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BODIES IN SKILLED PERFORMANCE

How dancers reflect through the living body

Camille Buttingsrud¹

Abstract: Dancers and dance philosophers report on experiences of a certain form of sense making and bodily thinking through the dancing body. Yet, discussions on expertise and consciousness are often framed within canonical philosophical world-views that make it difficult to fully recognize, verbalize, and value the full variety of embodied and affective facets of subjectivity. Using qualitative interviews with five professional dancers and choreographers, I make an attempt to disclose the characteristics of what I consider to be a largely overseen state of consciousness: embodied reflection. Dancers are familiar with this attentive bodily presence, which constitutes their work mode and heightens their abilities as experts. Detailed descriptions of their daily work at the theatre help us grasp the qualities and understand the enigmas of the absorbed state of bodily thinking. Husserl's theories on reflection and Merleau-Ponty's work on motoricity support our understanding of the structures behind embodied reflection. I believe it is a common human resource, and that whether we are experts or not, we all have the ability to reflect non-conceptually through bodily and/or affective activity.

Keywords: Dance; phenomenology; embodiment; consciousness; Husserl; empirical research; art

Since Maxine Sheets-Johnstone first published "The Phenomenology of Dance" in 1966 (1980), and Sondra Horton Fraleigh followed up with "Dance and the Lived Body" in 1981

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(1981), a number of works on dance philosophy have enlightened us in relation to dancers' experiences of consciousness, intentionality, habit, and knowledge found through the execution of their art. In 2012 the international research network "Performance Philosophy" was founded, connecting researchers and practitioners working in the emerging interdisciplinary field of artistic practise and philosophical scholarship, spreading an understanding of mutually beneficial cooperation between the worlds of performing arts and academic philosophy.

There is a lot to be learned from investigating and taking part in artistic practises. In this article, I give the word to the experts I've consulted - the dancers. Performers such as dancers cultivate exquisite bodily knowledge in their everyday work lives. Many "don't talk about it on that level," but "they can tell when it works" (Ole, in our interviews). When asked, they reveal an overwhelming insight regarding the bodily subject, an insight that may not fit traditional and canonical scholarly understandings of consciousness, cognition, and embodiment, but that can potentially expand academic understanding of what being a human being amounts to.

An experience that is familiar to dancers - as well as to artists in other fields, and athletes, soldiers, and others focused on bodily and affective activities - is largely overlooked in philosophical theories of cognition and consciousness: that is, our common human ability to *reflect non-conceptually through bodily and/or affective activity*.

In dance philosophy, the experience of reflecting, thinking and understanding through dancing is recognized and well described. There is Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's classical notion of "thinking in movement" (Sheets-Johnstone 1980; 2011), Dorothée Legrand and Susanne Ravn's legendary article that describes "a form of reflective consciousness at the bodily level" in dancers (Legrand and Ravn 2009), Anna Petronella Foutier's work on dance and "the reflections of the living body", explained through the "form of reflection, that Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls "radical", which is said to capture things in the state of their appearance" (Foutier 2013). And there is Einav Katan-Schmid's book on embodied philosophy in dance, where she, inspired by Varela, Thompson and Rosch's notion of "embodied reflection" in "The Embodied Mind" (2016), presents a chapter on "embodied reflections", that describes "the effortlessness of thinking in movement" (Katan-Schmid 2016). Joshua Bergamin has

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published an article on coping in flow, where he discusses dance and other forms of expertise, and the “distinct state of non-conceptual awareness” in skilful coping, which he sees as “an experience of spontaneity, flow and ‘owned-ness’” (Bergamin 2017). When it comes to my own work, I aim at finding the structures and characteristics of what one could call “high-order levels” of bodily consciousness, through describing “embodied reflection” in dancers (Buttingsrud 2014; 2016).

These descriptions provide evidence of a certain kind of bodily sense making acknowledged in the academic literature.

In the on-going “expertise debate”, both sides - John McDowell’s and the late Hubert L. Dreyfus’ - seem to argue within the frames of well-established philosophical thinking and terminology (Scheer 2013). Where bodily consciousness is recognized (Dreyfus 2005), the bodily aspects of the skilled subject are described as “pre-reflective” and “automatic”, and even “anonymous” and “pre-personal”². The notion of bodily agency described in dance philosophy does not seem to be as apparent in the expertise debate. The expertise debate includes works on theories with holistic approaches, though, like “Mesh” (Christensen, Sutton, McIlwain 2016), where a synthesis of bodily and cognitive mechanisms merge in expert performance, typically in sport.

