

**What are specific values of Dance Improvisation in
Performance?**

by Heike Kuhlmann

We are interested in improvisation as a performance and art form, as away of thinking and playing, and as a world view. We believe that within the practice of improvisation lies a key to another way of being with one another, one that encourages spontaneity, challenge, discovery, and the expansion of creativity.[...]
(Kaplan, 1995, Contact Quarterly, p.16)

Introduction

This essay aims to expose the specific values of dance improvisational performances and discuss why these values are sometimes difficult to perceive by the audience.

There are many different dance forms and dancing tradition; and Improvisation¹ is much more rooted in non-European dance tradition as e.g. African dance than in European modern dance. I want to write about dance improvisation in performance, confining the essay to postmodern dance, which started to develop as a performance form in the 50s with Anna Halprin on the West Coast and the Judson Church Group in New York. In the 60s and 70s it often carried social and political meaning (Cohen Bull, 1997, p.18). Maybe it had its climax in the 70s the Grand Union, an improvisational performance group, which ended abruptly in 1976 (Hupp Ramsay, 1991, p. xv- xvi), but it is still an existing performance form with annual festivals in different places (e.g. in San Francisco 1994 (Kaplan, 1995, p. 16) or the annual international improvisational plus+ festival in Washington DC (2004 dcimprovest@yahoo.com). Improvisation in performance has been criticised and questioned as an art form.² Cohen Bull raises the question if people would questioned a "poorly constructed or performed set choreography" in the same manner as they do with improvised pieces (Cohen Bull, 1997, p. 20). Stark Smith reports of people after viewing a good improvisational performance not wanting to believe that they had seen improvisation (Dilley et al, 1992, p. 45).

¹ Improvisation is used for many different purposes. Here I am only writing about Dance Improvisation for an audience, as a performance form. I will use different terms as e.g. improvisational performances or just improvisation to use different words, but not in order to change the content, except when it is explicitly said.

² Hupp Ramsay (1991, p. 57) writes that the members of Grand Union had more than one been disappointed by and frustrated with the dance and theatre press[...]. An example of a review of the Soho Weekly was "as accessible and entertaining as a nightclub act" (in Hupp Ramsay, 1991, p.57)

As a dancer, improviser and audience member I have experienced both sides. Discussions with other dancers and non-dancers lead me to research more about these specific values and why they are difficult to be perceived by the audience. Some theoretical background should help to point out the specific values of dance improvisation. All experiences are made through our bodies and especially in dance which is in essence an embodied art, the body is the focus of experience and perception. Fraleigh's concept of the lived body – an existential phenomenological approach, describes the lived wholeness of the self in dance (Fraleigh, 1987). The question of how we experience through our bodies is explained through the work of Merleau-Ponty who developed a theory of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Bourdieu's theory of 'Habitus' gives the possibility to discuss the socially constructed origin of perception and aesthetic disposition (Bourdieu, 1979). These three theories will be further discussed in this essay.

First of all it is important to clarify what is meant by the term of dance improvisation in performance. There is no clear definition but a range of meanings, from simple presentations of the process itself to highly structured improvisations. All these unify in one aspect which differentiates improvisation from set dance pieces, which is the *unpredictable*, the possibility of deciding and moving within the moment. Within the evaluation of the specific values of improvisational performances two extracts of the video "Fall after Newton" will be used to support my argument. After that I will discuss the difficulties of improvisation to be perceived and valued today.

Theoretical background

The main points for an analysis of the values of dance improvisations are the examination of the body as the medium through which the dance is transmitted and the consideration of the dance as an art form. Fraleigh (1987) discusses the aesthetic perspective of dance through existential phenomenology, which describes how something presents itself into consciousness. The lived-body concept provides a basis for describing the lived wholeness of the self in dance within a non-dualistic view of the body and within that concept all experienced values become embodied (Fraleigh, p.7-17) As the body is subject, medium and immanent source of the

dance, the dancer is the dance and has to embody the dance in order to differentiate it from ordinary movement as dance as a primary aesthetic intent. Embodiment is realised when the dance is lived as a pure consciousness. This is when dancer and body become inseparable (p.27-32). But Fraleigh argues that a dance is performed within the expressive condition of being-for-other and only becomes effective as art in relation to another, to an audience, which experiences the dance in their own bodies on a preverbal level through the dancer. This relation between dancer and audience with the body as the commune ground of the human being is described as the intersubjective field, the field of consciousness (p. 58-65). The importance of that for the analysis lies in this field of consciousness which is realised in the dance through the body. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception (1962) helps us to understand that dancer and audience perceive the dance with their own selective, intentional and personal perception. Perception is experienced through our bodies. Through our body we perceive and we act. Through our body we have access to the world.

