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# Paradoxical Body



Figure 1. Henri Matisse, *Danseuse Acrobat* (Female Acrobat Dancer), lithograph series, 1931–32. (©2006 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

*José Gil*

We know that the dancer evolves in a particular space, different from objective space. The dancer does not move in space, rather, the dancer secretes, creates space with his movement.

This is not too different from what happens in theatre, or on other stages and in other scenes. The actor also transforms the scenic space; the gymnast prolongs the space that surrounds his skin—he weaves with bars, mats, or simply with the ground he steps on relations of complicity as intimate as the ones he has with his own body. In a similar way, the zen archer and his target are one and the same. In all of these cases a new space emerges. We will call it *the space of the body*.

It is a paradoxical space on many levels; while different from objective space, it is not separated from it. On the contrary, it is imbricated in objective space totally, to the point of being impossible to distinguish one from the other. The transfigured scene where the actor performs—is it not already objective space? Nonetheless, it is a scene invested with affects and new forces—the objects that occupy it gain different emotional values according to the actors' bodies; and although invisible, the space, the air, acquire a diversity of textures—they become dense or rarified, invigorating or suffocating. It is as if they were enveloping things with a surface similar to the skin. *The space of the body* is the skin extending itself into space; it is skin becoming space—thus, the extreme proximity between things and the body.

We can perform the following experiment: let's immerse ourselves completely naked in a deep bathtub, leaving only our heads sticking out of the water; let's drop onto the surface of the water, near our submerged feet, a spider. We will feel the animal's contact on the entirety of our skin. What happened? The water created a space of the body defined by the skin-membrane of the bathtub's water. From this example we can extract two consequences pertaining to the properties of the space of the body: it prolongs the body's limits beyond its visible contours; it is an intensified space, when compared with the habitual tactility of the skin.

The space of the body is not only produced by gymnasts or by artists who use their bodies. It is a general reality, present everywhere, born the moment there is an affective investment by the body. It is akin to the notion of "territory" in ethology. As a matter of fact, it is the first natural prosthesis of the body: the body gives itself new extensions in space, and in such ways it forms a new body—a virtual one, but ready to become actual and ready to allow gestures to become actualized in it. Let's consider the simple fact of driving an automobile: if we can pass through two walls without touching them, or turn left without running over the sidewalk, it is because our body partakes of the space and the contours of the car. Thus we calculate distances as if they referred to our own body (at the front of the car, it is my body that risks running over the sidewalk). In a general manner, any tool and its precise manipulation presupposes the space of the body.<sup>1</sup>

The dancer presents that particular characteristic of apparently not needing any kind of object, or any kind of body, in order to form his or her own proper space. All dancers, choreographers, and thinkers who refer to the space of the body have always described it as emanating from a single body that is surrounded and made autonomous *by* the space of the body.

Rudolf von Laban conceived the space of the body in the shape of an icosahedron; that is, in the shape of an invisible polyhedron with 20 faces whose points of intersection mark the possible directions of the movements of a dancer (who remains at its center). The energetic

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1. Irony of technology's destiny: the technological universe not only finds within itself that paradoxical or "magic" capacity that the body has of secreting a proper space, but it also finds in that capacity its own limits—precisely because of what the space of the body allows, i.e., the *immediate* knowledge of space without any need for calculation. This immediate knowledge represents perhaps one of the absolute limits set before artificial intelligence (see Dreyfus [1979] 1999).

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points in space are defined by the intersections of three faces of the icosahedron. Spatial directions are figured by planes and energetic nuclei by points. Dance produces a space of the body that implies forces and that feeds itself through tensions. Laban's icosahedron surrounds the dancer in a form that he transports from one point in space to another, while at the same time movement erupts in the icosahedron, thus transforming it and preserving it through its mutations.

Others have conceived the space of the body as an egg or as a sphere. But all describe it as a lived experience of the dancer, who feels himself moving within a kind of container that *supports* movement.

We can attribute at least two functions to the space of the body: (a) it augments the movement's fluency by creating a proper milieu, with the least amount of viscosity possible; (b) it makes possible the positioning of virtual bodies, who multiply the dancer's point of view.

Indeed, the space of the body results from a kind of secretion or reversal (whose process we will have to clarify) of the inner space of the body toward the exterior. This reversibility transforms objective space, giving it a texture close to the one of internal space. The dancer's body no longer needs to move as an object in an exterior space—from now on, the dancer's body unfolds movements as if traversing a body (its natural milieu).<sup>2</sup>

An image will help us apprehend this kind of corporification of space from which the space of the body emerges. We can see the body as a receptacle for movement. In possession dances (in the tarantella, in the "Saint Vitus dances," and in many others) it is the body itself that becomes a scene or a space of the dance, as if someone—another body—was dancing inside the possessed subject. The dancer's body unfolds in the dancing body-agent and in the body-space where it dances, or rather, the body-space that movement traverses and occupies. So that dance—and no longer possession—can begin, it is necessary that there is no longer interior space available for movement. It is necessary that interior space partake so intimately of exterior space that movement *seen* from the outside coincides with movement lived or seen from the inside. Indeed, this is what happens in danced trance, where no space is left free outside of the consciousness of the body.

