

STAGE PRESENCE IN DANCE

A COGNITIVE ECOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC

APPROACH

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Figure 1. Dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* clapping back at the audience, *Théâtre de la Criée*, June 2017, Marseille, France.

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATURE

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *Stage Presence in Dance: A Cognitive Ecological Ethnographic Approach* has neither been previously submitted for a degree, nor submitted as part of the requirement for a degree to a university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that this thesis is an original piece of research written by me. Any help and assistance that I received during my research and the preparation of this thesis have been appropriately acknowledged. I certify that all information sources and literature used are acknowledged in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee, Reference Number 5201600503 on 20th July 2016.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Pini', with a stylized, cursive script.

Sarah Pini, Student N. 43403662

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*Tu ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi
finem di dederint, Leuconoe, nec Babylonios
temptaris numeros. Ut melius, quidquid erit, pati!
Seu pluris hiemes seu tribuit Iuppiter ultimam,
quae nunc oppositis debilitat pumicibus mare
Tyrrhenum, sapias: vina liques et spatio brevi
spem longam reseces. Dum loquimur, fugerit invida
aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.*

(Horatius, Carmen 1.11)

Ask not ('tis forbidden knowledge), what our destined term of years,
Mine and yours; nor scan the tables of your Babylonish seers.
Better far to bear the future, my Leuconoe, like the past,
Whether Jove has many winters yet to give, or this our last;
This, that makes the Tyrrhene billows spend their strength against the shore.
Strain your wine and prove your wisdom; life is short; should hope be more?
In the moment of our talking, envious time has ebb'd away.
Seize the present; trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may.

(Horace, Ode 1.11, translated by John Conington, 1882)

To Doris McIlwain,
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ABSTRACT

The concept of *presence* in performing arts and theatrical traditions has historically been related to the intrinsic quality of the performer to enchant the audience's attention. In this view, *presence* is conceived as the prerogative of the skilled performer, resulting from regimens of training, as well as intrinsic charisma. The main problem with the *classic model of stage presence* is the performer's position of power, and the relative concealment of audience' participation. According to this view the performer 'captures' the attention of spectators, who are generally conceived as passive receivers.

This thesis suggests addressing stage presence through a cognitive ecological approach to explore how presence in performance emerges in relations to a complex and dynamic environment, that includes audiences and performers co-presence and the socio-cultural situatedness of the performance event. Through a phenomenological and ethnographic approach, this work investigates variations of presence in three different dance practices: Contemporary Ballet, in the case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* and the staging of Emilio Greco's piece *Passione*; Contact Improvisation and the community event of the Global Underscore 2017 in Italy; and Body Weather, a radical movement ideology in Australian dance company De Quincey Co.

By exploring how theatrical presence emerges kinaesthetically in dance and how dancers' mindful bodies make sense of their lived experience of presence, this work shows how different performance' ecologies shape different experiences of presence, framing phenomena of presence in a cognitive ecological sense.

This thesis draws in part on the following published or forthcoming papers. Relevant parts of the text have been rewritten to suit the integrated nature of the current work.

Pini, S. & Sutton J. (in press). Enculturation and the transmission of kinaesthetic knowledge: *Passione* (2017) by the Ballet National de Marseille. In Farrugia-Kriel K. & Nunes Jensen J. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*. London, New York: Oxford University Press.

Pini, S. & Pini, R. (2019). Resisting the ‘patient’ body: a phenomenological account. *Journal of Embodied Research*, 2(1): 2 (20:05). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.11>

Pini S. & George, J. (2019). Synthetic organisms: performing promise and doubts. *Critical Dialogues*, 11: HACKING THE ANTHROPOCENE, 48-59. ISSN: 2206–9615. https://issuu.com/critical_path/docs/criticaldialogues_final

Pini, S. (2018). Alternative approaches to the classical model of stage presence in performing arts: a review. *Humanity*, 9, Special Issue: Making a Mark, 1-14. <https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/hass/index.php/humanity/article/view/64>

Pini, S. (2018). Displacing disease: a performative account. [Video essay]. *Proceedings ‘Displacements’ the 2018 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology*. <https://displacements.jhu.edu/body-and-image-trajectories-of-transformation/>

Pini, S., McIlwain, D. J. F. & Sutton, J. (2016). Re-tracing the encounter: interkinaesthetic forms of knowledge in Contact Improvisation. *Antropologia e Teatro. Rivista di Studi*, 7, 225-243. DOI: 10.6092/issn.2039-2281/6268

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Presence is theatre’s promise as well as its doubt”

(Peggy Phelan, 1993, p. 121)

The first time I saw the dance company *Aterballetto* performing *Comoedia Canto Terzo* I thought I knew exactly what ‘presence’ was about. *Comoedia Canto Terzo* is a dance piece based on the third canto of the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. The performance took place at the historical Municipal Theatre ‘Valli’ in Reggio Emilia.¹ When I saw the dancers in *Comoedia* lined up, slowly walking together towards the proscenium, starkly dressed in flesh-coloured costumes, that was the moment for me when the magic called ‘stage presence’ revealed all its magnetic power. It was the year 2000, I was a young dance apprentice and in that period the company *Aterballetto*, under the direction of Mauro Bigonzetti, was considered one of the best contemporary ballet companies in Europe.²

As soon as the dancers made their appearance on stage—their bodies neatly sculpted by blades of light, partially lit from the lateral scenery flat—I was transported into an

¹ The company *Aterballetto* was the only internationally renowned ballet company independent of an Opera House in Italy. The piece *Comoedia Canto Terzo* was choreographed by *Aterballetto* former artistic director Mauro Bigonzetti.

² Mauro Bigonzetti is an international choreographer who has been the artistic director of the resident Ballet Company of *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan, one of the oldest classical ballet companies in the world. From 1997 to 2007 Bigonzetti was artistic director of the dance company *Aterballetto* based in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

otherworldly dimension of beauty and wonder. The dancers were representing the creatures of the Dantesque paradise, their ethereal silhouettes emphasized by the light design. On the backdrop above them, a sphere of light created the scenography, to symbolise the metaphysical ideal of supernatural perfection. Such a sophisticated penumbra made the dancers' bodies look otherworldly, as if suspended and detached from the ground, immersed in an unknown almighty mystical space.

During that first viewing of *Comoedia Canto Terzo*, enchanted as I was by the power of the dancers' bodies, my attention didn't centre on the scenography, nor the stage design, nor the atmosphere that was created in the theatre, or the emphasis provided by the music of Johann Sebastian Bach which was chosen for that piece. I didn't consider the choreographer's choice of displaying the dancers' bodies in a line that was lyrically moving towards the audience, or the skilled choices of the lighting designer, which conferred on the dancers the incredible allure of supernatural beings. My only focus was the epiphany of those ethereal bodies on stage. When I saw the *Aterballetto* dancers entering the stage, as their appearance literally brought me to tears, was their exquisite talent and technique. According to my teenage self, those dancers were able to radiate such phenomenal presence as the result of their excellent technique, which had sculpted and transformed their bodies in a dramatic way. My analysis back then was clear: thanks to their ballet training and physical qualities, they appeared so otherworldly because that is what they were.

A few years later, I saw Bigonzetti's *Comoedia Canto Terzo* again, but that second time I had a very different experience. It was 2003 and I was part of an elite group of young dancers selected to take part in a well-established year-long professional dance apprenticeship in Reggio Emilia, before carrying on with my professional dance training among other well-known European dance companies.

When I saw *Comoedia Canto Terzo* for the second time in 2003, I didn't see angels, but instead professional dancers performing their job. Why was this such a different experience? Did the dancers lack something that evening, or was it the spectator (me) who had changed, or was it something else? The *Aterballetto* ensemble likely performed beautifully on stage, but that second time the sense of breathtaking epiphany was no longer there. Is stage presence only a prerogative of the performer? Or it is coupled with the audience's expectations?

There are two intertwined goals in my research, which mutually inform one another. Firstly, to look at the ways dancers move, think, and feel differently in respect to their different training and dance practices. Secondly, to use this to investigate how embodied knowledge can shape multiple ways of feeling, sensing, understanding, and performing 'presence'. Fundamental to this work is a consideration of the dynamic relationship among different mindful dancing bodies—their environments and cultural practices—in enacting and making sense of 'presence'. To do so I focus on a specific form of presence, what in theatre and performing arts is commonly known as *stage presence*.

I approach this topic through a series of related research questions. I ask if 'presence' is more than an intrinsic quality of the performer and if so, what it is, where it is, how does it emerge, and how might these questions be answered differently in different contexts and forms? To tackle these questions, I frame presence in performing arts as a cognitive phenomenon and explore how presence emerges kinaesthetically in dance. Although the term 'cognitive' can be used at times to conjure up a 'rational' or 'in the head' notion of phenomena, I use it instead to refer to cognitive phenomena in line with more recent '4E cognition' theory, in which cognition is understood as enactive,

embodied, extended, embedded (see Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018). I explain this approach further below.

Utilising a phenomenological and ethnographic approach and drawing on the embodied knowledge and kinaesthetic intelligence of several international professional dancers, choreographers and performing artists, I tackle questions of how different enactments of presence emerge and operate across different contexts and practices. I explore how theatrical presence emerges kinaesthetically in dance, how dancers' mindful bodies make sense of their lived experience of presence, how they attend to their 'being present', what the elements involved in this process are, what kind of relationships develop and how these relationships/elements influence and transform each other in the making.

In this thesis I consider the experiential bedrock of presence in specific environments and socio-cultural contexts. I ask how certain groups of people feel, experience, think and talk about presence through their sentient bodies. Addressing the variations of presence in three different dance practices—namely, *Contact Improvisation*, *Body Weather*, and *Contemporary Ballet*—I aim to contribute to a diverse body of literature intersecting the interdisciplinary space between the fields of anthropology of dance, phenomenology, performance and dance studies and cognitive science.

Whereas the mainstream notion of presence in the performing arts maintains that presence is best captured by the intrinsic quality of the performer to enchant the audience (Trenos, 2014), this thesis provides a different, phenomenological and ethnographic, exploration of presence in dance.³ By exploring enactments of presence

³ Helen Trenos refers to Stanislavsky's account of the presence of the actor, conceived as an 'intangible quality' possessed by fortunate performers: "There are certain actors who have only to step on the stage and the public is already enthralled by them... What is the basis of the fascination they exercise? It is an indefinable, intangible quality" (Stanislavski, 1963, cited in Trenos, 2014, p. 64).

in three distinct dance genres through a cognitive ecological framework (Hutchins, 2010; Tribble & Sutton, 2011), I provide a detailed critique of the classic notion of stage presence in performing arts. In this view, presence is conceived of as the prerogative of the skilled performer, resulting from either rigorous training or intrinsic charisma or a combination of both (McAllister-Viel, 2016; Rodenburg, 2007; Trensos, 2014).⁴ The main problem with the so-called *classic model of stage presence* (Sherman, 2016) is the performer's position of power, and the relative obscurity of the audience's participation. As Sherman notes, the classic model of stage presence imagines an audience without agency. According to this view, the performer 'captures' the spectators' attention, spectators who are generally conceived as passive receivers.

Enactive approaches to cognition (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) argue instead that perception does not passively happen, but is rather something that people actively do (Noë, 2004, 2012). Scholars who have adopted enactive and phenomenological approaches (Macneill, 2014b; Sherman, 2016; Zarrilli, 2012, 2014) argue that stage presence emerges in the spatiotemporal and experiential realm of embodied situated interaction, shared between the performer, the performance score, and the audience.

Through a focus on the cognitive ecologies of different dance practices, this thesis presents the construction of alternative conceptual models of stage presence that contrast with the classic version. This thesis addresses the phenomenon of stage presence from a cognitive ecological approach encompassing embodied, enacted, and situated perspectives. Rather than a metaphysical ideal, presence is here understood as an emergent and distributed process that occurs across the audience, the performers, the

⁴ Trensos (2014) frames 'presence' as something that is "done, enacted, or performed, and consequently something that can "be acquired and taught" (p. 66). She refers to the teachings of several Western and Eastern theatrical traditions including Stanislavski, Zeami, Barba and Chekhov. For example, she mentions Chekhov who "argued that it was possible to achieve a radiating presence 'through exercises' which he outlines in some detail in *On The Technique of Acting*" (Trensos, 2014, p. 66).

cultural context, and the environment. The alternative models of stage presence presented herein illustrate how performers, audience, and context mutually influence each other, shape different enactments and contribute to different cognitive ecologies of presence.

Grounded in the lived experience of my interlocutors—international performing artists, professional dancers, teachers, and choreographers—I demonstrate how presence in dance is not just an individual quality of the performer. Instead, presence should be understood as an emergent effect arising from interaction within the complex lived environment of the performance—which includes the audience, the context, and the surrounding physical space. This research accounts for the role played by the larger performance ecology in shaping the participants’ lived experience of presence comprising different techniques of the body; idiosyncratic movement styles; unusual environments; original dramaturgies; and different performers on ‘stage’.

Drawing on the embodied knowledge and kinaesthetic intelligence of several professional dancers, choreographers, and performing artists, and through ethnographic immersion on and off the stages (and other unusual performance and training spaces) where dance practices as different as Contemporary Ballet, Contact Improvisation, and Body Weather are performed, my thesis demonstrates how different enactments of presence emerge and operate across different contexts.

While spectatorship has been more broadly investigated in the performing arts, both in the context of live performance (Heim, 2016; McConachie, 2008; McConachie & Hart, 2006; Radbourne, Glow, & Johanson, 2013; Shaughnessy, 2013) and cinematic experience (Peterson, Gillam, & Sedgwick, 2007) also analysed through a cognitive ecological approach (Tan, 2007); the lived experience of stage presence from the

performers' point of view has often been overlooked or filtered through scholarly interpretations relying on theoretical rather than phenomenological accounts.

This thesis demonstrates how the study of the phenomenon of stage presence benefits from a cognitive ecological approach (Bateson, 1972; Hutchins, 1995, 2010). In demonstrating this I build on Hutchins' view of human cognition as "profoundly situated, social, embodied, and richly multimodal" (Hutchins, 2010, p. 712) as well as a cultural phenomenological somatic (Csordas, 1993, 1994, 2011) and enactive ethnographic approach (Wacquant, 2005, 2015).

Drawing on these approaches to 'cognitive ecology' I suggest alternative ecological models in which the performer's presence emerges in relation to a complex and dynamic environment. This dynamic environment includes spectators' and performers' co-presence and the socio-culturally situated nature of the performance event.

I embrace an interdisciplinary perspective to inform the study of the experience of presence in dance. This is accomplished through investigating variations of presence in three dance forms and identifying different modalities emerging from these professional dance practices. I conducted multi-site fieldwork across Europe and Australia, during which I explored: Contemporary Ballet, in the specific case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM) and the staging of the piece *Passione* by Emio Greco and Pieter Scholten; Contact Improvisation jams and the event of the Global Underscore in Italy; and Body Weather, attending workshops led by members of the dance company De Quincey Co in Australia.

This project began in 2013 as part of Professor John Sutton's and Associate Professor Doris McIlwain's Australian Research Council research grant: 'Mindful bodies in action'. This was a large interdisciplinary project addressing issues in philosophy of

action and sports psychology, such as: embodied thinking, cognitive control, agency, and expertise. The project investigated questions of consciousness and intelligence in action by focusing on different sports and skilled movement practices, including: cricket (Sutton, 2007); mountain bike racing (Christensen, Bicknell, McIlwain, & Sutton, 2015); yoga (McIlwain & Sutton, 2014); and dance (Sutton, 2005; Pini, McIlwain, & Sutton, 2016; Pini & Sutton, in press). Privileging the direct experience of the researchers themselves in the kinaesthetic practice under investigation is not exclusive to anthropology, but also informs studies of kinaesthetic awareness, embodied skills, and expertise across the cognitive sciences (see Geeves, McIlwain, Sutton, & Christensen, 2010; Sutton & Bicknell, in press).

I joined this research group on the basis of my background as ethnographer, along with my expertise in dance. Before completing my studies in Cultural and Medical Anthropology in Bologna, Italy, in 2012, I trained professionally in ballet and contemporary dance, working and studying with renowned choreographers throughout Europe. In 2003 I entered the XIV edition of the annual professional dance program sponsored by the *Associazione Teatrale Emilia-Romagna* (ATER) and the *Fondazione Nazionale della Danza* (Italian National Foundation of Dance) directed by the choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti. After a year-long apprenticeship in Reggio Emilia, in 2004 I moved to France to join the *Cannes Jeune Ballet*, company casting the young dancers of the pre-professional program of the *École Supérieure de Danse de Cannes Rosella Hightower*. This world-renowned ballet academy was directed at that time by Monique Loudières, former *Danseuse Étoile* of the Paris Opera Ballet.⁵ In Cannes I

⁵ *Danseuse Étoile* translates as ‘star dancer’, is the highest rank a dancer can reach at the Paris Opera Ballet. The term is equivalent to the title ‘Principal dancer’ or to the title ‘Prima Ballerina’ in Italian.

worked with several choreographers including Carolyn Carlson, performing as a soloist in her creation *Ice* with which I toured several theatres in France.

In 2005 I moved to Belgium to join the first edition of the European professional insertion programme for young dancers D.A.N.C.E. (Dance Apprentice Network aCross Europe) under the artistic direction of Frédéric Flamand, William Forsythe, Wayne McGregor and Angelin Preljocaj. At that time they were, respectively, the artistic director of the *Ballet National de Marseille* (France); the director of *The Forsythe Company* (Germany); the director of *Random Dance*, now known as *Company Wayne McGregor* based at the Studio Wayne McGregor (London, UK); and the director of the *Ballet Preljocaj* (Aix-en-Provence, France). During this period, I performed alongside experienced dancers of the *Forsythe Company* in William Forsythe's creation *Human Writes* (2006) in Dresden, Germany, as well as participating in new creations such as *Fire Sketch* by Angelin Preljocaj in Aix-en-Provence and re-adaptations like *Contre Six* by Michèle Anne and Terry De May in Toulon, France.

Due to a serious illness in 2006 I had to interrupt my dance career. This event set me on a long transformative journey, forcing me to explore other ways of 'being-in-the-world' where I felt lost more than I ever felt 'present'. Understanding how other people feel, experience, and think about presence thus became the focus of my research. I wanted to understand how other people experience presence and how they make sense of their presence through their mindful bodies. Following this path, I eventually made it back to where my quest about presence began.

The work I present here is not intended to be a comprehensive description of presence in dance, nor does it seek universal generalisations on how dancers experience presence kinaesthetically. Instead this study presents a detailed and specific account of the

multiplicity of ways presence is understood and performed across different cultural contexts and performance settings, as explored in the three dance forms taken as the subject of this study. In doing so I hope to illuminate the complexity of the phenomena of stage presence and how these are shaped by different artistic traditions, different mindful bodies and different dance practices.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 briefly addresses central theoretical perspectives informing ideas of *presence* in Western culture. I introduce philosophical theories that shape the understanding of presence and offer an account of the ontologies that contribute to produce presence's multiple definitions. By providing an overview of some philosophical issues concerning presence (Heidegger, 1996 [1927]; Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]; Derrida, 1997 [1967]; Clark, 1997; Noë, 2012), the second chapter emphasises how the concept of presence informs a cluster of different connotations, encompassing metaphysical, existential, psychological, cognitive and performative dimensions.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature pertaining to stage presence in performing arts theory and retraces the evolution of the concept of 'presence' in Western theatrical culture (Goodall, 2008; Tribble, 2017). I outline approaches that influence discourses of presence in performing arts, focusing on the accounts of performance scholars' interpretations of stage presence (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 2012; Goodall, 2008; Heim, 2016; Power, 2008; Roach, 2004, 2007). I then discuss how scholars who adopt an enactive and phenomenological approach (Macneill, 2014a; Sherman, 2016; Zarrilli, 2009, 2012) have challenged the view that conceives theatrical presence an individual prerogative of the performer. Next, I introduce my graphical interpretation of the

Classic model of stage presence. Finally, I highlight the complexity of presence and identify gaps within this body of literature, suggesting how adopting a cognitive ecological framework (Hutchins, 1995, 2010; Tan, 2007; Tribble & Sutton, 2011) could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of stage presence. I implement my framework in a model, which I apply variously to each of the specific movement practices in chapters 5, 6 and 7 to follow.

Chapter 4 introduces the research methodology and underlying theoretical approaches employed in this research. These include: enactive ethnography (Wacquant, 2015), somatic modes of attention (Csordas, 1993, 1994), dance enaction (Warburton, 2016), thick participation (Samudra, 2006, 2008), and apprenticeship as ethnographic method (Downey, 2010; Downey, Dalidowicz, & Mason, 2015). I underscore the importance of a reflexive ethnographic approach to acknowledge and address the influence of the subjectivity of the researcher in the fieldwork. Reflection on, and acknowledgement of, the influences and motivation for the researcher's approach helps to identify more explicitly the interaction between the subject matter under study and the researcher's own embedded embodied interaction with presence. Through a phenomenological approach to illness (Carel, 2008, 2016), a feminist philosophical approach (Braidotti, 2002, 2003; Mol, 2002) and autoethnographic analysis of cancer (Pini & Pini, 2019), the chapter frames my biographical experience of 'losing' presence and provides an insight into the experiential background that prompted this research. The chapter closes by providing an overview of the three contexts of practice and introduces the fieldwork on the dance case studies investigated.

Chapter 5 investigates variations of stage presence in the specific case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM) and the staging of the piece *Passione* choreographed by Emio Greco and Pieter Scholten, former artistic directors of the BNM (2014 – 2018),

at the *Theatre de la Criée* in Marseille in May and June 2017. It discusses how kinaesthetic knowledge is transferred from the choreographer to the dancers' bodies in the context of an institutionalised dance company (Pini & Sutton, in press). The chapter presents a proposed *Distributed Enacted* model of presence in Contemporary Ballet. It illustrates how different understandings of presence result from the ways in which presence is understood and embodied on stage, and how such meanings shift during the choreographic process following the unfolding of the piece's re-adaptation process, rehearsals and performance.

Chapter 6 addresses independent groups of Contact Improvisation (CI), a duet system-based practice aimed at fostering interkinaesthetic awareness and challenging habits of movement (Pini, McIlwain, & Sutton, 2016). The chapter presents a proposed *Interkinaesthetic Social* model of presence in Contact Improvisation based on the intersubjective and interkinaesthetic dimensions (Behnke, 2003) that shape the experience of presence among CI movers. I explore how presence is understood and enacted and by several *contacters* during CI jams and workshop in Sydney, Australia, and in Emilia Romagna, Italy, and during the CI annual community event 'Global Underscore' (GUS), as observed in Arezzo, Italy, in June 2017.

Chapter 7 examines the relationship between the presence of the environment and the performer in Body Weather (BW). This dance movement ideology originated from Butoh, the best-known form of Japanese contemporary dance theatre, significant for its relationship with nature and its philosophical roots in Shinto and Buddhism (Baird & Candelario, 2018; Fraleigh, 1999). BW was developed by Japanese dancer and choreographer Min Tanaka and brought to Australia by the choreographer Tess de Quincey (Candelario, 2019; De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019; Fuller, 2018; Scheer, 2000). This chapter presents an *Omnicentral Situated* model of presence in Body Weather,

which addresses the attention cultivated in BW specifically towards situated awareness and emplacement (Pink, 2009, 2011). The chapter takes a particular focus on the immersive workshop that took place in Bellambi, New South Wales, Australia, in July 2016. I address some training elements as practiced and observed during several BW dance workshops conducted by members of the dance company De Quincey Co.

Chapter 8 summarises the discussion of the three ecological models of stage presence presented in the previous chapters. These models are based on dancers' lived experiences of the different training systems and artistic demands characterising these three dance styles. By showing how different dance practices sustain embodied experiences of presence, and how different performance ecologies shape dancers' phenomenological accounts, this work reframes the lived experience of theatrical presence in a cognitive ecological sense.

I emphasise the diversity of cognitive ecologies in which stage presence is understood and performed, emphasising how divergent ideologies embedded in different techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973; Bourdieu, 1977; Crossley, 2007; Wacquant, 2016), and different aesthetic and cultural factors, contribute to shape the experience of presence. By moving away from the classic model, the thesis closes by stressing how explorations of presence in dance suggest an alternative picture of the phenomenon of stage presence, and provides a reflection on future directions and broader implications for cognitive ecological models of presence in performance.

CHAPTER 2

BEING THERE: THEORIES OF PRESENCE

*“il n’y a pas d’homme intérieur, l’homme est au monde,
c’est dans le monde qu’il se connaît”.*

“there is no inner man [sic], man is in the world,
and only in the world does he know himself”.

(Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012 [1945], p. ixxiv)

In Western culture, the concept of *presence* evokes a cluster of different connotations, encompassing ontological, metaphysical, existential, cognitive and performative dimensions. The concept of presence plays a fundamental role in the phenomena of performance, as scholars in this field emphasise: “Western theatre has a complex tradition of discourse on presence” (Goodall, 2008, p. 6). However, due to its multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature, “presence has proven remarkably resistant to scholarship” (Sherman, 2016, p. 5). To set the stage for addressing the complex phenomenon of theatrical presence in chapter 3, I begin by providing an overview of some theoretical discussions of presence. In this chapter I introduce central theoretical perspectives that shape understandings of presence, stressing how questions around the meanings of presence have been crucial for the study of body-mind couplings. I provide an account of some of the epistemologies that contribute to produce the various definitions of presence, spanning multiple disciplines from performance studies to cognitive science.

Defining presence

Jane Goodall (2008) retraces the etymology of the term presence from the Latin *praesentiā*, which stands for the present events, to what is ‘present’. Similarly, Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye (2011) underline the relationship between presence and what is ‘present’. Drawing on the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Giannachi and Kaye offer a comprehensive reconstruction of the etymology of presence:

the noun ‘presence’ indicates that which is *prae* (before) and *sens* (past participle of *sum*, ‘I am’), suggesting ‘before I am’, or that which is ‘in front’ of me or ‘in view’ of me. *Sens* is present participle of *esse* (to be), which indicates ‘in actual existence’, opposed to *in posse*, in potentiality (OED 2009). We can see from this that presence occurs in relation to a distinct tense—the present participle—which marks the present in the act of its unfolding. This suggests not only a link between the idea of presence and notions of being and ‘essence’ or ‘essential nature’ (OED), but also that there is an indissoluble connection between presence and definitions and concepts of ‘the present’ (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 4).

The authors stress the temporal dimension of the term *presence*: “while the notion of presence evidently entails an implicit reference to temporality, the noun ‘presence’ is explicitly linked to the adverb ‘present’ ” (Giannachi and Kaye, 2011, p. 5). Giannachi and Kaye also draw on the *Shorter OED* (1975), which frames *presence* as “the fact or condition of being; the state of being before, in front of, or in the same place with a person or a thing; being there” (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 5). A conceptualisation of presence as ‘being there’ derives from Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996 [1927]). Heidegger’s project was to undermine classic

metaphysical assumptions that the objects observed in the world exist independently of any observer. According to classic metaphysics, the subject “is considered separate from the objects in the world which it encounters through perception, as opposed to being embedded in and connected with the world through action in that world” (Miller, 2016, p. 20). Heidegger elaborates his philosophy by reframing Being in relation to its temporal presence in the world. Miller elucidates Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics:

[O]ne overarching point of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was to undermine the metaphysics of presence by demonstrating that time and change are a fundamental part of being, not divorced from it. Heidegger’s point is that focusing on the present and striving towards an understanding of the essences or unchanging nature as the actuality of being is misunderstanding what being is. If being is worldly, and the world is a place of change manifested in time, then being is temporal. (Miller, 2016, p. 23)

As Miller puts it, the problem with classical metaphysics for Heidegger is that “Western philosophy had forgotten and misunderstood being by focusing on ‘consciousness’, privileging ‘metaphysical’ presence and a self-enclosed, abstract, thinking subject” (Miller, 2016, p. 20). A more radical approach to metaphysics, which has influenced notions of presence in theatre and performance studies, was elaborated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Derrida’s deconstructionist theory was a striking addition to a discussion that has inspired philosophical debates for centuries (Derrida, 1997, 2001 [1967]). According to philosopher and dance scholar Andre Lepecki, “for Derrida the entire history of metaphysics, which he identifies with the “history of the West,” has always been structured around a center: that of Being as presence in all the senses of the word”

(2004, p. 131). Lepecki refers to Derrida's work *Writing and Difference* (1967) in which Derrida asserts that "it could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendental, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" (2001, p. 353). According to Lepecki, Derrida's critique of classic metaphysics aims to "liberate philosophy from the burden of presence at/as the center of philosophy itself" (Lepecki, 2004, p. 131). Following Lepecki's analysis "it is only with Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger that presence as Truth, presence as Subject, and presence as Being There, respectively, are decentred" (Lepecki, 2004, p. 131). Goodall stresses that "Heidegger is an important influence on the work of Jacques Derrida, who associates the fascination of presence with an investment in lost origins and an illusion of the fullness of being" (Goodall, 2008, p. 5). The problem, however, was that "as revolutionary as these 'destroyers' of metaphysics were, their task was not according to Derrida, fully taken to the limit" (Lepecki 2004, p. 132). According to Derrida, what makes the project of Western logocentric philosophy unattainable is its search for transcendental beings, truths, and essences (Miller, 2016, p. 22). I return to Derrida's deconstructionist turn later in this chapter to underline the relevance of his project in shaping notions of presence in performing arts theory.

Being there

Philosopher Alva Noë in *Varieties of Presence* (2012) considers presence as what lies at the centre of the concept of consciousness, through which "the world shows up for us, in thought, and in experience; the world is present to mind" (2012, p. xi). Noë

proposes a consideration of presence that involves a phenomenological and enactive approach to cognition. In this Noë follows Giannachi and Kaye's (2011) mapping of the multiple definitions of presence; particularly when they state that "presence thus also implies awareness, self-awareness, consciousness and even alertness, all of which contribute to the unfolding of the 'I am' in relation to which an object of attention is located spatially and temporally" (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 6). A view that encompasses the coupling of the subject and world in the study of consciousness and cognition has become prominent since the publication of *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Varela et al., 1991). Varela and colleagues view cognition as enaction, in which the agent and the world are not separate, but 'mutually specifying' (1991, p. 197).

Following this enactive turn philosophers and cognitive scientists have moved towards a rejection of person-world dualism, arguing instead for an understanding of cognition in terms of organism-environment autopoiesis.⁶ This account emphasises how dynamic approaches highlight the interaction of brain, body, and environment in co-constituting individual behaviour and cognition. Following the concept of 'being there' as definition of presence, Andy Clark's work *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Clark, 1997) has been influential in the development of the interdisciplinary project of 4E cognition. This approach conceives of the mind as embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended; cognition is shaped and structured by dynamic interactions

⁶ The term autopoiesis was coined in 1980 by Humberto Maturana starting from the Greek word αὐτο- (auto-), meaning 'self', and ποίησις (poiesis), meaning 'creation, production'. An autopoietic system is a system that continually redefines itself and sustains and reproduces itself from within. An autopoietic system can be represented as a network of processes of creation, transformation and destruction of components which, by interacting with each other, continuously support and regenerate the same system. In *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* Thompson writes: "Maturana and Varela (1980) originally proposed that all living systems are autopoietic systems and that all autopoietic systems are cognitive systems. 'Autopoiesis' pertains to the self-producing organization of a living system, whereas 'cognition' pertains to the behaviour or conduct of a system in relation to its environment" (Thompson, 2007, p. 124).

between the brain, the body, and both the physical and social environments. Whilst there are a variety of approaches to 4E cognition, most share a common goal: to reconfigure, and in most cases reject, traditional cognitivism (Menary, 2010).

According to Clark's extended mind hypothesis, brain, body, and world are united in complex systems of reciprocal causation. Clark's thesis describes cognition as a process of constant feedback loops between the brain, the body, and the material world in which we live. To develop his extended mind project, Clark draws from the embodied mind thesis (Varela et al., 1991) as well as Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* and Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, which he describes as "a mode of being-in-the-world in which we are not detached, passive observers but active participants" (Clark, 1997, p. 172).

Clark does, however, distinguish his view from that of Heidegger, who argued against the idea that knowledge involves a relation between minds and an independent world. According to Clark, "Heidegger's notion of the milieu of embodied action is thoroughly social. My version of being there is significantly broader and includes all cases in which body and local environment appear as elements in extended problem-solving activity" (Clark, 1997, p. 172). Closer to the scope of Clark's project is the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "who was concerned to depict everyday intelligent activity as the playing out of whole organism-body-world synergies" (Clark, 1997, p. 172). According to Clark,

Merleau-Ponty stressed the importance of what I have called "continuous reciprocal causation"—viz., the idea that we must go beyond the passive image of the organism perceiving the world and recognize the way our actions may be continuously responsive to worldly events which are at the same time being continuously responsive to our actions (Clark, 1997, p. 172).

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012 [1945]), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that all consciousness is perceptual, and that a sense of subjectivity cannot be separated from its ‘being in the world’.⁷ This condition requires a reconsideration of time as the fundamental dimension of what he calls a subject’s ‘field of presence’, which he understands as moving in two senses, across both a temporal and spatial dimension. In his words, “perception gives me a ‘field of presence’ in the broad sense that it spreads out according to two dimensions: the dimension of here–there and the dimension of past–present–future.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 277). Merleau-Ponty suggests that

we need not wonder why the thinking subject or consciousness catches sight of itself as a man [sic], an embodied subject, or an historical subject, and we should not treat this apperception as a second-order operation that the subject would perform beginning from his absolute existence. The absolute flow appears perspectively to its own gaze as “a consciousness” (or as a man or an embodied subject) because it is a field of presence – presence to itself, to others, and to the world – and because this presence throws it into the natural and cultural world from which it can be understood. We must not represent this flow to ourselves as an absolute contact with itself or as an absolute density without any internal fault-lines, but rather as a being who continues itself into the outside.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 477–478).

By highlighting Merleau-Ponty’s categorisation of a temporal and spatial dimension constituting the ‘field of presence’, I wish to highlight how this philosophical approach, which includes a notion of presence as ‘being there’, has contributed to

⁷ In the ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to the *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Donald Landes clarifies that the possibility of the subject being in the world “involves a reconsideration of time as the fundamental dimension of my field of presence—I am neither outside of time nor merely subject to it” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xlvii).

conceptualisations of presence across other domains, including dance. My aim here is not an exhaustive discussion of different definitions of presence but instead to pinpoint some of the concerns underpinning conceptualisations of presence across the neighbouring fields of performance studies, phenomenology and cognitive science.

The concept of ‘being there’ also influences definitions of presence within the cognitive neurosciences. Cognitive psychologist Giuseppe Riva identifies “presence as a neuropsychological phenomenon, evolved from the interplay of our biological and cultural inheritance whose goal is to produce a strong sense of agency and control: *Presence as the feeling of being and acting in a world outside me*” (Riva, 2008, p. 103 - emphasis in original). In these contexts, *presence* is understood as a cognitive phenomenon “concerned with the subjective feeling of existence within a given environment” (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998, p. 78). Interestingly, this latter definition has been central to telecommunication and virtual reality endeavours since the beginning of these fields (see Lee, 2004).

In this context “the default sense of ‘being there’ is the basic state of consciousness in which the user attributes the source of the sensation to the physical environment” (Biocca, 1997, p. 20). Within the fields of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, presence is generally associated with the concept of *telepresence*, a sense of transportation created by a medium. Telepresence has since been generalized as the illusion of ‘being there’, or “the compelling perceptual sensation of being in a place other than where your physical body is located” (Biocca, 1997, p. 18). Lee (2004) provides a general review of presence-related terms such as telepresence, virtual presence, mediated presence, copresence, and further definitions across virtual reality and communication theory.

Telecommunication scholars Lombard and Ditton (1997) identify six key concepts of presence and analyse the factors that promote a sense of presence in communication technologies. These include virtual reality, video conferencing, home theatre, and high definition television which are designed to provide users with an illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated. They also consider other media such as telephone, radio, television, and film that also offer a degree of presence. Lombard and Ditton define presence as an illusion, or “the sense of non-mediation although a medium is being used, an acceptance of the environment represented in the medium to a point where the user ceases to be aware of the medium”. In their account “because it is a perceptual illusion, presence is a property of a person” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997 - online). Lombard and Ditton also emphasise that presence “results from an interaction among formal and content characteristics of a medium and characteristics of the media user, and therefore it can and does vary across individuals and across time for the same individual” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). This conception of presence as a “property of a person” is consonant with views of presence in theatrical performance where presence is conceived of as an intrinsic quality of the performer.

Being with

Another stream of research in Telecommunication theory is *social presence theory* which broadly investigates the sense of being with another (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003), that can be either another person or a form of artificial intelligence. Social presence theory focuses on the ability that communication media have to transmit social cues. Social presence theory has been mostly employed in research in Virtual Reality and in human-computer interaction to investigate how the ‘sense of being with another’ is shaped and affected by interfaces, often taking for granted that this sense of presence

is a stable identifiable moment. Researchers in these fields have observed how “although understanding social presence is sometimes the goal of research where this concept is employed, social presence research is more frequently a means to explore some aspect of technology or the effects of technology” (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 456). Assessing the sense of presence in virtual reality research, psychologists Zahorik and Jenison advance an alternative position that holds that a sense of presence is tied to our interaction with the physical environment. In their paper ‘Presence as Being-in-the-World’, they reframe the prevailing ‘rationalist take’ on presence in perceptual psychology and artificial intelligence through an approach that combines existential philosophy and ecological psychology. They consider virtual reality and teleoperation research as resting heavily on a “rationalistic orientation” that involves a dichotomy between subject and object and recourse to mental representations (Zahorik and Jenison 1998, p. 79). In their view such adherence to subject/object distinctions and mental representation poses a problem for the examination of presence since “researchers are forced to continually relate subjective feelings of presence to objective facts of presence, both through theory and measurement” (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998, p. 82). Relying on Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, Zahorik and Jenison assert that “Being [...] is defined in terms of action within a worldly context. Existence is action and action is existence” (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998, p. 85). Drawing on Heidegger’s phenomenal existentialism and Gibson’s perceptual theory, their account invites a reconsideration of the limits that the dominant view in cognitive neurosciences imposes on virtual reality research.⁸ In their view, “Heidegger’s take on the nature of existence concerns

⁸ Gibson’s perceptual theory frames perception as dynamic coupling between the organism and the environment. According to Gibson, “perception for the organism is the pickup of information that supports action, and ultimately evolution” (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998, pp. 85). Gibson terms this reciprocal ‘action-supportive information’ an *affordance*, the action-perception loops between the organism and its environment.

the way in which we interpret the environment or situation we are in. He claims that we are “thrown” into situations in which we must continually act and continually interpret” (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998, pp. 82–83).

Within these fields, researchers have been interested in defining, describing and unveiling or fostering the experience of presence, often neglecting the situated nature of the performer’s experience in a specific environment and cultural context. Psychologist Craig Murray has observed how in these fields “the complexity of presence remains unappreciated. Researchers generally conceive of it as a stable experience, both within the real and virtual environments. This is apparent in their attempts to quantify the phenomena, ‘measuring’ people’s perceived and observed presence” (Murray, 1998, p. 212). He notes instead that “presence is rather a fluid experience, with no stable, static, quantifiable moment” (Murray, 1998, p. 213). A frequent critique of mainstream approaches in VR, media and communication theory and neuropsychology is that they tend to favour internalist and individualistic perspectives. Such assumptions are what they have in common with classical metaphysics.

Presence deconstructed

A radical approach to the problem of presence in philosophy was taken by Derrida. Departing from Heidegger’s philosophy, Derrida focuses his critique instead on what he terms ‘logocentrism’; namely, a tradition characteristic of Western science and philosophy in the “search for a kind of transcendental beingness that serves as an origin” (Miller, 2016, p. 21). Miller elucidates how Derrida’s approach focuses on tackling the metaphysics of presence, “something about being that is irreducible, eternal, unmediated and immediately present. Thus the metaphysics of presence and

logocentrism look towards a presence and meaning unto itself, outside of all relationality” (Miller, 2016, p. 21). Miller further elaborates his analysis observing that:

Derrida attacks the metaphysics of presence largely on the basis that thought and meaning are dependent on language, and language itself is a referential system. In that sense, there can be no ‘pure’ origin or meaning which is self-contained or self-referential. All meaning, whether understood through words or other signs, belongs to interdetermined systems (Miller, 2016, p. 22).

According to Derrida, “from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs” (1997 [1967], p. 50). In Derrida’s account, no meaning can be found *ab originem*, distinct or absolute, since “any form of meaning necessarily depends on a reference to other signs, words or meanings. Any element has to contain other elements, ones which are both present and absent” (Miller, 2016, p. 22). Derrida explains this theory in *Of Grammatology*:

The so-called “thing itself” is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. The property of the *representamen* is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself. The property of the *representamen* is not to be *proper* [*propre*], that is to say absolutely *proximate* to itself (*prope*, *proprius*). The *represented* is always already a *representamen*. (Derrida, 1997 [1967], p. 50 - emphasis in original)

Because “something present only has meaning in relation to something that is absent” in other words, presence cannot be separated from its absence, and Derrida replaces

presence with the concept of *différance*, which in French includes the double meaning of ‘differentiate’, to distinguish, and ‘defer’, to delay meaning (Miller, 2016). In Derrida’s account, the idea of presence has to be replaced with an understanding of how meanings and words inform one another. Miller explains Derrida’s deconstructionist move emphasising that “signs can never completely summon forth meaning in an originary sense since they constantly refer to other signs in a chain of signifiers which create meaning. Meaning is always referred, deferred or traced down the chain so is never completely articulated” (Miller, 2016, p. 22). According to Derrida, this is what makes the project of Western metaphysics unattainable: its search for transcendental presence. Elaborating on Derrida’s approach, theatre scholar Elinor Fuchs stresses that:

To Derrida, there is no primordial or self-same present that is not already infiltrated by the trace—an opening of the “inside” of the moment to the “outside” of the interval. “That the present in general is not primal, but rather, reconstituted, that it is not the absolute, wholly living form which constitutes experience, that there is no purity of the living present” is the theme running through every textual exegesis Derrida has made (Fuchs, 1986, p. 165).

Derrida’s philosophy challenged “the assumption that it is within the power of human nature to enter a Now, to become entirely present to itself” (Fuchs, 1986, p. 164). Fuchs underlines the impact that such a view had on shaping accounts of presence in the performing arts.

Following the deconstructionist turn, Giannachi and Kaye observe how in this framework, notions of presence lie within complex entanglements between notions of self, the present, absence and being, which cannot be neither pulled apart nor neatly distinguished. In this sense, according these authors:

Presence may be best considered as performed, as produced in the act, rather than as a function of a particular medium or in relation to the ‘intrinsic’ value of certain modes of presentation—or simply as a term privileged and so *in opposition* to absence. Indeed, presence is produced *in difference*, both at the level of the sign and in the phenomenological encounter with the other, so the phenomena of presence may emerge in layering, in veiling, in the very operation of the sign and representation. (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, pp. 19–20)

As Giannachi and Kaye emphasise throughout their analysis of multiple definitions presence, phenomena of presence emerge instead of in unfolding acts or processes. In their view, presence is “*in* the theatrical relation: a function of representation (or the sign) itself, rather than a ritual transcendence, a moment available in opposition to technologies, or a transcendence of the mechanisms by which is produced and received” (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, pp. 20). As Giannachi and Kaye observe, the complexity of the concept of presence reflects a variety of understandings attempting to seize its dynamical and relational nature. By focusing primarily on dance and performing arts, the next chapter addresses the problem of presence in performance by reviewing notions of theatrical presence and proposing alternative theoretical approaches that challenge the classic model of stage presence.

CHAPTER 3.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE CLASSIC MODEL OF STAGE PRESENCE

“presence presupposes a plurality and alterity and so, arguably,
it is societal and thus cultural”
(Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 5)

Is presence just as much of an important quality for dancers as it is for actors? In this chapter I address the self-centred view of the performer’s presence and explore how this conceptualisation operates in the context of theatrical performing arts. This chapter outlines the salient meanings linked to theatrical presence in the performing arts and retraces how the concept of presence has become associated with an ineffable and captivating quality. Through a critical review of the relevant literature in theatrical and performance studies, complemented with the accounts of international dance experts, dance directors, and performers, this chapter offers an overview of the principal concepts that contribute to understandings of stage presence in professional dance and performing arts contexts.

After discussing scholarly interpretations of this multifaceted phenomenon, the chapter introduces the subject of my research. I highlight the need for a more inclusive analysis of stage presence, that considers the lived experience of performers, alongside the

situatedness and the cultural context in which a performance event takes place. My thesis offers an alternative framework for the study of stage presence, presenting an alternative approach to the problems entailed by the so-called classic model of stage presence (Sherman, 2016). This chapter closes by suggesting how, through the analysis of three diverse dance practices, a cognitive ecological ethnographic approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of stage presence.

Presence in performance

As it is in philosophy, presence is a much-debated theme in the literature and history of theatre and performing arts. Performance scholar Philip Zarrilli observes how presence “is a highly contested and vexed term” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 121). Definitions fluctuate from the mystical and “intangible quality” possessed by the actor, to “the actor’s most important creation”, to “the most significant interaction in theatre” (Trenos, 2014, pp. 64-65). Philosopher Suzanne Jaeger stresses how the analysis of presence in performance theory has revolved mainly around two conflicting viewpoints,

[...] first there are those for whom the lived phenomenon of presence still makes sense and is borne out in practical experience. Presence is thought of as “the lingua franca” for many stage performers, acting teachers, critics, and audiences. Second are poststructuralist interpreters of performance art who reject the possibility of any singularly meaningful experience of self-presence. (Jaeger, 2006, p. 122)

Stage presence is commonly conceptualised as the impact of a performer on an audience, broadly defined as “a quality that attracts attention on the stage”⁹ and “the

⁹ Definition of *stage presence*, 2019, in Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stage%20presence>

ability to command the attention of a theatre audience by the impressiveness of one's manner or appearance".¹⁰ Among theatrical performing artists it is commonly conceived as the "ultimate enigma of acting" (Trenos, 2014, p. 64), or the "supreme attribute for an actor" (Goodall, 2008, p. 17).

