IMPROVISATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN DANCE AND OTHER RELATED PRACTICES SINCE THE 1960's

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1. Introduction

This paper introduces «improvisational performance in dance» as one of the manifestations of postmodern dance in the second half of 20th century. It discusses the complexity of the connections between improvisation as performance mode and other forms of improvisation in Western theatre dance of the 20th century and progressive arts and suggests that there can be no universally accepted notion of improvisation which is valid across time and space. Adopting an interdisciplinary methodology which combines elements of the postmodern critique of epistemology with Foucauldian strategies of new history, this paper concentrates on the fluidity and contextual/temporal character of any emerging definitions of the term «improvisational performance in dance». By these means, it resists dualistic approaches to the research material and suggests a theoretical framework within which a plurality of meanings of the term becomes possible and prepares the ground for more radical claims such as the reconsideration of the binary opposition between improvisation and choreography.

In Foucault's methodology, linear conceptions of history have been strictly criticised because they attempt to re-constitute the «true» nature of the past by prioritising such concepts as development and progress. Foucault has instead suggested the notion of discontinuity which facilitates the understanding of historical material as a space of transformation.

> One of the most essential features of the new history is probably the displacement of the discontinuous: its transference from the obstacle to the work itself; its integration into the discourse of the historian, where it no longer plays the role of an external condition that must reduced, but that of a working concept. (Foucault 1972: 9)

Within this perspective, forms can be conceived within their processes of being «repeated, known, forgotten, transformed» (Foucault 1972: 25). It becomes impossible to confront this complexity on the basis of such concepts as «tradition», «influence», «development and evolution» or «spirit», which have been operating for many years as linking devices of major significance in traditional historical analysis (Foucault 1972: 21-30).

On the basis of this perspective, improvisational performance in dance can be grasped within its processes of transformation. Therefore, by using the tool of Foucauldian discourse, this paper emphasises that what constitutes a more relevant form of knowledge, from a postmodern perspective, is an understanding of improvisational performance's mechanism of transformation rather than the construction of a fixed model of the form.

It becomes clear that the contextual information and the discussion on prior and contemporaneous (but different) uses of improvisation included in this paper are not meant to cover the area comprehensively nor to construct a firm lineage within which improvisational performance can be located. Rather they provide an overview of selected forms of knowledge possibly available in various degrees to a number of postmodern dance artists whose work is improvisational. These forms have indirectly contributed to the birth of improvisational performance either through processes of their own transformation or as areas in which resistance or denial has been ultimately exercised. On the basis of this theoretical position, these experiences cannot be considered as «influential»[1]. Rather, they should be understood as a range of tools, verified through experience, by means of which further experimentation could be undertaken.

2. *About improvisation*

From within the philosophical discourse, Ryle (1979) not only prefers to replace the terms «imagination», «creativity», «originality» with «improvisation» but also detects an improvising element in the very mechanism of «thinking» itself. He asserts that

> the vast majority of things that happen in the universe are in high or low degree unprecedented, unpredictable, and never to be repeated. (Ryle 1979: 125)

Human thinking and the ability to respond to such unpredictability is also part of this picture, insofar as «innovative thinking is a necessary element in inferring itself»

[1] Foucault (1972) refers in detail to the problematic character of using the notion of «influence» in historical studies.

(Ryle 1979: 127). Technically, the way this mechanism operates means it is possible that «between some premises and some conclusions there are no intermediate steps» (Kolenda in Ryle 1979: 12).

This is an unusual position for the philosophical discourse because improvising becomes thus «*logically* necessary» within the process of human thought (Kolenda in Ryle 1979: 12). On the basis of this assumption, Ryle comes to the conclusion that thinking «quite generally is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation» (Ryle 1979: 129). It seems as if, for Ryle, thinking is always creative; moreover, as if a degree of improvisation is always part of the very process of thinking. In a similar way, improvisation can be described as the ability to bring together efficiently the partly known with the partly unknown. If it were feasible to devise a general definition of improvisation, this statement would probably be fairly close to it.

From her perspective as a dance educationalist, Barbara Haselbach would probably agree with it, at least, as far as movement improvisation in dance education is concerned. Her understanding of the term includes two options: improvisation as «experience» and improvisation as «spontaneous creation of form and content» (1981: 5-6).

In the first case, the unknown movement possibilities of the body are explored from the known position of the mover as individual. This can be accomplished as a «sensitizing experience ... focus[ing] not on the creative activity itself, but on the individual perception and its capacity to differentiate» (Haselbach 1981: 5). The second case is a formalisation of the human being's need to express her or his «stored experiences»; it is an «inside out» process which creates a new (and therefore unknown) vessel (or form) for the already existing (Haselbach 1981: 6). As Ryle has said: «It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard» (1979: 129)[2].