In other words, movement in possession *aims* at dancing. But it faces a resistance or inner viscosity that manifests itself in disorganized movements, as if only the *full* transfer of gestures and of an interior disorder toward the surface of the body could channel the energy for an unblocked fluency. But only an outside space without viscosity allows such a transfer. A space like the space of the body—where interior and exterior are one and the same.

All of this shows that dancing movements are learned: it is necessary to adapt the body to the rhythms and to the imperatives of the dance. Muscles, tendons, organs must become the means for the unimpeded flow of energy. In terms of space this means to tightly imbricate interior space and external space, the inside of the body invested with energy, and the outside where gestures of the dance unfold. Interior space is coextensive with exterior space.

The learning of classical ballet technique shows this clearly. Before the mirror, the student learns how a certain position of limbs corresponds to a certain kinesthetic tension, thus constructing a kind of interior map of those movements that will allow him to move in a precise manner, but without having to take recourse to an exterior image of the body. But what is an energetic map of movements if not a device that turns exterior space interior and vice versa?

The body must open itself to space, must become, in a certain way, space. And interior space must acquire a texture similar to the one of the body so that gestures may flow as easily as movement propagating through muscles. The space of the body—as exterior space—

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2. *Translator's note:* The "reversal" proposed by Gil departs from but also expands Maurice Merleau-Ponty's proposition (outlined in *Phenomenology of Perception*) that the body is not "in" space, but it is "of" space. In Gil's case, we would have to say that both body and space are "of" the "space of the body" (see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2000:67–148, 203–98).

satisfies this demand. The body moves in it without facing the obstacles of foreign, objective space—with all its objects, its density, its prefixed orientations, its own points of reference. In the space of the body, it is the body that creates its own referents to which all exterior directions must submit themselves (thus, Laban’s icosahedron also comprises vectors).

Another function seems to be tied to the space of the body: it assures the narcissistic position of the dancer by multiplying the virtual images of his body. Why is it that one always considers the dancer’s body as essentially narcissistic? Let’s compare it to the actor’s body: both intensify the common narcissism that always accompanies the exposure of any body in space. As Merleau-Ponty described so well,<sup>3</sup> a seeing body enters into a field of vision that sends back its own image, as in a mirror: to see is to be seen. The body carries with it this reversibility of the seer and of the seen, regardless of whether there is or there isn’t another body in the visual field. This is why Merleau-Ponty talked about a “narcissism of vision.”<sup>4</sup>

Because the scene constitutes itself as an appropriate object for the gaze, bodies augment their narcissistic potency in it. They find themselves in it just to exhibit themselves. But while the narcissism of the actor is divided among other elements beyond the body (the play of voice and word), with the dancer it is fully concentrated in corporeal presence. Whether the dancer wants it or not, he carries with him a powerful narcissistic capacity.

Now, the dancer’s narcissism does not only summon the gaze. It is true that one “sees” dancing, but it is also true that one “listens,” and even more profoundly, one “senses” dancing (because one “touches” or “experiences” the movement: the reflexivity of the body is total). There is no single visual or kinesthetic image of the dancing body, but a multiplicity of virtual images produced by movement that mark so many *points of contemplation* from which the body perceives itself.

The dancer senses his dancing. The dancer does not see himself as an object in motion across space, but accompanies his body’s movement (seen from the outside by the spectators) with virtual images formed according to the map he has created from the choreography. It is something different than a mirroring, because the virtual image is never built in itself (while the visible gestures are, they are the virtual image’s actualization). The dancer sees his dancing “as in a dream”—thus opposing his body image to the one presented by reality. On one hand, the danced movement pulls the body back upon itself; on the other, it projects its multiple images toward points of narcissistic contemplation, points that are necessarily outside of the body proper, and that are found in space. But in which space, since it can be neither objective space nor interior space? It is the space of the body that provides the exterior-interior points of contemplation. Indeed, the narcissistic relationship of the dancer with his body implies a complicity that objective space, neutral and homogeneous, cannot provide. And it supposes a distance—of contemplation—that interior space refuses to provide. Only the space of the body, with its intense exterior, can satisfy both demands.

The dancer contemplates the virtual images of his body from the multiple points of view of the space of the body. Paradoxically, the narcissistic position of the dancer does not demand an “I.” Rather, it demands (at least) one other body that can detach itself from the visible body and dance with it. Thanks to the space of the body, the dancer, while dancing, creates virtual doubles or multiples of his or her body who guarantee a stable point of view over movement (to Mary Wigman, to dance is to produce a double with whom the dancer dialogues).

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3. Particularly in *Le Visible et l’Invisible* [1964] and in *Notes de Travail* [1964].

4. *Translator’s note*: The full quote can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”: “Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision” (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1964] 1968:139).