Arguably the process of consciousness in dance can only be realised after having perceived the dance in an aesthetical manner. Bourdieu (1979, p. 50-52) calls this the aesthetic disposition, understood as the aptitude for perceiving and deciphering specifically stylistic characteristics. He asserts a dependency of aesthetic disposition and material conditions, constructed by the interrelationship between economic, social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1979), refusing the existence of the collective and individual genesis, and seeing aesthetic perception as a socially constituted and acquired one (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 4, 29, 50). Instead he argues that aesthetic qualities of work of arts are not immediately evident to everyone, that the recognition (here I would also say the perception) of aesthetic qualities is a learned ability, which is acquired under definite conditions of cultural socialization. The possession of 'cultural capital' can mostly be connected with economic capital, so that people with less economic capital tend to possess less cultural capital (Harrington, 2004, p.95). "That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimizing social differences" (Bourdieu, 1979, p.7). The socially constructed and acquired aesthetic disposition can be supported by Foucault's concept of 'powerknowledge' which

discusses the direct coercion of political power over bodies through the diffuse, invisible discipline of the given form of knowledge (Foucault in Counsell, 2001, p. 127-132).

The understanding of specific values of dance improvisational performances is challenged if we consider the body as a key point of the analysis. Through the body we become conscious. The body is the medium of action and perception, but at the same time, the body is the medium through which we are socialized and disciplined. Both sides interrelate with each other and have to be considered in the discussion as to why these values are sometimes difficult to perceive by the audience.

The range of improvisational performances

The origins of the word improvisation are from the Latin word in-providere, which means "not foreseen"(Ritter, 1988, p.28). Ritter sees in improvisation a "spontaneous, freely structured, at times deconstructed danceform, or anti-form"(Ritter, 1988, p. 28-29), whereas for Cynthia Cohen Bull improvisation can cover the range of "dancing in the present", "spontaneous choreography", "messaging around" to "making it up as you go along"(Cohen Bull, 1997, p. 17).³

"Improvisation means choosing among the possibilities at the moment in contrast to executing certainties determined beforehand"(Murray in Cohen Bull, 1997, p. 17), - "a continuum from the simple presentation of the process itself to highly structured improvisations conceived as dances"(Cohen Bull, 1997, p.17-19). That means it depends on the performer, if she/he/they show a free improvisation where nothing was planned beforehand or if they there is a structure, for example a score⁴ which

³ Hagedoorn gives a comparison between set and improvised dance pieces: "A dance performance can be seen as a journey through the state space of all possible moments. In a choreography the dancer who acts as a guide for the audience, has to follow the path set out by the choreographer, who has mapped out an itinerary in advance. In dance improvisation, by contrast, the journey is created on the spot, which is what makes improvisation interesting to both dancer (s) and audience. " (Hagedoorn, I.; 2004)

⁴ A score is a structure, in which the dance is performed. That can be for example a specific timing, the use of space, of props. To give an example: "The dance will last for 5 min in a committed area. One dancer has to sing all the time – common songs. One person has to be in silence." (Anon, 2.12.2004)

gives a frame in which the dance is performed.⁵ The structure can help the performer to deal with uncomfortable situations where they do not know what to do, how to move, react, behave. It is a guideline or threat through the performance and can assure the happening of an ending, whereas a completely free improvisation gives much more freedom to the dancer on one hand, but it requires more skills and most of all it requires the ability of choosing what to do, how to move in difficult situations, so that the audience will not become bored or disappointed because nothing happens. On the other hand, it can be very exciting for both performer and audience to know that nothing is planned and to see what comes out of this.

