



Reconfiguring Dance/Body at the Crossroads of Culture¹

Rustom Bharucha, 18 September 2013

I'd like to begin by teasing out some thoughts in the very construction of this conference's agenda. When we hear the word 'dancebody', it appears to be a compound – we're not dealing with a 'dancing body', or 'dance and body', or 'dance beyond body'. We hear one word: 'dancebody'. But when we see the words dance/body, we realize that the compound is actually made up of two words which are divided (or linked) not by a hyphen, but rather by a slash. I would suggest that this slash is best read as a tangent – that point of contact between two surfaces which do not intersect. In this regard, the second part of our conference's title focusing on 'the crossroads of culture' signifies an intersection. Perhaps inadvertently, therefore, there are two modalities of movement which are embedded in our agenda, epitomized by a tangent and an intersection.

The word 'tangent' draws its etymological roots from the Latin 'tangentem' (nom. *tangens*), the present participle of 'tangere', which literally means 'to touch'. It would be useful to reflect on the politics of touch in two different contexts – one provided by Erin Manning in her formative book *The Politics of Touch* (2007) which straddles the worlds of dance and political philosophy, and the other provided by the very different context of an interdisciplinary, site-specific public art project in Durban, South Africa, called Tangencya², which I had conceptualized as a dramaturge within the framework of a 'politics of touch'. While the first part of Tangencya was held in 2005 before Manning's book came out, there are interesting overlaps between the projects, but also some significant contextual and political differences.

¹ This paper is an abridged version of the original keynote lecture, presented by Rustom Bharucha at the conference *DANCE/BODY AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE*, which was held between 16–18 June 2011, in Nicosia, Cyprus.

² Affiliated to Create Africa South, Tangencya embraced multiple disciplines in order to catalyze collaborative ventures in public spaces, drawing on the interaction of artists and a few individuals and groups constituting a fragile set of relationships. The first stage of the project, jointly curated by Andries Botha and Miguel Petchkovsky, was held in December 2004–January 2005; the second stage, curated by Botha, was held in April 2006. I have been affiliated to both stages of the project as a theorist and writer whose primary task was to hold daily conversations with the artists and the public at large. For a brief description and analysis of Tangencya, read my essay 'The Limits of the Beyond: Contemporary Art Practice, Intervention and Collaboration in Public Spaces,' in *Third Text* vol. 21, no. 4, 2007, pp.397–416.

For a book so exploratory and open in its somatic thinking, the argument of Manning's *The Politics of Touch* nonetheless rests on some firm and non-negotiable axioms. She says, for instance, that 'There is no body that exists before it moves.' While movement is obviously privileged in this epistemology of the body, we would need to question what kind of movement is being addressed – is it a continuous movement which has increasingly been subjected to deconstructionist critique by postmodern dance scholars, or an interruptive/disjunctive movement, a movement that is arrested or which breaks down into what Andre Lepecki highlights as 'still-acts'? In a very different cultural trajectory going back many centuries, stillness has a different psychophysical significance in the corporeal language of Hatha Yoga. In my close interaction with the Indian dancer and choreographer Chandralekha, particularly during her rehearsals of a production entitled *Prana*, in which the *asanas* of Yoga were intersected with the *adavus* of Bharatanatyam, I learned from her that *asanas* are not virtuoso static poses; rather, they are circuits of energy in embodiments of stillness. For her, the most difficult of *asanas* was the *savasana*, in which the body lies absolutely still on the back, hands on the side, in the figure of a corpse. In this 'death' of movement, there is inner movement in which the journey of the body continues.

Returning to Manning's axiom that 'there is no body that exists before it moves', I would agree so long as we are prepared to complicate our idea of movement in dance as something that incorporates stillness and breakdown. Let us also remember those states of incarceration and torture in the real world where bodies are not allowed to move at all. In such scenarios, there is no voluntarism or free agency, countering Manning's essentially liberal and pluralist assumptions that movement is always already available for bodies to exist.

Another axiom provided by Manning – 'There is no such thing as a body that is not relational' – resonates sharply with a formulation of 'culture' in one of my early essays. In this attempt to physicalize the amorphous category of 'culture', I had suggested that 'culture is not just what exists in me or what exists in you' – in other words, it is not just an internalization of deeply embedded inherited codes of self-understanding and socialization. Rather, I had suggested that, 'Culture is what could exist between me and you.' In this formulation, it becomes obvious that my reading of culture (like Manning's reading of 'body') is relational, intrinsically linked to at least one other body. And it is intrinsically processual.