Yet, after Wittgenstein, there is not much space for definitions[3]. From the perspective of the practitioner, the American improvisational artist, Steve Paxton, not only avoids any similar attempt but finds it particularly difficult to speak about improvisation.

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[2] Haselbach notices that the distinction between her two notions of improvisation is only a theoretical model, because «in reality there is a constant exchange with reciprocal influences in both directions» (1981 p. 7).

[3] In philosophy, Wittgenstein pointed out the controversial character of the attempt to provide «definitions» as early as during the early 1950s. With his work Philosophical Investigation (1953), he introduced the perspective of «family resemblances» claiming that the necessity of using definitions arises as a consequence «of an insufficient grasp of how language works» (Sluga in Audi 1995 p. 859). Thus, he contends that there is no single common element amongst all the different instances which seem to represent the same «definition». Rather these examples have common elements only with some of the rest, in such a way that all of them have something in common with at least one other member of the group.

> Trying to pin down something concrete about improvisation ... was a mind wrenching experience. Verbal experience is a different state of mind than improvisational experience, and I learned once again, that a rule of thumb of media might be: one medium cannot describe another. Writing about movement is an academic sideline to an experience of now/now where the «/» is indicator of time passing. (Paxton 1980: 44)

It remains that improvisation in dance is the totality of cases named as such, all of them assembled together in one group by means of their «family resemblances». To study these «family resemblances» means to isolate smaller groups of instances of improvisation and this would probably be a more realistic task. Except that the same problem would appear in smaller scale: more «family resemblances», smaller groups and so on.

In addition, to describe improvisational performance as the form of theatre dance in which there is no choreography and movement takes place spontaneously during the event of the performance does not only polarises the relationship between choreography and improvisation, it also implies the necessity of a pre-existing definition of the concept of choreography.

3. What is improvisational performance?

To claim that, in improvisational performance, the audience witnesses «the creation and disappearance of irretrievable formal elements» (Sulzman 1979 p. 16) is a possibility but not a necessity[4].

Dworin (1981) provides more parameters of what she names «improvisation in performance» and which further specify the sort of «family resemblances» one expects to find within the idiom of improvisational performance. Nevertheless, the term «improvisation in performance» is not very accurate; although it places «improvisation» in the context of «performance», it does not guarantee that improvisation is the only, or even the main, performance mode of the work. This expression can also refer to those cases in which small parts of a set dance piece have not been choreographed and the dancers are free to fill these «gaps» in their own ways, with relevance to the main concept.

The above description is not what characterises improvisational performance as such and, as Dworin says, the audience too is expected to play a different role.

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[4] Haselbach makes a similar claim. Her sense of «improvisation as spontaneous creation of form and content» refers to «a form which is not final or calculated, but transitory and provisional, only valid for the moment» (1981 p. 6).

> The emphasis in a performance of improvisation is different, as is the attitude it requires of its audience. It is a process of creating at the very same moment as performing and it asks an audience by their presence to become part of that making process ... The audience must be able to suspend their notions of art as a spectacular event and be ready to participate kinaesthetically and emotionally in the creating of art in the moment. (Dworin 1981: 12)

Dworin adds it is crucial to stress the argument that the unstructured character of improvisational performance does not reflect the absence of skill or discipline (1981: 12); most significantly, it does not indicate a lack of ability to use compositional techniques. In fact, the mechanism of decision-making during the performance event operates on the basis of instantaneous choices of primarily compositional character[5].

Pressing notes that the literature about the teaching of improvisation in music includes at least five approaches (in Sloboda 1988). The oldest one that can be found in history manuals on Western music is largely based on the idea that «improvisation is real-time composition and that no fundamental distinction need be drawn between the two» (Pressing in Sloboda 1988 p. 142). In principle, it seems that improvisation in music is generally understood as improvisation in the context of performance. Pressing also discusses the character of improvisational skill in music pointing out that it

> depends partly on increasing the efficiency of perceptual processing to allow the inclusion of more and better-selected information in the improviser's decision-making procedures. (Pressing in Sloboda 1988: 167)

The element of decision-making is far more important in performance than in other contexts where improvisation might be used. Amongst other possibilities, decision-making also refers to compositional choices in terms of timing as this takes place in the form of response to other elements of the work. In dance, improvisation is often used for choreographic purposes. Under these circumstances the improvisational process is much less about composition than about generation of movement material. Yet, in music, this use of improvisation is more of an exception (Pressing in Sloboda 1988).

Emphasising the compositional aspect of improvisational performance in dance facilitates a reconsidered understanding of the relationship between improvisation and choreography. This theoretical position is not without relevance to manifestations of postmodern dance during the last thirty years. As Fulkerson explains, in this context, choreography became «concerned with what it is to be present within experience» (1996 p. 40). She situates this perspective in relation to

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[5] This is probably why Julyen Hamilton (1995), amongst other improvisers, prefers to describe his performance strategy as «instant composition».

