the seventies as an act that denies the ways of academicism or neoclassicism. Search

(...) crossing borders and reaching a level of human-expressive freedom in which the artistic does not derive from physical abilities or mere inspiration, but from a process of search and experimentation that integrates all the knowledge about the human movement to give greater possibilities of expressivity and liberation; (this manifestation) opened new horizons in the dance expression and placed the current man, his inner life, his worries and

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<sup>4</sup> Interview conducted in French by the author in Paris, on January 15, 2016 to the choreographer Georges Momboye.

<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted by the author in Cali, Colombia, on April 20, 2016, to choreographer Adriana Miranda and producer Andrés Becerra of the company Azoe Danza

<sup>6</sup> Website without pagination or publication date:

[http://ddooss.org/articulos/otros/Pina\\_Bausch.htm](http://ddooss.org/articulos/otros/Pina_Bausch.htm)

his fundamental qualities in the foreground. (Ferreiro, cited by Reyes, 2013, page 824).

This way, says Aude Thuries in *L'apparition de la danse* (2016), the study of the creation of sense was disdained in relation to dance for several reasons. The first, because of the preponderance of the theater, the spoken art, faced with dance, where that question - that of the sense - was not even raised. Then, due to the same place that dance occupies in the "Pantheon of the Arts", formulated in general in relation to the apparent inability of dance to generate sense, or in other words, to tell a story. Dance, since its origins, has been considered a frivolous activity, or worse, morally reprehensible and scandalous, that can incite dangerous bacchanalia. Pleasant entertainment, nice yes, but which is not understood. "In dance, the sense is not found in the narrative transparency of the corporal movements, it always occurs as a horizon, it does not cease to avoid any attempt to grasp it", says David Le Breton (Prologue by Frigon and Jenny, 2009, p 9).

Contemporary dance was an artistic revolution, a choreographic moment that bodies had never experienced before. As a reaction opposed to the erect and perfect figures of ballet, bodies and movements were rounded. Self-control was faced with exuberant bodies. Against resistance to drive, abandonment to the drive was proposed.

From then on, dance will take on absolute writing autonomy since the gesture is not determined by a predetermined symbology, be it religious, social or aesthetic. I make a gesture, I feel inside that it has a sense but this one is going to be revealed later, or never. Contemporary dance is based on this investment. (...) As Valéry said in *L'âme et la danse*, dance is the art of imminence "(Dobbels, 2012: 41).

In contemporary dance writing there is no single or unequivocal reading because there are several planes that open simultaneously. A simple movement can express the whole being. Contemporary dance constitutes a space for vindication of the power of the body and movement as a means of expression. "Dance never has the clarity of a story, and such is its strength" (Le Breton, in Frigon and Jenny, op cit, 2009, p.11).

We are far from the Sylphs, Bayaderes or mythological nymphs of the "White Ballets", far from that fantastic world portrayed in the choreographies of Marius Petipa at the end of the 19th century in Europe. Ballet has been structured through a thread based on a narrative. *La Bayadère*, *Giselle* or *The Swan Lake* are tragic tales of impossible love, structured around a narrative that is circumscribed within a script.

The French psychoanalyst and philosopher Daniel Sibony tells in his book *Le corps et sa danse* (1995) that Trisha Brown, an important choreographer and dancer of *post-modern American dance*, confessed: "Every time I talk about dance, I think I'm lying" (the emphasis is ours). As if verbally evoking the dance were not enough to express everything that it encompasses, all the feelings it can generate, as if speech were not rich enough, as if oral language were a kind of betrayal to one's own body.

If we followed this approach, we should conclude that, in order to generate emotion, empathy, connection with the other could only be achieved through the body and movement.

This would be equivalent in the same way to affirm that, so as to write about dance, it was necessary to know how to dance. It is as if, in order to think, to research, to study dance, it were necessary - also - to put the body in motion. Would Paul Valéry's thoughts then be vain, who at first apologizes for venturing into the world of dance, he, *a man who does not dance*? So this is how the philosopher himself defines himself in *Philosophy of Dance* (Valéry, 2015, page 7), and he asks readers to have resignation and patience in attending to the words of a man who dares to express himself about dance without using his body.

It is undeniable that a physical, carnal, phenomenological approach to dance helps to write about it. The condition of the author of being a growing dancer and an apprentice of choreographer with undoubtedly vivifies this intellectual discourse of lived moments of dance that are marked in her body and in her memory. But, evidently, the incarnated experience comes as a complement to the moving power of writing itself. "However, a philosopher can perfectly look at the action of a dancer, and, observing that he is pleased, can also try to obtain from his pleasure the second pleasure of expressing his impressions in his language" (Valéry, op. cit., P. 19).