To provide a metaphor for this processuality, I had invoked the domestic practice of making yoghurt. In India we make yoghurt at home instead of buying it from the supermarket. As some of you may be aware, the chemistry of making yoghurt is facilitated

through the insertion of a left-over, a trace, of yesterday's yoghurt. This element, which curdles the milk into yoghurt, is literally called 'culture', a catalytic and processual agency.

From the processual lessons drawn from her embodied practice of the tango, Manning highlights the crucial dynamics of relationality in terms of 'reaching-toward': 'I reach not toward the "you" I ascertain but toward the "you" you will become in relation to our exchange.' This is a far more fluid understanding of 'me' and 'you' than what is suggested in my more singular understanding of these terms. Later in the book, Manning reiterates, 'When I reach to touch you, I touch not the you who is fixed in space as pre-orchestrated matter/form. I touch the you that you will become in response to my reaching toward.' It is not surprising that this assertively processual reading of bodies which are endlessly deferred should lead Manning to endorse Deleuze and Guattari's 'bodies without organs', which can never be 'reached', because one is forever in the process of attaining such bodies, which represent a constantly elusive limit. Within the logic of a 'recurrent potentiality', therefore, Manning categorically asserts that, 'There is no identity to the Bodies without Organs. There is only movement'. While this rejection of identity politics is provocative, it also strikes me as being somewhat utopian in the context of post-apartheid societies like South Africa to which I would like to turn my attention now.

'What does it mean to touch in the context of post-apartheid public spaces?': this was the central question underlying the diverse artistic interventions of the Tangencya project. Even as South Africa has formally disbanded the system of apartheid through the highly performative process of 'truth and reconciliation', and despite possessing one of the most democratic constitutions available in the world, the reality is that the residues of racial segregation continue to foment tension and violence. Reinforced by the very topographies of social space where entire communities – primarily poor and black – continue to live in the same townships determined by the segregationist laws of apartheid, these communities are denied the possibilities of social mobility and inter-racial interaction in an ostensibly cosmopolitan post-apartheid public culture. How does one touch the Other in such a topography, if the very structuring of social spaces continues to obstruct intimacies between strangers, who continue to be haunted by the real specters of no-man's lands and no-go zones?

While I was working on Tangencya, there was a critical event that took place in a supermarket, involving a South African Indian salesgirl and a black male Zulu customer. It seems that while the customer was waiting for his change at the cash counter, the salesgirl did not place the change in his outstretched palm, choosing – or was it her body that acted as a reflex? – to place the change on the counter between them. This 'non-touch' was interpreted by the Zulu man as a racial gesture, and it was not long before entire communities claiming to represent 'Zulus' and 'Indians' hurled accusations and

counter-accusations against each other, contributing towards a nasty affirmation of mutually imbricated racisms. If every touch in a post-apartheid space has the potentiality of becoming a blow, every non-touch also has the possibility of consolidating racist norms.

In Manning's terminology, the salesgirl's 'non-touch' could be described as a manifestation of 'tact', which also emerges from the stem *tangere*, 'to touch'. According to Manning, 'In its first definition tact is touch. Yet, something has occurred, in time, that has created an uncanny rift between tact and touch: tact is interpreted as a certain prescience that keeps me from touch, from moving toward ... Tact is knowing when not to touch.' This 'knowing', I would argue, is not just an individual response, but a deeply embedded *habitus*, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term – a condition that has been consolidated not just through the dictates of the state, but through the more immediate laws of community and caste.

Keeping the phenomenon of caste in mind specifically in countries like India, one needs to emphasize that entire histories encompassing several generations of inter-community taboos on social interaction have given shape to the differentiations of tact and touch – their separation is not just an 'uncanny rift' as Manning emphasizes. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the stigmas relating to untouchability.

Within her dance philosophy, Manning has a somewhat ethereal interpretation of untouchability when she says, 'I am moved by you and I move (with you), but I do not become you. You are untouchable ... What I touch is that untouchability.' Obviously, this is a different context and resonance of untouchability from the condition faced by millions of low-caste and outcaste people in India for whom the transgressions of touch are accompanied by the very real risks of abuse, ostracism, if not lynching. To this day, low-caste children in rural India are not allowed to drink water from the same tap out of fear that their touch will pollute the water. Touch is not just skin-to-skin contact; the accidental brushing of an untouchable's clothes can trigger a violent reaction. In the worst scenario, even the shadow of an untouchable can be regarded as an inauspicious sign of pollution. I am not trying to say that this is the dominant reality of caste in all parts of India; caste is a massively complex and mutant phenomenon. However, the politicization of caste through *dalit* ideology and the aggressive policy of reservations adopted by the State may have increased social and economic opportunities for the downtrodden, but they have not succeeded in circumventing the taboos of touch which remain obstinately resilient to change in the cultures of everyday life.