What makes presence in performing arts such a divisive phenomenon has to do with a concept of presence that includes both an essence and an absence. A central problem in the study of presence contends that "the very thought of presence implies a concept of absence, so that the two have a mutually dependent and oscillating focus in the mind" (Goodall, 2008, p. 5). Goodall underlines how Derrida's critique of classic metaphysics has "influenced a widespread movement in contemporary philosophy that has found it is easier to convert discussion of presence into a focus on absence" (Goodall, 2008, p. 5).

Many analyses of presence in performing arts are grounded in post structuralist theory. These interpretations follow Derrida's deconstructionist approach to theatrical presence (Auslander, 1994, 2002; Fuchs, 1986; Lepecki, 2004; Phelan, 1993; Power, 2008). According to Power, since Derrida has tackled the notion of presence, "the idea of theatre as a 'live' and present phenomenon has come under some intense scrutiny" (Power, 2008, p. 5).¹¹ Power points out that "poststructuralist approaches to theatre tend to emphasise a shift from envisaging a stage which stresses the importance of the present, to a postmodern aesthetic of absence and textuality" (Power, 2008, p. 5).

¹⁰ Definition of *stage presence*, 2019, in English Oxford Dictionary. Retrieved from https://www.lexico.com/en?search_filter=dictionary

¹¹ Derrida tackles the 'Artaudian paradox' in his essays *The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation*, to stress that to achieve a theatre of pure presence, one should first find a way of representing this presence. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida argues that "Presence, in order to be presence and selfpresence, has always already begun to represent itself" (Derrida, 1978, p. 249 cited in Power, 2008, p. 5).

Within the post-structuralist framework, others performance scholars started to interrogate the complexity of the phenomenon of presence in relation to the experience of participating to an event where it is said that presence may ‘emerge’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 2012), turning more towards a phenomenological (Jaeger, 2006; Sherman, 2010, 2016) and enactive approaches (Macneill, 2014a; Zarrilli, 2012, 2014, 2015).

These analyses underline that the problem with presence in performing arts is linked to a concept of ‘presence’ associated with the self of the individual actor. The problem with this view is that it implies that it is a particular quality of the actor’s self, namely their capacity for presence, which enables the audience to experience ‘presence’ (Macneill, 2014; Sherman, 2010, 2016; Zarrilli, 2004, 2009, 2012). Zarrilli argues that “post-structuralist critiques of presence have rightfully debunked any notion of presence as an essence” since

...a reified subjectivist notion of ‘presence’ is as complicit in a dualist metaphysics as is the Cartesian ‘mind’. Neither provides an adequate account of the ‘body’ in the mind, the ‘mind’ in the body, or of the process by which the signs read as ‘presence’ are a discursive construct”. (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 121)

Simplified views of Cartesian philosophy notwithstanding, the post-structuralist critique of presence is in contrast to the way in which, in mainstream Western performing arts—including professional dance and acting—presence is often described as an enigmatic attribute of the performer, shrouded in mystery and surrounded by elaborate imagery.

For example, the following job advertisement for a well-known European dance company suggests that stage presence is a fundamental requirement for professional dance performers:

Ultima Vez and Wim Vandekeybus are looking for professional and highly skilled dancers to join future creations in 2017 and 2018. Performers between 18 and 35 years old with an exceptional way of moving and a *strong theatrical presence* are welcome to apply.¹²

As framed in this call for audition, presence appears as a necessary skill or attribute that every dancer aiming to join this dance company should master and possess. This view of presence as a key attribute or skill that a professional dancer must possess is common in the context of aesthetic dance performances.¹³

Due to the fact that the literature addressing stage presence in dance is scarce, I explore this question through an analysis of theatrical and performance studies approaches, applying these approaches to dance. To understand how this concept of presence has developed across time, the following section explores shared meanings and common rhetoric underlining conceptions of stage presence in its classic form. This analysis of what I call ‘classic model of stage presence’ in performance begins with the frequent association of theatrical presence with a charismatic power.

Charismatic quality

A common practice, from popular culture to academic discourse, is to associate stage presence with *charisma*. We are used to thinking that “presence belongs to those actors we cannot take our eyes off, who are riveting, who draw us in, are magnetic, charming,

¹² Emphasis added. Ultima Vez is an internationally renowned contemporary dance company founded in 1986 by Belgian choreographer, director and filmmaker Wim Vandekeybus. Audition announcement retrieved from the online dance magazine *Danzaeffebi.com* available here: <https://www.danzaeffebi.com/danza-work/audizione-wim-vandekeybus-ultima-vez-belgio/> also published on <https://dancingopportunities.com/audition-notice-ultima-vez-wim-vandekeybus/>

¹³ Gay McAuley calls theatrical performances ‘aesthetic performances’ (McAuley, 2001) to distinguish from performance in everyday life (Goffman, 1956).

and charismatic” (Trenos, 2014, p. 64). In addition, as McAllister-Viel underlines, among professional actors and performers, the word ‘charisma’ is often used interchangeably with ‘presence’ (McAllister-Viel, 2016, p. 449).

Associating presence with a charismatic allure is also common practice in classical dance milieu. In a blog post dedicated to this topic Amy Brandt, editor in chief of *Pointe magazine*, describes stage presence as the natural ability that some dancers have “to draw people in and change the atmosphere around them” (Brandt, 2013 - online). She writes that “stage presence can carry a dancer to a higher artistic realm. It’s the final piece of the puzzle, the emotional heart of a performance that can bring an audience to tears. Without it, even the best choreography risks falling flat” (Brandt, 2013).

Brandt refers to principal dancer Alessandra Ferri who identifies presence as something that goes beyond acting skills and a strong dance technique.¹⁴ In this interview, Ferri takes Rudolf Nureyev as the ultimate example when she stated that: “[y]ou could not not look at him.¹⁵ Even when he was standing still, he galvanized your attention” (Ferri quoted in Brandt, 2013). Discussing presence, Ferri emphasises that “it’s what people call ‘charisma’. It’s being in charge of the space around you and in tune with the energy of the audience” (Ferri quoted in Brandt 2013).

Cormac Power in *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (2008) explores three modes of presence—the making-present, the having-presence and the being-present—that he describes as Fictional, Auratic, and Literal Presence (Power 2008, p. 11). According to Power (2008) what distinguishes the ‘having presence’ mode

¹⁴ Alessandra Ferri is an Italian principal dancer who danced with the Royal Ballet (1980–1984), the American Ballet Theatre (1985–2007) and La Scala Theatre Ballet (1992–2007). Ferri was granted the rank of *prima ballerina assoluta*, a title traditionally reserved only for the most notable female ballet dancers.

¹⁵ Rudolf Nureyev was a Soviet ballet and contemporary dancer and choreographer (1938 – 1993). Named *Lord of the Dance*, Nureyev is considered the greatest male ballet dancer of his generation.

is its coupling with a powerful sense of charisma; this includes a sense of prestige or authority, and also a more abstract quality, a presence which is above the ordinary, something that has more significance than appearance might suggest (Power, 2008, p. 47).

This idea aligns with Max Weber's concept of charisma: "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men [sic] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber [358–9] quoted in Sherman 2016, p. 3). What is problematic with this view is the fact that by associating the work of the actor with the actor's personality, stage presence not only becomes reified as the "secret power of the actor's art" (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 123), but also this understanding perpetuates the modern ideology that underlies "the cult of the individual" (Goodall, 2008, p. 12).

Performance scholar Philip Auslander states that "in theatrical parlance, *presence* usually refers either to the relationship between actor and audience—the actor as manifestation before an audience—or, more specifically, to the actor's psychophysical attractiveness to the audience, a concept related to that of *charisma*" (Auslander, 1994, p. 37 - emphasis in original). Several performance scholars have critiqued this coupling of stage presence with a sense of charisma. Grounding their analysis in different methodologies—from literary and historical analysis (Roach 2007; Goodall 2008), to philosophical and critical theory (Power, 2008) to phenomenology of acting (Zarrilli 2009, 2012), to ethics of attention (Sherman 2016)—these scholars have highlighted the problems that arise through associating stage presence with personal charisma, a conception deeply rooted in the Western understanding of presence.

One of the issues that lies behind this conception, as Goodall notes, is that even if “presence may be the supreme attribute of the performer, the lure of charisma carries with it the insidious idea that it is a supreme attribute of human being [sic]” (Goodall, 2008, p. 51). What meanings underlie the idea that the performer’s stage presence is coupled with the idea of an innate quality? How has the idea of presence become infused with mystical allure? The following section illustrates the evolution of the concept of stage presence in Western cultural and theatrical traditions.

Mystical power

Jane Goodall in her book *Stage Presence* (2008) emphasised how this classic conception of stage presence encompasses a series of different meanings. Goodall has pointed out how the phenomenon of stage presence is intrinsically mutable and dynamic, ultimately identifiable as a product of social construction, shaped by the progress of different aesthetic, scientific and political ideas across time. Goodall describes “how this mysterious attribute has been articulated and what kinds of imagery surround it” (2008, p. 7). Embracing a historical approach to the analysis of the figure of performers as different as Nijinsky, Mesmer, Hitler, and Bob Dylan, to name just a few, Goodall outlines the rhetoric and poetics that have shaped the evolution of the idea of presence across different historical contexts.

Goodall begins with a reconstruction of the pre-modern origins and meanings of presence. In Goodall’s analysis, apart for a temporal dimension, presence also invokes both the idea of potency or *power*, and the idea of *appearance* which is linked to epiphany. According to Goodall, one of the earliest usages of the term ‘presence’ is associated with the Eucharist, which “symbolises the Presence of Christ when Christ is no longer there” (Goodall, 2008, p. 8). Goodall states that in the later Renaissance

“[presence] and its connotations start to split: there is divine or divinely ordained presence and there is worldly presence” (2008, p. 8). She also points out that “in the later Renaissance, presence is a quality that starts to leak out amongst the non-anointed, especially if they have regal or aristocratic personal attributes. By 1579 it can mean ‘demeanour, carriage, or aspect of a person’” (p. 8). According to Goodall, the idea of presence that stands at the core of the Western theatrical tradition can be traced back to these two models of human presence. On one hand there is “the classically educated noble man identifiable by manners, speech and bearing”, and on the other there is “the hermetic model of the ideal man” (p. 8) where the magus, through his privileged relation to the power that he draws from the universe, is the sole bearer of metaphysical forces.

The image of the magus as a powerful metaphor to describe the actor’s ability to enchant audience attention is found also in the work of early modern scholar Evelyn Tribble. In her recent book *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare’s Theatre: Thinking with the Body* (2017), Tribble emphasizes the idea that in the late Renaissance, the actor, through the execution of meaningful movements, was believed to be mastering the extraordinary power to charm audience attention. She states that “in early modern plays [...] the ability of the skilled actor or orator is likened to bewitchment” (Tribble, 2017, p. 25) Tribble cites one early modern text where the author describes the skilled actor’s ability to draw the audience’s attention to him: “sit in a full Theatre, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center” (John Webster ‘The Excellent Actor’ (1615) as quoted in Tribble 2017, p. 25) As Tribble notes,

the ability to produce ‘significant’ or meaningful movement through the managed body is akin to sorcery, a reminder that the secret of both the actor and the conjurer is to manage and direct attention and affect. The actor is imagined

as seizing the eyes, ears and attention of the audience and directing them through an invisible tether. (Tribble, 2017, p. 25)

According to Goodall, since the beginning of modernity in Europe and America, presence came to be associated with the cult of the individual, where the symbolic “connotations of Eucharistic Presence are diluted into a more generalised sense of ‘dwelling power’ and the state of ‘I am’, the language used to describe it begins to draw on the vocabularies and image banks of the dynamic sciences” (Goodall, 2008, p. 12). Thus, the idea of presence became associated with a radiant power that transcends the natural and lifts the individual to higher plane, a property that previously had been only reserved for superhuman beings such gods and kings, spirits and angels. According to Goodall, these two models of human presence, the divine and the mundane, are what lie at the core of Western theatrical traditions’ understandings of presence.

Goodall explains how this ‘worldly’ presence started to be related to “the regimes of training and technical prowess: elocution and vocal technique, deportment, the aesthetics of gesture and facial expression” while the ‘divine’ or otherworldly’ presence “is suggested in the more mysterious qualities of magnetism and mesmerism, a sense of inner power being radiated outwards” (Goodall, 2008, p. 8). These two models of presence persisted through the Modern epoch, and from this point two different aspects were merged together: *theatrical training* and a sense of *inner power*. As Goodall stresses, from the 18th century, the latter idea was associated with a vocabulary borrowed from the sciences of the time such as radiation, electricity, magnetism, and mesmerism, which when combined with magic and mysticism became synonymous with presence. From this combination of art and science, presence began to be understood as the skilled performer’s capacity to create a sense of transformation.

Coniunctio oppositorum

Goodall concludes her analysis of the historical evolution of the concept of stage presence with a reflection on its dual quality and intrinsic double essence. In her view, the practice of performing reveals the ontological core of presence, the fact that “presence is often bound up with paradox, a holding together of contraries, as if the one who embodies it is a convergence point for opposing forces. An alchemist would have understood this also as a switching point, the *coniunctio oppositorum*, through which transformation occurred” (Goodall 2008, p. 188). It can also be identified in the skilled performer’s capacity to create a sense of transformation or the ability to access a different plane of being as “the power to convert one state of the world into another” (Goodall, 2008, p. 168).

This idea of presence as embodiment of opposite forces echoes what theatre scholar Joseph Roach describes as the ‘It-effect’ (2007, 2004), a sort of allure that certain people exercised effortlessly. Roach interrogates the paradoxical nature of the ‘It-effect’, wondering “whether It is a ‘God-given’ gift to the fortunate few or the hardscrabble self-selection of the fiercely driven” (2007, p. 8), and retraces the essence of this characteristic to the “fortuitous convergence of personality and extraordinary circumstances or efforts” (p. 8). In his account, “the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities—truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and mask” (Roach, 2007, p. 9) can be projected by the performer and felt by the audience in a coherent gestalt. Roach relies on Elinor Glyn’s definition of ‘it’ as “the easily perceived but hard-to-define quality possessed by abnormally interesting people”

(Roach, 2004, p. 555).¹⁶ According to Roach's interpretation, stage presence is associated with a sort of allure that certain people exercise effortlessly. The lucky person who possesses such a fortunate convergence is deemed to have 'it'. For Roach the power of 'it' consists in the "apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, singularity and typicality" (Roach, 2007, p. 8), where mutually exclusive qualities like "egoless self-confidence or unbiddable magnetism" (p. 8) co-exist in a mysterious balance.

The idea that presence consists of an embodiment of opposite qualities and the "convergence of personality and extraordinary circumstances or efforts" (Roach, 2007, p. 8), resonates with a view of what it means to have presence in ballet. During a conversation I had with Jason Beechey, Rector of renowned German dance institution *Palucca Hochschule für Tanz Dresden* since 2006 (University of Dance Dresden), this theme emerged clearly.¹⁷ Beechey, who is a member of the artistic committee of the *Prix de Lausanne* and who serves regularly as Jury Member of prestigious international ballet competitions such as the Youth American Grand Prix, stressed how presence in ballet does not always result from perfect physical qualities and excellent technique.¹⁸

In conversation with Beechey, he pointed out:

¹⁶ The concept of 'it' has been attributed to Elinor Glyn, a famous British novelist. The introduction of the film scrip 'It' (1927) based on Glyn's novel and starring actress Clara Bow, frames 'it' as "the quality possessed by some which draws all others with its magnetic force. With 'It' you win all men if you are a woman and all women if you are a man. 'It' can be a quality of the mind as well as a physical attraction" Source retrieved from Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_girl#cite_note-movie-4.

¹⁷ The *Palucca Hochschule für Tanz* is a professional dance academy in Dresden, Germany, founded in 1925 by the renowned dancer Gret Palucca. The interview with the *Palucca Schule Rector* Jason Beechey was recorded on Skype on the 10th May 2018. A detailed list of all interviews conducted for this research is available on page 306.

¹⁸ The *Prix de Lausanne* is an international dance competition held annually in Lausanne, Switzerland. The competition is for young dancers seeking to pursue a professional career in classical ballet, and many former prize winners of the competition are now leading artists with major ballet companies around the world. <https://www.prixdelausanne.org/>

When you see sometimes young children that are super talented, they've got an amazing facility, everything comes [easily], often they're the ones that don't make it. Sometimes they're pushed too fast too early and they burn out or they lose interest, but I find oftentimes that the ones that have a challenge, maybe they got scoliosis, or they don't have the best bodies, but often those ones they got the strongest presence.

Beechey's view echoes Roach's account of presence as "embodiment of contradictory qualities" and the "convergence of personality and extraordinary circumstances or efforts" (Roach, 2007, p. 8). The Rector continued explaining his perspective on stage presence in ballet as resulting from overcoming a challenge, whether it be personal in nature, such as a physical limit, or the consequence of a socio-economic disadvantage. Beechey told me:

Sometimes I find that presence is stronger in dancers that are dealing with a challenge, or in a conflict. I find that if one kid comes from like—it's awful to say too—a really rich kid, they have everything, life is easy, they go "oh I'm doing ballet because it's fun", and they are kind of boring [to watch dancing], where sometimes the kid you find, maybe they are from a very poor family in Brazil, but dance is their passion, but they got to fight like crazy to get training, to have money for [ballet] shoes, those ones I find, you feel this burning passion, or they have flat feet so they really got to find... I find often the one who got a challenge in life, or a challenge physically, they often have the strongest, what I would call a 'presence'. When you go 'wow', you feel this desire, this passion, and then you go "she doesn't have the best feet, but who cares, I can't stop watching her!". The presence for me is often stronger in one who's dealing with a challenge.

What other types of circumstances or efforts are involved in the externalisation of this kind of presence? Beechey stressed that: “I think sometimes dancers who I find very interesting to watch because of their presence, oftentimes are people who are really insecure, or they are very emotionally fragile, or they appreciate what they are, the chance of being in front of people because they come from a difficult background”.

According to Beechey’s account, presence in ballet correlates with a certain tension between contrasting qualities. Beechey emphasises how dancers who face a challenge in life often appear to convey a more captivating presence on stage. This is similar to what Roach identifies as “embodiment of contradictory qualities” (2007, p. 8); what makes a ballet dancer’s presence more compelling might arise from the contraposition between the ideal and reality, between perfection and struggle, the disciplined grace of the ballet dancer’s movements in contrast with the effort to transcend her physical limits.

Auratic presence

Another common interpretation of stage presence in the classic sense is the concept of *aura*. Several performance scholars who dealt with the phenomenon of stage presence have discussed the ways in which an auratic presence can be manifested. As Goodall describes, charismatic people and performers are imagined to have presence when “an energy field that extends around them in space and in time also, so that you might sense them coming, or feel that they’ve been here, after they’ve gone” (Goodall, 2008, pp. 7-8).

Cormac Power retraces two different aspects of auratic presence, identifying an underlying tension between these two variations. The first one refers to a quest for “an

autonomous theatrical aura beyond representation, based on notions of transcendence and self-presence” and the second to the “idea of aura as created through the act of representation, based on an understanding of the actor’s craft and the cultivation of ‘stage presence’ ” (Power, 2008, pp. 52-53).

According to Power the first type of aura is associated to Walter Benjamin’s definition of the unique presence of the artwork and is produced through the fame or reputation of the performer.¹⁹ This type of ‘aura’ is mainly grounded in the existing and previous conceptions that surround the reputation of an actor or of an artwork. The second way of manifesting an auratic presence is in the act of performing, where the actor’s presence “can be constructed through his [sic] manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention” (Power, 2008, p. 49).

Power refers to Kandinsky’s appeal to the *Spiritual in Art* (1912) and to Stanislavski’s conception of the art of acting as two examples of the spiritual quality of art that can transcend the medium through which it is embodied (Power, 2008, p. 51). According to Power “the ‘spiritual’ quality of art is associated with the exploration of ‘inner life’, a vitality that can be experienced but cannot be directly represented” (Power, 2008, p. 50). Power underlines how in theatrical discourse the concept of aura assumes a spiritual component, a mystical power that the actor can obtain through rigorous mental and physical training. While I have discussed above the notion that presence is an intrinsic quality of the performer, a contrasting approach is the idea that the performer’s

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*, 1935. Sherman writes that “Benjamin defines aura as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, no matter how close it may be” (“The Work of Art” [1935] 23). The aura is first of all unique—it pertains to one object only and separates that object from all others. Hence the association of aura with stage presence in its classic sense—both refer to something special about an actor, namely the appearance of his or her uniqueness” (2016, p. 69).

presence can be enhanced and manipulated through skilful practice is another view sustained by the classic model of stage presence. I explore this in the next section.

Enchantment smothered in artifice

To find an example of presence in terms of praxis, Roach refers to Eugenio Barba's notion of 'resistance', developed in *the Secret Art of the Performer* (1991). Barba's 'resistance' corresponds to what in classical theatre is named '*contraposto*', a specific technique of the body aimed at generating asymmetries and oppositions within the movements of the limbs, with the goal of creating interesting lines of the body. Through 'resistance', writes Barba, performers create 'total presence', in the way that they

...exploit and compose the weight/balance relationship and the opposition between different movements, their duration and their rhythms, enables them to give the spectator not only a different perception of their (the performers') presence but also a different perception of time and space (Barba & Savarese, 2006, p. 227).

Through this technique the performer can create a tension from her body on stage, that confers on her a sense of fascination. Through this example Roach illustrates the idea that at the core of the 'it-effect' resides "in a particular play with polarities" (Roach, 2007, p. 8). The history of theatrical practice is shaped by the development of different methodologies and specific training systems to develop actors' presence. Roach observed that what Elinor Glyn referred to as 'it' was the last version of a long series of aliases given to stage presence throughout the history of human performance (Roach, 2004, 2007). Roach mentions several prominent theatre scholars who developed similar conceptions of the phenomenon of presence. In Roach's analysis it all begins with

Quintilian who defined ‘ethos’ as the quality of the great orator. For Zeami, the founder of Noh theatre, author of the *Fushikaden*—the 15th century treatise on acting—‘it’ was what unfolded in the skilled actor once he reached the ‘Flower of Peerless Charm’, the ultimate level in an actor’s training. For Castiglione ‘it’ was the characteristic noble attitude of the ‘sprezzatura’; for various religious thinkers it was linked to ‘charisma’, a sort of grace granted by God. For the sociologist Max Weber ‘it’ was “condensed into a principle of powerfully inspirational leadership or authority” (Roach, 2007, p. 7). Stanislavsky referred to ‘it’ as ‘charm’ in *Building a character* (1949), the second book outlining his system, describing how the actor must exhibit ‘Stage Charm’. Philosopher Paul Macneill observed how

...criticism of traditional theatre at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was followed by experimentation in training actors for greater ‘presence’ on stage. Presence was thought of as a valued aspect of performance—if not the essence of theatre. It was understood as something that an actor emanated, and audiences responded to (Macneill 2014, p. 137).

A significant example of this rhetoric is the figure of Sarah Bernhardt.²⁰ In her posthumously published treatise on acting Bernhardt wrote:

...the art of our art is not to have it noticed by the public... We must create an atmosphere by our sincerity, so that public, gasping, distracted, should not regain its equilibrium and free will until the fall of the curtain. That which is

²⁰ Sarah Bernhardt was a French stage actress who starred in some of the most popular French plays of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including *La Dame Aux Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas, *Ruy Blas* by Victor Hugo, *Fédora* and *La Tosca* by Victorien Sardou, and *L’Aiglon* by Edmond Rostand. She also played male roles, including Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

called the work, in our art, should only be the search for the truth. (Bernhardt, 2017 [1923], p. 65)



Figure 2. Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt in *La Dame aux Camelias*. Collection of The National Library of Australia.

Auslander stresses the centrality of the concept of ‘self’ in performance theory. Auslander embraces a deconstructive philosophical approach to the work of Stanislavski, Brecht, and Grotowski to highlight how all these theatre scholars “implicitly designate the actor’s self as the logos of performance; all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths” (Auslander, 2002, p. 30). Auslander’s analysis emphasises how

An examination of these theories of acting through the lens of deconstructive philosophy reveals that, in all three theorizations, the actorly self is, in fact, produced by the performance it supposedly grounds. Stanislavski's discourse on acting is inscribed firmly within logocentrism: he insists on the need for logic, coherence, and unity—the “unbroken line”—in acting and invokes the authority of such theological concepts as soul and spirit in his writings. (Auslander, 2002, p. 30)

This notion of the actorly self was developed further by Jerzy Grotowski's theorization of the ‘holy actor’. For Grotowski, the task of the ‘holy actor’ is to train to transcend individuality and reach a greater sense of presence. Of Grotowski's “archetypal actor” Power writes that “Grotowski proposed that through discipline with intense physical and mental training, the actor could relinquish his hold on individual selfhood and become a spiritual embodiment of humanity” (Power, 2008, p. 51). What is problematic with Grotowski's view is that it associates ‘presence’ with the actor's self. As Auslander puts it, even if “Stanislavski, Brecht, and Grotowski all theorize the actor's self differently, all posit the self as an autonomous foundation for acting” (Auslander, 2002, p. 30).

Central to these theorists is the idea that stage presence can be developed through training and the acquisition of specific theatrical techniques, a view summarised by director and voice coach Patsy Rodenburg: “Many people believe it is something you have or don't have ... I don't agree: you might not have the make-up, clothes and lighting effects that enhance the stars but you can learn to find your full charisma” (Rodenburg 2007, xi, quoted in McAllister-Viel, 2016, p. 449). Similarly, this idea prevails in the context of professional dance. With regards to the question of whether stage presence is something that it is possible to learn, *prima ballerina* Alessandra Ferri

replied “It can’t be taught completely. But, you can help people who don’t have it improve” (as quoted in Brandt, 2013).

This idea that the performer can enhance presence through focused training has extended beyond the theatrical domain and has become entrenched in our common understanding of presence. A significant example of this rhetoric can be found in the recent popularity achieved by authors, such as social psychologist Amy Cuddy, who promise effective strategies to help develop everyone’s intrinsic charismatic potential. Cuddy’s book *Presence, Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges* (2015) has become a bestseller, while her TED talk (Cuddy 2012) became the second most-viewed talk in the history of TED, reaching over 55 million views. In her book Cuddy defines presence as a “state in which we stop worrying about the impression we’re making on others and instead adjust the impression we’ve been making on ourselves” (Cuddy, 2015).

The book tackles how to overcome fear and access self-confidence to master stressful situations such as job interviews or public speaking, which is grounded on her controversial research on power posing and body language (Cuddy, Wilmuth, Yap, & Carney, 2015).²¹ On her account, *presence* is “the state of being attuned to and able to comfortably express our true thoughts, feelings, values, and potential. That’s it. It is not a permanent, transcendent mode of being. It comes and goes, it is a moment-to-moment phenomenon” (Cuddy, 2015, p. 24). According to her account *presence* is not static, but instead encompasses a particular ‘state of being’ pertaining to the sphere of

²¹ Cuddy’s work on power stances does not replicate – and the other researchers who collaborated with Cuddy disavowed the original claim during the replication crisis. A summary of the controversy is available here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amy_Cuddy#Power_posing

subjectivity which seems to focus only on the performer's agency, neglecting the interactive aspects that constitute our social interactions.

Classic model of stage presence

The view that considers stage presence as a prerogative of the performer, and her ability to direct the audience's attention is what Jon Foley Sherman describes as *the classic model of stage presence* (2016, p. 1 – emphasis added). According to Sherman, this view reiterates that “performers, by definition remarkably different than others [sic], take on proportions larger than their bodies; they tower, they command, fascinate, and compel, and they do so by virtue of something intrinsic to themselves” (Sherman, 2016, p. 2).

Grounding his analysis in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Lecoq's theatrical method, Sherman's account focuses on the ethics of attention entangled with spectatorship. Sherman elaborates his philosophical analysis focusing on Renaud Barbaras' phenomenology of distance and desire. He locates, the origin of the classic view of stage presence in the separation of audience and performers. Sherman then returns to Merleau-Ponty's description of space and phenomenology of perception to bridge the “uncrossable distance between perceiver and perceived” (Sherman, 2016, p. 91). Sherman criticises previous interpretations of stage presence. In his view:

All of these renderings of stage presence, whether formulated as a quality, a possession, a state, or an action, obscure a crucial element: the attendants. More precisely, these theories imagine attendants without agency. Whether stage presence is described as a kind of personal intensity or as a learned practice, the performer occupies a position of power. (Sherman, 2016, p. 4)

This model emphasises the position of power and separateness occupied by the performer. In this view it doesn't matter if presence is conceived of as an essence or quality, or a kind of personal intensity, or described as a learned practice. The main problem with this model is that it assumes that the audience is without agency. Disregarding the elements that contribute to 'create' the phenomenon of presence, including how and where presence arises, the classic model views stage presence instead as a prerogative of the performer.

Sherman also underlines how, in this classic sense, presence "is often described in quantitative terms: actors have a lot of it, they have enough of it, they could do with more of it" (Sherman, 2016, p. 2). He argues the classic version refers to "the sense of perceiving something about the performer, a unique truth about the performer magnified by the stage" (Sherman, 2016, p. 2). According to Sherman (2016), the classic model of stage presence conceals audience participation because it describes something that happens to the audience, rather than something the audience is engaged in. Perception, in this view, is passive, more like reception. However, as philosopher Alva Noë reminds us, perception doesn't happen to anyone; it is something people do (Noë, 2004).

Here I provide a graphical representation of the *Classic* model of stage presence, which emphasises the central role of the performer in shaping phenomena of presence.

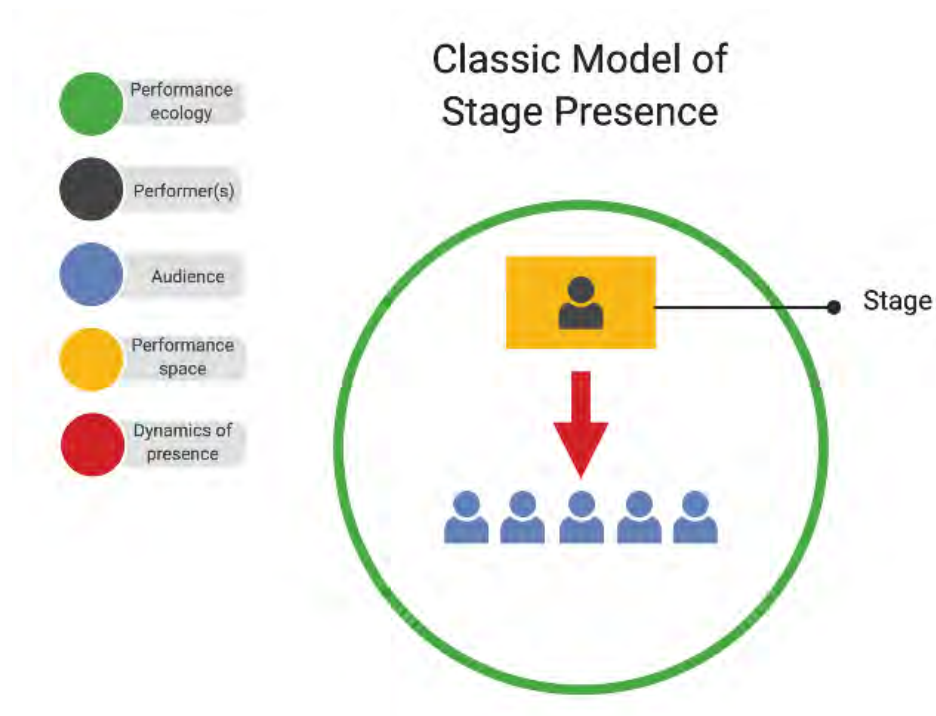


Figure 3. *Classic* model of stage presence

The above diagram illustrates the classic model of stage presence as unidirectional, moving from the performer towards the audience. The arrow indicates how presence, described as a quality of the performer ‘to enchant audience attention’, moves unidirectionally towards the audience. The green sphere indicates the performance ecology, which includes the performer, audience and context. In chapter’s 5, 6, and 7 of this thesis I present alternative diagrams that maintain the same colour scheme as the classic model of stage presence above. This model describes presence as a fixed property or attribute, rather than a dynamic process arising between active agents.

Alva Noë suggests that the phenomenon of presence should be understood as a matter of engaged action: “that presence is achieved and that its varieties correspond to the variety of ways we skilfully achieve access to the world” (Noë, 2012, p. xi). According to Noë:

For philosophers there may be a temptation to think of experiences as a kind of logical act, comparable to an act of judgment or to assertion. We find it natural to think of experiences as representations. But experiences are not acts, in this sense; they are not representations; they are activities, events themselves; they are temporally extended patterns of skilful engagement. When you perceive an event unfolding, it is not as if you occupy a dimensionless point of observation. You live through an event by coupling with it. [...] The very experience is a world-involving achievement of control and attention. (Noë, 2012, p. 80–81)

Noë summons up notions of control and attention that reflect an engaged cognitive coupling with the world. Phenomenological perspectives have emphasised the relevance of the physical and cultural environment on the study of embodied cognition, and “the emerging viewpoint of embodied cognition holds that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body’s interactions with the world” (Wilson, 2002, p. 625). Similarly, referring to the interactive dimensions that shape the sense of agency, philosopher Shaun Gallagher stresses the role played by social effects because

...embodied action happens in a world that is physical and social and that often reflects perceptual and affective valiances [sic], and the effects of forces and affordances that are both physical and social. Notions of agency and intention, as well as autonomy and responsibility, are best conceived in terms that include social effects” (Gallagher, 2013, p. 15).

In sum, we have seen how accounts of stage presence as either an innate quality of the performer, or as a learned skill, are underpinned by a common denominator—they are limited to an individualistic conceptualisation of presence. By focusing only on the performer’s role, the interactive aspects of performing are neglected. We have seen how

this common view describes stage presence as an aura, or charisma. Or, on the one hand, as the embodiment of opposite qualities, and on the other hand, as the idea that presence can be enhanced by the practice of specific training techniques. All these notions of the common view revolve primarily around the performer's agency as an individual.

Emergent co-presence

Several performance scholars have emphasised that in order to comprehend the phenomenon of stage presence we should recognise that it goes beyond the intrinsic qualities of the single performer's intentions and actions (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 2012; Goodall, 2006, 2008; Heim, 2016; Macneill, 2014a, 2014b; Power, 2008; Sherman, 2016; Zarrilli, 2002, 2009, 2012). Cormac Power points out that "aura in performance can be created through an interaction between actors, text and audience; that is, in the "moment to moment" unfolding of the performance rather than the realisation of a metaphysical ideal" (Power, 2008, p. 53).

Power echoes Philip Zarrilli's understanding of theatrical presence not as a quality possessed by individual agents but as a process that unfolds across different social actors, the performers and the audience, within a specific spatiotemporal frame and context (Zarrilli, 2002, 2012). Zarrilli maintains that audience and performers co-constitute the performance event by their phenomenal co-presence. In his view "the so-called sense of stage presence, emerged in the spatio-temporal realm of experience, embodiment, and perception shared between the performer(s), the performance score and its dramaturgy, and the audience" (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 120).

Similarly, some researchers have argued that rather than being a quality or a skill, presence is inherently a social event. Caroline Heim refers to Ervin Goffman's theory of social interaction (see Goffman, 1956) to illustrate the role played by audiences in shaping the unfolding of the performance and how "the real enchantment in theatre happens in the encounter between actors and audience members" (Heim, 2016, p. 2). While providing a definition of stage presence, Helen Trenos has stressed that "in performance, presence is the occasion when the actor and audience are fully and totally in communion, when they are both consumed by the moment, and are fully present together" (Trenos, 2014, p. 65).

This shift of awareness "from the intrinsic qualities of the actor to the process of enacting a drama" is discussed also by Goodall (2008, p. 9). She retraces the cause for this shift in the dual timeframe that characterises the immersive experience of the audience while attending a theatrical performance; namely, the fictional present that unfolds throughout the representation of the drama, and the lived present of both the audience and the actors, the "social here and now of the performance" (Goodall, 2008, p. 9). According to Goodall, the "identification between performer and spectator is at the heart of the matter, so that these frames of experience converge as a rediscovery of our own physical being through that of the actors" (Goodall, 2008, p. 9).

This reciprocal recognition of audience and performers of being fully present is what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the 'radical concept of presence' (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, pp. 112–116). She proposes a tripartite definition of presence where "the simple presence of the actor's phenomenal body on stage" stands for 'the weak concept of presence' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 94). In contrast, Fischer-Lichte defines "the 'actor's ability of commanding space and holding attention'" as 'the strong concept of presence' (2008, p. 96). The third definition is what Fisher-Lichte describes as the 'radical concept of

presence’ (p.112)—a conceptualisation of presence as an embodied process of consciousness:

For, in my view, presence is to be regarded as a phenomenon that cannot be grasped by such a dichotomy as body versus mind or consciousness. In fact, presence collapses such a dichotomy [...] through the performer’s presence the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming—he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy. This I call the radical concept of presence, written as PRESENCE: PRESENCE means appearing and being perceived as embodied mind; perceiving the PRESENCE of another means to also experience oneself as embodied mind. (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 115)

In discussing Fischer-Lichte’s tripartite definition of presence, Zarrilli argues that ‘the strong concept of presence’ “is not singular, but rather multiple—the quality, valence, and intensity of the actor’s ability to generate an inner ‘energy,’ to engage one’s entire embodied consciousness in each performance task, to command space and hold attention is always shaped by one’s training/experience, as well as the dramaturgy and aesthetic of a specific performance” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 122).

Zarrilli’s account also include other elements—in his view “it is the quality and valence of embodied consciousness, awareness, and perception that are deployed in relation to each specific task/action *in the moment of each enactment* that determines whether ‘presence’ might or might not emerge at a particular performance” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 146 - emphasis in original). For Zarrilli presence does not only relate to the embodied mind of the audience and performer, but instead also includes the dramaturgy, the

aesthetic context of the performance, the training experience of the actors and the multiple ways in which bodies become enculturated.

On the edge of the absent

Zarrilli approaches the question of ‘presence’ phenomenologically, assuming an ‘enactive approach’ to acting in which the actor optimally engages her body-mind fully in each moment of performance as she responds to the performance environment (Zarrilli, 2009, pp. 41–60). Zarrilli considers that ‘presence’ should only exist for the actor as an emergent state of possibility, as a “state of being/doing where one’s embodied consciousness is absolutely ‘on the edge’ of what is possible” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 147). In his view

...phenomenologically actors should situate themselves in the indeterminate position of being ‘on the edge’ of *not knowing*. This place of ‘not knowing’ is a state of readiness—a dispositional state of possibility to which the actor can abandon herself in the moment. To inhabit this state of not knowing what is next or what might emerge is to inhabit a place where there is the potential to be ‘surprised’ in the moment of abandonment. (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 147)

Zarrilli conceives presence as a perceptual openness to what is possible and unexpected. In his account, this state of ‘surprise’, the openness of the performer to the unfolding possibilities of the performance event, is what could enable the audience to perceive presence. This idea resonates with poet John Keats’ notion of ‘negative capability’: “I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899, p. 227).

A similar understanding of stage presence that has to do with a loss of certainty, or a sense of surprise and disorientation shared between performers and audience members, is maintained by Sherman (2016). Like Zarrilli (2009, 2012) Sherman argues that presence should not be considered a possession nor a quality of an individual, but instead a certain relationship between active agents. Referring to Zarrilli's interpretation, Sherman argues that the existing accounts contribute to maintain the dominant ideology which separates performers and audience:

...because stage presence never exceeds the control or practice of the performer, attendants do not have a choice over how or to whom they attend: performers demand a particular response and are granted it. Alteration, movement, and involvement in this kind of stage presence lie in the will (or training or "being") of the performer to whom the attendant is not responsible but obedient. (Sherman, 2016, p. 100)

Sherman distances his view from other accounts of stage presence by insisting that the ethical aspects that shape the relationship between audience and performers during the unfolding of a performance have been overlooked in previous conceptualisations. By engaging predominantly with phenomenological investigations, these theorists often neglect the specificity of the cultural and historical contexts in which the phenomenon of stage presence takes place. By focusing primarily on the dynamics of power and the ethics of attention that couple the relationship between performers and the audience, we risk overlooking other important aspects that constitute the phenomenon of stage presence.

Even if Sherman recognises the important role played by history in shaping the evolving conceptions tied to presence, he refrains from providing an account of the specificity of

the historical processes that might lie behind the audience's agency as largely absent from conceptualisations of stage presence.

Researchers who approach presence from a more structural perspective have stressed how, from the end of the eighteenth century, a variety of strategies were adopted to minimise audience interference with the unfolding of the show (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Heim, 2016). The introduction of penalties aimed at discouraging disruptive behaviours—like eating, drinking, and talking during the performance—or the invention of gas lighting which permitted the darkening of the auditorium (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 39), controlled and shaped the behaviour of the audience in order to minimise any disruptive impact on the execution of the performance by the actors. The practice of “darkening of the theatres combined with the enforcement of theatre etiquette structures anesthetised demonstrative audience performance” (Heim, 2016, p. 76). This may have also contributed to shaping the classic rhetoric of stage presence. After all, not all audiences in all genres or forms of performance are, or have been, equally *able* to interact and construct a shared sense of presence.

Current interpretations of stage presence in performing arts oscillate between theory and practice. However, the direction of influence tends to prioritise theoretical analysis, with conceptualisations of presence informing and influencing the lived experience of performing. Can we envision instead a perspective where the practice of performance informs philosophical reflection? In the literature of theatrical practice, a dominant concern raised throughout the analysis of the constitution of presence is represented by a criticism of the limits of language. The post-structuralist turn transformed and influenced conceptions of presence in theatrical traditions, but a classic view of stage presence is still the dominant model in popular discourse, thus affecting conceptions of

presence in performing arts such as contemporary dance. Can we aim for a more embodied account of the phenomenon of stage presence?

Shift in perspective: From phenomenology to ecology

Philosopher Suzanne Jaeger grounds her account of theatrical presence in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perceptual experience. Providing her definition of presence Jaeger posits that "stage presence can be defined as an active configuring and reconfiguring of one's intentional grasp in response to an environment" (Jaeger, 2006, p. 122). Jaeger states that:

Presence is the possibility of transformation in familiar, habituated, and socially entrenched patterns through which one experiences the world. The "on performance" or moment of stage presence is possible because of this capacity to be open to what is other than a mere repetition of familiar ways of structuring experience. Being present requires having a recognizable style of being the world, but it also requires the power to concentrate on the singularity of the moment, ready for the shifts, accommodations, and adaptations belonging to the challenge of active, conscious, fully embodied engagement 'in the moment'. Audiences can see it. The performance is alive with that special quality some performers have and that we call stage presence. (Jaeger, 2006, p. 139)

This view that conceives stage presence as a "special quality that some performers have" resonates with the classic model of stage presence. Even by focusing on phenomenological experience can be richer, extending the individual focus, as 4E theory emphasises.

What kind of environment is a dancer inhabiting while performing? What are the elements included in this scenario, shaping and being shaped by the performer's presence? In Jaeger's definition the role played by the environment appears static and abstract, lacking resonance with the richness and complexity of the performers' lived experience.

In the case of a professional dancer performing a choreography or improvising in a full theatre, the environment in which she is immersed is constituted by other active agents: the audience, and often other performers on stage, the changing soundscape, lighting, and the structure of the choreography. In this sense framing presence as intentionality in response to environment might not be enough in the context of theatrical enactments of presence. How is this sense of presence understood in performance? Giannachi and Kaye consider *presence* in performance is "implicitly associated with dynamics of relation, separation and proximity" (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 4). As Giannachi and Kaye observe:

...presence is necessarily a function of being before or after 'itself', a *taking place* within temporary networks and ecologies. Experiences of presence may thus be associated with dynamic and shifting relationships that incorporate and imply liminality, tension and contestation and that function in approaches to and withdrawals from 'self' and 'other'. Such phenomena are produced and received in the uncertainties and slippage in the experience of 'being there' and 'being before': in temporary acts implicated in the production of the networks in which they take place. (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, pp. 19–20)

Can we approach the experience of presence from *both* an historical and cultural perspective, *as well as* an embodied and enactive perspective? My thesis suggests that a consideration of the different forms of embodiment in dance as well as the cultural

and environmental aspects of experience is crucial. Following psychologist Raymond Gibbs, “culture does not just inform body experience; embodied experience is itself culturally constituted” (Gibbs, 2005, p. 37). To understand how presence is enacted across different dance genres, we need to account for the diversity of the cultural contexts in which these dance forms develop, are taught, and continue to be practiced. As Gibbs observed: “Bodies are not culture-free objects, because all aspects of embodied experience are shaped by cultural processes. Theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition that occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally based” (Gibbs, 2005, p. 13). For this reason, addressing the diversity of ways in which a sense of presence can be experienced through the dancing body can provide a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of presence.

A cognitive ecological approach

Giannachi has stressed how the “discourse on environment and ecology should therefore play a crucial role in the analysis of presence” (Giannachi, 2012, p. 50). Giannachi considered a series of artworks from John Cage to land art, to emphasise how “presence is also an ecological process that marks a moment of awareness of the exchanges between the subject and the living environment of which they are part” (Giannachi, 2012, p. 53). Can this ecological approach to art be applied to other performative practices and contexts where the association to the environment might appear less immediate than land art and environmental artworks?

After all, some performance genres actively embrace context and environment, while others are more shielded and inward. Only attention to the specificity of performance practices can catch the genuine variability of presence across contexts. If we aim to

address the multifaceted renderings of presence, we need to account for the complexities of the performance event. If stage presence is considered a cognitive phenomenon, it cannot be distinguished from its cognitive ecology.

Cognitive ecology is a growing field in cognitive science, and involves “the study of cognitive phenomena in context” (Hutchins, 2010, p. 705). Cognitive ecology understands cognition not as internal to the individual but as co-constituted by the interaction and interconnection of perception, action, and thought across particular social beings and complex environments:

Increased attention to real-world activity will change our notions of what are the canonical instances of cognitive process [...] Perception, action, and thought will be understood to be inextricably integrated, each with the others. Human cognitive activity will increasingly be seen to be profoundly situated, social, embodied, and richly multimodal. The products of interaction accumulate not only in the brain but throughout the cognitive ecology (Hutchins, 2010, p. 712).

According to Hutchins, the conceptual origin of the field of Cognitive Ecology traces back to Gibson’s ecological psychology, Bateson’s ecology of mind, and Soviet cultural-historical activity theory. Gregory Bateson, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (1972) showed how the loops that define mind extend through the body and out into the surrounding cognitive ecosystem. Gibson’s (1979) ecological psychology stressed that psychological processes could only be understood in terms of the dynamic coupling between the animal and its environment.

