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The Notion of Space in Dance Performance

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The Notion of Space in Dance Performance

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Abstract

The body and the art of dance express ideas and reflections on both personal and socio-political issues in different ways, depending on the ideals and the particular characteristics of each era. The positioning of the body in space has always concerned dancers and choreographers who began to question the existing conventions of spatial organisation. Choreographers challenged the concept of “choreographic space,” placing their performances in public spaces and non-theatrical venues. The interconnected relationship between body and space is evident in both the context of everyday life and in dance performances. Although the shape or dimensions of the structured space in which movement takes place do not change, they do change in our perception through the experiential and emotional connections that are being made.

Keywords: Choreographic space, site-specific dance performance, perception, embodiment.

The Representation of the Body and the Questioning Minds of Isadora Duncan and Rudolf von Laban

The body is related both to the personal sense of one’s self and to the socio-political context of which it is a part of (Tsouvala, 2008). It incorporates elements of culture through everyday practices and personal choices. Carrying these influences, the individual through his/her movement shapes his/her areas of habitation. At the same time the particular characteristics of each place define his/her individual and collective activity within it. According to (philosopher) Susan Bordo “... our bodies are trained, shaped and imprinted with the mark of the historically dominant forms of the sense of self through the organization and arrangement of space, time and the movements of everyday life” (Makrinioti, 2004, p.31).

Throughout the history of dance, changes in the representation of the body are evident, embodying the perceptions and beliefs of each culture and socio-political system. The body and the art of dance communicate thoughts and ideas that in each era are expressed differently through choices of movement, costume, set design, stage design, stage space, the audience they target, and the concepts and symbolism they wish to bring into dialogue with society. The contribution of the dancer Isadora Duncan and the choreographer, architect, and theorist Rudolf Laban was decisive in the development of dance regarding the notion of art itself, the perception of space and the choice of non-theatrical venues for the dance performances. They suggested a more liberal expression of the body and the self with a new kinetic vocabulary and engaged with alternative places for performing. Their approach offered another way of understanding and perceiving the body and their questioning minds influenced the next generations of dancers, choreographers, and other artists by opening the way to experimentation.

The dancer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) was a pioneer in the art of dance and with her work she proposed a new approach to both the image of the body and the conceptual content of her art. She was not only a dancer, but also a revolutionary and dance theorist who held a critical attitude towards society, culture and education. She fought for women's rights and social liberation (Barbousi, 2009). She promoted the image of the female body as subject with will and rights, free from social conventions (Daly, 2002). What she presented is contrary to 19th century choreographies. The new dance form indicates a shift in the role models of women, dancers and in the nature of the performances. The dancer choreographs herself and at the same time is a performer of a dance that expresses her own personal impulse without following steps that have been prescribed for her. Dance performances take place even on an empty stage. Dance is gradually becoming a practice for physical and mental health (Barbousi, 2014). Duncan altered the conventional sense of "beauty" and played an important role in displacing dance from enclosed spaces to alternative outdoor performance spaces. Her movement was not restricted by technical forms such as the ballet virtuosity and her dances were combined with live orchestral music, stage decoration and her own speeches. The combination of various artistic elements led her to the creation of innovative hybrid performances that departed from the prevailing aesthetics of 19th century art which required huge stages and expensive productions.

In Europe, Rudolph Laban, Jacques Dalcroze and Mary Wigman performed also in open spaces. The choreographer, theorist and architect Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) worked on the harmony of space (choreutics) and other influential theories such as the quality of movement (eukinetics, effort) and developed the analysis and documentation of human movement, called "labanotation", first published in 1928 (Maletic, 1987).

Laban developed one of the most comprehensive languages for the analysis of the art of movement. In his theory, the moving body is linked to specific spatial relations and is defined in relation to its position in space, the directions it follows (forward, backward, sideways), the planes (low, middle, high) on which it moves, and the path patterns it forms (curve, straight, zigzag). As the body moves in space it leaves “traces” that create, what is called, “sculptural space,” that is the visible space of choreography. He therefore proposes a practical exploration that studies the relationships between the body and other bodies and objects, the relationships created as the body moves, the forms it takes, its interaction with space and the effort it makes each time to realize a movement (Maletic, 1987).

The analysis of movement he developed, helps to describe movement in a qualitative and quantitative way that is applicable to any method of researching body movement. As the element of space is analysed also verbally, it becomes a key element in the practice of improvisation, enhancing the cultivation of the perception of space. It also plays a central role in choreographic experimentation making it evident that the posture and position of the body in space is a statement and offers specific meanings. Laban's analysis has influenced later artists in how they see and understand the body.

The Aspect of Space in Dance Performance

The positioning of the body in space has engaged dancers and choreographers who have begun to question the conventions of spatial organization that were previously proposed. As early as the 1950s, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) considered that the moving body was in itself extremely interesting and did not need to represent anything else, e.g. character, idea, story etc. and began for the first time to reconfigure the theatrical stage space by abandoning the conventions implied by the frontal focus of the stage, creating choreographies with complex arrangements and complex spatial relationships between the dancers. He used public spaces for his performances and called them “events.” He collaborated with artists from other fields, such as music and visual arts, creating performances that could even be presented in galleries or museums. The coexistence of bodies and art forms open the field for further experimentation in the rearrangement and use of space for the production of art.

