

Dancing Memories: The Transience of Experience

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Abstract

This article reports and speculates about the dance composition called Público. Five performers used their own dancing memories to develop the creative material of this work. This corporal research was led due to sensations, perceptions and emotions. For this creation, autofiction was used to widen up possibilities for building meanings. In order to evaluate its creative trajectory, the relationship among memory, emotion and movement is hereby discussed. Also, studies carried out by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson give basis to the idea that time and memory are metaphorical concepts which are interrelated. These authors propose the notion of embodied; it underlines the correlation between past and present perceptions. John Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience is also an approach here proposed. It is used with the view that part of the creation of the scenic structuring has been deviated from issues and necessities caused by the creative process.

Key words: dance, memory, aesthetic experience.

1. Presenting Público

Público— 3 atos e um livretois a choreographic work created in 2010 under the direction of Adriana Grechi, a Brazilian choreographer. Five performers were selected for sharing scenically their dance stories; they were: Andréa Guilhermina, Júlia Rocha, KarimeNivoloni, Nina Giovelli, and I. When we first met, we shared our experiences with one another regarding our own dance trajectory, our expectancies, needs and desires. Some literature was suggested to be studied; which were: *Consuming Life* by Zigmunt Bauman, *Des HistoriesVraies* by Sophie Calle, and some excerpts of Clarice Lispector's work and Fernando Pessoa's poetry. Furthermore, some works of José LeonilsonBezerra Dias, who is a Brazilian visual artist, were examined. All references above were important for further discussion about commercialization and trivialization of intimacy. By researching these artists, we were presented to different ways of dealing with the issue of poetic autobiography and autofiction. In addition, such study gave us the basis for developing a choreographic writing once the director wanted us to produce texts regarding our creation process. These texts were constructed in order to be projected during the scene.

Since the very beginning, there were certain materials which were already pre-established to set the choreography. The director wanted to organize a presentation with five performers. However, it would have to be established as simultaneous solos. Even dancing concomitantly, dancers would not make any contact. One would be affected by the other's presence even though they could not touch or face each other. Each of them was supposed to emphasise their own particular character of their dance. Whenever some sharing movement happened, it was supposed to be established as an individual appropriation and not as commonplace. Also, images taken by a video camera in real time would be used with the intention of making some details clear. To do so, the images would capture and develop some detailed parts of the body that the audience could not see, like hands, eyes, hair, etc. Texts produced during the creation process would also be projected. The choreographic work would consist of overlaid and fragmented scenes. The cast was supposed to deal with different focus of attention simultaneously. The costume would be composed of everyday clothing. Several of those choices were firstly decided because they were part of the language that has been developed by the choreographer through her career.

However, it will become clear that each creation of art requires its own specificities since elements and materials are defined in the act of creation. The rigorous procedures and resources may complicate the study of certain issues as well as it may disturb the process of communication of the work. Our movement research was based on activities that stimulated memory and attention to sensations and perceptions caused during the creative process. The director asked us to bring songs that would take us back to some memorable moments of our lives or meaningful situations regarding our dance experiences. After warming-up and heel-taps which assisted in relaxation and body awareness, we improvised one at a time, with our eyes closed. In order to have these exercises done, each performer chose the songs that would play during the improvisation.

The other colleagues took care that no accident occurred while one was dancing with her eyes closed. This might have been the most precious step of the artistic creation. Very particular qualities of movement emerged spontaneously. When we talked about these experiences, we could notice that we distinctly understood the idea of revisiting our own memories. Many were the experiences lived and images created at those moments: there was one who departed from their own juvenile experience of parties and rock concerts, who danced their millions of dance steps of numerous classes which had been carried out throughout their entire lives, who danced stimulated by recent performances, who created surpassing images of a dancing squid and became one of it, who was inspired in their own joys and pains, and who departed from their own idea that memory is an invention to explore the unusuality. Each rehearsal emerged different dances while the others were retaken and modified. The director insisted that we should carefully observe the sensations which came from these experiences. In fact, many were the sensations and emotions lived through this process. Dealing artistically with our own memory understanding was an intense practice. We knew that was impossible to go back the experience itself. Therefore, we had to detach some images from our past and recreate it in our present. This single practice already brought us a strong emotional work.