As Early Modern scholar Evelyn Tribble and philosopher John Sutton argue, the aim of cognitive ecology is to direct our analyses towards “the multidimensional contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often

collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments” (Tribble & Sutton, 2011, p. 94). They also suggested how the “cognitive ecology facilitates a system-level analysis of theatre: this model of cognitive ecology would posit that a complex human activity such as theatre must be understood across the entire system” (Tribble & Sutton, 2011, p. 97). Therefore, to grasp the phenomenon of stage presence I propose we turn towards a cognitive ecological approach. In order to address the complexity of stage presence as dynamic cognitive phenomenon, we need to address not only the perceptual relationship between audience and performers but also the global cognitive ecology of the performance. This includes the audience and performers’ co-presence and how they co-construct meaning, the socio-cultural context, and the situatedness of the aesthetic performance event. According to Giannachi and Kaye:

...presence is the ecology or network that inexorably ties the ‘I am’ with its past and the future, and that forces ‘I am’ to confront itself with what is other from ‘it’. [...] Spatially, temporality, sociality and being *are*, therefore, the conditions through which it occurs. Its construction is social *and* cultural, which means that our perception and reception of ‘presence’ vary in time and space (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 5).

Also unexplored are the ways in which the relationship to other performers on stage, to the audience and the surrounding environment can affect a performer’s sense of presence, and how this sense is integrated with the broader context in which stage presence is enacted. If presence is understood as an emergent social-cognitive phenomenon, what is missing from the current conceptualisations of presence is the experience of the performers.

As Goodall suggests “another kind of study could be written based on what happens in the studio and the rehearsal room, or drawing on accounts of performers whose unique qualities do not cause them to register on the celebrity scale” (Goodall, 2008, p. 16). If we want to understand the phenomenon of stage presence in its complexity, we need to consider its experiential situatedness in a specific environment and cultural context. We also need to extend the investigation to other performative settings and cultures, such as dance for example.

To see if dance can provide a more inclusive account of the phenomenon of stage presence, this thesis presents an enactive ethnography (Wacquant, 2015) of three different dance forms: Contemporary Ballet, in the case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* and the staging of the piece *Passione* (2017) by Emio Greco and Pieter Scholten at the *Théâtre de la Criée* in Marseille (France); Contact Improvisation, in the case of independent groups of *contacters* in Italy (Bologna, Ferrara and Arezzo); and Body Weather within the context of the company *De Quincey Co* in Sydney (NSW, Australia).

The analysis of these three fieldworks ethnographies generates different models of presence. The models I am going to present—in chapters 5, 6, and 7—maintain the same colour scheme of the *Classic* model of stage presence detailed above [Figure 3, page 66] to emphasise how different dance genres and performance ecologies shape different relational modes of presence.

My aim with this project is not to deny the clear talent and charisma that certain artists manifest, nor to deny the pleasure that certain subjective experiences of presence can provide. The aim is instead to stress that the way we experience presence depends not only on the vantage point we take, which position we occupy but also on the kind of performance ecologies we participate in.

This is to say that the performer is not a ‘representation’ of presence. Instead, performers, like audiences, are active agents, mindful bodies that take part in a matrix of meaning. We enact different roles at different times in different worlds. That is where, in my view, the illusion of stage presence begins. I would like to suggest that when we see performers glowing with presence, we might want to question our standpoint and the elements that are involved in the process. When we think that certain people have more presence than others, do we question where are we situated? From where do we look at the performance? Are we looking at them from behind the curtains? Are we moving on stage next to them? Or are we comfortably seated in the auditorium on a velvet red chair? In other words, the aim is to stress that different vantage points enable different experiences of presence and that such affordances depend on a specific cultural context. Each element in the performance ecology brings a different story, adds a different layer. Every element contributes in shaping, re-shaping and reconfiguring the ecology in an everchanging mutually transforming process.

The aim of this project is to show how (counterintuitively) that even what the embodied perspective of the performer tells about presence is more than just body-mind coupling alone. This project shows how the myriad interactions with a certain environment, culture, context, other agents (audience, performers, objects, environment), and other elements of the dramaturgy, specific training and practices participate in shaping the phenomenon of presence.

Summary

In this chapter I have challenged the classic view of stage as internalist and limited. My thesis contends that understanding presence requires ethnographic analysis of specific contexts using a cognitive ecology approach. The classic conceptualisation of the

phenomenon of stage presence emphasises the individual performer's agency and depends either on specific training methodologies to enhance performer presence, or on the more idiosyncratic prerogative of the performer's charismatic qualities. I have argued that the classic model is limited because it focuses solely on the individual performer's subjectivity, thereby neglecting the crucial interactive aspects embedded in the performance event. Scholars who have distanced themselves from this classic model have argued instead for a more relational and dynamic understanding of presence conceived as emerging from the encounter between audience and performers in the moment.

In this chapter I have reviewed salient conceptualisations of the classic view of theatrical presence and retraced the metaphysical and cultural origins of such approaches. Through the analysis of different theatre and performance theorists, complemented with the accounts of dance experts, I have emphasised the need for a more comprehensive account of presence in performance.

By introducing the theoretical framework that inspired my analysis of presence across different dance forms and cultural contexts, I suggested an alternative approach to the study of stage presence: a cognitive ecological ethnographic framework that considers both the situatedness of performers' lived experience, and the cultural context in which a performance event take place.

This thesis promotes a shift in focus from an experience of presence relegated to the internal individuality of the performer, towards processes of interaction with the broader ecology. By constructing alternative models of presence in dance, I suggest a shift from the idea that artistic presence is something which 'belongs' to the artist/dancer to being thoroughly based on the interactive terrain unfolding between

performer, spectator and context. Through the analysis of the accounts of several professional performers and choreographers across three historically and culturally different dance practices, the remainder of the thesis explores how particular enactments of presence in dance generate different ecologies of presence.

CHAPTER 4.

(RE)SEARCHING PRESENCE

“There is always something missing,
and the quest for presence is itself an expression of lack”
(Jane Goodall, 2008, p. 5)

Exploring presence as ecological phenomenon requires methodology that considers both the phenomenological experience and the cognitive ecological variations in which presence emerges. This thesis explores dancers’ lived experience in order to provide alternatives to the so-called classic model of stage presence (Sherman, 2016). It addresses the embodied experiences of presence through an immersion in diverse dance genres, training methods, performance practices and cultural traditions. This work interrogates the experience of different dance experts, performers and choreographers. It is essential to direct particular attention to the socio-cultural aspects of the dance forms under study.

Giannachi and Kaye observe how presence in performance “is implicitly associated with dynamics of relation, separation and proximity” (Giannachi & Kaye, 2011, p. 4). To explore how diverse performance ecologies shape different enactments of presence, I address these phenomena directly through engaging with them first-hand in an ethnographic investigation. Ethnography is a well-established methodological tool to investigate cultural phenomena in context (Daynes & Williams, 2018), rendering it the

optimal way to approach this topic. This research is grounded on the assumption that in order to understand *presence* what is required is the researcher's own 'being there'. By 'understand' I mean 'comprehend,' a holding together, from the Latin verb *comprehendere*, composed of two words *cum* and *prehendere*, meaning to take together.²² My approach to the study of presence involves direct aesthetic engagement. The term 'aesthetics' derives from the Greek transitive verb αἰσθάνομαι (*aisthánomai*), which means "I perceive, feel, sense, apprehend by the senses, understand".²³ My approach thus begins by 'being there' and experiencing what presence feels like (and what it means) for the people who perform it. This implies not only observing, gathering, and analysing other people's accounts and experiences; but also accessing and sharing in an embodied kinaesthetic understanding of presence together with the participants of the ethnographic investigation. The opportunity to accessing and understanding people's perspectives and participating in phenomena of presence within their respective dance practices is made possible through a cognitive enactive ethnographic approach, in other words, by enacting presence in the fieldwork along with them.

This chapter introduces the research methods and underling theoretical approaches employed in this research, illustrating the methodologies that inspired the analysis of presence across three dance forms. This chapter underscores the relevance of a direct involvement of the researcher in the process of enculturation and enskillment into specific movement practices, and presents the methodology employed to explore the performers' lived experience. My method draws upon a wide range of compatible

²² The etymology of verb 'comprehend' is retrieved from Erymonline.com available here: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/comprehend>

²³ The etymology of the term 'aesthetics' is retrieved from Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, available here: [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=ai\)sqa/nomai](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=ai)sqa/nomai)

positions including enactive ethnography and carnal sociology (Wacquant, 2004, 2005, 2015), cognitive ethnography (Hutchins, 1995), embodiment and somatic modes of attention (Csordas, 1993, 1994, 2011), dance enaction (Warburton, 2011, 2016), apprenticeship as ethnographic method (Downey, 2010; Downey et al., 2015), thick participation (Samudra, 2006, 2008) and visual methods in ethnographic research (Pink, 2007). I am going to explain what these approaches entail throughout the chapter.

The case studies involved undertaking fieldwork and research exploring the three different dance genres which comprise the subject of this thesis including: Contemporary Ballet, in the case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* and the staging of the piece *Passione* by choreographer Emio Greco; Contact Improvisation, and the experience of the Global Underscore in Italy; and Body Weather, a movement ideology originating from Butoh in the Australian version proposed by members of the dance company De Quincey Co. The chapter closes by providing an overview of the fieldwork of the three dance practices considered and the methods employed, anticipating the context of the three respective ethnographic chapters.

A cognitive enactive approach

This project builds on the tradition of ‘cognitive ethnography’, an approach to the study of cognition in real world situations. Cognitive ethnography was developed by Edwin Hutchins in *Cognition in the Wild* (1995), an ethnographic study of distributed cognitive processes in three different contexts of navigation. Hutchins looked at navigation in early modern European seafaring, in Pacific Micronesian voyages, and in a contemporary navy ship (Hutchins, 1995). He addressed how a particular cognitive task—in this case navigation—can be done in differing ways in differing contexts. Hutchins’ approach challenges the view that cognition can be studied independently of

cultural, social and ecological settings. His work stemmed from the field of cognitive anthropology, defined as “the study of the relation between human society and human thought” (D’Andrade, 1995, p. 1). Cognitive anthropology traditionally focuses on “how people in social groups conceive of and think about the objects and events which make up their world” (D’Andrade, 1995, p. 1), focusing primarily on how social groups categorise and think about certain aspects of their world. Hutchins’ work instead focuses on cognitive practices and processes understood in terms of distributed cognition. Rather than investigating how people construct their belief systems, his approach offers a critique of disembodied views of cognition and instead argues for a view of cognition as a complex system of mutually unfolding relations across multiple agents and the material world they inhabit.

Drawing on the 4E approaches to cognition, of which Hutchins’ work is a part, including enactive, embedded, extended and embodied cognition, which emphasises the fundamental role of the body in the study of cognition, this research pays particular attention to the body as source of knowledge. To explore how presence is enacted differently for different performers in different practices, this work engages a cognitive ethnographic approach (Hutchins, 1995; see also Muntanyola Saura & Kirsh, 2010; Muntanyola-Saura & Sánchez-García, 2018). However, it is important to note that this is a cognitive ethnographic approach which is implemented in a more kinaesthetically engaged form of inquiry and corporeal reflexive practice.

My approach focuses primarily on an engaged form of participant observation that social anthropologist Loïc Wacquant calls ‘enactive ethnography’ (Wacquant, 2015). Wacquant’s formulation of ‘enactive ethnography’ involves a critique of the notion of ‘agent’, ‘structure’ and ‘knowledge’ as predominantly addressed in the social sciences. Wacquant considers these concepts as characterised respectively by a dualist,

externalist, and mentalist perspective. He proposes instead to focus on “the primacy of embodied practical knowledge arising out of and continuously enmeshed in webs of action, upon which discursive mastery comes to be grafted” (Wacquant, 2015, p. 2). Wacquant argues that “enactive ethnography, the brand of immersive fieldwork based on ‘performing the phenomenon,’ is a fruitful path toward disclosing the cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata (that is, habitus) that generate the practices and underlie the cosmos under investigation” (Wacquant, 2015, p. 2).

The concept of habitus is crucial in understanding the ways in which “body techniques pulls the physical, mental and social aspects of human being together as an irreducible whole” (Crossley, 2007, p. 85). The concept of habitus was elaborated by Bourdieu drawing from Mauss ‘techniques of the body’ (1973) and further delineated in his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). Wacquant explains this concept as:

a mediating construct that helps us revoke the common-sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing ‘the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality’, that is, the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and patterned propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which in turn guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu. (Wacquant, 2016, p. 65)

Practice theory emphasises how different cultural and social factors inform different techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973; Bourdieu, 1977; Crossley, 2007, 2013; Wacquant, 2016). As Crossley explains, “body techniques, as habitus, are forms of practical reason” that are “embedded in cultural contexts where they have a symbolic significance, are normatively regulated and perhaps also ‘rationalized’” (Crossley,

2007, p. 86).

Scholars in sociology and anthropology have taken this approach of directly engaging with a specific bodily technique as a way of bridging the distance between the participants and the ethnographer through the language of the body (see Ness, 1992; Downey, 2005; Samudra, 2006; Wacquant, 2004). Dance anthropologist Ann David emphasises how in order to gain a rich understanding of the phenomena of her inquiry, “the ethnographer needs a cultural competence that comes from a variety of approaches—embodied practice, language skill and analysis, contextual knowledge and close engagement with the detailed particularities of the specific cultural practices under scrutiny” (David, 2013, p. 52).

The opportunity to engage practically with different dance contexts is salient in relation to what anthropologist Greg Downey and colleagues point out about apprenticeship as an essential ethnographic method to investigate bodily arts (Downey *et al.*, 2015). They observe how the practice of apprenticeship represents a fruitful way to access “the complexities and variability of enculturation into a dynamic and changing skilled community” (Downey *et al.*, 2015, p. 186). In discussing the relevance of conducting ethnography through practical apprenticeship as useful research method to entering specific communities of practice, otherwise difficult to access, these researchers observe how “one of the great challenges to ethnographic fieldwork is the simple problem that ‘non-participating observer’ is not an appropriate role in some social settings” (p. 186). These anthropologists emphasise how often “apprenticeship settings are ideal contexts in which to gain entry into a community and provide a meaningful position for the researcher and the research agenda” (Downey *et al.*, 2015, p. 186). This approach to directly engage with informants’ practices has been considered a common

methodological tool in the field of anthropology of dance since its inception (Royce, 1977).

Dancing the fieldwork

Engaging with the habitual practices of the participants is an established research method for dance ethnographers who specifically focus on “the people and their movement systems as expressions of cultural knowledge rather than the society as a whole” (David, 2013, p. 51). Dance anthropologists explore the ways people move to understand how people think, feel and make sense of their worlds. This attention to dance practices relies on the assumption that “knowing in the body is inherently integrative and ought to facilitate knowing cultures from inside-out” (Royce, 2002, p. xv). Dance anthropologists emphasise the relevance of this approach because “dance is not just a matter of what people are doing, but of how they invest meaning in the process of constructing and realising the dances—both being-in-the-world and being-with-others” (Henry, Magowan, & Murray, 2000, p. 257).

Sally Ann Ness points out the relationship between ethnography and dance, stressing that “there is something essentially anthropological about choreographic phenomena. A dimension of human existence becomes more vividly accessible, more available to representation and study than in perhaps any other form of symbolic action” (Ness, 1992, p. 4). Anthropologists in this field emphasise the importance of “watching, observing in detail, but even more importantly, participating in the movement and dance clearly allows a deeper level of engagement, and looks to the body as a source of knowledge” (David, 2013, p. 51).

Dance ethnographers focus on revealing symbolic aspects of cultural life of specific social groups through the experience of dancing the fieldwork together with them.

Examples include Andrée Grau's fieldwork with Aboriginal Tiwi groups in Northern Australia (Grau, 2005, 2011); Felicia Hughes-Freeland and her work with Javanese dance (Hughes-Freeland, 2010); Kalpana Ram's work on Indian dance and immigrant-postcolonial audiences and performers (Ram, 2000, 2010, 2011); Sally Ann Ness ethnography of the ritual dance of the *sinulog* in the Philippines (Ness, 1992, 1996) and Deidre Sklar's work on the performance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in New Mexico (Sklar, 2001). Ethnographic research is thus kinaesthetically performed, and analysis and sense-making go through the layered embodied knowledge of both the researcher and researched. Sally Ann Ness compares dance with ethnographic inquiry emphasising how both share "a common hermeneutic interest in understanding exploring, explaining, and representing what it can mean to be a physical human 'self' " (Ness, 1992, p. 7).

Methodologically my approach to presence in dance blends anthropology of dance with enactive ethnography but differs from more traditional dance ethnographies in fundamental ways. Dance anthropology generally explores dance practices to access other aspects of human life. Dance ethnographers look at how people dance to get an insight into their cosmologies, their understanding of social worlds, rules, values and beliefs. The study of dance has become instrumental in grasping other significant aspects of the life of certain groups or cultures because "not only the obvious forms of dance and movement systems, but all actions, rhythms, postures, ways of doing can express what is hidden behind the obvious physical manifestation" (David, 2013, p. 51). Dance anthropologists often consider dance a symbol, a text or a metaphor to reveal other meanings, to uncover other aspects of a culture that are considered intrinsically related to certain people's dance practices. However, rather than looking at dance as a medium for revealing other concealed aspects of human life, my approach considers

diverse dance forms as the bedrock to explore stage presence from an embodied perspective. In this I follow an approach to the study of dance which Edward Warburton calls ‘dance enaction’. As Warburton emphasises,

An adequate account of dance experience requires more than general mental processes or specification of causes; it requires a description of the content (i.e. what is felt/thought) that is common to all experiences of dance and that distinguishes one experience from another. (Warburton, 2016, p. 95)

Dance is here understood not as symbol to be interpreted or as a text to be ‘read’, but as a magnifying glass to investigate lived experiences of presence in a performance setting. Without neglecting the ways certain dance forms participate in a cultural context that has specific ways of constructing, thinking, training and shaping the physical body, my approach considers the phenomenological enactive experience and cognitive ecologies of the people who perform ‘presence’.

To explore presence in dance, attention should also be directed towards the ways people move and how such movements shape the way they think. Maxine Sheets-Johnston’s phenomenological approach to movement as a way of knowing has been seminal to dance studies (Sheets-Johnstone, 1966, 1981, 1999). Similarly, dance scholar Edward Warburton adopts a phenomenological enactive approach that considers the moving body the background mode of our consciousness, “a philosophical argument for the foundational role that perception plays in understanding and engaging with the world” (Warburton, 2011, p. 65). A relevant issue in this branch of philosophy is the idea that consciousness is deeply rooted in our bodily experience, and the way the body relates with the world. Phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher emphasises this aspect through the concept of the ‘body-environment’, which postulates that

...this lived body environment, this elemental “flesh” is neither, as Aristotle had postulated, in between the physical and the psychical, nor, in post-Kantian terms, in between the subject and the object. The lived body is at once physical and psychical. And more fundamental than the “distance” required for the subject-object distinction is the “intertwining” and “communion of the lived body-environment. (Gallagher, 1986, p. 166)

This phenomenological approach has been influential in cultural anthropology in its emphasis on how cultural practices and knowing processes cannot be dissociated from the body. Based on the assumption that “embodied experience is the starting point for analysing human participation in a cultural world” (Csordas, 1993, p. 135), an influential approach to the idea of embodiment in cultural anthropology is Thomas Csordas’ approach to somatic modes of attention. As phenomenologist Philippa Rothfield emphasises, “the concept of somatic attention signals lived corporeality as the manner by which one person engages with another” (Rothfield, 2005, p. 48).

By acknowledging the direct involvement of the researcher in processes of enculturation and apprenticeship in the practices of her inquiry, this work takes on a particular attention to the knowing body. As Crossley (2007) puts it, “human bodies, for the phenomenologist, are both perceptible and perceiving, sensible and sentient” (Crossley, 2007, p. 82). As such, my study considers both the lived experience of the bodies of the participants and the body of the researcher as a site of knowledge. In this respect I embrace not only the concept of ‘enactive ethnography’ proposed by Wacquant, but also his previously formulated approach to ethnography defined as ‘carnal sociology’ (Wacquant, 2004, 2005). According to Wacquant the mindful body of the ethnographer is treated ‘as a fount of social competency and an indispensable

tool for research' (Wacquant 2005, p. 466). Wacquant contends that 'all agents are embodied and all social life rests on a bedrock of visceral know-how' (Wacquant, 2005, p. 467). This somatic 'carnal' approach requires that the researcher acknowledge the crucial role played by a certain form of embodiment and corporeal experience in shaping one's own theoretical perspective.

This is not a 'mono-graph'

Daynes and Williams observe how ethnographic practice is necessarily reflexive—the ethnographer is inevitably part of the scene she is observing. Referring to Bourdieu, “the ethnographer’s social and cultural capital necessarily impacts both his [sic] relationships in and with the field, and his academic work” (Daynes & Williams, 2018, p. 24). From that embeddedness emerges the problem of how to translate such embodied experience. The carnal sociology of Wacquant emphasises the physical dimensions of the rendering of kinaesthetic knowledge, and advocates for a visceral approach to the interpretation of ethnographic material. In Wacquant’s view:

Ethnographers are no different than the people they study: they are suffering beings of flesh and blood who, whether they acknowledge it or not, understand much of their topic ‘by body’ and then work, with varying degree of reflexive awareness and analytic success, to tap and translate what they have comprehended viscerally into the conceptual language of their scholarly discipline. (Wacquant, 2005, p. 467)

The problem of how to translate embodied knowledges into the academic discourse is addressed by Jaida Kim Samudra in the context of her ethnographical investigation of

a Chinese Indonesian martial art (Samudra, 2006). I share Samudra's concerns about the problem of analysing kinaesthetic practices. As she puts it, the issue is that often

...the usual methods of collecting data through linguistic and visual media may not suffice; even participation alone is no guarantee of success, for the researcher is still left with the problem of how to analyse newly acquired physical skills as a shared social experience. (Samudra, 2008, p. 666)

In order to elaborate such expertise into a theoretical discourse, Samudra suggests that the researcher should pay more attention to her own embodied skills that incorporate the collective process of knowledge interchange, since "the communications of the body can be verified even when not encoded into language because they work in practice" (Samudra, 2008, p. 667). According to Samudra "ethnography is culture written: the memory of the collective body must somehow be translated into the inherently discursive consciousness of scholarship" (Samudra, 2008, p. 666). Considering the intersubjective nature of bodily knowledge transmission Samudra develops her account from Clifford Geertz's notion of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). However, rather than focusing on the interpretation of the social discourse, she advances the idea of *thick participation* as a suitable research modality to tackle the social dimension of shared experience. Geertz elaborated his ethnographical approach to culture borrowing the concept of *thick description* from Gilbert Ryle:

From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of

intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973, pp. 311–312).

In Samudra’s view, “thick participation is, thus, cultural knowledge recorded first in the anthropologist’s body and only later externalized as visual or textual data for purposes of analysis” (Samudra, 2008, p. 667). Concerning the movement of translation of this knowledge into the scholarly text, Sally Ann Ness addresses the limit of the production of traditional ethnographic literature that she calls ‘the classic ethnographic score’ (Ness, 1996, p. 141). According to Ness this score, although it mostly designates an idealised ‘mythical’ practice, is still influential both ideologically and pedagogically within the discipline. Ness identifies two movement patterns characterising the classical ethnographic production: first, a reversible move of the ethnographer’s body from the home office to the field-site then a move back to the home office. These correspond to the action sequence of the research conceptualisation, —participant/observation (embodiment/network) followed by—writing up. Ness addresses this problem by stressing the arbitrariness of such an imposed dichotomy of home/field separation that she sees as “a by-product inherent in the composition of the classical score”. In her view this effect is manifested in the format of the monograph:

The “mono-graph” creates an effect of authorial (versus personal) omnipresence (or unipresence), an author whose writerly faculty is independent of the site it writes about, and, in fact, in some cases, insistent on being dissociated from it. This effect is countered in the monograph genre only via the relatively weak strategy of adopting an “ethnographic past” tense and/or providing notes on the research process in supplementary material. (Ness, 1996, p. 141)

According to Ness, the monographic style denies the significance of the *process* of development of authorial consciousness and assigns the home office the exclusive role of authorial residence. Even more importantly: “a monographic text does not expose inherent displacement(s) that affect and delimit its realm(s) of analytic presence” (Ness, 1996, p. 141).

I have argued elsewhere that the body is not singular but always multiple, and that we “engage our thinking through our body, which is permanently in a state of change and is made up of a multiplicity of elements that cannot be neatly pulled apart” (Pini & George, 2019, p. 54). My ethnographic research necessarily reflects this variety. As Ness underlines, the ethnographer must learn by participation and through repeated interaction, like the dancer does. As my primary inquiry research tool was my body, the fieldwork undertaken in this thesis reflects the diversity of ways of knowing through the body and the ethnographic process this involves. My ethnographic approach is grounded on the idea that the body is historically formed, in my case inevitably shaped by both a professional dance training and a radical experience of illness.

Phenomenology of the (ill) body

Phenomenology considers the body our perceptual horizon, the background mode of our consciousness, “a necessary support of all that we perceive and experience” (Ram & Houston, 2015, p. 12). Sometimes the body emerges from this background and reclaims our attention in ways that can be unfairly brutal, and merciless. Phenomenologists stress that it is through experiences of pain and illness that the body emerges from its ‘background’ and becomes apparent to us. In Gallagher’s view: “when the lived body loses its equilibrium with the environment, it suddenly appears at center

stage, announcing itself as painful, fatigued, distorted, clumsy, embarrassed, etc.” (Gallagher, 1986, p. 152).

According to a phenomenological perspective, there are certain circumstances in which the body emerges loud and clear, and “in illness, in disability, in the awareness of death, in pain, we find that ‘bodily events become the events of the day’ ” (Merleau-Ponty 1986, p. 85, as cited in Ram and Houston, 2015, p.12). When such events occur, we can no longer ignore the body’s centrality in shaping how we think and who we are.

In November 2006, aged 22, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. Following my diagnosis, I had to interrupt my career as a professional dancer to undergo oncological treatments, which ended up stretching over a 10-year long medical journey. As I was taking residency in the ‘kingdom of the ill’ as Susan Sontag framed it (1977, p. 3), a long transformative process began to unfold. In 2007 after giving up my dance career I underwent a first-line chemotherapy regimen. Unfortunately, the results were ineffective, so I went through what is called second-line therapy, in my case an even stronger chemotherapy regimen, an autologous stem-cell transplant, and a cycle of radiotherapy. After over a year of strenuous treatments, I finally thought that my illness was in remission, but in fact, it was not. From 2008 until 2014 my cancer relapsed many times. In 2009, following the failure of all standard protocols, I had to take on a new role. In the next six years I was enrolled in several clinical trials involving monoclonal antibodies and immunotherapy – often enrolling in phase two trials, but also in the more uncertain ones. No longer a dancer, not only a cancer patient, but also a ‘guinea pig’: my body was offered to ‘science’ as a bare instrument of medical research, in exchange for hope, time, and care. As experimental treatment and clinical trials were not always available, during those years I also received different salvage chemotherapies. The combination of traditional chemotherapy with experimental treatments allowed me to

pursue my studies and earn a bachelor's degree in visual arts and a master's degree in cultural anthropology before commencing my PhD research in November 2013.

Unfortunately, after eight years of recurring cancer treatments, and a few months into my PhD research, in 2014 my illness relapsed yet again, and I was eventually confronted with the necessity of receiving an allogeneic stem cell transplant (Allo-HSCT).²⁴ A profound fear was gripping my being, along with the increasing awareness that the transplant might be the last chance to cure my disease. I was feeling like I had been stuck in a separate dimension, from where I could see the world only at distance, as if I was trapped behind a pane of glass, observing the world without being able to participate in it. After having suspended my PhD research for two years, in 2015 I underwent a stem cell transplant—from an unknown, unrelated donor—that radically transformed my blood and my body. My long medical trajectory finally culminated with the success of this most transformational of all treatments. The allogeneic stem cell transplant completely morphed my blood; it not only equipped me with a different blood type than the one I was born with, but it also gave me a radically new immune system. The entire biology of my body was changed, hybridised, to the point of allowing the co-existence of two different genomes. I finally became a 'chimera'.

In Greek mythology the Chimera is a fearful fire-breathing hybrid creature from Lycia in Asia Minor. The Chimera is usually depicted as a lion, with the head of a goat protruding from its back, and a tail that might end with a snake or a dragon head. In medicine and genetics this term indicates an organism containing a mixture of

²⁴ An allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplant (Allo-HSCT) is procedure in which a person receives blood-forming stem cells (cells from which all blood cells develop) from a genetically similar, but not identical, donor. This is often a sister or brother, but it could be an unrelated donor, as it was in my case. A stem cell or bone marrow transplant replaces damaged blood cells with healthy ones. It can be used to treat different conditions affecting the blood cells, such as leukaemia and lymphoma. Definition retrieved from NHS website available here: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stem-cell-transplant/>

genetically different tissues. The term ‘chimera’ has come to describe anything composed of different parts, anything that is perceived as wildly imaginative, implausible, or unattainable. Becoming a biological ‘chimera’, and incorporating such complex hybridity, radically influenced the way I perceive and make sense of the world.

Phenomenology has stressed the role played by the illness event as a disruptive force that pushes the perception of our body into the foreground of our conscious experience, disrupting the ‘normal’ mode in which we experience the world through our absent body. Drew Leder, in *The Absent Body* (1990), argues that in this default mode the body is absent from consciousness, and that is through its dysfunction that the body becomes suddenly present to us, impossible to ignore.

By framing the conscious attention to the body, phenomenologists often assume an approach to the lived body as a more general and universal construct. Such a perspective of the body is fundamentally dichotomous, and researchers in phenomenology of sport and dance have stressed how the body can appear in the foreground of our awareness even in the absence of illness or pain, contrary to Leder’s view. Several phenomenological explorations of dance suggest that dancers can have a reflective access to a form of subjectivity experienced at the bodily level (Legrand & Ravn, 2009; Parviainen, 1998, 2002; Ravn, 2009; Ravn & Hansen, 2013; Rothfield, 2005). Legrand and Ravn, for example, argue that dancers’ subjectivity “is bodily expressed, thereby allowing the experience of the body’s subjectivity directly during perceptual experiences of the body” (2009, p. 390).

Jenny Slatman demonstrates how a phenomenology of the body can account for more dimensions of embodiment than previously acknowledged (2014, p. 550). Feminist scholars and medical anthropologists have stressed the limitations of a universalistic

understanding of the body. They remind us of the illusion of conceiving of such a thing as ‘the’ body, because there are many bodies, and multiple ways of producing, understanding, experiencing and inhabiting them (see Braidotti, 1994; Irigaray, 1993; Martin, 1992, 1994; Mol, 2002). Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock have stressed the complexity and plurality of the body as a construct, identifying at least three different modalities of thinking and talking about it. They distinguish between the phenomenal body-self, the social body and the body politic (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). These anthropologists consider sickness a form of communication influenced by many elements all converging and shaping the individual body-self. In their view:

...sickness is not just an isolated event, nor an unfortunate brush with nature. It is a form of communication—the language of the organs—through which nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously. The individual body should be seen as the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and struggle. (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 31)

This view of the individual body as terrain where “nature, society and culture speak simultaneously” becomes particularly salient when the bodily experience includes etiologically complex diseases such as cancer.

Susan Sontag defined cancer as ‘the disease of the Other’ (Sontag, 1977), while Deborah Gordon, in her work on the meanings of cancer and the practice of nondisclosure of cancer diagnosis in Northern Italy, stresses how an experience of cancer is entirely informed by a dimension of alterity (Gordon, 1990). Gordon points out how cancer itself is often lived as ‘other’. In her ethnography, she emphasises that “both medical and popular accounts present a battle between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’,

the ‘benign’ and the ‘malign’, reasserting the dichotomous understanding of the world that cancer in fact defies” (Gordon 1990, p. 276). Likewise, one of the challenges I faced along my journey was to find a sustainable balance between these two polarities. From a biomedical point of view, the subject of the illness event is the pathology. In order to be treated and possibly cured, the ill person has to subject herself to a specific regime, the biomedical one, where a body-self is made a ‘patient’ body-object that can be enrolled in a therapeutic protocol, investigated, cut, scrutinized, assessed, and transformed. From the narrative perspective the subject is the person diagnosed with the disease (Mattingly, 1994, p. 817). How could it be possible for the cancer patient to comprehend and to hold in mind these two opposite dimensions, their body-self and their body-diseased-object as they live through it, embodying and experiencing both simultaneously? According to Gordon “cancer challenges the dominating dichotomies of life/death, mind/body, individual/society, healthy/sick, good/bad, inside/outside. It exposes the dangers of converting the bad, the ugly, the painful to ‘other’. It calls for opening to and accepting the unwanted” (Gordon, 1990, p. 293).

Perhaps because I trained professionally in dance before being diagnosed with cancer, and because as a dancer I developed an attention to a conscious form of bodily subjectivity, my awareness was already deeply somatically attuned before experiencing illness. In this sense my experience of illness diverges from more orthodox phenomenological interpretations in that illness did not bring the bodily experience to the fore. What I discovered instead, by enduring my 10-year long journey in the kingdom of the ill, is a spectrum of bodily perceptions that co-exist with an intentional focus towards the world.

What illness reveals is not just a subject-object dichotomy but instead a multiplicity of ways the body can manifest its presence, and an array of ways we can attend to it.

Throughout my experience I inhabited different bodies and enacted many roles; I moved from dancing on stage to sitting for hours in the hospital waiting room, witnessing my perceptions modulate to the range of identities I ended up performing. During this path I observed how my embodied understandings were shifting while I was taking on different roles, when I became a ‘patient’ body, or a laboratory test subject, a medical ethnographer, a chimeric hybrid creature, a PhD student, or a cancer survivor.

Living through uncertain times and coping with impending threats and radical transformations made me realise the significance of questioning and rethinking our cultural assumptions and conceptual categories. By becoming a biological chimera, I gained access to an embodied understanding of the concept of hybridity that challenges dualistic thinking. Illness is a site where opposite perspectives become meshed, combining and re-combining new meanings and different forms of agency, which often confuse and get confused. Through illness the body reveals the plurality of experience, making us embody paradoxes and contradictions, urging our fragmented selves to hold together the multiple ways in which we can be aware of our bodily conscious existence.

Losing presence

Presence is generally thought as something that people can feel, sense, have, and sometimes, lose. My research has been deeply shaped by the latter conceptualisation. The focus on ‘having presence’, so crucial in my professional dance experience, shifted to the question of how to live in the present mode after being diagnosed with cancer in 2006. From that moment, the question of presence became pervasive, brought to the foreground of my awareness.

Living with lymphatic cancer for a decade taught me a great deal about the preciousness of what philosopher Havi Carel in *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* defines as a “crystal drop of Now” (Carel, 2008, p. 124). Carel considers the illness experience a ‘violent’ invitation to philosophise and to find reasons to carry out a meaningful and happy life despite the limitations imposed by illness. She points out that

Knowing how to live in the present is the ability to be content in the present instant, content with earthly existence. Knowing how to utilize the present is having the ability to recognize and seize the decisive instant, without regretting a past or desiring a future. (Carel, 2008, p. 131)

Carel captures an experience I also aim to emphasise: that living with a life-threatening disease can lead people to appreciate and seize the smallest fleeting fragments of beauty and joy hidden in the present moment. Through this journey I have learnt to treasure Horace’s aphorism to the core.²⁵ Limiting my existence to the ‘now’, to the present, became a necessary mode for coping with the suddenly uncertain world I was thrown into when I was diagnosed with Lymphoma at the age of 22.

During my ten-year long journey with cancer, because of the frequent relapses of my illness, I underwent the full range of oncological treatments available. During this time, I experienced what is known by the lay term of ‘chemobrain’ or ‘chemo fog’, and in medicine known as Chemotherapy-Related Cognitive Impairment (CRCI) (Williams et al., 2016). Chemo fog refers to a collection of deficits in memory, attention, concentration, and executive function that affect patients who undergo chemotherapy treatments. Typical symptoms of chemobrain include forgetfulness, impaired concentration and attention, difficulty with multitasking and with word recall, short-

²⁵ Horace’s aphorism “carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero” which translates as “Seize the present; trust tomorrow e’en as little as you may”, is quoted in the opening of the thesis on page 7.

term memory loss, and often the inability to organise daily tasks (Asher & Myers, 2015).

A feeling of estrangement and disconnection reached an unprecedented level of intensity after I underwent my allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (Allo-HSCT) in November 2015. Given the high toxicity of the conditioning chemotherapeutic regimen employed with this procedure, several clinical studies have investigated CRCI in haematological patients undergoing this type of transplant (Syrjala *et al.*, 2011; Scherwath *et al.*, 2013; Sharafeldin *et al.*, 2017). Such conditioning regimens and related toxicities alter brain metabolism, resulting in a long-lasting decrease in cognitive function, which is a common complication for patients undergoing HSCT (Maffini *et al.*, 2017). Neurocognitive dysfunctions range from subtle to severe and in many cases last years after treatment (Kelly *et al.*, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2016).

For a couple of years after my transplant I struggled with focusing on the task at hand; even performing what had previously been simple habitual activities became a difficult job. It was not only verbal retrieval and the ability to retain information in short memory that were impaired, but also my motor control and manual dexterity. I could no longer fully control my movements. For over two years I was not able to drive, since driving required the ability to focus simultaneously on several elements and to promptly respond kinaesthetically to sudden changes—to coordinate reflexes and movements on the fly. For a long period even recalling the intention to perform a certain action became a difficult task if I just let a few seconds pass after the intention to complete the task formed in my mind. To be able to carry on with my life and maintain an acceptable degree of functionality I had to constantly and effortfully direct my conscious awareness to the thing at hand, regardless of whether it involved a manual task, recalling

a memory, performing an action, or retaining an intention or a thought. I was forcing my concentration to attend to the present moment, trying to focus my attention deliberately. My relationship to the world thus felt syncopated, unsynchronised, and (somewhat paradoxically) constantly lagging behind.

After my Allo-HSCT, Carel's precious 'crystal drop of Now' became for me a slimy liquid blob almost impossible to grasp. It was as if the present mode I learned to access intensely was instead slipping away from me, as I was finding myself constantly lost in the rapid elusiveness of the moment. During this time, feeling my own presence 'in-the-world' became an impossible task as I was experiencing the world at an increased distance, as if it was hurtling away from me, spinning around me at a pace I could no longer keep.

In their book *Your Brain After Chemo: A Practical Guide to Lifting the Fog and Getting Back Your Focus*, Daniel Silverman and Idelle Davidson provide several accounts from cancer patients who have experienced chemobrain. Jackson Hunsicker, an American writer, TV and film director, described his experience: "It is painful when people look at me with confusion while I am trying to talk. I know that I'm not making sense, and I don't know how else to talk. When it happens, I die a million deaths and feel very dumb" (Silverman and Davidson 2009, p. 47). As the above quote makes clear, these treatments not only disrupt brain function, but also have a deep impact on the psychological wellbeing of those affected. Such cognitive impairments deeply influence the social life and interpersonal exchanges of these patients, contributing to a rising sense of alienation and frustration and in some cases a deep sense of self-doubt (Silverman & Davidson, 2009) .

During the years following my transplant, I was constantly forgetting things, dropping objects, and missing information. I couldn't follow a discussion if it involved listening and responding to more than one person, and simply retaining basic information became a real challenge. I was feeling depressed, terribly clumsy and isolated. Since dwelling in the 'here and now' became an arduous enterprise, the question of how to feel present, to be present, acquired renewed urgency and salience. Understanding how other people feel, experience, and think about presence thus took on a new shape and vigour in my research. I wanted to understand how other people experience presence and how they make sense of their presence through their mindful bodies.

I thought that I should look at the experiences of those people who are considered as "having presence": people who work, learn, perform, and enact presence on a daily basis, such as actors, performing artists, and in particular those artists I knew best due to my time as professional dancer—dancers. By doing so I hoped I could not only recover my 'absent' presence but also find a renewed version of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls "*the feeling of being in sync with the things of the world*" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 117 - emphasis in original).

Exploring the lived experience of presence from the performers' perspective thus became the focus of my research. I wanted to understand what a phenomenology of presence entails, the elements involved in the phenomenon, the relationships between these elements and how they influence and transform each other as they emerge. I was curious about how dancers make sense of their lived experience of mindful bodies while they engage their presence aesthetically, how they negotiate and make sense of their 'being present' while performing challenging acts immersed in complex environments.

What guided my inquiry was also the desire to discover how I could regain an agentic perspective ‘in-the-world’ and re-entering the social life that was left behind. The possibility of reshaping my relation to the world, to re-experience presence through the body, would enable me to dive back into what Carel calls the “flowing river” of our conscious experience (Carel, 2008, p. 123). To put it more simply, I was guided by the need to ‘understand’ presence anew.

Thankfully my condition improved over time, and I was able to continue my doctorate project without further delays. The intense experience of ‘losing’ presence to the chemo-fog made me realise the central role played by the body in matters of presence. Through the ethnographic research among different dance practices and performers I could ‘comprehend’ first-hand how the possibility to ‘feel’ presence extends beyond the brain, modulated by the social and cultural context in which we are involved and immersed, shaped by the kind of practices and engagements we entertain with the world and the bodies we are.

This research comprises different moving bodies and their voices that I will introduce in the following sections, providing details of the three dance forms and the research methods employed in the respective fieldwork sites. Due to the fact that my own embodied experience guided the research of presence through different bodies and dance practices, this thesis emerges not as a ‘mono-graph’, but as a ‘multi-graph’—a multisite moving fieldwork: partial, transient, and as plural as the bodies who produced it. According to Ness, “ethnographic work requires such a travelling body, always shifting its sites of lived experience, visiting diverse cultural locations, carefully aiming and timing its displacements and replacements so as to draw connections in between them” (Ness, 1996, p. 142). Because my body was deeply transformed before, after, and during the fieldwork, it was not possible to base my approach on what Ness defines

the ‘classical score’ of ethnographic research. My approach has been influenced by my lived experience of surviving through a body that is fragmented, failing, unstable, ill, other, multiple and hybridised, reconfigured, reshaped, decomposed and recomposed, regenerated, disintegrated and born anew, always in becoming, chimeric. The body I discovered while I was conducting my fieldwork on presence is a different type of body not only ‘culturally’ but also biologically. When I started this project, for example, I had a different blood type than the one I have now, originating from my grafted stem cells, which have a different genome.

From this perspective the body as phenomenological and cultural construct can never be universal nor stable. Because there is no singular body, presence can only be researched in difference, plurality and diversity. As the body is multiple, there can be only multiple ways of understanding presence as well as multiple ways of enacting it. On this premise I started to look at how different dance forms shape different bodies, which in turn enact different forms of presence. As Merleau-Ponty indicates, time and space are important dimensions of presence through which our ‘field of presence’ emerges, glimpses, and fades (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 478). Presence is never fixed nor stable, but everchanging in space-time. In this sense I began to look for emergent patterns as they were unfolding, without establishing an interpretative framework *a priori*. I let this framework emerge from the data, from the dancers’ experience and from experiencing the dance with them. To summarise my approach, I borrow Ness’s words once again:

...what has been vital to the production of this text, rather than any standardized corporeal patterning or movement sequence, has been its insistence on a certain kind of writerly body in motion, a body that participates and is affected by other

bodies, that learns, remembers and forgets others, a body that de-corporates its memory on the move. (Ness, 1996, p. 142)

It is common in anthropology to account for a reflexive perspective that acknowledges the mutual co-informing movement between the participant and the observed. As the ethnographer affects the fieldwork, the fieldwork always transforms the ethnographer. Inhabiting a hybridised body inevitably reshaped my relationship to the world. Body cells mutate, die and are born every day and we all inhabit many bodies just as many bodies form and shape us. My experience of illness made this multiplicity even more salient. Since the body is not a stable universal construct, but is instead always multiple and in a process of becoming, my focus was on how different bodies are continually making sense of different forms of presence in the moment. Because the body is constantly shaped by everchanging processes of becoming, there could be no steady, universal account of presence. As there is no one singular, optimal way of sensing, perceiving, feeling presence via embodied means, what remains unexplored and reclaims attention are co-shaping, mutually informing, kinaesthetic emergent cognitive ecological processes of presence.

Reflexive methods

To investigate how dancers enact and perform different forms of ‘presence’, this work explores the different ways of being-in-the-world that diverse dance practices incorporate and embed within their specific aesthetics, training systems and technical demands. In engaging with reflexive practice, apart from attending and participating in the training and workshops myself, I asked my participants to become spectators of themselves. During the interviews I showed them videos of these three different dance forms, including: an excerpt of the piece *Passione* danced by the

Ballet National de Marseille at the festival *Romaeuropa* (from September 30 to October 1st, 2016) at the *Teatro Argentina* in Rome. The video is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nZAySggFjU>



Figure 4. *Ballet National de Marseille* performing *Passione* in Rome, 2016.

I have also shown to my interviewees a performance of Contact Improvisation (CI) called ‘Improvisation performance 01 - Choreographic Research’ portraying CI dancer and choreographer Alejandro Rolandi and three other dancers improvising together at the dance research centre Critical Path in Sydney. The video of the performance is available here: <https://vimeo.com/49362040>



Figure 5. Snapshot from Rolandi's Improvisation performance, 2012.

The third video I presented to my interviewees was a short dance film 'AURA NOX ANIMA' by Body Weather artist Lux Eterna, recoded in Anna Bay, New South Wales, Australia in 2016. The video is available here: <https://vimeo.com/164818040>



Figure 6. Snapshot from *Aura Nox Anima*, short dance film by Lux Eterna, 2016.

By incorporating this reflexive practice during the interviews, I asked my participants to assume the position of the audience and to comment on videos of their own performance as well as to reflect and comment on videos of the other two performance types. By asking my participants to take up the observer standpoint and analyse the

other performers' enactments of presence, I aimed to explore the intersection between the observer and the observed (Pink, 2007).

During this fieldwork I not only trained in unfamiliar dance practices of CI and BW, but I also observed the processes of enculturation within these dance forms. I could trace how processes of enculturation into specific training forms shape the construction of sense and experience of presence. I observed how dancers who are deeply enculturated in particular ways of moving share analogue understandings and similar embodied responses to presence.