> the post-modernist search for the real person in dance, the whole person, the holistic act of performing, and the non-manipulative approach to the audience. (Fulkerson 1996b: 40)

Fulkerson locates her own work «in the neighbourhood of Contact» (1996b: 42), which is indeed a form of improvisation.

In the same article, Fulkerson (1996) directly situates Contact Improvisation[6] within the follow-ups of the Grand Union work. Similarly this research argues that the Grand Union experiment was the culmination of a series of reconsiderations of the medium of dance which took place in the avant-garde American dance scene during the 1960s. By adopting the extreme artistic strategy of «total improvisation», this work provided the ultimate crystallisation of the perspective according to which «dance could be anything»[7].

It was not surprising, then, that a number of new attitudes to dance as an art form subsequently became possible, amongst which improvisational dance could also claim a space. Yet, because of the socio-economic character of the following decades (a series of economic crises with international repercussions and retrogression towards more conservative political attitudes), the artistic ethos of the 1960s and 1970s was quickly abandoned. Banes writes in the late 1980s: «We can no longer afford the permissiveness of the sixties ... Ours is an age of artifice, specialization, conservation and competition» (1987: XXVIII). Siegel, referring to the dance production of the 1980s, also notes: «Little by little the diversity, the unpredictability, the strangeness that was so much a part of experimental dance was tamed» (1991: XIV). The artistic attitudes that responded to the 1960s optimism, sense of democracy and freedom lost financial and audience support and became marginalised. Improvisational dance was part of this.

Fulkerson also explains that, for the last twenty-seven years, she has been involved with «developing mind-body imagery within choreography» and she describes her work as

> the creation of forms which are participatory, chaotic, life-like in structure, which allow for continual renewal and change, as well as imply lines of predictability. (Fulkerson 1996: 42)

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[6] For more details on the historical and technical aspects of Contact Improvisation see Novack (1990).

[7] The British choreographer Rosemary Butcher, who experienced directly the American dance postmodernism of the late 1960s during her visits to New York notices: «I knew then that choreography could relate to any form of moving activity» (1992 p. 18) and she adds: «There was always something about the fact ... that dance could be anything» (1995).

Fulkerson does not use the term «choreography» in contrast to «improvisation»; rather she refers to dance making or dance production as a whole, encompassing the entire range between completely improvised movement work to strictly choreographed, as this is manifested in the practice of postmodern dance. This is an interesting perspective, which exhibits an integrated understanding of these terms, from the position of the practitioner, whose involvement with creative work in the area of dance making has dissolved the accompanying theoretical contradiction. By locating choreography and improvisation along a single spectrum, Fulkerson does not simply legitimise them both in equal terms but also creates an appropriate conceptual framework within which all their possible combinations become acceptable.

4. A reference to the past: movement improvisation and modern dance

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, neither the reconsiderations of the 1960s, nor the work of the Grand Union was an exclusive domain where improvisation contributed to Western dance production during the 20th century. The whole preceding tradition of modern dance had made available a number of creative tools. For instance, improvisational techniques were an important part of the work of such modern dance artists as the Americans Isadora Duncan and Alwin Nikolais, and the German Mary Wigman[8]. It can be argued that Isadora Duncan's theory of movement has an improvisational aspect, which is her fundamental trust of the body. For Duncan, movement meant a response to experience and experience is very much linked to emotion. According to Martin,

> She has described her search for certain key movements which should arise out of elemental emotional experiences such as fear and love, and from which a whole series of developing movement should flow as of its own volition. (Martin in Magriel 1947: 6)

Duncan was firmly convinced that «spontaneous movement of the body is the first reaction of all men to sensory or emotional stimuli» (Martin in Magriel 1947 p. 3). This position brings to mind the technique of Contact Improvisation, which prioritises the understanding of movement as response to direct physical stimuli through sharing weight with a partner (Novack 1990).

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[8] Although written and other sources directly mention the use of improvisation in the work and choreographic processes of these choreographers, there is not enough evidence about the absence of this approach in the work of others. Further research has to be undertaken in relation to methods of generating movement material in the work of other modern dance artists.

In traditional dance literature, Duncan has been frequently criticised for not having provided a proper technique in relation to her innovative approach to movement[9]. In some ways, such opinions reflect the failure of traditional dance theory to acknowledge improvisational approaches to movement as frameworks within which movement can be generated in specifically chosen ways.

Scholarly work on Duncan's contribution preceding the recent emphasis on the notion of bodily intelligence cannot avoid the assumption that improvisation is the opposite of choreography. Layson claims that Duncan is not an improviser, because this seems to be the only means of legitimising her work as choreography (1987: 165). Within this perspective what validates the work of a choreographer is the ability to exercise choice and the risk of taking the responsibility of the decision-making process, thus assuming that improvisation lacks the above features and occupies a lower position within a hierarchical system based on higher and lower forms of dance.

