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DAN 540

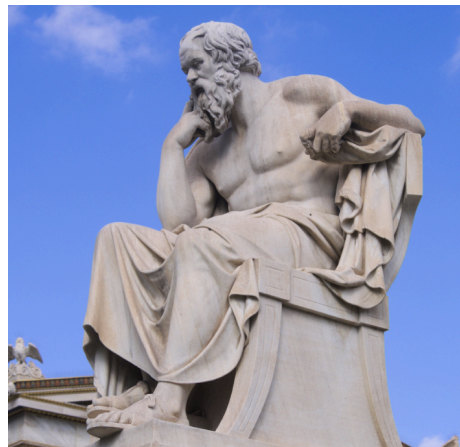
Dance Research Methods: Final Project

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Enacting Phenomenology: Practice as Research

Imagine a philosopher, philosophizing.

Now, my humble guess is that you've created a mental image of a person, seated, chin in hand, frozen, pondering existence. Perhaps something like the one below:



Socrates by Leonidas Drosis, Athens

The association of deep thought with stillness is pervasive. School teachers tell children to sit still while in the classroom. Parents punish bad behavior with thought and stillness: “Go sit in that corner and think about what you've done.” In addition to thought, stillness is associated with order, discipline, and control. Movement, on the other hand, is associated with thoughtlessness and freedom. Movement is play. Movement threatens order. Movement means change, rebellion, and stirring.

Undoubtedly, there is a shift in the quality of consciousness when one engages in bodily movement versus when one is still. I make this claim naively, brashly, but with a knowing confidence from my own felt experiences as a dancer. The experience of dancing is a mysterious one. While my body is in motion, my thoughts change form. If I enter a dance with a thought in mind, that thought undergoes a transformation as I acquire new information from my experience dancing. Sometimes this information is

not even articulable in words, but expressed in my body's continued movement. Much of my dance training has as much to do with focusing and shaping my awareness as it does with "physical" training. Describing my conscious experience while dancing is slippery and ambiguous; it is this territory that I toe in the research herein.

"The phenomenologist seeks the heart of the experience itself: the immediate and direct consciousness of man in the face of the world," Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes in her seminal book, Phenomenology of Dance (7). The task of the phenomenologist is hefty and, frankly, impossible. To describe "experience itself" is to imagine that this is within the grasp of our consciousness, a consciousness which holds so many objects besides one's present experience. Memories, judgements, worries, pleasures, suspicions, predictions, associations... our minds are cluttered with things that get in the way of living in the immediate and direct world.¹ Perhaps this very ideal of pure presence is what draws me to phenomenology. Describing the phenomenon of being inside dancing, attempting to glimpse this in its center, and thus in its entirety, is enticing in its infeasibility. To experience dancing with a positioning of tabula rasa is contrary to a great deal of the training that I have received in graduate school and beyond, where there are often mental seeds planted that are intended to inform one's dancing. A history of working with an idea in conjunction with movement improvisation is part of my positionality in conducting this research.

One dance practice that I engage with regularly is *butoh*. This form holds interest for me especially in the way in which it affects my internal landscape. *Butoh* is an avant-garde performance art form that originated in Japan in the late 1950's, made known locally by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno before gaining international recognition during the 1970s. Drawing on aesthetic tropes of traditional Japanese theater, in reaction to the destruction of World War II and the ensuing westernization of Japan, "*ankoku butoh*" is translated to the "dance of darkness." The original *butoh* artists pursued the irrational, the provocative, and the banal, as a way to process intense social upheaval and the effects of war. By forcing a viewing of humanity's inner ugliness, *butoh* practitioners subvert aesthetic expectations of dance. A general sentiment I've heard and read among *butoh* artists is that there is truly no single aesthetic form of *butoh*; it can look like anything. To me, though it may look like anything, it feels like a particular something. In my experiences practicing and performing *butoh*, I notice a particular state which I get tripped into through a combination of imagery, heightened sensation, and focus on my center. This state, to me, feels like the crux of this technique, and I am in search of how to get there fully and

¹ At least, that's what my mind feels like.

with ease. I am teaching a course on butoh at Smith College in the spring of 2024, which makes me especially attuned to finding articulations of its practice.