2. Memory, emotion and movement

Regarding how the course of this choreographic creation trod, it should reflect on the relationships among memory, emotion and movement. According to Johnson (2007), the movement is one condition of our sense of the world and of ourselves. Perceptual knowledge comes from the movement, which means gestures and corporal actions as well as interactions with other people or objects in movement. We are hardly ever aware of the nature of our movements; so we are constantly experiencing the qualities of our relationship with things, spaces, and applications of force. "Through movement, we learn not only the contours and qualities of our world, but also the sense of ourselves as inhabiting a world with which we can interact to achieve some of our ends and goals." (JOHNSON, 2007, p. 27) Damásio (2000, 2004, 2005) states that any object and circumstance in which we get related to will lead us to an emotional reaction. Thus, a movement experience arouses some emotion because the movement affects the correlation between body and environment. Emotion might cause different degrees of intensity but its occurrence is certain. We may even not notice it, but we do suffer its effects. Emotions are patterns of complex chemical and neural reactions whose objective is the regulation of life. They happen whenever there is a change in the internal or external environment of an organization. This change may come from sensorial mechanisms that process objects and situations, or from mental evocation of objects and circumstances through images caused by thoughts.

Thus, the memory itself causes this alteration. Movement, emotion and memory are intrinsically connected. In this light, our memory cannot be understood as a container where information is kept. Memory is embodied, rooted to our body and mind through a continuous process of recreation. Each remembrance is temporary, which means that its recall is a transformation. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) used the term *embodied* to refer to the notion of body as a body condition. It is the correlation between experienced perceptions and perceptions being now experimented. This means that the previous experience and the present one are getting reconfigured all the time. There is no concluded body in which we would be able to define its shape as a totally stable one. Instead, there is a procedural body with its construction unfinished and continuously built. Dewey (2010) explains that we change every time we get related to something. Attitudes and interests are built by the accumulation of meanings originated from performed and suffered situations. In a continuous operation, meanings become the basis of an always renewed correlation with the world.

The bodymediatheory, which has been proposed by Greiner and Katz (2005), regards the body as a media information processing. This theory helps us to understand what happens when some information is in contact with a body, how this information affects this body, how it becomes part of it, and how it is transformed by this relationship. There are also changes in any other information that had previously composed this body up to the moment that this contact takes place. Even the environment where this meeting happens will change; it will transform both, the present bodies and information temporarily present. Information does not simply come by filling in a body; it is instead negotiated with information that was already present. The very meaning we give to things is embodied. Johnson (2007) explains that along our personal story we learn meanings to basic body level. First of all, meaning is based on our sensorimotor experience, visceral connections and feelings with the world. Only after a second moment, several imaginative capacities use sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts. Only by this means, it is possible to deduce abstract concepts. When the meaning happens in a level of consciousness, it can be encoded in concepts and propositions. On the other hand, when it is constituted of continuous processes of an immanent and pre-reflexive meaning, it concerns structures, patterns, feelings and emotions. In both cases, cognitive resources are collected and they operate in our sensorimotor experience and emotions monitoring. Each meaning rearticulates different meanings.

Furthermore, the author states that meaning is a connection among present, past, and current or feasible future. Meaning is not a fixed object in the world to be unveiled; it depends on our own experiences and the ability of body, mind and environment to be integrated. In this sense, mind and body are not two separate things. According to Johnson (2007), the human being is “mindbody”, i.e., mind does need a human brain, and the human brain does need a body interacting with complex environments that are composed of physical, social and cultural resorts. In short, our sensorimotor experiences in the environmental are basis for any of our concepts.