More artists and choreographers of that period, influenced by the developments, moved away from the theatres, such as Alan Kaprow with “happenings,” and began to explore a broader conception of choreography. These innovations included choreographers from Judson Church Dance Theatre who performed in the city and radically expanded notions of sustainable places for choreography. At the same time the adoption of everyday movement as a core movement

vocabulary (e.g. Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown.) are indicators of this new practice that is detached from pre-existing aesthetic codes (Rubidge, 2012).

Trisha Brown's early works included walking on walls, performances on rooftops and happenings in private apartments. Lucinda Childs' *Street Dance* (1964) is often cited as an example of early site-specific dance performance as the choreographer questions human engagement with the built environment and promotes the idea that everything can be seen as a dance.

These works and many more created by postmodern choreographers such as Simone Forti, Douglas Dunn and Meredith Monk avoided conventional ways of presenting dance and often incorporated everyday activities and movements. Other movement practitioners such as Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton and Anna Halprin approached dance through dance improvisation and performed in open space. While these works did not label themselves as "site-specific" at the time, they reflect the concepts of today's site-specific dance performance (Hunter, 2015).

Modern dance evolves in line with the events of each era. The presence of women as early as the beginning of the 20th century asserting their participation in political, economic and social life is decisive, and the economic depression in the 1930s in America makes dance present as a means of political activism (Barbousi, 2014). New experimentation continues to resist the restrictions of ballet performance. The body that appears on stage is not intended to astonish with its virtuosity, but is presented as an everyday body, familiar to the viewer, performing simple choreographic patterns (Vounelaki, 2021). The adoption of everyday movements combined with alternative performance spaces such as public urban space or museums have reconfigured expectations of the art of dance. Experiments with movement and space as key parameters continue to expand the boundaries of dance art, creating new models in terms of form, the role of artists and the conceptualisation of performance space.

In the emerging genre of site-specific art, the audience becomes an integral part of the creative process. Instead of watching the artwork, the spectators should instead inhabit it as they inhabit the world.

Contemporary site-specific dance performances are presented in a variety of forms as the genre continues to evolve and incorporates a wide variety of elements from contemporary circus, walking practice, land art, durational performances, etc. Many artists focus on the relationship between body and space and use tools from site specific art and walking art to explore people's relationship to space, landscape, and the city.

Choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker started a walking performance in 2016 that was repeated in 2018 and 2019. It is a slow walk that invites participants to pause and reflect on the city and try to approach it through the most basic form of movement: walking. De Keersmaeker

wants to prove that walking is dancing and that everyone has the ability to dance anytime and anywhere. It is an opportunity to highlight dance as a medium that can bring people together in public space in an accessible way and can help change our perception of this space. (De Keersmaeker, 2019).

The field of choreography has also been expanded by the art of video dance where the “video space” becomes a site of choreography and through installation works where the artists worked with digital media, video and cinema. Dance environments are created even in digitally augmented spaces through interaction (Rubidge, 2012).

The structured space in which movement takes place does not change the shape or dimensions of the space, but it does change the form it takes in our perceptual experience. Scholar and artist Sarah Rubidge (2012) has pointed out that as dancers move, the relationships between the mobile and “static” features of space change. The viewer perceives space in a different way, creating a different experience of the environment in which she/he is present. Therefore, movement shapes the space.

Conclusion

When tracing the developments in the use of space in dance performances historically, changes in the perception of space and the body in each period are visible. From ballet performances that highlighted virtuosic movement and were limited to specific arrangements of bodies in space, dance performance now requires a broader kinesthetic awareness of the environment and the surroundings in which the body moves. The choice of kinesiology and performance site, highlight the personal expression of the artist or a group of people and the placement of the body in space is a crucial choice for both the aesthetic and the conceptual dimension that the artist wants to present. Dance, which had been the entertainment of the king's court, changed its role, making the body a means of spreading ideas, reflection, claiming rights and protest both in dance performances and in everyday life. The paths we traverse, the way we move and walk either as individuals or collectively makes evident our relationship to the places we inhabit and the way we mutually shape each other as integral members of the same environment.

Although the notion of “choreographic space” is broad and clearly extends beyond the practice of dance, in general terminology it often simply refers to the spaces in which choreography takes place: theatrical venues, installation rooms, urban areas, domestic places, rural landscapes, etc. However (beyond the topological) it can also refer to the more dynamic spatiotemporal space that is inherent in any choreographic project and is created by the activity of dancers as they perform a choreography or by people as they engage in everyday movement in public spaces. In other

words, the choreographic space may have two aspects/perspectives. The first is that it is a field for choreography. The second is that the action itself within a space can make it “choreographic.” By turning our attention away from any primary functional purposes of the space, and focus on the movement that is already happening there; the space is being choreographed (Rubidge, 2012).

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