Current dance theory would probably come to different conclusions. Given the diversity of current approaches to the body, which shape the development of several «techniques» of movement production, the specificity of Duncan's «technique» could be evident in her concept of how the body moves. «She had become convinced ... that movement arose from a central inner source which she called the soul» (Martin in Magriel 1947: 5). Although this belief adds a spiritual character to Duncan's work, it can be argued that her method of movement production was operating on the basis of specific choices made according to her understanding of how the body moves.

Daly discusses the same problem from a feminist perspective without touching upon improvisation as opposed to choreography; rather she concentrates on the problematic aspect of a gendered-biased (and therefore hierarchical) understanding of the relationship between the dancer (the performer) and the choreographer. She contends that Duncan has been described as dancer rather than choreographer by her contemporary critics and historians because of their «wilful denial» of her different sense of choreography (1992: 241).

This perspective exposes the discussion to another form of dichotomous interpretation; in this case body and mind are not only separate from a philosophical point of view, they are also strictly attributed to two separate areas of the society. The mind, which is responsible for the decision-making processes of the human being, is

[9] Martin is particularly bewildered by Isadora's unknown method of generating «the lowest common denominator and the basic unit of composition», namely the gestures which she subsequently built into sequences. He speculates on the possibility of a link between this method and the Stanislavsky approach to theatre training, claiming that Duncan was familiar with the latter.

the realm both of the choreographer and the male. The body is the domain of the dancer and it becomes the means by which the female fulfils her role in meeting the needs of the male.

Daly disagrees with the argument that the theory of the «male gaze» provides an appropriate lens through which to read Duncan's contribution. She claims that «a new theory of representation is required: one that includes within its very structure the capacity for change» (1992: 244). It seems that this suggestion is better equipped in relation to the currently changing notion of choreography. In this respect, Daly's understanding of Duncan's contribution implies a reconsideration of what the choreographer's skill might be. Daly notes:

> Unlike ballet, [Duncan's] dancing was not vocabulary-intensive ... her vocabulary served as a kind of neutral backdrop for the dynamic coloring of her movement. For it was how she moved –and sometimes how she stood still– that distinguished her dancing. (Daly 1995: 64)

Daly adds that Duncan's use of structure was similar to her use of movement vocabulary, in the sense of «a framework, meant to recede from view as the work was performed» (1995: 67). Finally, Daly identifies further similarities in the way Duncan used tension-release principles in building movement vocabulary and choreographic structure.

> The lifting of the arm is precisely calculated ... The upper arm is tensed as it is raised until midpoint, when the full arm and chest are released upward together. Duncan strategically choreographed such release points into her dances, usually at the top of an extension. (Daly 1995: 78)

Martin also reports Duncan's discovery of the relationship between «emotion and visceral action and visceral action to outward movement» (in Magriel 1947: 5). This information brings to mind such current approaches to the body and movement as Body-Mind Centering (BMC). An important objective of the BMC technique is to increase the mover's awareness in relation to her/his internal organs and support with this knowledge a wider understanding of the movement possibilities of the body[10].

Mary Wigman's approach to movement was also improvisational. Yet, hers was understood and used more as a technique «to make the body an instrument so dexterous and so pliant that it can express all shades of emotions» (Wigman 1975 p.

[10] For more information on Body-Mind Centering see Bainbridge-Cohen (1993) and Hartley (1995).

53), than as a material repercussion of a certain spiritual conception of the body. It was a tool of exploration, not unexpectedly emphasising individual processes, in Laban's fashion[11]:

> Instead of studying dancing from a diagram of what other dancers have done before you, you travel the realms of the dance with your own body. (Wigman 1975: 53)

Wigman's approach to movement generation seems to have been largely based on improvisation but she reworked this material thoroughly through pre-performance compositional choices in order to make her choreographic intentions clearly visible. She maintains:

> Composing embraces construction, clarification, arrangement, rounding out, completion. Composition is the concrete expression of a creative inspiration. Improvisation is a loose coordination of successively occurring, spontaneous ideas; whereas composition is clearly delineated, inspirited form. From the happen-stance of improvisation there flowers the final reality of composition. (Wigman 1975: 86)

Manning locates Wigman's approach to improvisation on the basis of the difference between «technique» in the American sense, a codified movement vocabulary and *Technik* in the German sense, a method for experiencing and structuring movement» (1993: 91). Wigman used the latter for both her teaching methods and dance making processes.

Manning also traces Wigman's competence with improvisation to her training with Rudolf Laban, yet she acknowledges the impact of her Dalcrozian education at Hellerau, Germany. During these early years, Wigman «learned how to manipulate movement by improvisationally varying its formal qualities» (Manning 1993: 54). Later on she was able «to release and intensify the expressive range of her movement» (Manning 1993: 56) while she worked with Laban, whose approach to improvisation was less tight.