The problem with fitting practical, artistic work into established philosophical worldviews is that our thinking, as far as I see it, is still influenced by the body-mind dualism of our past. We might have put the philosophical idea of dualism³ behind us, but its hierarchies and its terminology, upon which we have built societies, educational systems, and understandings of life as such, still make it difficult for us to fully recognize, verbalize, and value the vast variety of our embodied and affective resources.

The dancers I’ve interviewed for the empirical research tell me how they aim at “letting go of (conceptual) thinking” while working. Doing so, they experience a “bodily freedom” that gives room for “meaningfulness, where it all connects”, and where one “understands without

² See Sara Heinämaa’s article “Anonymity and Personhood: Merleau-Ponty’s Account of the Subject of Perception” for a clarification of these notions.

³ By the philosophical idea of dualism, I refer to Descartes, and also to Plato’s idealism.

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judging". This bodily and affective attentiveness is experienced as "profound contemplation". Dancing can be a way of making sense of life, a way of thinking (bodily) without thinking (conceptually). As one interviewee, Eleanor, insightfully puts it: "Dance is a medium of non-representational thought". My own first-person experiences as a performer⁴ align with these descriptions.

I argue that the phenomenon of bodily sense making constitutes a state of consciousness in its own right. Not only due to what I see as its irreducibility to special forms of conceptual reflection or pre-reflective bodily awareness, but also because it has its own way of knowledge-gathering and knowledge-processing - in other words, its own unique reflection. In this article, I outline the particular characteristics of, what I call, the *state of embodied reflection*.⁵

How are we to understand what *embodied reflection* amounts to? In dance contexts, this is what it is: Dancing at a professional level, knowing the steps by heart, in other words pre-reflectively, does not suffice. As a dancer you apply attention and accuracy to those memorized steps as a means of generating expression. You take bodily ownership of the wholeness of the performance situation, and fill the physical form of the bare steps with content such as emotion, interpretation, and meaning, all on a bodily-affective level. As a result, you experience an extended freedom and strength through dancing. The experiences and work, which follow the mere acquisition of the steps, are executed reflecting through your body. This is an example of embodied reflection.

METHODOLOGY

If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been "worked over," that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both "subject" and "object," both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them.

Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" in "The Visible and the Invisible", (1968, p. 130)

⁴ I worked as a dancer, physical actress, and singer from about 1985 to about 2010.

⁵ Consciousness is traditionally referred to as being reflective through the mind (in philosophy, as such), as well as bodily, pre-reflective (in phenomenology and fields of embodied cognition). Reflection through the body, as a non-conceptual, high-order experience, is not yet commonly considered.

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Embodied reflection is extensively used by professionally trained dancers and is, thus, distinctly recognizable to them. This article is, therefore, based on qualitative research interviews with such dancers. What's more, I've let the dancers' descriptions lead the way in a somewhat untraditional manner in order to give space to a rich description of this particular bodily state. On the theoretical side, I make use of dance philosophy, classical and current phenomenology, and other philosophical theories.

The interviews are conducted, transcribed, analysed, and, when needed, translated by myself. I make use of two different methods. One is the *micro-phenomenological interview method*, earlier known as the elicitation interview method (Petitmengin 2006; Petitmengin et. al. 2019). The second is the *phenomenological interview method* (Høffding and Martiny 2015). I find the different modes of communication enclosed in the two methods complement one another and open up for possibilities of individual preferences in the interviewees.

THE DANCERS

The empirical material consists of nine interviews with five dancers, who all additionally teach and choreograph. Six of the interviews are with dancers from Åben Dans⁶, a dance theatre in Roskilde, Denmark, where they've kindly opened their doors to my research. I initially spent time with the dancers during the making of the performance "Ai, ai, ai". Later, I conducted the formal interviews in individual settings. The dancers at Åben Dans, Ole Birger Hansen and Antoinette Helbing⁷, are working within contemporary dance⁸. The three remaining interviewees are contemporary dancer Ellen Kilsgaard⁹, butoh dancer Yael Gaathon¹⁰, and choreographer and dancer Eleanor Bauer¹¹, whose international work spans ballet, contemporary dance, as well as dance research.