3. Metaphorical concepts

According to the explanation above, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) state that concepts are metaphorical. These authors believe that concepts are neural structures that allow us to feature our categories in mental terms and they also enable us to reason about them. It is worth to mention that neural categorization happens when some information is mapped out and grouped in certain input patterns, generating output ones. For example: each ant is different from one another but if you are not an expert, you will not be able to distinguish them. All of them are called the same: ‘ant’. Each category is usually conceptualized in more than one way which is called ‘prototype’ by the authors. Lakoff and Johnson (2002) express that the categorization of objects and experiences is crucial for us to understand and act in the world in a way that it will make sense for us. This is a way of identifying a particular perspective of the object or the experience by highlighting certain properties, attenuating others and even hiding some. Choosing some categories and not others to conceptualize something requires our perceptions and proposals for each situation. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) point out another important aspect in the categorization process: most categories are automatically constituted and we are not aware of them.

On that account, one part of categories is consciously formed; the other is a larger percentage which imposes itself without any deliberation. Conceptual structures result from our categories as well as from inferential classification and/or from imaginative mechanisms related to them. “An embodied concept is a neural structure that is actually part of, or makes use of, the sensorimotor system of our brains. Much of conceptual inference is, therefore, sensorimotor inference.” (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p. 20)

In addition, Johnson (2007) explains that our interactions with the environment are preserved in neural maps through structures and patterns. Whenever we interact with the world, we create maps in order to have a better and more durable survival. Thus, sensorimotor activation patterns boost correlated neural areas. Neural maps are primary ways for us to connect, mean and act with the world.

In neural maps, adjacent neural cells (or small groups of neural cells) fire sequentially when a stimulus moves across adjacent positions within a sensory field. For example, scientists have manipulated the visual field of the frog and measured the electrical activity of region of its brain to show that as one stimulates a frog’s visual field, the neurons of its optic tectum will fire in coordination with the visual stimulus. (JOHNSON, 2007, p.127)

Neural maps are not internal representations of an external reality. Sensorimotor and somatosensory maps are the necessity of organisms to structure their experiences and their realities. As stated by Lakoff & Johnson (1999), human concepts are not reflexions regarding external reality; instead, they are our body and brain conceptions which specially come from our sensorimotor system. Concepts are metaphorical constructions that initiate in the beginning of our lives, in the period of confluence. It is, for instance, the case of the connection between the heat perception coming from the mother’s body and the feeling of affection. A neural correlation between a sensorimotor operation and a subjective experience or judgement happens. The confluence between both takes place at the same time that their respective neural nets are activated. These nets are established with the constitution of neural maps. Afterwards, in a second moment, these domains are differentiated. However, whenever an experience drives a specific neural net, which is learnt through previous co-activations, a conceptual mapping comes up through the experience called primary metaphor. Its mechanism goes beyond brain areas linked to sensorimotor experiences towards subjective experiences.

From a conceptual point of view, primary metaphors are cross-domain mappings, from a *source domain* (the sensorimotor domain) to a *target domain* (the domain of subjective experience), preserving inference and sometimes preserving lexical representation. Indeed, the preservation of inference is the most salient property of conceptual metaphors. (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p. 58)

In this way, body experience and cognition are strictly linked. These meaning systems – and others – are able to compose our concrete and abstract concepts. Lakoff & Johnson (2002) allege that each concept is somehow partially structured in terms of others. Therefore, it is said that concepts are metaphorical. Whatever we call memory has also strong basis on experiences that constitute our understanding of time.

However, the notion of time is structured by sensorimotor experience in which we resort to understand it. Time is a concept. Considering time a basic understanding of memory, it is worth for us to observe how time was partly constituted in the ideals of our culture.

4. Time Metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), the notion of time and the other concepts is constructed in a very unconscious way. Time conceptions are part of our daily conceptual system and they are linked to other concepts as, for example, movement, space and event. Whenever we build clocks or pendulums to measure time, we understand time intervals as successive repetitions of an event type. Our experience of time is connected to our experience of events. And as for this experience of events, time is directional, irreversible, continuous and capable of measurement.