Let us turn at this point to Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* which I will relate to the bodies of dancers, and more specifically, to the practice of improvisation. Significantly, Manning ends her book on the words 'Let us improvise' by pleading strongly against the tendency in writing to submit to a 'stagnant humanist vocabulary'. Claiming that the

politics of touch (in her reading) 'fights this impulse', she subscribes to the familiar associations of improvisation in terms of freedom, invention, and the pleasures of the 'unforeseen' (a word derived from the Latin *improvisus* to which improvisation is linked). In a related reading, dance scholar Susan Foster specifically links the 'improvised' to 'that which eludes history' – an axiomatic position that compels her to ask, 'What would history look like if it were to acknowledge the fact of improvisation?'

To both Manning and Foster, Bourdieu would provide some startling complications to their assumptions. For a start, far from rejecting history in relation to the body, Bourdieu would claim that the habitus is 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history.' This is not just a history of words which enables us to think and feel, but one that is catalyzed through a 'motor function' that animates gestures and movements – 'a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting' which constitute a 'language of the body' (*hexis*). Actively resisting the charge of 'mechanical learning by trial and error', Bourdieu describes the *habitus* as the 'intentionless invention of regulated improvisation', which functions under the laws of 'conductorless orchestration.' Such paradoxes capture the enigmas of everyday living where the fact that 'we don't know what we're doing' suggests that 'what we do has more meaning than we know.'

Translating the enigmas of 'knowing', 'doing' and 'meaning' in the dance language of improvisation requires some shifts from Bourdieu's priorities. Susan Foster gets to the heart of the matter when she invokes 'improvisation's bodily mindfulness' which 'summons up a kind of hyperawareness of the relation between immediate action and overall shape, between that which is about to take place or is taking place and that which has and will take place.' Spatiality and temporality are yoked together in a simultaneity of consciousness that is activated not through the generalities of the *habitus* which for all its sense of '*le sens du jeu*' (a feel for the game) doesn't quite capture what Paul Carter has described as 'eido-kinetic intuition.' This is a 'capacity to intuit directly the nearness of things, and to have the measure of them' in relation to an almost kaleidoscopic contraction and dilation of movement patterns. Not only does Carter associate this intuition with ball players, he also regards it as a 'condition natural to hunters.'

From ball players to hunters to dancers, how would we begin to posit something like a dancer's *habitus*? Note that I focus on the dancer rather than dance, because there can be no generalized *habitus* for dance, but rather deeply individuated and nuanced manifestations of specific embodiments of dance culture. Far extending the subtleties of what Bourdieu would describe as the *hexis*, these embodiments are integrally related to particularized systems of training the bodies of dancers. To the extent that almost all dance bodies are the articulations of specific modes of training is to state a truism, but

how bodies are trained and what are the affective results of this training open up diverse areas of investigation which await an adequate intercultural reading.

From ballet to modern dance to non-Western training processes, there are diversities and differences at microkinetic levels even within particular schools of dance. Let us engage briefly with non-Western training systems, which are often essentialized and homogenized at so-called 'pre-expressive' levels. The movements of a Balinese dancer, for instance, are moulded by the teacher 'dancing the movement' as it were into the dancer's body. In Kathakali, the body is formed not only through the daily practice of rigorous eye-movements and flexions but through the seasonal massage of the dancer's bodies, with the guru unlocking the joints of the body with his feet, each step making the dance body more supple. In Cambodia, as I recently learned from a young dancer trained in the court tradition, when she made a mistake or stepped out of line, she would be punished by standing in a torturous dance position for an hour on end – this very literal punishment on the body contributing towards her *habitus* as a dancer trained in a particular tradition.

The intimacies and disciplinary protocols of the *guru-shishya parampara* in the examples mentioned above need to be contrasted with more mechanized training processes. What happens to the *habitus* of the dancer when it is denied the intimacies of a body-to-body, person-to-person pedagogical process? In the official regimen imposed on classical Thai dancers, for instance, which cannot be separated from cultural tourism and the creative industries, a rigid set of dance movements are repeated mechanically in factory-like training programmes. In such conditions, one can almost sense that a particular dance body is being 'cloned', with identical copies emerging from the same DNA as it were of a singularized dance system.

These coercive, yet apparently self-induced rules and regulations, I should add, do not disappear in more ostensibly 'democratic' regimes of dance in the 'Western' world, where dancers' bodies are sharply marked, identified, and shaped through the taxonomies and vocabularies of particular choreographic regimes. Here the dancer's *habitus* can extend into body-behaviours in everyday life. Supplemented by the inflexible laws relating to fitness and dietary control, this dance regimen can determine not just the dancebody but the very mind and 'look' of the dancer.