By immersing myself in a CI community I became a fellow *contacter*; by training in Body Weather I became an apprentice. I was invited to join performance events such as the Impro-Exchange not as ethnographer, but as a fellow performer.²⁶

By attending the rehearsals and performance of *Passione* from behind the curtains, I retraced my earlier steps of being a professional Contemporary Ballet dancer, blending emic and etic perspectives, letting the multiplicity of perspectives converge and merge together, entangled in a mutually informing process.

Contemporary Ballet

This ethnographic inquiry begins with Contemporary Ballet. In 2017 I went to Marseille, France, to explore presence in the context of the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM), a company established in 1972 by Roland Petit and directed by Emio Greco

²⁶ Impro-Exchange is an intensive laboratory and public performance which aims to explore the nature of improvisation between dancers and artists from different backgrounds, ages and traditions organised annually by De Quincey Co. Over four hundred artists from all around the country have engaged in this process since inception in 2006. Usually each lab culminates in a one-hour improvisation for general public, inviting feedback. Further details are available here <https://dequinceyco.net/impro-exchange-2016/>

and Pieter Scholten from 2014 until the end of their appointment in 2019.²⁷ The opportunity to carry out my research among the dancers of the BNM was made possible thanks to kind intercession of some members of the company. I was familiar with the environment of the BNM since the time of my professional dance training during the first edition of the international insertion program D.A.N.C.E. (Dance Apprentice Network aCross Europe, 2005-2007) which included an apprenticeship period at the *Ballet National de Marseille*, however at that time the company was directed by Belgian choreographer Frédéric Flamand (2004-2014).

During my fieldwork I attended the rehearsals and the staging of the piece *Passione* by Italian choreographer Emio Greco and Dutch dramaturg Pieter Scholten. The piece *Passione* is the re-creation of Greco and Scholten's previous work *Passione in Due* which was choreographed and performed by Greco himself and the composer Frank Krawczyk in 2012. After Greco took the direction of the BNM in 2014 he recreated the piece for the company. The staging and rehearsal process of the piece *Passione* by the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM) appeared to be the ideal case study to explore the classic version of presence in dance—not only because *Passione* was created and danced as a solo by the choreographer Emio Greco and its new choreographic score involves a series of solos, but also because of the themes it expresses. *Passione* is inspired by the Johann Sebastian Bach's work 'St Matthew's Passion', and so alludes to the metaphysical presence of Christ. The version of *Passione* I attended was danced by seven dancers of the BNM ensemble (Vito Giotta, Angel Martinez-Hernandez, Valeria Vellei, Denis Bruno, Nonoka Kato, Anton Zvir, and Aya Sato) accompanied by

²⁷ The *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM) was established in 1972 by French dancer and choreographer Roland Petit, who directed the BNM for the next 26 years. Petit is known for having created dramatic ballets combining fantasy with elements of contemporary realism, collaborating with artists such as Jean Carzou and Max Ernst.

the musician Frank Krawczyk at the *Théâtre La Criée* in Marseille in May and June 2017.



Figure 7. Dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* in *Passione*, 2016 (courtesy of the BNM).

Contemporary Ballet is considered an evolving dance genre that straddles the competing forces of innovation and tradition. According to dance scholar Gretchen Alterowitz, Contemporary Ballet is a dance form that encompasses classical technique with specific training methods to produce distinctive movement vocabularies and new choreographic material (Alterowitz, 2015). A dialogical relationship between classic canons and postmodern aesthetics drives a variety of approaches, thus generating new choreographic material, idiosyncratic movement vocabularies, and distinct training methods. In framing Contemporary Ballet as distinct, Alterowitz stresses that “mainstream contemporary ballet is performed by dancers who are classically trained and who use that training and the resulting particular ways of moving to influence the choreographic material” (Alterowitz, 2015, p. 21). In the following chapter I proceed

by addressing the transmission of kinaesthetic choreographic ideas, pursuing Alterowitz's point that classically trained dancers' 'particular ways of moving' are the key influence on Contemporary Ballet. The work of Greco and Scholten blends canonical elements of classical ballet with postmodern inspirations, and it can be considered a relevant example of this specific dance genre.

My exploration of presence in the context of Contemporary Ballet also included a short period of fieldwork at the Melbourne Festival during the staging of world-renowned choreographer William Forsythe latest work 'A Quiet Evening of Dance' (17th - 20th October 2018) at the State Theatre in Melbourne. Forsythe's work included a collection of pieces danced by former members of the Forsythe Company, including well-known international soloists Christopher Roman, Riley Watts, Jill Johnson, and Brigel Gjoka. During this fieldwork I interviewed several members of the crew including Jill Johnson, director of dance at Harvard University, and Brigel Gjoka, dancer, choreographer and former artistic director of Art Factory International (AFI). Their accounts have been valuable for reflecting on and elaborating my ecological account of presence in dance.

Contact Improvisation

Contact Improvisation (CI), a dance technique initiated in the '70s in the United States by the American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton, CI soon became a well-known expression of postmodern dance and art movement.²⁸ CI has gained widespread

²⁸ Steve Paxton is an American dancer and choreographer, founding member of the *Judson Dance Theater* and the experimental group *Grand Union*. In 1972 Paxton named and began to develop the dance form known as Contact Improvisation (CI), a dance form that utilises the physical laws of friction, momentum, gravity, and inertia to explore kinaesthetic relationships between dancers. A comprehensive description of CI is provided by Koteen and Smith (2008, p. xiv), also retrievable on the website of the journal *Contact Quarterly*. CI is defined as "an evolving system of movement based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia. The body, in order to open to these sensations, learns to release excess muscular tension and abandon a certain quality of wilfulness to experience the natural flow of movement. Practice includes rolling, falling,

recognition—jams and workshops are organised worldwide—both in the independent scene of the performative arts and in more institutionalised and traditional dance settings. Throughout this ethnographic research, CI acted as a bridging practice between my previous self-identity as a professional dancer and the more recent role of ethnographer, providing the ground for a new set of skills and hermeneutics to emerge.

My first encounter with CI traces back several years, to the time of my professional dance apprenticeship in some of the most renowned European dance companies.²⁹ My first experience of CI during the time in which I was a professional dancer was diametrically opposed to what I had encountered during the fieldwork. As a professional dancer, my training had been partially shaped by a conception of the body that dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster describes as the *hired body* (Foster, 1997, p. 253). This concept refers to the way in which many professional dance training programs are aimed at “producing” highly skilled dancers, talented in many different styles, from ballet to modern dance techniques; in this context, CI is considered simply one among the many different styles required to satisfy the demands of a multitude of different choreographic strategies characterising the contemporary professional dance panorama. According to Foster this dancing body is “uncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision, it is a body for hire: it trains in order to make a living at dancing” (Foster, 1997, p. 255). The tendency to conceive of the body as an instrument to serve in the art of dance has deeply rooted origins. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, discussing the cultural and aesthetic transformations in the history of modern dance, refers to Martha Graham, one of its

being upside down, following a physical point of contact, supporting and giving weight to a partner. Alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation, trusting in one’s basic survival instincts. It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened” (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. xiv).

²⁹ My professional dance apprenticeship took place in several renowned European companies, see chapter 1 - Introduction, page 24.

prominent pioneers, emphasising that “as an instrument, there was no doubt but that the body was trained to serve: [sic] ‘through all times’ ” (1978, p. 197). Graham stated that, “the acquiring of technique in dance has been for one purpose—so to train the body as to make possible any demand upon it by that inner self which has the vision of what needs to be said” (Graham quoted in Sheets-Johnstone, 1978, p. 197.) Sheets-Johnstone underlines how in the context of modern dance “the specialized education of the body was a life-time commitment to ‘the vision of what needs to be said’ ” (1978, p. 197). This conception of the body, as described by Foster, may conceal a threat, since the so-called “hired body, built at a great distance from the self, reduces it to a pragmatic merchant of movement proffering whatever look appeals at the moment. It not only denies the existence of a true, deep self, but also proscribes a relational self whose desire to emphasize predominates over its need for display” (Foster, 1997, p. 256).

During my fieldwork I re-approached CI in more independent settings, often imbued with radical left-wing cultural and political connotations. My own ethnographic approach to CI was characterised by a predominance of an attention towards the relational self over the performative and aesthetic aspects of the dance. Here along with my participant observation and direct involvement in the training practices of my informants, I followed the process that dance anthropologist Deidre Sklar defines as “empathic kinaesthetic perception”, an ethnographic approach to movement analysis that does not occur at the level visual engagement alone, but instead involves a “bridging between subjectivities” (Sklar, 2001, p. 32). As dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright explains, such empathic kinaesthetic approach suggests “that the physical knowing in movement must be explored through the body as well as observation and interviews” (Cooper Albright, 2011, p. 13).

My research on the experience of presence among diverse groups of *contacters* involved a multisite fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2017.³⁰ During this time, I joined Contact Improvisation classes, workshops and jam sessions in four different locations: in Sydney in New South Wales (Australia), in Emilia-Romagna (Italy) in the cities of Bologna and Ferrara, and in the city of Arezzo (Tuscany). In Sydney I participated in several CI classes conducted by Argentinian performer and choreographer Alejandro Rolandi, focused on exploring various technical skills and playful modalities of the form. The classes took place at the Annandale Creative Arts Centre, a space that hosts an array of artistic initiatives supported by a local evangelical Church.

Because of my illness relapse, from 2014 to 2016 I moved back to Italy to undergo further oncological treatments. While there, in 2014 I attended several classes and jam sessions organized by the members of the C.Bo group, an independent self-established community of CI practitioners based in Bologna which met mainly at T.P.O. (Occupied Polyvalent Theatre), a social arts centre set up in the '90s as a public space known for being a meeting point for several cultural and political initiatives linked to social resistance, antifascism and antiracism.

³⁰ Multi-sited ethnography provides a method to contextualise space and place in ethnographic discourse. It highlights the relevance of conducting research in multiple sites to provide access to a wider range of relevant informants and perspectives. For a definition of 'multisite fieldwork' (see Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995).



Figure 8. TPO (Teatro Polivalente Occupato) space in Bologna, Italy, 2014.

In 2014 I also participated in a weekend-long workshop in the city of Ferrara (Ferrara Contact) led by Italian choreographer Manfredi Perego, a CI independent event organised annually on the occasion of the Ferrara Buskers Festival. On both these occasions I had the opportunity to share personal accounts and experiences with a heterogeneous group of CI practitioners, ranging from complete novices who had never before practised CI, to expert dancers trained in this form for several years and who are currently CI facilitators teaching and conducting workshops around the world.

After returning to Australia in 2016 and following the completion of my Body Weather fieldwork, one year later I travelled back to Italy to join the Global Underscore (GUS) 2017, a significant dance event for the Contact Improvisation community that only happens once a year around the time of the Northern Hemisphere summer solstice. The GUS was organised at the Spazio Seme, an independent dance and art centre in the city

of Arezzo. The GUS event was facilitated by a participant in my research, Caterina Mocchiola, international CI teacher and performer.



Figure 9. *Contacters* during the Global Underscore, Spazio Seme, Arezzo, Italy, 2017.

Body Weather

After my transplant I returned to Australia in 2016 and resumed my study of phenomenological experiences of presence in dance. As my body was recovering and adapting to the radical transformations following my transplant, I started my training in Body Weather (BW), a movement ideology linked to a form of dance known as Butoh, a Japanese avant-garde dance form initiated by Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata in the 1960s. Butoh is significant for its relationship with nature and its philosophical roots in Shinto and Buddhism (Fraleigh 1999), which “[give] performers opportunities to become aware of what is going on inside of themselves mentally and physically” (Kasai, 2004, p. 354).

Engaging with my hybridised body into an unfamiliar dance practice allowed me to shape a new space. The radical experience of the transplant destroyed my blood cells, as well as my bone marrow, replaced by my donor's grafted stem cells. With this erasure of previously sedimented knowledge, came an openness and room for what was new. As Sally Ann Ness emphasises, "nobody, 'no-body', can learn an unfamiliar neuromuscular pattern without being willing to acquire a new and perhaps startling insight into who it is they actually are—that is to say, a truly plural being or figure" (Ness, 1992, p. 5). As I was trying to figure out how to live with my new hybrid body, I began to train in Body Weather (BW), a form of dance itself considered a radical movement ideology developed by Japanese dancer and choreographer Min Tanaka and introduced to Australian dancers in 1989 by performer and choreographer Tess de Quincey.

I approached BW in the context of an intensive workshop organised by members of the company De Quincey Co. in Sydney. I conducted my fieldwork in Sydney attending a BW workshop led by Tess de Quincey, and BW classes led by Victoria Hunt and Linda Luke. I also participated in an immersive workshop in Bellambi (NSW, Australia) led by Linda Luke in July 2016, and I took part in the Impro-Exchange 2016 led by BW international facilitator Frank Van de Ven, which culminated with an open door performance at the Glebe Town Hall in December 2016.



Figure 10. Body Weather workshop on Bellambi Beach, NSW, Australia, 2016.

Following embodied mind theorists Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) on the importance of considering non-Western traditions of thinking experience, in particular Asian philosophy in relation to awareness and presence—this research aims to carry out an interdisciplinary consideration of different dance practices. Not only within Western traditions, such as ballet or contemporary dance forms, but also to explore Western forms influenced by Eastern traditions such as Contact Improvisation, and hybridised forms of body expression such as Body Weather. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock underline how the Western concept of “an observing and reflexive I, a mindful self that stands outside the body and apart from nature, is another heritage of Cartesian dualism that contrasts sharply with a Buddhist form of subjectivity and relation to the natural world” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 13). Lock and Scheper-Hughes argue that in Buddhist philosophy

Understanding is reached not through analytic methods, but rather through an intuitive synthesis, achieved in moments of transcendence that are beyond speech, language, and the written word [...] It is experientially received as a perception of the unity of mind and body, self and other, mind and nature, being and nothingness. (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 13)

In this regard, I purposefully chose to explore dance forms that belong to different cultural traditions and that also express remarkably different aesthetics. Contact Improvisation and Body Weather are considered postmodern forms of corporeal expression, marked by what Elinor Fuchs describes as the ‘aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence’ (Fuchs, 1986, p. 164). These two dance forms are shaped by ideologies that already question or displace the centrality of the individual performer/creator in shaping phenomena of presence. Dance sociologist Helen Thomas underlines how postmodernism and poststructuralism emphasise the so called ‘death of the author’ view, which challenges the traditional privileged speaking subject as well as suggesting a “shift towards the readers/viewers as writing/choreographing the text/dance and combining the ingredients in any way they choose” (Thomas, 1996, p. 72). She points out how

[t]his intertextuality calls into question traditional (logocentric) notions of “true” “real” “fixed” meanings, and that goes for the audiences/spectators as well as texts/performances and authors/choreographers. In this view, there are potentially a multiplicity of voices/eyes at work in any discursive practice, the task for analysis is to hear/see and deconstruct them. (Thomas, 1996, p. 82)

Referring to Dempster’s essay ‘Women Writing the Body: Let’s Watch a Little How She Dances’ (1988), Thomas stresses how the body in postmodern dance is considered

“unstable, fleeting, flickering, transient—a subject of multiple representations” (Dempster, 1988, p. 49 quoted in Thomas, 1996, p. 73). Thomas concludes by pointing out how the ways in which we look at dance are neither neutral nor individual, but instead are “inscribed in a chain of cultural codes and practices in and through which our bodies, our subjectivities, are situated and implicated” (Thomas, 1996, p. 73). For these reasons, along with researching postmodern dance forms such as Contact Improvisation and Body Weather, I also wanted to explore presence in more traditional Western dance settings such as ballet, where I would expect the relationship with the performer-self and her presence would be less divergent from the classic model of stage presence.

In the following chapters I present some forms of negotiation and transmission of this kinaesthetic knowledge and show how this dynamic process informs the performance cognitive ecology as it shapes dancers’ experience of presence.

CHAPTER 5.

THE RE-CREATION OF *PASSIONE* BY THE *BALLET*

NATIONAL DE MARSEILLE: DISTRIBUTED ENACTED

PRESENCE IN CONTEMPORARY BALLET

*“Un’ œuvre c’est trois choses :
C’est l’imagination du créateur, de l’interprète et du public”*

An artwork encompasses three things:
the imagination of the creator, of the interpreter and the audience.
(Frank Krawczyk, Marseille, 2017)

“stage presence is the capacity to blend together with energy, with the other dancers,
with the atmosphere, with what we have to do, with what is being asked”
(Angel Martinez-Hernandez, Marseille, 2017).

The chapter focuses on the re-creation of Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten’s work *Passione* (2017) for the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM), addressing the complexity of the piece’s stratified structure and development in order to explore how presence was understood and enacted in this unique version performed by the dancers of the BNM. I begin by providing an overview of the artistic enterprise of Greco and Scholten to illustrate the stylistic principles that underpinned the re-creation of *Passione*. Next, I present some significant features of the choreographer’s method and movement vocabulary that are salient for understanding dancers’ enactments of presence within this choreographic work and context.

Emio Greco's work has been studied by researchers concerned with the development of different techniques for transcribing and recording a dance work through different notation systems and technologies, including interactive installations and motion capture experiments (Alaoui, Bevilacqua, & Jacquemin, 2015; DeLahunta, 2007; DeLahunta & Bermúdez Pascual, 2013). My focus here, in contrast, is on the lived experience of the dancers of the BNM.

In this chapter I examine some of the strategies for the transfer of kinaesthetic knowledge across different bodies in this unusual and challenging case. The version of *Passione* I address here is the re-adaptation of Greco and Scholten's previous work *Passione in Due* performed by the choreographer Greco himself and the composer Frank Krawczyk in 2012. This work was developed around the figure of the dancer/choreographer, as highlighted in the synopsis of the piece:

In the dialogue with Bach's St. Matthew Passion, adapted and performed live by composer and all-round musician Franck Krawczyk, a teeming dance concert unfolds between two men and between dance and music. Driven by seven necessities and seven different tempos, Emio Greco turns his body inside-out, transforming from a neighing stallion into an ignorant clown, from a stripper into a vulnerable Christ-figure. Accompanied by the firm sounds of the piano and the melancholic timbres of the accordion, suffering, sensuality, self-sacrifice and self-reflection are revealed in the body of a single dancer.³¹

³¹ Synopsis of *Passione in Due* as it appears on the website of Greco and Scholten choreographic centre and dance company ICK (International Choreographic Arts Centre) retrieved from <https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/productions/archive/passione-in-due-16>



Figure 11. Emio Greco in *Passione in Due*, 2012 (courtesy of the BNM).

The version of *Passione* I investigate is a re-adaptation of the original solo work performed by Greco, re-arranged to be performed by seven dancers from the ensemble of *Ballet National de Marseille*. When I read the synopsis of this version *Passione* (2017) for the first time, I was convinced that through this fieldwork I would be able to encounter an exemplary version of the ‘classic model of stage presence’ (see Sherman, 2016). Furthermore, I hoped to be able to illustrate how this model operates within a professional and institutionalised dance context. Here is what the synopsis of this new version of *Passione* states:

In seven different tempos, Franck Krawczyk and the dancers of Ballet National de Marseille revisit Johann Sebastian Bach’s St Matthew Passion. Suffering, sensuality and sacrifice are awakened by the power of the piano and the melancholy of the accordion. Echoing this profound music, the bodies of the

seven dancers respond with whipped-up gestures in a universal dialogue and joyous astonishment, bathed in divine light.³²

At a first glance, the case of the BNM performing Greco and Scholten's piece *Passione* seemed likely to be emblematic for several reasons. First, because the structure of the piece involves a series of solos. This entailed that I would be able to gather dancers' experiences of presence from the perspective of a single performer on stage channelling the attention of the audience. Also, the piece is representative of an explicit reference to the Western metaphysical ideal of presence, as it is a work inspired by *St Matthew Passion* and choreographed on Bach's composition of the same name. I thought that these symbolic connotations would reinforce the common association of stage presence with an auratic and charismatic power that transcends the ordinary (see Goodall, 2008).³³



Figure 12. Angel Martinez Hernandez (in the middle) in *Passione* (courtesy of the BNM).

³² Synopsis of *Passione* retrieved from the website of Greco and Scholten's choreographic centre ICK available here <https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/productions/archive/passione-67>

³³ I have discussed notions of stage presence as auratic power, charisma and embodiment of opposite qualities in chapter 3.

This fieldwork could also have provided a particularly illustrative case of how the classic version of stage presence operates within an institutionalised dance context, because Greco and Scholten's production for the BNM could be considered a significant example of the dance genre of Contemporary Ballet.³⁴ Correspondingly, I was expecting an account of presence from the dancers of the BNM similar to the version captured by the classic model of stage presence. However, as soon as I embarked on my fieldwork at the BNM and began to listen to the dancers' accounts, a more complex and nuanced picture began to emerge.

In this rendering of *Passione* the choreographic work originally performed as a solo is instead turned into a kinaesthetic concert, distributed and interpreted by seven different dancers. The examination of the transfer of choreographic ideas from the kinaesthetic experience of the choreographer to the *corps du ballet* leads to the formulation of my proposed *Distributed Enacted* model of presence in Contemporary Ballet. In this chapter I address the choreographer's idiosyncratic methodology to train and transform dancers' bodies so that they can 'fully' reveal their presence on stage, and how such artistic vision influences the dancers' experience of presence. This includes the strategies and meaning the dancers of the ensemble elaborate to fulfil the choreographic demands of the piece.

³⁴ According to dance scholar Gretchen Alterowitz, Contemporary Ballet is a dance form that encompasses classical technique with specific training methods to produce distinctive movement vocabularies (Alterowitz, 2015). The work of Greco and Scholten is characterised by an idiosyncratic dance vocabulary, an intrinsic complexity and stratified structure and blends canonical elements of classical ballet with postmodern inspiration, thus it can be considered a relevant example of this dance genre. I have addressed the distinctive choreographic methodology of Emio Greco in the forthcoming edited volume *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet* (Pini, S. & Sutton J. (in press) Enculturation and the transmission of kinaesthetic knowledge: *Passione* (2017) by the Ballet National de Marseille, published in Farrugia-Kriel K. & Nunes Jensen J. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*. London, New York: Oxford University Press).

***Passione*: an embodied manifesto**

The staging of *Passione* I attended took place in May and June 2017 at the *Théâtre La Criée* in Marseille. The theatre *La Criée*, located in the old port of Marseille, was established in 1981 as National Theatre of the city. The piece *Passione* encapsulates Greco's idiosyncratic expressivity and physicality.



Figure 13. *Théâtre de la Criée* in Marseille, image retrieved from the website of the Theatre.

Passione is based on Greco and Scholten's foundational principles *Les Sept Nécessités* (The Seven Necessities)—their artistic manifesto. Both the musical composition and the choreography of the piece are inspired and elaborated according to these seven principles, which resemble a phenomenological 'credo', grounded on the physical experience of Greco's dancing body.

Table 1. Greco and Scholten's artistic Manifesto: 'The Seven Necessities'

1	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que mon corps est curieux de tout et moi : je suis mon corps</i>	<i>I have to tell you that my body is curious about everything and that I am my body</i>	Curiosity
2	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que mon corps m'échappe</i>	<i>I have to tell you that my body is escaping from me</i>	Dialogue
3	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que je peux contrôler mon corps et en même temps jouer avec lui</i>	<i>I have to tell you that I can control my body and play with it at the same time</i>	Control (Choice)
4	<i>Il faut que je vous dise qu'il faut que vous tourniez la tête</i>	<i>I have to tell you that you have to turn your head</i>	Contradiction
5	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que je peux multiplier mon corps</i>	<i>I have to tell you that I can multiply my body</i>	Doubt
6	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que je ne suis pas seul</i>	<i>I have to tell you that I am not alone</i>	Challenge
7	<i>Il faut que je vous dise que je vous abandonne et que je vous laisse ma statue</i>	<i>I have to tell you that I am abandoning you and leaving you my statue.</i>	Heritage (Testament)

For each of the 'Seven Necessities' there is a corresponding distinct concept: *Curiosity*, *Dialogue*, *Choice*, *Contradiction*, *Doubt*, *Challenge*, and *Heritage* (Bermúdez, 2007, p. 25). In this piece each dancer performs one of the principles of Greco and Scholten's manifesto as well as embodying the corresponding concept.

Table 2. Cast distribution of *Passione* at the *Theatre de la Criée* (2017)

Sequence of solos	BNM Cast <i>Passione</i> (30/05-02/06 2017)	The Seven Necessities	Music score adaptation from Bach's oratorio
1st solo	Denis Bruno	Curiosity	Overture
2nd solo	Valeria Vellei	Dialogue	Chorale
3rd solo	Gen Isomi (premiere 30/05) Anton Zvir (31/05 - 02/06)	Control (Choice)	Scherzo
4th solo	Angel Martinez-Hernandez	Contradiction	Fugato
5th solo	Aya Sato	Doubt	Aria
6th solo	Vito Giotta	Challenge	Recitativo
7th solo	Nonoka Kato	Heritage (Testament)	Coda

The choreography of each solo is informed by these seven qualities or properties which delineate the seven respective characters the dancers embody and express. Each of these tableaux is associated with a different musical tempo, adapted from Bach's composition and performed live by the musician and composer Franck Krawczyk, who collaborated and performed with Greco in the previous rendition of *Passione in Due*.

Each scene of *Passione* is also characterised by a reference to the circus; every dance solo is inspired by an allusion to a different type of circus performer. An additional layer of complexity is added by the idea that through each solo the dancers can accomplish a sort of expiation of a Deadly Sin associated with each of their respective characters. Each embodiment of Deadly Sin is also linked to a specific body fluid, symbolized by seven bottles containing different coloured liquids placed on stage on top of a bench, which constitutes part of the scenography for the entirety of the piece.

These are among the most salient features characterising the multilayered structure of *Passione* [see table 3], along with the clear reference to the figure of Jesus Christ and his celebrated Passion. Accompanied by the sounds of the piano and the accordion, Greco's *Passione* is a dance concerto where sacred and profane are skilfully blended, and where the universal themes of suffering, sensuality, and sacrifice are revealed through the power of the dancers' bodies.

Table 3. The multilayered structure of the piece *Passione*

The Seven Necessities	Distinct Properties	Capital Vices	Body Fluids	Circus Performers	Music Tempos
<i>I have to tell you that my body is curious about everything and that I am my body</i>	Curiosity	Wrath	Gall	Marionette	Overture
<i>I have to tell you that I am not alone</i>	Dialogue	Envy	Blood	Tightrope Walker	Chorale
<i>I have to tell you that I can control my body and play with it at the same time</i>	Choice	Greed	Sweat	Clown	Scherzo
<i>I have to tell you that my body is escaping from me</i>	Contradiction	Lust	Sperm	Illusionist	Fugato
<i>I have to tell you that you have to turn your head</i>	Doubt	Pride	Tears	Clown triste	Aria
<i>I have to tell you that I can multiply my body</i>	Challenge	Sloth	Urine	Fire Eater	Recitativo
<i>I have to tell you that I am abandoning you and leaving you my statue.</i>	Testament (Heritage)	Gluttony	Saliva	Ventriloquist	Coda



Figure 14. The scenographic bottles in the background representing 7 body fluids.

Origins of the Seven Necessities

To provide the necessary background to understand the multilayered structure of the piece, I begin by addressing the choreographic research undertaken in the long-term collaboration between Greco and Scholten, founders of the company Emio Greco | PC and Directors of the International Choreographic Arts Centre (ICK) in Amsterdam. Greco and Scholten were appointed Artistic Directors of the *Ballet National de Marseille* (BNM) in 2014 and directed the company until the end of 2018.³⁵ From the early days of their artistic collaboration, Greco and Scholten have developed a mélange of classical vocabulary and post-modern dance. Greco was born in 1965 in the city of

³⁵ The Ballet National de Marseille (BNM) is a dance company established in 1972 by Roland Petit, who guided the ensemble for twenty-six years until 1998, when he was succeeded by Marie-Claude Pietragalla, former étoile of the Opéra of Paris. Following Pietragalla's tenure, the Ballet National de Marseille was directed by the Belgian choreographer Frédéric Flamand (2004-2014).

Brindisi in southern Italy. He studied different dance techniques in his hometown, before moving to the French *Côte d'Azur*, where he studied ballet at the *Ecole Supérieure de Danse de Cannes Rosella Hightower* and began his professional career as dancer at the *Ballet Antibes*. He later worked with the Belgian choreographer and visual artist Jan Fabre. Scholten, by contrast, initially worked in drama as a dance dramaturg before his twenty-year collaboration with Greco commenced.

They established their dance company Emio Greco | PC in the Netherlands with their first work, a solo entitled *Bianco* (1996). Along with the debut of this first work, Greco and Scholten also published their artistic manifesto *Les Sept Nécessités* in 1996. Prompted to define what is necessary for the new dance they were developing, the Directors elaborated seven principles of the body's logic which stood at the core of the choreographic language they would create. Subsequently, they created the solo *Rosso* (1997) and the "solo for two" *Extra Dry* (1999).

These three works including the solo *Bianco* formed the trilogy *Fra Cervello e Movimento* (Between Brain and Movement). From the very first production, their distinctive stylistic signature included a tension between so-called 'pure dance' and more expressive dance theatre. French dance critic Rosita Boisseau defined Greco's distinctive style as a hysterisation of classical dance, marked by characteristic arm whirls and rapid twists.³⁶ However, Greco's idiosyncratic choreographic style was deeply influenced by the classic ballet repertoire as much as it borrows from more radical artistic influences.

³⁶ My interpretation of the review written by dance critic Rosita Boisseau, "*On reconnaît le style spécifique d'Emio Greco, cette hystérisation de la danse classique, avec ses moulinets de bras, ses fentes rapides, ses torsions, mais son sens de la découpe et du détail s'autodétruit par saturation*" in *Au "Purgatorio" Jusqu'à Saturation: Une Chorégraphie d'Emio Greco à Paris*, published on *Le Monde*, 2008. The original article is available here https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2008/12/18/au-purgatorio-jusqu-a-saturation_1132694_3246.html#ens_id=1132782.

According to Belgian philosopher Antoon Van den Braembussche in his reconstruction of the genesis of Greco and Scholten's artistic enterprise, since the beginning of their collaboration, their choreographic research has been characterised by the minimalist fashion of postmodern dance, but without its characteristic abstractness.

For Van den Braembussche, what Greco and Scholten (Van den Braembussche refers to them as Emio Greco | PC) create instead is a universe “pervaded by an extreme expressiveness, rooted in a minimalist extremism” (Van den Braembussche, 2001, p. 72). For this syncretism of a minimalist aesthetic with a taste for extreme explorations, the philosopher deploys the neologism *extremalism* which defines the choreographer's distinctive style, based on the power of the dancer's body.³⁷

As Van den Braembussche notes: “this new term reflects the search of Emio Greco | PC for extreme minimalism and for a maximizing of extremes positioned between the profane and the sacred” (Van den Braembussche, 2001, p. 72). In the piece *Passione* this relationship emerges vividly as a central theme of Greco and Scholten's artistic vision—one that is deeply ingrained in all their productions.

The choreographer's vocabulary and movement style are permeated by an *extremalist* use of the body to encompass communicative tensions. These elements are key to understanding BNM dancers' enactments of presence and how Greco's vision contributes to shaping their experience.

³⁷ In his book ‘It's Life Jim’ (2001), Van den Braembussche reports that the term “extremalism” was first coined by François Le Pillouer, Director of the *Théâtre National de Bretagne* (Van den Braembussche, 2001, p. 72).

Reading dance and the textuality of the body

Driven by the desire to grasp Emio Greco's artistic vision, I interviewed the choreographer after he finished rehearsing with the dancers at the theatre *La Criée*, the day before the premiere. During the interview I asked Greco what prompted the development of his artistic methodology and what influences shaped his choreographic vision. In Greco's own words: "when I started to create the first piece with Pieter 21 years ago, I was confronted by the limits of my education, and the fact that to achieve a certain technique sometimes you condemn a lot of other expressions, other pathways in the body. I was confronted by a kind of rigidity". Greco's reply resonates with a statement he released in a previous interview, in which he said:

I'm running away from my own limits. I want to understand where these limits come from, then destroy them and enjoy discovering infinite possibilities. Once done, we are free to return to ourselves, bringing back things from the past. For it is the future that accepts the past. We don't mind dancers wearing ballet shoes. We owe it to ourselves to see beyond this classical tradition, so we tackle the academic perspective head on (Greco & Scholten, 2001).

In illustrating his particular approach to movement, Greco emphasised his opposition to a certain rigidity that he observed in more canonical dance forms. In framing his relationship with tradition, Greco stated that it was precisely the limitations he encountered during his earlier career that served as stimuli for developing his own artistic research practices and methods. Following up on his description, I asked him: "Do you mean in ballet?" Greco replied:

Not only in ballet, even contemporary techniques, because sometimes there is such a formality in modern contemporary dance that it is just the same. From the first work we did that was '*Fra Cervello e Movimento*' I started to see that the key, the solution for me would have been to start to detach the moment when the movement starts, when your mind recognizes it [internally], and [from there] to create a different awareness or a 'trust' in the body.

Greco's methodology, as the choreographer himself pointed out, is aimed at challenging the formality he finds characteristic of many classical forms of dance, such as ballet, in which the emphasis on the aesthetic form, accurate reproduction and fidelity of positions of a codified movement vocabulary, are the premise for successful performance execution and choreographic creation.

I asked Greco about the source of inspiration for his dance. The choreographer replied that his movement vocabulary directly emerges from the corporeal experience, rather than being characterised by pre-existing aesthetic forms that are only subsequently superimposed onto the body. Greco explained to me how the entirety of his methodology stemmed from the specific physicality and intrinsic movement quality of his own body:

Because I have a very hard [inflexible] body, the more rigid you are, the more you need to break through, you have to find [a way]... and this helped me to find a lot of differentiation, because with a flexible body it is more difficult, maybe because I was so rigid, and I'm still rigid in dancing, so that I really have to... to go and to be so specific and to be really precise. This helped me to find out all these kinds of important elements, also because first I did it on myself, because I was reading myself, sometimes it was too painful to watch myself

dancing in the recordings, and I'm still very rigid, you never go far away from your body in fact, your characteristics stay there, but you can take advantage of it.

Greco emphasised the important role played by his specific bodily quality in shaping the development of his vocabulary and style. Another aspect that Greco stressed was that the process of researching and creating his own dance language stemmed from his ability to "read the body". With the expression "I was reading myself", Greco indicates the reflexive approach he had applied to the analysis of his own physicality and movement texture from the beginning of his choreographic career.

Further to this, when I asked him whether his dance can be seen as expression of the tensions and physical experience of the dancing body or rather the result of aesthetic forms a dancing body can accomplish, he emphasized his idea of prioritising an embodied communicative force: "Yes I can read the other bodies, what is the type of nature, the type of writing that a body creates and then I can support it, I can start from there, but never from the form."

This ability to "read the body", according to Susan Foster, is a matter of expertise that is not easily acquired. To be able to understand and make sense of a dance, one has to first "develop a knowledge of the body and its motion" (Foster, 1986, p. 59). This is attainable through attention and awareness to one's own movement, and through attention to the movement of others. After the "reader of dances" has learned "to see and feel rhythm in movement, to comprehend the three-dimensionality of the body, to sense its anatomical capabilities and its relation to gravity, to identify the gestures and shapes made by the body, and even to re-identify them when they are performed by different dancers", only then, Foster claims, "the viewer can apprehend the

choreographic codes and conventions that give the dance its significance” (Foster, 1986, pp. 58–59).

Foster’s book *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (1986) combines a methodological interest in literary studies and its theoretical framework to inform dance scholarship. According to Goellner and Murphy, Foster showed how the concept of *textuality*, developed by semiotician Roland Barthes, can inform a suitable language for the analysis of dance (Goellner & Murphy, 1995, p. 2). As Foster illustrated, the semiotic understanding of dance as a system of symbols comparable to language has a long history. Dance and literature have long been metaphorically connected: such a coupling is retraceable in the etymology of the word *choreography*, which includes the Ancient Greek verb *graphein*, ‘to write’. As choreography stands for ‘writing dance’, reading becomes synonymous with ‘interpreting’ dance, and consequently, with understanding the bodies that enable the dance.

By this analogy I am not suggesting that a semiotic interpretation of dance is or should be the framework of reference for understanding dance and choreographic practices. Referring to Csordas’ “somatic modes of attention” sociologist Helen Thomas has argued in fact that “representational or discursive approaches to the body, while valuable, need to be complemented by a phenomenological approach” (Thomas, 2003). Anthropologists and dance scholars who have embraced phenomenological and cognitive approaches for the analysis of dance, such as Sheets-Johnstone’s work *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966), suggest an understanding of dance as a kinaesthetic art form resulting from embodied knowledge processes rather than a representation of a system of symbols (see also Warburton, 2011, 2016, 2019).

This brief excursus on the semiotic approach to dance studies is important to help our understanding of the conceptual framework on which Emio Greco's choreographic system is based. The dancers of the BNM told me that the choreographer in fact never really abandons his vocabulary. Even when he creates new pieces, he is always relying on the same movements that have been codified in his language and repertoire, which he rearranges and reframes into different choreographic phrases like a syntax.

Forms and intentions

For Greco the aesthetic component of his movement vocabulary doesn't come from a pre-given shape or form but has to be researched and expressed through the underlying intention at the origin of the movement. Greco explained his account of the distinction between form and formality:

Then I create the form but to go in the form is the extreme, I love the form, in fact at the end I search only for new forms, because the form contains the content, it is very important, but then you have to be very precise, [since] the form is not formality, but it is [only] a very specific position of the body that can catch, that can contain a certain state.

According to Greco, there is a close correspondence between a specific position of the body, a specific shape that a dancing body can sculpt, and the intrinsic mental state that is contained or held in such aesthetic form.

In the book *Capturing Intention* (2007), which provides an interdisciplinary analysis and documentation of the work of Greco and Scholten, Corinne Jola discusses the dialectic of intention and form in the work of the choreographer from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. Jola emphasizes that movement intentionality and its relation

to form is worth investigating despite the dearth of previous research in this area. She points out how “in the work of EG | PC [Greco and Scholten] the reliability of the movement form within dancers is secondary. The idea is that the intention itself is the goal and random effects are within the voluntary range of individual expressive bodies” (Jola, 2007, p. 67). To better understand this idea of capturing the intention of the movement, and how Greco’s methodology is coupled with the idea of intentionality, I refer to the phenomenological concept of ‘intentionality’, a term derived from the Latin verb *intendo*, meaning “to aim” or “to stretch.” The ideas expressed by Greco during our interview echoes philosopher Joel Krueger’s definition of intentionality. Krueger states that “in this technical sense, intentionality refers to the way consciousness can stretch out or be directed toward objects internal (images, memories, etc.) and external (things, relations, and events in the world)” (Krueger 2018, online version).

Summarising Husserl’s account, Krueger underlines that “this striving isn’t just going on in our head. It’s a *relational* process through which we stretch outside of ourselves and interact with the world” (Krueger 2018, original emphasis). Following Krueger’s elucidation, I suggest that Greco’s expressive tension underpins his methodology: a corporeal translation of this conception of ‘intentionality’, embodied and expressed through the dancing body. Krueger reminds us that “phenomenologists insist that minds are irreducibly embodied” and that “the things we think and experience—and the way we think and experience them—reflect aspects of the physical structure of our body as well as the things our body can do” (Krueger 2018, online version).

Returning again to Jola, what is important in Greco and Scholten’s work is the intention that stands as the source of the movement, not solely the form that a certain movement realizes. She states that “in the work of EG | PC intention is used as a deliberate practice. The assumption on the part of the artists is that, when consciously attended to, the

intention within a movement becomes somehow perceivable, e.g. it may register with the viewer as the motivation for the movement” (Jola, 2007, p. 63).

The kind of deliberate practice described by Jola, through which such intention becomes manifested, is fostered through the practice of the method *Double Skin/Double Mind* developed by Greco and Scholten. This methodology is composed of four basic principles: *Breathing*, *Jumping*, *Expanding* and *Reducing*. Greco and Scholten state that this technique is intended to develop dancers’ corporeal and mental awareness to make intention and form coincide.³⁸ Within the method *Double Skin/Double Mind*, which aims to encompass both dancers’ mental intentions and their physical gestures, Greco appears to incorporate his notion of phenomenological *intentionality* into specific novel techniques of dance training.

Double Skin/Double Mind

To feed and support their choreographic research, Greco and Scholten created their distinct training method called ‘Double Skin/Double Mind’ (DS/DM), aimed at preparing and shaping the bodies of the dancers for the specific expressive inflection they wanted to produce. According to them, this method aims to infuse every movement with a specific intention, to bring forth external manifestations of inner thoughts. The method DS/DM constitutes the basis of the idiosyncratic movement vocabulary Greco and Scholten developed, as well as the methodology for the entirety of their

³⁸ Excerpt from ICK website: “Double Skin/Double Mind (DS/DM) is a dance method developed by Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten to discover the sensitivity of the body through four basic principles: Breathing, Jumping, Expanding and Reducing. This awareness of the possibilities that the body can generate is necessary when creating new choreographic material. Because of this, the DS/DM method is the basis of every individual performance by Greco and Scholten. The DS/DM method is offered as a masterclass, a training or a workshop to both amateurs and professionals. Experiencing the DS/DM method can lead to a new physical and mental awareness in which intention and form coincide. DS/DM also provides insight into the artistic work of the two choreographers.” Retrieved from <https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/academy/education/ick/double-skin-double-mind-20>

choreographic productions. The method is based on Greco's kinaesthetic experience as the primary unit of investigation.

During my fieldwork at the BNM rehearsals of *Passione*, I observed Greco teaching a class focussed on his DS/DM method on the stage of the Theatre *la Criée*. The class was condensed into a one-hour warm up session to prepare the bodies of the dancers for the incoming *filage* of the piece. It started with a breathing exercise, the dancers scattered across the stage facing the proscenium, the choreographer standing in front of them with his back to the empty seats of the parterre. Greco said to the dancers, "Enjoy the path of your breath", suggesting they visualise the body being traversed by the breath, inviting them to follow their breathing like a channel, a trail inside the body. With the exhalation the dancers bent their bodies towards the ground; while inhaling, their bodies filled up with air to expand and their arms lifted. Greco told them, "As much as the body allows reach inside yourself" alluding to this inner tension, this reaching from the inside, suggesting that the dancers infuse their movements with the intention of going deeper inside, seizing inner 'sense' inside their body.

Their movements then became larger, first by engaging the legs, then by involving the entire body. The dancers breathed in while reaching their arms to the ceiling, then with the exhalation they relaxed their entire bodies, letting themselves softly collapse to the ground by bending their legs. They repeated this sequence several times, inhaling and stretching their bodies to their maximum reach, and then with the breath-out letting them collapse to the floor. Greco directed the dancers to "scan all of your body, open, reach more, more, more, more", telling them that the stronger and longer their bodies became through this exercise, the more they could remain soft (adaptable) inside. After many repetitions the dancers were instructed to release their ankles, their head and shoulders, and to 'travel' more into the body, to '*degagé*' until the ankles, always

repeating through the breathing cycle of expansion and reduction of the body. Greco then asked them to ‘go more into the body’, to explore and open it to different directions, to travel more in the space, to release and shift the balance, while always emphasising the breathing-in and out with the body. The cycle of expanding and releasing continued, the dancers kept stretching their bodies through their breathing in and out.

As the exercise increased in speed, their movements became more dynamic, and Greco suggested they “send the energy out, then suck it in, breath out, what is more important is the *relaché* (release)”. To emphasize this letting go of the body, Greco told the dancers to shake the body, to relax, to drop it out, and to feel their bodies’ weight. They were asked then to release their bodies through some little jumps, and to shake their hands at an increasing speed: “faster, more, more, then relax. Shake the body, arms, legs. The feeling in the hands must extend to all the body.” The dancers kept shaking their limbs and sending their energy out, while they started to move more into the space. This sequence was repeated many times, interrupted only by ten seconds of pause; then they began all over again. The last sequence involved eight jumps in first position (*première*), followed by eight *changements*, then by eight *echappés*.³⁹ After this sequence they then began to shake their bodies again, only to recommence with the series of jumps. Then they vigorously shook their bodies again and slowly began to reduce their pace until they finally got to a simple walk in space, while they kept going with their focus on the breathing cycles.

³⁹ In ballet terminology *changements* are the common abbreviated name for *changements de pieds*, consisting in small jumps in which the feet change positions in the air. *Echappés* are movements done from a closed (first or fifth) position to an open (second or fourth) position. A glossary of ballet is available here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_ballet

The last part of the training involved the dancers randomly wandering in space. They were still expanding their bodies through the breath and sending their arms towards the ceiling, pushing their feet into a *relevé* (rising onto the balls of their feet) and maintaining the position for a few seconds, to then just leaving the pose, and acquired a more ‘neutral’ posture. The dancers continued repeating this movement of expansion and release for a few minutes before concluding the DS/DM training.



Figure 15. BNM dancers stretching after DS/DM training at Theatre *la Criée*, Marseille, 2017.

According to Greco, dancers working with the DS/DM method, through this exercise of reaching and stretching of their bodies, can attain a specific intention from which their communicative power can emerge. This idea seems to echo Husserl’s account of mental intentionality, in which “this directedness is ... a striving, it is from the very beginning ‘driving at’ a satisfaction” (Husserl 2001, p. 126, as cited in Krueger, 2018). Greco believes that the difference between more traditional dance techniques and his method DS/DM consists in the exercise of a conscious attention towards the different

layers of the body. This is particularly relevant in relation to the choreographer's view of stage presence and how that view influences dancers' enactments of presence. Greco believes that his method DS/DM might give the dancers, whose bodies and minds are deeply 'enculturated' and trained in classic techniques, a deeper access to their authentic artistic potential. Margaret Mead defined enculturation as "the process of learning a culture in all its uniqueness and particularity" (Mead 1963, 187). From an anthropological perspective, dance is generally considered a cultural practice and the experience of dance a culturally embedded event. As dance scholar Edward Warburton says: "to be trained as a dancer today is to be enculturated into a world of meanings and movements" (Warburton, 2011, p. 68).

