

# Dancing as Making - 1: Proprioception

---

Sam Gill

“Dance is the only art of which we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made.”

-Ted Shawn

At a recent conference on education, Sir Ken Robinson said, “There isn’t an educational system on the planet that teaches dance every day to children the way we teach them mathematics. Why? Why not? I think this is rather important. I think that math is very important, but so is dance.”<sup>1</sup> I think it likely that Robinson was referring to public education, yet his point is inarguable. Clearly our culture under-appreciates and often simply devalues dancing. It would be difficult to find anyone who would insist that we should spend money and time teaching dancing on a par with science and math, or even social studies and literature, or even art and music. Where does dance fit in a world directed by the masculine power of production? The answer is simple: dance is valued to the degree it is seen as productive. Yet, what does dancing produce? In the most immediate sense, dancing produces nothing beyond the bodies of the dancers dancing. One certainly could argue that there is some existence of a dance beyond the dancing, say the classical ballet “Sleeping Beauty.” Hasn’t it existed as some sort of entity for a long time? It was choreographed by Marius Petipa and first performed in 1890. It is still frequently performed. Dance as artifact may apply in some sense for choreographed art performance dancing, but not for all the rest of the world’s dancing. And for all dancing there is no parallel artifact like a play script for theatre or a musical score. Dance notation is not viable since it is difficult to read<sup>2</sup> and it produces no kinesthetic images.

While I strongly feel that dancing makes no thing, I still want to consider dancing as making. First I want to reflect a bit on this whole process of making especially as presented by Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. I am surprised at how deeply making and unmaking are related to the human body and how long this relationship has been acknowledged. It is fascinating to think about how all making is, in some important sense, motivated by some lack of the body and amounts to a projection of the body into the world beyond the body.<sup>3</sup> And thus the motivation, the agency, for making rests in part on the pain or discomfort associated with this lack. We make things to alleviate a deficiency. It is a crazy insight to recognize that all made things are, in some sense, patterned on the body or at least our idea of what a body should be. It is important that we realize that in making stuff, we are remaking ourselves. I find insightful Scarry’s discussion of the hinge effect of made things. We make things as projections from our bodies or our image of what our bodies should be. These made things, standing seemingly independent of us in the world outside our bodies, then return the favor, exercising an agency projected on them to remake us. The energy and effort

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html) See also <http://www.sirkenrobinson.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Dance notation systems are comprehensible only to the extensively trained and then cannot be “read” in anything like real time.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 284-88.

required to make a thing is multiplied in its impact on us and those around us as it hinges back to show us what we did. Scarry's analysis of the potential impact of the small effort and movement required to pull the trigger of a gun is far out of proportion to the impact the fired gun may have on the world. Of course, to make a gun from the inception of the idea of such a device through a history of development and design and manufacture and distribution is a long and complex one, yet we can see that in making there is often a powerful multiplication of the hinged return.

Dancing as art, as performance, as done for an audience, as a product of culture, of high culture seems to make something in the sense of most makings. Even so, such forms of dancing are usually uncomfortable products of masculine makings (even if not done by male dancers). Notice the terminology that has come to be associated with these accepted forms of dance. They are done by "companies" of dancers. The company puts on "productions." These days choreographers typically refer to their creative process as "making work." The results of choreography are themselves referred to as "works." The economic side of this type of dancing is prominent. Audiences pay to watch. Programs tell audiences the meanings and stories of the dances and the qualifications of the artists. Advertising and promotion are extensive. And so on. Importantly the dancing that is most embraced by our culture is a business enterprise whose business is to produce dances. Even with all these terminological adjustments and masculinizations to fit a world driven by productivity, dancing remains an uncomfortable fit. Few dance companies really make it; few dancers actually earn a living. And, notably, dancing, even of this type, is only rarely associated with masculinity and masculine sexuality. Baryshnikov is a rare exception.

Are there ways of appreciating in a richer sense even these dances as makings? And then what of all the other types of dances that exist throughout the world where there is no abiding product?

