

PETRA SABISCH: QUALITY MOVES.

Dance (Praticable) by Frédéric Gies*



"re·late v

1. *vi* to have a significant connection with or bearing on something 2. *vt* to find or show a connection between two or more people or things 3. *vi* to concern, involve, or apply to somebody or something specifically 4. *vi* to have a friendly relationship with or friendly feelings toward somebody, based on an understanding of the person or on shared views or concerns 5. *vi* to understand and respond favorably to something, or feel that it has a personal meaning or relevance (informal) 6. *vt* to tell a story or describe an event."

(Encarta® World English Dictionary)

Relate

When attempting to grasp the impact of a dance performance, one is confronted with the problem of sensing its specificity. Yet, what sounds relatively easy, to sense a specificity, has given rise to the most vehement debates in the history of philosophy, concerning the way in which experience and theory can or should be conceived. In these debates, the distinction between the empirical and the theoretical seems to steer a bunch of implicit assumptions that still echo in the way aesthetic theory, philosophical approaches and dance criticism envisage their own methods of writing about artwork. Sometimes priority is given to a more descriptive mode (as what is supposed to testify for the experience of the perceived performance and hence allow its translation into another medium); sometimes to the elaboration of more abstract issues (as what is supposed to give a theoretical prospect).

Yet, the problem of sensing a specificity would be completely irrelevant, if one could dissolve it in favour of one of the two terms or resolve it into a question of a more or less. Let's state it right away: what persists in this problem is the *relation* between the empirical and the theoretical. Or to say it more precisely: to differentiate between these terms only makes sense if one relates them to one another. In this sense, differentiation is this relation. Unfortunately, to state this does not mean to

do away with the difficulty to conceive this relation. This remains ineluctably a matter of further practice. Sense specificity.

The present text relates two practices: philosophy and dance.

One. In philosophy there is a line of thought called empiricism, that traverses the various and divergent conceptions of Hume, Dewey, James, Whitehead, Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi, only to name a few. What matters in empiricism, be it characterized as radical, superior, transcendental one or as empiricism only, are precisely relations. As a point of departure, and in order to prevent philosophy from becoming a playground for mere abstractions, universals and generalities, empiricism has first of all obliged thought to consider its relation to experience.¹ To make a long and finally not very linear story short, let me just paraphrase in a paradoxical formula, how Gilles Deleuze conceives the complex relationship of the empirical to the theoretical in his empiricism: It is what forces us to think *that* which can only be sensed.² In this conception, the theoretical and the empirical are combined in a way that prevents them from being derivative of each other and also from being aligned in a hierarchical fashion. Nevertheless, everything in Deleuze's transcendental empiricism starts with the sensible, or rather at its limit, there where it compels thought, a thought that has always to be related back to the differences in sensation:

"Empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetics an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible: difference, potential difference and difference in intensity as the reason behind qualitative diversity. It is in difference that movement is produced as an 'effect', that phenomena flash their meaning like signs. The intense world of differences, in which we find the reason behind qualities and the being of the sensible, is precisely the object of a superior empiricism. This empiricism teaches us a strange 'reason', that of the multiple, chaos and difference (nomadic distributions, crowned anarchies)." ³

Two. How does this practice (of differentiating the empirical from the theoretical) manifest itself in choreography and dance? In what way does dance process its sensible specificity? And what does it mean to pose this question to a practice that takes place in the location for theory par excellence, the theatre?

One in two: Let's come back; let's spell it out first, the empirical: to sense that which can only be sensed. The theoretical: to view, to conceive, to image what forces us to

think the sensible. What follows is an investigation into how this relationship between sensing and viewing is processed in the performance *Dance (Praticable)* by Frédéric Gies.