According to Marcel Mauss "the body is man's [sic] first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body" (Mauss, 1973, p. 75). As 'techniques of the body', dance techniques translate into a certain set of dispositions, a recognisable style of moving and acting, of being-in-the-world. The choreographer Emio Greco believes that being 'enculturated' by classic training might inhibit dancers from tapping their full expressive potential. The choreographer further elaborated on the potential of his method:

[with DS/DM] You don't rely on what is used in a more normal technique, [with DS/DM] you can really brush it out, you can clean it out, clean off those years and years of *condensation of manners* [Greco alluding to classic training] and then the inner look goes through the body, through the dance, through the technique.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Emphasis added.

When Greco talks about ‘condensation of manners’, he is referring to a system of dispositions acquired through the practice of professional dance training based on classical and modern dance techniques. These dance practices are regulated by specific training programs that shape not only dancers’ bodies in particular ways, but also encompass a set of values and rules that shape the social behaviour of the members of the collective who perform them. In Greco’s view, the practice of his DS/DM method can help the dancers break through the set of dispositions forged through the practice of classic dance techniques. The choreographer elaborates this idea by saying that:

There is still an old way of thinking that there is a kind of behaviour to look like a dancer, so it seems that you need to have a certain kind of look [appearance, disposition], that is similar, and this doesn’t help the dancers to flourish, to let come out what can really be their presence.

In Greco’s view, presence can be reached by a practice of ‘purification’ from “those years and years of condensation of manners” that he locates in dancers’ classic education in ballet and modern dance techniques. To disrupt and challenge dancers’ movement habits, Greco elaborated his dance method DS/DM, which he suggests can offer radical access to dancers’ ‘presence’, as well as helping them attain a richer range of movement qualities. According to Greco:

In ballet or in modern dance you use the limbs [...] but it is not so physiological, certain techniques have a more mechanic understanding of the body, and this [DS/DM method conversely] is a kind of physiological understanding, so with this method you also develop the sense of the liquid, of the soft organs inside your body, you distinguish the harder parts, the skeleton, you distinguish the muscles, and then at the end the skin, which communicates with the external world, so you start to have multiple layers of interpretation with your body, you

can imagine how you can grow, how you can strength your personality and your technique.

This idea that the body has multiple layers of interpretation lies at the centre of Greco's methodology, hence the name Double Skin/Double Mind. As the choreographer later explained to me, this stands for the multiplicity of layers and possible interpretations embedded within the dancing body. Such embeddedness of multiple meanings is a major characteristic of the work of Greco and Scholten, and also constitutes the framework of the piece *Passione*.

The re-creation of *Passione*: the choice of the cast

Intrigued by the complexity of Greco's methodology, and the fact that in *Passione* all seven characters were originally created and interpreted by the choreographer himself, I asked him what predominant factors guided his choice of the cast for this new version of *Passione*, and how he managed to transpose his vision for each specific character to the dancers' bodies. Talking about his casting decisions, Greco revealed:

Before being technical, [the decision] was more linked to some human aspects of the dancers, certain ways of how they are, how they stand with their bodies, beyond the technique. Also the dramaturgy of their bodies, the structure, the psychology that you can read through it [...] So first I used the human, and the relation that there is with this technique, what kind of dialogue is there, because of this dialogue [with the technique] then you can enter between the two things and we can expand. Certain people they don't have that dialogue, and then it's very hard, but if there is a dialogue, then you can enter also with your [own] dialogue [movement vocabulary], with your indications, and the body starts to

expand, starts to receive many other elements and also many other dimensions, and it keeps giving back.

I was curious to compare the choreographer's vision with the dancer's perspective, and to understand the choreographer's strategies to translate into the dancers' bodies the specificity of each character. During my conversation with the BNM dancers, I asked them what they thought about the casting choices for *Passione*. Quite unanimously they believed the attribution of each of their specific roles had to do with their appearances and physical characteristics. Several dancers of the company told me that Nonoka Kato, for example, was chosen for this role because of her appearance, which conveys a very poetic 'presence'. Nonoka performs the final solo of the piece, epitomising the directors' Seventh Necessity: 'I have to tell you that I am abandoning you and leaving you my statue' associated with the idea of *Heritage*, (*Testamento*), which forms the 'the last will' or in this case the last word that she announces to the audience once she enters the stage. The BNM dancers told me that for Greco "just to have her there like a statue" would have beautifully suited this character. The dancers thought that the choreographer's choices of the cast relied on their physical characteristics more than any other aspect of their personalities or movement qualities.

When I asked Denis Bruno, the dancer who performed the overture (first solo) associated with the Deadly Sin of Wrath, the reason why he imagined the choreographer chose him for this specific character, he told me, that Greco must have seen in his athletic and muscular physicality the potential for channelling the idea of anger through the expressivity of his body. But some of the dancers also reported that they did not necessarily recognise themselves in their respective roles. These dancers found the process of conveying the choreographer's idea of their characters without the possibility of fully drawing from their personal styles, a challenging task. Denis told me, "I don't

recognize myself in the anger, the animosity. I don't have this temper inside. It was difficult to exteriorise it in the beginning”.



Figure 16. Denis Bruno dancing the overture in *Passione* (courtesy of BNM).

Interpreting the Seven Necessities

How do dancers achieve presence on stage with *Passione*? In relation to actors rather than dancers, feminist performance scholar Peggy Phelan wrote that “the actor achieves presence through performing as if another” (Phelan, 1993, p. 117). According to Roach, the fact that “performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else” (Roach 2007, p. 9) fosters the magnetic power of their theatrical presence. Can dancers achieve presence through performing *as if another* as actors do? My interlocutors suggest the opposite. For example, Anton Zvir, who in *Passione*

perform the third solo of the ‘clown’ associated with the Necessity of ‘choice’ (*I have to tell you that I can control my body and play with it at the same time*), told me that “in the theatre actors really play the role. In dance we dance a character, in dance you are always you and transmit that character”. Anton observed how the dancer needs to be ‘open’ on stage in order to be able to transmit to the public a given feeling. He highlighted how a dancer needs to be ‘whole’: “*Savoir transmettre au public le sentiment, il faut être ouvert sur scène, il faut être entier. Ça veut dire être vraiment toi. Pas essayer de jouer quelqu’un d’autre, être toi, dans ce rôle-là.*” (To be able to transmit to the public the feeling, you have to be open on stage, you have to be whole. It means to be really you. Do not try to play someone else, be yourself, in that role).

According to these accounts, presence in dance is not achieved by performing as someone else. I report here a brief conversation I had with Vito Giotta, a ‘veteran’ of the BNM ensemble who in *Passione* performs the ‘fire eater’ in the 6th solo associated with the Necessity ‘*I have to tell you that I can multiply my body*’. Vito thinks that presence in dance:

...is about feeling the sensation and try to express this sensation as you, through your experience [...] It is something that it is in you already and the piece just brings it, made it explicit, you express it but it is something that it is you, it is not something that you pretend or fake.

According to my interlocutors at the BNM, the “fictional mode of presence” (Power, 2008) doesn’t seem to operate in the context of professional dance as it does for actors in theatre or cinema. The art of acting requires performers to actively take on the role they play in order to transmit the qualities of a given character to the audience. Like a magician who makes the audience believe an illusion is real, the good actor is

supposedly the one who is able to skilfully embody a given role, becoming that character, making it real and alive in front of the audience.

In contrast, according to my informants, a dancer will never ‘dance’ as another. A celebrated quote attributed to Agnes de Mille states: “the truest expression of a people is in its dance and in its music. Bodies never lie”.⁴¹

For Greco presence is a fundamental aspect of his choreographic vision, and he has built his training method DS/DM upon this idea, allowing dancers to access their full expressive potential and manifest a powerful presence on stage. I asked Vito what kind of directions they received from the choreographer in this respect:

He [Greco] always says to us to express the feeling of the moment, and then he gives us a feedback, if he sees what he would like to see or not. It is always about the piece, about the roles, we never do acting class, because I think, we have to interpret something but it has always to be our feeling, our perception of it, if we start to learn how to be another, it is different. If we take theatre classes to learn how to be dramatic, or how to be whatever, when we go on stage to dance we will be like interpreting something, and I think in dance, what we are looking for is more the [real] feeling, like what will you do if you were [interpreting] a certain role but you will take your choices as you.

As Vito reported, Emio Greco’s attention to the expression of the ‘feeling of the moment’, echoes Susan Foster’s view of the dancing body as a vehicle for aesthetic expression. Foster stressed that

...training not only constructs a body but also helps to fashion an expressive self that, in its relation with the body, performs the dance. Aesthetic expression

⁴¹ Agnes de Mille was an American dancer and choreographer (1905 – 1993).

can result when a self uses the body as a vehicle for communicating its thoughts and feelings, or when the self merges with the body and articulates its own physical situation. (Foster 1997, p. 241)



Figure 17. Vito Giotta performing the 'Fire Eater', *Théâtre de la Criée*, Marseille, 2017

To describe the ability of dancers to absorb different movement qualities, to allow the transmission of kinaesthetic knowledge across their bodies and the body of the choreographer, dance scholar Edward Warburton argues that, alongside somatic and kinaesthetic forms of empathy, dancers develop a ‘feel for’ the movement and a connection to the choreography through mimetic empathy. For Warburton, mimetic empathy is “a form of cognitive empathy, the ability to put oneself imaginatively in the place of another, reproducing in one’s own imagination and physicality the emotional tenor and movement form of another” (Warburton, 2011, p. 74).

The process through which the sharing of embodied information occurs in dance, according to Warburton, is not merely a re-presentation or replica of the choreographer’s movement but involves “bodily experiences of the choreographer’s way of dance-making, which, through mimetic mirroring of movement qualities and emotion and intent, becomes a shared vision” (Warburton 2012, 74). Warburton states that “dancers as interpretative artists must be able to both physically reproduce a choreographer’s movement vocabulary and faithfully represent her expressive intention. When dancers are successful, viewers not only see the movement, but they also feel its expressive intent” (Warburton 2012, p.73).

In relation to dancers’ ability to faithfully represent the choreographer’s expressive intent, several dancers of the *Ballet de Marseille* emphasised that having a ‘strong presence’ is considered a problem for the kind of work they did under the direction of Emio Greco. They said that this can represent a problem for Greco who did not like the dancer’s presence to prevail over the choreography. According to the BNM dancers, for Greco the interpreter should never prevail over the work. What is at stake is the effectiveness of the choreographer’s communicative ‘intention’, the expression of the artistic message embedded in his creation. This view exemplifies Greco’s

understanding of the dancers' bodies as a medium for his aesthetic enterprise, conceived as 'vessels' for the expression of his work.

With regard to owning a personal and highly distinctive movement quality, Angel Martinez Hernandez described some difficult aspects at play with this transmission from choreographer to dancer. Angel's performance in *Passione* both evoked the figure of Christ and revolved around the principle of the body "escaping", representing the Deadly Sin of Lust associated with the directors' Manifesto principle of *Contradiction*.



Figure 18. Angel Martinez Hernandez performing the 'body escaping' (courtesy of BNM).

Angel's physicality and movement qualities of suppleness and sensuality radically differ from those of the choreographer Greco. Angel revealed how the complex process of adapting his movement modality to Greco's material was not always an easy task:

He [Greco] wanted to see [reproduced] what he was feeling [when he danced this solo], so in the beginning it was hard to get into that point because you

cannot feel like someone else feels, and then he was not really... I could see that he was not identified with what I was doing, because he would say “ok this I don’t feel it”. In the beginning it was hard to get into that point because you could see he didn’t know how to direct me, and how to give me the information to take out what he wanted. Then little by little, I think he started to let me do and we start to find a way to talk between us, to get into a line where, I think he would have agreed, let’s say, he was agreeing with what I was doing, and let me go through this way, always directed by what he was saying.

As the dancer explained, the problem for Greco was that he could not recognize his own style, nor see his movement signature through the body of this particular dancer. The dancer revealed that working with Greco on the re-creation of *Passione* was quite a difficult process for him, due to this difference in movement quality between dancer and choreographer. Angel embodied articulated and fluid the qualities, in contrast to Greco’s movement style, self-described as more rigid and strong.



Figure 19. Angel Martinez Hernandez in the 4th solo ‘Contradiction’ (Deadly Sin of Lust).

The rehearsals before the show

During rehearsals of *Passione* at the *Theatre La Criée*, I observed Greco working with Angel Martinez Hernandez and giving him his corrections. Greco wanted to make sure that Angel was really making evident the feeling of the body becoming fluid, in Greco's words "escaping". He suggested to the dancer that he should feel the water inside, like an internal rain. I observed Angel holding in his frustration, nodding and replying to Greco "*je l'avais pas bien senti*", (I didn't quite feel it right). Greco added: "You should give more direction with the extremities, feel the movement more internally, think about the idea of solemnity" as Angel's solo quite explicitly evokes the figure of Christ.

During the last rehearsal every dancer repeated their own solo while Greco was on stage with them, giving his corrections to each dancer one by one, until it was time for the last *filage*. The dancers were given a few minutes to put on the costumes, to focus, and to enter the mental space of the character. The general rehearsal took a couple of hours, then the dancers were given an hour to relax and complete their make up before the show would begin.

The BNM dancers' accounts evoked what dance sociologist Randy Martin in *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (1990) emphasised when he stated that

[t]he choreographer has something she wants to say, and forges the rehearsal process to say it. But just when she would find that voice, when the dance is complete, the body that her yearning implies is materialized in those of the dancers. Her desire to speak becomes their movement, (Martin 1990, p. 116).

Martin described the rehearsal time before the performance as the time when “the piece is realized and passes into danced experience”, when the dancers can attain a renewed agency over the choreography:

To the dancers who refine the movement through technique while they produce something beyond it, this time marks the receding role of the authority embodied in the person of the choreographer. For all the excitement of the creative process, perhaps one of the cruelties of choreography is that it leaves the choreographer not so far from where she began. [...] As the essence of the piece is realized and passes into danced experience, the choreographer’s loss makes performance possible. (Martin, 1990, p. 117)

Given that this version of *Passione* performed by the dancers of the BNM is a re-adaptation from a solo dance tailored to the choreographer’s body to a piece for seven different dancers, it represents an interesting case to which Martin’s account of “the choreographer’s loss” does not apply. In *Passione* the choreographer’s presence is distributed across the seven different dance solos. To emphasise this aspect, composer and musician Franck Krawczyk told me:

Emio, il ne danse pas mais il danse quand même. Dans le travail, pour moi il est encore présent dans la pièce, il est incarné, je le sens encore là.

Emio [Greco] doesn’t dance in *Passione*, but he dances it anyway. In the work, for me he is still present in the piece, he is embodied [in the work], I still feel him there.

Passione incorporates the choreographer’s presence on stage through the bodies of the dancers, as well as permeating those bodies with Greco’s artistic vision and his own idiosyncratic moving style; in other words, with his dancing *omnipresence*.

Another degree of complexity for the BNM dancers comprises the ability to embody not only the specific choreographic features of their respective roles, but also Greco's individual style and manner of being on stage. As a dancer, Greco is recognised for manifesting a quite exceptional sense of presence on stage according to several dance critics, including Belgian philosopher Antoon Van den Braembussche. Referring to Greco's execution of his first trilogy *Fra Cervello e Movimento*, Van den Braembussche affirmed: "the dancer Greco has an overwhelming presence. He completely dominates the scene, however large it is, wherever he is positioned. The progression from a duet was not easy in this respect that a dancer had to be found who would not be blown off the stage by Greco" (Van den Braembussche, 2001, p. 10). Negotiating their interpretation and presence on stage with the choreographer's *omnipresence* was a challenging task for the BNM dancers that had to accommodate their own expressive kinaesthetic style and physical qualities with the choreographer's ideas and specific way of moving and understanding the body in dance.

Distributed Enacted model of presence in Contemporary Ballet

Based on my ethnographic observations in the specific context of this fieldwork, I propose here a *Distributed Enacted* model of presence in Contemporary Ballet. The following model illustrates the relationship and dynamics of influence and how the sense of presence emerges across the performance ecology of the piece.

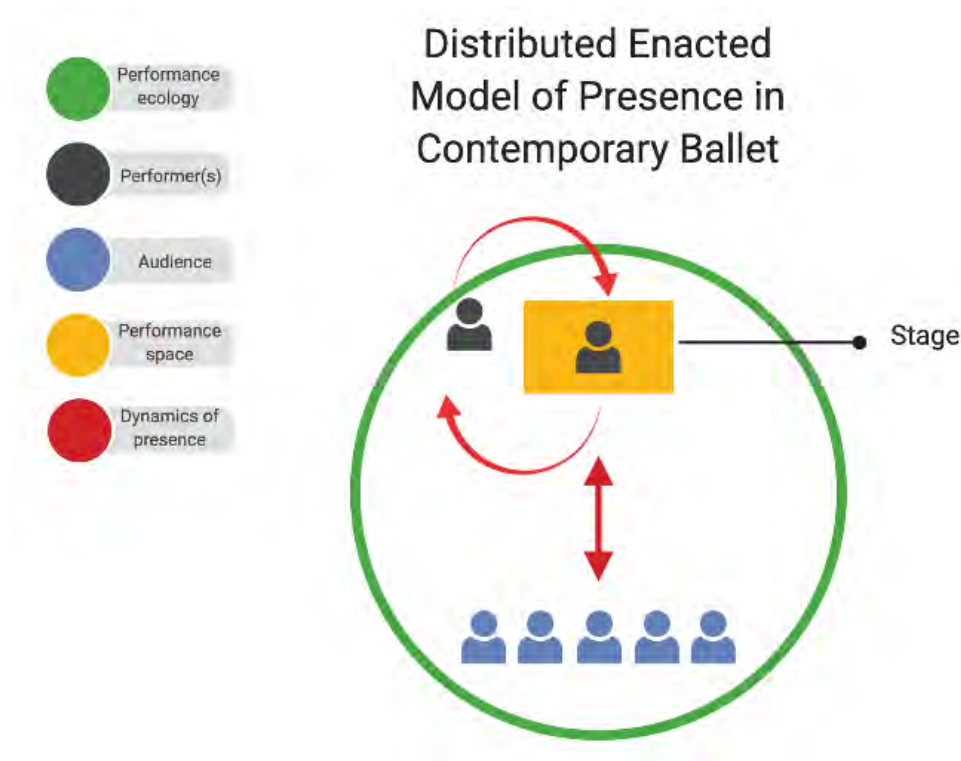


Figure 20. *Distributed Enacted* model of presence in Contemporary Ballet

Similarly to the diagram illustrating the classic model of stage presence [Figure 3, page 66] the *Distributed Enacted* model of presence in Contemporary Ballet indicates the stage and the space of the performance in yellow. However, unlike the classic model, the arrows between the performer and the audience point in both directions, to underline the relevance of their role in shaping phenomena of presence in this context. The diagram is informed not only by the elements of the choreographer and the other performers, but also the dramaturgy, the objects that are part of the scenography, the musician Frank Krawczyk and his piano, and the musical score. All these components enable the enactment and distribution of presence across this performance ecology. Although the above-mentioned elements comprising the performance ecology might

not contribute equally to the emergence of presence, in this model they are highlighted nonetheless as integral ingredients that together shape the emergence of presence.

Passione is a bodily concert in which the sense of presence became manifest through the physicality of the bodies of the dancers. These bodies maintain a special relationship with the choreographer's presence, which is distributed across the seven dancers who embody the principles of his Manifesto encoded within the multi-layered structure of the piece.

Greco's *extremalist* presence

One element in this ecology that assumes a substantial role is the choreographer's *omnipresence*. During our interview, I asked Greco about his research on presence, something that he identifies as 'aliveness', which appears to be a fundamental part of his work. Greco described the sense of presence as a 'state of wanting', as an ability of the body to express and project out its desires and intentions. He explained his idea of presence as follows:

Yes, [presence is that] and beyond, and the states that it is ready to create, something in the possibility, in the possible state, it is something that it is able to grasp a moment or to create a situation, even in the stillness it is very aware, this creates the state of the body of constantly aiming for something, wishing, wanting something, this wishing [is what] makes the body very ambitious, and at the same time very vulnerable, and fragile, it doesn't make it arrogant. It's the opposite, it is this state, in this state of wanting, [which] sometimes it can bring some failure, and this is another aspect that I consider essential, the attempt to go, the attempt means that it's a trial, it's not sure that you're going to get it.

As underlined above, Greco's training method DS/DM and choreographic language explores body-mind relationships by questioning and contrasting thought and action. The choreographer's research revolves around this tension; it focuses on what happens when the body reaches the limit, when the body 'takes over' the mind.

The dancers of the BNM revealed how this practice of pushing their bodies to the limit of their physical abilities, in both daily training routines and rehearsals, is one of Greco's key techniques to prepare the dancers for his choreographic work. Such strenuous use of the body is a fundamental aspect of Greco's aesthetic and artistic research, which the choreographer conceives of as an essential instrument for the creation of his choreographic material.

The BNM dancers often mentioned that the choreographer explicitly asks them to go beyond their limits and to 'overcome themselves'. Interestingly, Greco's intention with his work is to reveal the unity of the body and the mind, through a practice that emphasises pushing the body to the limit of exhaustion and physical pain, only to be able to move beyond its own habits and comfort zone.

According to the BNM dancers, Greco's work departs from the idea that the mind controls the body, which in turn can be overtaken by challenging its physical strength, energy and resistance. According to the choreographer's perspective, when the body is exhausted, when dancers are too tired to think and the fatigue takes over, that is the moment when the dancing body can take 'advantage' and fully manifest its expressive power. In Greco's account this moment coincides with the emergence of the dancer's presence.

The BNM dancers often reported how both the directors Greco and Scholten repeatedly incite the dancers to push the boundaries of their physical resistance, to bring forth what lies beyond such limits, beyond the overly controlled and polished forms encouraged

in much classical ballet training. BNM dancer Nahimana Vandenbussche emphasises this aspect:

They like when it [movement] is dirty!⁴² because they say “from dirty it can become something more, but if you go safe, if you don’t push it, you don’t even go there to challenge yourself”, because it has to be always a challenge [...] and I think this training is how Greco makes us to understand [...] I think it’s this, at the beginning it’s a bit complicated, because you don’t understand why you have to tire yourself so much, but then when you go through it and you realize “oh my god, actually it really helps” then you feel you have grown a little bit.

This point was also emphasised by Greco’s long-term collaborator and co-director Scholten, who stated. “Because there’s strength in vulnerability, we can see objective beauty in a suffering body” (Greco & Scholten, 2001). For Greco the dancing body achieves ‘presence’ by undergoing the kinaesthetic transformation provoked by his specific dance training. The BNM dancers reported how the choreographer always pushes the dancers to reach beyond their physical limits: the tiredness, the burning muscles, and the mental exhaustion.

Referring to the common assumption that permeates institutionalised dance forms, in which the body of the dancer is conceived of as a medium, as an object that needs to be transformed and shaped to accommodate the specific aesthetic demands of the artistic tradition, dance anthropologist Andrée Grau pointed out that: “Through history ballet dancers came to look upon their bodies as tools that can be stretched, bent, starved or whatever in order to push the boundaries of the technique so that today many ballet

⁴² A common expression in professional dance milieu used to indicate a quality of movement that is unpolished, or rough.

dancers think of what they can do to their bodies as though they were objects” (Grau, 2005, p. 145).

In this respect it is interesting to observe how this idea of the body as an object that can be “stretched, bent, starved” to serve the art of dance is reiterated through Greco’s idiosyncratic choreographic vocabulary and dance method DS/DM, despite his attempts to break away from the classic tradition in other ways. Notwithstanding Greco’s intention to ‘see beyond’ the classical tradition, the objectifying conception of the body that is a common view in classical dance forms re-emerges through the narrative of Greco’s artistic research and methodology. Greco’s own enculturated body in classical techniques remains nevertheless the unit of analysis of his artistic research as revealed through ‘The Seven Necessities’.

Given Greco’s peculiar relation to formality and the ‘forms’ that his dance vocabulary assumes, it is relevant to ask how this relationship to presence is mediated across Greco’s methodology and the diversity of the *corps de ballet*.

Dancers’ enactments of presence

I discussed with the dancers involved in the staging of *Passione* how they negotiate their identities and expressive selves during the choreographic process. I also asked about how they approached the re-enactment of the choreographer’s ‘presence’ through their bodies, and what kind of direction Greco gave them. I was interested, for example, whether he suggested any specific strategy or technique to tap into their characters’ presence and to elicit audience participation.

The dancers told me that the choreographer's way of communicating to the audience has to go through a focus on the specific movement quality of their characters. One dancer of the ensemble explained:

During the work it could happen that he [Greco] says something about presence, how to be on stage, but it is more related to the character, to the specific solo, of course he says to me how to be, how to interpret my part and what he says to me it is different than what he can say to Vito because we are different characters. In my case he insisted a lot on the fact that sometimes I'm much too shy, or much too inward.

Nahimana Vandebussche, explained to me how the choreographer insists on a certain 'fullness' of movement:

[Greco] doesn't say like 'show yourself', but he says that "the movement has to be full, this will anyways translate to the audience, but if you don't finish the movement, you just stay on the inside and then you don't open". For example, he says a lot to "open chest". I think for him if you open the chest, then you automatically open yourself, your soul, how he would like to convey it also to the audience. He never really says how to do it, but I think it is more through the kind of movement that he wants.

I asked Nahimana how this transfer or communication between dancers, audience and choreographer occurs. The dancer explained to me that:

You have to understand what he [Greco] says, he gives hints, and you need to understand from those hints what he actually wants, and these hints makes you think "ok, so you want me to get [my presence] out" because you need to look also at them [audience], I believe he [Greco] makes it really through the

movement to make you connect with the audience, and he doesn't really say like 'be present' but more like 'be aware', be aware they are there, be aware of your surroundings and if you are aware of your surroundings, you automatically interact with the people.

Several dancers of the ensemble told me how the presence of the audience affects their performance. According to the dancers' accounts, the audience plays an important role in shaping their enactments of presence and the way they experience their dance. Nahimana further elaborated on this:

For me it is the audience that makes all the difference because I enter and then suddenly you are like completely there [laughs]. It's like they give me the strength to go. For me it is like 'now we are going together to concentrate', like 'now, the performance starts!'. When you see the people [in the audience] there is something that either it connects or it doesn't connect, and when it connects then things go like 'wow!' then I really don't care about what Emio says.

These dancers' accounts evoke what Martin (1990) wrote about the rehearsal period preceding the performance when "it is the dancer's own vision that reveals them":

...the choreographer's effect on the dancers is concentrated in their effect on the audience. Performance, the moment when dancers are at their fullest as the subject of dance, when their experience of dancing is truly totalizing, is also the instance when the dancers' bodies are the pure object of the audience's eye. It is the dancer's own vision that reveals them. (Martin 1990, p. 117)

For the dancers of the BNM, revealing their own vision is not always an easy task. Partially because expressing the choreographer's ideas requires further effort beyond the ability to reproduce the choreographer's movement quality and intentions. Their

task extends beyond the accurate execution of the choreographic score. This production asks them to understand and incorporate the entirety of the choreographer's artistic manifesto, as well as negotiating his 'presence' which permeates the entire piece.

Atmosphere and collective energy

The BNM dancers developed their own idiosyncratic strategies and motivation to respond and make sense of the choreographer's poetics and demands. They attempted to find strategies to 'conform' to his vision, his methods and artistic framework, while remaining true to their bodies and their personalities. Here, I present some of the reflections provided by the dancers of the BNM about their experience of presence within this specific choreographic work.

Nonoka Kato, who entered on stage at last as she performed the final solo—the Testament—explained to me that to make the connection to her character she connects with the other dancers who preceded her on stage; she goes through all the states the other dancers inhabit and have to make manifest through their solos, tuning in to the specific feeling of each solo. She explained:

I think about going through the whole [unfolding] time [of the piece], every time, and during the show I imagine myself going through every feeling [embodied in each different solo] and I try to keep it until the end, when I make my entrance running on stage, that's the moment, until I stop running, from the moment Denis [overture - first solo] enters the scene, for me, in my mind, I run, I start running.

Further, Nonoka explained to me the importance of finding her own meaning for interpreting her role. She confessed that she found it difficult to understand the choreographer's vision of 'the last will' and the idea of leaving the audience the

choreographer's 'heritage' by posing like a 'statue'. This idea didn't resonate with her feeling, so she told me that she came up with an image that helps her connect and develop her character. In her words: "*Je pense que c'est mon dernier spectacle, je pense que c'est mon dernier spectacle chaque fois que je danse ce solo. Ça c'est ce que me donne le sens de faire ce solo*" (I think it's my last show, every time I dance this solo, I think that this is my last show. That's what gives me the sense of doing this solo).



Figure 21. Nonoka Kato performing the 7th solo in *Passione* (courtesy of BNM).

Dancers develop their own meaning in order to be able to perform the piece. Reflecting on the dancers' strategies to foster their sense of presence, Aya Sato, another dancer of the ensemble who interpreted the 5th solo, revealed:

I dance between Angel and Vito, actually Angel gives me a lot of energy, and every time is completely different. For me Angel leaves atmosphere on the stage and then I enter after him. The energy and the audience also, they watch him dance, and the audience also makes atmosphere, not on the stage, but in the theatre, is from his dance but I think is energy.



Figure 22. Aya Sato dancing the 5th solo, *Théâtre de la Criée*, 2017.

Both Vito and Angel told me how they see the atmosphere, the force of being together in this piece, as a collective presence that emerges based on the connections they establish throughout the unfolding of the piece. Vito, for example, emphasises the strong connection all the dancers feel in the finale of *Passione*, when he says that they all feel they have all become Nonoka. I asked Vito if they received such indication from the choreographer, but instead he said “No, we don’t have to do this, nobody asked us to do this, but I think it’s something that just comes out”. The finale of the piece surprises the audience. At last, all dancers come back on stage and join Nonoka, who was standing still on the proscenium. Together they perform an unexpected powerful last dance. Dressed in colourful costumes that evoke the different temperament of the characters they play, the dancers of the BNM ensemble move as if they were one

massive body, performing in unison a last compelling dance that leaves the audience enlivened and moved.



Figure 23. The finale of *Passione* (courtesy of Didier Philispart).

Because every single dance solo in *Passione* embeds one of the Seven Necessities, the seven foundational principles of the directors' manifesto, the dancers of the Marseille ensemble were required not only to embody the choreographer's vocabulary and aesthetics, but also to embrace the complexity of his artistic vision. In order to do so, they had to make sense of his entire conceptual framework and meet not only the audience's but also the choreographer's expectations.

Throughout the process of working with Greco, by being exposed to the choreographer's creative processes, the dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* have acquired a specific movement vocabulary and learnt how to interpret Greco's idiosyncratic kinaesthetic language. They have become enculturated into a new and

highly specific set of bodily and movement practices. In this the dancers of the BNM “have embodied the choreographer’s aspiration and transformed her [sic] vision into a collective body” (R. Martin, 1990, p. 118).

The dancers’ accounts emphasise how they integrate their own understanding of presence with the demands of the choreographic score. Their accounts also stress how stage presence is more than the intrinsic ability of the performer. Angel Martinez Hernandez captured this idea when he said that “stage presence is the capacity to blend together with energy, with the other dancers, with the atmosphere, with what we have to do, with what is being asked”.

For the BNM dancers, presence emerges as an extended awareness that comprehends the presence of the audience, the other performers dancing the piece, the choreographer’s vision and methodology, the dramaturgy, and the space of the theatre. It emerges as a matrix of information and thoughts and feelings shared across the performance space, the audience and the dancers participating in the collective cognitive ecology of the performance.

Summary

In this analysis of *Passione*, I presented a case where an idiosyncratic dance vocabulary operates within the context of an institutionalised dance genre such as Contemporary Ballet, addressing the underlying processes that inform the construction of meaning in dance. The analysis of *Passione* demonstrated how the choreographer’s methodology and movement language is embodied and re-enacted by the dancers. I have examined not only a choreographer’s personal style and dance vocabulary, but also the relationship between his specific training method and dancers’ idiosyncratic ways of

moving. I investigated how the dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* articulate their kinaesthetic understanding and their diverse forms of presence in relation to the choreographer's artistic vision and demands, addressing the specificity of this case study to exemplify how meanings are negotiated across different bodies. I have considered the role played by the choreographer's methodology Double Skin/Double Mind (DS/DM) in shaping the transmission of kinaesthetic knowledge. This method is aimed at training and fostering the multiplicity of layers and expressive possibilities of the dancing body. The idea that the body has multiple layers of interpretation is central to the work and artistic methodology of Greco and Scholten, and the dancers working with the DS/DM method, according to Greco, can attain a specific intention from which their communicative power can emerge. I identified in the method DS/DM a physical and embodied manifestation of the phenomenological conception of intentionality, which aims to encompass both dancers' mental intentions and their physical gestures.

From this fieldwork it appears that the dancers of the BNM understood presence not as an individual skill but as an emergent possibility arising from interactions of several elements, including: the audience, the choreographic demands of the performance, their specific role and solos, and the energy emanating from the other dancers when they leave the stage. Stage presence in this context emerges as distributed across the environment, the theatre's atmosphere, the choreographer's 'omnipresence' in the score, the other dancers and the audience. By environment here is intended not only the physical space of the theatre with its geographical and historical location, but also the social environment of this specific ballet company and how the artistic agenda of the artistic directors is integrated within the structure of the company. Presence extends to the work of each singular dancer and how each of them performs the choreography, how they understand and embody this particular dramaturgy, including the objects that

are part of the scenography, the meanings they construct for themselves and the collective. With this chapter I demonstrated how processes of presence enacted across different actors diverge from the classic model, with the distinct elements of the ecology operating in different ways. The exploration of these dancers' lived experience provides an alternative interpretation of the phenomenon of stage presence that moves away from the so-called classic model of 'stage presence', exposing the relationships that link the various elements of the ecology. This chapter, combined with a focus on the cognitive ecologies of different dance practices throughout this thesis, suggests the manner in which we might catch a glimpse of the phenomenon of stage presence from a social, enacted, and situated perspective.



Figure 24. The curtain call. *Passione* at the *Théâtre de la Criée*, Marseille, 2nd June 2017.

CHAPTER 6.

THE GLOBAL UNDERSCORE AND INTERKINAESTHETIC SOCIAL PRESENCE IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION

“To be disoriented is to be undone, to be thrown off balance.
But it also hints at a deeper knowledge.
We rarely think about where we are until we have been lost.”
(Cooper Albright, 2013, p. 38)

In this chapter I explore stage presence and Contact Improvisation (CI)—a duet-system dance practice based on improvisation, focusing on the sensory modalities in play as well as the cultural context in which this dance form is performed. This chapter is informed by the accounts of diverse clusters of *contacters*, practitioners of CI, encountered during a year-long research period in Sydney, Australia; and Bologna, Ferrara and Arezzo in Italy. Through my ‘observant’ participation and the analysis of first-person descriptions of my interlocutors, I explore the phenomenal experience of presence and participation in improvisational dance performances. I focus on the community dance event of the Global Underscore as observed in Arezzo, Italy, in 2017 to introduce my proposed *Interkinaesthetic Social model* of presence in CI. I continue by addressing how presence is experienced through the body by focusing on *contacters’* physical experience of ‘falling’, also described as ‘disorientation’. To consider how cultural metaphors are rooted in physical experience, attention is given to *contacters’* accounts of the extent to which bodily metaphors are shaped, enacted and performed within this context of practice. I provide a brief overview of the specific movement

system of CI, grounding my analysis on dance scholars' accounts as well as on the information provided by CI practitioners and CI facilitators during my fieldwork.

The moment I entered the space of the *Teatro Polivalente Occupato*—the Multi-purpose Occupied Theatre (TPO)⁴³ in Bologna—a squatted social centre that hosts cultural and artistic initiatives which promote social and environmental justice, human rights, and support migrants' and asylum seekers' rights—to join a jam session of CI, many things felt 'unorthodox'. The feeling of strangeness was in a minimal part due to finding myself in such a space to do a dance training. It was unusual for me, coming from a traditional professional dance background, to engage in dance training with people who were not professional dancers. But other reasons amplified this feeling of strangeness. Returning to my hometown only a few months after having moved to Australia to start my PhD, to undergo experimental treatments for my relapsing disease, deeply influenced my feeling of estrangement. Because my stay in Italy depended on the outcome of my oncological treatments, I didn't know how long I would stay for. Since there was no guarantee I would be able to get back to my PhD project in Sydney in a short time, continuing my research in Italy seemed the only possible option. After setting foot back in Bologna, I searched for CI training in the city and found 'C.BO' an independent self-organised group of CI practitioners who met up for practice and jamming every month. There I encountered a group of people that I would have never imagined could have a passion for this type of dancing if I had met them elsewhere. When I arrived at the TPO to do my first CI class in Italy, I looked around at the people in the room: none of them were professional dancers, nor even ever trained as such. There was a lawyer, a teacher, a pensioner, some university students, a few government

⁴³ After a first eviction from the spaces of the Academy of Fine Arts in 2000, the TPO was established in a former aquarium factory, squatted until 2007. From that year until the present, the TPO has been located in Via Casarini 17/5, Bologna.

employees. They mostly looked like ‘ordinary’ people; their bodies didn’t reveal a ‘second’ nature, they were not overly sculpted by a dance training. Despite appearances, some of them had considerable experience with this dance form, training in CI for many years.



Figure 25. Group C.BO during a class of Contact Improvisation at TPO, Bologna, 2014.

Navigating this space of deep uncertainty, I approached my fieldwork with trepidation. I could sense my initial resistance to entering such unusual dance environment to dance with such diverse group of people. However, I soon realised that if I could perform the *epoché*, if I could manage to suspend my judgment and accept the fact that I was going to learn how to dance from people who were not professional dancers, I could encounter something that perhaps I had previously overlooked.

A similar view of the dancing body in play with traditional dance forms was shared by one of my interviewees, Argentinian choreographer and CI teacher Alejandro Rolandi, whom I met in Sydney during my CI training before moving back to Italy. Alejandro

grounds his practice and choreographic research on CI because he thinks this dance form promotes an approach to the dancing body that is completely opposite to that in other Western dance techniques. Alejandro stressed the different attitude that distinguishes CI from other institutionalised dance forms such as ballet, where an attention to formality is pursued as an essential component. He told me that “ballet is designed for being observed, not for being felt; CI is different because it’s a practice often for the simple reward of dancing, and so you don’t need the context of being observed”. He further elaborated his view saying that:

In CI you can come in and dance and focus on what is happening to you, your feelings, what you notice, what your sensations are, but you don’t have to necessarily be paying attention to composition, or to the story that the audience might perceived [...] I think these dance forms [like ballet] are a lot more reliant on form and shape and how it is perceived, to the point that if they [ballet dancers] don’t have the audience, they are the audience, they do it in front of the mirrors, they are observing themselves. In CI we don’t have to do that, CI is about you feeling. CI also has a form, when you dance and you want to look like CI, you have to be fluid, you have to be round and spherical, but it is a different sort of form, it can be more experiential, I think, it is more about what is happening to you.

Contact improvisation is considered by many dance scholars a dance genre radically opposed to ballet in both cultural and aesthetic implications. Performance scholar Robert Turner stresses a similar point referring to CI’s initiator Steve Paxton in his analysis of the difference between CI and other Western forms of movement, including sport and dance. According to Turner there is a tendency in Western culture to prioritise “the proper performance of a particular, choreographed, and controlled form of

movement” while focusing on “the sensation of movement was merely secondary. In CI, on the other hand, behaviour evolves from sensing movement” (Turner, 2010, p. 125).

Dance anthropologist Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull summarising CI’s historical origins and salient characteristics—including an emphasis on the sense of touch and moving together in contact—underlines CI’s experimental endeavour over any aesthetic objective:

Contact improvisers amalgamated the sensual, free-flowing, inwardly experienced movement of ‘60s rock dance with an “objective” stance toward the physical capacities of the body typical of ‘60s experimental dance. They borrowed movement exercises from aikido - the Japanese martial art - in order to create dancing that was not based on aesthetic choices. At the same time, a crucial new element was added: touch. If dancers doing the twist never touched, contact improvisers tried to maintain a constant “point of contact” between bodies (Novack, 1988, p. 109).⁴⁴

My ethnographic approach to CI was shaped by interviews such as that of Alejandro and was thus characterised by attention towards the relational aspects of the practice over the performative and aesthetic qualities of the dance. During a conversation Alejandro stressed how in CI “the physical connection is really fascinating, there is a lot to learn, and it’s pleasurable, but then it often get forgotten that it’s improvisation,

⁴⁴ Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull (1947-1996) was an anthropologist, dancer, and choreographer who published under the name Cynthia Novack. In the last months of her life, she dropped the name of her first husband, ‘Novack’ by which she was known. She chose to reassert her original family name, ‘Cohen’ and the name of her partner, ‘Bull’. She died as Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull, and her posthumous works have been published under this latter name. In this chapter I am referring to her as Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull, but in referencing her works I maintained her first name Novack.

it's not as much about creating a choreography as such that there is kind of typical of CI, but it's more about what every present moment can bring to you”.

Classes of CI usually begins with a ‘meet-up’, in which the participants sit in circle and introduce themselves to the group.



Figure 26. *Contacters* sitting in a circle before starting the class at Ferrara Contact Fest, 2014.

As I entered the space of the TPO in Bologna to participate in the group practice, I was invited to join the group which was sitting on the floor. We clustered together in a circle and before starting the class we introduced ourselves and expressed our motivation for ‘being there’. As we started to move together in the space, their experience in CI became evident, and the resistance of my initial trepidation started to abate.

In the space I was there as a fellow *contacter* to learn more about this dance form, curious to hear from the people who practice it how they experience presence when dancing in contact. I was not there to judge their performance, nor to assess how they would progress in their training, just as any other *contacter* I encountered during my research was not there to judge how I was dancing, or whether I was doing it ‘right’.

To them it did not matter what kind of background in professional dance training I had, because in the space at TPO we were all simply *contacters*, entering the space to get in contact, to learn something about ourselves, through the kinaesthetic encounter with others. Working in pairs, we started to explore moving together in proximity, exchanging and feeling each other's weight while maintaining a point of contact between our bodies. By entering this context of practice, CI seemed a welcoming dance, focused on the ability to feel and respond to the other dance partner's movement as well as the movement of the broader group, sometimes by following the music, sometimes simply by tuning into the dynamic created by our dancing bodies.

CI is considered a practice of non-verbal interpersonal communication. From the accounts of several practitioners, CI is also described as a democratic dance practice. The following section underlines the relevance of this aspect for the contact improvisation dance community.

Key features of CI: a democratic practice

Describing a postmodern dance form such CI in words has always been a difficult task, as Nancy Stark Smith—one of its founding members—emphasises.⁴⁵ This is partially because not a single official definition, nor the language to represent it, was ever fixed. Because there was no copyright to restrict the divulgation of the form, *contacters* started to formulate their own definitions of CI, which were collected and published on *Contact Quarterly*, the journal dedicated to dance improvisation since its establishment in 1975. As Smith emphasises, “this was done not only as a way to document and encourage

⁴⁵ Nancy Stark Smith is an American dancer and founding participant of Contact Improvisation. She developed the Underscore practice since the early 1990.

attempts to put language to the evolving movement form but also as a way to discourage attachment to any way of defining it” (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. xii).

One of the key features of CI that was frequently mentioned by my interviewees was that the practice supported a non-judgemental approach to the dance, which came from the ‘openness’ of the practitioners and the improvised character of the form. When asked about the most fascinating aspect of this practice, what drew him to it, Tommaso, one of my interlocutors in Bologna, framed the issue in this way: “I was struck by the environment, the fact that it is an environment that I could immediately perceive as a protected environment, that is, a space in which you can really improvise, even if you are not a dancer, even if you don’t have the [technical] basis, and the absence of judgment”. In a similar spirit, Davide, another Italian CI dancer, revealed:

[CI] is a dance that doesn’t necessarily require the knowledge of structures and technique before it can be practised: it can be approached by people who are not expert dancers but have a developed attentiveness and possess the ability to manage their own movements and the relationship of movement with others. Moreover, it seems to me a “horizontal” environment, where people with any level of experience are happy to dance together, and generally it is frequented by “humble” people, whom even when they’re very experienced, do not emphasise the fact that they are expert dancers nor use it [their expertise] to draw any separation of knowledge.



Figure 27. *Contacters* improvising during a jam at TPO, Bologna, 2014.

A common aspect stressed by many *contacters* is the fact that CI is considered a highly democratic dance form, open and accessible to everyone. CI classes and workshop are offered to participants without distinguishing or dividing them by levels of expertise or dance background. Another aspect often emphasised during the practice is how CI is not a dance of gender. Instead, it is a dance form in which the roles of men and women do not exist and people from any gender are “ideally free to dance with everyone else in the room without the need to act out a role, or to feel inhibited by its intimacy” (Houston, 2009, p. 105).

A similar reflection was shared by many CI dancers, who often explained me that practising this form is about learning a certain quality of moving in contact, rather than learning how to reproduce a form. Dance sociologist Helen Thomas emphasises how in CI “the body is ideally the subject and the object of attention” and pointed out the role played by touch and weight in directing the attention inwards to the experience of the

body. As Alejandro Rolandi previously used the comparison between ballet and CI, in Thomas' analysis, ballet represents the "celebration of the ideals of visualism and the pursuit of the mastery of the body over nature" (Thomas, 2003, p. 109), where the possibilities of the body are explored through control. According to Thomas, in ballet the body of the dancer is seen as a vehicle for the representation of the ideas of the choreographer. By contrast CI instead "invites the performer to let go" (Thomas, 2003, p. 110), allowing for an exploration of the possibilities of movement liberated from both technique and codified steps. Davide, one of my interlocutors, during a workshop we attended in Ferrara, reported an anecdote from his first CI experience that emphasises this point:

During the first jam I ever attended I danced for 45 minutes with a Sardinian CI teacher, without knowing it [that she was a teacher]. At the end she told me "it [the dance] was beautiful because with you I felt like I returned to the true CI: you don't know anything, but you were really into the mutual dance and into the music; often the people that have learned some techniques lose spontaneity because they try to do what they know, to insert their will". I like the fact that you can practise this dance from the beginning and even better using only instinctual or natural knowledge, rather than through practised techniques, steps, and classes. Obviously after this first encounter my goal was to learn more, trying to maintain the instinctual approach to inner listening.

As dance phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone emphasises, as an expression of postmodern ideologies, CI actively contributed to the transformation of the role of the choreographer who "was no longer that individual who had 'the vision of what needs to be said', but a doer, a knowing accomplice, a facilitator" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1978, p.