In dance improvisation, either free or structured, the improviser is required to be able to reflect the atmosphere or to interact with the audience, to mirror potential dialogues or conflicts. But it is also necessary for the improviser to accept the possibility of failure, of not knowing how to resolve a situation and to disappoint the audience. Another difference is the necessary ability of every single improviser to have an overview in every single moment over the situation, that means what the other improvisers were up to at any given moment as well as to have a perception of the condition of the audience response. In comparison to music improvisation where the musicians can hear each other, it is not always possible for a dance to see, hear, feel the other dancers (Hupp Ramsay, 1991, p.13). Especially in improvisational group performances, the dancers are asked to create an atmosphere as well as to resolve difficult situations together in a group in a non-hierarchical way. This is described by Foster:

The experience of neither leading nor following, but instead moving, moving with, and being moved by another body creates a multibodied co-motion.[...] As

⁵ Failure has to be understood in another way than in a set dance piece where failure is a technical failure. A improvisation can fail because of many different reasons. To let the Improviser David Zambrano talk as an example: "I like both [a structured or non-structured improvisation, the author] very much depending on the circumstance and also on the day, because sometimes I go totally open and nothing happens. That's the risk of improvisation, and sometimes with a structure – you have the structure, nothing happens but you still have the structure, somehow the structure works. It's hard to say because there are magic moments when you feel you have control over all the forces. You have this direction, that direction of force, you have control over them, you feel very aligned with the space. You feel you know very well what's behind you or in front, also you know the relationship of parts of your body through the center, you find a game of interaction with each part and the space. When I find a game, when I find a playfulness, then it's happening, but when I feel I have to force it to make it happen, then it's hard, and sometimes that happens because.... It's hard to say but it's really inspiration. Most of the time I'm very inspired, but when it doesn't happen, it's awful, for me and for the audience." (Zambrano, David in Benoit, 1995, 179)

dancers practice this relationality with one another, they learn more about each other. They respond creatively to mistakes; they help each other out of ruts; they move beyond their limits. They disagree; they make mistakes and reject decisions; they stumble into something new; they concentrate. Most important, they take collective responsibility for the time they spend together. (2002, p.240)

For many improvisers this is one very important aspect of improvising, it is learning for life (Anon, Space to Move 11, 2004). In improvisation as it is not real life, there is the possibility to try out different things, to play with situations – here the performer is the body for the audience to perceive and experience it (Fraleigh, 1987 p.65).

Foster talks about the collective responsibility which performers experience in Improvisation. In this lies a big opportunity to learn about real life to resolve problems collectively. This social and political meaning was very important in the 60s and 70s (Banes, 1987, p. xix), but is it not still or even more important today where hierarchies and social structure are not as much questioned anymore?

The other important aspect to draw from of the previous quotation is that the performer needs to find a specific state of body/mind⁶, which enables her/him to be open to the situation and the possibilities, to maybe choose new or different ways. In real life the performer as well as the audience can remember this freedom of choosing to deal with a situation in a different manner and that opens the possibility to choose in that situation in real life. In this lies an enormous power of improvisation.

Two extracts of the video "Fall after Newton" from 1987 will demonstrate a small aspects of this immense field.

Fall after Newton

"Fall after Newton", a video, is about the beginning and development of contact improvisation (see Novack, 1990). Two extracts from this 1987 video demonstrate

⁶ Some performers (e.g. Cotto in Benoit, 1995, p. 120-133) practice authentic movement as a way to let come the unconsciousness to the surface and into 'action' and to be able to find new ways. Others call it a specific state of Body/mind (Walker, Space to Move, 2004) where the performer is conscious about all the different choices she/he can make and choose the adequate one.

some characteristics of improvisation⁷, although contact improvisation is special as it is beyond being an improvisation about the changing point of physical contact, with a focus on physicality and not on personality (Foster, 2002, p. 93-96).