At this point, let me present a hypothesis: 'What happens to the *habitus* of dancers when they are assembled from diverse cultures in a particular space?' To what extent is the *habitus* porous, in sync with the mobility of global migration? And does it lend itself to translation and hybrid practices? Instead of responding to these questions at the level of generality, it would be more useful for me to draw on a specific dance-related story which was shared to me by Cheryl Stock, a choreographer and dance educator based in Brisbane, Australia.

In her early career, Cheryl crossed borders in her formative experiments on contemporary dance in Vietnam. She was not teaching 'contemporary dance', which is best read not as a genre but as a method of exploring the contemporary which already exists in diverse cultures in extraordinarily textured ways. There is no one overriding sense of the contemporary, but several 'contemporaries' which may, in certain contexts, be linked to traditional forms of body knowledge. In a spirit of intercultural reciprocity, Cheryl invited Phaim Anh Phoong, a male Vietnamese dancer trained in the classical tradition, to play a pivotal role in a contemporary dance piece called *Ochre Dusk* (1990) which she was choreographing for Dance North in Sydney. While Anh Phoong didn't have much English at that time, which resulted in some communication problems, his dance instinct was so pure and tuned that he faced no misunderstandings with the company. On the final dress rehearsal, his performance was, in Cheryl's description, 'breathtaking'.

But, on opening night, something inexplicable happened: Anh Phoong seemed to 'slow everything down', and drag and stretch his movements, so that he seemed to be 'drowning' while the other dancers were working themselves up to a virtuoso crescendo of movements. I will quote from Cheryl to evoke her stunned reaction to what seemed like a sabotage of her work:

What was he doing? He was ruining my work. My anger got the better of me after the performance. Anh Phoong listened as tears streamed down my face. His face was impenetrable but in his eyes I thought I could read a mixture of anger, perplexity and sadness. He said nothing to me except a quiet 'sorry'. Later that night in between his own sobs, he explained to our administrator, 'I slow it down for Cheryl to make more beautiful.'

Every time I tell this painful story I tend to choke because it works totally against the grain of what one has come to expect from the dominant narratives on intercultural misunderstanding. These narratives are marked by the predictable imbalance of power relations, economic inequities, the decontextualization and framing of non-Western material in Eurocentric contexts, and so on. However, this story involving Cheryl Stock and Anh Phoong is different in so far as the intercultural misunderstanding comes out of love for the other: 'I slow it down for Cheryl to make more beautiful.'

At one level, it is possible to read the 'slowing down' as an intransigent reflex of Anh Phoong's *habitus* as a dancer trained in a particular system. For all his openness to experiment within the framework of Australian contemporary dance, the 'slowing down', it could be argued, is part of his 'dance motor' that cannot be eliminated. To this reading one could add the dimension of aesthetics in relation to producing beauty, which is also inextricably linked to his dance training. But perhaps, it is also tempting to read the

'slowing down' as the revelation of a gift – a surprise gift offered to Cheryl on opening night. This is obviously not a gift with a coercive agenda and the demand or expectation of a return; rather, in a more Derridean sense, it is a gift of the heart, which is beautiful in and of itself.

If this seems somewhat too romantic a reading, one could add that this gift comes not just with aesthetics, but also with protocols. Though Anh Phoong doesn't precisely state why he is giving the gift, it is possible that he has no other option but to do so. This is part of his etiquette as a Vietnamese dancer trained in the classical tradition, where the dancer is expected to regard his performance as an offering. While such offerings in non-Western dance cultures are often read in the context of religiosity, they can also be seen as part of an ethics which underlies aesthetics. And perhaps it is this imbrication of ethics in aesthetics that is probably the most elusive of dance qualities to grasp at an intercultural level.

So, was all this lost in translation? I would argue that there was no translation. And, more critically, perhaps there is no adequate translation of such embodied affects and intercultural gestures of the gift in dance. This is what makes the moment so painful, and yet, so beautiful.

At this stage in the lecture I would like to problematize the concept of 'dance citizenship', which, at some level, would appear to be a regressive maneuver. The nominal concept of citizenship is more often than not linked to the nation-state, which in turn has been challenged through new concepts of postnationalism and global cosmopolitanism. It would appear as if all dancers on the move are global citizens, when in actuality many of them could be denied the basic rights of citizens in terms of medical care, housing, and employment. At a time when there are millions of stateless people, refugees and asylum seekers, living in wretched conditions of uncertainty, I wouldn't be so cynical about citizenship. For these individuals, nothing could be more reassuring than the certainty of a passport. We who have the privilege to cross borders tend to take our mobility for granted.