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[11] Wigman herself traces her familiarity with improvisational practices to her training with Rudolf Laban. She describes the exploratory character of Laban's teaching method and his attitude of never «hold[ing] on» to any of his discoveries. As a consequence, «he always needed people who would ... put [his ideas] to practical use» (Wigman 1975 p. 34). This approach was extremely beneficial for his students who were allowed to, and supported in, developing their individual approaches. It is particularly striking though that, for his teaching of improvisation, Laban frequently used other media as a starting point: drawing, drama and poetry. Wigman does not explain clearly how the transition took place from the initial idea to its application in dance.

5. Improvisation in the avant-garde milieu of the 1960s

Within the same postmodern consideration of history, the wider avant-garde context of the 1960s is treated as a space of contemporaneous manifestations of notions of improvisation. This could have potentially informed the development of the improvisational practices of postmodern dance during the 1960s culminating in the work of the Grand Union. This is again a presentation of a number of examples of relevant experiences of «knowing how» which were more or less available to the dance artists, depending on the circumstances and the efficiency of communication channels.

The use of *improvisation* in the avant-garde art of the 1960s was both political (it reflected the attitude of the artists towards art and life, their philosophy) and methodological/compositional (functional). It was a manifestation of the period's urge for freedom and at the same time a position against the socio-political *status quo* and an artistic programme for exploring the possibilities of the «new art»[12].

Further understanding of improvisation as part of the American politics of the 1960s requires familiarity with the socio-political and intellectual context of the period. Similarly, further understanding of improvisation as an artistic practice requires knowledge of the character of the avant-garde American art of the 1960s with special attention to postmodern dance practices.

In this framework, the presentation of the work of the Grand Union as the culmination of the Judson experiments of the 1960s does not imply the construction of an evolutionary line, gradually progressing from the less to the more improvisational. Rather, it should be treated as a space within which the accumulation of particular experiences (or manifestations of «knowing how») made possible the embodiment of a radically different conceptualisation of the dance work: that of the «totally» improvisational performance mode of the Grand Union group.

This experience should not be considered as a direct «influence» on the work subsequently made; rather the Grand Union made available to the succeeding artists an embodied form of «knowing how» that subverted traditionally accepted notions of theatre dance. In conjunction with the prevailing interest in the body, new concepts of movement were able to emerge by means of primarily improvisational practices. At the same time, more possibilities of «what a dance piece could be» became conceivable, amongst which improvisational dance also claimed a space.

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[12] For an overview of artistic manifestations in the area of «new art» see Battcock (1966).

6. *The artistic strategies of the avant-garde art of the 1960s*

Within this political, intellectual and cultural radicalism, the meaning of the arts was deeply re-considered. In her analysis of the piece *Zen for Head* in the first Fluxus concert, Armstrong mentions:

> The questions that *Zen for Head* raises about art ... have to do with the role of art and artist; with the relationship between action and object, between object and museum, between art and life; and with how art is made, presented and received. They also have to do with the boundaries of art –how these are determined and by whom. (Armstrong in Armstrong 1993: 14)

During the 1960s the use of such terms as «multimedia» or «intermedia» manifested the birth of new artistic forms where artistic media (such as words, music, movement and materials), which were traditionally used separately, could co-exist in the form of «events».

In their multifaceted search for freedom, Banes argues, the avant-garde American artists of the 1960s adopted the artistic form of «multimedia» as one that abolishes the hierarchy among the arts; it «enacted an equal union» (Banes 1993: 129) of them. Kostelanetz prefers to use the term «theatre of mixed means». He points out that these forms are fundamentally different from similar attempts of the past, Diaghilev's ballets for instance, because their components did not «complement each other ... [they rather] function nonsynchronously, or independently of each other, and each medium is used for its own possibilities» (Kostelanetz 1968: 4).

This new artistic strategy indeed facilitated a certain blurring of the borders between the different arts. As the American postmodern dance artist, Kenneth King, states:

> The new theater [wa]s an arena of transacting techniques assimilated from what we previously called «play», «modern dance», «sculpture», «painting» and «movies». (King in Battcock 1966: 243).

Avant-garde dance, as an active agent within this fervent process of reconsideration, was also deeply affected:

> There are no rules for a choreographer. He is no longer wholly dependent on dance movement as *the* medium, and now extends his actions into theater. (King in Battcock 1966: 247)

The redefinition of the meaning of dance as art was both an outcome and a starting point for generous exchanges with other arts, particularly the visual arts. Movement, legitimised as dance, was an important part (sometimes the most important part, as in

Anna Halprin's work, for instance) of such mixed forms as the «happenings». This experience was instrumental for both parts. On the one hand, dance artists had the opportunity to broaden their notion of dance and, on the other, the wider artistic community fully accepted them within a common artistic space.

Historically, this is probably one of the rare cases when dance was able to grow in such an environment of direct exchange with other arts, in particular the visual arts. This became an important element within its radical development during the 1960s in America, without losing the importance of its own potential as an artistic medium.