Complicity and distance of the actual body in relation to all virtual bodies are thus accompanied by a contemplation of the movement that simultaneously partakes of that movement and distances itself from it, in order to acquire a consistent perspective at the interior of movement itself.

To dance is to produce dancing doubles. This is what explains the existence of duos (or, in a general manner, of a series of  $n$  dancers making identical or complementary movements). The actual partner realizes the virtual double of the dancer. It is quite natural that the partner occupies such a place: he sees himself in the other, he adjusts gestures and rhythms according to the other, augments the same impulse, contemplates himself from the place of the other.

It is necessary above all not to identify the production of doubles by dancing movement with a phenomenon of mimesis. The partners in a duo do not enter into any mirroring mimetic relation; they do not “copy” forms or gestures from each other. Instead, both enter into the same rhythm, while marking within it their own differences. This rhythm surpasses both partners, given that the difference perceived in one of the partners bounces back and resonates on the movement of the other reciprocally. Thus, a plane of movement<sup>5</sup> is formed that overflows the individual movements of each dancer and acts as a nucleus of stimulation for both. The two partners will actualize other virtual bodies and so on. A duo is an arrangement for building multiplicities of dancing bodies.

A partner’s movement tries to enter the rhythm or the form of the other’s energy—as a matter of fact, one partner becomes the other, becomes the other’s dancing energy. From this we can derive the constitution of series—as if the same energy would spread from one body to another, traversing during the entire process of such a becoming all the bodies that comprise the series. Dance has the vocation to form groups or series.

In this sense, a duo or an indefinite series of bodies makes dance more than the serial production of virtual bodies—all of them doubles, since the original virtual body initiated a becoming-double, that is then added to the multiplicity inherent to doubles. (This is what Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker understood very well in *Rosas danst Rosas* [1983], for instance).

Dance is also an art of constructing *series*. (It would be of interest to choreographic analysis to adopt this methodological point of view more often). Danced movement creates most naturally the space of doubles, of multiplicities of bodies, and of bodily movements. An isolated body that starts to dance progressively populates space with a multiplicity of bodies. Narcissus is a crowd.

Many other paradoxical aspects of the space of the body are clearly manifested in the dancer’s movements: the absence of internal limits when, seen from the outside, it is a finite space; the fact that its first dimension is depth, a topological depth, nonperspectival in such a manner that when it blends with objective space it is able to dilate, shrink, twist, disperse, unfold, or collect itself in a single point.

From the start, the first aspect creates a deep impression on the spectator looking at the dancer on the stage (the spectator will endure simultaneously a process of becoming-dancer): all of the body’s movement, or all movement coming out of the body, smoothly transports the spectator across space. No material obstacle, object or wall, impedes the spectator’s trajectory, which does not end in any real place. No movement ends in a precise location within

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5. *Translator’s note:* Gil’s notion of “a plane of movement” directly refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notions of “plane” developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (plane of immanence, plane of consistency, plane of composition, plane of desire, etc.). Deleuze and Guattari explore the semantic ambiguity of the word “plan” in French which refers not only to a geometric figure but also to “map” and to “making a plan.” See particularly the subsection “Memories of a Plan(e) Maker” in their chapter “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1980] 1987).



Figure 2. Inspired by the 1983 premier performance of *Rosas danst Rosas*, this still from the film of the same name uses mathematical repetition of gestures to produce the virtual series and doubling of dancing bodies Gil describes. From left: Samantha van Wissen, Anne Mousselet, Cynthia Loemij, and Sara Ludi in *Rosas danst Rosas* (1997), directed by Thierry De Mey, with choreography by Anna Teresa De Keersmaecker. (©1997 *Rosas*; courtesy of *Rosas Press and Promotion*)

the objective scene—just as the limits of the dancer’s body never prohibit his gestures from extending beyond his skin. There is an infinity appropriate to danced gestures that only the space of the body is able to engender.

Let us remember that the space of the body does not come about except by the projection-secretion of interior space on exterior space. The body, as we saw, also becomes space. The movements of the space of the body do not stop at the frontier of the body itself, but they implicate the body in its entirety: if the space of the body dilates, this dilation will impact on the body and its interior.

Depth as a dimension radically distinguishes the space of the body from objective space, because it is not a matter of a measurable depth—as with a length moving 90 degrees to measure the distance separating an observer from the horizon. What is characteristic of this depth<sup>6</sup> is its capacity to tie itself to a place, so we may call it topological: it is a certain link between body and place that carves in it its own depth. The space of the body is that spatial milieu that creates the depth of places. If a certain scenic place all of a sudden becomes unlimited, if the height toward which Nijinsky projects himself acquires an infinite dimension, it is because a depth was born there.

Depth is the primordial dimension of the dancer’s space. It allows the dancer to mold space, to expand it, or to restrict it, to make it acquire the most paradoxical forms. It is even from depth that one may create depthless choreographies with marionette-bodies. In short: because the space of the dancer’s body is riddled with virtual vacuoles he can make it into an eminently plastic matter.