Henk Borgdorff, from the Amsterdam School of Arts, nurtures the debate about artistic production and its relation to research and the production of sense<sup>7</sup>. The fundamental question posed by the philosopher is about the status and nature of research in the visual arts and the performing arts and its relation to artistic practice. Can the practice of art be worth research? Borgdorff being based on the trichotomy of Christopher Frayling, he proposes three structuring forms of artistic research. We could distinguish, in the first place, research *on* art, which seeks to draw reliable conclusions about artistic practice with a theoretical distance. On the other hand, there would be research *for* art, understood as the processes in which art is the objective, rather than the object, of the research processes. In this case, research would be at the service of art. Finally, according to Borgdorff, we will mention research *in* art, which deals with a type of production made from practice itself, which does not assume a separation between subject and object, without considering any distance between artistic practice and the researcher. To the author, this last category defends that artistic production is in itself a fundamental part of the research process, and the work of art is, in part, the result of research. There is no fundamental separation between theory and practice in the arts. According to this statement, artistic practice offers an intentional and original contribution to what we already know and understand from research. Artistic practice can be qualified as research, says Borgdorff, when its purpose is to expand our knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Borgdorff, H. Article without pagination:

[http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vH4DddAmNOsJ:www.gu.se/digitalAssets/1322/1322698\\_el-debate-sobre-la-investigaci-n-en-las-artes.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=co](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vH4DddAmNOsJ:www.gu.se/digitalAssets/1322/1322698_el-debate-sobre-la-investigaci-n-en-las-artes.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=co)



and understanding through original research. Dance, as we understand it here, is then part of this practice.

The dance researcher, a category that still looks for its roots to consolidate, has the very practice of dance as specificity, it is its object of study. Although other disciplines may be based on dance, this differentiating aspect is proper to the dance researcher. Its reflection comes from the experience produced by it, both corporeal and intellectual. It is based on the knowledge of the dancer and on the corporal experimentation of theory. It is generated through the molded body and the lived body, as we said elsewhere<sup>8</sup>. This research space defined by its object of study is based on intuitive knowledge of the body, knowledge of the dancer, the lived experience of the viewer and it invites a multidisciplinary vision and the integration of all discourses related to dance.

What we advance is that it is possible to write about dance, it is possible to approach it with words, writing, body and movement, it can be moved through both oral and corporal discourse, *as long as sense is generated*. To develop this argument, we will draw on the book by Aude Thuries cited above, *L'apparition de la danse* (2016), which we will take up again at various times.

#### 4.1. Permanence

In the testimony of Merzouki used at the beginning, a recurrent issue of contemporary dance was evoked (and which we could extend to contemporary art): the incomprehension it sometimes generates. How many times, when leaving a dance show, have we heard the public (and even, we confess, have resented ourselves in the flesh) say they have a sense of *not having grasped what is important?*" I did not understand, "a man says sadly in the room." What is the story?", asks the mother who came to see her daughter dancing. This is, in other words, a claim for *the sense* of the dance text. Many choreographers express a true rejection to hand programs, where you have to explain what it is about, where you have to tell the story, where the artist is the one who, from the outside, gives sense to the work. This submissive position of the public excludes the possibility the artist offers of interpreting it, and it is there, to Rabih Mroué, a Lebanese actor, playwright and visual artist, where the defeat of art resides:

The failure of the theater lies in the usurpation of the public's rights of judgment, when the actor or actress is the one who reacts, being scared, crying, singing, dancing and thinking aloud instead of the audience. The one who judges is him / her and not the spectator, who has no choice but to accept the ideas and be influenced passively. Viewers become unable to distance themselves from the scene to think about their own interpretations. (Mroué, 2010, p 27).

The public does not understand, needs to be guided in their reading. Neophytes are disoriented. "Is that dance?", they complain indignantly. There is a manifest

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<sup>8</sup> Toro, A. 2015.

need to place dance in a known category, to catalog it. Hence, many times a rejection to it is generated. Even today, the money of the State and the place destined to dance in the theaters continue accounting for this incomprehension. Contemporary dance has always felt the need to legitimize itself as art. And if, for this genre, praised for its plasticity, the road to recognition is arduous, let us not even evoke Hip-Hop. Relegated to street dancing, or at most to acrobatic gymnastics, this dance style carries a connotation of violence. The universe that surrounds it, composed of urban graffiti and loose street clothes, with caps and shoes, the type of song (rap) that accompanies it, the movements that can be considered rough and abrupt, all this is associated with marginality, drugs and gangs. This way, Hip-Hop does not benefit from the financial subsidies that such recognition brings. Its introduction in theaters has meant a confrontation against these collective imaginarieness and paradigms, as the choreographer Mourad Merzouki corroborates vehemently:

Besides wanting to share with many and show that a street child is something other than a criminal, I should (...) show that Hip-Hop, which is a street dance, is not reduced to a dance associated with the crime. Hip-Hop can be a complete dance like any other. I have had to fight with most people to be able to share it and show that it can reach any type of audience and that, as dance, as any other, it can be legitimate, it can have a space in theaters. That has been the double battle I have had: to make Hip-Hop recognized and also to show that, because your story is not linked to a dance conservatory and is unique, it does not mean that you cannot be an artist or a choreographer like others and share on stage what you have in your head and what you are feeling<sup>9</sup>.

