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Special Diploma in Choreological Studies, Year 3 : Living Architecture

Written assignment

Space and relationship – An exploration of and a reflection on Laban’s spatial concepts in current dance practice

This interactive document was made in answer to the following written assignment:

“(B) Referring to writing on choreutics and illustrating from current practice, present your understanding of at least five of the following concepts for movement arts: kinesphere, proxemics, lability, scaffolding, scale, harmony, ‘land of silence’.”

Its original version is for the web and is available at

<http://thespaceintherelationship.wordpress.com/about/>, where a PDF document is also available for download.

Introduction

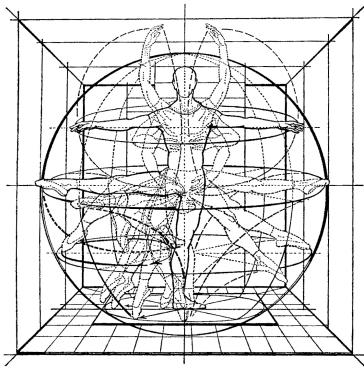
In the introduction to his essay *Air and dreams* on movement and imagination, Gaston Bachelard mentions, "perceiving and imagining are as antithetic as presence and absence" (Bachelard, 1943, p.8). Imagination brings us away from the present moment, and perception pulls us into it. He places the position of the poet on the crest of these two worlds trying to match presence and absence, to ground imagination not in escapism but in an "invitation to travel", and use perception to notice not only what is there but also what is not there.

With dance, a “clear spatial dynamism” is what articulates this relationship between presence and absence (Laban, 1966, p.93). The dancer perceives and acts to articulate

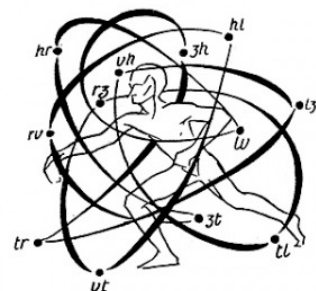
signs and phenomenal events in front of an audience, with their peers, or in daily life, today in a society that presents a rather fragmented experience of space. I will explore here the development of Laban's original spatial concepts in the current practice, with a focus on how space relates to interpersonal relationships under five main notions: kinesphere, proxemics, harmony, lability, land of silence.

Kinesphere:

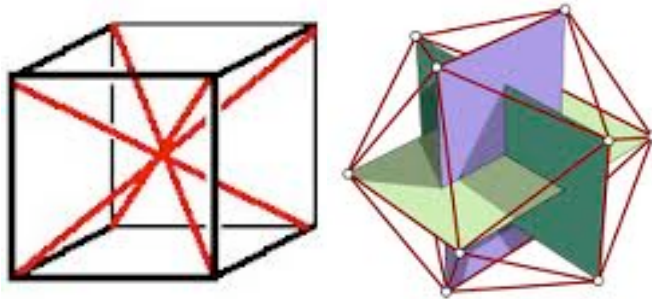
The notion of kinesphere was created by Rudolf Laban to define: “the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extended limbs without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot” (1966, p.10). This spherical space around our body shifts as soon as we shift our weight. It is also the first area of movement exploration before going into “space in general”. It follows anatomical limitations, being actually more elliptic than spherical as constitutionally, the average body has a wider area of reach forward than backward.



Visibly speaking the kinesphere stays invisible until the moment we move within it and make it tangible by leaving our trace-forms, the spatial consequences of our movements (Preston-Dunlop, 1981, p.27).



Taking the body as a reference (called “body cross”, although Laban considered we can also look at space using other references), the kinesphere is also the container of a cube (containing all diagonal directions and dimensions) and of an icosahedron made by three bi-dimensional planes: it contains angular geometry inside a round geometry.



This very precise geometry is also the supporting structure for our personal interactions, defining personal space and body territory.

Antony Gormley in his last exhibition *Model¹* at The White Cube, created a series of works that articulate the relationship between these two different types of geometry and questions the way we inhabit our personal space.