6. What Deleuze calls *spatium*, in *Différence et Répétition* [1968].

*Translator’s note:* Deleuze introduces the notion of *spatium* to distinguish his own understanding of spatiality from that of Merleau-Ponty, which Deleuze saw as still reminiscent of the Cartesian notion of space as extension.

Thus, units of space-time that characterize the dancer's movement are formed. And because the dancer does not move in common space, his time transforms the objective time of clocks.

This has nothing to do with the appearance of a represented event whose own time irradiates through the behavior of the actors, as in theatre. In dance, the event, regardless of whether we are referring to a narrative or to an abstract dance, refers to transformations of the regime of energy flow. This is due to the fact that such transformations of energy mark the passage to another level of meaning. The event is real, corporeal, modifying the very duration of the dancer's gesture. A leap, a figure, may not constitute an event if they are coming from the same regime of energy. On the other hand, a gesture as simple as a turn of the head, or the lifting of an elbow, may testify to the irruption of decisive events on the choreographic path. Dance is composed of a succession of micro-events that ceaselessly transform the movement's meaning.

To every transformation of the energetic regime there is a corresponding modification of the space of the body. Such modification always consists in certain forms of contraction or of folding, in certain forms of spatial dilation or of distention, which are all made possible by depth. These are, so to speak, dilations and foldings *in the same place*, and not in objective extension. For instance, only the unfolding of space brought about by depth allows the dancer to acquire an "eternal slowness" when executing the movement: if a (same) distance has become too wide, the dancer need not traverse it in a hurry, under pressure from an external force. We know that Nijinsky over-articulated movements, thus de-multiplying distances by means of microscopic decompositions of movement. He thereby dilated the space of the body: he gave the impression of having all the time in the world, dislocating in space with the superb ease of someone creating (unfolding) space as he moved.

The same happens with any great dancer, regardless of technique. In truth, there is no fixed and autonomous space of the body. The space of the body varies according to the velocities of its unfolding, in such a way that it is dependent upon the time movement takes in opening the space of the body. This time depends on the texture—more or less dense, more or less viscous—of the space of the body, which is born from the energy involved. Energy creates space-time unities. The dancer does not traverse the space of the body as he would traverse an objective distance in a given chronological time. While dancing, the dancer produces singular and indissoluble space-time unities that confer a force of truth to metaphors such as "a dilated slowness," or "a sudden enlargement of space," used to describe the dancer's gestures.

So that we can understand how dance transforms the body, we need to have a more precise idea of this body, which we talk about all the time as if it was an unquestionable evidence. Yet, at the very moment we question the body, it becomes almost ungraspable. From the start we find ourselves before a multiplicity of points of view, all different, often unarticulated, but nevertheless all pertinent.

We have the body of Western anatomy and physiology, comprised of organ systems and of more or less independent functions—a body image about to change thanks to recent contributions from microbiology, neurosciences, and all the advanced scanning and scoping technologies. We have the Eastern or Asian body, a multiple body—the yoga body and the Chinese medicine one, defined by other organ cartographies, and predicated upon a physiology of energy flows. Both systems of knowledge refer mostly to the body's interior.

Among the several types of body found in the "psych" therapies, and in many body therapies, the interiority of the body and its organs are either reduced to representations that gain symbolic values and significations according to sign structures (as with psychoanalysis); or they are understood within complex systems that combine relational and behavioral positions with signifying values.



There are some rare attempts in Western medicine to articulate the point of view of symbolic analysis—we can cite the case of psychosomatics whose intelligibility remains quite precarious.

The merit of phenomenology lies in its consideration of the body in the world. It is not a therapeutic perspective (even though it spawned a whole psychiatric school), but a study of the role of the body-proper<sup>7</sup> in the constitution of meaning. The notion of “body-proper” encompasses the perceiving body and the living body, that is, the sensing body, and the notions of “Flesh” in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Erwin Straus. With this notion, the description of the body in a situation takes precedence over all other considerations of meaning or function. We can measure the significance such an image of the body had for choreographers and for dance theory (particularly in the United States after WWII) in the work of authors such as Susanne Langer.

However, the phenomenological body (particularly the one found in Husserl, and not so much the one in Susanne Langer) did not understand two essential elements of living particular to dancers: what they call the body’s “energy,” and the body’s space-time.<sup>8</sup>

Here, we would like to consider the body no longer as a “phenomenon,” no longer as a visible and concrete perception moving in the objective Cartesian space, but rather, we would like to consider the body as a meta-phenomenon, simultaneously visible and virtual, a cluster of forces, a transformer of space and time, both emitter of signs and trans-semiotic, endowed by an organic interior ready to be dissolved as soon as it reaches the surface. A body inhabited by—and inhabiting—other bodies and other minds, a body existing at the same time at the opening toward the world provided by language and sensorial contact, and in the seclusion of its singularity through silence and non-inscription. A body that opens and shuts, that endlessly connects with other bodies and elements, a body that can be deserted, emptied, stolen from its soul, as well as traversed by the most exuberant fluxes of life. A human body because it can become animal, become mineral, plant, become atmosphere, hole, ocean, become pure movement. That is: a *paradoxical body*.