What we call the domain of time appears to be a conceptual domain that we use for asking certain questions about events through their comparison to other events: where they “located” relative to other events, how can they be measured relative to other events, and so on. What is literal and inherent about the conceptual domain of time is that it is characterized by the comparison of events. (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p.138)

This is related to movement. The authors who have been previously mentioned illustrate that time metaphors are developed through common and daily *embodied* experiences which come from our connection with the world. We move towards the others and vice-versa. So, we automatically correlate this movement with events that provide us the sense of time. “In short, we correlate time-defining events with motion, either by us or by others.” (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p.151). There are two domains that together constitute the metaphorical concept of time: event and movement. However, we see events and movements crossing a line in the space which enables us to make plans for the future. Time measures are metaphorically represented as space measures. As a matter of fact, time concept is metaphorically structured. Metaphor here is not taken as a figurative language. This means that our spatial and perceptive experiences, as well as our emotional and cultural experiences, are metaphorically conceptualized. According to Lakoff & Johnson, “Metaphor allows conventional mental imagery from sensorimotor domains to be used for domains of subjective experience.” (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p. 45)

There are some main metaphors of time which are daily used. Among them, there is the image of an observer in the present facing the time. He has the future in front of him and the past behind. The objects that pass through him characterize the time, which means that time is in movement. We regularly talk about coming dates, past situations and future activities. It is like time is coming from somewhere in the past, passing through the present and leaving towards the future. Another common metaphor is the observer in movement. In this case, the observer goes through the time. Everything he passed by is the past and everything he will pass by is the future. Objects and situations are static; they wait for him to come. Wherever the observer is, it is always the representation of the present. We illustrate this understanding when we say that we are moving towards a new stage of our lives, or that we left behind our childhood, and so on. Time is automatically taken as a location or region in space. All these metaphors are the basis of many comprehensions of time. There are those who believe that are able to predict the future or even to remember something in the past exactly as it happened. It is possible to believe in fate or even in the past irreversibility. Sometimes, all of us have our notion of time based on these metaphors. It is interesting to highlight that when memory is designed based on these metaphors of time, which means, as a path or something that passed by us, it presents itself as a container. In this case, it seems possible to remove some past event from the past. However, the *embodied* concept shows that any new information, even if it is a memento, deals with information that constitutes both, body and mind, at that very moment. Experiences are continuously recreated. So, when something is remembered, it is recreated.

We experience only the present. We have to conceptualize past and future. We have memory and we have images of what we expect. But memories and expectations are not in themselves laid out along a time line. (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1999, p.155)

5. Sharing and consummation of the art

In movement research of *Público* memories were used to instigate imagination. There was not the intention to revive something previous at any time, there was only the intention of reinventing each performer’s dance from ideas, images, emotions and experimented sensations that came from memories. There was a mixture of biography and fiction in the material that was being constructed. Past penetrated in the present, while the former recreated the past itself. The story of our lives was scrambled during the trials.

Autofiction is here understood as “[...] a genre which scrambles categories of autobiography and fiction in a paradoxical way; it links in one single word two writing forms which, at first, should be excluded.”¹(FIGUEIREDO, 2010, p. 91). ‘Autofiction’ is term created by Serge Doubrovsky and it regards the possibility of breaking and scrambling a story, and finally building a narrative like a novel. From memory, we can recreate whatever was lived or even get deviated from it. For *Público*, the dance created was not attached to facts which composed each performer’s life but the intention was to deform them, renovate them, and recreate them. Since the beginning, the director aimed to develop scenically the autofiction idea. This was happening while the body research was going on and due to stimuli given in order to have artifices and inventions introduced in the materials which were coming up. Besides, as previously mentioned, our dances contaminated and mingled with each other. All these issues induced the body research to be built through fictitious processes. It is also worth to say that the director-choreographer was who determined what would be kept in the spectacle, which mingles would compose the scene, and which inventions would be part of the work. That was the collaborative aspect of the creation and the way all parts were involved in their own work. However, there were few possibilities of negotiation between the performers` and the director-choreographer`s creative necessities. Such situation did not result in great conflicts for the creation because the roles and limits of each part had previously been clear. However, it generated aesthetical consequences for the work.

Eco (2010) discusses about the increase of ‘Open Works’ in the XX century. They are characterized by the possibility of reaching many organizations according to the interpreter initiative. Instead of understanding them as concluded ones, which indicates one single structural direction, these works propose to be concluded by the interpreter at the time of his/her own aesthetic enjoyment.