In this project that “investigates our experience of architecture through the body and of the body through architecture”², instead of molding his sculptures on his body,

¹ http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/antony_gormley_model_bermondsey_2012/

² exhibition description

Gormley has chosen parallelepiped iron blocks as a geometrical unit for the construction of buildings of all sizes that present human-like features³, putting in relation the idea of pixel used in computer technology and the physical body.⁴

One of the rooms contains a giant body construction open to visitors: through their physical interaction with it, they explore this dark interior whose structure recalls traditional architecture. I visited it. Before entering, one must agree not to climb on or in it. Deprived from far sight my first instinct is to measure the limits of the space I am in to visualize its structure, and my first area of reach is my kinesphere. I move it horizontally mostly and a little bit up and down, but with the limitation of not changing altitude I have to extend myself on the architecture hoping to reach its limits. After having crawled, stretched onto the cold floor and walls, and jumped endlessly to reach one room's ceiling unsuccessfully, I left with the experience that this body we inhabit all the time still contains unknown dimensions.

The notion of kinesphere has been expanded in the dance practice, particularly in two strands of movement research:

- Experimenting with the notion of centre:

William Forsythe has expanded the kinesphere: area of maximum easy reach, to “super-zone” and “mini-zone”: areas of off-balance reach and areas of minimum reach. In his choreographic material, he mostly plays between these two extremes, to which he has added the notion of decentralization: movement can take place around a centre either in the body (that doesn't need to exist anatomically), or outside of the body: a virtual centre. Moving through his perception of space, Forsythe creates not one but many kinespheres that change size, multiply, fragment, collapse and disappear swiftly (Baudoin&Gilpin, 2004)⁵.

- 360 degree exploration and shared kinesphere:

³ the sculptures were inspired by some of Peter Brook's characters

⁴ interview, exhibition video

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDTu7jF_EwY

For Steve Paxton, “Contact Improvisation is a study of physics [...], Newton’s paradigms, [in which] we are Newton’s apples themselves” (Franklin, 1996, p.57). Paxton plays with the “kinesphere-apple” that he considers 360 degree, any body part being potentially able to sustain the body weight in motion, in relation to other “apples” of the same kind. Following a rolling point of contact between two bodies, the kinesphere becomes a shared space around a common moving centre and sometimes around a unique gravity centre.⁶

All of the research around spatial considerations of the kinesphere make the subsequent human relationships more ambiguous in terms of theatricality, dancers becoming at the same time more animal and more technological for an outside eye, like alienated.

In *D’avant* by Ballets C. de la B.⁷, we can see how the performers have physically pushed the notion of interdependence to the absurd, choosing costumes that allow them to create a comic meaning for an audience.

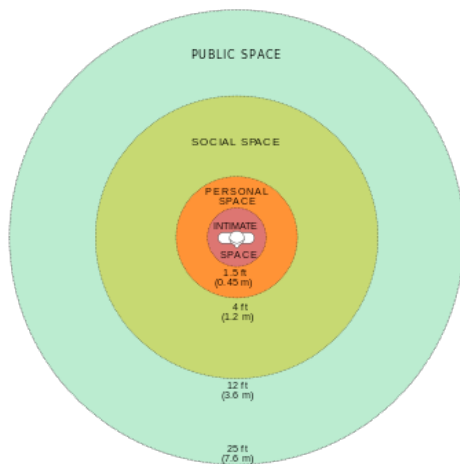
Proxemics:

Proxemics is a recent terminology (1966, E. Hall) that is part of non-verbal communication, defining that in daily life, the distance between people runs in parallel with their interpersonal relationships. It establishes four different spheres of relationships (each subdivided into far/close): Intimate, personal, social and public, which respective distance span may vary from one culture to the other.

⁶ for a comparative view of duets (maybe watch a couple of minutes each): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45nvgqkUJTY> (Forsythe&Caspersen)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k768K_OTePM (Paxton&Stark-Smith)

⁷ <https://vimeo.com/25234797>



In a theatrical context, dance displays proxemics that the viewer interprets as signs, because they are part of everyone’s physical background.

However dance practitioners will look at them in a dynamic perspective, i.e. focusing also on the movement in between these different relationships and on how they become one another to create meaning.



In current choreographic works, proxemics are not only displayed to the viewer, but also used between the performer and the spectator with the intent of closing the kinesthetic gap -gap between experience of the performer and experience of the viewer (Preston-Dunlop, 2002)- by bringing the latter at the centre of the work.

Tino Sehgal’s Unilever Commission at Tate Modern, “These associations”⁸, calls for a subjective experience by the nature and dimension of its set-up: a three-month long choreography that gathers an ever-changing cast of professional and non-professional dancers, framing the space of the Turbine Hall eight hours a day through movement patterns, spatial structures, physical games, sound and personal stories.