Viewing *Dance* as an effect of movement qualities (the theoretical)

Frédéric Gies' performance "Dance (Praticable)" is a solo that takes place on a white dance floor with no set at all, except the loud speakers at the side of the stage. It begins with Gies coming on stage, dressed in short blue training shorts and an ordinary green T-Shirt: the non-fetishized training outfit of a barefooted dancer with shoulder length hair and a moustache. Accompanied by a disco track, the dance starts abruptly by walking in a straight line towards the audience and facing the audience. After an interval of silence, the three most popular songs of Madonna's "Confessions on a dance floor" resound. "Hung up", "Get Together" and "Jump" are played out subsequently, whilst Gies's continuum of movements unfolds through changes of modes, tone, rhythm, velocity, spatiality, intensity, without using slow motion.⁴

Instead of giving here an exhaustive description of each section, it seems more interesting on the one hand to call upon the reader's imagination of Gies' movements alongside the printed score and the present collection of texts. On the other hand, I will further expand upon the pertinent percept that marks *Dance*.⁵ This percept consists in the fact that the danced movements are produced through the differentiation of movement qualities.

Stating this might sound trivial, since every dance performance seems to use, whether consciously or not, movement qualities. Yet, *Dance* shows a choreography that is not in a first place initiated through the forms of movement (as ballet does for example) or through their function (as in contemporary task-oriented performances). Neither does it follow the most common choreographic procedure of building up a specific vocabulary of danced movements and thereby establishing a style proper to the author or relative to a certain technique (as one can recognize a Cunningham or even Contact Dance style).

Instead, *Dance* shows the formation of movements as an *effect* of the most heterogeneous qualities of bodily movements. A kind of grammar of movement, made of qualities. In this sense, the qualities serve as movement generator. But to consider the qualities separately, would mean to lose track of what is key to *Dance*. Since as soon as movements emerge from these qualities, they enter into a relationship with the forms they produce. Gies uses this relationship between the movement

quality and its visible form in order to create a friction with recognizable choreographic styles. In other words, when you see Gies dance, you see a whole history of dance styles (e.g. Cunningham, Brown, Contact, Jazzdance, Dancefloor etc.) popping up via his movements, without yet representing them. At this point, it is crucial to note Gies' non-representative way of showing these styles: neither are they merely copied forms, nor is their accomplishment parodied through a lesser degree of perfection in the interpretation. It is rather by producing and running through these differences in specific movement qualities that the diverse dance styles emerge and flash across from within Gies' movements. In this sense, the styles are *quoted*, but again, this quote does not cite a form as such but a way to produce movement via heterogeneous qualities. It is an entirely new manner of quoting, that sparkles with a great dose of humour out of Gies's dance: precisely by following with rigour the principle of producing differences in the initiation of movement qualities, it keeps an enlightened difference to that which is quoted. It uses the qualities that inevitably participate in any production of movement (quoting how the movement is produced), without ever becoming the stylistic signature of an author. Qualities just belong to everybody and that is the very point of *Dance*.⁶

In order to make it more concrete, imagine for example somebody who moves around with linear, contemporary ballet movements, yet without having the leg lifted up to athletic height, without having pointed the toes and maybe even without having the leg fully stretched out. Imagine further, that this way of moving strangely reminds you of Cunningham, without yet following the rigour in form accomplishment. And then imagine Gies dancing precisely these movements with a particular attention on something that you might not know. Imagine also, that as a spectator you are able to follow this attention-trajectory in different qualities, and you realize that one of these qualities, (whether you are able to name it or not) - here for instance the lymphatic system - seems to underpin all of Cunningham's style without reproducing it in its precise form. In this way, you can get an approximate picture of what Gies' work consists of: first of all a practice of sensing, using and switching between differences in initiating movement qualities (see the practice of *Practicable*)⁷; secondly, a rigorous analysis of what these qualities evoke in imagery and in particular in the one of dance history, and thirdly, an injection of the appropriate dose of ambivalence into the performance so as to make dance styles appear without directly displaying, representing or re-enacting them. How does this strange and humorous choreographic operation work?

The necessary speculation of movement in the relation between sensation and imagination (the empirical)

Gies's working methodology for *Dance* has been strongly influenced by his yearlong encounter with Body-Mind Centering.⁸ Developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen and her colleagues since the seventies, this body practice explores the body's diverse systems, such as the organic, fluid, skeletal, ligamentous, muscular and neuroendocrine.⁹ The connections *of* and *between* these systems are investigated through the interweaving of anatomical and physiological knowledge with the sensations of qualitative changes in movement, encompassing touch and voicing. This text will not venture an outline of what BMC *is*, but rather expand on that very relation between sensation and imagination in movement production, which caught my attention throughout my encounter with Gies's practice, and more precisely, when learning the score for the group version of *Dance*.

