Landscape Choreography: Public Gestures of Space Appropriation

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The question of the body, and in particular the body under capitalism, is a recurrent and indeed central issue in our lives. Living bodies, mobile and active, may already be said to be extending both their spatial perception and their occupation of space like a spider spinning its web. Very often what appears empty may turn out to be full. Appropriated spaces abound, but it is not always easy to decide in what respect, how, by whom and for whom they have been appropriated. This is typical of urban space, and of how such space is produced. The collective body warms up, rehearsing its moves in everyday life, in order to take control of its time and rhythm through the art of maintenance, the self-construction of a common space. Urban space is political. This is the basis of our idea of choreography.

Henri Lefebvre wrote that humans learn to hold themselves together by a sort of dressage. This means that physical training is based on repetition:

> Repetition, perhaps mechanical in (simply behavioral) animals, is ritualized in humans. . . . The linear series have a beginning (often marked by a signal) and an end: the resumptions of the cycle depend less on a sign or a signal than on a general organization of time. Therefore of society, of culture. Here it is still necessary to recognize that the military model has been imitated in our so-called western (or rather imperialistic) societies. Even in the so called modern era and maybe since the mediaeval age, since the end of the city-state. . . wouldn't this be the secret of the magic of the periodizations at the heart of the everyday?[1]

My thesis is that the disciplinary society that defines the body within the structure of the educational, military, psychiatric, and prison system, as discussed by Foucault,[2] has been overcome by a society based on communication technologies. In this sense, if we assume that there is a secret body-training within our society, we have to detect how it has evolved in contemporary urban space.

What is important to understand in communication technology is that this training (dressage) is not based on the repetition of gestures imposed by institutions, but it follows the logic of passive automation of relationships between bodies.

Here, the image of the swarm is a very useful one. A swarm can be defined as the precondition for the automation of social communication and affective relations. When a network is inscribed in the brain of the multitude, then you have a swarm.[3]

In this respect I would like to remember the discoverer of the waggle dance in a bee swarm, the great Nobel laureate in physiology and medicine Karl von Frisch. Speaking about swarming, he said, “each hive with his queen is a closed ‘state’ and with the brood only creates the number of citizens of this state. A new hive needs a new queen, and you can increase your families through the ‘swarm’ of bees.”[4]

This is the point: there exists an automation of social communication and affective relations that generates the field of what is possible and what is visible. Choreography is the automation of this field of possibilities.

This is the difference between dance and choreography: choreography is the field in which dance is possible. As William Forsythe put it, "Choreography is about organizing bodies in space, or you're organizing bodies with other bodies, or a body with other bodies in an environment that is organized."[5]

Social bonds are based on this automation, this continuous training of bodies to repeat certain gestures such as passively introjecting codes of conduct and assimilating all the daily acts that the body repeats. This daily training of the social body, these automatic processes, defines the relationship between individuals and the relationship of the individual with the environment. In this type of process where urban space is constituted, there are two possible directions that can be taken. If society is a homogenizing machine the bodies lose their ability to feel, they are expropriated, and society becomes a structured body but devoid of desire. This is achieved through approval processes where social relations are mechanically simplified and turned into a rule. Or, alternatively, the exact opposite may happen. Collective intelligence, the relational web underlying social relations, is set in motion creating a movement and refusing to be flattened into a one-dimensional code of conduct. In a word, collective intelligence sets out in search of a body by increasing its perceptual intensity and its ability to feel.

Let's now jump to a truly contemporary example of this concept. The technocracy of networking is one of the main fields where relations and communication in general are built. We may think of the algorithm called PageRank, created by Sergey Brin and Larry Page, which constitutes the basis of Google's research power. Billions of people approach a computer monitor simultaneously, and the field of this particular choreography, and repeat the same gesture of search as a contemporary human swarm through the algorithm.

This is an example of automation of social communication and affective relations that generates the field of what is possible and what is visible.

Singing the same song, dancing the same dance, is always dangerous. We know that this is the very foundation of fascism: homogeneous subjectivation, planning, and space organization. So our issue, when thinking about landscape choreography, is how to understand the power of bodily organization, but at the same time how to avoid singing the same song and dancing the same dance.

Following Ranciere's dichotomy *Police/Political*,[6] we may consider how *police* controls the visible and the sayable, while the *political* is what re-organizes the field of the seeable and sayable through dissensus. So we may share these questions: When, where and how do dance practices become dissensual? And when, where and how do these dissensual practices contest hegemonic norms, mainly triggered by the state?[7] Choreography has to be political, and this is possible only when the organization of bodies is not the result of an imposed policy, but rather a movement. In a way, dissensus has to institute a new organization of bodies. The tension within the opposition of singular/common is the intensity of the becoming-common. We have a political movement when people find the way to create a new song, an event opening up a new landscape. When a movement happens (in the field of art or politics) the effect is that you are able to see things that you could not see before.

We have to grasp how powerful this viral contagion is, involving and binding together communication technology, the body, and urban space. And we have to stress that a choreographic landscape design is hidden within the layers of this contagion.