⁸ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-tino-sehgal-2012>

There is no separation between performers of all ages dressed casually and visitors-spectators, who are invited to make choices in terms of proxemics: either to passively observe these vary in reference to them (performers come towards and away, and may touch them or speak to them), or to actively seek or avoid interaction with them by entering the performers' personal space or preserving their own. All of Hall's distances are covered through the structure of the choreography in a space that provides detached and immersive points of view. Because of the simplicity of the movement material, the spectators become part of the choreography against their will. By proposing pure experience and therefore immateriality in a product-orientated society⁹, this work wants to give it value: all performers are paid an hourly wage to interact in a personal way with strangers.

Dance films too use proxemics to bring the viewer closer, but they break the continuity of real life interactions. Taking the screen as their stage they provide a multiplicity of viewpoints impossible to experience live, as it would break physical laws and/or social conventions. The choreographer has total control on what the spectator will see: dance film uses editing and cuts between shots to create motion for the spectator between in and out, here and there, now and then, in front of their screen. It blurs our conventions about private and public to artistic effect, opening up the field of "dream-movement" and "dream-architecture" (Laban, 1966, p.5).

Today this dream-area has such expansion that performances can even happen in *Second Life*¹⁰. This is one of the biggest differences between the moment Laban was practicing and nowadays. As I come to watch this kind of performance, my physical relationship to the performers is fragmented: I recognize their movements on a flat image and see them still next to me in front of their computer. On one hand, it is a rather intimate experience, because their fantasies are exposed on the screen, however, the unity between proxemics and meaning being physically broken, I cannot feel but only think empathetically. I wonder if screen interface -of a computer or a

⁹ It is important to acknowledge that Tino Sehgal does not photograph or record any of his works

¹⁰ See Eva and Franco Mattes' performance of *Reenactments*
<http://0100101110101101.org/home/reenactments/performance-abramovic.htm>

camera- might now have to be added to the categories of relationships that Laban had established, with the subcategory of far and close geographically.

Harmony



from the Greek root
meaning "joint, agreement,
concord".

Space harmony deals with the form of movement.

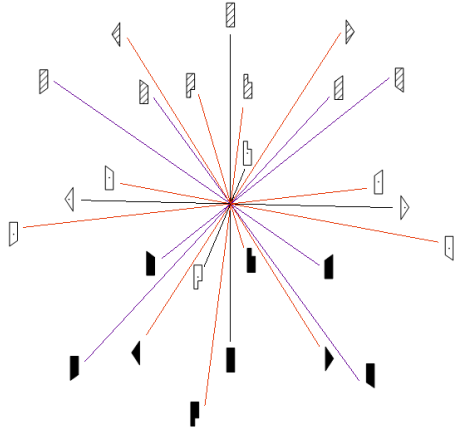
Laban created a parallel between music and movement, assuming that there exist rules in movement that organize it just as there are rules in music that structure sound and its composition.

He used the term harmony in many instances in *Choreutics* and *Choreographie*, evidence that it was a major reference to give structure and meaning to movement. Overall harmonic movement is intended as what permits the flow of movement as opposed to boundness. The spatial laws that govern this harmony are:

- laws of equilibrium: how directions within the kinesphere links to stability (3D in dimensional scale) and lability (diagonal directions, linked to harmony as allowing a flow of movement)
- law of flowing-from-the-centre: each movement initiated by any part of the body starts from the centre or affects it (responsible for sequentiality and connectivity in the body)
- law of countermovement: each movement happening in one or more directions contains its stabilizing counterpart

(Laban, 1926, p.18, 29, 76 and Laban, 1966, p.29, 67, 82, 106)

The application in movement of these main harmonic laws defines the choreological order. It defines dance-logic, therefore the anticipation for the performer and the watcher of where the movement will go next.



Looking for movement that would promote harmony, therefore flow, Laban developed many scales within the various polyhedrons he created based on the 26 main directions constitutive of the kinesphere. Of particular interest for the movement researcher were the constantly three-dimensional A-scale, and its mirror image the B-scale, which execution he wanted to be figured out by the performer as opposed to prescribed (1966, p.111)¹¹.

He observed that these scales when performed simultaneously by two dancers looked like a defense-attack movement scale (ibid, p.34). He had understood that one of the original motivations for man to move was survival, and fighting instinct followed universal rules of movement due to the structure of the human body, which are enclosed in any martial art form. Around the same time as Laban, Morihei Ueshiba developed a martial art in Japan that used these harmonic laws to achieve survival with a peaceful scope: Aikido¹².