⁶ <https://abendans.dk/?lang=en>

⁷ <https://antoinettehelbing.com/>

⁸ Contemporary dance is an umbrella notion for western artistic dance complementary to classical ballet. From Legrand and Ravn (2009)

⁹ <http://www.ellenkilsgaard.com/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bluecliff.org/yael-gaathon>

¹¹ <https://www.goodmove.be/>

TUNING IN TO THE BODILY

The performances at Åben Dans are created by means of preliminary improvisations, which are captured on camera. The choreographer and the director present the dancers with themes to improvise, and the dancers do their improvisation work while being recorded. In due course, the team cooperatively choose the most suitable bits of improvised movement material, which, eventually, come together to make up the performance. From that stage on, the dancers work on recapturing their own movements as seen on the recorded film. The different sections of the performance are later connected, and the dancers rehearse the movement material over and over again until it becomes second nature, and the director and choreographer are satisfied with the movements, as well as expressions, atmospheres, and tempi.

Overlapping the process of acquiring the performance as second nature, a new phase starts for the dancers, a phase which, as we shall see, has a lot in common with the initial improvisations. In this phase, the dancers feel increasingly familiar with the material, and the directions received from the leaders integrate and become meaningful as parts of their own movements. Taking ownership of the material frees the individual dancer to invest other aspects of herself into the performance; to interpret, play with the rhythms, articulate, and connect emotionally and sensorially.

A dancer's work on a performance indicates a number of shifts in consciousness. Before work starts, the most prevalent state might be the continuous, everyday experience of being-in-the-world, which is the pre-reflective, bodily mode, described thoroughly within the phenomenological literature (Husserl 1952). This mode might also be the state of consciousness one enters performing something well known in an automatic fashion, relying on one's second nature. In addition to pre-reflective consciousness, one might initially think about the work that's about to start, intensely observe a new dance partner's moves, worry about an injury, or reflect upon any other issue in a conceptually reflective state of consciousness. Reflective consciousness is equally established as a state of consciousness in traditional phenomenological texts (Husserl 1976). Thoughts, judgements, and other forms of minded reflections might appear during rehearsals, as they do in our everyday lives.

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What the dancers have reported, though, is that they mainly focus bodily during their work, and aim at not engaging in mind-based reflections. They enter their professional room of attention by means of their bodily and affective faculties. This experience of consciousness, which I call “embodied reflection”, is not described in the traditional, phenomenological literature on consciousness.

Let us take a closer look at the dancers’ experiences, starting from the beginning of a normal workday at the theatre.

Getting ready for an improvisation, Antoinette tells me how she settles down, standing on the studio floor in front of the camera and the rest of the team. Her morning warm-up is already done. This is the moment where the actual work on the performance starts. Before moving, she merely stands listening for a while, in search of quietness around her and inside herself. “It is as if I get bodily peace and fully enter my body. Then I feel everything inside and outside. I recognize my lungs and breathing. My head is on top of me. It moves a bit backwards, into a good position, balancing on the spine”.

What she reveals next is quite interesting in relation to the philosophical understanding of observation as a means of reflection (Zahavi 2017, pp. 18-29). When we scrutinize an object, we objectify it. Our attention has moved from a pre-reflective awareness of one object amongst other objects in our surrounding, to a specific grasp of the object in question.

Antoinette talks of a certain release of the gaze in relation to her practice, as part of her tuning in to the bodily: “It (the preparation of the body before moving) has a lot to do with the eyes, too, I feel. The eyes have to relax. I often feel they are grasping out for something. When there are things I want to understand, the eyes are pressing out of my skull. And in this situation I want them to calm down and let things come to them, instead of them wandering out in the world.” She claims that getting a still and slightly inwardly directed gaze helps her in allowing the body to focus. “And then I just sense it - I am ready.”

INTENTIONALITY

Antoinette starts to move, either alone or with her peers, depending upon which scene they are working on. What happens speaks of an attention upon *wholeness*, rather than upon specifics, which is characteristic of this concentration through the body: “I feel my whole skin,

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perhaps not the skin itself, but the edges of my physical body. I notice where I'm exposed to air. Where the clothes meet my body." When asked about the directedness of her focus, she tells me: "I actually feel all my body parts simultaneously. I'm rather conscious of it all. I feel the whole surface of me moving."