[...] although delivered art is not materially unfinished, it is possible to object that any work of art demands a free and inventive response especially because it will not be able to be truly understood if the interpreter does not reinvent it in a congenial act with the author. In fact, this observation is a recognition that contemporary aesthetics has just appeared after having reached mature critical awareness of interpretative relationship. The artists from previous centuries were probably very far from being critically aware of this reality. However, nowadays this consciousness exists, and mainly in the artist who is not subjected to the ‘openness’ as an inevitable factor. Instead, the artist establishes this art in a productive program and even proposes the work in a way it may promote the greatest possible openness.² (ECO, 2010, p.42)

Despite of not being practicable to probe into this issue here, for the last few years there have been several discussions which show that this contamination is more than a tendency; it is a worldview. Regarding the authorship issue, Setenta (2008) states that authorship is not based on the existence of an original one with a single owner; it is particular only by organizing shared information with others. Information is not original because it shows multiple origins. The authorship results from sharing. Any idea inserted in the world is an unstoppable flow of contaminations in all directions. In these terms, the authorship would be something like co-authorship and the author is someone who reorganizes information.

Regarding the dance universe, Louppe (2004) finds more subtle and relevant to understand the body as one that experiences the movement and time-space. Even regarding each experience as unique, we are non-stop affected by others and vice-versa. The author says that when there is an encounter between the choreographer and the dancer, each of them is invited to use their own capacities and part of their aesthetical choices. Still, she suggests that there is a current interest in interstitial spaces, in uncertain borders, and in unknown body constructions. The promotion of sharing actions and mainly differences comes from breaking the boundaries that build hierarchies and dominances. The intention is not to make all of these actions equal. On the contrary, the intention is to let them coexist and interpenetrate in singularities. By opening the artistic creation, it may promote the construction of aesthetic experience. Dewey (2010) defines aesthetics as the enrichment of immediate experience. In order to happen, the means and the ends of a work of art must be interpenetrated.

¹ TN: My translation. All quotes which were originally written in Portuguese and are here found were especially translated for this paper. “[...] é um gênero que embaralha as categorias de autobiografia e ficção de maneira paradoxal ao juntar, numa mesma palavra, duas formas de escrita que, em princípio, deveriam se excluir.”

² TN: My translation. “[...] poder-se-ia objetar que qualquer obra de arte, embora não se entregue materialmente inacabada, exige uma resposta livre e inventiva, mesmo porque não poderá ser realmente compreendida se o intérprete não a reinventar num ato de congenialidade com o autor. Acontece, porém, que esta observação constitui um reconhecimento a que a estética contemporânea só chegou depois de ter alcançado madura consciência crítica do que seja a relação interpretativa, e o artista dos séculos passados decerto estava bem longe de ser criticamente consciente dessa realidade; hoje tal consciência existe, principalmente no artista que, em lugar de sujeitar-se à “abertura” como fator inevitável, erige-a em programa produtivo e até propõe a obra de modo a promover a maior abertura possível.”

Aesthetic experience is linked to experiences as a whole. We build each aesthetic experience with and from perceptions that are part of us. It needs to be established as a difference that makes a difference. However, this does not happen at once. There is a dealing process between current and previous perceptions. Dewey (2010) states that each person assimilates values and meanings from previous experiences in a distinct way. Some things are more emphatically memorized than others and because of that they are remembered more easily. What is expressed is not an influence from past events or only an experienced moment right now; instead, it is the strong union among aspects and values of past and present. Dewey (1980, p. 76) said “[...] the act is expressive only as there is in it a unison of something store from past experience, something therefore generalized, with present conditions.” This happens in both, the creation and the appreciation process. In the aesthetic perception, the present is not unbound to past; instead, the past is transposed to present, expanding it and deepening it. Its meanings are gathered and there is no way to avoid them. According to the author, each experience is concluded by itself but not entirely because there is a reminiscence of part of its meaning and value.