This body is composed of special matter, which gives it the property of being *in* space and of *becoming* space. That is to say, this body has the property of combining so intimately with exterior space that it draws from it a variety of textures. Thus, the body can become an interior-exterior space producing multiple space forms, porous spaces, spongy, smooth, striated, Escher’s or Penrose’s paradoxical spaces, or quite simply a space of asymmetric symmetry, like left and right in the same body-space.

It is a fallacy to say that we “carry our body” like a weight we always drag around. The body’s weight constitutes another paradox: if it requires an effort so we can make it move, it also carries us without effort across space.

As shown to us by Picasso’s *Women Running on the Beach*—their legs and arms spreading like the very space that their running, the horizon, the sea, and the wind generate—the body’s texture is spatial; and, reciprocally, the texture of space is corporeal.

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7. *Translator’s note:* The “body-proper” (*corps propre*) is a key concept in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, the matrix from which all phenomenological accounts could arise: from within the body of the subject. Merleau-Ponty would revise this notion of body-proper later in his posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible* ([1964] 1968). Here the body-proper becomes no longer the matrix but an “exemplar” for Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh in its constitutive reversibility. More recently, neuroscientist António Damásio has used the term to oppose it to what he terms “the brain.” For Damásio, “the brain” encompasses all parts of the nervous system, including all neurologically induced chemical discharges in the blood system. What is not “the brain” is the “body-proper” (see António Damásio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994).

8. Such critiques also apply to the semiotic approach. An exception could be found, perhaps, in the refined analyses of an author who claims such an approach, Susan Foster (see Foster 1986).

This paradoxical body is constantly opening and shutting itself to space and to other bodies—a capacity that has less to do with the existence of orifices marking the body visually than with the nature of skin. Because it is mostly through the entire surface of the body, rather than through the anus, or the vagina, that the body opens itself up to the outside. These orifices are at the service of organic functions of exchange between interior and exterior—but rarely do they control the total opening of interior space (except in sexual pleasure and in speech).

The “opening” of the body is not a metonymy, nor a metaphor. It is really the interior space that reveals itself once it returns to the exterior, transforming the latter into the space of the body.

But why should one want to open the body and project it toward the outside? We know: in order to build the space of the body and, at the limit, to form the plane of dance’s immanence as the last transformation of that space. And why should we want immanence? In order to reach the highest intensities, the ones Cunningham called “of fusion.” But, finally, why should we want to dance?

The moment we try to answer this question we are immediately redirected toward desire, toward the very nature of desire.

Which is tied to a simple verb: to assemble.

A verb coming from Deleuze and Guattari that seems to us to be the most adequate one to express that which in desire is most implicated in the desire to dance.

Desire creates assemblages. But the movement *to assemble* always opens itself up toward new assemblages. This is because desire does not exhaust itself in pleasure, but augments itself by assembling. To create new connections between heterogeneous materials, new bonds, other passageways for energy; to connect, to put in contact, to symbiose, to make something pass, to create machines, mechanisms, articulations—this is what it means to assemble. To ceaselessly demand new assemblages.

In this way desire is infinite—and it will continue to produce new assemblages unless exterior forces no longer come to tear, break, and cut its flux. Desire wants above all to desire, that is, to assemble, which is the same thing. The assemblage of desire opens up desire and prolongs it.

If assemblage opens and prolongs desire, it is only because it has become *desire’s matter*; not its object, but its proper texture, participating in desire’s force, in its intensity, in its “*élan vital*” to use Bergson’s expression.<sup>9</sup> In other words, desire is not only desire for assemblage, it is already assemblage—it transforms what it “produces” or “builds” into itself. If the desire of a painter consists in the assemblage of certain colors in a certain way, the resultant painting’s force is desire. The assembled colors and spaces desire.

Regardless of the type of assemblage, desire always seeks to flow through it. In thought’s movements as well as in the makings of the artist, or in the elaborations of speech, to desire is to assemble in order to flow—to assemble so that the power to desire increases. This is why desire leads back to itself, it transforms, metabolizes all elements that it touches, traverses or devours. For desire, everything must become desire.

What is a danced gesture if not a particular assemblage of the body? All gesture is, in itself, an assemblage. But in general, gesture assembles the body with an object or with other bodies. To say “see you later” while oscillating the arm from left to right is to reconnect a body with another at an imminent rupture of contact. The danced gesture articulates the anterior posture of the body with a new position (often) without the help of an object

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9. *Translator’s note:* The reference is to Henri’s Bergson’s use of the term in *L’Evolution créatrice* (Creative Evolution; New York: Henry Holt & Co, [1907] 1910).

or another body. The result is a passageway for energy and for movement that, rather than arresting them, increases their flow and intensity.