Methods Design: Different modes of knowledge-gathering

Dancing with attention to my present experience, finding words to describe this practice, and then analyzing the results through the lens of phenomenology, are the steps I outlined for myself in the design of this study. In collecting data, my methods involved dancing, recording, writing, and repeating this sequence 8 times, reframing and revising my intentions in each iteration. I reserved three hours of studio time in the Crew House, a beloved dance studio that sits on Paradise Pond at Smith College. With my phone camera set up on a tripod, I practiced butoh-influenced improvisation for a predetermined amount of time.² Immediately after (sometimes even before I turned the camera off), I walked over to my laptop and wrote down what I could remember sensorially, or what stood out as relevant to me during this recent dancing episode. These thoughts informed the next round of setting a score for dancing, as I followed curiosities that arose from within the practice. As per phenomenology, I was mostly (but not perfectly) ambitionless in conducting this research, only hoping for something meaningful to emerge.

Data Collection

What follows is my collection of words written the day of the session, in chronological order. I have attached a video clip that corresponds with each episode to offer a more complete picture of the dancing experiences.³ The words that appear next to each number are what I wrote in advance of each movement: a rudimentary score that changed in each iteration but carried the accumulated information from what already happened. The italicized words are what I captured immediately following the movement.

1. Bracketing as a score: no words, no nothing. Just me and what I'm perceiving. Write first, then dance for 5 minutes. Then write again as a harvest of what I've just experienced. ([video 1](#))
 - *(pre-dance) I sit cross legged on a wooden floor which warms the underside of my legs. I can smell myself, my feet in particular, not bad,*

² Although I decided this length of time for myself, I actually never was accurate in my ability to stay within these limits. This was partially due to a faulty alarm that never rang, and partially due to my body's absorption in the task such that I lost my conception of time.

³ Note that in the [slideshow presentation](#) I created, there are edited clips of the videos both in terms of duration and speed (fast motion).

just like something. The computer screen is bright against the dark walls, windows, benches. I can feel tension in my upper back and soreness in my lower back. The sound of my fingers clicking on the keys as I write. Blink blink. An itch on the back of my head. Bright light from the car that drives by, I see through the window.

- *(post-dance) DANCE 1. Creaky joints. Itches on my skin. A song stuck in my head, baby's got the bends. The sense of my body rising into and falling out of my awareness. No direction but movement anyways. Frozen joints and yet floating. In a pool of water, warmth. Those creaky moments give me the chills like nails on a chalkboard. No words score doesn't work of course, there are words. But like in meditation, finding the mental strength to acknowledge and make peace and separate. Eyes closed so i'm not seeing anything but changing light and my imagination grows. Thoughts about releasing judgment of myself, of my dancing, of every dance I've ever done. saliva building up in my mouth.*

2. Let's try again. Eyes open this time. Body feels more awakened. The timer didn't work so I danced for 10 minutes, until I couldn't stand it anymore. I'd rather feel the container of time since my sense of time while dancing is so warped. ([video 2](#))

- *Noticing movement where i wasn't expecting it arrests me. The cobwebs swaying in the corners of the lights. The cobwebs are still up at the top of the room. Cabin feeling. Eyes open - there's so much to see. The movement of my eyes feels like the whole dance. Hearing the creaks of the space, mysterious pops and clicks. Humming sounds like breathing. Bright light in my eyes. Balance feeling off balance. Those itches on my skin send shivers down my body. What if i danced those. My tongue wants to dance. A feeling of sadness. Following pleasure and also feeling the edges of pain. Leaning in. resistance of some sort. Being on the verge.*

3. I just want to go again without thinking too much. Trying to release thoughts but I've made it hard for myself by looking at travel plans over the holidays. ([video 3](#))

- *The part where i discovered my shadow. Noticing when i stop myself like i'm censoring my idea before i let it go all the way. Editing. Stop that! Some pleasure in the virtuosic moments - that's why i do them. How can i balance in a fun new way. What if i send my leg that way instead. The*

silence in here is powerful, potent. Makes me feel like my body is an actual instrument. Many thoughts today and i wonder if doing this is helping me cope with all of them.