Art does not only lead to an experience; art is an experience itself. In order to achieve an aesthetic quality, it is also necessary to be interested in whatever is proposed by its process and in the conditions which delay or accelerate its progress. Aesthetic experience is restrained when art production and intellectual procedures are submitted to conventions. Dewey (2010) states that this experience is affective. In other words, it is thoroughly linked to emotion. An artistic creation comes from successive transformations of stimulus and from the emotion originated of some experienced situations or events in the world. Artists build a concrete situation and thus generate emotional responses. The author points out two factors of an expressive work of art: the first one would be the existence of motor inclinations for those who produce it and for those who appreciate it, because some sensorimotor familiarity with material resources used is important to enjoy the work - they could be paint, pottery, sound, writing, movement, gesture, etc. The second factor is characterized by the extraction of previous meanings and values, in a way it merges qualities directly presented by the work. Aesthetic perception has to recreate past experiences to compose a new pattern. It is neither possible to discharge stunted experiences nor inhabit them as the way they were.

In *Público*, the dance research was improvised from the movement quality generated while it was being built. However, great part of the scene structuring was composed by pre-defined choices. This interfered with the dance spontaneity and with the own aesthetic experience of work. I can state that based on my own experience as performer of this choreography. Also, several conversations with the other dancers involved in this project and with some spectators could support the construction of this analysis. To integrate as many materials, the performance sometimes seemed lost in its own fragmentation and excess. Certain choices were not part of what was requested by the creative process. A lot of experimentations are necessary for artwork to be able to produce an aesthetic experience. So, it is possible to be affected by it. Besides, a creation with a director-choreographer and performers working together has particularities. The connection between past and current experiences takes place among all involved. This connection is cut off if it does not happen in each one and among all. Both of them, the director-choreographer and the performer must be aware of this because creation is a sharing process. For *Público* there was some objection to that effect. Aspects and values that were part of the director-choreographer's background remained steady. Very few times were they arranged according to demands which came from the creation experience, which means, from the connection of the director-choreographer's and the performers' past and present experiences. According to Dewey (2010), inflexibility in the predetermination of a final product, either by the artist or the spectator, leads to a mechanical or academic product. The work does not reach the state of consummation. The result the artist wants to achieve must be the completion of whatever had happened before.

However, it cannot be the fulfilment of a previously defined schema. The unexpected is a condition. It is possible to learn with our own work by observing the construction of something that was not part of the project or the initial aim. In fact, this cooperation work is not easy at all. The artists, the spectators and the artistic creation must be all connected. It is important to identify when this does not happen and to propose strategies to promote this connection. Dance must be reconstructed up to the point it reaches its own end; the consummation of its process. This is crucial for an aesthetic experience. According to Dewey (2010), the artist has an aesthetic perception of their own creation when there is a dynamic and affective recognition of what has already been produced by using it as a stimulus for the next step. The artist embodies the attitude of the spectator. On the other hand, the spectator has to create the experience. This means that there is an act of creation. According to Dewey (1980, p. 59),

In both, there is comprehension in its literal signification – that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole. There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist. (DEWEY, 1980, p.59)

Eco (2010) sees the artist as someone who produces an artwork desiring that certain aspects are understood. However, each spectator is singularly affected by this art, because it depends on many factors that cover personal, social, cultural, and historical issues, as well as their propensities and opinions. An artwork turns to be aesthetically valid when it generates multiple perspectives and comprehensions. It must remain itself, though. There is one of its aspects that is not open because it remains independent of its enjoyment. However, there is another part that is open and it enables the spectator to have several interpretations and experiences.

Communication is part of the art characteristic to promote sharing experiences. Communicability has nothing to do with popularity. Dewey (2010) defines communication as a creation process of participation that makes usual what is unique. The difficulty of *Público* in this sense has to do with the precipitation of some principles and patterns of composition, as well as the conclusion of the scene structuring. Both of them became too inflexible. Moreover, the body research from memory, in particular, reached a level of intensity that may point to possible developments. Some spectators that could attend this stage of the creation process reported that their own memories were evoked. Thus, the immediate experience and the recreation of previous experiences were intensified. However, they said that these perceptions did not happen when the work was structured as a spectacle. Even though the performance *Público* has not been established as an aesthetic experience, it shows that its body research has indeed the potential for this work to be consummated, and it can be constituted as an experience with aesthetic quality.

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