What do danced gestures assemble? We can say: they assemble gestures with other gestures; or an actual body with all the actualized virtual bodies; or still, a movement with other

Dance operates as a kind of pure experimentation with the body's capacity to assemble, thus creating a laboratory where all possible assemblages are tested. Dance not only puts the body in motion by assembling its limbs (which usually only articulate according to functions), but dance enchains this motioning over the pure vital movement the body shelters.

movements. In all cases, danced gesturality experiments with movement (with its circuits, its quality, its strength) in order to obtain the best conditions to execute a choreography. In this sense, to dance is to experiment, to work all possible assemblages of the body. This work is precisely what assembling consists of. To dance is therefore to assemble the body's assemblages.

As an articulated and fluidic machine, the body is made to connect with objects and other bodies. Dance operates as a kind of pure experimentation with the body's capacity to assemble, thus creating a laboratory where all possible assemblages are tested. Dance not only puts the body in motion by assembling its limbs (which usually only articulate according to functions), but dance enchains

this motioning over the pure vital movement the body shelters. Dance unearths it, makes it gush out and awaken other potencies of movement. Dance assembles "trivial" movement with that vital movement, thus discovering new assembling possibilities for corporeal gestures. In order to look for a new form, its matter—movement—first searches for an assemblage. It works in order not to assemble limbs, body parts, organs, but precisely to assemble that which assembles them—like a certain assemblage of legs and arms assembles itself with a certain assemblage of head or torso. And so on and so forth: How does this assemblage of assemblages enter into a combination with a certain falling movement; and how does this assemblage of assemblages of assemblages... Dance is an abstract machine of assemblages exposing and hiding them endlessly. Dance always wants to assemble assemblages and not organs with other organs.

This is how the map created by the dancer aims at energy and not at concrete movements: the most abstract and subtle modulation of energy is enough to actualize the most concrete bodily movements. Energy is what assembles assemblages; the energy map is what composes the most abstract tracing of movements.

It is in this sense that we can talk about the body as a totality. Not as an organism where we could find a global function operating in each part, but as a body-total that constitutes in and of itself a map of the assemblage of all possible assemblages. This totality naturally produces a body without organs, a plane of immanence.

This is why dance realizes in the purest way the assembling vocation of desire. Which explains, without a doubt, its very powerful—yet so often de-eroticized—presence in most courtly and royal dances. The de-sexualization of bodies accompanies the deployment of the movement of assemblage; that is to say, of danced movement as the movement of desire. If dance de-eroticizes bodies, it is because danced movement has become desire (desire to dance, desire to desire, desire to assemble). When eroticism breaks through and possesses bodies (namely in popular dances), it is because the movement of assemblage of assemblages was itself taken up by a concrete erotic assemblage. Then, everything is inverted: it is the movement of concrete gestures that sustains the *continuum* of abstract assemblage, while a whole choreography becomes impregnated with eroticism, like a wave or an atmosphere.

These three realities—(a) desire desires to assemble; (b) desire desires immanence; (c) desire desires to flow—all demand a space, a territory where desire may desire. To desire is already to start building such a space or plane where desire can flow and unfold its power [*potência*]. This is a space from which all obstructions, all flux-breaking, flux-cutting, and flux-vampirizing machines have been brushed off by the very intensity of the flux.

This plane, as we already know, is the plane of immanence or the “body-without-organs.” Why this expression of a body that has no organs? Why does such a body compose a plane of immanence?<sup>10</sup> Let us say simply that the habitual body (the body-organism) is formed by organs that impede the free circulation of energy: in it, energy is invested and fixated on the organism’s system of organs—this is how one builds those “interiorized sensori-motor systems” that Cunningham talks about, and that for him always represent an obstacle to innovation. To untangle from these systems, to constitute another body where intensities may be taken to their highest degrees, such is the task of the artist and, in particular, of the dancer.



*Figure 3. Marcie Munnerlyn and Rashaun Mitchell perform against a moving projection of shadows and doublings of the dancing bodies produced by motion capture video in BIPED, 1999. Choreography by Merce Cunningham, décor by Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, lighting by Aaron Copp, music by Gavin Bryars, and costumes by Suzanne Gallo. (Photo by Tony Dougherty; courtesy of Cunningham Dance Foundation)*

How do we make this body-without-organs, this plane of immanence of desire? In this case, the plane of movement immanent to the dancer?<sup>11</sup> Let’s take as an example a therapeutic ritual as described by ethnologist András Zempléni in his fieldwork with the Wolof from Senegal [1984:325–52]. In many cultures, therapeutic dances aim at curing by means of trance. Among the Wolof, trance is also entered through dancing and other procedures; and it arrives only through the de-structuring of the body-organism.

This is how the Wolof proceed: they remove the entrails of a sacrificed animal and cover the body of a female patient with them. After bathing the patient with the blood of the sacrificed animal (an ox or a goat), the animal’s intestines are emptied out and then,

10. It is known that Deleuze borrowed this expression “body-without-organs” (or “b-w-o” or “BwO”) from Artaud’s poem “To be Done with the Judgment of God” [1947]. The expression appears in Deleuze for the first time in *Logique du Sens* [1969], but without the full signification it will acquire later on in *L’Anti-Oedipe* [1972], and, most significantly in *Mille Plateaux* [1980], where it designates the plane of immanence.