4. Back to the beginning. More butoh-esque moment time. shorter time frame. Short spurts might be best for memory. [\(video 4\)](#)
 - *The internal gaze - sends me backwards. Weight rocks back. Knees soften, horizontal forces in my legs, i feel the folds. Feel my face soften. The shiver - how tremendous. I can almost recreate it now. That sensation up the back of my body through the top of my head. Mostly in my spine.*
 - *The cry the skin tingling the felt pieces of hair on my face. The tears feel so good there is a pleasure in the eruption. The numbness after the initial spring. The skin the skin the skin.*
 - *Gravity pulling the snot down my nose. I want to tense, tension, muscles tightening, snarl, ugly, nasty. The turning into a monster thing. the way that i am aware of my body and also letting it roar. Some aching in my shoulder. The hair on my face again.*
5. Let's try being on the floor, near the floor. [\(video 5\)](#)
 - *The comfort of the floor as a stable body very nearby. Feeling my own skin - the warmth, rubberiness, fleshy quality (face to arm). Opening my eyes and i'm surprised by where i am and how small my body feels suddenly. The slow descent, so fun, i have to do it, the determination, fixation on an image.*
6. One more: breath. Tune into the sensation of breath. As a constant fixture. What connects me to my environment. [\(video 6\)](#)
 - *A widening of my body. Breath makes me become fascinated with my mouth and nose. I hear a tone in the humming now, i could sing it. A stretching into the horizontal - how good it feels to send things away from one another. Does every sensation have pleasure or pain attached to it in some way? I feel like i'm in between pleasure and pain a lot, toggling between in my butoh dance. I feel the pull of a spiral turning me around. Breath helped me ease my thoughts. Breathing and looking at something was relevant. Amplified the seeing, the hearing, the feeling. I can hear my spit sloshing around in my mouth, the mechanisms of swallowing it.*

*Gross. Lovely. Sinking down into the ground. Welling up into something.
Twitches in my thigh.*

Words I wrote down, an attempt to summarize immediately after this whole session:

What am I looking for?

Something, anything.

What is coming up?

Skin, the sensitive skin that helps me find something deep. The creakiness caused by stilling and then moving again. Impulses. Pleasure and pain. Finding pain in pleasure and pleasure in pain. In silence i feel like i'm doing nothing. This is enticing. How artificial light feels while it's dark outside.

Relevance: meaning making

For Nigel Stewart, the final stage of the phenomenological method is “a hermeneutic stage involving a shift from descriptive purity towards an excavation of the meaning buried within the phenomena that have been described” (371). Meaning is not imposed upon phenomena but embedded in the phenomena themselves; we can find this through a process of excavation. In uncovering the meaning beneath my recollections of bodiliness I unearth some of the conditions that make for a transformative butoh practice, and a transformed sense of being-in-the-world.

One feature of my dancing seen in the video documentation is a quality of nothingness, simplicity, and subtlety. The movement therein is not particularly visible or mobile. The slowness that I engaged in my dancing is an associated feature of butoh dance because this method of moving aids the deep listening involved in invoking a delicate quality. I was interested in disrupting this tendency in episode # 3, so I moved more quickly and freely here, not worrying about sticking to my preconception of butohness. Interestingly, it was in this writing session that I noticed the “editing” of my movement ideas before they have been released. While slowness associated with butoh could be seen as a crutch, or an externally imposed aesthetic that gives butoh a certain “look” when it posits not to have one, there seems to be a tangible usefulness to this method in the practice of butoh. Perhaps it’s important to distinguish between practicing slowness and practicing butoh; slowness is a tool, a warm-up that creates the conditions for more uncensored butoh work to take place.