The first is a dance duet from Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith who improvise together with the musician Colin Walcott. It is part of a "Contact Quarterly Benefit-Performance" at Moving Arts in Berkeley in 1978⁸. The musician is playing the sitar - an Indian instrument, while the two dancers are improvising together, using contact improvisation as dance form, to the music. Steve Paxton explains beforehand that after many years of practising contact improvisation they have started to use music to challenge themselves in the improvisation. All three performers have equal opportunities both to create the atmosphere and the improvisation. Each one of them seems to be very aware of the other two, which can be confirmed through the flow, but also the short interruption of the physical contact between the dancer and the way the music is accompanying them. The physical contact enables their bodies to move on a more unconscious level, to allow the body to react to the contact without interference of the mind (Paxton, 1987). As both dancers, Paxton and Stark Smith, are very experienced in contact improvisation, they are open to make choices to the music and each other within seconds. It gives a good example of the above described necessary skills of the improvisers to reflect the situation and to be able to mirror the atmosphere. We can also see pauses, where one of them is waiting for an impulse from the others to create the performance collectively, but we also see a very short moment of misunderstanding between the dancers, where Paxton does not know what Stark Smith is going to do. In that moment he is just pausing and opening himself for what ever will come next. This moment is very exciting to watch, as a tension is increasing until it culminates within a resolution in another flow of moving together. This is reinforced by the kind of music. It reveals the incredible possibility of the performers to create collectively a very exciting atmosphere. It is almost impossible for the audience to perceive that on a conscious level, but the

⁷ Steve Paxton is explaining and commenting on the video as well as he is dancing in the first duet. That is very useful as it gives the unique possibility to be able to reflect on both perspectives - the inside and outside perspective.

⁸ To also include the audience, it is possible to see a little bit of it in the background of the dance duet, that the performance is held in a normal dance studio, the audience as well as the dancers are dressed in informal clothes. At some points you can hear laughter. I found this important to mention as it expresses the kind of audience, interested in the movement itself and the surprises the improvisations could reveal, as well as the surrounding, quiet informal, where improvisation is mostly shown at.

appearance of laughter could be interpreted as an unconscious reaction of the audience, revealing that they are carried away with the performers. These moments are of great merit.

When they appear in 'good' choreographed dance pieces, they have a different quality, as if they had been planned and wished to appear without any influence of the audience. Unfortunately moments like this are not estimated in the same manner, as they happen occasionally, forgetting that one important aspect of improvisation is letting these moments happen, that the work of the improviser is to make her/himself open to be able to let these moments happen. The music is on the one hand interpreting the dance, on the other hand influencing it. It is a continuous interaction of play and joy, which makes it very delightful to watch as well as it might create the wish to move and dance.

The second extract emphasizes the solo by Nancy Stark Smith, although it switches over to another duet (Nancy Stark Smith with Curt Siddall) which is included here for a better understanding of the richness of contact improvisation, the duet form.

The solo from Nancy Stark Smith shows her testing her movement playing with gravity. Steve Paxton comments (1987): "She doesn't direct herself, she starts moving and then lets it happen, finding ways to cope with momentum and gravity." She is moving around, going to the floor and away from the floor without any interruption of the flow of her movement, letting her body decide where it wants to go and how it wants to move. I found that very exciting to watch, as it shows the immense possibilities of the body to move and react.

For me as audience of this video it shows Stark Smith in a State of Body/mind consciousness where she is able to go with the flow.

For other people responses can be different as there is no narrative, nothing planned. Later on I will discuss the influences/criteria as to why we might perceive these kinds of performances in a different way.

The solo is an exploration of the possibilities of the body coping with momentum and gravity as Paxton commented. This can be an example of a critical point of improvisation, because not everybody is interested in totally free improvisations. Anna Halprin (source) argues that totally free improvisations do not have any further development in them, so that there are not enough objective criteria to assess or

assimilate the impact it has upon both the audience and our own personal lives. The upcoming question is, what is the improvisation for? Has it to have a development in it? For Halprin it seems to be necessary, as she stopped doing improvisation, but continued practising 'exploration', which for her were movement practices with much more focus and more control. They should internalize a developmental aspect (Halprin, 1987, p.11). This might have been a reason for Halprin to develop her environmental and healing dances (Kaplan, 1995, p. xi).

So now I want to use this critical view to discuss the special value of improvisational performances. Here it might be useful to have in mind that there are many different possibilities of what an improvisational performance can look like. A major difference might lie between a free and a structured improvisation. Using both can lead us to two major values of improvisation.