So this could be seen as the key question: how an audience, the public, and citizens may appropriate urban spaces with dissensual gestures in order to change the seeable and the sayable of their landscape. This is why we are so interested in forms of assembly and forms of public self-organization that change what is sayable. We would also like to understand forms (of assembly) in connection with challenges constituted by collective folly, physical desire, and unknown errors.

Contemporary dance is a dehumanized object: in a historical process that runs throughout the twentieth century, contemporary dance works around an expressive object on a relational plane. The human body moves on a stage in an environment consisting of other non-human elements: the position of the microphone, the sound, various objects, the landscape. Some authors conceive works only for sound, or moving objects. The concept of dance expands its borders and the framework moves to this general "putting things in motion" within the frame of the scene, a game in which the performer's body is but one element. Contemporary dance is this study in general of the transition between movement and non-movement staged for an audience.

What we have tried to do with *Landscape Choreography* is to consider dance from the point of view of a temporality stretched to the extreme and overturned. In short, we have tried to consider the real, the world, and the political as the space of dance and choreography. Society is already a great choreography to be observed; urban space is already scenic and performative. Our role as activists and researchers is to design frameworks to interact with society and urban space, sometimes entering this performative stream, sometimes hacking it, creating interferences, and sometimes destroying it. The act of staging is no longer in the foreground; social cooperation is already performing its rites, its movements. We train, we exercise the eye, creating interferences, which might lead to small changes. We try to use our forms of expression as a means to build political relationships and transformation of social relations processes.

Landscape Choreography is making a particular use of dance.

With reference to Henri Lefebvre, we have placed emphasis on the construction of urban space as a grid, a texture of habitual gestures performed by the people who inhabit and cross it daily. The way in which bodies pass through space on a daily basis can be conceived as the field of a social choreography. Every place and urban space is sustained by a set of codes and implicit rules that dictate the conditions of possibility for using the body by those passing through space.

This aspect is crucial for us: from a choreographic perspective every urban space is different because it is characterized by specific rules, codes, and regulations restricting the conditions of possibility for behavior and mobility.

How can we define these regulatory codes? It's a difficult question to answer exhaustively. Certainly culture, history, power structures, the economy, relations between work and free time, the bureaucracy, identity or ideological processes—all these factors contribute to creating regulatory fields within which specific relationships between individuals and standards, territories and possibilities for action form, both on the cultural, economic, and urban/architectural level.

In fact, it should be noted that body control codes in urban space materialize only minimally in the spatial and architectural arrangement of objects: they largely operate within the collective intellect of the communities that move across such an arrangement. In most cases, although physical impediments or prohibitions to move in a certain way

might not appear, no one dares to act in a different way. The moment something happens differently a wave of protest explodes because this new action was hitherto inconceivable.

As dancers, we try to connect with urban space and the objects that compose it without declaring that we are performing art, or a show, or a workshop. Often the creation of a fourth wall, a white cube, a space designated for art, a stage, or the simple posting of a program, the enunciation of a title, or the presence of a costume, immediately creates a different space, in which the regulatory codes of the body in everyday life are as if suspended. For this reason, we have decided to dance in urban spaces without declaring ourselves artists; we do so abruptly, avoiding being protected from any utterance, frame, or aesthetic preface.

Some people who spend every day in a specific space start to show us some objects, actions, or practices that are particularly significant for them. Somehow these aspects start telling the story of that place, revealing its expectations and latent tensions. These are the aspects and objects with which we interact and dance. We have happened to dance in front of factories rather than in the folds of more traditional spaces; or in the mud of ploughed fields, in squatted basements, on the beach among bathers, on window sills, in a coal mine, or in a park in flames.

In each of the places we have worked, our unusual behavior, which consists of a use of the body that is not suited to the situation, has at some point started to provoke the latent regulatory code. Our choreography comes into conflict with the social choreography that defines the space.

This year one of the first codes that quite frequently appeared in very different territories is sexuality. When we danced in a public space interacting with objects and significant aspects for the people who go through that space, showing strong, non-coded and emancipated bodies, the first question we raised, the first issue we caused, was connected with sexuality. There always appears a man or a woman following a purely masculine-coded logic that chastised the behavior of some women of our group who were using their bodies in a way they considered objectionable. I emphasize that we have never brought into the urban space a dance that questions the subject of sex. We have never tried to provoke people using this topic. While we were dancing on a traditional structure to clean carpets (of which there are dozens in the Manastur district) or in the ashes of a park that had just been burned by a Mafia attack, dressed in an ordinary way regardless of sex, and without any particular allusions to sexual matters, some of the women dancers have been reprimanded for their behavior, for the fact that they danced, that they moved, that they performed those actions.