198). This also underlines how the democratic character of CI differs from other dance forms.

Phenomenologist Elizabeth Behnke points out, “in CI, no single ‘choreographer’ imposes the artistic form of a ‘work’ on the flow of movement; not only does the dance proceed in collaboration between and among participants, but the improvisational structure allows the emerging movement itself to guide the dancers” (Behnke, 2003, p. 51). Some of my interviewees believe that CI can guide them in exploring their ‘instinctual’ or ‘innate’ ability to interact through movement with other *contacters* and the surrounding environment. Through their accounts they describe how training in CI fosters an attentiveness towards embodied ‘natural’ knowledge over what they identify as ‘rational’ thinking. As some scholars have observed, this common view of the practice conceals an old Western ideological tendency to separate ‘nature’ from ‘culture’ (Turner, 2010).

Getting in contact: frequent misconceptions

Turner stresses how CI is often considered a transformative practice among CI independent dance communities—both teachers and participants—criticising what he considers a misleading interpretation of CI principal focus. In Turner’s analysis, a dualistic attitude informs CI’s discourse, characterised by the contraposition of the terms “reflex” and “bodily” as opposed to “consciousness”, “culture” or “habit” (Turner, 2010, p. 130). According to Turner, a widespread idea is that in CI “the body and its reflexes could be free, spontaneous, uninhibited, unfettered, if it were allowed to act without consciousness’s interference, its cultural blocks, gaps, impositions, and habits” (Turner, 2010, p. 131). In his view, a common misconception held by many CI practitioners is “the fantasy of unconscious and reflexive, ‘natural’ human interaction

and relations” (p. 131). Turner argues that this view ignores Paxton’s central aim in developing CI, which was instead based on the “development of consciousness” (p. 131).

Turner suggests that CI practitioners and trainers should rather focus on increased attentiveness towards bodily awareness and on the sensations that might arise from this specific kind of dancing in contact. The separation between an instinctual, ‘natural’ knowledge of the body on one hand, and the more ‘artificial’ skilled body produced by technique, is based on a fundamental misconception of the nature of CI. According to Turner, many CI practitioners share a conception of CI that tends to emphasise a separation between consciousness and bodily experience, reinforcing a contrast between culture and nature that paradoxically undermines CI’s transformative and political potential.

When asked which aspect of the dance form they found most significant, several CI practitioners told me that when they initially started practicing CI, they were surprised by what they describe as getting out of their “comfort zone”. Marco, one of the participants from Bologna, told me how—outside of the space of the jam—he usually gets annoyed if someone enters his physical space, but “in CI this does not happen because this ‘comfort’ space around us gets immediately broken. There is a degree of intimacy of the bodies, not of sexual intimacy, but of intimacy because we are physically close to one another [...] as if the moment of the jam is the only space in which this physicality can be explored, under its own rules”.

Cynthia Cohen Bull in her ethnography of CI groups in North America, emphasises how the people she interviewed found this dance practice freeing because it involves the sense of touch liberated from its customary socio-cultural connotations (Novack

1990). In her analysis Cohen Bull associates the physical exploration of weight and touch with the interest in the psychotherapeutic movements in the '70s:

The technical investigation of the give and take of weight coincided with the interest in touch so prominent among the therapeutic psychology movements of the early '70s. Although contact improvisers were cautioned not to become involved in “the gland game,” as Paxton called it, the sensuality of the form was a major feature for participants and audiences. In this respect, contact improvisation can be seen as a culmination of opposition to post-war repression. (Novack, 1988, p. 109)



Figure 28. Steve Paxton in Contact Improvisation Concert, 1975 (retrieved from Chevet Magazine).

What kind of problems are involved in ‘the gland game’ that Novack refers to? CI performers are generally acutely aware of the fact that, as a dance form deeply focused on the tactile system and sensuality, CI could be easily confused with the sexual

connotations of intimate touch. Dance scholar Sara Houston, who conducted research on the experience of male prisoners practising CI, affirms how “this idea is particularly prevalent in cultures—such as those with a North American or European Protestant heritage—where lingering touch of body parts between two people is seen as crossing the barrier of formal behaviour” (Houston, 2009, p. 105). During my fieldwork I met *contacters* who confessed to me an interest in the practice of CI motivated by the strong psychological value of getting in physical contact with other people; however, they were also generally very aware of the confusion that an emphasis on the sense of touch and proximity could generate if the rules of the game are not completely clear.



Figure 29. Contacters improvising during a jam at TPO, Bologna, 2014.

One of my informants, Caterina Mocciola, international CI dancer and facilitator, disclosed her disconcert:

Because I’m the teacher I welcome people to come to the class, it doesn’t matter who they are, they’re coming to the class willing to learn, so I am really happy

to share what I know, to share my knowledge, but sometimes there might be people that really hurt my nerves, because of their intensity or lack of awareness, but anyway [as teacher] you welcome them, and this is really challenging and once I reached the point where I was going ‘wow I cannot do this any longer’. It has affected me, it has got to the place that I just don’t want to touch people, and it happened a few times over the years, at one point was a really big problem for me, intimacy sometimes is a really huge problem. Once we were doing this exercise, I was just hugging someone, but this someone had a very strong sexual energy, and I wasn’t comfortable with it, and I really struggled, something so simple as hugging someone can become difficult. Ultimately Contact is ‘contact improvisation’, it’s the improvisation part what is important, it is not just about the contact.

Despite recognising the benefits that might result from practising this intimate dance form and developing a sensitivity to proximity, my informants were quite vexed by some extreme directions that this practice has taken. Some *contacters* mentioned an international CI festival called ‘touch and play’ that takes place in many venues across Europe and North America and has been running since 2010.⁴⁶ This event combines CI workshops and classes with other practices that have strong sexual components such as sensation play and bondage. The people in the CI community I spoke to in Italy do not approve of this and see it as a contamination. As Tommaso told me, “when you sexualise CI, you debase it”. As my informant Caterina emphasized, for its more ‘orthodox’ practitioners, what is important is the improvisational aspect of CI rather than ‘getting in contact’. In this context, the surfaces of the bodies of the dancers “are

⁴⁶ Information about the project ‘Touch and Play’ was retrieved from the website of the organisation <https://touchandplay.org/>

used as communicators, not in terms of arousal, but for understanding where weight is being concentrated and where support needs to be given” (Houston, 2009, p. 105). As Houston and Bull emphasise, in CI touch can be sensual but not sexual; touching becomes desexualised. In the practice *contacters* negate any sexual reference, using the surfaces of the body in a functional way, as kinaesthetic ‘affordances’. My interlocutors often stressed the importance of this unwritten rule: they said that it is precisely this commonly accepted and shared rule, which excludes any sexual subtext, that allows the exploration of close kinaesthetic proximity to happen in a way that would not be possible otherwise.



Figure 30. *Contacters* jamming at TPO, Bologna, 2014.

For the people I encountered during these jams, CI is a dance practice that allows personal transformation, not just a hobby or leisure activity. However, listening and being open to engage with different bodies in a mutually improvisational dance is not

an easy task. It requires not only an open-minded attitude, and committed practice, but also a flexible and adaptable framework within which the dance can take place.

The Global Underscore

In 2017 I travelled to Tuscany to join the Global Underscore (GUS), a significant dance event for the contact improvisation community. The GUS is a unique dance improvisation event that happens once a year around the period of the Northern Hemisphere summer solstice. The GUS is based on the structure of the Underscore, a dance improvisation framework developed by Nancy Stark Smith in 1990. Smith's CI Underscore is a framework "that can be seen as a vehicle for incorporating Contact Improvisation into a broader arena of improvisational practice" (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. 90). It integrates kinaesthetic and compositional aspects into the improvisation practice. As Smith stresses, the Underscore could be seen as a tool to direct somatic experience during the improvisational dance, a somatic technique aimed at enhancing the experience of presence. The GUS is a four-hour long contact improvisation session danced on a global scale. It is organised across several cities around the world, and it follows the structure of the Underscore. In 2017 it was danced simultaneously in 55 countries around the globe, no matter the time zone, and it was streamed live in the places where this dance took place. In 2017 I was fortunate enough to attend it at the *Spazio Seme*, an independent dance and art centre in the city of Arezzo, Italy. In June 2017 I travelled to Tuscany to join the space where this four-hour improvisational dance was going to take place.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Spazio Seme is a culture and arts centre that promotes dance training and research located in the city of Arezzo in Tuscany, Italy (www.spazioseme.com). The centre is co-directed by Leonardo Lambruschini, dance performer and Contact Improvisation teacher, co-founder of the international festival 'Italy Contact Fest' (www.italycontactfest.com) who kindly gave consent to conduct participant observation and collect visual material during the 2017 GUS event.



Figure 31. Spazio Seme, Arezzo, June 2017.

After a short stroll across the medieval city centre, just outside the ancient city walls of Arezzo, I arrived at the *Spazio Seme*. When I entered the space, I found my informant Caterina, international CI dancer and facilitator, working on the score. She was crouched on the floor, meticulously drawing all the Underscore components on a giant piece of paper. She explained me that the GUS is a framework for practicing and researching dance improvisation. Its aim is to guide dancers' experience as they progress through the changing states of the jam.



Figure 32. Caterina writing the Underscore at Spazio Seme, Arezzo, 2017.

As Caterina explained it to me, the Underscore is a dance practice that supports “getting into a state of presence” through the exploration of different dynamic states. Caterina told me that “the Underscore is a practice mainly about presence, and there is a series of changes of states, of this presence, [where] you go through different phases, individually and within the group”. The GUS comprises several phases and provides somatic tools to explore presence kinaesthetically, although Caterina stressed that the Underscore provides guidelines, not rigid instructions. The first two phases focus on getting into a state of presence, inviting the participants to ‘collect’ and become aware of their presence in the here and now.

After all the participants arrived, we sat in a big circle on the floor, while Caterina briefed us on what was going to happen. She went through all aspects of the Underscore, illustrating its phases and the characteristics of the somatic ‘devices’ available during the practice. The first phase is called *arriving energetically*. In Smith’s classification

this stage is symbolised by two brackets (). This phase is where the participants are asked to “arrive into the present moment” by bringing their attention, their presence, and their focus into the room and the present situation (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. 91). The second stage is called *arriving physically*, arriving into sensation in the body, symbolised by the sign (•).

For Smith, ‘arriving physically’ means tuning into ‘body time’, “where there’s enough time to register your sensations and absorb their information” (p. 91). The very first stage is a warmup exercise to elicit a sense of “becoming present in your body”. Caterina explained to me how during the GUS “presence can start from sensation, but it also becomes an awareness that you create, and it changes, and it morphs while you go through the experience”. The following stages of the GUS include the gathering together of all the performers, moving through the space by walking or running—this phase is what Smith calls *preambulation*, which finally leads to arriving at exploring the more internal sensations of the body, a phase she calls *skinesphere*.

Skinesphere and telescopic awareness

The term *skinesphere* was inspired by Laban’s concept of the *kinesphere*, “the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extended limbs without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot” (Laban, 1966, p. 10). Smith’s *skinesphere* refers to “the movement arena inside the boundaries of your skin” (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. 92). As Smith explained in a video interview, this somatic concept functions as an invitation to become aware of the sensations, movement and changes inside the body.⁴⁸ The notion of *skinesphere*

⁴⁸ In a video interview Nancy Stark Smith explains how the Underscore consists in a framework for exploration and research for movement improvisational practices. Source available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzG609NWp1Y>

includes a practice of self-attunement.



Figure 33. GUS participants entering the space of the *Skinesphere*.

As Smith emphasises, CI doesn't focus only on the body moving through space, but also cultivates the idea that there are many things moving through the body: different textures, states, flows, that run inside the body as it moves through its 'skinesphere'.

Caterina explained to me the idea of the skinesphere as a space to access presence, where *contacters* can get into contact with self, resting and finding deep replenishing connection:

The skinesphere is the starting point where you drop into your body within, the skinesphere is the boundary of your skin that contains all your sensations, all your emotions, all the experiences you go through. The best way initially is to really connect to what's happening in yourself, and somehow paying attention, observing, listening to what's happening inside different sensations, you can go into really fine details, and see what is present within your body, and this is the

portal, the access point to what presence is, once you then expand to the group.

Caterina further explained me how the *skinesphere* is also a way to connect with the Earth, framing and supporting the grounding we can establish with ourselves, the connection and attunement to oneself and the Earth. Caterina highlighted that the practice of visiting the skinesphere at the beginning of the Underscore is what enables the entire dance session to unfold. She explained that

Once you have established this connection, that is somehow the foundation from which you start and from which you can stay connected, in your solo dancing and with the group, that's the starting point, then there is an expansion, once you find it within, then you can expand out, reaching out in the environment around you, and your presence can have an influence on the people that you are working with, dancing with, practising with.

The Underscore includes five elements that are available at any time, called 'nonsequential anytime all-the-time aspects' (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. 96). These are: *streaming*, *gap* (not quite knowing what is going on), *listening*, *telescopic awareness* and the so-called *idiot button* that participants can symbolically press at any point during the jam. This 'button' can be activated when directing attention and becoming aware of too many things creates a type of exhaustion, when the dancers need to release from the overwhelming stream of information and awareness experienced during the dance. The idea of the 'telescopic awareness' which allows *contacters* to zoom in to an awareness of inner sensations and to zoom out to an awareness of what happens around them that extends to the group and could reach far beyond the physical situational presence of the dance, is particularly interesting for exploring presence during the Underscore. This telescopic awareness also invites CI performers to extend their

awareness to other ‘distant’ groups through this somatic device, inviting them to connect to memories of previous dances as well as to other people dancing in other places. Caterina explained this idea that

During the Global Underscore this net expands out of the actual physical room where we are practising, and we reach through what she [Nancy Stark Smith] calls the *telescopic awareness*, we reach the other sites, by using the imagination, maybe if you know the facilitators of the other groups, you connect to memories, sensations, experiences you shared and everything kind of feeds back in and out, it’s a constant flux of information, technique, movement.

According to multiple informants, the Underscore provides a framework, a space for exploring the feeling of the intensity of things, through the *preamble*, synchronising, the feeling of gravity the body feels towards the ground, the intelligence of soma, of our cells, and attuning to sensation and intelligence in the body. For its practitioners, the Underscore consists in a process for observing and experiencing presence. They explained me how it provides a structure to navigate the levels of experience by starting first with yourself, then with the group, finally by reaching far out to a global scale, connecting to the various places around the world where this event takes place, directing attention, imagining and remembering other people dancing in other spaces. This connection might happen through memories, interpersonal connections (such as knowing dancers in other locations), so they can connect through remembering, reliving and re-enacting the sensations of other dances they have shared together. In the case of the GUS this is also fostered through technology, through the video streaming that provides an extra layer or affordance for connecting to distant sites.



Figure 34. The jam in Arezzo streamed live across all the sites of the GUS 2017.

Caterina further elucidated how presence emerges during this practice:

With CI you have the preparation of your awareness and the connection to yourself, and the presence that you have with yourself to open to the unknown and to the others. In particular, the Underscore has completely shifted my understanding of awareness, and my understanding of what happens in an improvisation setting, with the group mind. It's something that you agree upon, that we're going to be sharing the space, we're going to be sharing the understanding that we have, the different degrees of connection, and then that creates a focus, the energy it becomes, this presence appears, that is really a feeling of each other.

Several practitioners explained to me how presence in CI emerges from a physical and energetic exchange across the elements involved in the performance, firstly across the *contacters* themselves. Caterina emphasised how it is often about the person with whom

you dance, who brings a specific quality, and that the two qualities meeting each other leads to the emergence of a ‘collective’ quality. She stressed how:

The physical connection is a component of these compositional states, or improvisational states, which is a state of presence, and being open to what is available, whatever that is, and to be open to embrace it, and transform it, so there is this dual relationship between you and what’s there, so you get affected but you can also affect.

By attending the GUS event and listening to these performers’ experiences, I observed how presence in CI is shaped by kinaesthetic interactions among the participants. Through a practice of fostering somatic awareness, and by engaging in kinaesthetic explorations without attempting to control them, presence in CI emerges as a mutually informing relationship between the participants. Referring to the practice of the Underscore, Caterina emphasised this mutually informing aspect of presence in CI:

There is this duality, the constant connecting to the self and there is also connecting to the outside, so there is this thing that is innate, with the improvisation or something that you really want to develop through the journey of an improviser, as a practice, an artistic practice and a life practice as well, because the two are not, you can’t separate them any longer. The more details I actually manage to include in my awareness, the more choices I can make and the more I’m aware of the choices I make, the more I can include, so there is this... it is like this active circle of everything that fits into each other, so then you can expand as a whole, together with the environment, as a whole human being together with the environment that surrounds you.

The example of the CI annual event of the Global Underscore provides an exemplary case when considering how to address the notion of presence in dance. One of the questions that arose through this research was whether focusing on directing attention to sensing other people's presence is something that can enhance *contacters'* own experience of presence. When I questioned Caterina, she replied that during the Underscore this process happens first "by becoming attuned to your own presence, and then by including people in this process it is both enriching and enhancing of the experience that you could have individually". This expansion of awareness from tuning in to individual embodied presence to the presence of the group is in Caterina's view what allows for the emergence of an embodied 'group mind':

You focus on the group mind that gets created, so that you can feed off each other, in sustaining the practice, in influencing and receiving influence and navigating through the so called 'unknown' space. [GUS] is really the practice based on noticing and observing, noticing the composition, noticing what's happening for you and noticing what's happening within the room, with the interactions that you are having maybe closer to you when you're engaging in a duet, or a trio or even in bigger formations or constellations of contact improvisation, but definitively it is about creating a map, where you are, connected to the whole. Often Nancy talks about the patterns, and by pattern [she means] what gets created connectively, so you can always rely on that to be supported and you can always support that. You can offer, and the generosity in this sense of opening yourself to the others, so then you can receive and give, and it's this constant dialogue, that happens on the smaller scale and on the larger scale.



Figure 35. The sites of the Global Underscore 2017.

Intercorporeal kinaesthetic interaction

After a few jam sessions and several interviews with my interlocutors, I could observe how CI is considered an “experimental technique of awareness of the self in relation to others” where its extensive practice constitutes “the basis for our more expressive, improvisatory interaction” (Turner, 2010, p. 134). In CI there are no predetermined steps and *contacters* stress the importance of listening to oneself and to others throughout the improvisation. CI is a dance form that both requires and grants a level of freedom and responsibility, where people can join and leave the dance as they wish. *Contacters* can dance alone, in duo, in a group, and they can change dance partners at any in time. CI is an experimental dance form that allows the testing of physical limits and possibilities without making normative judgments. CI is also a practice that invites and trains the body to be present and available to accommodate sudden, spontaneous and unexpected changes. In conversation with Alejandro Rolandi, he further elucidated

this point, “If CI can enhance presence, it is mainly because it forces you to notice, it pushes you to be aware of what is going on because you are interacting in real time with another person without really knowing what is going to happen”. *Contacters* often stress the relevance of the practice in fostering an attention to the present moment, requesting its practitioners to inhabit the ‘here and now’.

Considering the insights of the participants of this study, as well as my experience with this form, presence in this context emerges as an interkinaesthetic social process, emphasised by the role that other dancers play in shaping this experience. Based on my participant observation of the GUS event as well as attending several CI jams and workshops, I present here an *Interkinaesthetic Social model* of presence in CI. In this context, presence emerges from social and *interkinaesthetic* interactions, a concept borrowed from phenomenologist Elizabeth Behnke (2003) that she uses to describe the intercorporeal kinaesthetic experience in play with this form. CI’s initiator and choreographer Steve Paxton describes how this relationship in CI emerges:

The partners in the duet touch each other a lot, and it is through touching that the information about each other’s movement is transmitted. They touch the floor, and there is emphasis on constant awareness of gravity. They touch themselves, internally, and a concentration is maintained upon the whole body. Balance is not defined by stretching along the centre columns of the body, as in traditional dancing, but by the body’s relationship to that part which is a useful fulcrum, since in this work a body may as often be on head as feet and relative to the partner as often as to the floor. (Paxton, 1975, p. 40)

Following Paxton’s account, Behnke argues that CI is a movement practice that not only explores “variants beyond the everyday, testing the limits and leeway of our

relation to ground and gravity”; but also it “opens a dynamic, aperspectival/multiperspectival world whose correlate is not a single, ideal spectator, but an intercorporeal/interkinaesthetic community, experienced in the thick presence of relational motility” (Behnke, 2003, p. 54).



Figure 36. Participant observes the unfolding of the jam during the Global Underscore, 2017.

Behnke refers to the peculiar character of CI as a form of dance that enables a shift from an egocentric perspective to a “multiperspectival meeting of vectors in which I directly experience not only my own mobilized momentum, but that of others with whom I am in contact” (Behnke, 2003, p. 52). As several CI practitioners stressed, CI is a dance form characterised by an absence of a judgmental external gaze or a privileged standpoint from which it should be experienced. In this context *Contacters* experience presence by dancing in proximity, through their bodies and their senses, and physical connection.

Behnke underlines how, in CI, this aspect is precisely addressed through an emphasis “on the kinaesthetic rather than the visual” (Behnke, 2003, p. 51). According to Behnke, the main principle governing CI is the experience of movement from the inside: the

cultivation of a kinaesthetic awareness by means of a particular attention to the relation of gravity, weight and momentum (Behnke, 2003, p. 43). According to Behnke, CI advocates for an “effective *epoché* of the hegemony of the visual” (Behnke, 2003, p. 50), and at the same time, by heightening kinaesthetic awareness, it “permits an encounter with alterity in which kinaesthetic autonomy and interkinaesthetic connectivity coexist” (Behnke, 2003, p. 49). Another important aspect of CI is also evinced by Behnke, namely that this dance practice, by promoting a refinement of so-called “internal awareness”, fosters a focus of the senses towards the “responsiveness to another” (Behnke, 2003, p. 41). For Behnke, the body in CI is “as much an interkinaesthetic body as an individual one” (Behnke, 2003, p. 42).

This last point stressed by Behnke was emphasised also by Caterina, the GUS facilitator, when she observed the fundamental role that interacting with another dancer played to shape her capacity to tune into her own experience of presence. Caterina told me “with CI, particularly in the beginning, it was very useful to have another body to connect with, it was easier for me to connect to someone else than connecting to myself, so the body of the other dancer was my way in”. Emphasis on the interkinaesthetic awareness that arises through the practice of CI has also been addressed by Ramaswamy and Deslauriers (2014), who explored emergent spirituality in the experience of dancing. They underline how the practice of CI is consonant with an enhancement of the sense of attunement and resonance. Even if resonance could be better seized since “it arises from the meeting of my body with another’s” (Ramaswamy & Deslauriers, 2014, p. 118), while attunement to another’s awareness is a subtler event to seize, nevertheless the authors conclude that the two are “almost simultaneous emergent processes” arising from the encounter of two improvising dancing bodies.

Interkinaesthetic Social model of presence in Contact Improvisation

Attempting to render bi-dimensional a multi-dimensional complex dynamic event such as a dance improvisation performance entails simplification. Here, the figure portrays the space of the performance as a yellow circle, since in the case of CI jams the stage of the performance is represented by the entirety of the space in which the improvisational dance takes place.

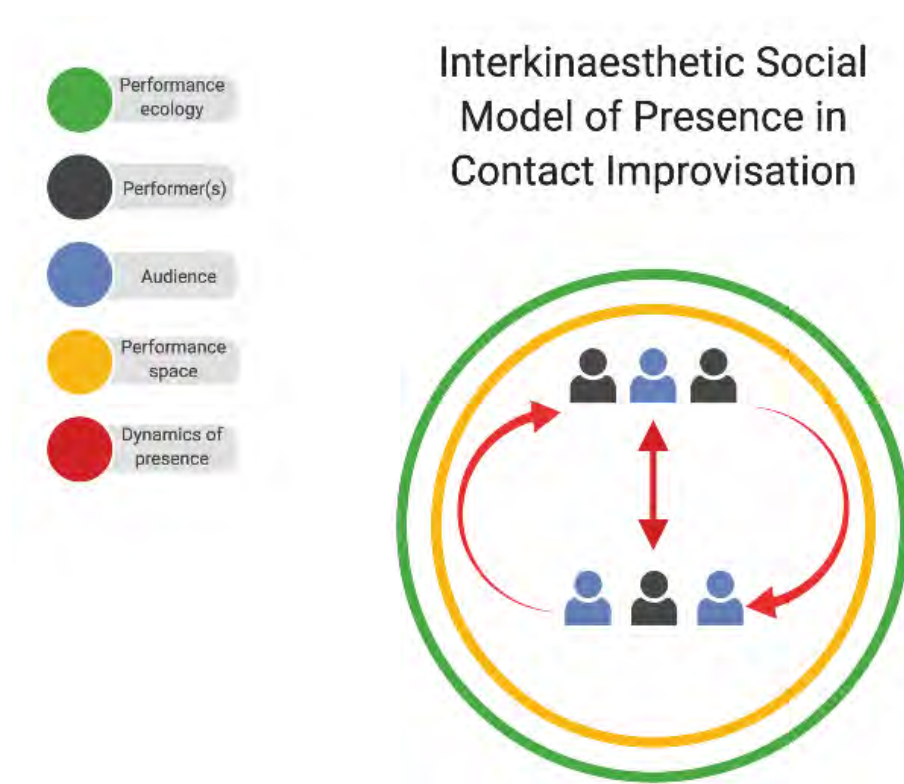


Figure 37. *Interkinaesthetic Social* model of presence in Contact Improvisation.

The green circle represents the global cognitive ecology of the performance, which includes the knowledge of the practice and the score, as well as the participants' presence in their mutually interchangeable roles of audience and performer, and the situational context of the dance event. In the figure the mutually informing dynamic

between the performers is displayed as a feedback loop of awareness (represented by arrows), created by the exchange of kinaesthetic information and interactions enabled through this dance form.

On the edge of awareness

Several performance scholars argue that rather than being a quality or a skill, presence is inherently a social event, where audience and performers constitute such performance event by their phenomenal co-presence (Heim, 2016; Sherman, 2016; Zarrilli, 2012, 2014). Zarrilli argues that presence, for both the audience and the performer, consists in sharing a moment of ‘not knowing’, where presence, rather than an intrinsic quality of the performer, consists in “being on the edge of *not knowing*”, namely inhabiting a state of surprise and openness to what might arise (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 147 - emphasis in original).

Similarly—as CI facilitator Alejandro Rolandi explained to me—presence in CI consists in a practice of “being really aware”. He emphasised how “CI practice pushes you to be on edge of awareness”. For Alejandro, presence in CI consists in becoming aware of the shifting and changes occurring across the unfolding of the performance. Presence in his view consist in an ‘ability’ to become aware of all the elements participating to the performance ecology:

Presence is simply that ability to engage, I think, fully, with your surroundings, and with your internal states. I think what we call stage presence is just a state of awareness, of what is going on in the world that the performer is inhabiting. If a performer appears to be aware of the moment that he is in and the position he occupies, the way his body is held and his concentration is on what is happening in its surroundings, I think we perceive it like a high state of presence.

He elaborated this idea by explaining how presence in CI consists in being able to notice, respond to and adapt to many things simultaneously: internal bodily sensations; the movements of the partner or partners; how the group moves in the space.

Sensory modalities and bodily epistemologies

Several dance scholars argue that one of the most interesting features of CI is that it is a dance practice that challenges the dominant sensory modalities of Western dance. Several comparative dance studies addressing issues of bodily perception and agency have emphasised CI's peculiar attention towards the sense touch over vision (Bull, 1997; Cohen, 2010; Foster, 1997; Ramaswamy & Deslauriers, 2014; Thomas, 2003). Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull compared the sensory modalities at play in CI with ballet. In her analysis she describes CI as a dance style characterized by "the primacy of touching" (Bull, 1997, p. 275), which she contrasts to the "primacy of the seeing" (p. 271) that informs ballet and recognise in visual perception the prevalent sensory modality for experiencing the dance for both the dancer and the spectator.

The theme of touching as opposed to seeing is a major topic in the work of many feminist scholars. For example, the philosopher Luce Irigaray has stressed that the sense of sight has always been dominant in Western culture, how it has been subjected to serving rationalistic and naturalistic perspectives. She emphasises how even if "touch takes part in all our sensory perceptions, all our living relationships, but our culture is dominated by looking at" (Irigaray, 2011, p. 137). According to Irigaray, by favouring the 'looking at' approach, our Western culture has ended up binding the sense of touch mostly to the function of appropriation and control, rather than considering it a valuable entry point to a deeper understanding of self and others.

A similar perspective is shared by Elizabeth Behnke, who addresses the ‘looking at’ approach from an aesthetic perspective, pointing out that “the inherent structure of vision is separative, enforcing a hiatus between seer and seen, while in touch we meet the other at the interface that defines our boundaries” (Behnke, 2003, p. 48). Other researchers have instead addressed how contemporary dance techniques such as CI present distinctive features characterized by a privileging of the proprioceptive mode of attention over vision. Phenomenologists Dorothee Legrand and Susanne Ravn have addressed perceived subjectivity in movement among professional dancers trained in different dance techniques. They underline how contemporary dancers, often proficient in CI, tend to experience an attunement of a more proprioceptive nature, in contrast to the more visual attentional focus of ballet dancers (Legrand & Ravn, 2009, p. 398).

Reflecting on CI as an embodied practice that challenges the sensory dominance of vision, Behnke stresses another relevant aspect of CI, introducing the field of balance and imbalance, consistent with the expansion of cognitive and perceptual possibilities that might arise at the intersection of two dancing bodies in the act of collaboratively redefining their relationship with gravity. Behnke goes on to say that “in the field of balance and imbalance, however, we find another without hiatus and without interface” (Behnke, 2003, p. 48).

Behnke observed how these “kinaesthetic earthly experiences, often relegated to the background of our perceptual awareness, might become clearly discernible when we actually experience a fall” (Behnke, 2003, p. 48). In the following section I refer to some *contacters*’ accounts of their physical experiences of ‘falling’, in order to provide a reflection on how such kinaesthetic experience conveys a different meaning accordingly to the cultural context in which it is experienced.

Falling and failure: embodied cultural metaphors

CI participants often discussed how practising this dance form allowed them to discover and develop a ‘pleasure of falling’, of reaching and rolling on the ground, pleasures that they had not enjoyed since childhood. Marco, during a conversation we had in Bologna, told me how before practicing CI, the idea of falling was for him only associated with getting hurt:

...before I was thinking that if I fall, I will injure myself, because I am big, and I fall from high. Truth is, later I realized that very often falling is the best thing that might happen to me. Now, to the people that are dancing with me for the first time, I say “look, if you’re going to lift me, if you see that something is going wrong, let me fall, do not try to stop me, you just let me fall and I’ll be alright”.

In respect to learning how to fall safely, Tommaso, one of my interviewees in Bologna, recalled an episode when he experienced some ‘benefits’ he thought he gained thanks to his training in CI:

Once, coming back from a Contact Improvisation festival after a week of dances, I took my bicycle and went for a ride, I was riding without hands with my headphones when my seat broke, and I fell on the ground from my bike with all my weight, like a sack of potatoes. Since I had learned how to fall, I fell in a very soft way, embracing my bike, rolling, and then I stood up. There was a guy who was staring at me wondering if I had my head broken, but I was totally uninjured, not a scratch, and I am pretty sure that if it would have happened to me before I started practising CI, I would have hurt myself. I think this is something that my body has learned, and now it is available to me every time. I

fall, and I am unhurt, I stay soft, I adapt to things, I am aware of the space behind me, I am aware of my own weight, if I am going off balance, how far I will fall, how I will fall, where I will fall.

Dance anthropologist Cynthia Cohen Bull in *Sharing the dance: Contact Improvisation and American culture* (1990) highlighted the importance of CI as a training that fosters the cognisance of accepting disorientation. Cohen Bull stated that “in addition to sensitizing oneself to weight and touch, a student of contact improvisation must accept disorientation and learn to be turned upside down or sideways” (Novak, 1990, p. 151).



Figure 38. *Contacters* jamming at Ferrara Contact Fest, 2014

In this respect Clizia, another of my interviewees in Bologna, when asked about her perceptual experience of falling during a CI jam session, stressed that for her the “first sensation was of disorientation and instinctual re-orientation because something has changed in the way I perceive the movement and in the way I rely on the senses”. Dance

scholar Ann Cooper Albright pointed out how ‘falling’ constitutes one of CI’s primary skills, and that it originated as such even in the early developments of this form of dance (2010, p. 22). Cohen Bull states that from the beginning of the practice, dancers had to learn techniques of falling in order to be able to avoid injuries and to be sufficiently capable of adapting to the unsteady physical architecture and possibilities for action in CI:

Contact improvisation is virtually the only contemporary American theatre dance form that emphasizes the wildness and awkwardness of falling, relying on conditioned or reflexive controls and strategies rather than on choreographed movement. Experiencing contact improvisation can teach an enjoyment of and a reconsideration of spatial associations. (Novack, 1990, p. 151)

Dance scholar and CI performer Karen Schaffman observes how CI training fosters an “increased sense of awareness, enabling dancers to fall safely and effortlessly” (Schaffman, 2003, p. 199). According to Schaffman “by practicing falling, dancers learn to venerate ‘the down’ and revel in disorientation. Training in CI consists of learning how to not hold oneself ‘up’ but rather to welcome perspectives from inverted spaces and deviated angles, by softening one’s vision, listening to micro-skeletal shifts, and rolling through spherical space” (Schaffman, 2003, p. 199). Schaffman states that “CI celebrates falling and in doing so proposes an embodied alternative to the metaphors of space and failure” (p. 199). In her view, it is the space of uncertainty that dancers in CI are brought to share, where they are encouraged to work reflexively and attune their senses to compose the dance “through ongoing negotiations between partners, that enable a reconsideration of falling and its cultural connotations” (p. 199).

The feeling of disorientation, that might arise when *contacters* experience a fall, is linked to specific meanings and associated with social behaviour. Cohen Bull's ethnography emphasizes how in American culture falling is typically linked to mental instability and related to a lack of physical control, which is often interpreted as "a sign of injury, illness, or intoxication" (Novak, 1990, p. 151). Following Cohen Bull's consideration, Albright (2013) draws a parallel between experiencing disorientation and being thrown off balance, pointing out how, as a cultural metaphor, falling carries heavy symbolism in the West, where it "is generally seen as failure, a defeat, a loss or a decline" (Albright, 2013, p. 36).

Linguist George Lakoff and cognitive psychologist Mark Johnson argue that metaphors of spatialization are rooted in physical and cultural experience, and how "understanding emerges from interaction, from constant negotiation with the environment and other people. The nature of our bodies and our physical and cultural environment imposes a structure of our experience" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 230). They conceive of metaphors as not only a matter of language, or as 'imaginative rationality', but as conceptual structures deeply ingrained in our bodily experience.

Following Lakoff and Johnson's theory of embodied metaphors, psychologist Raymond Gibbs and colleagues observed "a direct link between recurring patterns of embodied experience, primitive and conceptual metaphor, abstract concepts, and conventional and poetic language". They emphasize how "bodily experience can be derived from both sense modalities such as sight and sound, as well as full-bodied kinaesthetic action" (Gibbs, Lima, & Francozo, 2004, p. 1194). Gibbs addresses CI as a dance practice that exemplifies our ability to conceptualise human experience in terms of metaphors. According to Gibbs "it is nearly impossible for us to conceive of ourselves, others, the world we live in without embracing the power of metaphor"

(Gibbs, 2003, p. 187). Gibbs observes that “we use metaphor not only to express our thoughts linguistically, but to make sense of our everyday experiences and to establish coherence out of an inchoate world” (Gibbs, 2003, p. 187).

Gibbs considers CI as a fruitful example to illustrate how specific cultural metaphors are rooted in kinaesthetic experience. This potential is exemplified by Schaffman, who criticises the culturally prevailing ethnocentric perspective in the West with which he associates the conceptual metaphors of “Unsteadiness is Near Failure and Falling is Failure”. Schaffman emphasises the power of CI training in testing and reshaping kinaesthetic information in terms that challenge the metaphorical associations of ‘up and ‘down’:

Unsteadiness is not a sign of failure any more than up signifies the positive. Conventions concerning the notions of space and weight lose their determinacy, granting room for unconventional perceptual and sensorial experiences. In Contact Improvisation, the moving body, defined by momentum and touch, defies traditional Western codes, though not through an inversion of conceptual metaphors. Instead, as practice, CI presents alternatives to these conceptual metaphors that we hold as common language. (Schaffman, 2003, pp. 198-199)

Following Schaffman, Albright suggests that “if we shift the orientation of the West’s vertical hegemony, falling can become not just an ignominious ending, but rather the beginning of other possibilities” (Albright, 2013, p. 37). Lakoff and Johnson observe how “our values are not independent but form a coherent system with the metaphorical concepts we live by” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 22); in a similar view, according to Albright (2013), the experience of falling and disorientation is inherently linked to the rise of a deeper knowledge. Albright stresses that while, as cultural metaphor, ‘falling’

is often associated with negative values such as ‘failure’, in CI falling is perceived as an opportunity to open up multiple possibilities and different orientations. Albright argues that we usually do not think about where we are until we have been lost, that “in order to understand what orients us, we need to experience disorientation” (Albright, 2013, p. 38). This was captured poignantly by Katja, one of my interlocutors in Bologna, who after a jam session told me that “this is the ongoing quest of this kind of dance, Contact Improvisation is indeed a continuous catastrophe and also an endless failure, because it is exactly in the loss of balance that alternative or unexpected solutions might be found”.

Mind the ‘Gap’: Disorientation and presence

CI invites dancers to enter a space of *not knowing*, and to fall into ‘gaps’. Albright refers to Smith’s concept of the ‘Gap’ as the feeling of suspension in time-space, a feeling of disorientation arising when *contacters* do not know where they are. She considers the ‘Gap’ as one of the most precious moments offered by CI. For Smith ‘being in a gap’ corresponds to the feeling of falling before touching the ground, a space of incertitude, a “suspension between two known points” that holds the potential in which new possibilities can unfold (Koteen & Smith, 2008, p. 92). For Albright this ‘Gap’ can also acquire political connotations, as “this ‘gap’ allows for a suspension of one kind of cultural paradigm (that falling is failure), such that other meanings might take its place” (Albright, 2013, p. 39).

In terms of the practice, the spot that Smith defines as the ‘Gap’ is the moment during improvisation in which the dancers lose track of their perception of time and space and feel ‘suspended’, lost in the momentum where every direction becomes a new possible path to explore. This sense of ‘suspension’ that CI dancers can experience during the

unfolding of the dance, has been associated with a state of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 2000 [1975]). Schmid observes how the practice of CI fosters a sense of flow (Schmid, 2015). In *positive psychology* the concept of *flow* is defined as the state “characterized by complete absorption in what one does” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This sense of complete absorption in the task at hand has often been defined in sport psychology as “being in the zone”. The ‘zone’ has been described as a time when everything flows and unfolds effortlessly, when we can find ourselves completely engaged in the present moment. As an example, I provide here the account of Jasper Blake, Canadian Ironman triathlete who in his online blog states that mental toughness resides in the “ability to achieve a deep state of presence”. Blake defines *presence* as a state of complete absorption in the activity at hand that provides a sense of fullness and clarity. He describes this zone as “a heightened state of presence. You are completely ‘there’, without the mental distractions, doubts, worries or judgments that often accompany thought” (Blake, 2015).

As researchers in practices such as yoga, Qi Gong and many other similar wisdom-based traditions have emphasised (Kirkcaldy, 2018), mindfulness is both “a state of mind and an embodied way of being in the world” (Sousa & Shapiro, 2018, p. 114). This state of ‘flow’ as enacted in CI, conversely to Blake’s account, cannot be willingly prompted. *Contacters’* experiences of presence diverge from a description of presence that can be ‘achieved’ as an intrinsic ability of the performer.

Schmid stressed how the practice of CI has fostered his capacity for ‘becoming present’, although he notes that this ‘presence’ is not something under his control. In an article published online in *Contact Quarterly*, Schmid emphasises how “Finding your flow dancing is all about diving into the present moment. But, like sleep, the flow experience is something you can only invite; it is impossible to force its appearance” (Schmid,

2015). Similarly, my informant Caterina recalled a significant experience of being in a sense of presence in CI, captured as a flowing ‘gap’ and linked to a feeling of disorientation:

In CI you have this constant dual thing of the internal and external awareness even with your gaze. Your eyes are open because you are registering what’s going on around you, you are constantly aware of the others’ feet that are flying near your head, or where is the floor, and you read it through your eyes, you’re reading it through your body, or through your partner’s body—if you’re doing something aerial—you have this internal awareness but you can switch to the external through your gaze, so you have more presence within the environment around you, and when I was switching from one to the other, I had no idea of where I was in the space. In the beginning it was like ‘wow’, I thought I was here then I realized I’m not where I thought I was, and it was a bit scary, and then I thought ‘oh my god this is so amazing’. Sometimes you find yourself with a hand on the floor and you go ‘how did I get there?’, then you realise that you got there because your body knew, your body always knows, even when you are not oriented. Having this conscious disorientation was really fascinating, it was like rediscovering going back to a [embodied] childhood memory like when your father throws you up in the air, and you go ‘oh, I’m flying now’ and this is exciting, for me there was a moment of fear but more like surprise because I wasn’t expecting it.



Figure 39. Caterina turned upside down during the GUS jam, Arezzo, 2017.

Accepting disorientation and learning how to be “turned upside down or sideways, moving through space in spiralling or curving motions” (Novak, 1990, p. 151) is a common experience for dancers trained in CI. Caterina’s report emphasises how CI training provides opportunities for exploring different sensorial attunement with movement and gravity. Behnke (2003) stressed how CI provides the empirical occasion for “testing the limits and leeway of our relation to ground and gravity” (Behnke, 2003, p. 54), suggesting a reconsideration of the experiences of balance and imbalance produced by shifting surfaces and fields of support. For Albright “*disorientation* is a word that insists on its opposite for meaning. To be disoriented is to be undone, to be thrown off balance. But it also hints at a deeper knowledge” (Albright, 2013, p. 38 - emphasis added). Nancy Stark Smith captured this succinctly: “the expression ‘fall

from grace’ becomes an impossible statement when falling itself is experienced as a state of grace” (Albright & Stark, 1989, p. 3).⁴⁹

To conclude this digression on the kinaesthetic experience of dancing off-balance as an opportunity for discovering different spatial and cultural orientations, I refer to Albright’s account of CI that considers the event of ‘falling’ as a bridge to enter an unexpected state of ‘grace’:

The truly radical potential of Contact at this historical juncture lies in the physical training that celebrates the down, dwells on the floor and revels in the process of rolling, sinking and crawling. Through these kinaesthetic experiences that orient towards gravity, Contact can lead us into a resiliency that not only helps us survive the inevitable falls of life, but also rescues us from the relentless ascension and striving for success that marked the late twentieth century. (Albright, 2013, p. 41)

CI provides opportunities to reconsider our relationship to spatial perception and other sensory modalities through learning the techniques of falling, of yielding to gravity. CI is a dance practice that “through its blending of weight, flow, momentum, and gravity, carries the dancers into moments of uncertainty and surprise (Schaffman, 2003, p. 200), where a sense of agency is ‘counterintuitively’ experienced as a loss of control, a letting go and tuning to the moment.

What kind of relationship emerges between ‘presence’ and a dance training that celebrates the ‘loss’ of balance? According to the *contacters* encountered during my fieldwork, the potential of this dance practice in relation to presence lies in its attention

⁴⁹ Also quoted in *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World* by Ann Cooper Albright, 2019, 30.

and cultivation of interkinaesthetic awareness; by accepting disorientation and a lack of control. CI prompts dancers to move ‘on the edge of awareness’. As Schaffman observed: “the question of failure in CI remains valid, but it is not measured in terms of stability or instability. Rather it has to do with issues as reluctance, manipulation, and lack of attentiveness to the moment” (Schaffman, 2003, p. 199). This attentiveness to the moment has been described by many of my interlocutors as ‘being on the edge of awareness’, by training and pushing the boundaries of what you can be aware of in the moment of performance.

Stark Smith suggests that “the risk factor of being off balance or falling wakes people up and keeps them awake a lot of the time. That is part of the benefit of the practice it seems, to keep people awake and focused on the present. And then they feel more fully engaged with their body, with their mind, with each other” (Smith, 2003).⁵⁰ In this context presence emerges as a mutually informing, co-shaped interkinaesthetic social process in the moment of sharing the dance and improvising together.

Summary

Engaging with local communities of *contacters* allowed me to retrace some relevant features of this practice including the absence of a judgmental attitude; the lack of a privileged standpoint; and an attentiveness towards interkinaesthetic awareness. CI is a duet system based on the interplay between the sense of touch and the loss of balance. CI consists in a dance form that is not developed for an external gaze but instead focuses on the kinaesthetic experimental and playful interactions of the actors involved. CI is a community-based practice that prioritizes the “sensitization to the corporeal”, as

⁵⁰ Retrieved from ‘Risking presence’, Interview with Nancy Stark Smith (2003) available here: http://proximity.slightly.net/archive-old/v_six/v6e3a3.htm

stressed by CI initiator Steve Paxton (1975). CI practice consists of a training open to different levels of kinetic skill and various degrees of experience. For many of its practitioners, CI not only represents a dance practice but a reflexive modality to access and foster bodily awareness and self-transformation. All these elements contribute to shaping the experience of presence in CI in significant ways.

Through my fieldwork and observational participation in the Global Underscore and in other events within the CI community, I have developed an alternative model of the phenomenon of presence, one that moves away from the so-called classic model of stage presence. Embracing the social, interactive and interkinaesthetic aspects embedded in performing dance together in contact, I have proposed an *Interkinaesthetic Social* model of presence in Contact Improvisation that illustrates the mutual dynamics that inform presence's experience in this practice, emerging from social and interkinaesthetic interaction of the elements comprised in this performance ecology.

From this fieldwork it appears that CI dancers understand presence not as an individual skill but as an emergent potentiality arising from the interaction with other performers/audience and within the specific framework of the practice. Drawing on the lived experience of CI practitioners, I emphasised the uniqueness of CI's cognitive ecology, how embodied skills are enacted, and how bodily knowledge is constituted and exchanged in this context. Through a focus on *contacters'* physical experience of 'falling' and disorientation I considered how cultural metaphors shape and are re-shaped, enacted and transformed by these dancers' kinaesthetic experiences. I demonstrated how CI, as a dance training privileging touch and disorientation, questioning dominant Western sensory metaphors and promoting a focus on interkinaesthetic processes, challenges habits of movement, nurturing an experience of presence through interkinaesthetic awareness.