What first arouse my curiosity, was the affirmative approach to scientific facts, that one might paraphrase as following: "If we take as a given the information about the human body as provided by anatomy and physiology, i.e. that all these cells, organs, inter- and intracellular communication, the glands and the other diverse systems *exist*, then let's go for it, let's sense them." The implicit assumption, that it is possible to sense what exists, seems both playful and startling at once: playful, because sensation demarcates on the one hand precisely that phantom limb that is constitutive of the construction of scientific facts, and startling, because here sensation is not understood as contradictory to the facticity of facts, but rather as a means of using them in another way. That is to say, as a different experimental practice.¹⁰ In this way, sensation is first of all put in relation to the anatomical and physiological findings and not obturated in an esoteric practice, as an enigmatic phrase such as "Go into your organs" might suggest.

In her book *Sensing, Feeling and Action*, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen describes, at the example of an exploration of the organs, how this operation works:

"Feel a 'place' in your body, somewhere in the contents of your pelvic, abdominal, thoracic, or cranial cavities, inside your skeletal-muscular container. You do not need to know the name or function of that 'place,' but you can simply use your sensory mindfulness to localize your focus. Or, locate the organs in an anatomy book and study their names, size, shape, location and function. Then utilize your imagination to transfer that information to your own body." (p. 31)

In Gies's work, both procedures are used: one examines a part of the body by attempting to sense its specific materiality, characteristics, movement parameters and its connections to other systems. Sensing this body part means then to let it resonate until movement becomes initiated. Alternatively, one views the anatomical images of a chosen part of the body, relates these images to the knowledge of its specific functions and tissues, and fine-tunes this projected embodiment in relation to the sensation.

At a first glance, one might think that these procedures differ through either an internal or an external motivation of the sensed movement. In fact, they are only two different directions of one and the same process, in which sensation and imagination inseparably interlace and permanently feed back into each other. It seems that there is no sensation that would not be accompanied by an 'image-production' procedure. For as soon as attention is paid to the manner in which a sensation channels its way through the body, you start to picture the differential that the sensation is made of in order to characterize its specificity.¹¹ To image sensation or imagination. The complex of images you receive is then again re-adjusted in relation to the sensation, and sometimes the image-aggregate, in the process of its formation, drifts you away from the initial sensation. It troubles and modifies the sensation, which responds by triggering another image of its by then modulated differential. An infinite feedback circuit.¹²

What is so curious about this relationship between sensation and imagination is that it is so prolific in unlocking new possibilities of moving and thinking movements: a sheer inexhaustible "sensimagination", or a perpetuum mobile of modulated relations. This relational compound no longer represents movement as a direct line running from point A to point B, alike a dual system in positional analysis. (Remember the key argument of Bergson's philosophy of change, according to which nothing is understood of the quality of a movement, if one cuts it down to the size of successive sequences of displacement in space).¹³ The texture of this relational compound is rather made of a dynamic network of sense-image-permutations, out of which more or less amplified movements are catapulted into the field of visibility.

What triggers every single movement to run through the connective tissue of this network is what I call a "necessary speculation": a speculation, because it literally "speculates", i.e. considers and contemplates the vague and dynamic differential in the inbetween of sensation and imagination. This speculative aspect is necessary to the extent that it specifies the quality of the movement in a constant process of re-adaptation to the modulated differential. In this way, the movement is propelled by a kind of conjecture. Yet, this guesswork is not at all based on incomplete informa-

tion or insufficient knowledge on the relationship between sensation and imagination; it is rather the exact expression of the indeterminacy of the relationship. Without such speculative insights into the 'co-instant' interplay between the kinaesthetic regime and the image-production procedures of the imagination, no specifications concerning movement qualities could be made. In this sense, it is the necessary speculation of movement that first of all transforms the undetermined relationship between sensation and imagination into a singular one.¹⁴ It engineers difference in movement qualities, without ever exhausting the virtuality of the relation.¹⁵