In today's works, harmony is rarely displayed as such, but often refers to a way to deal with chaos and order.

William Forsythe proposes "perfect disorder" (Gilpin & Baudoin, 2004): the deconstruction in space of the highly organized form of ballet, keeping its clarity but

¹¹ To access these scales, a Laban App is available on iPhone and iPad, that will be more representative than any video and encourage individual practice

¹² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUPN_OSuHFQ

exploding the shapes at a high speed, thus giving time for movement only to be perceived and not interpreted by the viewer.

Instead, Rosemary Lee with *Square dances*¹³ creates a non-conventional order in London's chaos by actively re-connecting its community to a sense of belonging: four public squares in the middle of the city host the movements of an intergenerational cast of performers, divided by age and gender. Through choral movement and spatial structure, the dancers perform material that is individual in its vertical dimension, but collective in the horizontal open and inclusive traditional group structures, using a shared intuitive sense of time. Allowing the spectators in, this choreographic work brings a sense of equality while displaying individual journeys and aspirations, giving all involved the time to feel for one self and for each other.

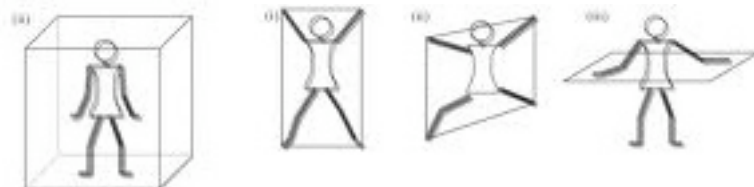
Lability:

Laban originally links the notion of lability to its opposite: “stability” and the concept of “flow”: “the dimensional directions are supporters of stability, while the diagonals ensure the labile flow” (1926, p.75). However, once more, it is the order in which these directions are reached through movement and their pathways that will emphasize or diminish this state of lability.



dimensional directions linked to stability

diagonal directions linked to lability



¹³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXamnO0nE6A>

Lability could be defined as a form that favors disequilibrium and asymmetry, as opposed to stability that favors equilibrium and symmetry. It goes far beyond the action of leaning, going off-centre ¹⁴. Lability is also a state resulting from repetition or duration: practicing the A-scale on one side; spiraling or turning in the same direction for a certain amount of time; going through Richard Serra's giant sculptures¹⁵, etc. It presents variable degrees and occurs in the form of movement or in the choreographic form; focus plays a crucial role in maintaining lability over time.



Meaning wise, lability presents affinities with the notions of impermanence and loss of control.

As seen before William Forsythe has re-inserted lability in aesthetic cannons that used to despise it, “so that previously hidden moments in balletic movements are made plainly visible.” (Baudoin & Gilpin, 2004)

By presenting a process of movement research performed in real time, and expecting the spectator to attend it, Forsythe has set the path for many contemporary works that show the research of a form in real time as a product. Such are instant composition ¹⁶ or Contact Improvisation performances.

Lability has a poetic content by essence because it shows the moment when control of movement gets lost. When witnessing lability being performed, the viewer will physically relate to this loss of control with sensation of freedom, fear or vertigo, depending on their personal experience with it.

¹⁴ qualifies lability as one of the elementary 11 actions

¹⁵ <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/17146>

¹⁶ <http://instantcomposition.wordpress.com/knowledge-base-i-i-c/i-i-c-knowledge-base-context/>

From a performer's point of view, staying in a labile state requires investing all prior movement and theatrical knowledge into the ability to research the unknown, which finds an infinite path of exploration in interpersonal relationships. The more performers there are and the less rules being set, the more potential lability for a performance.

Land of silence:



“Behind external events the dancer perceives another, entirely different, world. There is an energy behind all occurrences and material things for which it is almost impossible to find a name. A hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence, the realm of the soul, and in the centre of this land stands the swinging temple... in which all sorrows and joys, all sufferings and joys, all struggles and deliverances meet and move together.” (Laban, 1935, p.89)

At the time Laban wrote these words in *A life for dance*, his school was situated in a dance-farm, in which the students would practice together indoors and outdoors, but also share a collective life, perform all cultivating activities, working towards a concrete goal, over seasons. Most of these activities because of their task-focused

aspect would be performed without the necessity of verbal language. For Laban this was a condition to put the experience of movement before representation in order to reach its spiritual content. The word “abiding” used by Paramananda in *The body* expresses the attitude that supports inhabiting this place of silence, stillness and mono-tasking with full involvement (2007, p. 105).