"If dancers do not talk, how will I understand them?", asks the writer Sanjoy Roy, in his web series "Planet Dance: Bodytalk. A visitor's guide to contemporary dance"<sup>10</sup>. How to understand the sense of the work when no story is narrated, or at least, when we do not identify it? How do dancers communicate with their body? The clip says:

Now you can see that *understanding* is not the most important thing. You do not need to get to the point to appreciate the experience. What you need is to get in touch with your inner dancer. Tune in to the body song. And open your senses to varied and mixed means of communication. So, does dance have a meaning? Yes. And it's as much about the meaning you give it as it is about it. (Sanjoy, 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> Interview to Mourad Merzouki, op. Cit. To see a fragment of the work *Agwa* de Merzouki, created in 2008 for 11 Brazilian dancers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzfGMUFwPf0>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuzGb7VvIMQ> 1'40 "min, consulted on 11/17/2015.

Original text in English.

Take the example of rhythmic gymnastics. Graceful and slender athletes jump, turn on themselves, grab various objects, ropes, rings, ribbons and balls, with grace and safety. Their skill causes admiration, their coordination and taking of risk leave us stupefied. But, in what this demonstration of physical ability would not know how to be dance? In that there is no possible reading, there is no creation of sense. Rhythmic gymnastics is based on a series of repetitions (after several years of very rigorous and demanding training, of course) after all, mechanical movement. There is no room for improvisation. Subjected to the yoke of perfection and body synchrony, athletes are all equal, as outputs of the same mold. Even their smile is affected. Neither is there any room for bodily diversity.

If we talk about dance, as in rhythmic gymnastics, its teaching implies a relationship with a subject. What makes it alive and productive also happens here through the body: the teacher's body transmits the dance to their students through some codes, which they memorize. The basis of learning is repetition, so that the body of the apprentice keeps it in its memory and knows how to reproduce it. And yet, where we distance ourselves from sport is that we are witnessing an *incorporation process*, where the apprentice includes what is assimilated to his own gestural vocabulary, with an imprint that is unique to him. That movement that was alien, difficult to imitate, uncertain at the beginning finally becomes *part of dancers' body*, marked by their experiences, emotions and memories, a definitive component of their own sensuality.

The contemporary dance dancer must be able to interpret any style that they demand, must be able to undergo untimely changes of tempo and rhythm. The dancer must have a malleable physique to be able to adapt to the creativity of the choreographer. But frequently, choreographers seek humility, the weaknesses of the artist to exploit them in the deepest. As Merce Cunningham says, "On the one hand, there is how you want the movement to look and, on the other hand, there is a person who is not you, who is the one who does it" (Lesschaeve, 2009, p.75). True dancers must know how to use those cracks - or what Adriana Miranda, the choreographer of *Ázoe Danza*, calls "our urgencies" - as their greatest creative force. To approach the limit, their limits, so that poetry is born.

When dance has been incorporated into the body of the dancer, he symbolizes his impulses and is freed from the technique, forcing them to detach themselves from molds laden with generic sense, socializing and reproducible to infinity. Dance then becomes the dancer's life drive. The performer goes into a trance. Creativity overflows. In improvisation, the dancer self-symbolizes, his gestures now have another sense, one, deep, that only he knows. That tells intimate, painful, personal stories. Beyond the technique, beyond memory and body control, what sustains the dancer is a feverishness and an exaltation as ephemeral and evanescent as dance itself. What Patricia Cardona (2010) does not hesitate to call excessiveness.

When dancing, the body and the mind connect. Brain function is maximized. A dancer does not get dizzy. He is not afraid to fall. His thinking processes are different. Through practice, he develops the muscular memory that allows him to explore the world without fear, he reinforces the balance,

suppressing the signals of his inner ear, his eye reflexes are faster, they have greater fluidity. Are you afraid of falling? Change your perception of the world. Resist, fly, turn. Dance <sup>11</sup>.

The public has vanished, the space dilated, time suspended. The dancer dances to himself. It is a lived body. Or, as Didi-Huberman describes the brilliant flamenco dancer Israel Galván: "a character made entirely of humility, laconism and innocence, but when he dances he explodes in grandiose events, baroque figures, guilty beauties, before returning unflinchingly to the silence and darkness on the edge of the stage" (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p.28).