As I discussed in earlier lectures, and am returning to here, dancing is distinctive for its relationship to making. It is a making where what is made is bodily identical with the maker. In some important respects the dancer is the dance. In dance making where is the hinge that Scarry describes? Where is the multiplier effect, especially for non-art non-performance dancing? The dancing body is at once self and other! In dancing the dancer makes an other, yet this other is the same body as that of the dancer. There is no physical separation. The dancer experiences this other in the same way as the dancer experiences her own body, her own self. This is quite remarkable, certainly provocative. We need consider other ideas and perspectives to understand the nuances and power of this aspect of dancing as a kind of making.

Again, to review what I have talked about before, most human experiences and actions can be considered in terms of one or more of the human senses being dominant. Reading involves primarily the visual sense. Writing adds something of the tactile. Eating engages taste predominantly, but also smell and even vision. Dancing is of the body and is sensual and engages feeling, yet what are the senses dancing engages? Dancers perhaps see themselves, but only from the rather odd angle of peering down at their bodies and even mirror images are strangely distorted and limited. Dancers smell their often sweaty bodies and those of other dancers, but how can smell be "the dance sense?" Hearing is important since dancers dance to music, to rhythms. Yet, postmodern dance demonstrated that

dancing can be done in silence without anyone questioning that it is still dancing. Touch is important in some ways—the contact of the foot and sometimes other body parts, with the floor and perhaps other dancing bodies or objects. Yet, clearly this isn't distinctive of dancing. Taste doesn't seem to be much involved in dancing. There is another sense; one commonly overlooked.

Proprioception is sometimes identified as the kinesthetic sense, another sense or one that significantly extends the sense of touch. Technically proprioception is a neurological phenomenon. Proprioception is based in sensory receptors attached to the muscles ligaments that sense and provide information about the demands placed on joints and muscles both from without and within. Dancing is heavily dependent on knowing where one's body parts are and on being able to move one's body in intended ways. Proprioception clearly is inseparable from movement. Proprioception then seems a strong candidate for the dancing sense.

I'll develop this idea of proprioception more fully now. In his book, *Parables for the Virtual*,<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi writes that "the spatiality of the body without an image can be understood even more immediately as an effect of *proprioception*, defined as the sensibility proper to the muscles and ligaments as opposed to tactile sensibility ... and visceral sensibility ...."<sup>5</sup> In what is to me an important discussion of proprioception, Massumi gives us much to appreciate and contemplate. He differentiates layers of the gross bodied senses. Touch, the tactile sense, in the limited sense of exteroceptors in the skin, perceives subject and object in that they mediate between feeling outside and inside. The visceral sense, that feeling in the gut—that feeling response of fright, for example—is the deepest layer of perception. Interestingly, as Massumi points out, visceral perception precedes the exteroceptive sense perception surely because it involves different areas of the brain and anticipates the translation into explanation of sight or sound or touch perception. Visceral perception registers intensity. Viscerality is a rupture in the stimulus response path; it is the perception of suspense; it is the space of passion.<sup>6</sup>

On proprioception, Massumi writes:

Proprioception folds tactility into the body, enveloping the skin's contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera. The muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes as qualities: ... Proprioception translates the exertions and ease of the body's encounters with objects into a muscular memory of relationality. This is the cumulative memory of skill, habit, posture. At the same time as proprioception folds tactility in, it draws out the subject's reactions to the qualities of the objects it perceives through all five senses, bringing them into the motor realm of externalizable response.

Continuing, Massumi writes:

---

<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Proprioception effects a double translation of the subject and the object into the body, at a medium depth where the body is only body, having nothing of the putative profundity of the self nor of the superficiality of external encounter. This subjective and nonobjective medium depth is one of the strata proper to the corporeal; it is a dimension of the *flesh*. ...

Proprioceptive memory is where the infolded limits of the body meet the mind's externalized responses and where both rejoin the quasi corporeal and the event. As infolding, the faculty of proprioception operates as a corporeal transformer of tactility into quasi corporeality. It is to the skin what movement-vision is to the eyes.<sup>7</sup>

Massumi has previously described "movement vision" by contrasting it with "mirror vision." Mirror vision is, as in seeing oneself in a mirror, from one angle, partial, and never effectively in movement. Movement vision is, he describes, "the kind of vision that grasps exactly and exclusively what mirror-vision misses: the movement, only the movement."<sup>8</sup>

Massumi is describing here what before we learned from Merleau-Ponty as "flesh" and from Leroi-Gourhan as "gesture."