So we realized then that the regulatory code is almost never explicit, but always implicit. It emerges only when provoked, or in the form of conflict. It's very difficult to find a law or a sign, or a person who explicitly takes a position such as: "women should stay at home, have to ask permission before intervening, must express themselves only when decisions are taken by others . . ." or: "we protect our women, who in return are kind to us, they give us children, they are kept in poverty and accomplish domestic duties." It's very difficult that these regulatory codes, which control the expression of the body, are openly endorsed. Nevertheless, they represent very strong implicit codes, at least in some areas, regulating the daily "power to act."

We have also mentioned the historical evolution of the relationship between dance and social choreography. Is there a relationship between the role of dance and the

construction of public space? We started considering the dance hall at court as a place where dance was reproduced in camouflage, reassuring social hierarchies. In fact, it formalized the way in which a couple's relationship was staged, not only the hierarchy between male and female but also between noble and servant. In late romanticism we see the first experiments in which these social bonds were broken. An example of this is the avant-garde experiments practiced by Rudolf Laban during World War II in the Swiss town of Monte Verità, close to Ascona. In these "moving choirs," body expression was no longer a function of social reproduction, but entered a process of emancipation: we witness individuals dancing naked in a group seeking a relationship directly with nature. Dance is no longer seeking to reflect representation of social order, the individual is no longer confined to a role. Dance stands for the channel through which the dancer can find himself as part of a cosmogony beyond social constructs. Dance no longer reflects a social order, but it is a path in which individuals find themselves. The code is no longer embodied in a mask, but is transformed into a new and universal language by which anyone can connect with the whole. Here we have the first mass dance characters, in which so many individuals perform the gestures of this new language that rejects social constraints and creates another space in which everyone has the same opportunity to find themselves and others.

It is not a coincidence that Joseph Goebbels hired Laban to choreograph the parades of the new Nazi people (1936), and that later Laban was fired for being too frivolous and not submissive to the dictates of propaganda. Despite this, the shape of this mass choreography in which anonymous individuals finds themselves in the name of a whole to come, changes in the shape of the military parades of the new totalitarianism. It defines the relationship between the body and a model for public space. The public space turns into a mass of anonymous and equal individuals. Norms, costumes, and good uses of the body are no longer declared but implied through choreography.

The code continues to be broken in the history of choreography also in the second part of the twentieth century. In questioning forms, the dancer tries to emancipate and find himself. Hybridizations from classical to dance theatre, or from various forms of contemporary to other disciplines; the third theatre and the physical theatre; and finally conceptual dance, are all investigated as anthropological and aesthetic fields, in a continuous attempt to escape the code. The success of the role of "solo" dance is also significant. The dancer tries to find space for her own dancing individuality, and in this space – aseptic and without context, private and universal at the same time – the dancer seeks to articulate a different language, a personal expressive code.

The term *speech act* means the power of action contained in a linguistic utterance (while I speak to you, I'm also transforming the environment): the language is also an action. Vice versa, we can consider the performative as an action that becomes language: when I'm performing an action I'm also communicating a message, which again sparks another action.

Social processes run implicitly and underground, the media coverage reflects the society and influences political actions creating ruptures within this underground stream, sometimes interfering and triggering changes, such as concerning the role of the performative. The performative we believe in is the blending of action and show, the act combined with the awareness that you are performing the action. In this sense we like

performing actions that interfere with social processes, in the awareness of acting in order to open a discussion, knowing that the action is a communicative act at the same time.

This is how we understand the performative value of work conducted with Landscape Choreography: we act with our bodies in an urban space knowing that our performance is saying something, knowing that we are unveiling a message. Without having any answer we seek to continuously transform the action into public discourse.

Within this context, we started with the idea of choreography in the form of speech – a Choreographic Speech – to be executed as a performance in an urban space together with the citizens we worked with.

Our starting point was that we were dancers who only wanted to show their choreographic research. We welcomed professional and non-professional dancers alike. Fundamentally, we wanted to demonstrate and affirm the relationship that each individual has with their body when they dance. 'I'm Emanuele and I dance like that...'
Then, we questioned the relationship between body and public space. How does this search, performed by the body, for individual emancipation, connect with the way in which urban space encodes prohibitions concerning the use of the body?

Using our specific form of speech, we've communicated with the people around us. We've told them about the sexist reactions we suffered, as well as other standardization mechanisms and underlying techniques of control of the body that take place within the space we move across on a daily basis.

The question is: how are we able to change the vision we have of the urban space in order to be able to move in other directions? May we form a collective visual story about another image of the city? The ability to collectively imagine is the added value, the contemporary fixed capital, which is why the real challenge is to occupy the imaginary throughout our lives, our presence in space.

[1] Henri Lefebvre, extract from Elements de Rythmanalyse (Paris, Editions Syllepse, 1992); tr. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
[2] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1975).
[3] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "The General Intellect is Looking for a Body," in *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).
[4] Karl von Frisch, *Tanzsprache und Orientierung der Bienen*. (Berlin/Heidelberg/New York: Springer-Verlag, 1965).
[5] William Forsythe, "Choreographic Objects," in *Suspense*, ed. Markus Weisbeck, (JRP Ringier Kunstverlag, 2008).
[6] Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[7] Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005).