Perhaps this is another of the difficulties in providing dance with sense: the absence of codes to read it. There are styles the sense of which has been fixed because their meaning can be "translated" into words, gestures can create iconic symbols and be coded, as in ritual dances. Conversely, in contemporary dance, significance lies in the choreography, in the gesture, in the dancer or in what he wants to convey. Hence the difficulty to enunciate it. The mere fact of dancing, however, attributes a sense to both the performer and the viewer. For it is that moment of exaltation, of solitary and impulsive rapture of the dancer that generates the connection with the audience. When the dancer lets himself be invaded by the sense, inhabit the unexpected, it is pure emotion. His own and the one that he precipitates in the spectator. The presence of the dancer possessed of his own being is, paradoxically, synonymous with otherness. A dancer inhabited by sense has a stage presence, his movement acquires exceptional qualities.

We will briefly mention a very interesting experience that was carried out in various prisons in France and in Québec by Point Virgule Parisian Contemporary Dance Company (Cf. Frigon and Jenny, P. 2009). Directed by Claire Jenny, the company brings together dancers, actors, artistic collaborators and conceives dance as an element for social intervention. One of its privileged scenarios is prisons, where dance workshops are proposed to male or female prisoners. Dance in prison might look like an aberration: the men and women who are there serving their sentence are precisely subject to confinement and narrowness, conditions that could be antinomic to the free expression of movement. These bodies have been searched, insulted, humiliated, imprisoned, crowded, and they no longer know how to break the chains of confinement and despair. Or how to mobilize again. And yet, thanks to the expertise and sweetness of the choreographer and her artistic team, they achieve very beautiful and deeply emotional results for the captives in the first place and also for those who participate in the process, both the artists and the audience that attends the resulting performances of the workshops. Jean-Pierre Poisson, a member of the company, said: "(The female convicts) do magnificent artistic things because everything is so loaded that all the clumsiness has been sublimated" (Frigon and Jenny, 2009, p.93).

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<sup>11</sup> Video "The mind of a dancer" on the Facebook page "Collective Culture" <https://www.facebook.com/CulturaColectiv/videos/vb.631575563520028/1251810954829816/?type=2&theater> .

The work questions the viewer so personally, the bond that binds it to him is so intense that it isolates him from his companions. The viewer lives that same moment of loneliness that the dancer experienced moments before. Internal, indescribable earthquake (when the earth *moves*, in Latin), where the stories, the fears and joys that inhabit it overflow the being. Unlikely, the unknown threads of life of the dancer have been intertwined with those of the viewer. The emotion of the former has caused the alteration of the latter. That is, the shudder of the one who lives the dance from a foreign body but in a *not less carnal way*. "The purpose is not to show oneself but rather that the viewer recognizes "something" (a verbal and / or nonverbal fabric / text) vital and organic with which to get hooked and that comes from the vulnerability of the actor" (Cardona, op cit, p. 8). When dance moves.

Thus, a dancer never dances alone: he dances first and foremost with himself. Then with the dance corps and finally with the viewer, incorporating mobility, synchrony with music and physical dexterity. So we need the other to dance, to generate sense. This is corroborated by Georges Momboye:

If you dance alone in this room, it's nothing. Dance is a collaboration, without the other it is nothing. Nothing at all. You need the other, that's dance. It's the bond with the others, it's sharing with the others, it's the parallel path you have with others. The conception that Western has of for me alone means to take away all the sense of emotion, of sharing. You're alone in the world. In Africa, the alone is always based on improvisation. The others are sitting around you, forming a circle, you're in the middle and even then you don't feel alone because you have the support, the support of everyone, of the group. They will drive you to go beyond you, to give everything you can give. The western-style conception towards the alone is to shine as much as you can, to use all the space; (...) but dance without the other can't exist. To me, it's necessary that the other has a sense so that the dance lives. [eleven]

It is said that dance is an ephemeral act ... an act based on immediacy and evanescence, an evaporation resulting from a live performance. An act that *disappears* barely when sketched, it barely materializes on stage.

There is no greater argument against this postulate than the work of the Spanish Olga de Soto, *history (s)*. The choreographer is based on the historical work of Jean Cocteau, *The young man and death*, to make a documentary in 2003<sup>12</sup>. After several months of searching, she manages to locate some of the people who were in the *premiere* of the ballet, that June 25, 1946 at the theater des Champs-Élysées in Paris and that are still alive. Each testimony of these spectators helps to revive the original work in the context of the end of the war and also recreates the story of these survivors of the last century. Almost sixty years after the premiere, the

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<sup>12</sup> Interview to Georges Momboye, op. Cit. To see a fragment of Momboye's dance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emPdXN8I5yc> . Improvisation by Georges Momboye with percussionist Thomas Gueye

emotion of those who are now old is intact, when they evoke the coming on stage of the dancer Nathalie Philippart, in her yellow dress and her arrogance, or when they remember Jean Babilée facing a duo with this species of surreal appearance. Joy is revived, the smile comes back and flourishes, the admiration is evident. Evanescence was not such.