It is crucial here to highlight that this necessary speculation of movement is immanent to the relationship between sensation and imagination. In this way, it resembles the concept of "interpretation" that Simon Hecquet and Sabine Prokhoris have explored in terms of choreographic scores. In their book *Fabrique de la Danse* they show how far interpretation is already implicit in choreography and hence redoubled in the score: "écrire une lecture" or writing a reading.¹⁶ The "lecture" is then not only due to the cinematographic enterprise of translating a series of movement modifications into a graphic sign system. It intervenes already in the specific practice, through which *Dance* is fabricated: the necessary speculative zone of a sensation-imagination-relation, out of which movements emerge, that are no longer subject to a history of codified forms and authorized styles, but involved in everybody's qualities.

In this context of sign-translations and score inventions, is it necessary to remember that the practice of choreography is, like any other artistic practice, already made up of signs? However, in contrast to common sense models of semiotics, these signs are no longer subordinated to a signifier-signified relation. They are rather what compels by not yet being pinned down as either a sensation or a signification. And precisely from amidst the perplexity of what gives to sense and of what signifies, they allow for the interpretative/speculative as agency of differentiation. Retracing this necessary speculation as immanent to *Dance* means then to do away with a conception of empirical relations to which interpretation could be merely added, like honey on a slice of bread. It also means to replace a dialectic conception of the sign with a concept of what compels sense. And, last but not least, it eradicates the illusion that artistic practices would require external textual procedures, in order to make this way of viewing, interpreting and speculating happen. For his part, Gies shows that quite the contrary is the case: *Dance est une lecture*.¹⁷

Relate differently: sense, view, speculate. About qualitative moves in dance

Three. By interlocking the experience of moving with the capacity of viewing what this kind of movement production produces, *Dance* gives to see in how far the theoretical participates in the empirical. Still, it is not enough to say that these two terms are related and participate in each other; one has to grasp the specificity of their relation. What specifies their relation in *Dance*, is precisely that necessary speculation, which triggers movement by imaging qualities according to a differential of sensation. As a result, different movements appear as transitional effects of qualitative transformations in the body. Qualities that move and cause to move. These movements are different from one another, but equally considered. It is as if their form would not matter, although it is evident that as soon as they become visible, they take on a specific form. Nevertheless, in *Dance*, the forms of movement are secondary to the qualities of movement. They are what derives from a change in quality. And precisely because qualities subtend the forms of movement, all sorts of recognizable dance styles can emerge within differences in quality, without ever being represented directly.

Consequently, the whole scenario of dance seems to be inversed: What is at stake is no longer the specificity of forms of movement, a singular vocabulary or the expression of a self, but rather a grammar of the formation of movements by difference in quality. Thereby Gies radically redefines dance as what already traverses us potentially and yet, makes us move not only differently but specifically: a qualitative shift. Not only in relation to the history of dance, but also to the history of conceiving relations.

Sense it, view it, speculate it.

*This article has been published in Frédéric Gies: *Dance (Praticable)*, Berlin 2008, pp. 15-24. The pagination refers to this edition.

¹ In his radical empiricism, William James defines these relations as conjunctive ones: "*Radical empiricism*, as I understand it, *does full justice to conjunctive relations*, without, however, treating them as rationalism always tends to treat them, as being true in some supernal way, as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality altogether." William James: *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Longman Green & Co 1912, p. 44.

² See the famous third chapter "The Image of Thought" in Gilles Deleuze: *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton, London/ New York: Continuum, Reprint (1994) 2001, pp 164-213. [Originally published as *Différence et répétition*, Paris: PUF 1968].

³ Gilles Deleuze: *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton, London/ New York: Continuum, Reprint (1994) 2001, pp. 68-69.