11. In *Mille Plateaux*, there is a whole chapter dedicated to the subject: “How to Make Yourself a BwO?” However, after reading these very dense pages, the mystery remains regarding “what one should do” to avoid the strata and build a full body (Deleuze and Guattari 1980:199). We still cannot quite see what transformations the body must endure so that it can become a plane of immanence. What we would like to show, in this essay, even if in a general way, is how the dancer proceeds with this task.

cut, and after that *tied*, bit by bit, to the body of the patient: to her left wrist and to her right ankle (or vice-versa); to her waist, like a belt; to her chest and back, as if it was a crossed brassiere tied under her breasts. Finally, a part of the animal's stomach, emptied out and *turned inside out*, is attached to the patient's hair like a small coif. Under a blanket of coagulated blood, the patient will wear these visceral adornments and this coif made out of stomach until the ritual bath she will take the next day in the lustrous waters of her new altars [Zempléni 1984:332; italics in the original].

It should be underlined that all of this extremely complex process is unfolding while the patient is in a trance undergoing the strongest intensities she can endure (frequently, the patient will faint).

This ritual operation consisting in the extraction of organs from the organism and in the emptying out of interior space has several objectives: by extracting the organs and by splaying them out, one destroys the organization of the organism. In this way, *one frees the affects invested in and fixated on the organs* that had been organized according to precise and stable structures and strata.<sup>12</sup> (All of this supposes, quite obviously, an “identification” with the animal—or, more accurately, a “becoming-animal.” This is quite explicit and well-defined among the Wolof by means of chanting and ritual gestures).

Secondly, one creates an interior “paradoxical” space, which both is and is not in space. Being empty, and being of the order of the *non-incorporated corporeal*, interior space is composed of “interstitial matter,” that is, of the matter proper of becoming par excellence. This matter will allow: (a) the whole body to become surface (skin), given that the interior no longer separates in terms of thickness (viscera) the different oppositional planes of the body (back and front, anterior and posterior); (b) the exterior to attract upon itself the entirety of the interior's movement, most particularly the motion of affects. Interstitial matter has no thickness: it has become pure matter transformable into surface energy. It is matter for becoming; it is the matter of becoming.

As Deleuze insists, everything in the BwO is a question of matter [see Deleuze and Guattari 1980:189–90]. Building the BwO consists in determining which matter is adequate to the body one wants to build: a body of pictorial sensations, a body of pain for the masochist, a body of loving affects as in courtly love, a body of thought for the philosopher, a body of health for the sick, a body of movement for the dancer. In each case, desire chooses the adequate matter.

We perceive the interstitial nature of interior space by noting that it is not a lived aspect of consciousness. It is empty (void, a floating body), but it has the power to attract toward itself all sorts of “matters” and to transform them into particular intensities (intensities of thought, of colors, etc.). Why is it that interior space attracts toward itself all sorts of matter? Why is it that it becomes the object of operations (for instance, as we saw in the Wolof ritual, operations of “reversal” toward the outside, or of “turning inside out” as a glove) in order to become a “body of thought,” or a BwO of sensations, or a plane of movement? Because

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12. *Translator's note:* It is important to remember at this point that Deleuze and Guattari followed Artaud by saying that the enemy of the body is not the organs but the *organization* of the organs imposed by social-theological forces (see Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987:158). Which means that all anatomy is already desire-organized according to hegemonic laws that “properly” assign functions to the organs. “The organism is not at all the body, the BwO; rather, it is a stratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences” (159). If we think about the legal organization of body orifices and their “properly assigned” functions—for instance, in sodomy laws in the U.S.—we can see how legal-judicial systems linked with the judgment of God constantly attempt to organize organs into a system of (re)production. The full BwO is not a body free of organs then, but free of the judgment over how organs should behave, of how they should access and produce their own plane of immanence; that is: their own plane of consistency of desire.

interior space composes an interface with the skin. No longer a content, having become empty, it has a tendency to confuse itself with the container (the skin). It establishes an intimate connection with the skin, becoming a sort of inner atmospheric wall of the skin. In this interior space-skin machine, atmosphere constitutes the very texture of the matter of the BwO.

Let's remember that the skin is not a superficial membrane, but it has a thickness, that it *indefinitely* extends itself into the body's interior: this is why tactile sensations are localized a few millimeters within the skin and not at its surface. This is what allows the formation of the machine interior space- (or atmospheric matter) skin. An interfacial machine situated between an organic interior that tends toward disappearing and an exterior that tends toward occupying it entirely.

Now, this space allows the liberated affects to run freely, as well as any other matter it will attract toward itself—thought, emotion, wood, mineral, supernatural being, ancestor (who enters the Wolof patient): they all tend to flow within it just as energy flows in the dancer's body. We can thus talk about a body of emotions or a body of intensities.