In this artistic climate, «improvisation was seized on by the avant-garde artists as a potent emblem of freedom» (Banes 1993: 156) and became a common strategy for a large number of artistic media. George Maciunas, the instigator of the Fluxus movement[13], sees improvisation as one of the major artistic strategies of the 1960s seeking on the whole to abolish formalism and abstraction. For him formalism, which also means artificiality, relies on pre-determination while «the reality of nature ... like that of man himself is largely indeterminate and unpredictable» (in Armstrong 1993: 156-157).

Kenneth King discusses the role of improvisational strategies in the context of the «happenings»:

> The Happening prevents a logical literary explication by improvisation or indeterminate methods which strip the performance of connotation and specific meaning by the use of repetition, juxtaposition of objects and acausal relationships. (King in Battcock 1966: 245)

At the same time, improvisation was also becoming popular within theatre training. In 1963, Viola Spolin published the book *Improvisation for the Theater* which was the outcome of many years of experimentation in «game structures», «problem-solving» methods and «point-of-concentration» techniques. This material was published following a period of thorough testing with professional actors and it was extensively used in actors» training as a preparation for acting in written plays. Spolin's approach is deeply egalitarian. She does not accept the difference between «talented» and «non-talented» people. Learning is a matter of experience, experience means a relationship with the environment; an aspect of this relationship is intuitive. She asserts: «When response to experience takes place at this intuitive plane ... [the person] is truly open for learning» (Spolin 1963: 4). The intuitive operates spontaneously and this is where Spolin locates the value of improvisation. In brief, she uses it for learning purposes and her ultimate goal is to make the theatre techniques

[13] The Fluxus movement, which originated in 1962 and included primarily American and German artists, was a form of Dada revival. For more information see Armstrong & Rothfuss (1993).

intuitive. Improvisation in the theatre has a long tradition, especially in the area of training. In Stanislavsky's method, for instance, which is based on the actor's ability to identify with the role, personal exploration is a key element approached mainly through improvisation (Litvikoff 1972).

Using his mixed background in theatre and dance, Daniel Nagrin also developed his own improvisational approach during the 1960s. He started applying his method the following decade and this work became available as a book in the early 1990s. His method, applicable to dance as well as to theatre or music is, primarily based on the idea of movement as metaphor.

Like dance, in music, improvisational practices during the 1960s were not new ground. Many forms of traditional music around the world hold past experiences of improvisation[14]. Yet, in the context of the 1960s in America, music improvisation within the jazz idiom was the most directly available. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was considerable exploration in jazz improvisation at the level of «harmony, rhythm and melody» (Banes 1993: 25).

The history of improvisation in the musical forms of the 20th century is well documented in a number of sources[15]. A close reading of such material seems instrumental for the researcher of movement improvisation, mainly because it makes available a number of models by which, issues of movement improvisation could be approached theoretically.

In the dance scene, Banes points out that the avant-garde dance artists of the 1960s not only chose improvisation because of its relationship with the idea and practice of freedom but also as a practice which «relied on the wisdom of the body» (Banes 1993: 211). The Judson Dance Theater group used improvisational practices in a number of ways, but most frequently in structured forms, similarly to jazz music. The choreographer Trisha Brown in particular was critical about free improvisation. She contends that this method of generating movement should be treated

> not as an instrument to surrender to the body's impulses, but as a rational plan for generating action in a cohesive community. (Banes 1993: 211)

It seems that the Judsonites welcomed improvisation more as a choreographic strategy than anything else alongside indeterminacy and chance methods. This attitude was consistent with the spirit of freedom in the early 1960s and the general tendency to reject everything belonging to the past. According to Banes (1983), such artists as

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[14] For a brief but substantial reference to improvisational practices in music see Pressing in Sloboda (1988). In this essay, there is a short chapter dedicated to «oral traditions and folklore».

[15] For example, see Cope's (1989) chapter on improvisation.

Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, Lucinda Childs, Carolee Schneemann and others used extensively structured improvisation as a performance mode, as for example in Concert #14 of the Judson Theater group where the first part included seven improvisations[16].

The lineage of the Judson Dance Theater can be traced back to Cunningham's use of chance in choreography, Anna Halprin's teaching of improvisational dance during the late 1950s, and Robert Dunn's radical teaching of composition. Most of the Judsonites had worked with at least one of them. Dunn's approach to dance was fundamentally subversive and it can be argued that it was the initial point of all of the successive reconsiderations of the medium of dance which took place during the 1960s and culminated with the work of the Grand Union.

7. Grand Union

Grand Union lasted from 1970 to 1976 and the company took its name when Yvonne Rainer decided to abandon the leadership of her group. At that time, the company was already performing Rainer's work *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* in an improvisational style, although still under her guidelines. By abolishing herself as a leader, she abolished the last possible sense of control in the creative process. From then onwards, the decisions were open to any member of the group at any time.