⁴ It is interesting to set *Dance* in relation to what has been called "conceptual dance" in the nineties, and more particularly in what concerns the display of continuous bodily transformations, in which slow motion became a specific means of perception. Leaving aside the unfortunate debate about "non-dance" - a hallucination by pseudo-critical guardians of the discipline that confined dance to a mausoleum of codified movements - I will shortly outline what marks this interest by referring to Xavier le Roy's solo performance *Self-Unfinished* as an example. *Self-Unfinished* invents a cinematic regime of attention that plays, amongst other things, with movement as a winding back and forth of time. On the one hand, slow motion is used here as a specific movement quality, but also and primarily as a particular device to render perceptible the constantly changing imagery of a body which cannot be fixed. Or, to come back to the opening paragraph of this article, where relations are the vanishing point of terms: it shows a self without terms, since it renders these terms as timely processes, that permanently disclose new images, new relations, evolving continuously, upside down, inside out... It seems that *Dance* takes up the crucial feature of continuity for the perception of change from another angle: there is no need to use slow motion as a cinematic device, but a necessity of using the continuity of movements in order to show in which manner the constant switches between different qualities of initiation change the shape and style of movements. Hence Gies replaces what has in the meantime become an aesthetic feature of the nineties, with his own regime of change in movement qualities. Thereby he demonstrates that the "conceptual" in dance has never been limited to just one way of moving. For a more thorough analysis of the impact of relations in contemporary choreography and the cinematic regime of le Roy, see Petra Sabisch: *Choreographing relations. Contemporary choreography and practical philosophy at the example of works by Antonia Baehr, Gilles Deleuze, Juan Dominguez, Félix Guattari, Xavier le Roy and Eszter Salamon*, Dissertation, forthcoming London 2009.

⁵ The term "percept" refers to a Deleuzian vocabulary and designates a package of sensations and relations that is immanent to the artwork and hence irreducible to a subjective perception. See e.g. Gilles Deleuze: *Unterhandlungen. 1972 - 1990*. trans. by Gustav Rossler, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1992, p. 199 [originally published as *Pourparler 1972-1990*, Paris: Editions de Minuit 1990]. More precisely it means the encounter between terms, that is different from the terms and involves a change, see Daniel W. Smith: Introduction "A Life of Pure Immanence": Deleuze's "Critique et Clinique" Project (pp. xi- liii), here p. xxx, in: Gilles Deleuze: *Essays Critical and Clinical*, transl. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, London/ New York: Verso 1998 [originally published as *Critique et Clinique*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 1993).

⁶ Much more could be said about the consequences of this approach for issues of authorship, since it allows to think a radical equality in value between different bodies and dance styles. This radical equality shows up in the diverse parameters of Gies's conception of dance, for instance in the use of the score as a means to steer co-choreography. The choice of Madonna's popular dance floor music is here also exemplary, because it is itself composed of quotations of musical styles. Furthermore, his interpretation of dance suggests precisely that dance is not a judgemental set of formed movements, but rather a means of levelling any hierarchy of values into a series of differences, which evolves

through working with qualities. It is for this reason that Gies does not worry at all about playing three tunes from the same album. He merely does away with what has been an essential characteristic in the formation of contemporary dance: the rejection of a simple illustrative use of music for dance (in contrast to ballet and dance theatre). Therefore he redefines dance as that which emerges out of a main stream of accessible qualities, which become specific only through a careful work on difference.

⁷ *Praticable* is a research platform initiated and run by a group of dancers and choreographers (Alice Chauchat, Frédéric de Carlo, Frédéric Gies, Isabelle Schad, Odile Seitz). It aims at sharing physical practices in order to circulate specific practical know-how, to invent new practices and to create different modes of distribution for performances. For more infos, see <<http://www.praticable.info>>.

⁸ Please note, that BMC™ is a registered trademark owned by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. In this text, the trademark symbol is omitted after the word, when reference is made to individual encounters with this experimental practice. As this article is clearly not interested in retracing whether or not these individual encounters took place within the "authorized" frame or through the study of the accessible books, the practice with other practitioners or other auto-didactic approaches, rather it draws upon that very complex of questions, which come out of these experiential encounters. For further information see also <<http://www.bodymindcentering.com/>> (retrieved 03/07/08).

⁹ For an introduction to BMC™ see Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen: *Sensing, Feeling, and Action. The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering. The collected articles from Contact Quarterly dance journal 1980 - 1992*, Northampton, MA: Contact Editions 1993 and Linda Hartley: *Wisdom of the Body Moving. An Introduction to Body-Mind Centering*, Berkeley (California): North Atlantic Books 1995.