Among today’s choreographers, some artists such as Siobhan Davies or Rosemary Butcher have made an artistic statement of inhabiting this land of silence through stripping down their material to the essence, considering and knowing the space around them to let choreography emerge, rather than creating every aspect of the performance. The choreographer Yoann Bourgeois has developed a bare language between circus, theatre and contemporary dance that builds pieces for and in a space. In *Cavale*, originally made for Grenoble’s belvedere (a French city in the Alps circled by mountains), he questions the human desire for accessing ideals through the metaphor of the flight, using a built-in trampoline hidden in the set, repetition and constant variations of relationships between the two male performers, and gives the viewer time to be moved by their eternal suspension and fall while reflecting on their own.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://vimeo.com/13079214>, Translation of the text spoken in the video: “In a poem, Pasolini said –I don’t have the exact quote- that he only has this left: “a desperate vitality”. The desperate vitality is the hatred for death. What on earth separates the retiring from arrogances and the hated death? Well I would say it is this difficult distance, incredibly strong and almost unthinkable, that I call neutrality. It is actually a protest, this protest embodied in the fact of saying: ‘I don’t care much about knowing whether God exists or not, but what I know, and will know till the end, is that he shouldn’t have created love and death at the same time.’ And neutrality for me is this irreducible ‘no’. “ (silence) “In my book *Air and dreams*, I studied at length the dream of flight. It is a very positive dream, and very simple. In our happy nights, we sometimes happen to have the feeling we can fly. Most often, the dream of flight has no wings or mechanism, therefore is a flight that doesn’t need to imitate birds, i.e. to copy reality. We have become so aerial; the air element has impregnated our self so deeply that a light beat of the heels is enough to detach us from earth. We then start to glide, most often close to the ground. If we touch the earth another beat of the heel gets us back up again for an easy ride. Curiously, some dreamers while waking up are surprised not to be able to fly anymore.”

Conclusion:

It is rather fascinating to notice that Laban's sophisticated spatial concepts still have full relevance today and are used and developed, as such or not, by pioneering artists in the field of dance, fine arts and architecture.

As space, time and relationships get more fragmented in people's daily lives, the current practice of the live art of movement has a function of bringing people back to their physical bodies, and of interacting with each other following the logics of the here and now, which are not anymore an evidence for all. However the question they ask might not be whether "cyberspace relationships" are better or worse than "in-person relationships", but rather how they can co-exist and harmonize in a sustainable way.

Whether they are islands of re-connection, experiments on mind-body stimulation or a spiritual search for essential motion, contemporary dance works express the concerns of our time: they question the value we give to existing in real space and time, and make us face or realize our desire to challenge the physical, social and psychological laws that govern us, and to actively enter the "dynamic reverie" (Bachelard, 1943, p.8) as dreamers of our perception.

Bibliography for *Space and relationship – An exploration of and a reflection of Laban's spatial concepts in current practice*

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Infography, internet database:

http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/antony_gormley_model_bermondsey_2012/

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-tino-sehgal-2012>

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/17146>

<http://instantcomposition.wordpress.com/knowledge-base-i-i-c/i-i-c-knowledge-base-context/>

Video links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDTu7jF_EwY (William Forsythe, *Solo*)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45nvgqkUJTY> (Forsythe&Caspersen)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k768K_OTePM (Paxton&Stark-Smith)

<https://vimeo.com/25234797> (Ballets C. de la B., *D'avant*)

<http://0100101110101101.org/home/reenactments/performance-abramovic.htm> (Eva and Franco Mattes, *Reenactments*)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUPN_OSuHFQ (Aikido practice demonstration)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXamnO0nE6A> (Rosemary Lee, *Square Dances*)

<https://vimeo.com/13079214> (Yoann Bourgeois, *Cavale*)

All of infography and video links were last accessed on 15 May 2013.

Photography credits (in order of appearance):

Antony Gormley, *Model* at The White Cube

Sasha Waltz & Guests, *Impromptus* and *Körper*

Rosas (Ann-Teresa De Keersmaecker), *Zeitung*

Yoann Bourgeois, *Cavale*