It would then be that dance is not so ephemeral, not while there are men and women who remember it with the same intensity, not while there is a built-in memory. As long as there is memory, as long as it has felt, dance will not completely vanish and survive its initial interpreters. As Olga de Soto says, "I don't think it's the (drama) of its disappearance, because they haven't disappeared," something "has disappeared, but other things remain, and although they're modified, transformed by time, these works continue existing"<sup>13</sup>. That is, the communicative intention of dance or what we can also call the social bond of dance. The moment in which the movement stops being only effective to become an organized movement according to symbolic laws and that establishes the connection with the other.

(Dance) is something that does not have materiality, that emanates from the real body of the dancers but that, nevertheless, is completely detached from it. (...) (The dancers) do not create the materials of the dance: neither its own body, nor the fabric that surrounds it, nor the ground, nor anything of the environment -neither light nor music, nor the force of gravity, nor any physical accessory. They use fragments of all this to create something, dance, which is located far above what is physically present. (Thuries, op.Cit, p.82 and 143).

"Dance is an appearance, or if you want, an apparition. It results from what dancers do and yet, it's something else." (Langer, cited by Thuries, page 80). The art of imminence, as we said before.

## 4.2. Concretions

We have seen it, dance does not use words, or very little. But like language, it uses gestural, rhythmic, sound, vocal, and plastic symbols. Dance is a social practice that responds to a code, gestural, cultural, communicative. Dance is a ritual, the body a vehicle of sense. "The art of the presence of the dancer and the actor is to light the fire of life. (...) This presence (from Latin *prae-sens* meaning "being in front of a sensitive being") triggers the mechanisms of communication with the viewer" (Cardona, op.cit, p.6). Dance communicates when it revives in us our capacity for wonder, when it awakens meanings, articulates stimuli, when it becomes deep memory.

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<sup>13</sup> To see fragments of the work *history (s)*, click this web page, interviews in French: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXFruRCYDCM>.

We cannot in this argument fail to evoke the semiological character implied in generating sense through dance, equating it with any discursive construction. With Barthes, we will remember the three levels that this semiologist introduced in France since 1982 and that are still valid when analyzing any attempt at expression (Barthes, 1986): the level of Communication; the symbolic plane or meaning; and finally, the plane of the signifier or significance. The first level remains in what is purely informative; the symbolic sense, on the other hand, resides in the plane of the signs, the primitive sense that the author has wanted to impregnate his discourse with, what Barthes calls the *obvious* sense. The obvious would be the sense to which an aesthetic value is added, an emphasis that corresponds to the last plane, that of the signifier or *obtuse*. This is the one that is not well described but that is latent in the message, it is the expression of a deeper feeling. The obtuse, the level that interests us in this piece of research, bears a certain emotion, a certain value, a certain evaluation. The obtuse does not lie in language, it is inscribed in perception. Without it, communication and meaning circulate, pass without anchoring, remain at the level of information. Without it, the first reading does not reveal any meaning. The obtuse implies the composition of several joint elements, hence the difficulty of naming it. It is outside the articulated language but latent within the interlocution. It is discontinuous, indifferent to history and the obvious sense. The obtuse is an accent, a supplement that the intellect does not manage to assimilate, a counter-narrative, which follows a sequentiality different from the planes, an unthinkable sequentiality, against logic and which subverts the story. It is a story supplementary to the main story, to the narrative development of facts created by the obvious.

Remembering Barthes allows us to extend his purposes towards the sense of perception. Because perception is of the order of the obtuse, of the interpretation, of significance. Art is both expressive and communicative and has everything to do with significance. Its sense is the result of a social construction, even when it arises from an individual proposal. While the artistic activity necessarily contemplates the participation of the other at the spectator level, it always has a social character. "A book is composed of signs that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things. Without an eye that reads it, a book contains signs that produce no concept and it is, consequently, mute," said Umberto Eco in *The Book of the Rose* (Eco, 1982, p.498).

To Merleau-Ponty, in *The visible and the invisible* (1964), the body is fundamental in perception because it is through it -the body- that the relationship with the world is established. The world is what we perceive. It is the body what allows us to touch the world, to touch and be touched. From this phenomenological approach, the illusion of the encounter of perception with the objects themselves is made to coincide. We see what we think we see. The body can prevent resentment and, in counterpart, without it, the subject is prevented from all perception. Merleau-Ponty understands the experience of bodily perception as a means of knowledge based on the -unsplittable- link of the subject with the world. The construction of sense is made from this perspective, through the body relationship we have with the world. Adopting this phenomenological position is to integrate dance as part of a research process that is based on the premise that *the body is a place of knowledge*. From there,



knowledge of the body is studied from different disciplinary perspectives and fields: performative studies, dance-therapy, semiotics, communication theory, feminist studies, research based on the arts ... All of them provide references that allow the body to be configured as a place of experience and knowledge and, therefore, as a subject and focus of research.