Continuous Project-Altered Daily, which premiered in March 1969, in its very first version, included a decision making element: the performers could choose the sequence of pre-made pieces of movement material during the actual event of the performance. Gradually, Rainer decided to show through this work all the intermediate stages between the making and the performance of a finished piece; she identified seven «levels» of performance: rehearsal, run-through, working-out, surprises, marking, teaching and behaviour (Rainer 1974: 130).

Illustrating these concepts, the work was perpetually changing, until Rainer realised that she could not go any further along these lines. Grand Union was born at that point as a democratic group without structure nor hierarchy. No one was responsible for the group. All the performers participated on equal terms and contributed to the making of the performance event in a totally unstructured manner which was named «total improvisation».

Continuous Project-Altered Daily was not an exception among Rainer's other pieces. As early as 1964, around the end of the Judson period, Rainer devised another improvisational piece. After having danced at the Green Gallery for an event organised

[16] For more information on the Judson Theater group see Banes (1980).

by the artist James Lee Byars[17], Rainer wrote an essay which would later accompany, in taped form, an improvised solo entitled *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*. In this text, Rainer emphasised the necessity of «connection» between the performer and another element, either externally (in the same space and time) or internally (within the performer's internal state), but always carrying this «connection» with conviction (Rainer 1974: 298-301).

The period of Rainer's work between 1964 and 1970 not only traces the mutation of the Judson Theater experience into the Grand Union experiment; it also documents the «story» of the practice of improvisation which, as a tool in the hands of a radical artist who trusted it deeply, was allowed to reveal its inherently subversive character.

8. A canvas of events, ideas and interpretations

During the first half of the 1970s, the use of «total» or open improvisation as a performance mode by the American group Grand Union was a conceptual choice[18]; it was the outcome of a series of reconsiderations of dance which took place during the 1960s as part of a wider revolution in the context of the American avant-garde scene and radically changed attitudes to dance as an art form[19]. The main contribution of this revolution can be epitomised in the shift of focus from appearance to conception within the nature of the artistic object, an element directly borrowed from the work of the Dadaists at the beginning of 20th century (Wheeler 1991). The blurring of the borders between the traditionally distinct art forms was one amongst other elements brought by the new order (Armstrong & Rothfuss 1993).

While postmodern dance grew as an integral part of the American avant-garde art of the 1960s, the character it adopted during the 1970s is indebted to a double source: the heritage of this wider artistic context and the specific postmodern dance tradition which gradually emerged in the course of the same decade. In this atmosphere, dance

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[17] Nothing more specific has been mentioned about the place and time of this event in Rainer (1974 p. 298). According to her «Chronology» of work (1974 p. 332) Some Thoughts on Improvisation, which was performed accompanied by the recorded version of this text, premiered as part of a programme shared with the visual artist Robert Morris and toured in various places in Europe during 1964.

[18] Nancy Lewis, who was a member of Grand Union emphasises that she enjoyed the intellectual character of the work. She notices: «The physicality was also obviously brilliant and thrilling but it was the minds between the lines» (in Banes 1987: 224).

[19] A detailed account on Grand Union's work has been provided by Ramsay (1991). See Banes (1987) on the early American dance postmodernism and Banes (1993) for the American avant-garde art of the early 1960s, an integral part of which was the work of the early dance postmodernists. For further information on the American avant-garde art of the 1960s see Battcock (1966, 1968 and 1973).

artists attempted to emancipate themselves from the traditions of the past, primarily by reconsidering the use of dance vocabularies (Banes 1987). Pedestrian movement was introduced as working material and attention was brought to the dancing body via the new interest in the materiality of dance. «Movement» as «dance» was both studied in terms of its mechanics and totally liberated from its traditional role as representation of ideas, stories or feelings[20].

Yet, during the second half of the 20th century, emphasis on the body was not exclusive to dance. Brown has pointed out the recent «proliferation of discourses on the body» (1994: 1), some of which can be traced back to the 1960s. In the post-war optimism of the developing American society, the interest in the phenomenological sense of the «experience» and the «growing suspicion of verbal means» (Banes 1993: 191) contributed to the celebration of the physical body as an «alternative to the primacy of the verbal» (Banes 1993: 191). Holistic approaches to the body became increasingly popular, providing new models of understanding and suggesting new methods of treating both the physical and metaphorical illnesses of the harassed postmodernist body. Movement became a preferred means of self-study and subsequent therapy.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a number of improvisational practices which invested in a diversity of body and movement concepts emerged as independent practices in the U.S., not all of which were directly connected with dance. Such examples are Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen's technique of «Body Mind Centering» (Bainbridge-Cohen 1993) and Mary Starks Whitehouse's approach to «Authentic Movement» (Whitehouse 1987)[21]. This lineage, which draws from the discoveries of the 1930s through the work of Mabel Todd, and even further back via Frederick Matthias Alexander and others, reaches the present time, informing through the years the making of improvisational dance.

