

## *The Philosopher and The Dancer*

*The Philosopher and The Dancer* is an act of spontaneous, solo, movement improvisation; offered here as one particularized instantiation and re-enactment of the corporeal situatedness and interrelatedness of self and world that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The improvisation can take place in any indoor studio/space, ideally with a suitable floor - the ostensibly static nature of an indoor space/place serving as a clear context for the embodiment and modeling of some of Merleau-Ponty's core philosophical constructs. As an improvised event, *The Philosopher and The Dancer* can last for a few minutes (6 or 10) or for longer (15 or 20) and is unaccompanied by music; it is the embodied weave of dancer and immediate environment - a cultivated sensitivity and practised responsiveness to one's spatial and temporal inherence in a particular world - that is foregrounded. This demonstration/performance is offered as a place in which an alternative articulation of Merleau-Ponty's thought will be evident.

I have been studying and performing improvisation for the past 17 years and engaged in an improvised danced and worded conversation with Merleau-Ponty - in studios, studies and in the liminal spaces in-between - for the past 6.<sup>1</sup> Improvisation is understood here to be real-time composition, a form in which the emergence and shaping of danced and/or spoken material transpires as one process. In this emerging - this becoming, harnessing and shaping - the solo improvisations also illuminate the dancer's emplacement in, and dynamic interaction with, a world; a world to which her body, her 'vehicle of being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 82), gives access. Each spontaneous, emergent dance is co-constituted by the world of the space/place/studio - architecture, objects, people and the feeling that hangs in a room as a result of its material qualities and affective reverberations. The spontaneous expression of the improviser's dancing body, responding to and interacting with the space/place that she inhabits, models Merleau-Ponty's understanding that we are bound to the world, that we are

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<sup>1</sup> [The Fifth Appendage: investigating the role of vision in solo improvisational dance training](#). In: *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 5 (1), pp. 31-44. ISSN 1944-3927

[Experienced Space](#). In: *Galway Dance Days/CORP\_REAL symposium, March 2014*, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

[THE PLACE FROM WHICH I SEE: a practice-led investigation into the role of vision in understanding solo performance improvisation as a form of composition](#). Doctoral thesis, April 2013, University of Huddersfield, UK

"Composing Vision": A demonstration of practice-led research into solo performance improvisation. In: *Studio Matejka: The Human/Body as a 'Cultural Actor' Research Symposium and Work Demonstration, June 2012*, University of Salford, UK

[Spontaneous Combustion #42](#). In: *Work in Progress sharing PhD by PaR in Dance and Performance, June 2011*, Centre for Practice-led Research in the Arts and the Choreographic Lab, The University of Northampton, UK

[Playing with/in boundaries](#). In: *Proximity*, 13 (3), pp. 4-9. ISSN 1445-7830

[Improvisation as Performance and Immediate Writing](#). In: *TaPRA Conference, September 2010*, University of Glamorgan, Wales, UK

[Spontaneous Combustion](#), July 2009, Cecil Street Studios, Melbourne, Australia

'of' the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 248, original italics), 'intervolved in a definite environment' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 82). The improvised dance is an embodied, temporally and spatially bound interaction with and with/in the delimitations and discovered freedoms of any given world, an enactment of the 'body as spontaneous expression' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 65) that emerges through a (self-aware) perceptual interfacing and sensorial free play with and with/in it.

*The Philosopher and The Dancer* also works with and illuminates Merleau-Ponty's distinctive interest in vision. The ready fusion of vision and touch that permeates his philosophy is expressed and embodied in part through the coupling of vision and movement, the 'intertwining of vision and movement' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 162) that enables perception of and engagement with the world. The driving premise that 'vision is attached to movement' and that movement is 'the natural consequence and maturation of my vision' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 162) feeds directly into this model of improvisation. Seeing here is active, compositional, and constitutive; it is an activity of exploring, making contact with and responding to one's environs. By moving eyes and body, by engaging in spontaneous dance as active, embodied enquiry of and interaction with the environment, the dancer is opened to the presence and affective reverberations of what is around her. Amidst tactility and kinesthesia (senses commonly prioritized in dance and dance improvisation) vision becomes purposeful seeing; 'my glances themselves - their synergy, their exploration, and their prospecting' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 67) prompt the dancer to move her body - 'to aim at things through it... to allow [herself] to respond to their call (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 139).

**Figure 1:** *Rendering myself present to what I see.* Photo by Michael Thresher

**Figure 2:** *Surrendering to seeing.* Photo by Michael Thresher

**Figure 3:** *Eyes leading the body through space.* Photo by Michael Thresher

## References

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Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1964a) *Signs*. Translated by Richard McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

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