Ole talks of his awareness of the space around him in the studio: "I feel my dimensions in the room, I feel how big I am. There are many simultaneous experiences. I sense the edges of the room, the corners there and there and there, and where I am in proportion to the rest. And at the same time I am (aware) inside myself". He knows where his arms and legs are, as he puts it. In addition to this, he perceives the wholeness of his own dance work as it proceeds: "I fill out the movement phrase". His attention is on the general rehearsal situation, the physical space he is in, the space his body fills, and the movements he makes according to the task he has been given.

The dancers' bodily intentionality does not seem to fit the object-directedness described in Merleau-Ponty's theory of motoricity, or motor intentionality. This theory describes our subjective, originary, bodily relations to objects, and how this "I can" directedness enables us to move in space and be with things in general. Our gestures and movements towards and with objects are connecting and intertwining us with the world, towards which we are thrown; we interact with the world and with others in ways we are implicitly, pre-reflectively aware of (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 139-140).

What the dancers describe, though, is a bodily directedness that is both deliberate and immediate, which, seemingly effortlessly, encompasses various facets of the situation simultaneously. As we have seen, a dancer's consciousness can be directed towards the whole body, bodily feelings, the environment, and movements in the environment - all simultaneously. The attention of this bodily reflective state embraces the whole context of the activity. This form of bodily intentionality is not only multifaceted, but seems altogether different from what we know from established philosophical theories. It does not have the directedness conceptual reflection has towards its object of reflection, where the attention moves like a pointing finger towards the object, and narrows the field of focus down to one specific end. Neither does this bodily intentionality work on a pre-reflective level as our motoricity does - it is far too attentive, fine-tuned, and deliberate to fit that description.

IMMERSED IN INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The experience of being absorbed in dance gives Antoinette a feeling of *depth* that she would miss in her life, if she didn't dance. "It feels as if it (the creation of the improvised dance) comes from a deeper place in me. And the movements that come (in this state) communicate more with other people".

Several times during our interviews Ole mentions the *freedom* he experiences being in flow while dancing¹². He sees it as a break from everyday stress: "There is so much control everywhere else". "All of a sudden one can let go and enter this completely different room." He always enters this room of consciousness when he works, but his consciousness is not permanently on that level throughout the whole workday. Getting there is a process, and it has a lot to do with the setting he is in. Dancing with someone who also easily "lets go", like his dance partner Antoinette, helps. "It's not a switch I turn on. But we know each other well, we've done this several times, and we know how to get there". He describes how the two of them start out by just moving around for a while, "and then all of a sudden it's there".

According to Ole, finding the flow-state in an improvisation demands bodily and affective courage. It is a question of daring to enter that room in you where the control that conceptual reflection gives is left behind. When you dare to "let yourself free" you might "open up and let the other in", Ole says, "bodily, and... the whole thing. I feel deeply connected with the other (dancing in this state). It's like when you make love to someone you feel close to."

When he works with performers who are emotionally afraid, who have too fixed movement patterns, or who simply are not trained as dancers, he feels the difference. Their physical insecurity prevents the two of them from having a bodily communication on that specific level.

What does this immersed bodily communication consist of? To Antoinette, it starts with listening to the other body, just as it did when she tuned in on her own. Again, she emphasizes

¹² "Flow" is a term coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), and it describes the conditions for optimal experience. Like the terms the "zone" and the "groove", "flow" is frequently used by practitioners to describe an elevated state of consciousness in artistic and athletic performance – what I would call a bodily reflective state.

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the lack of conceptual thinking: “(We are) two bodies listening to each other, not trying to pressure anything or push any ideas into the situation. When one forgets one’s ideas... it’s like, his arm senses that this is a good moment, and then – wow – he lifts me. It was not an idea, it was the way the body saw the situation. (One) exploits the possibilities and the directions, and brings what *is* further.”

During the rehearsals of “The Mirror Project”, a dance performance about reflection that Antoinette was inspired to create after our talks, she and her fellow dancer coined the term *listening-seeing*. Listening-seeing explains the specific attention they make use of during the performance, in order to move synchronized, even when they are out of each other’s eyesight. “We use our bodies and ears to see each other,” Antoinette explains. “Almost every movement has a sound that can be heard, and a tempo, and a quality. One can hear an arm swinging through the air, if the movement is performed clearly. If it is done in a fumbling way, it’s difficult to sense it.”