This shared experience of a space of intimacy with the world in which we live is beautifully described by Ana Sánchez-Couso (2011), who follows the phenomenological approaches of Merleau-Ponty. It deserves to be reproduced *in extenso* below:

The body is not just a line, or a "membrane without thickness", but the visible surface of a union between exterior and interior horizons. The outline would be what binds us to the fabric of the visible, and with it to a fabric of non-visible being. That is why there is an inexhaustible depth on this surface: it puts me in the exteriority of the world, while revealing what there is of the world in me. From this perspective, separation is not isolation but a threshold that arises from the encounter of the interior and the exterior. So this threshold is not only closure but also opening. (...)

To speak of opening is to offer the possibility of crossing the threshold. We are porous and pierced bodies. There are things that touch us and stay on the threshold, but they can also penetrate and pierce us. So, for this depth of the surface to be possible, so that the contour remains open and can reveal what there is of the world in me, it is necessary to go beyond a relation of opposition or similarity, proximity or distance. It may not be enough to touch, to be in the doorway, but to cross it, to let us through. (Sánchez-Couso, 2011, p.107-109).

What is dance?, asks Aude Thuries. A show that combines theater, mime, music, circus and dance, can it be qualified as such? This author, a dancer and researcher in dance, searches in various disciplines for elements that consolidate a definition, as we stated above, following Borgdoff's perspective. From the philosophy side, Thuries emphasizes that thinkers such as Hegel, Kant and Schelling, who founded Aesthetics as one of the new domains of Philosophy, talk about the sensitivity of the beautiful in the Fine Arts. It is just that in their considerations they do not include dance as belonging to the latter category. For these philosophers, simply dance is not an art. And as such, it does not exist.

Already in the twentieth century, great modern philosophers (Nietzsche, Valéry and today Alain Badiou) have built a look of dance that essentially considers it from the ecstatic experience. They do not mention their works or their authors, there is no obvious interest in their techniques or producers. On the other hand, they do evoke it as a source of metaphors, about essence, origins, life and death. Philosophy, says Thuries, a masterful discipline of conceptual elaboration, has devoted very little to the study of dance.



On the side of History, it is the identity issues, reflecting an era and the spirit of a time, which that have guided the definitions of dance. As for Anthropology, its approach to dance has been through the body and its cultural practices. An anthropological conception of dance would aim to find the sense and place of dances in societies, which would provide basic knowledge for the understanding of their culture. Thuries therefore laments the absence of a true reflection on dance as a cultural object in Western disciplines.

Art? Practice? Method? The author, finally, does not venture to propose a final and exclusive definition of dance. In fact, rather than considering what dance is, Thuries prefers to ask himself *when* there is dance. We can perfectly understand terms without needing to define them, he says. For example, we understand the concept of time but we are unable to define it. Also, a precise definition of a term does not help either to understand it completely.

However, a definition serves as a starting point to analyze the phenomenon of dance. Let us then take a classic statement of the term, from mid-twentieth century: "Dance is the movement of a body that moves according to a precise rhythm and a conscious mechanics in a space calculated in advance" (Levinson, 1929, quoted by Simonffy, 1999). Others will add "the collective appropriation of space through the body and movement" (Dallal, 1979).

With Thuries, let us analyze in a fragmented way the elements of this proposal: on the one hand, dance, to be dance, requires movement and displacement. The proposal of non-dance, which emerged in France in the 90s, unequivocally breaks this affirmation. In non-dance, the dancing movement disappears for the benefit of other activities or scenic techniques, ranging from the integration of theater, reading, plastic arts, music and frequently video and various types of projections. Dancers do not dance. They hardly move. Jérôme Bel, despite being a great dancer, is one of the most important exponents of this "dance" current.

Now, rhythm and music. The relationship of Merce Cunningham's work with technology was analyzed *in extenso* elsewhere<sup>14</sup>. Merce Cunningham, a great figure of the American dance, a former student of Martha Graham, is considered to be the dancer and choreographer who made the conceptual transition between modern dance and contemporary dance, in particular by uncoupling music from choreography. The choreographer proposed dance, music and plastic arts each on its own, independent of each other, to be superimposed on the day of the show in an "open" artistic encounter. None had preponderance over the others. Cunningham proposed an artistic *Gestalt*, where the whole summed more than the parts. Being unknown until the day of the *première*, dancers rehearsed without music and with unexpected musical tempos. Casual movements were generated in a creation irrigated by computer science.