Joining visceral perception and proprioception Massumi calls this conjunction "mesoperception," which he describes as

The synthetic sensibility: it is the medium where inputs from all five senses meet, across subsensate excitations, and become flesh together, tense and quivering. Mesoperceptive flesh functions as a corporeal transformer where one sense shades into another over the failure of each, their input translated into movement and affect. Mesoperception can be called sensation, for short.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Massumi identifies the internal senses of the viscera, muscles and joints as the impetus for integrating the inputs of the common five senses via the medium of movement.

Massumi's discussion of proprioception reveals that it is a complex of ideas with far-reaching implications. To summarize and digest a bit, some things can, I believe, be said.

- Proprioception translates sensations on the skin, conditions of movement, as qualities
- Inversely proprioception translates qualities held in memory as sensorimotor programs into patterns of movement
- Through patterned movement proprioception translates into relationships the way the body encounters objects
- Relationalities are proprioceptively recorded as posture, gesture, habit, skill, body schemas, sensorimotor patterns, corporeal concepts

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

- Proprioception translates qualities between memory and sensorimotor responses as expressions

The issue of self and other underlies all in this discussion. An important insight is that mesoperception—which is experienced as sensation, that is, as a feeling kind of knowing, awareness, consciousness—translates between self and other and does so in both directions. External stimulations are connected with relationalities, qualities, and values. Internal values engender sensorimotor patterns, movement. Proprioception is inseparable from our sense of self, fundamental relationality, subjective-objective interplay, consciousness, and body ownership.

Dancing then as making is the making, as introduced a number of times before, through movement of an other, a corporeal other, an other whose body is coincident with the body of the maker, the dancer. The dancer then experiences this other not as object, but rather as subject, proprioceptively. The dancer feels the other in exactly the same way the dancer feels and knows herself. The other is not known even by touch which translates the objective to the subjective. Rather the other is known in movement; experienced as posture, gesture, habit, skill, image schemas, corporeal concepts, and sensorimotor patterns. In dancing, the other is mesoperceived. How remarkable.

Following Massumi's focus on proprioception, it is important to clarify that the approach I am developing is intended to do more than limit our focus on the brain in the skull (a limitation often, it seems, taken by neuroscientists), yet I clearly do not intend to suggest that the brain is not essential. As developed throughout these lectures the entire neurophysiological system of gesture/movement must be included.

Proprioception then in this way of referring to the full interactive system, is the prominent sense involved with dancing in that most simple and direct sense that proprioception is the sense that provides us an awareness of the position and location of the parts of our bodies and is the basis on which directed and controlled movement is possible. Furthermore, when considered in terms both grounded in and transcending corporeality, proprioception is fundamental to all of the senses and all of our actions. Proprioception is body and movement, but it is movement in process, movement-as-such, movement "in itself," flesh in its reversibility,<sup>10</sup> perception in its play, self in its otherness. Proprioception as incorporeal materialism is seduction,<sup>11</sup> play, structurality.

Dancing is, in the most basic sense, movement, yet not any movement is dancing. Might we not suggest that what distinguishes dancing is that it enacts just these qualities of mesoperception; it plays out change? It is not about anything; it does not mean anything; it is a display in corporeal moving terms, of that which cannot be captured as a point in space and time or even a trajectory. Dancing is an exercise in and celebration of self-othering or other-selfing that enacts without production or application our

---

<sup>10</sup> A phrase that anticipates my discussion of Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>11</sup> A term that anticipates my discussion of Baudrillard.

proprioceptive awareness, our becoming-in-being, and our interplay with the world through movement.<sup>12</sup>

Dancing means nothing? I am certain this statement is a shock to many; some will find it repulsive. Clearly at first glance it appears antithetical to my deep respect for dancing, the dancing “in itself.” Yet, what I am attempting to provide some glimpse of is the dancing as dancing part of dances. Certainly specific dances can have meaning; can be deeply meaningful, of course. But what I am after is that dancing is not fully graspable because it cannot be arrested or captured without it being transformed into something else in the process. I am trying to glimpse the dancing before there can be any meaning connected with it or expressed by it. Here dancing is at once so ephemeral that we cannot grasp it and also that which is most abiding among all the meanings and qualities that can be carried by it.

---

<sup>12</sup> At some point I must expand this to consider the function of mirror neurons in dancing, which surely has something to do with audience experience.