The tuning in and listening mentioned earlier is almost always followed by the use of physical eyesight, even if the gaze is turned slightly inward, as Antoinette told us. But for this performance, the dancers were “seeing” through their auditory senses, as well as through the rest of their living bodies. “All the senses play a part here”.

When Antoinette and her dance partner got immersed in each other’s movements working on this choreography, it didn’t feel as if one of them were leading and the other following. They had talked about that possible trap, and made sure to co-operate on equal terms in the active undertaking of the task as well as receptive listening to each other and the wholeness.

Again, we see an experience of attention through wholeness, rather than an attention upon a particular body part or other object:

“It’s a bodily listening to the other dancer. The whole body is listening. The skin can also listen. It’s also the ears. Vibrations are felt on the skin, and the skin is felt very clearly.” Antoinette explains how she uses listening-seeing to “see” whether the dancer behind her is lying down or standing upright, and whether she’s moving or is still. When asked whether she sees it as an experience of a spiritual connection between them, she denies firmly this and

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claims that it is “mere physics”. “It might be the air. Perhaps there are wavelengths that we haven’t been in the habit of listening to earlier”.

Antoinette’s method of listening-seeing is a bodily reflective experience of consciousness. There is no conceptual attention, no observational scrutinizing of the other or of one’s own body parts, no measuring or other judging of one’s movements. The attention is directed towards the wholeness as an open embrace, rather than meeting the object like a laser ray.

“It is as if we are not two bodies anymore but have become one. One organism. I often experience it with Ole. There’s no resistance,” Antoinette tells me. “The movements don’t stop, there’s no doubt, in a way. We are in it together,” she continues. “It is very satisfying to be in this state with someone else. Perhaps it has to do with the harmony of the two bodies. The dance doesn’t have to look super harmonic, and physically there can be resistance and conflict. But there’s that underlying agreement.”

Classical ballet dancers working in the “corps de ballet” - the group of dancers who are not soloists, and who often work as a backdrop in the different scenes of a ballet performance – are, according to interviews I conducted for earlier work, often conceptually reflective in order to make sure they move synchronized as a group. When they, for instance, stand in a line with seven other dancers who all lift their legs, they have to check up on their own leg, as well as estimate the height of the other legs to both sides. There is a constant calculation going on, I was told. Letting go of conceptual control and getting immersed into an intersubjective experience of wholeness does not seem to be an option in all dance settings.

There are a number of interesting differences in the various styles of dance, as there are personal preferences when it comes to the work mode of the individual dancer. On the same note, the borders between the different experiences of consciousness are not waterproof, either. The dancers and other artists, who’ve helped me in my research so far, have all told me about the variety of modes of consciousness experienced through their workdays. When I stress the bodily reflective level, it is because it seems to be the favoured state of consciousness in any performance or creative situation, and because it is in need of structured philosophical elucidation.

FROM MINDED REFLECTION TO PRE-REFLECTION TO BODILY REFLECTION

When the team of dancers and leaders at Åben Dans have chosen the improvised movement material they find suitable for the performance, the dancers start working on recapturing their own movements as seen on the recorded film.

This happens in a very different mode from the improvisation mode. There the dancers' attention was directed towards the wholeness of their living, moving bodies, the other, and the environment around them. At this point, the dance work requires conceptual reflection: observation of specific details, objectifications of one's body parts and movements, comparisons, judgments, and critical examinations of the steps shown by "the choreographer" in front of them - in this case themselves on the screen.

"In a way it's from the outside and in. You go from the form (that you see on the screen) and into the body. And then you repeat it till it can be done from the inside and out," Antoinette says.

When learning a new skill, being it biking or how to bake a cake, I start out reflecting upon the different processes the activity consists of. I practise, I fail, and I try again. Finally I know how to perform cake baking or biking, and I can let go of my former intense rationalisation concerning the way pedals or cups of flour work. The biking or baking is embedded in me, and I can perform the task pre-reflectively, or without much thought.

These everyday tasks do not demand any more attention - unless I start training for bike races, or sign up for a baking competition show. Then I will pay specific attention to the task again, perhaps on another level or differently from when I was initially learning the skill.