Figure 40. Participants of the Global Underscore 2017 in Arezzo.

CHAPTER 7.

DANCED BY SPACE: OMNICENTRAL SITUATED PRESENCE IN BODY WEATHER

“Why don’t we feel the centre lying in the dream, or somewhere else?”

(Min Tanaka cited in Marshall, 2006, p. 61)

This chapter presents the research I conducted during a year-long fieldwork in New South Wales, Australia, taking part in Body Weather (BW) classes, workshops and dance improvisation events organized by members of the dance company De Quincey Co in 2016. I discuss salient BW training features and principles as observed and practiced during my apprenticeship, including an emphasis on the following ideas: groundedness and imagination; the development of a heightened sensory awareness and fine sensitivity to the surrounding environment. I focus on relevant aspects of this movement methodology as explored during an intensive three-day workshop led by Linda Luke, BW facilitator and member of De Quincey Co, that took place at Bellambi Beach, NSW in July 2016. Based on my direct experience with this practice and the accounts of several BW performers encountered during my apprenticeship, and using a cognitive ecology framework, I propose an *Omnicentral Situated* model of presence in Body Weather. Here, the model I propose is inspired by Min Tanaka’s concept of omn centrality, which can be understood as a displacement of focus from the performer to the environment in which she is immersed (Marshall, 2006). The chapter closes by

discussing how the practice of BW presents opportunities for developing ‘ecological consciousness’ and reconsidering our affective positionality towards both our social and natural environment.

Opening spaces

In June 2016 I began my training in Body Weather (BW), attending classes and workshops at the ReadyMade Works Studio in the inner-city suburb of Ultimo. A multi-purpose rehearsal studio for the performing arts, the studio is used mainly by the independent dance community in Sydney for training, rehearsing and developing new works. Entering the studio feels like entering someone’s house—ReadyMade doesn’t look like a traditional dance studio, but instead like a creative open space—it has the atmosphere of a New York industrial loft, with vintage furniture arranged on a large wooden floor.



Figure 41. ReadyMade Works Studio (retrieved from www.creativespaces.net.au).

Before meeting the BW artistic community in Sydney, I was not familiar with this dance form, nor did I know any of the dancers involved with this practice. When I began this practice, I had only just returned to Sydney, a few months after my allogeneic transplant. The prospect of resuming not only my research but commencing a dance training after undergoing this procedure felt both frightening and joyful.

My first class was with Tess de Quincey, a leading Body Weather artist and choreographer in Australia. The intensive three-day BW workshop led by Tess de Quincey began on Friday 1st June 2016 and the class started at 6 pm. A mixture of excitement, uncertainty, and curiosity resonated deep within me when I entered the space of the studio. Everything was new to me, the practice, the people, the space, and even my own body.

As soon as the other participants arrived, the BW dancers began performing an unusual ritual: they started ‘preparing’ the space. Kirsten, who later became one of my informants, filled three buckets with water in the bathroom and placed them on one side of the dance floor, which occupies one half of the studio. With bare feet, the BW dancers lined up in parallel, soaked the rags in the buckets and started to wipe the black Tarkett floor. Tess did not give any instructions, but everybody seemed to know what to do. Unsure about this custom, I did not dare to ask, but I soon aligned with them, waiting for my turn to wipe the floor, pulling the rag on the floor while running on all four across the space. This ritual of cleaning the floor before starting the training seemed to serve both a practical and a philosophical purpose. The mopping of the floor functioned as a warming up of the body before the work, as well as enacting the synergistic relationship between the space and the body that is specifically cultivated in BW.

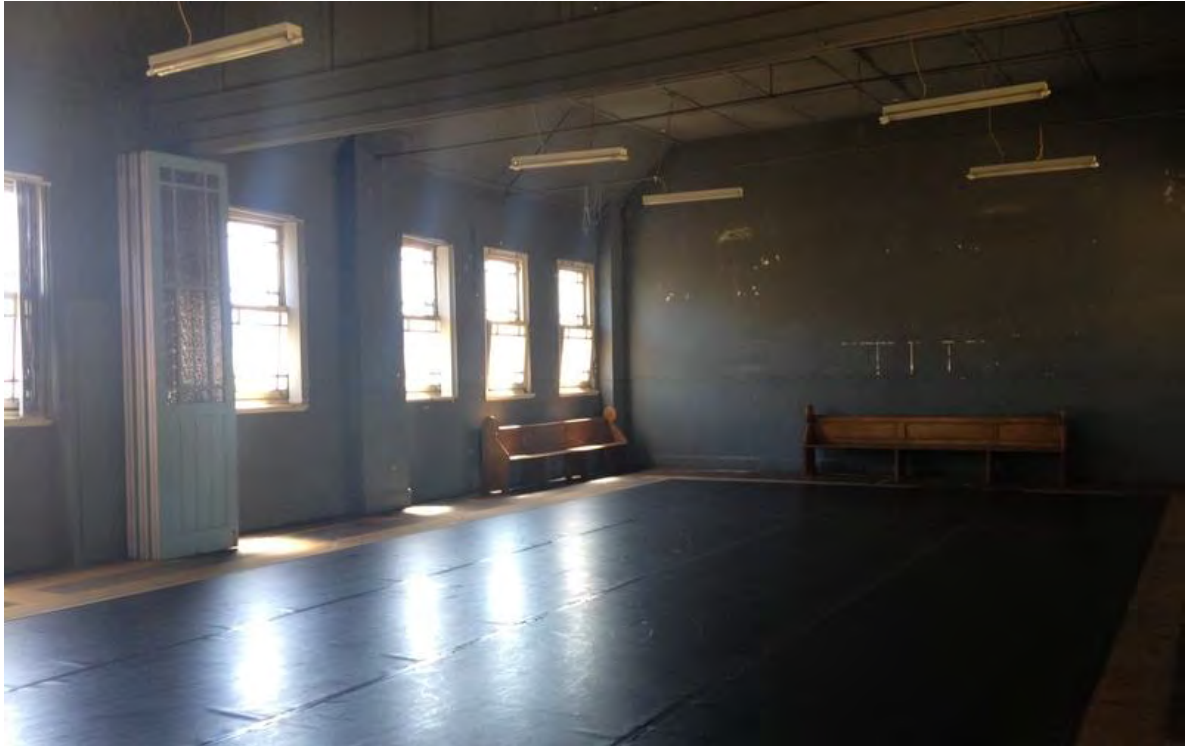


Figure 42. The dance space at ReadyMade Studio in Sydney.

After the floor was ‘ready’ to be entered, and our bodies warmed up, Tess presented us with some exercises to help us ‘tune in’ to the body. First, Tess invited us to feel the ground with our body. We started by lying on the floor, and she asked us to imagine that we were moving in the sand. Then we split into two groups and took turns to watch the other people move in this (imaginary) sandy desert. The third part of the exercise involved moving a partner’s body, gently pulling and pushing her limbs while maintaining the focus on imagining the density of the sand all around us. We continued the exercise in groups of three, with one person watching the other two as they moved up from the ground, exploring all the intermediate levels on the way to standing up. For this exercise we were taking turns and observing each other’s exploratory journey rising from the floor. After everyone had a turn, we reflected for a few minutes on what we had just experienced and observed, and we took the time to discuss and share our

perceptions with the group. While I was watching two fellow dancers in my group moving from the floor up to standing, and while looking at their movements, I felt in my body a sense of fluidity and a sensation of stretching in my limbs, even as I was sitting still. Tricked by the power of imagination, I thought I saw the ground covered with sand for just a second.

Peter Fraser, BW performer and teacher, observes how “to establish a relation between imagination and body that is transformative, not pictorial, requires an extensive training of both the body and the imagination. Tanaka developed just such a training—an investigative training with a focus on noticing the body and its relations to time and space” (Fraser, 2016 - online article). Tess’s intensive BW workshop continued with other exercises aimed at prompting and challenging our body through imagination. We did an individual ‘whispering’ exercise. Tess invited us to whisper words to ourselves while moving. At first it was required that the words were related to the external environment, to what we were seeing: smoothly whispering any word that we would use to describe the room in that moment.

The second part of the exercise involved whispering words related to the boundary of our skin, including sensations and emotions, after which a third part followed during which we could whisper words freely. This last exercise was based on letting our imagination take over and whisper whatever thought popped into our mind, moving the body in a sort of improvisational dance while noticing the effect that these words had on our movement. The final part of the exercise involved whispering words while lying on the ground. We did the exercise in three different positions: first we had to lie on our belly, then lying down on one side, and lastly lying on our backs while facing the ceiling. Slowly moving through these positions on the ground whispering these words,

we were invited by Tess to send our breath and our attention into parts of our body, directing our focus to the subtle changes occurring inside and outside our bodies.

Transitioning from whispering words related to the surrounding environment to words related to our own internal physical sensations created a new space, a sort of invisible but corporeal dimension in which our whispering became like deep echoes that resonated through our bodies and the walls of the studio. It felt like opening another dimension where our thoughts became almost tangible, like soap bubbles floating in the space all around us.

This intensive BW workshop led by Tess de Quincey, along with the cultivation of an awareness of movement in relation to imagination and imaginary spaces, also included some vigorous physical training. Each day of the workshop the class started with the aerobic component of the training, which in the language of BW is called ‘M/B’, “an intensely rigorous physical practice, which can stand for mind/body, muscle/bone and movement/balance” (Candelario, 2019, p. 18). M/B training involves a progressive series of movements across the space of the studio, serving to open the body to new possibilities of movement. This physically intensive part of the training usually takes one to two hours, as the dancers proceed to perform a series of walks at a fast pace continually back and forth across the dance floor.

Watching from a distance, the dancers aligned in the M/B practice look like a wave, like a storm that brushes through the space of the studio. This M/B series of exercises involves crossing the space repeatedly in straight lines using different levels, training a sense of groundedness in the joints, exploring the lower levels of the body and walking on the knees, and exploring the vertical dimension by walking on the toes. Each round of the M/B series is implemented by different elements that create more challenging

sequences of movements. These can include changing directions and walking and running backwards, sideways, increasing the speed and performing a series of runs repeatedly modified by adding different elements. According to Candelario, “this type of practice cultivates an ability to respond quickly to new information, and to keep doing so despite being tired or confused about steps or counts” (2019, p. 18).

Another feature of M/B is a keen attention to interoception, the internal sensations of the body, alongside a focus on external stimuli which can comprise either a verbal instruction or a physical demonstration suggested by the class facilitator. For example, during this intensive phase of the workshop, while we were keeping up with the challenging crossings of the space, Tess unexpectedly proposed another element to our running. She asked us to imagine that we were holding two swords in our hands and we had to go across the space trying to avoid ‘cutting’ the other people, while continuing to perform the complex sequence of steps with our feet.

Many of the movements in the M/B series are designed to disrupt a hierarchical organization of mind over the body. The goal of this part of the training is to unsettle the mind by challenging the relationship between different parts of the body. Performance Studies scholar Peter Snow observes how M/B practice exists as “a deliberate strategy to renegotiate, threaten and even undermine boundaries between minds and bodies, between parts of bodies, and between bodies and other bodies” (Snow, 2003, p. 52). This idea is further elaborated by Fuller, who observes how this method is “entirely opposed to hierarchisation or formalisation, it sees no part of the body as more important than another” (Fuller, 2014, p. 198). As Peter Fraser also underlines, ‘M/B’ practice “is a highly demanding physical, aerobic training but equally demanding of attention and perception. The result is a body that is flexible and able to

initiate and isolate from points all around it” (Fraser, 2016; on BW and M/B training see also McAuley 2000, Fuller, 2014; Grant, 2006).

After two days of training I could barely walk. My legs felt incredibly heavy, lactic acid permeating my whole body; but even if my muscles hurt, I felt open, somehow more attuned to my body and more aware of the weight and the pull of gravity upon it. One of the instructions Tess presented to us during the workshop was “give yourself to space and the space gives back to you”. These words stayed with me for some time after this first encounter. On my way back home from this three-day intensive BW workshop, crossing the Sydney harbour on the ferry, I felt enraptured by the contrast between the calm waters of the harbour and the nebulous grey clouds of the sky. For a moment it seemed to me like my thoughts and my inner emotional landscape were fusing with the outer environment, as if my feelings were suddenly absorbed and mirrored by the environment, magnified by the surrounding elements, resonating with the vast turbidity of the sky and the momentary quiet of the water.

On my way home, I thought about my trip on the ferry from the city as a situational metaphor of my being-in-the-world, as if this panorama could capture my feeling of existence. Unlike an oceanic feeling, where the ego dissolves its boundaries by merging with the landscape, in that moment I felt instead as if the landscape was returning to me, revealing to me the content of a deep embodied memory: the feeling of lying in the bed of my quarantine room at the hospital where time and space were suspended for months.

In that moment I thought that the landscape was echoing my feeling of having been held in a precarious equilibrium, holding tight the thin line between fear and hope, between the incertitude of undergoing a risky procedure that could unlock yet another

larger uncertainty (an as yet undiscernible future), and the certitude of not having a choice (except surrendering to the inevitable). The sky was dark, promising a storm, but the sea was calm, and in that moment contrasting forces mirrored what was happening within me, floating silently between two vast unknowns like the boat I was travelling on, suspended between the ocean and the cloudy sky. Maybe it was the Body Weather training I had just undertaken that fostered such feeling, but that particular image of the landscape revealed my thoughts and sublimated my feelings in a revealing instant.

A radical movement ideology

Body Weather (BW) is a radical and anti-hierarchical movement ideology stemming from Butoh tradition, an avant-garde dance style developed in Japan in the 1960s by dancers who followed the artistic direction of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. Butoh is a dance form fostering an image-based approach to movement creation, as well as “an emphasis on the transformation of the dancer into something else, an intense physicality that may result in explosions of movement across the stage or a strictly contained tension beneath the surface of the skin, and a focus on themes such as death, marginality, and nature” (Candelario, 2019, p. 12). BW stems from this tradition and was subsequently developed by Japanese choreographer Min Tanaka and his Maijuku performance group through the 1970s and 1980s. Tanaka established his dance group Maijuku in 1985 and further developed his own training methodology that later became known as Body Weather (BW). Defined as “a semi-intuitive technique” (Marshall, 2006, p. 55), BW is a movement philosophy for creating dance. It involves performing and training the dancing body in relation to the broader environment. Fuller describes Body Weather not as movement training but as research, as a way of acquiring

information and stimulation from the physical environment (Fuller, 2014, 2017, 2018). Tanaka first trained in Western classical and modern dance and in the mid-1970s began his solo career with a series of improvisational dances presented throughout Japan (for an account of Tanaka's career see Fuller, 2018). After having become known internationally as a solo improviser, Tanaka first began leading dance workshops in 1978, which he called 'Body Weather' workshops. However, later he would call them simply 'Body' workshops, in an effort to resist the formalisation of his training as specific technique.

Practitioners of BW say that this practice is informed by an anti-hierarchy ideal. According to Fuller (2018), in Tanaka's approach, hierarchisation and formalisation are linked together because both restrict the body, reducing its potential for experience. Tanaka's ideology was "to have no teacher, no students, and no physical movement that was better or more important than another" (Fuller, 2014, p. 198). To provide an example of Tanaka's radical methodology, I report here a conversation I had with BW performer artist and facilitator Linda Luke. She mentioned an episode with Min Tanaka that exemplifies his radical approach. Linda explained to me that Tanaka, despite being recognised internationally as the creator of BW, currently denies the existence of BW. He claims that BW does not exist, or rather that BW does not exist anymore. Linda, who took part in one of the last workshops Tanaka led at his farm in Hakushu, Japan, said:

I remember when I was there, he [Tanaka] was so frustrated with us, the international students, that he stopped the workshop four days before it was meant to finish. The workshop was supposedly 44 days and on day 41 he came in and said: "you are thinking about going home, so I don't want to do any more work with you, because you are not committed to the now".

Similarly to Linda's anecdote, Fuller emphasises how for Tanaka himself, "Body Weather is not simply a training method, but an ideology that informs training, dance, and daily life" (Fuller, 2014, p. 198). Salient aspects of this methodology consist in understanding the body as force of nature. Body Weather training proposes a mind/body focus where "an individual's will is engaged in a struggle to expand the capacity to receive multiple stimulations from other individuals and the physical environment" (Fuller, 2014, p. 198). BW is a movement method and performance practice that explores interconnected relationships across bodies and their environments.

Body Weather in Australia

This methodology was first introduced into Australia in 1989 by the choreographer Tess de Quincey. According to Marshall, "Tanaka was one of the first Butoh artists to come to Australia, his Mai-Juku company performing at the Sydney Biennale in 1982" (2006, p. 56). Tanaka was one of the few Butoh performers to tour the Communist bloc countries in the 1980s. Through such international exchanges Butoh came to influence the Australian contemporary dance scene, with artists like Tess de Quincey going to Japan to train and perform with him. Tess joined Min Tanaka and his Maijuku performance group for six years, from 1985 to 1991. Tess introduced BW in Australia in 1989, presenting dance-performances and site-specific works in a range of different environments and contexts, including immersive research workshops in both metropolitan and outback areas. She established De Quincey Co formally in 2000, as Australia's leading Body Weather company.

Tess de Quincey emphasises how BW not only blends contemporary dance training with Asian and Western philosophy and training practices, but also melds the performing arts disciplines of dance and theatre with visual arts, film, and music (De

Quincey & Maxwell, 2019). According to Tess, BW “emerges at their intersection, taking advantage of the ways in which different presentational genres—from gallery installations and black box theatres, to site-specific works of shifting scales, from industrial environments to desert riverbeds—contextualise and determine perception and reception” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 167).

Edward Scheer notes how Tess De Quincey resists the exclusivity of Body Weather and considers this dance form as not solely Japanese. De Quincey’s interest in BW relates to the fact that Min Tanaka was working internationally from the very beginning—with an international group of performers—and that he “was less concerned with Japanese identity and was more interested in human identity” (De Quincey cited in Scheer 2000, p. 137). According to Scheer, “De Quincey encourages cross-cultural oscillation in Australian performance” (Scheer, 2000, p. 137) and she also insists that BW training in Australia cannot be practised in the same way as it is in Japan.

During the workshop Tess stressed some differences between her practice of BW and what is considered the ‘tradition’ in Japan. She pointed out how BW practitioners usually work with a curved back like in Butoh. After she injured her back, she told us she adapted the posture to the Western physicality and aesthetics that usually maintains the verticality of the spine. During the training Tess also emphasised the difference between BW and other Western dance forms like ballet. She said that “in ballet you hold the weight, you carry it around, lifted; in BW you feel all the weight and you give weight and that gives you a different [perceptual] entering on the body”.

Scheer suggests that for Tess de Quincey, BW is an “open investigation,” a “laboratory” and as such it can be made available for sharing across cultures and within other social

circumstances (Scheer, 2000, p. 139). De Quincey and Performance Studies scholar Ian Maxwell recently framed BW as a radical approach to “the climates of our bodies and our minds”, and identified this praxis with “a ‘weather of being’ to negotiate change and to explore our world” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 166). They state that in BW practice:

Location and dislocation are constant players and questioners whilst environments overlap and swarm through and around each other posing a series of questions about our place within ‘nature’. Within the emergence of language and how articulation starts in the body, micro-signals expose the subconscious and provide clues for future development. (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 166)

The practice of BW cultivates and pushes the dancers to explore their embodied and psychological habits of action and reaction, of movement and noticing, and negotiating their cultural conditioning to expose the ‘subconscious’, letting new spaces and forms to emerge. In this sense BW, according to Tess De Quincey, can be considered a cross-cultural system of practice.

Immersive training in Bellambi, NSW

In July 2016 I joined an intensive three-day BW workshop in Bellambi, a suburb of Wollongong in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia. The workshop was led by Linda Luke, Sydney based BW performer and facilitator. Linda’s workshop was based on the structure of the type of workshops led by Tanaka at his Body Weather Farm in Hakushu, Japan, and adapted the training to the environment surrounding the

Bellambi Surf Lifesaving Club located at Bellambi Beach, approximately 90 km south of the city of Sydney.



Figure 43. The view over Bellambi lagoon from the Bellambi Surf Lifesaving Club.

The workshop was organised around three main areas: the beach in front of the Surf Lifesaving Club, the pathways alongside the park that separates the residential area from the beaches, and the Surf Lifesaving Club building itself, which for the duration of the workshop became our headquarters. This was the place where we came together to share reflections and experiences before and after the practice. During the three days of the workshop the hall of the Club was transformed at night into our dormitory, and during the day we shared our meals in the same space. Exchanging thoughts and experiences, cooking, eating, cleaning, washing dishes, resting, and taking care of the space all occurred together.



Figure 44. BW participants reflect on practice at the Surf Lifesaving Club in Bellambi

BW can take place at any site. Suitable locations range from outdoor environments like an urban street or a suburban park, or a rural site or indoor spaces like a dance studio. All types of environments are considered important sources of stimulation for both training and performance. Candelario reported that between 1986 and 2010, Tanaka hosted Maijuku Performance Company members and students on his Body Weather Farm in Hakushu, Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan. She pointed out how working on the organic vegetable farm was for Tanaka and the members of his company a way of sustenance that also served as a central focus of his training. Candelario observed that in BW “agricultural labour was considered an inherent part of dance training through information gained by the body from the physical environment” (Candelario, 2019, p. 12).

Candelario observes how BW training workshops “not only situate themselves in nature but also explicitly present the workshop as a way to understand or form a relationship with that particular landscape” (2019, p. 13). She further asserts that we should take

“these practices seriously as potential modes for transforming humans and forming relationships with the environment” (p. 13). Discussing the salient characteristics of this dance methodology, Linda Luke explained to me how the practice of BW shaped her way of perceiving and how BW teachings have become an integral part of her life. She told me that BW practice could influence and transform our relationship to life and our surroundings in a broader sense:

BW certainly changed the way I perceived the world, like now I’m just looking at the window watching how the trees move, how the movement of the natural environment, how it moves. It sounds like a cliché you know but it is a dance in itself, totally right there in front of you, but the depth of perception from it, because of the way you use your imagination in BW and the deep sensitivity to really tune in on this subtle level you might see the world, perceive things differently.

Before starting the physical training, we sat on the floor listening to Linda who illustrated to us the main sources of inspiration and elements that characterised the work during the workshop. The principal goal was to explore the relationship between perception, body, and landscape. The workshop had a particular focus on the concept of ‘intimate immensity’ draw from Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (Bachelard, 1969) and the ideas of infinite landscape, disintegrating boundaries, exploring how imagination moves us, and how we can create work/create world within our bodies; and the practice of *bisoku* or Slow movement. As part of the explorations on these themes, the workshop included a daily physical practice of M/B.

The physical work began with a M/B training session on the grass in front of the beach, which lasted approximately an hour and a half. This was similar to the exercises we did

in the studio with Tess in my first encounter with Body Weather; including a series of walks and runs at increased speed, exploring different levels and surfaces of the body.



Figure 45. Bellambi Beach

After the M/B session we went down to the beach. Linda asked us to find a spot to sit still by ourselves, then she gave us some black pieces of fabric to blindfold ourselves. She gave each of us an object; its surface felt smooth but irregular and the exercise was to spend time, about 40 minutes, exploring the object with all the senses except sight. This required tuning in to other senses to discover other aspects of the object. First, we had to imagine what this object could be, then notice its smell, the texture, its weight, and how it tasted. I first imagined holding a planet, I imagined the spherical object being like a small planet that I was holding it like Atlas held the Earth. From the smell I could recognise that it was a fruit, probably an orange, so then I tried to open it, but its skin

was very thick, it was very hard to peel. Eventually I managed to get to the inside, and I taste it. It was definitely an orange. It was incredible to experience and re-discover something as ‘ordinary’ as eating an orange through such an unusual process, and to taste its juicy pulp facing the setting sun on the beach. I felt a sense of inner happiness mixed with stupor rising from my body, it felt good being alive. Spending 40 minutes exploring the ‘world’ of an orange blindfolded and eating it in front of the ocean on a sunny winter afternoon was a sensorial, full and unusual experience for a dance training.



Figure 46. BW workshop participant tasting an orange during a blindfolded sensory exercise

When we talked about our sensations during this exercise we were surprised by the similarities of our experiences. Everyone was struck by the simplicity yet complexity of the exercise; it was like a ‘poke’ to the senses, rendering us alive to the billions of

things that go unnoticed every moment. Following the awakening of our senses in this manner, we went for a walk on the beach, with the instruction to expand our attention to our surroundings, paying attention to everything around us. When we arrived at the edge of the beach it was already dusk, and Linda invited us to improvise freely on the grass facing the Bellambi rock pool.

Following this dance improvisation session, we returned to the Surf Lifesaving Club to make dinner. Having consumed our meal, we went out to the beach again for the last exercise of the day. Down at the beach Linda proposed to us to go for a 'blind walk'. Divided into couples, one was blindfolded and tied to our partners by a cotton string attached to the index finger. The 'leader' had to guide the blindfolded person around in the dark, letting the 'doer' explore the space of the beach in the dark, touching the ground, the seaweed on the shore, and the plants in the bushes. We took turns so both partners had the experience of navigating the beach blindfolded.

The role of the leader in the exercise was to help the partner explore the environment with the sense of touch. The exercise lasted half an hour and finished when the 'leader' held the 'doer' for a few moments in a hug. After this hug, the leader had to leave their partner on their own in the dark for a few minutes, until the 'doer' was ready to switch roles and repeat the exercise. I did this exercise with Christie, a young performance student graduating from Wollongong University. Christie told me afterwards: "I think Body Weather is about discovering more universes in one thing. It asks us to discover the layers, to open multiple universes in a tiny detail. For me it is a radical practice, it allows me to experience [with my body] philosophical specific language to enter this state of perception".

Similarly to my BW interlocutors, Fuller observes how during Tanaka's workshops "there were exercises exploring the environment, imagery, *bisoku* (extremely slow) movement, blind work, and work on developing physical characters" (Fuller, 2014, p. 199).

Whilst BW training involves image work, sensation and stimulation usually take precedence over the use of visual imagery. BW practitioners emphasise the importance of partnered exercises. Peter Fraser pointed out that Tanaka created a range of partnered exercises that involve the body being manipulated sensitively from the outside to promote "a training in responsiveness, observation and imaginative re-creation for both parties" (Fraser, 2016 - online).

As Fuller observes "in Tanaka's view, simply imagining stimulation is not enough to engage a dancer's inner stream: the body has to experience actual physical sensations from nature" (Fuller, 2014, pp. 200-201). Fuller elaborates this concept of an inner stream, stressing that Tanaka focused his training on gaining awareness of his own inner stream. According to Fuller, "his own experience was that while he seemed from the outside to be moving very slowly, inside he was moving very fast. This idea of having two independent speeds, or "streams," in the body, inner and outer, is a concept that is of major importance in his philosophy of dance" (Fuller, 2017, p. 85).

***Bisoku*: Stillness and density**

This idea of observing an inner stream is fostered in BW by practising *bisoku*, namely moving slowly, ideally at the speed of one millimetre per second. During the Bellambi immersive workshop Linda proposed that we engage in several *bisoku* exercises. These activities were focused on cultivating an awareness of minute sensations. One simple

exercise involved making a fist with our hands and attempting to open our hand over five minutes. We then switched and tried the exercise with the other hand. Another *bisoku* exercise consisted of making an ‘eyes walk’, running through the horizon with the gaze for half an hour. The goal was to slowly trace the horizon line like a tiny ant, trekking over every hillock, treetop, suburban rooftop, or smooth plane of sea at the speed of 1mm/per sec.

Other exercises involved expanding the practice of *bisoku* to the whole body. On the third day of the workshop Linda asked us to go along the parklands that separate the beach from the residential area, and to do a *bisoku* roll on the grass for half an hour.



Figure 47. *Bisoku* exercise on the grass, Bellambi Park, July 2016.

Rolling slowly on the grass was challenging work, both physically and mentally. It was demanding for the tension required to engage and control the muscles to move slowly,

but also challenging was to focus on perceiving the world around us moving at a faster pace. In this exercise Tanaka's concept of awareness of a double inner stream became palpable.

Another fascinating exercise to perform was a backwards walk on the beach for a mile. We walked backwards along the length of Bellambi beach, while looking into a small mirror held in our hands that guided us in the direction. During this walk Linda suggested trying different speeds: some slow walks, some fast runs. After a while I had the impression that I was moving much faster than when I normally walk straight. Switching back to walking forward after this exercise was incredible, I felt the weight of gravity more keenly; my body was much heavier for me to move when I walked forwards. When walking backwards I felt embraced by the landscape through my peripheral vision, I gathered a more acute awareness of and information about the environment.

The *bisoku* activity that was the most transformative for me involved standing in front of the ocean and walking with the eyes closed, moving slowly towards the shore. For this exercise Linda suggested we imagine having not two eyes but instead one big eye that reflected the environment. With that in mind, the task was to imagine the landscape around us.



Figure 48. *Bisoku* and imagination exercise at Bellambi Beach, 2016

During this exercise I imagined I was a wild, weird, impossible creature, a mythological beast like Cerberus. I felt my hands becoming two heads, able to see and perceive exactly as my own head, then suddenly I felt like my head was splitting into two other parts. I felt like I had four heads and that was the first time I could feel a strong image rising from my body, from my physical sensations rather than my conscious imagination. This for me was the peak experience of the workshop. I realised that there is not a single ‘correct’ way to perform a movement, unlike most of my ballet training had taught me. In that moment I believed I understood what Linda meant by “be seen by the landscape” when she quoted Min Tanaka, that “the environment dances you, you are danced by the environment”.

In that moment I was being ‘danced by the environment’, which also meant a letting go in life and opening myself to the present moment, helping me to discover and develop other ways of moving and feeling.



Figure 49. Body Weather dancers performing *bisoku* on the beach (courtesy of Gideon Payten-Griffiths)

Reflecting on the minuscule movements found in stillness and attempting impossible tasks at 1mm per second, Gideon, one of the participants, observed how small details change with view, and how the eyes can be ‘fooled’ or ‘confined’. He reported his experience of the workshop saying, “For me, it was some wonderful work around sight and how our eyes take or receive, and while one mode seems penetrative and one seem receptive, both feel important.”

Fuller suggested that “Tanaka’s manipulation of time in the form of *bisoku* was an antithesis to the flow of urban life, and so contributed to his status of object” (Fuller, 2017, p. 82). In BW practice, the choreographic process is an attentive-receptive way of meeting with the body. The dancer has no ‘designs’ on the body—it is a dialogue that transforms the body into an undetermined form, trained to meet and respond to other bodies and the surrounding environment.

According to Tanaka, “the body is not a set entity. It constantly changes, like the weather. The body that measures the landscape, the body in intercourse with weather, the body kissing [the] mass of peat, the body in [a] love-death relation to the day” (Min Tanaka quoted in Marshall, 2006, p. 56). The body in BW is not conceived as a fixed entity, but instead like the weather it is constantly changing and transforming. As emphasised by De Quincey and Maxwell: “Body Weather proposes the body as itself an environment reflecting, in dialogue with, a greater environment. The body-mind, the endless loop of feedback between sensory stimulation and mind, generates an intelligent body, minutely responsive and agile in its capacity to realise new ways of being” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 167).

A fundamental aspect emphasised by this practice is a consideration of the body “as itself an environment” which both frames and is framed by a greater environment. According to BW performers, on a physical level, BW training develops the capacity of the body to respond to different stimuli, and to move at different speeds. It asks dancers to reframe habitual actions and routines from unusual perspectives, as such the practice of BW is linked to a praxis that cultivates presence.

In conversation with Linda, she stressed the relevance of BW training for cultivating ‘being present’ as an essential aesthetical component of performance. Referring to her

experience of witnessing another BW performer, Kirsten Packman, rehearsing a new work, Linda told me:

I think all dance practices can ask individuals to pay attention to the present, but I think BW demands to pay attention to the present otherwise it simply doesn't work! I think in BW, aesthetically, if somebody is not paying attention, you can see it. Last night I was watching Kirsten rehearsing her piece, and I saw an amazing, beautiful piece coming up. Critically speaking when I'm watching I can see when Kirsten goes into a mindful state and when she drops it, you can see it because literally her body changes, her speed changes.

Several BW practitioners have emphasised how this methodology has enabled them to develop and fine tune what they define as 'a heightened relationship to the everyday', a practice of noticing and cultivating awareness of the subtle movements and changes inside and outside their bodies in relation to the external environment. In this BW becomes for its practitioners not just a movement methodology or a dance training, but a philosophy of 'presence'. Kirsten Packman, BW performer and visual artist, describes the relationship with presence, space and the dancing body in these terms:

When I see space changed by the body, that's when I see presence, not just about the body but the spatial relationships, what's going on, so the activation across space, not just to other dancers but how the body is inhabiting space, it's almost as much about the body as space, sculpted by space.

BW training fosters an attention to 'presence' through the body in relation to the environment in which the body is situated, as well as developing attention to the internal 'environment' of the body of the performers.

Omnicentral Situated model of presence in Body Weather

By focusing on examples from BW performances, and direct personal accounts of BW dancers and choreographers, I address the emergence of presence advanced in my proposed *Omnicentral Situated* model of presence. Through BW training, dancers learn to seek and establish parallels between body, environment, and spatial relations, exploring how all these elements are constantly changing and in the process of transforming each other in the making. BW trains dancers to cultivate an awareness to sense themselves as part of an ecology. Based on several BW dancers' accounts collected during my apprenticeship and ethnographic fieldwork, as well as my direct experience, this proposed *Omnicentral Situated* model of presence in Body Weather emphasises the role of the environment in shaping phenomena of presence. The model also decentres the performer from the position of sole upholder of presence (when compared to the *Classic* model of stage presence).

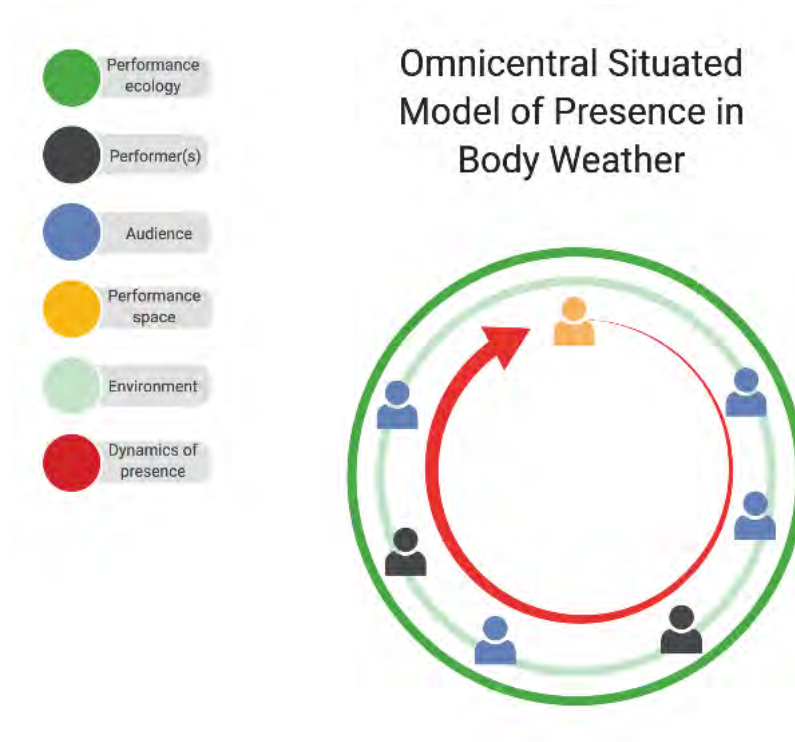


Figure 50. *Omnicultural Situated* model of presence in Body Weather

In this diagram the element of the performer is highlighted in yellow to emphasise the relationality that characterises the conception of the body in this dance form.

Because BW considers the body of the performer “like a weather system, the body is always changing, as is the space” (Candelario, 2019, p. 19), and as evinced by Stuart Grant in conversation with Tess de Quincey in BW “a body becomes a site where things other than it can take root and be performed” (Grant, 2006, p. 250). The diagram highlights the body of the performer as the stage, the place where the performance unfolds.

Candelario pointed out that in BW “rather than the body being at the center of its own kinesphere, it is both expanded and dispersed” (Candelario 2018, p. 50). BW practice focuses on cultivating a heightened awareness of sensation in the body and its surroundings, that includes an openness to receive and respond to both these elements. BW considers the body as “ever-changing, omni-centred, and completely open to external stimuli” (Fuller, 2014, p. 198).

De Quincey and Maxwell claim that the body of the performer in BW is configured through an active and continual exchange with its surroundings. They emphasise how in this context of practice, the act of performance in its exchange with an/ the audience, “starts with the body as an environment reflecting and in dialogue with a greater environment” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 166). Thus, in the diagram, the audience attending a BW performance is associated with the element of the environment, as well as the environment assuming the role of performer. Through the practice of BW the audience is considered inseparable from the environment in which the performer is immersed, just as the performer as inseparable from the space she inhabits.

Sarah Pink discussed a recent shift in the anthropology of the senses (Howes, 2005) that suggested a move beyond the notion of embodiment towards the paradigm of emplacement. According to Howes, this move “suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment” (Howes, 2005, p. 7). Drawing on her work *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009), Pink reframes her previous research on bull fighters in Spain in light of a notion of emplacement. She asks how we might understand the performing body in competitive public events such as the *corrida*, when we include observation and analysis of the physical as well as the cultural space in which the performance takes place. In her view, this framework is a valuable tool in addressing and understanding embodied performances more widely. Pink argues that “theoretical advances concerning the senses, human perception and place open up new analytical possibilities for understanding skilled performances and events” (Pink, 2011, p. 344).

With this aim Pink reinterprets the notion of place and emplacement building on the work of the philosopher Edward Casey (1993, 1996), the geographer Doreen Massey (2005) and the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007, 2008). She observes that even if each

of these accounts take “the analysis in a slightly different direction, their contributions are interesting because they variously seek to re-think place theoretically in ways that provide an abstract framework for understanding how ‘things’ in movement combine to constitute place and the perception of place” (Pink, 2011, p. 349). According to Pink, these theories are significant because they criticise the assumption that ‘space’ is the construct in Western philosophy that refers to spatial relations. Casey observes how the concept of place is subordinate to the more abstract idea of space, often conceived of as an ‘empty’ space, a space that pre-exists, and that ‘place’ is as such merely the meaningful occupation of it (see Casey 1993, 1996).

Pink stresses that the application of a theory of emplacement to what was understood as embodied performance offers several analytical advantages. She suggests that locating the performing body within a wider ecology can allow us to see it as an organism in relation to other organisms, thus recognising “both the specificity and intensity of the place event and its contingencies, but also the historicity of processes and their entanglements” (Pink, 2011, p. 354). Pink suggests that moving from a theory of embodiment to one of emplacement “invites us to also consider how in other ecologies of place the diverse constituents of place-events become entangled to produce specific configurations” (Pink, 2011, p. 354).

Jane Goodall refers to De Quincey’s statement that “places enter and inhabit people” (Goodall, 2006, p. 120) to emphasise the different way of relating to spaces and places in BW, a way that “brings out an explicit commitment to discovering the subtle atmospheres of location” (Goodall, 2006, p. 122). To emphasise this point, Goodall cites Min Tanaka’s notorious maxim: “When I dance don’t dance in the place, but I am the place” (quoted in Goodall, 2006, p. 122). According to Goodall, this view diverges from the prevailing way of thinking about the stage, the space of the performance *par*

excellence in Western culture, in which the stage is treated like a place “to be ‘taken’ by powerful players who have scripts to act out” (Goodall, 2006, p. 120).

As Goodall suggests, “English language expressions like ‘a commanding presence’ and ‘an imposing presence’ give us an image of the performer in a relationship of domination with the surrounding space” (Goodall, 2006, p. 120). This way of thinking evinces the traditional approach of equating theatrical presence with ‘command’ that is implicit in the classic model of stage presence. Conversely, in the practice of BW, the elements of the performers, audience and environment participate in the process of shaping the ecology of presence as well as contributing to its emergence.

Danced by space: The presence of the environment

Through BW training dancers become acquainted with a conception of presence recognized as a diffusion of focus that is not unidirectional but ‘omnicentral’. BW considers the body as omnicentric and in a state of continual flux (Baird & Candelario, 2018). The concept of ‘omnicentrality’ in BW is brought forward by its initiator Min Tanaka:

Since 1977 I started to call my concept about the body, ‘Body Weather.’ Its main concept is that sometimes I feel—even when we are talking—people take a position which is always inside of the body. It’s like one is always expressing, ‘I am here, I am in the centre.’ But I thought, ‘Why don’t we feel the centre lying in the dream, or somewhere else?’ It’s like the weather: centres are always moving. So if I have a chance to get stimulation from outside through my skin, I contain more than is inside of my clothing. That is Body Weather. It’s omnicentral, as if there are many eyes, many centres, moving. (Min Tanaka cited in Marshall, 2006, p. 61)

One of my interviewees, Gideon Payten-Griffiths, a Sydney-based dance performer, talked about his experience of presence as maintaining an open focus that is responsive to sudden changes. In his words, presence in BW is “like practising being immersed and open to change, open to receptivity and the world, having an open focus at the same time, but maybe it’s a diffusion of focus. It’s like juggling lots of balls at the same time”. Performers of BW describe their experience of presence as a ‘diffusion of focus’, which like the weather, is mutable and in a constant state of flux. Fundamental to this conception of presence in BW is the idea of the space becoming a dancing partner. This idea was evinced by Tess de Quincey during our conversation:

The relationship to be danced by space, that space is not nothing, it is something, and Min [Tanaka] used to talk about the endless stories that are available through space, that everything in history lives there, if you become danced... so for example I was used to this expression ‘put your arms, cut your arm through space’ which we do in the ballet tradition, but all of this is centred through the self-centering of the human, where if your arms get danced by space, by the intricacy of the stories, that in itself gives power to something beyond the human that also expands the presence, because one is engaging and in exchange with those histories and sensitivities.

The presence emerging from the performance context of BW is constantly in flux. Audience, performers and environment are immersed in an atmosphere that is always changing, responding to continuously new internal and external stimuli. According to De Quincey and Maxwell, considering how “the deep energy of our bodies is embedded in space, shaped by time, the environment, the specifics of place”, cultivating “the focus on an energetic exchange between bodies dissolves the logics of inside and outside, self and environment” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 167). This re-configuration of

presence in relation to the performance ecology also invokes an ethical consideration. De Quincey and Maxwell interrogate the liveliness of the exchange between Body Weather performers and their audiences, asking how the spectator engages with what emerges in the space of the performance. They also emphasize how this intense exchange offers an open-ended, ethical opportunity. In their account:

Audiences are entreated to unfurl imaginatively into new orderings of space, time and being. The exchange is at once individual, and deeply collective, testing what it is to be fully alive in, through and with our bodies. Implicit in this exchange is a fundamental ethical challenge that questions how we are together and how we organise ourselves. (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, pp. 167-168)

The ethical question of how we are together and how we organise ourselves is fundamental in performance contexts. Similar to the analysis suggested by Goodall in the context of performing place in Australia (2006), Candelario also recognises the potential offered by practices like BW training for cultivating ‘ecological consciousness’ and for developing ‘a new embodied ecological praxis’ (Candelario, 2019, p. 20).

Layers of presence/s

In November 2016 I participated in the BW dance improvisation event called Impro-Exchange lab, organised by members of the company De Quincey Co. This took place at the Glebe Town Hall in Sydney, a beautiful Victorian building built in 1880, which hosts different kinds of social and civic events. The Impro-Exchange lab was conducted by Frank Van de Ven from Body Weather Amsterdam, international BW facilitator and former member of Tanaka’s Maijuku group. De Quincey Co have organised these labs

annually for over a decade. Based on BW principles, these labs are designed to explore the nature of improvisation between dancers from different backgrounds, ages and traditions, and are open to dancers coming from NSW as well as other states in Australia.



Figure 51. Dancers during the Impro-Exchange, November 2016 (photo by Vsevolod Vlaskine).

In 2016 several Sydney-based performers as well as dance artists from all over the country participated in the Impro-Exchange. The goal of the lab was to provide a platform for dialogue, exchange, and discussion around strategies and processes of improvisation. The Impro-Exchange event culminated with a semi-structured improvisational dance performance open to the public, which took place in the main hall of the Glebe Town Hall.

The structure of the final performance was simple. It was divided into four blocks of fifteen minutes each. The first quarter involved improvisation including either solos or trios, the second quarter involved either trios or groups of six performers. The third bloc

was called ‘solo seduction’ and involved performers improvising individually, and the last quarter was left open to the dancers to explore freely any available combination, improvising alone, in groups of varying size. The performance lasted one hour, and given the improvisational nature of the performance during this time both audience and dancers were free to stay or leave the performance space at any time, paying careful consideration so as to not disrupt the unfolding of the dance.



Figure 52. Impro-Exchange at the Glebe Town Hall, November 2016 (photo by Vsevolod Vlaskine).

During a transition between two blocks of the improvisational dance, I left the performance space, overwhelmed by the atmosphere that was created in the hall. I felt I was pulled out by the density of the presence in that space. Exiting the main hall felt like stepping onto a different gravitational field. I waited over ten minutes before being able to re-enter the space, so intense was the energy emanating from this conglomeration of presences.

Mindful of that experience during the Impro-Exchange event, during a later interview with Tess de Quincey I asked her how artists who have been practising BW for decades cultivate their sense of presence and how performers who are trained in BW respond to the idea of the classic model of stage presence. As an artist who has based her artistic creations and choreographic productions on this methodology, Tess stressed that the position occupied by the performer is as a position of ‘exchange’ with the audience. During our conversation, she pointed out that when a performer is “open to exchange, and receptive, then there is this co-constituting of the moment”. Tess further elaborated on this idea, stressing how in BW:

We encourage this feeling of exchange that the whole act of engaging with the stage is about exchange, but it also about understanding energy in space, so for example the feeling of the space behind me and understanding what the space is that the audience is seeing, and seeing the stage from the audience perspective, at the same time as filling it, so as you move through and around the stage and being moved by the stage, that I’m endeavouring to catch that from an audience perspective, but also I’m thinking about if I face an audience actually I’m looking into hold all of the audience, I’m actually looking to go beyond and behind them so I’m holding around them, and I think all of these considerations point to a very different focus, and way of being than what we engage within a quotidian sense. So that relationship is very determining us to, it’s a heightening of perception, the body then portrays that through small tiny micro signals that are essentially legible to an audience in terms of intensity.