Conscious mechanics. We have already seen it, dance, to be dance, is anything but mechanical movement. Dance is, above all, lived body and empathy with the viewer.

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<sup>14</sup> Villarroya, T. *Something called past. Interview to Olga de Soto*. PDF without date of publication or name of the support.

Space and Time: the treatment of time is another characteristic that defines Merce Cunningham's identity. In his choreographies, the tempo of the music is not followed meter by meter, but that of the chronometer. It is the relationship between the movements of each dancer with the others what determines musicality, or its phrasing. This does not impose itself from the outside but, as strange as it may seem, each dancer carries it within himself. Finally, Cunningham also modified the relationship with space in his choreographies. Each dancer is their own center, there is no star soloist, each is the axis of their own territory and moves according to their own diagonals and their own laterality. Encounters and disagreements on stage, the space is made and unmade before the eyes of the spectator on his chair who decides, faced with the multiplicity of events on stage, on what to fix his eyes on. This way, he creates his own narrative, different from other experiences lived by other viewers.

Collective appropriation: obviously, a dance corps is not necessary for dance to exist. The delicate loneliness of a spooky Pina Bausch and her eyes blinded at *Café Müller*<sup>15</sup> (1978), dancing (or we could say, crashing) against the wall, is an extraordinary proof of that.

Now, let us extend the options more. Contemporary dance is not limited to a technique, its multiplicity of origins is paradoxically one of its strongest identity components: African dance, jazz, folk dance, belly dancing, flamenco, Indian classical dances, Hip-Hop, among many others, are fused with techniques such as those of Martha Graham, José Limón, contact dance, Feldenkraiss method, etc., etc.

Nor does it imply a bodily definition in its conception. We are not talking about the white and thin, ethereal and perfect dancer that, wrapped in lightness, thrills us with her impeccable *jetés* or her dizzying *cambré*. Beauty, in contemporary dance, arises from imperfection. The imperfection of dissimilar bodies, of different colors, of plural origins, of various ages. Trained or beginning bodies, it does not matter, but they manage to translate their incarnated experiences into the movement.

We cannot define dance by its presentation space either. Theaters and dance stages have lost their preponderance to open the door to other places, more urban and inclusive: bus stations, squares, museums, gardens, and even roofs and walls, as choreographer Trisha Brown does.

On the other hand, a definition of dance could no longer be summarized as a gender identity. The re-showing of *The Swan Lake* by Briton Matthew Bourne<sup>16</sup>, premiered in 1996, exquisitely bursts all the codes of our classical dancer. The delicate swans of the original work, the music of which was authored by the Russian composer Tchaikovsky, were replaced with muscular and erotic men. Although some want to disqualify it as the *gay* version of *The Swan Lake*, the intention of the choreographer, in addition to the evident provocation and the manifest intention to break paradigms, was to symbolize strength, freedom and beauty in these dancers. The body is freed from the impositions of identity, including gender.

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<sup>15</sup> Toro, A., 2014.

<sup>16</sup> *Café Müller*, to see the entire work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxIWlgzb7r4>.

Finally, speaking of another Russian composer, Igor Stravinski, he composed, at the beginning of the 20th century, one of the masterpieces of classical ballet, *The Consecration of Spring*. The work premiered in 1913 in Paris, by the Russian Ballets Company of Sergei Diaghilev. The soloist was Nijinsky, a Ukrainian dancer endowed with exceptional virtuosity and an amazing technique. The work has been re-shown by other great choreographers such as Maurice Béjart, Pina Bausch and Angelin Preljocaj. And between these versions, there is an *African* performance of *The Consecration of Spring*. It was created by the choreographer Georges Momboye, who we have already mentioned here, in 2007. A black dancer from Côte d'Ivoire, performing a western -we could almost say "white"-work par excellence, integrating African dancers and African cultural and dancing codes. Momboye would continue with *The Nap of the Saun*, by Debussy, also performed in its first version by Nijinsky, and the *Quatuor* by Bela Bartók, choreographed and now performed by the African<sup>17</sup>.

### 4.3. Propositions

Then let us recap. In dance, there may be particular conditions, let us call them so or, in their absence, the annulment of movement and displacements, of music, rhythm, space, mechanics, collective appropriation, technique, body style, scenarios, gender or ethnicity. Thuries finally observes that the common denominator that remains of this subtraction is *the body*. But even if we take this game to the extreme, in non-dance the new means used on stage have supplanted the dancer. When using other forms of expression alternative to dance, the presence of a dancer is no longer essential. A body, trained, molded or lived, is not required for expression in non-dance. On the other hand, both Merce Cunningham from digital theories and William Forsythe from the movement of objects on stage, tried to visualize a dance where the human body is absent. The body of the male or female dancer of flesh and blood *would not then be necessary either* for dance to exist.

