

Soft and Heavy Images

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“Maybe without this properly artistic moment of authentic passivity nothing new can emerge. Maybe something new only emerges through the failure, the suspension of properly functioning of the existing network of our life... Maybe this is what we need more than ever today.”

-Slavoj Žižek in ‘The Pervert's Guide to Ideology’ (Fiennes)

Background Theory

How do we unfold an embodied-epistemic-object (Spatz) on repeated expeditions as a group, without disrupting the fragile process of individual self-discovery and creativity? How do we frame and direct *playing* (Winnicott), for the sake of research, without compromising it?

One option is a *preparation* (Meisner), a process of *tuning in* the body- to a mode, layer, current, system, frequency, temperament, etc.- by means of self-excitement or manipulation. Discovering an effective self-manipulation is an iterative process, found in the resistance between speculative and ultimately material aspects of embodiment. As such, a preparation can take many forms, from manifesting images to ritualistic movement; granted it justifies the ends of relative efficacy. We can also think of preparation as *provisions* for the journey ahead, which enable and limit the kind of journey to be had. Crucially, this process remains distinct from the core of the practice, logically if not chronologically. A preparation both stimulates and relaxes the body; subsequently allowing a sensitive, cognizant journey within the core of the practice, as the practitioner is “pre-stimulated”. This approach refrains from consciously imposing tasks or intentions onto the practitioner during their journey, as to avoid impeding and limiting the fragile creative process, opting instead to “indirectly” lull them towards a magnanimous and fluid sense of aesthetics.

In our practice, we treat as such the discourse proceeding each improvisation session, and the exercises used to compliment, supplement, or otherwise integrate and corroborate this discourse. These exercises, often borrowed from other practices and distinct from the core practice in form and style, transmit a certain type of knowledge content experientially. The theoretical discourse and the practical exercises mandate one another through the benign and malevolent tension they maintain in opposition.

Jumping off from the previous session, we travel down the pathway of imaginations-embodiment. In specifying the layer of embodiment, we referred to the notion of *deformation* of the bodies “daily” technique as revealed in ‘A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology’ (Barba). The core of the idea is creating tension in the quotidian functions of the body as to evoke the “dilated body”: “above all a glowing body, in the scientific sense of the term: the particles which make up daily behaviour have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion, they move further apart, attract and oppose each other with more force, in a restricted or expanded space.” From an epistemic perspective, “deforming”, in this context an internal-performance, affords the experiential probing or tinkering in areas of embodied technique which concern primarily the physiological experience of the body, and “indirectly” shape its external-performance.

This is exemplified in the “alteration of daily balance in the search for precarious balance”. The daily balance is autonomous, often unconscious, and is based “on economy of power, on the

relationship between the energy used and the result obtained". Thus, by creating "a condition of permanently unstable balance" by means "uselessly complex, seemingly superfluous and costing excess energy", the "series of muscular relationships and tensions within our organism" that constitute and regulate our balance are intensified, *shaken up*. The process of balance and its affordances are foregrounded, made present and verisimilitudinous to the spectator and malleable to the performer.

From a more rigorously physiological perspective, "whether standing or reclining, (one) is never immobile: he oscillates following particular and complex rhythms. These rhythms are established by the various sensory-motor reflex systems which assure the regularization of tonic postural activity." The disruption or amplification of the regularization foregrounds the sensory-motor functions of the balance system, such as its "auto-receptive elements (muscular, tendonous, articular and vestibular)". In other words, the disorientation of the balance allows a *tuning into* an experience of dynamic "kinesthetic sensations", so called *somatic*, on a "pre-expressive" level; the embodied process which facilitates awareness and availability, so called *flow*.

Accounts of such tactics are plentiful, such as the "deformation of the daily position of the legs and a reduction of the base of support in the foot" found in classical ballet; the distortion of alignment, the displacement of the bodies' center of gravity, and so on. Standing on one leg, the sensory motors of the body must react and activate so to prevent falling, more so than they do when standing upright. The body must re-support, re-align, and re-center- and so these processes are revealed.

A "dilated body" can be achieved through "dilated mind"; that is, by manipulating the imagination. In the specific context of balance and muscular tension, imaginary stimuli have been proven to cause measurable physiological reactions. In the broader context of *deformation*, "thought is also motion, an action - that is, something which mutates", and "a way of moving in space is a manifestation of a way of thinking: it is the motion of thought stripped naked". So, a performer who draws on "grey, predictable, lazy way of thinking" in a repetitive way "without disorienting it, without re-routing it with leaps in cataracts and falls or in that profound calm which precedes the sudden escape of water seized by a new descent" is simply missing out.

It is the "work on the bridge which joins the physical and mental banks of the river of creative process" that we are enamored by, and it is the ebb and flow over that bridge that we are investigating. We are looking at an intersection, or the territory between, two pathways and travelling simultaneously down each. How can we utilize the *deformation* of the physical and mental processes to unfold the relationship of *imagination and embodiment*? What kind of *preparation* can we enact?

Account of the Encounter

After discussing the concepts above, we dedicated a preparatory ten minutes of self-practice to unravel the intrigue in precarious balance. We played with the organic amendments of the axis of balance in relation to minute redistribution of alignment or weight, and with the displacement of the core and change in its quality. E.g., the chin tilting right awakens the left hip to raise. It helped to work slowly and hold positions, as to listen to the quite oscillations of the body. The ten-minute duration proved too short, as remnants of confusion and anxiety caused by the "analytical" discourse lingered during the open-improvisation sessions and disrupted them (in an unwanted way).

In addition, we also recalled the preparatory exercises working on the embodiment of images (Chekhov) from the previous week. To clarify, I use the term *image* as deriving from imagination, "something imagined". Most written practices are concerned with forms of Realist theatre, and thus prioritize human figures, but the same tools can be expanded to include any image that is vivid in the void: elements, memories, animals, furniture, weather, movement, etc.