To flow like energy in the dancer's body: this indicates first of all a privileging of the dancer's "body (or plane) of movement"—as if the machine interior space-skin of the dancer composed a surface where all movements could be transformed into danced movements; as if the dancer's movement could attract toward itself all other body movements just as the body empties itself out and loses its organs. Finally, this would mean that there would be no such thing as articulation. Rather, a fluid circulation of intensities over a given matter, a skidding of energy fluxes one over the other, "multiplicities of fusion," as Deleuze and Guattari write in *Mille Plateaux*.

Two conditions are required for forming a body where intensities flow: (a) interior space, emptied out, must fall back toward the skin, thus constituting the matter of the BwO; (b) the skin, impregnated with interior space, has to become the body-matter of the full body (including the space of the body).

It should be noted that these two conditions imply immanence. There is no longer or no more the separation body/mind, or mind/matter; no transcendence comes to disturb the movements of intensities. In the case of the patient of the therapeutic ritual it is trance that assures immanence: thought, visions of ancestors, are acted by the dancing body—they all dance in that body they now inhabit.

Let us consider more closely the formation process of the BwO. The body is emptied out of its organs. Their removal leaves a floating cloud of affects, a mist of sensations in an atmospheric space. This milieu is, above all, affective. It is traversed by chaotic dynamisms with no anchoring point. The falling back of the milieu over the skin implies the transformation of the latter: because, on one hand, affect attracts to itself matters that become confused with the skin and, on the other hand, because the skin becomes the matter of becoming.

Falling back, returning, implies, as we saw, the attraction exercised by the skin over those affects populating the emptied-out interior space. Skin attracts them and impregnates them. It attracts them from within, because skin itself has ceased to be the map of the dissolved organism. Skin itself is in mutation, it changes nature, it wrinkles, it dilates—it searches for ways to become a new map for new intensities. It allows exterior and interior to penetrate it (this is clear in the Wolof ritual). It becomes an extremely porous interface, diaphanous, allowing all sorts of exchanges, confusing inside and outside. Skin no longer delimits the body-proper, but it extends beyond it across exterior space: it is the space of the body.

**Skin no longer delimits the body-proper, but it extends beyond it across exterior space: it is the space of the body.**



Figure 4. (above and facing page) Witnessed in Matisse's drawings, Gil imagines the dancer's body as a Möbius strip, a continuing moving line of paradoxical reversibility. Henri Matisse, *Danseuse Acrobat (Female Acrobat Dancer)*, lithograph series, 1931–32. (© 2006 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

The reversibility of interior on the exterior is equivalent to the progressive disappearing of the interior. Everything will happen now horizontally: the becoming of matter-body-skin will transform it into a BwO where intensive affect will circulate.

How does the dancer achieve such a reversibility? By creating, thanks to danced movement, a very particular device: his body becomes a kind of Möbius strip. A Möbius strip (an interior space-skin machine) that forms itself as it absorbs interior affect-forces and makes them circulate at the surface. The reversion that the BwO of the dancer builds, its plane of immanence, is realized by this device that transforms the dancer's body into a moving Möbius strip, ceaselessly making and unmaking itself, absorbing and dissolving the interior without stopping, making it climb to the single-sided surface [*única*], the surface without obverse.

That the dancer, through movement, transforms his body into a Möbius surface results from the very constitution of the body: covered by a single skin, it simulates on its back a quasi-obverse of the front—an opposition that rotation immediately annihilates, thus forging a single “frontal” surface, so to speak.

The obverse of the skin would be constituted precisely by this invisible interior wall: the “inside” of the outside, whose existence the major orifices (particularly the anus and the vagina) constantly testify to. Danced movement precisely shuts its orifices: the energy flowing over the unified body demands a continuum no organ can cut.

In short, the BwO is constructed by danced movement because this movement: (1) empties the body of its organs, de-structuring the organism, liberating the affects, and *directing movement toward the periphery of the body*, toward the skin;<sup>13</sup> (2) creates a continuous space-skin surface, one that prevents orifices from inducing movements toward the interior of the body. Quite on the contrary, breathing becomes almost dermic, sounds make the skin vibrate, vision happens totally at the surface. If the female ballet dancer erased all trace of her genital organs, contemporary nudity in dance paradoxically does nothing else than emphasize the continuity of the unified surface of the skin, by also not allowing interior organs to become manifest or visible; (3) builds, thanks to movement, a Möbius strip-like body: pure depthless surface, without thickness, without obverse, body-without-organs freeing the strongest kinesi-  
thetic intensities.

13. This is what makes dance fascinating: as the dancer experiences his whole body being transported to the periphery thanks to centrifugal movement, he feels increasingly more “centered” and reunited with himself.



It was this Möbius body (as paradoxical as the strip) that Matisse saw in the dancer. In his drawings and in his panels on “The Dance,” individual bodies as well as grouped bodies retrace Möbius strips. In his series of drawings, *Danseuse Acrobat* (Female Acrobatic Dancer [1931–32]) reproduced here, the second drawing traces a Möbius ring: when the dancer lifts her leg vertically, the front becomes back and vice versa—and the whole body emerges from the tracing of a continuous line.

—translated by André Lepecki

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