As previously discussed, performance scholar Philip Zarrilli frames stage presence in performing arts, particularly in the case of actors performing in theatre, as an unfolding

phenomenon emerging through the co-presence of performer and audience in the act of “being on the edge of *not knowing*” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 147 - emphasis in original). In Zarrilli’s view stage presence emerges when actors depart from a dispositional state of openness and readiness, a state of abandonment to the possibility of being surprised in the moment. This place of ‘not knowing’ according to Zarrilli, “is a dispositional state of possibility to which the actor can abandon herself in the moment” (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 147). This idea of presence as openness of the performer to the unfolding possibilities of the performance event, in his view, is what enables the audience to perceive presence. In a similar manner, Tess de Quincey talks about presence as a moment of ‘instability’. Tess told me: “it’s in a risk position, that’s where I think presence manifests”. According to Tess, stage presence for the dancer “is about this questioning of being, and if you’re about to wobble, this instability is questioning how your feet are on the ground”. Tess explains this idea further by saying “you’re actually on an edge, and it’s that act of instability that I think it’s where I place my focus and attention and I believe that’s the most real way of communicating, by sharing it [presence] and I certainly respond to it really strongly when I see it in others”.

BW practitioners stress that BW training consists in a practice that cultivates presence. Scheer writes that BW creates density, that in BW is “a training through resistance” (Scheer, 2000, p. 139). Tess emphasises the role played by *bisoku* and stillness in developing a bodily sense of speed and cultivating an attention to the finest details. This contributes to creating a sense of layering, a density in the atmosphere. Tess explains this by saying:

Anything that is faster and impressive, carries us through, we can go along with it, but there is also that impressive aspect that ‘maybe I can’t do that’, so there is that distance and you’re looking at something and be impressed by, whereas

when you stop in space and just make a connection [with the audience] through stillness, it feels to me that presence is also very much about when you open a space that's big for us all, and we all participate in that, it's a participation opposed to just being the 'wow' factor.

Tess's account resonates with Pink's approach to the philosophy of emplacement, where audience and performers "have become part of a specific configuration, or ecology, of persons and things. Their experiences are not simply embodied, but part of a unique environment in progress which both shapes and is shaped by their actions" (Pink, 2011, p. 344).

Summary

In this chapter I have presented some salient features that characterise BW Training as observed and practised during a year of fieldwork. BW emerges as a radical movement practice which focuses on decentralising the attention of the performer by challenging and disrupting sensorial hierarchy and habits of movement. BW suggests a practice of 'surrender' and openness to new directions and perspectives stemming from kinaesthetic investigations of the body. BW invites audience and performers to interrogate and explore the extent of their agency and the agency of the world towards them. Based on my participant observation of BW training and performance events, I explored how BW dancers envision their relationship with the environment, what it means to 'be seen by the landscape', delving into realisations such as the notion that "even a rock can become a dancing partner", as Linda once framed during the practice.

Building on cognitive ecology framework and Tanaka's concept of 'omnicentrality' as displacement of the centrality of self, I proposed an *Omnicentral Situated* model of presence in BW. I have addressed how BW dancers experience presence by cultivating

an attention to their bodies and the poetics of the ‘inner weather’, as well as attending to stillness and practising slow movement in observation of the broader environment. I have suggested how presence in BW can be understood as a process of heightened awareness to the internal and external stimuli coming from the body and its surroundings. The practice of BW questions the agency of both the performer and the environment, focusing on the reciprocal relationship between the landscape and its inhabitants. As suggested by several BW performers, presence in BW emerges when performers find themselves in a ‘risk position’. Throughout my fieldwork I observed how BW dancers cultivate this approach by embracing an omnicentral focus that invites a displacement of the self-centric perspective, resulting in attention to the environment that includes the audience as part of the performance ecology. By tuning in to the subtle sensations of the body, this practice nurtures an awareness that departs from the body and expands beyond the flesh and bones of the dancers. As framed by Tess de Quincey, “the skin is only one borderline. The psycho-physical bundle that makes up a human propels the questions and our imagination into far-reaching trajectories that have the ability to shape our lives” (De Quincey & Maxwell, 2019, p. 166).

In this chapter I have also stressed how the practice of BW invites a consideration of cognitive ecology and emplacement as a valuable framework from which to address the matrix of relations shaping the atmosphere of the performance event. I have emphasised the complexity of the phenomena of stage presence, highlighting the entangled relationship between the elements contributing to the changing ‘weather’ of the performance ecology. The practice of Body Weather suggests a more intricate form of relationship between performers, bodies and senses, audience, and the space in which the performance takes place, in contrast to the linear unidirectional model of influence embedded in the classic model of stage presence.

CHAPTER 8.

BEING HERE: COGNITIVE ECOLOGIES OF PRESENCE

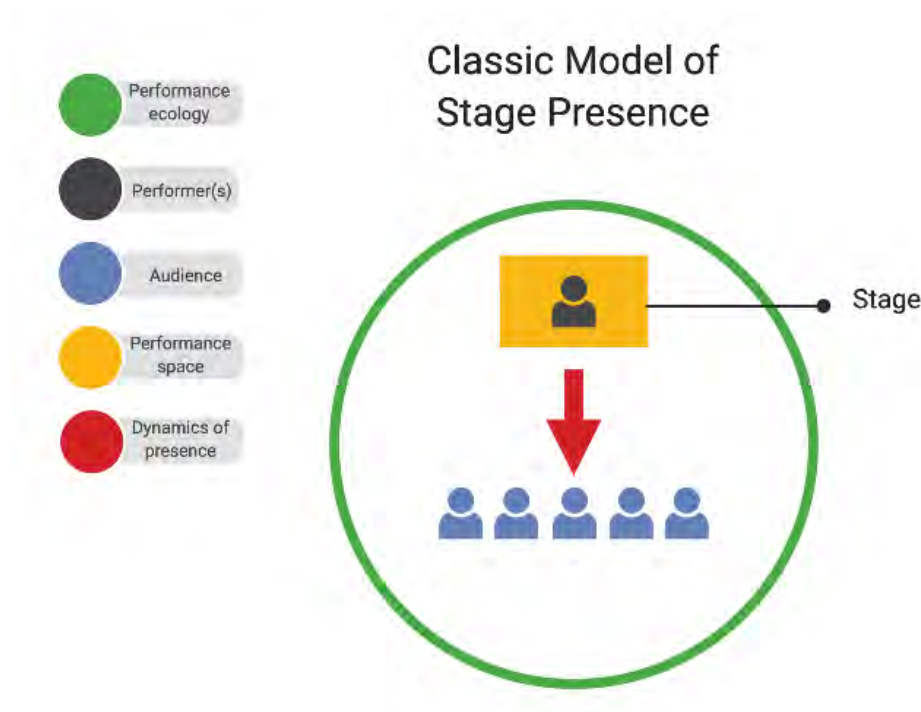
“To see the World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour.”
(William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1807)

In Western culture, the term ‘presence’ evokes a cluster of different connotations, encompassing metaphysical, existential, cognitive and performative dimensions. The concept of presence plays a fundamental role in the phenomena of performance, and this thesis has addressed a specific aspect of presence, which in theatre and performing arts is commonly referred to as *stage presence*.

This chapter opens with a brief review of the aims and motivations of this study as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches taken. Next, I discuss the implications of the work presented herein, including the contributions of the specific and general findings of both the ethnographic fieldwork and the theoretical analysis. By suggesting how the approach developed here could be extended to other artistic domains and culturally situated performative contexts, I explore future directions for research and suggest some of the contexts that could benefit from such an interdisciplinary approach.

The classic notion of stage presence in performing arts and theatrical traditions has historically been related to the intrinsic capacity of the performer to enchant an

audience's attention. In this view, *presence* is conceived of as the prerogative of the skilled performer, resulting from regimens of training, and/or intrinsic charisma. The classic model of stage presence (Sherman, 2016) puts the emphasis on the performer's position of power, and the contribution of the audience's participation is relatively concealed. As Sherman notes, the classic model of stage presence assumes an audience without agency. According to this view, the performer 'captures' the attention of spectators who are generally regarded as passive receivers.



Enactive approaches to cognition (Varela *et al.*, 1991) instead argue that perception does not inertly happen, but it is rather something that people do (Noë, 2004, 2012). Performance theory scholars who adopted enactive and phenomenological approaches (Macneill, 2014a; Sherman, 2016; Zarrilli, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015) have argued that stage presence emerges in the spatiotemporal and experiential realm of embodied

situated interaction, shared between the performer, the performance score, and the audience.

To grasp this phenomenon, this thesis frames presence in performing arts as a cognitive phenomenon, where ‘cognitive’ refers to more recent approaches to cognitive phenomena such as that captured by 4E cognition theory, in which cognition is understood as embodied, extended, embedded and enacted (see Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018). As emphasised by 4E approaches, ‘cognitive’ does not imply just reasoning and problem solving but also includes perception, emotion, and action (see Christensen & Sutton, 2012; Colombetti, 2014; McConachie & Hart, 2006; Noë, 2004; Shaughnessy, 2013; Tan, 2013; Tribble & Sutton, 2013). The cognitive turn in the arts and humanities has infused performance and theatrical scholarship with a new paradigm to address aesthetic phenomena, showing how “an interaction with a work of art can be aesthetic, poetic, and autopoietic” (Cook, 2018, p. 2).⁵¹

As performance scholar Jane Goodall observed, the phenomenon of stage presence is intrinsically mutable and dynamic, a product of social construction, shaped by the entanglements of mutually informing cultural, aesthetic, scientific, and political ideas across time (Goodall, 2008). This thesis has emphasised the need to address not only audiences and performers’ perceptual relationship but the global cognitive ecology of the performance that includes audience and performers’ co-presence and how they construct meaning, the socio-cultural context and the situatedness of the aesthetic performance event.

The cognitive ecology framework approaches cognition not as internal to the individual but as constituted by the interaction and interconnection of perception, emotion, action,

⁵¹ I provided an explanation of the term ‘autopoiesis’ in footnote on Chapter 2 - Being There: Theories of Presence, on page 34.

and thought across particular social beings and complex environments (Hutchins, 1995, 2010; Tan, 2007; Tribble & Sutton, 2011). Interdisciplinary research at the junction between cognitive science and the arts and humanities stresses how an ecological approach to performance and cognition is gaining influence and importance. For instance, Tribble and Sutton have suggested how the “cognitive ecology facilitates a system-level analysis of theatre: this model of cognitive ecology would posit that a complex human activity such as theatre must be understood across the entire system” (2011, p. 97). As Amy Cook emphasises, the implication of this turn is that “a focus on cognitive ecologies stops extracting individual ‘thinking’ agents as figures from the ‘ground’ within which they stand and work; cognitive ecologies examine the situated and distributed system of cognition” (Cook, 2018, p. 8).

By considering stage presence’s experiential groundedness in a specific environment and socio-cultural context, this thesis explored how presence appears as more than an intrinsic quality of the performer and how different enactments of presence emerge and operate across three different dance practices. The cognitive ecological framework proposes to focus on particular contexts and pay attention to them on their own terms to gain a proper understanding of presence “in the wild”, as Hutchins would put (1995), rather than some abstract and illegitimate top-down conceptualisation.

Drawing on the embodied knowledge and kinaesthetic intelligence of several international professional dancers, choreographers and performing artists, this thesis examined how embodied knowledge can shape multiple ways of feeling, sensing, understanding, and performing ‘presence’. Fundamental to this work was a consideration of how different mindful dancing bodies, enact and make sense of ‘presence’ in relation to the dynamic relationship amidst their environments and cultural practices. As Alva Noë argues, “perceiving is a kind of skilful bodily activity”

(Noë, 2004, p. 2) in that we enact our perceptual experience, ‘we act it out’. Noë underlines that what we perceive is determined by what we do and by following the enactive approach, he stresses that “perceptual content becomes available to experience when perceivers have practical mastery of the ways sensory stimulation varies as a result of movement” (Noë, 2004, p. 119).

This enactive view stresses the idea that the body is an organic whole that integrates capacities and abilities to perceive and to act, and “what people perceive depends upon what they are able to do, and what they do, in time, alters what they perceive” (Gibbs, 2005, p. 17). Through a phenomenological and enactive ethnographic approach, this thesis addressed how dancers’ mindful bodies make sense of their lived experience of presence, and explored the elements involved in this process as well as the relationships between such elements and how they influence and transform each other in the making. By engaging firsthand with the multiple ways in which dancers move, think, and feel differently in respect to their various training and dance practices, this research investigated how theatrical presence emerges kinaesthetically in dance within different dance ecologies.

My aim was not to provide a mere comparison between technical aspects of different systems of training at play within dance forms, or to discuss cultural and aesthetic differences between dance genres *per se*, but to show how different techniques shape a variety of cognitive ecologies of presence. Discussions about different forms of embodiment in dance have been offered by comparative studies addressing different ethnic dance forms (see Bull, 1997; Cohen Bull, 2001; Grau, 2005, 2011; Legrand & Ravn, 2009; Ravn, 2009). By focusing on different dance practices, my aim was to emphasise the diversity of the cognitive ecologies in which stage presence is understood and performed. I showed how divergent ideologies embedded in different techniques

of the body (Bourdieu, 1977; Crossley, 2007, 2013; Mauss, 1973; Wacquant, 2016), and different aesthetics and cultural factors, contribute to shape the experience of presence. As Crossley explains, “body techniques, as habitus, are forms of practical reason” that are “embedded in cultural contexts where they have a symbolic significance, are normatively regulated and perhaps also ‘rationalized’” (Crossley, 2007, p. 86). The experience of body is visceral but also shaped by patterned practices in differing dance ecologies, which includes both constraints but also opportunities and affordances.

Through an enactive ethnographic approach to the dancing body (see also Warburton, 2016) and a focus on embodied learning as tool for research—that included fieldwork involving direct enculturation and enskillment in Contemporary Ballet, Contact Improvisation, and Body Weather—I aimed to emphasise how each of these three movement practices are themselves a form of enquiry into body-mind-world relations. My thesis shows how different body techniques shape different ecologies of presence. By addressing the case of the *Ballet National de Marseille* and the staging of Greco’s piece *Passione*; or by engaging with Contact Improvisation communities and participating in the event of the Global Underscore (2017) in Italy; and by training in Body Weather with members of Australian dance company De Quincey Co, I have observed how these dance methodologies offer different forms of embodiment and their own practical, enacted and embodied theories of presence.

These dance practices are themselves research methods that investigate ‘presence’ through embodied kinaesthetic means, a different method to that available in typical cognitive scientific exploration. As cognitive anthropologist Edwin Hutchins observed: “Cultural practices are not cultural models traditionally construed as disembodied mental representations of knowledge. Rather they are fully embodied skills. Cultural

practices organize the action in situated action. Cultural practices are emergent products of dynamic distributed networks of constraints” (Hutchins, 2011, p. 441).

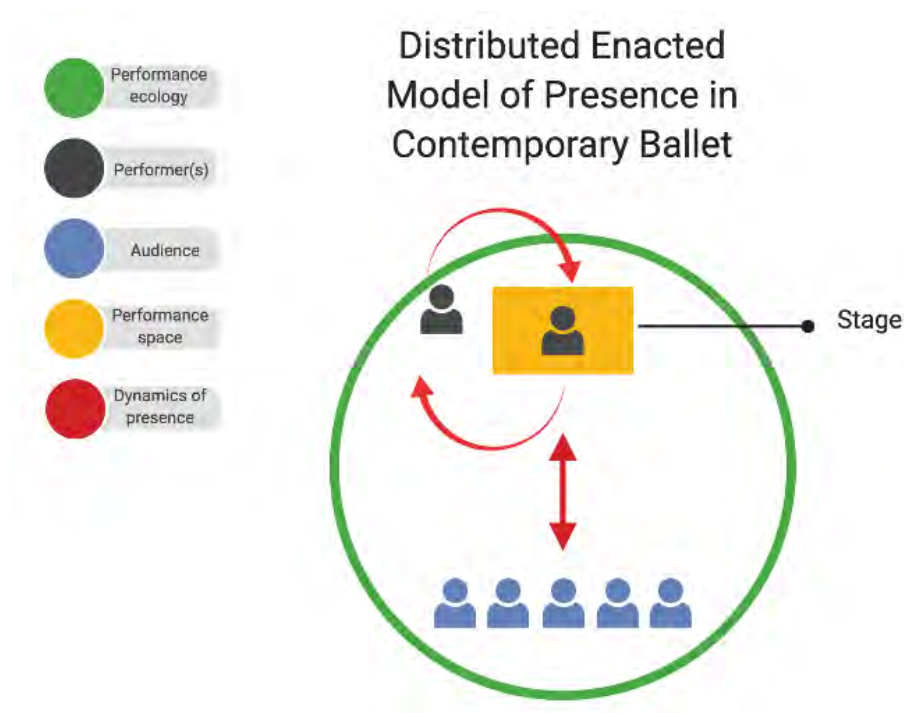
Following Hutchins’ definition of cultural practices, I observed how ‘making sense’ of the principles and methodology of the choreographer Emio Greco in relation to the re-staging of the piece *Passione* was for the dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* both a process of enculturation and a cultural practice. In this analysis of the work *Passione*, I presented a case in which an idiosyncratic dance vocabulary operates within the context of an institutionalised dance genre such as Contemporary Ballet, addressing the underlying processes that inform the construction of meaning in dance.

Through *Passione* I observed how the idea that the body has multiple layers of interpretation is central to the work and artistic methodology of Greco and Scholten and I demonstrated how the choreographer’s methodology and movement language is embodied and re-enacted by the dancers. I examined not only the choreographer’s personal style and dance vocabulary, but also the relationship between his specific training methodology and dancers’ idiosyncratic ways of moving. I investigated how the dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* articulate their kinaesthetic understandings and their diverse forms of presence in relation to the choreographer’s artistic vision and demands, addressing how meanings are negotiated across different bodies.

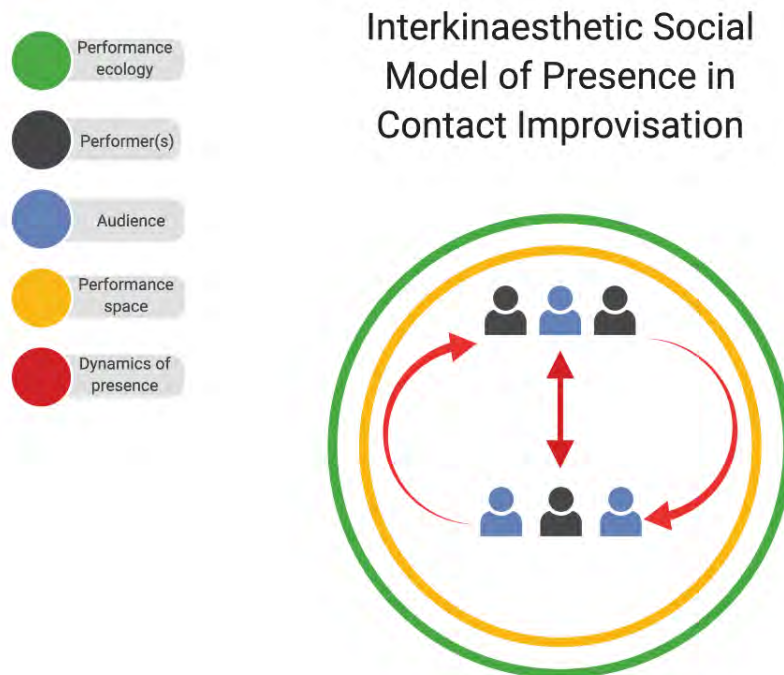
Specifically, I considered the role played by the choreographer’s methodology Double Skin/Double Mind (DS/DM) in shaping the transmission of kinaesthetic knowledge. Dancers working with the DS/DM method, according to Greco, can attain a specific intention from which their communicative power can emerge. Despite the prima facie notion that this case study would fit with the classical model because of the

institutionalised setting and solo performances, my fieldwork showed that the dancers of the BNM understood presence not as an individual skill but as an emergent possibility arising from interactions of several elements: the audience; the choreographic demands of the performance; their specific role and solos; and the energy emanating from the other dancers when they leave the stage.

Presence here extends to the work of each singular dancer and how each of them performs the choreography, how they understand and embody this particular dramaturgy, including the objects that are part of the scenography, and the meanings they construct for themselves and the collective. Through the analysis of Greco's work *Passione* for the BNM and how presence is distributed across the choreographer's 'omnipresence' in the score, the other dancers, the audience and the theatre's atmosphere, I proposed a *Distributed Enacted Model of Presence in Contemporary Ballet*.



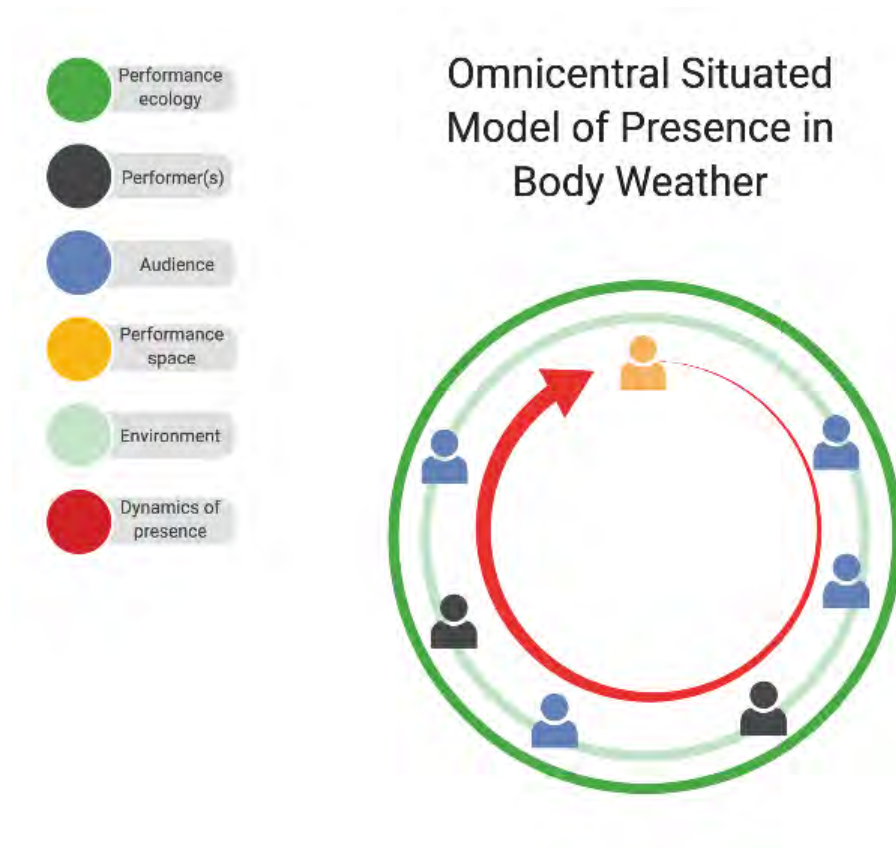
On the other hand, engaging with local communities of *contacters* and attending the Global Underscore 2017 in Italy, allowed me to observe how, for many of its practitioners, Contact Improvisation (CI) not only represents a dance practice but a reflexive modality to access and foster bodily awareness. Through a focus on *contacters*' physical experience of 'falling', or disorientation, I emphasised the unique nature of CI's cognitive ecology and how embodied skills are enacted. I considered how cultural metaphors shape and are re-shaped, enacted and transformed by these dancers' kinaesthetic experiences. By defying dominant Western sensory structures and promoting a focus on interkinaesthetic processes, CI challenges habits of movement, nurturing the experience of presence through interkinaesthetic awareness. I presented an *Interkinaesthetic Social Model of Presence in Contact Improvisation* that illustrates the mutual dynamics informing presence in this practice, emerging from social and interkinaesthetic interaction of the participants.



My fieldwork involving the practice of Body Weather (BW) suggested a more intricate form of relationship between performers, bodies and senses, as well as the audience and space in which the performance takes place. Rather than the linear, unidirectional model of influence of these factors that the classic model adopts, in BW a dynamic unfolding embedded understanding of the relationship between these factors emerged. Based on reflexive participation and observation in BW training and performance events, I explored how BW dancers envision their relationship with the environment, and what it means to ‘be seen by the landscape’.

BW emerges as a radical movement practice focusing on decentralising the attention of the performer by challenging and disrupting sensorial hierarchy and habits of movement. BW invites audience and performers to interrogate and explore the extent of their agency and the agency of the world in which they are embedded and of which they are a part. Throughout my fieldwork I also observed how BW dancers embrace an omnicentral focus that invites a displacement of the self-centric perspective, and attention to the environment that includes the audience as part of the context.

By tuning in to the subtle sensations of the body, BW nurtures an awareness that departs from the body and expands beyond the flesh and bones of the dancers. I emphasised the complexity of the phenomena of presence, highlighting the inter-relationship between the elements contributing to the changing ‘weather’ of the performance ecology. Building on Tanaka’s concept of ‘omnicentrality’ as displacement of the centrality of self, I proposed an *Omnicentral Situated* Model of Presence in Body Weather.



This thesis has presented alternative conceptual models of ‘stage’ presence that contrast with the classic model. I have addressed the phenomenon of presence from a cognitive ecological approach encompassing embodied, enacted, and situated perspectives. Rather than a metaphysical ideal, presence is here understood as an emergent and distributed process that occurs across multiple aspects of the performance ecology including the audience, the performers, the cultural context, and the environment. The alternative models of presence presented herein illustrate how performers, audience, and context mutually influence each other, shaping different constellations of the parts and contribute to different cognitive ecologies of presence.

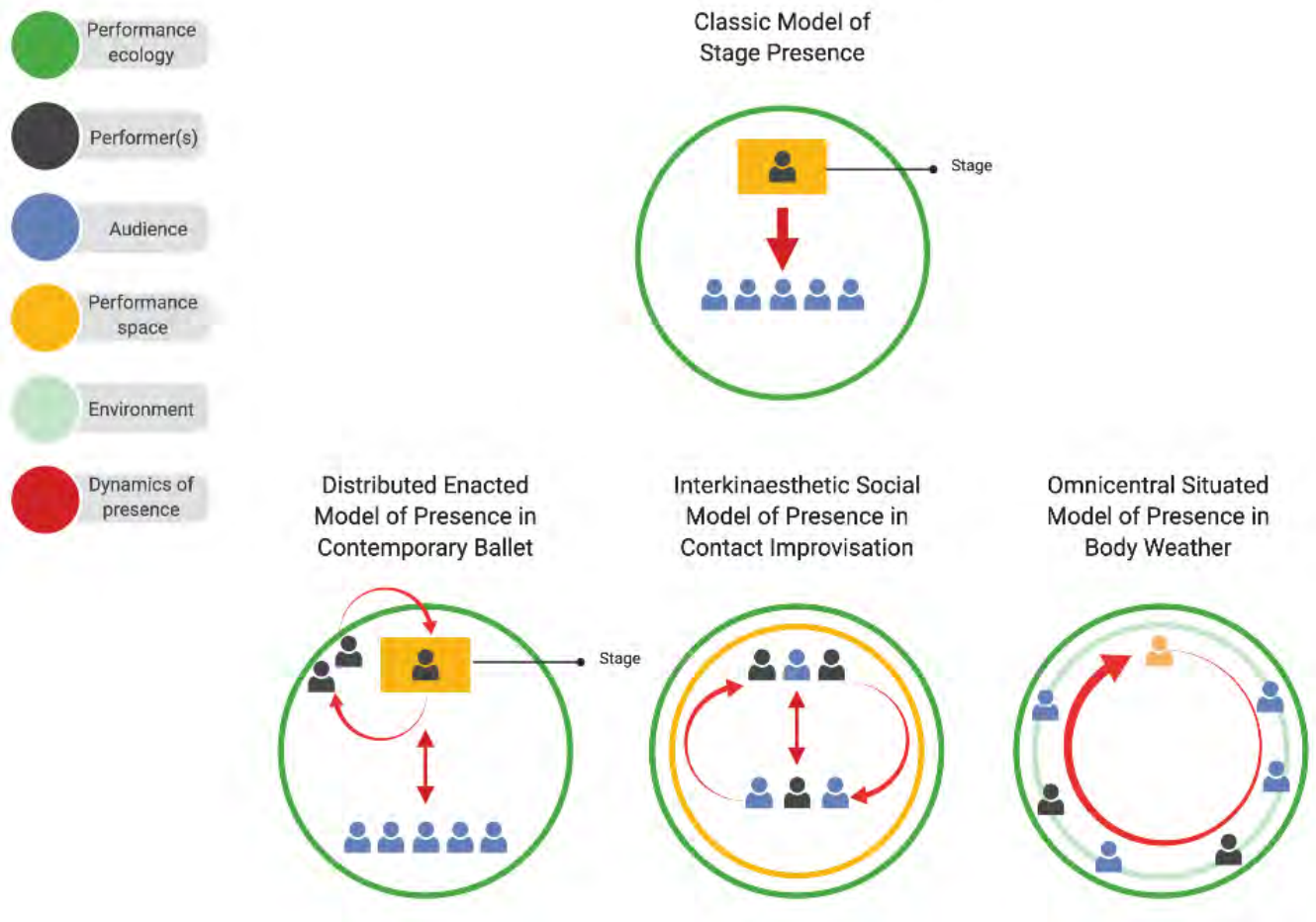


Figure 53. Alternative ecological models of presence in three dance forms

These alternative ecological models of presence all involve a dynamic relationship between performer and audience, between the performers themselves, and between performers, audience and the surrounding environment; this is in direct contrast to the classic model of stage presence. Hutchins (1995, 2010) argued that the unit of analysis for cognitive phenomena is flexible, rather than exclusively focused on the individual. These ecological models of presence in dance focus on the different performance ecologies of each dance style and depending on each case, they take on a different shape involving differing dynamic relationships of bodies, minds, environments, and socio-cultural contexts.

As Cook puts it, “if cognition is embedded in a given environment, always affective, and extended outside of skin and skull, then a spectator’s experience, emotion, and attention depends less on what is happening “inside” the actors onstage [...] and more on a staged, enacted experience of their own” (Cook, 2018, p. 2). My thesis builds on 4E cognitive theory and suggests an alternative model of stage presence to that of the classic model—one based on a cognitive ecological ethnographic framework that considers both the situatedness of performers’ lived experience, and the cultural context in which a performance event takes place. Through the analysis of the accounts of several professional performers and choreographers across three historically and culturally different dance practices, I have explored how specific ways of enacting presence in dance generates different ecologies of presence.

As Angel Martinez-Hernandez, one of the dancers of the *Ballet National de Marseille* told me: “Stage presence is the capacity to blend together with energy, with the other dancers, with the atmosphere, with what we have to do, with what is being asked”. Through examples from the re-creation of the piece *Passione* by the *Ballet National de Marseille*, the telescopic awareness at play with the Global Underscore, and the idea of omn centrality in BW, I emphasised the complexity of phenomena of stage presence, highlighting the inter-relationship between the elements contributing to the changing ‘weather’ of the performance ecology.

Building on approaches to ‘cognitive ecology’ (Hutchins, 1995, 2010; Tan, 2007; Tribble & Sutton, 2011), this work suggests alternative ecological models in which the performer’s presence emerges in relation to a complex and dynamic environment, which includes audiences and performers co-presence and the socio-cultural situatedness of the performance event. These models expose the relationships that

entangle the various elements of these performance cognitive ecology. Engaging with these dance contexts has led to a more intricate understanding of the interrelationship between performers, bodies and senses, audience, and the space in which the performance takes place, than the linear, unidirectional model of influence embedded in the classic model of stage presence. As described by one of my interviewees, Gideon Payten-Griffiths, a dance performer who is experienced in both BW and CI, what is at stake is an interplay of different degrees and aspects of presence:

I think presence, it's like a spectrum of being lost in the moment, it's not like there is presence and not presence, there is some presence and more presence, and less presence and like when you are doing the actual show, there is an interplay, and it's a different kind of presence. It's an interplay of different conflicting presences as well.

My fieldwork shows that dancers understood presence not as an individual skill but as an emergent property arising from interactions with the environment that includes performers, audience, and the cultural and social context. With this work I have shown how the forms of presence enacted across these three distinct dance genres differ from that captured by the classic model, and also how they are all different from each other, with the distinct elements of the ecologies operating in different ways and in different balances.

To put my framework to the test, during the Melbourne International Arts Festival 2018 I attended William Forsythe's work *A Quiet Evening of Dance*, which was ranked best dance show of the year by The Guardian.⁵² This ballet is considered "beautiful not only for the breathtaking rigour of its construction but also for how it joyfully illuminated

⁵² The list of the Top 10 dance shows of 2018 according to the Guardian is available here <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/dec/17/top-10-dance-shows-2018>

the individual quirks and genius of its seven dancers” (Mackrell & Winship, 2018). On this occasion I met with the performers of the show, including Jill Johnson, international dancer, choreographer and Director of Dance at Harvard University. During our conversation Jill reflected on the role of the audience in shaping the performer’s experience:

...if there is a public that has an energy that is willing and giving you energy, then it goes further together, if there is a public that has a certain kind of opinion and you are challenging that, then that’s another kind of energy and requires a different kind of strategy to still have that same presence, in the face of that. Because it’s like the mind frame when you feel accepted everything is warm, great, feels good, but if you know, how do you remain the same and curious and open when the response from exterior is different?

With respect to the variability of theatrical presence’s experience, during the interview Jill Johnson stressed how presence cannot be reduced to a single formula or individual prerogative:

I think everyone has the potential for presence, babies have presence, I think we all have it and our life experience is shaped whether or not that gets seen, I think for performers I don’t think there is one, you know someone that would just say: ‘oh this person was incredible’, someone else might think ‘that doesn’t do it for me’ so I think there is a beautiful thing about not being singular, so different people resonate with different things, different kinds of people and different ways of having presence, and that might change in a life time too, you are like a certain kind of performer when you are younger than when you are older, you just value different things, so it’s great that there is no catch-all [...] for me anyway there are probably a million different versions of this.

Johnson's account emphasises how dancers understand presence, not as a quality possessed by individual agents, but as a process that unfolds across different social actors including the performers and the audience, within a specific spatiotemporal frame and cultural context. This was poignantly consistent with the thesis developed through my prior fieldwork, including the importance of considering the diversity and variability of enactments of presence, and therefore its cognitive ecology.

By showing how different dance practices sustain embodied experiences of presence, and how different performance ecologies shape dancers' phenomenological accounts, this work reframed the lived experience of presence in a cognitive ecological sense. My aim with this project is not to deny the clear talent and charisma that certain artists manifest, nor to deny the pleasure that certain subjective experiences of presence can provide. Instead, I have emphasised that the way we experience presence depends not only on which vantage point we take as individuals and which position we occupy, but also on the various kinds of performance ecologies we participate in. This is to say that performers as audiences are active agents, mindful bodies that contribute to a matrix of meaning. We enact different roles at different times in different worlds. Each element in the performance ecology brings a different story, adds a different layer. Every element contributes in shaping, re-shaping and reconfiguring the ecology in an everchanging dynamic and mutually transforming process.

By demonstrating how the interactions within certain environments, cultures, contexts, other agents (audience and performers), and other elements of the dramaturgy, the training and the practice, participate in shaping the phenomenon of presence, this project contributes to fostering the increasing interest for interdisciplinary research across the arts and the study of body-mind-world relationships. Through a focus on the cognitive ecologies of different dance practices, we might catch a glimpse of the

phenomenon of stage presence from a more embodied, enacted, distributed and situated perspective.

By embracing an ethnographic and phenomenological approach to presence in dance this work contributes to a diverse body of literature crossing the interdisciplinary divide between the fields of anthropology of dance, cognitive anthropology, phenomenology, performance, dance studies and cognitive science. By exploring how a cognitive ecological framework informs an alternative conceptualisation of the phenomenon of stage presence in dance, my aim has been to contribute to expanding the field of dance and performing studies and the cognitive turn in the arts and humanities. Scholars in the arts and humanities have turned to a cognitive ecological approach to consider other performative and aesthetic experiences. These studies includes embodied memory in modern theatre (Tribble & Sutton, 2011, 2013) performer-object interaction in acting training (Paavolainen, 2012), cinematic experience (Tan, 2007), and navigation (Hutchins, 1995). This thesis also adds to the burgeoning literature on the 4E cognitive perspective in the performing arts and includes dance, by examining a novel case study: presence in dance from an ethnographic ecological standpoint.

By embracing a cognitive ecological approach to the study of presence I hope to promote a ‘change of mind’ that could have implications for investigating other performance domains where phenomena of presence are crucial. A cognitive ecological approach to presence has substantial implications not only for the study of theatre or dance, but also for studies on spectatorship and audience experience. In the context of cinematic experience, Ed Tan stressed how the ecology of the cinema is a profoundly cognitive ecology, which is not only “determined by technical or perceptual conditions” (Tan, 2007, p. 568). Tan argues that the ecology of the cinema:

...includes the availability of knowledge obtained in the world and even more specifically in the cinema itself, which is shared by film viewers and filmmakers. It also contains the goals and intentions of viewers and filmmakers in a collaborative effort to make film viewing not only a coherent but also an involving experience. (Tan, 2007, p. 568)

This approach is arguably also relevant in any context in which it is crucial to foster an understanding of the mutually informing relationship between elements (including both social actors, subjects and objects) participating in the performance ecology.

Other fields and contexts relevant to this approach might include: performative domains such as music performance (Geeves et al., 2010); participation in competitive sport (Sutton & Bicknell, in press); and participation in public spaces and events (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). By demonstrating the viability of a cognitive ecological approach, my aim is to influence further enactive and phenomenological investigations of a variety of artistic and performance contexts and inspire a further move away from individual-centered descriptions to analyses of joint activities in contexts in which the quality of the performance relies on interactive collaboration. The fields that could benefit from this approach include: different types of pedagogical contexts, such as participatory arts workshops, team sports or language classes (Pink, 2011); user's experience of new technologies; as well as studies of interpersonal communication in complex environments such as medical systems, care practices and doctor-patient communication (Dunn, 2010). By emphasizing how the study of presence has not only performative but also ethical implications (Candelario, 2019; Goodall, 2006; Sherman, 2016), I promote an approach to the phenomenon of presence from a social, cultural, enacted, and situated perspective.

Through my autoethnographic analysis of illness I observed how inhabiting a hybridised body reshaped my relationship to the world. By engaging with postmodern dance forms, I sought to show how the body is “not fixed, but is constantly in flux, adapting and transforming itself through its engagement with the world” (Thomas, 1996, p. 73). We inhabit many bodies, just as many bodies form and shape us. Since the body is not a stable universal construct, but is instead always multiple and in a process of becoming, my focus has been on how different bodies enact different forms of presence. Because the body is constantly shaped by everchanging processes of becoming, there could be no steady, universal account of presence. As there is no one singular way of perceiving and feeling presence via embodied means, my aim has been to explore the different ways in which mutually informing, kinaesthetic cognitive ecological processes of presence emerge in dance.

With this work I have shown how different configurations of presence arise in relation to different contexts. Through focussing on the cognitive ecologies of different human and non-human interactions, I sought to show the importance of phenomena of presence in influencing our cultural and social life, including types of kinaesthetic and affective interactions that shape our mindful bodies and the world we inhabit.



Figure 54. Final bow. *Ballet National de Marseille* in *Passione*, June 2017.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Marco Molin, 1st October 2014, Bologna, Italy.

Tommaso Grassi, 30th October 2014, Bologna, Italy.

Clizia Ornato, email correspondence, 29th January 2015, Bologna, Italy.

Katja Garbin, 25th January 2015, Bologna, Italy.

Davide Giacobbe, email correspondence, 2nd February 2015, Bologna, Italy.

Caterina Mocciola, 24th June 2017, Arezzo and 21st October 2015, Bologna, Italy.

Kirsten Packman, 1st April 2017 and 28th August 2016, Sydney, Australia.

Linda Luke, 9th September 2016, Sydney, Australia.

Tess de Quincey, 16th May 2017 and 6th October 2016, Sydney, Australia.

Alejandro Rolandi, 25th March 2017, Sydney, Australia.

Gideon Payten-Griffiths, 22nd March 2017, Sydney, Australia

Lux Eterna, 1st April 2017, Sydney, Australia.

Aya Sato, 31st May 2017, Marseille, France.

Nonoka Kato 31st May 2017, Marseille, France.

Vito Giotto, 30th May 2017, Marseille, France.

Frank Krawczyk, 30th May 2017, Marseille, France.

Anton Zvir, 30th May 2017, Marseille, France.

Denis Bruno, 3rd June 2017, Marseille, France.

Nahimana Vandenbussche, 2th June 2017, Marseille, France.

Emio Greco, 1st June 2017, Marseille, France.

Angel Martinez Hernandez, 4th June 2017, Marseille, France.

Jason Beechey, 10th May 2018, Skype interview, Sydney, Australia.

Jill Johnson, 3rd May 2018, Skype interview, Sydney, Australia.

Brigel Gjoka, 18th October 2018, Melbourne, Australia.

APPENDIX



MACQUARIE
University

RE: HS Ethics Application - Approved (5201600503)

Fhs Ethics <fhs.ethics@mq.edu.au>

20 July 2016 at 11:19

To: Professor John Sutton <john.sutton@mq.edu.au>

Cc: Professor Greg Downey <greg.downey@mq.edu.au>, Dr Julie-Anne Long <julie-anne.long@mq.edu.au>, Miss Sarah Pini <sarah.pini@students.mq.edu.au>

Dear Professor Sutton,

Re: "Dancing bodies, shaped minds: An ecological approach to kinaesthetic intelligence"(5201600503)

The above application was reviewed by The Faculty of Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee wishes to thank you for your very well-written application that adequately addresses the ethical issues it invokes. Approval of this application has been granted, effective 20th July 2016. This email constitutes ethical approval only.

This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Associate Professor Greg Downey
Dr Julie-Anne Long
Miss Sarah Pini
Professor John Sutton

NB. STUDENTS: IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP A COPY OF THIS APPROVAL EMAIL TO SUBMIT WITH YOUR THESIS.

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

Progress Report 1 Due: 20th July 2017

Progress Report 2 Due: 20th July 2018

Progress Report 3 Due: 20th July 2019

Progress Report 4 Due: 20th July 2020

Final Report Due: 20th July 2021

NB. If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current_research_staff/human_research_ethics/application_resources

3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Sub-Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Sub-Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current_research_staff/human_research_ethics/managing_approved_research_projects

5. Please notify the Sub-Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

<http://www.mq.edu.au/policy>

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/current_research_staff/human_research_ethics/s

submitting_a_new_application

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat at the address below.

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of ethics approval.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Anthony Miller
Chair
Faculty of Human Sciences
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee

Faculty of Human Sciences - Ethics
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Email: john.sutton@mq.edu.au



Chief Investigator's / Supervisor's Name & Title: Prof. John Sutton

Participant Information and Consent Form

Dancing bodies, shaped minds:

An ecological approach to kinaesthetic intelligence

You are invited to participate in a study investigating the lived experience of different dance performers. The purpose of the study is to enhance the understanding of embodied intelligence through an analysis of kinaesthetic experiences of various dance experts within their practices.

The study is being conducted by Professor John Sutton, Department of Cognitive Science, ph. (02) 9850 4132, john.sutton@mq.edu.au; Ms. Sarah Pini (Cognitive Science Department, ph. (02) 9850 2958, sarahpini@students.mq.edu.au); Professor Greg Downey (Anthropology Department, ph. (02) 9850 8079, greg.downey@mq.edu.au) and Dr. Julie-Anne Long (Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies Department, ph. (02) 9850 2143, julie-anne.long@mq.edu.au) who are all from Macquarie University, NSW 2109. This study is conducted to meet the requirements for the degree of PhD of Ms. Sarah Pini under the supervision of Professor John Sutton, details mentioned above.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to talk to Sarah Pini during or after your training or performance, and participate to her research. Your participation may also involve being interviewed by Sarah, including being recorded with audio and/or visual recording devices and being the subject of observations Sarah makes in the form of field notes. Her notes will be available for you to review at any time, if you wish so. Your participation in this research project is unlikely to provide any discomfort, and you can withdraw from this research at any time with no adverse consequences whatsoever. With your permission you may be contacted at a later time to provide feedback on the results of this research, please see the Privacy and Confidentiality Scenario Sheet attached to this form.

The data from this research will be divulged by means of conference presentations, scholarly journal articles, book chapters, academic lectures.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential, except if you give permission to attribute your comments to you by name as to be declared in Privacy and Confidentiality Scenario Sheet attached to this consent form. Unless you wish to be acknowledged, no individual will be identified in any publication of the results. You may elect to have something that you said or did wiped from the research at any stage of the study.

Only the investigators abovementioned will have direct access to the audio or visual recordings and their written transcriptions of which you may be part. A summary of the results of the data can be made available to you on request at the end of the study either via email or regular post, please indicate that in the Privacy and Confidentiality Scenario Sheet attached to this form.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

I, _____ have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name: _____

(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Investigator's Name:

Investigator's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

(PARTICIPANT COPY)

Privacy and Confidentiality Scenario Sheet – Participant Copy

Some people like to have their contributions personally acknowledged. While others would like to remain anonymous. We would like to give you as much as privacy or acknowledgment as you would be comfortable with.

Please think for a moment as you read each of the scenarios below as to how happy you would be to participate in the various levels of participation and circle *yes* or *no* to tell us what level of privacy you would like to maintain for that participation.

Scenario One: Academic and scholarly articles, presentations and books:

I am happy to have:

My comments quoted anonymously in scholarly journal articles,
Presentations and books? YES / NO

My comments attributed to me by name? YES / NO

Scenario Two: Recorded dance visual material:

I am happy to have:

Excerpts of my dance practice recorded or photographed? YES / NO

And shown in conference presentation? YES / NO

My face identified on camera? YES / NO

Attributed to me by name
(you will be acknowledged in the presentation credits) YES / NO

I am happy to be contacted:

At a later date to reflect and provide feedback on the research's results? YES / NO

I would prefer to be contacted via (please provide your chosen detail):

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Post: _____

After this research has been concluded, I would like to receive a summary of the results via

Email: _____

Post: _____

Participant's Name: _____

(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Investigator's Name:

Investigator's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____