In the early 1970s, a parallel story can be seen in Britain. Rosemary Butcher and Mary Fulkerson both fertilised the birth of British New Dance from their direct experience of the early American dance postmodernism[22]. The former celebrated the primacy of the concept in the making of dance (Butcher 1992) and introduced improvisation as her preferred choreographic tool; the latter established the British

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[20] Since the 1950s, Merce Cunningham had already been investigating the possibility of using movement as dance for its own sake.

[21] Bainbridge-Cohen explains that Body Mind Centering is «currently applied by people involved in ... dance, athletics, bodywork, physical occupational, movement and speech therapies, psychotherapy, medicine, child development education, voice, music and the visual arts, meditation, yoga, martial arts» (1993 p. 2). «Authentic movement» on the other hand was originally conceived by Mary Starks Whitehouse as form of movement therapy (Olsen 1993: 47).

[22] See Crickmay (1988) for Mary Fulkerson's contribution and Jordan (1992) for a detailed account of Rosemary Butcher's training and early work both in teaching and choreographing.

tradition of New Dance through her teaching at Dartington College of Art, and consolidated the use of movement improvisation as a practice informing dance through the teaching of *release* technique (Fulkerson 1981-82).

Recently, a renewed interest in improvisational performance has stimulated further research in the character of the Grand Union work (Ramsay 1991 pxvi). At the same time, there is much significance in studying the nature of a major shift which has taken place both in the practice and conceptualisation of improvisational dance since the 1970s. It can be argued that during the last 25 years, while improvisational performance was manifesting itself on the basis of how various artists understood it, the experience of materialising it offered new insights into the form, thus suggesting new concepts for subsequent materialisations. This narrative of constant change organises the raw material of relevant information, sources and «factual» details into an initial picture which opens the discussion.

The Grand Union's choice of improvisation as a performance mode was conceptual, an answer to the question «what is dance?». The purpose of this approach was mainly ideological; improvisation was chosen because of its power as statement of belief rather than its potential for new explorations at the level of movement and composition. New solutions to the generation of movement material and compositional approaches had been explored to a large extent during the 1960s with the Judson Dance Theater and post-Judson work; Grand Union was able to use extensively the material of these discoveries[23].

In the following years, improvisational dance gradually took on new tools. Not only was it increasingly informed by the work of the independent improvisational practices, but further aspects in relation to its character were gradually clarified, amongst which was the relationship between the work and the audience[24].

In addition, by using a wide range of movement and composition concepts, the improvisers were able to develop more sophisticated systems of selecting the material to meet the requirements of the instantaneous character of the work. The operation of such decision-making systems has often been described as «instant composition».

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[23] The Grand Union not only inherited attitudes to dance and compositional strategies from the Judson and post-Judson period of the 1960s but in some cases, their work included movement material directly borrowed from earlier periods. Steve Paxton mentions that, in the early days of the group, Grand Union could be considered as «a repertory dance company with an inheritance from Continuous Project - Altered Daily» (Paxton 1972: 129).

[24] Lorber describes the work of Grand Union as resulting in an «ambivalent relationship with the audience» (1973 p. 34). He explains that this problem emerged because the boundaries between audience and performers had been blurred; often these performances had the character of a workshop because the group «aim[ed] to spur themselves new awareness» (Lorber 1973: 34).

This term, by joining improvisation with composition, draws attention, firstly, to the major difference between improvisation as a performance mode and any other uses of improvisation and, secondly, to the necessity of a «concept of composition», on the basis of which materials from a wide range of movement concepts are selected and «composed» within the unique event of the performance.

Current improvisational work has inherited from the avant-garde American art tradition of the 1960s the perspective of «art as life». This position emphasises the understanding of artistic work as a means of both practising and suggesting new attitudes to everyday life, thus contributing to the birth of a new culture.

In the 1960s, the extreme position of the totally improvisational performance was intended to stimulate changes in the ways art was perceived at the time. This was not separate from the artists» overall attitude to life: rather, it was an aspect of their politics of freedom and equality embodied through culture. The current practitioners of improvisational performance have not rejected this position; they still practise this form of dance as a manifestation of their attitude to life and, by doing so, they still attempt to provoke changes in the way art is conceptualised. By embracing a type of work which prioritises the element of choice so persistently, they believe their dance is political, a celebration of life and freedom - such a difficult task for the 1990s, stumbling towards the millennium in the middle of incurable illnesses, natural disasters and various forms of discrimination.

Abstract

La improvisación ha sido una estrategia adoptada a lo largo de todo el s. XX por aquellos artistas que han pretendido alejarse de los modos de composición tradicionales. Este artículo hace un breve recorrido por las distintas maneras en que se ha entendido el concepto «improvisación» y se centra especialmente en las propuestas de lo que se ha dado en llamar danza postmoderna norteamericana poniéndola en paralelo con otras disciplinas artísticas.

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