I became aware of citizenship at a visceral level through my close observation of 'Third Sector' citizenship and civil society movements in Brazil from the early 1990s onwards. On my first trip, which took me to a Candomblé centre in a shanty-town on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, I was entranced by the vibrant dancing of the white-skirted priestesses of this Yoruba Afro-Brazilian cult of worship, the swirling movements of the women building towards a *communitas* of ecstasy. But I was also puzzled as to why such an intense form of corporeal spirituality needed to link itself to a citizenship movement. I remember asking Mae Beate, the matriarch of the centre, this very question. What I saw before me at that point was not an incarnation of an *orixa*, but a black working-class woman. Holding herself upright, she said: 'I want to be recognized as a citizen.' To which I responded with another

question: 'What does a citizen mean to you, mother?' She said: 'A citizen is ...,' and her voice trailed a bit, 'when I enter a hospital, they don't turn me out because I'm black.' I learned a lot from that moment – notably, the fact that your immersion in spiritual energy and dance doesn't necessarily guarantee you fundamental rights.

'Dance citizenship' is a concept and practice that has been initiated by Ivaldo Bertazzo, a therapist, Yoga exponent, choreographer and dance educator, who has extended his concept of citizenship through dance to the most deprived youth of Brazilian society living in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Observing his dance practice, I noticed that his philosophy of movement had been distilled into biomechanics, where primary movements of the body relating to balance, concentration, focus, and coordination are repeated in incremental cycles of repetitive movement. To be noted is the fact that unlike the dance philosophy of, say, Erin Manning, which is implicitly structured around a couple (whose bodies multiply and mutate), Bertazzo works with a multitude of dancers who share the same space.

There are some possible traps here. As Manning puts it, 'The politics of touch departs from Aristotelian thought ... [I]n my turn towards an other, I engage with the very potentiality of extending my-self, of challenging my-self to feel the presence (and absence) of that other. Aristotle, on the other hand, would argue that every gesture performed by a citizen (a man) is pre-ordained towards the potentiality of inaugurating a polis, or a plurality of like-minded individuals.' In contrast, in Bertazzo's workshops, in which there are as many women as men, the overall goal is not to acquire homogeneity, but to imbibe what I would describe as a highly tuned, physicalized, and individuated heterogeneity of living-together. Not every form of repetitive mass movement, I would argue, needs to lead inexorably to like-minded uniformity; nor should one jump too quickly into assuming that all forms of mass movement are embryonic fascist spectacles.

What makes a crucial difference is the activation of critical reflexivity, whereby dance is constantly juxtaposed with grassroots critical theory. Bertazzo's psychophysical training is communicated through actual dance practice by community workers and social activists steeped in Paulo Friere's pedagogy of the oppressed. Unlike political activists in countries like India, who are tacitly or rigidly opposed to any form of incorporating the body into the political process – this was one of the limitations faced by Chandralekha whose awareness of the body as the source of social transformation was never understood by her political associates – the situation is different in Brazil. Here there is a greater openness to the potentiality of the body in questioning and re-imagining the body politic as a palpable reality.

Any process of social transformation, I would affirm, needs supplements and alliances. Dance can ignite the process of transformation, but if we wish to move beyond the

micropolitical into the wider domain of public culture, then it becomes necessary to draw on the inputs of social movements and alternative ecological practices. Just as I had indicated early in this lecture the need to sensitize ourselves to ethics in aesthetics, we also need more dialogue and actual collaboration across cultural and social sectors, for which new creative infrastructures and mediations are needed.

In my concluding reflection, I would assert that the process of transformation has to begin where you are. As dancers, you don't have to be in Berlin or New York or London, where, in actuality, any real possibility of transforming the systems in place poses huge challenges. In less capital-intensive systems, where there is more room for creative intervention and the role of the 'amateur' and the 'non-professional' is not so summarily derided, a process of transformation could begin with the realization that the border is not 'out there'. There are all kinds of borders which proliferate around us – not just political borders, but those created through poverty, exclusion and indifference. We also need to attune ourselves to the borders that we carry within us – borders that prevent us from acting and reaching toward the Other. Out of such infinitesimal border-crossings I do believe that new bodies can be envisioned which need not be perpetually deferred in a utopian postponement of a democracy to come. Rather, I believe that these bodies can resonate in the here and now, incorporating the tensions of everyday life into new possibilities of social transformation through dance.

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