In our conversation between the sessions, we discussed the notion of a *soft* awareness. In the context of the imagination-embodiment process, a soft awareness *allows* a smooth, fluid transference of power, a back-and-forth dialogue. Within that softness, along that spectrum, certain areas can be activated, charged, stimulated- which is what we can call *strong* awareness. In Lena's experience, the image of a weeping willow tree- sprouting, growing and wilting- informed an imaginary vector of movement, which influenced the weight and balance. "If there is just one necessity, to move forwards (for water or light), how does my body adapt." Here, the image is activated, made dense, agent, responsible- *strong* (*keras*, from Balinese dance); enacted in a body which *allows* the image to resonate, made reactive, adaptable- *soft* (*manis*). The charged image is released through the body, expanding into space, and then concentrated back into the body, provided the body is aware of and available to it.

Note that I refer interchangeably to the categories of imagination and embodiment, as well as the awareness to them and their relationship, as soft and strong- as from my perspective they connote one another.

"You put your mind to focus, like going towards the light, and then you observe how the body will solve going there. You do not interfere- you let the process unravel itself." For Susanna, soft awareness is a lucid awareness to the body and its reaction to the images (that are *invited* to manifest). She achieves this by keeping constant awareness of the sensorial body through a *body-scan*. "The embodiment of the image is *soft*, a continuation of muscle tension. For example, there is a change of temperature in the toes which takes my attention- but I do not actively start moving them. You continue observing, you let the tension sit and simmer, and then at one point the tension will activate movement, or move elsewhere, or dissipate."

Similarly, the awareness of the body can be strong while the imagination is soft. Omer kept a strong awareness of the body in testing ways to create a precarious balance; staying in a position of imbalance and sensing when it loses its radiance, and if or how that radiance can be reawakened without relying on virtuosic action. Here, the images are soft, resonating onto and from the body, coming and going- mostly crustaceans and underwater ravines. The body is activated, and the mind organically adapts. Due to preparatory exercises, this process is constituted by a certain "imagination-frequency" which has been tuned into prior.

At times, an association or image are already activated, *strong*, from a preparation or some charge that is introduced into the practice from the reality of the practitioner. The same is true of the body. In this case, the source of the strength need not be immediately named or pinpointed, rather allowed to resonate a while- such was Ariel's experience in the open improvisation.

To illustrate a body that is *to be decided*, in the sense of existing in the liminal space of action and passivity, Barba refers to a principle from the Japanese Noh theater. "The expression *jo-ha-kyu* describes the three phases into which all a performer's actions are subdivided. The first phase is determined by the opposition between a force which tends to increase and another force which holds back (*jo* means 'to retain'); the second phase (*ha*, 'to break') occurs at the moment when

one is freed from the retaining force, until one arrives at the third phase (*kyu*, 'speed'), where the action culminates, using up all of its force in order to stop suddenly, as if faced with an obstacle, a new resistance." Otherwise, as an acting teacher in Israel once vaguely explained: "I must pee, but I won't go just yet. Eventually, I will."

Softness does not necessarily imply passivity, strongness does not imply tension, and neither connote stasis. Rather, maintaining clarity in the sense of softness requires concentration, particularly while working with the strong *disruption* of the habitual tendencies of embodiment. Both aspects are kinetic, and so are the image and the body by analogy.

Some images to illustrate the kinetic relation of soft and strong forces. A dense snowball collecting soft snow. The stiffness of an arrow negotiates with the power of the bow, the forces of nature, as it is drawn- as it flexes, pierces through the air, and swiftly through the target. A bullet fired on the moon with sufficient force will defy gravity and go into orbit. A pebble surviving a gushing whirlpool and plunging into the depth.

The concept of soft awareness is comparable to "soft focus" from Viewpoints (Bogart), "the physical state in which we allow the eyes to soften and relax so that, rather than looking at one or two things in sharp focus, they can now take in many. By taking the pressure off the eyes to be the dominant and primary information gatherer, the whole body starts to listen and gather information in new and more sensitized ways." This *soft focus* is trained by disorienting the body, specifically sight, through challenging tasks layered simultaneously, affectively coaxing the practitioner into a state of embodied softness.

Conclusion

In future encounters, we would like to continue exploring how various kinds of images afford different experiences of embodiment, as well as the relation of the imagination-embodiment process to temporality and to space. We have previously discussed how the distance between the quality of the image and the ability of the body inform the imagination-embodiment process. We noted how "impossible" images challenge embodiment, so that it evolves in surprising ways (here the distance between quality and ability is maximal), and in this session Susanna suggested expanding the category of the impossible to include inanimate objects along with mystical creatures, etc. Inversely, we noted how certain imagery is intuitive and direct to exploration of certain embodied abilities (here the distance between quality and ability is minimal). For example, as we were dealing with balance and weight, Ariel imagined carrying a fridge and other images of external weights- letting them shape the balance of the body. Lena's image of a weeping willow tree swaying in the wind in extremely intuitive for the intention of the embodied research in balance and weight. Susanna imagined being a white marble ball. Omer suggested the image of a ball of energy in the core, which appears in many practices concerned with movement, and subsequently weight.

In terms of the overall efficacy of the framing of the research, the spectators in each improvisation session noted consistently how there seemed to exist a fluid synchronization between the enactors; meaning that the preparation of two pathways, travelling along two contiguous fields of embodied technique, relatively reliably afforded a certain experience throughout various bodies. Note that this endeavor suspends the questions of an audience and of authenticity, not cherishing or disregarding their importance- rather letting them echo; it focuses on embodied "insights" as a preliminary question, valuable.

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