Many words in the harvests of this session spark the memory of heightened sensitivity through my skin. I frequently refer to an itch, shivers, and tingling. Skin

covers my whole body, it is the membrane that separates me from and joins me with my environment. Its contact with the air, the floor, my clothing, and my own body was highly perceptible during this dancing session, and I was able to capture memories of sensations through my skin with clarity. Directing a dancer to focus their attention around the sensations being captured through their skin could be a tangible somatic instruction that creates the ideal playing space for butoh dance to unfold. I am curious about specifying further and improvising around the actual shiver, or the itch; how do these particular skin sensations reverberate throughout one's entire being? How does imagining a sensation differ from sensing itself? I am curious about the acting technique of "sense memory", as used in the acting method of Stanislavsky, and how this could be applied here. Perhaps in practicing butoh I use my imagination to transport me to a recognizable state, a moment in a previous class (maybe, for me, it's my first ever butoh class), which is complete with sensations and images. The recalling and reliving of a particular state is the task of the repeat practitioner of butoh.

In dancing I am often experiencing some combination of pleasure and pain, moving between these extremes and sometimes confusing them. I have trouble discerning certain movements as painful or pleasurable - perhaps they engage my muscular activation (pain) but deliver a feeling of satisfaction (pleasure). I was especially aware of these modes while doing this movement exploration. One type of ambiguous sensation that I encountered was "creakiness." This sensation arose after I had been moving in slowness for an extended time, and redirected my movement or increased in speed. As though my connective tissue had hardened and I was breaking it open again, my joints hosted a feeling of rustiness, or iciness. Though vague in this explanation, this word "creakiness" was quite apparent to me at the moment and was the first word that I wrote down post-dancing. The feeling of creakiness was uncomfortable, noticeable, and addictive. It was not pleasurable or painful but relevant. In the first durational butoh improvisation that I was guided into, I remember experiencing a great deal of pain as we were instructed to bend our legs deeply and move more slowly than imaginable. Then we were guided to move freely, to break this structure, and the pleasure I felt was profound. When I dance butoh, I usually cry at some point. This is a moment where I feel the toggling between pleasure and pain: the pain of whatever tear-inducing image, memory or emotion has arisen, and the pleasure of physical release through tears. I believe butoh is a space where I have a blurred perception of pain and pleasure, and where somatic sensation and imaginings intersect.

Further curiosities

Upon finishing this session, I did not initially think that I had made any grand discoveries pertaining to my dance and writing practice. I took a few days to not look at the videos or the words. When I returned to put these things together in a coherent presentation, I realized that there were indeed some findings that seemed relevant. A continuation of dissecting the findings of this study feels important, yet outside of the scope of this particular moment in my academic career. I would like to more concretely tie in the theoretical background that has brought me to pursue an applied phenomenological method. This feels like the missing piece of this writing: seamlessly incorporating others' voices in a work where I am mostly discussing my personal and artistic experiences. I have been inspired by the writings of Nigel Stewart, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Jo Pollitt, and Robin Conrad, although in this case I have not had the time to pull out the specific wordings which they use when describing their own dance research methods. I have also been greatly influenced by the members of DAN 540, Gabi, Laura, Frankie, Niki, Caitlin, Gabby, and Yun, as well as my professor, Melinda, who has provided much of the guidance and resources I needed in order to have any sort of framework for this research.

Perhaps a future version of this project would be a continuous tracking of dancing and writing as I develop a choreographic work or body of material to teach. I have noticed languaging to be an essential part of my dance practice and would like to continue to develop my particular way of expressing through words. The feedback loop between writing and dancing holds interest for me, as well, and I can see the exploration of these tools in conjunction with one another lead to the development of a particular medium I use in my art. It is amazing how setting up a study, identifying methods, and sticking to it can yield profound, worthwhile results. I am inspired to incorporate these data into my classes, choreographies, and practices, to pursue more reading that is parallel to the themes that arose, and to someday attempt a similar study as a method of deepening my dance and writing research.

Works Referenced

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. *The Phenomenology of Dance*. Philadelphia. Temple University Press, 2015.

Stewart, Nigel. "Dancing the Time of Place: Fieldwork, Phenomenology, and Nature's Choreography." In *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart. Germany: Peter Lang, 363-376.