[p. 24]

¹⁰ For the construction of facts as artefacts, see Bruno Latour/ Steve Woolgar: *La vie de laboratoire. La production des faits scientifiques*, trans. by Michel Biezunski, Paris: La Découverte 1996 [originally published as *Laboratory life. The Construction of Scientific Facts*, 1979]. Concerning the more recent debates on the relation between image and concept in the construction of scientific evidence see also Sibylle Peters: "Von der Kunst des Demonstrierens. Zur Figuration von Evidenz in der Performance des Vortrags", in: *Intellektuelle Anschauung. Figurationen von Evidenz zwischen Kunst und Wissen, [Intellectual Evidence. Figurations of Evidence between Art and Knowledge]*, ed. by ibid./ Martin J. Schäfer, Bielefeld: transcript 2006, pp. 201-222, here p. 205 [Transl. PS]: "What embeds as evidence the seemingly non-transferable complexities of research, also always conceals those contingencies, out of which science obtains in a first place the relations of sense [...]. "

¹¹ "The sensation is a canalization of the field of potential in a local action, from which another transduction is produced, that creates a global reconfiguration of the field of potential." Brian Massumi: "L'économie politique de l'appartenance et la logique de la relation", in: *Gilles Deleuze*, ed. by Isabelle Stengers, Paris: Vrin 1998, pp. 119-140, here p. 126. [Transl. PS]

¹² The specific modulations of movement that occur in the permanent feedback between sensation and imagination build the object of a current research by Alice Chauchat. In her performance-project "Collective sensations" that is planned for 2009, Chauchat investigates the possibilities of bodily movements to fashion, share, accumulate and trigger different layers of body images. By working on the multiple relations between movement-images, images of sensation and imaginative sensations, Chauchat specifies the simultaneity of the corporeal and the fictional as what makes our bodies move. Whence one can look forward to see a reality of transformative, improbable and utopic bodies, in which the power of imagination is localized inside the sensible.

¹³ See for example the chapter "Form and Becoming" in Henri Bergson: *Creative Evolution*, transl. by A. Mitchell, Mineola/ New York: Dover Publications 1998, p. 316: "We said there is *more* in a movement than in the successive positions attributed to the moving object, *more* in a becoming than in the forms passed through in turn, *more* in the evolution of form than the forms assumed one after another."

¹⁴ It is interesting to make a connection between the "necessary speculation" as that which motivates movement and Whitehead's speculative philosophy, in which speculation is necessary precisely as a "method productive of important knowledge". Alfred North Whitehead: *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected Edition, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York: The Free Press 1978, here p. 3.

¹⁵ It would be interesting to examine the 'image-production' procedures of anatomy more closely, in particular in regard to the different forms of knowledge in dance and anatomy. Whereas Gies's dance shows the know-how as a "necessary speculation" of movements in the interval of sensation and imagination, science seems to discard any form of such speculation. Yet, as Brigitte Weingart has shown in her brilliant article on the visualization of viruses, the 'image-production' procedures of anatomy are far from being mere evidence of facts. Her critique of the implicit assumptions that are at work in the visual representations of viruses relies on three aspects: firstly, it concerns the problematic relation between textual and image-production procedures, secondly, the concealing of aesthetic criteria in the scientific depiction, and thirdly, the relation between image-production procedures and diagnostics. Brigitte Weingart: "Viren visualisieren: Bildgebung und Popularisierung" [Visualizing viruses: image-giving procedures and popularisation], in: *Virus! Mutationen einer Metapher*, ed. by ibid. and Ruth Mayer, Bielefeld: transcript 2004, pp. 97-130.

¹⁶ Simon Hecquet/ Sabine Prokhoris: *Fabriques de la Danse*, Paris: PUF (Lignes d'Art) 2007, p. 127. See also their article about *Dance* in the present edition, in which this movement of interpretation is related to the fact of co-authoring the choreography, p. 36.

¹⁷ The lecture-performance "*Dance*"-"*Lecture*", performed by PS and Frédéric Gies on the 26th October 2007 in Giessen, draws in particular on this aspect: It showed in how far "dance" is already a "lecture" that gives to see and read on its own and cannot merely become the evidence of a textual practice, that would explain it. It knows how to do things without words.