We believe that dance can dispense with each of the elements described above. But never of the body. The body being our object of study, the object of our affection, we cannot resign ourselves to cancel it. We cannot, with one swipe, erase that which has been the sustenance of our research. We choose to keep, then, minimally, the human body as a natural matter, as a foundational element for dance to be dance. *Because it is the body what is capable of generating emotion*. The shudder. The body awakens our affective, visual and tactile memory. Etymologically, the word emotion comes from Latin *emotio*, "movement or impulse", "that which moves you towards". Towards what? Evidently towards the other. Some artifacts onstage can also generate connection, laughter, tears, discomfort, joy, pleasure, nostalgia, sadness, empathy with others. A puppet representing an angel, whose wings are illuminated, hiding the strings and the artist who manipulates it, which wanders

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<sup>17</sup> *The Swan Lake*, full version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuab3kK8cPU>

Fragment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChOnhxe-Vm0>

sweetly along the Acera del Darro in Granada will thrill us to tears. But they are still objects manipulated by the human body.

So, what is dance? After this dissection where we were eliminating elements, we will remain with the proposal of Daniel Sibony, the most convenient for our purposes: dance would be a term to designate every event that makes body and that makes an event out of the body (Sibony, op.). It makes body with itself, it makes body with the spectator. It exalts the human body in all its emotional and empathic capacity. Dance is an instrument of expression and knowledge of the world. It is a communication tool. It is an experience where the lived corporeality of the dancer is transformed into subjective sensations of movement, for him and for the other. There is dance when there is emotion.

With Thuries, we will then agree in stating that raising the question of sense, its construction and its presence in dance allows us to free ourselves from aesthetic appreciation (Thuries, op cit, page 48).

In proposing the study of the construction of sense as a possible key for the understanding of dance, we consider the latter as a human creation included in the field of symbolic activity. (...) To put it another way, we propose to approach dance as a cultural object, before considering it a work of art or a product of the body, which is also frequently, but we believe, not essentially. (Thuries, op.cit, p.49).

"You have to learn to let yourself be touched by beauty," said Pina Bausch, "by the gesture, the slightest breath and to perceive the world independently of what is known" (Sesé, T.op. Cit. <sup>18</sup>).

We will end with a quote from Zsuzsa Simonffy, Professor at the University of Pécs, in Hungary, who, we believe, sums up what has been stated herein:

A body is required to mean as the first element of the constitution of dance and, consequently, of the sign. (...) Dance, being a cultural fact, belongs to the order of signification. If what is proper to a sign system is to be able to be translated into another system, dance - and music - can be conceived as a language. To the extent that they (dance and music) can be articulated, they have a grammar like any particular language. It is enough then to decipher the meaning of these languages to be able to speak them. (Simonffy, 1999, p.199).

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<sup>18</sup> To see a fragment of *The Consecration of Spring*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKysugBrB8A>

Website without pagination or publication date,

[http://ddooss.org/articulos/otros/Pina\\_Bausch.htm](http://ddooss.org/articulos/otros/Pina_Bausch.htm)

As we have seen, dance, as a body narrative, brings from the symbolic an unquestionable creation of sense, without the need to be supplanted by verbal discourses. Dance proposes in itself a proper semiology, from which to consciously develop semantic fields subject to the interferences and the drives of the elements that make up its language, in which all the complexity of the body, its movements, its symbologies, what is expressed, the sense, what is collective and perceived have rank and need to create sense.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

From everything said in this paper, it is possible to affirm that, in contemporary dance, unlike classic ballet, there is no story that can be reconstituted verbally. This lack of sense is still apparent. Perhaps the true sense is expressed not through a verbal language but through the interwoven emotions between the dancers and the audience; as it is emotional, there is no possible verbal translation because they are not equivalent languages. The reading of these emotions is not unique or unequivocal because there are several planes that open simultaneously. A simple movement can express the whole being.

However, the mere fact of dancing creates a sense for both the performer and the audience. The qualification of "ephemeral", so many times applied to dance, would not be honestly valid because the emotional memory of the audience makes it survive beyond the moment of the performance (this one is ephemeral).

When distinguishing between research *on* art, research *for* art and research *in* art, and characterizing the latter as an activity that does not split the subject from the object (artistic practice is a fundamental part of the research process), the studies on the nature of the discursiveness of the body can be enriched insofar as the dancer, dance being incorporated in his body, symbolizes not a verbalizable history but his own drives. Dance becomes his life drive.

Dance can do without everything, except the body. As Thuries observes, the body is the common denominator that remains after subtracting everything that can be considered random. As we have recalled from Merleau-Ponty (*The visible and the invisible*: 1964), it is through the body that the relationship with the world is established. Without it, nothing would remain. And it is the body what writes the sense in dance. It is, therefore, the foundation of any attempt to explain how narrative is produced in dance.

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