Starting with free improvisation as exemplified in the video extracts: both were unstructured, but perceiving them was completely different, presuming as well that more people 'liked' the first extract than the second one. This was probably because the first one had more aspects to look at than the second one which was 'just' a solo. It seems to be logical that more factors of interest like music and human interaction generate more interest. So if people are not interested only in movement, they have the possibility to concentrate on the interaction or the music.

Discussion and Outlook

Therefore I want to focus now on revealing the value of the Nancy Stark Smith solo, as it shows an explorative improvisation of momentum and gravity.

One value seems to be obvious for people interested in seeing movement: it is exactly the joyfulness of seeing a demonstration of an exploratory process with failures and adventurous experiences. The second one is more difficult to grasp: it is showing a process in a performance with failures and adventurous experiences. That allows the audience to make a connection from the performance to their real life, gives the audience the permission bring that back to their real life, to explore it with the failures and adventurous experiences. How can that happen? According to Carlson, we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, or I would

say, when we see them on stage, it introduces a level of consciousness to both performer and audience (in Bial, 2004, p.70). So in bringing a process on stage and into consciousness lies the value. That cannot be realised in just improvising by oneself, because, after Fraleigh it is necessary to perform in this case a improvisation for an audience, so that it can be valued. The experience of that dance is passed through the body of the audience on a preverbal level and constructs the field of consciousness which connects dancer and audience. This can also be supported by the investigations made with Authentic movement⁹, with the big difference that the 'outer witness' is very consciously observing the movement whereas in a performance the audience might use different channels of perceiving the movement. Suzanne Cotto argues that in improvisation the way one watches is different, because neither the Improvisers nor the audience know what will happen (Cotto in Benoit, 1995, 113). How and why do we perceive an improvisational dance in a different way?

The dance is finally valued as art through the perception of the audience, which is after Bourdieu (1976) and Foucault's (in Counsell, 2001) notions of the socially constructed and formed. Presuming the interference of society in the way we perceive means to agree that the audience will have different ways of perceiving and within that will reach different levels of consciousness. That clarifies difficulties of valuing dance improvisation in performance, and even more when the cultural environment of today is included. Whereas improvisation developed in the 60s and 70s in a surrounding of political themes of participation, democracy and cooperation (Banes, 1987, p.xix), e.g. in the centering dance from 1970 Richard Bull reflected limitations and freedom of each individual within a community. This was demonstrated through variations of circle forms, a common circle for every performer as well as individual circles which incorporated the common circle through various rules. Today improvisational performances have to face a very different cultural environment. Instead of the Performance Art of the 60s which wanted to be reflexive, presentational rather than representational, which wanted to situate the audience as participants rather than as spectators (Shephard and Wallis 2004, p.83),

⁹ For further reading: Contact Quarterly (2002): *Authentic Movement- special issue*. Vol.27. No. 2 or Adler, J. (2002): *Offering from the Conscious Body*. Inner Traditions.

or of 70s which emphasized more on 'politics of consciousness', the doing of performances as an activity of bringing consciousness in it (Carlson, 2004.p.72), Performance art and improvisation has to struggle against consumerism, offering the possibility of consciousness through Improvisation for both Improvisers and Audience and within that transmitting Marcuse's message

that art's task is to communicate a critical vision of freedom, rooted both in sensuous catharsis and in concrete negation of the prevailing social order. Art's task is to evoke alternative horizons of perception, experience and action that give courage to change the world (Harrington, 2004, p. 140).

With this essay I revealed specific values of dance improvisation in performance. Shortly summarizing it can be an exploration of movement possibilities, a reflecting of the atmosphere or a mirroring of potential dialogues, conflicts or social structures. It demonstrates our ability as human beings of choice making in every moment. The craft but also the difficulty of these specific values lies in the requirement of a certain amount of awareness of both dancers and audience to be able to perceive the performance with what ever it reveals to them. I demonstrated the socially constructed mechanism of influence of our perception, The way how we perceive most probably relates with our different social class and cultural backgrounds. Therefore it would be very interesting to carry out a survey about the differences in perception of dance improvisational performances of people with different social and cultural backgrounds, or to go into a deeper research on differences in valuing dance improvisations in the 60s/70s to the 90s/00s considering the changes in society

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