To the dancers, learning the steps by heart is far from enough. "Merely performing the form does not suffice", Antoinette claims. When the movement material has become second nature, you still go on working on those bodily memorized steps. The integration of the movement material gives the dancer an increasing feeling of moving with immediacy, in her own way. "What you need to get to that point, is to know the material really well. You have rehearsed it a million times and gotten bored with it. And then you find meaning in it, and can do it with emotion, or whatever takes it further than the form", Antoinette states. "You constantly work

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towards getting the same kind of freedom (that the improvisation situation gave) back”, Ole says. “You have to know your material well enough to be able to insert your own flow into it. Be far enough in the process to stop thinking. Just sense the movements”. Again, we learn of a process of letting go of conceptual reflection, similar to the process of leaving one’s everyday life mode to enter the room that allows for a free bodily improvisation. At this stage there’s no need to double check positions, remember steps, or think about agreements made – it’s all ingrained in the attentively dancing bodies, and conceptual reflection becomes superfluous.

As Eleanor, one of the dancers I’ve interviewed outside of Åben Dans, puts it, “the difference between skill and habit is attention”. Habit formation is not a rare performance thing, she reminds me. “Every single knowledge, every kind of knowledge is habit formation. It’s really just about practise.” Acquiring a skill, or making the habit interesting to watch, is another process, which requires attention: “If I use my habits skilfully, then I’m applying them with a certain position, or accuracy to the task at hand. Or they’re applied in a certain way, that’s problem solving.”

Ellen also shares her experience of learning new choreography and says: “Learning steps is a multifaceted thing. I mirror the form (the steps that the choreographer or teacher is showing), but I also try to mirror how he is.” Learning new steps implies grasping the qualities, atmospheres, and rhythms of the movements as well as the bodily moves.

“I try to recognize it all - up, down, around. The arm goes forward... the directions and lines in the room. All the basics.” To Ellen a dance is a landscape, and learning it, she explores the map of this landscape. When she knows the steps, she can dwell in the landscape itself: “When the movements are in the body, I can go into more detail. If my arm is moving up - how does it feel? How is it really? How does the raised arm affect my neck? What is the intended atmosphere here? What do the feet do as my arm moves up?”

Ellen articulates another interesting layer of the process; the way she as a dancer eventually takes ownership of the choreography: “I am the one moving my arm here! It is not the other person who is moving, and then I follow. I am the one who’s doing the dancing”. Bringing her “whole being into it”, dancing is an existential factor in her life. “To dance is a statement. And that’s the joy of dancing – it’s actively showing your strength, your power.”

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Summing it up, we have heard how getting pre-reflective access to the movements one has reflected upon with a conceptual mind while learning them is hard work, but a necessity for the dancer. Yet, to know the steps pre-reflectively is not a sufficient condition for professional performance of dance. Applying attention and accuracy, experiencing the movements as one's own, filling the physical form of the bare steps with the content of one's interpretation, experiencing extended freedom, meaningfulness and strength dancing, one's body is brought into the process of reflecting upon the material of the performance.

Ole experiences the transformation in this way: "The whole room opens up. The consciousness opens up, instead of thinking "now I have to do this, and then..." All of a sudden it is internalized, and then I can sense the moves and the connections between what I'm doing and time, the music, the room, and the relationships with the others."

Embodied reflection is experienced with the same immediacy as pre-reflective consciousness. The field of immediate presence is considerably enlarged, though. Ole puts it this way: "One's consciousness expands. Sometimes it feels as if it enfolds the whole universe. It's not as if you see the stars and the moon, but there's a feeling of complete expansion."

This is a very fulfilling mode to be in but, as Ole and many dancers remark, one's private emotional states do not play a part in it. I shall return to this in the next section. "It is very satisfying to feel related to it all. But I'm neither happy, nor sad. Afterwards I can say: "Oh, that was awesome!" But in the moment I don't feel this or that. It's just a sense of complete presence."

PERFORMING

When butoh¹³ dancer Yael performs, she spends hours preparing herself. "I need quiet. I go to the theatre at least two hours before I perform, to focus. I just slowly get into it. I do my warm-up, and then the make-up. I use body make-up, and I enjoy the process of applying it before the performance, it helps me. I start to focus, let go of everything. I bring myself to just being, and to what I need to be for the performance, reminding myself of why I'm doing this

¹³ Butoh is the name given to a variety of performance practises that emerged around the middle of the twentieth century in Japan.

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performance. And just try to let go of everything else that's disturbing in my life. You know, whatever problem is there."

"Letting go", which seems to be a kind of mantra to dancers, is not just a question of switching off the conceptual mind. It is an expression that covers the deliberate action of stopping flows of irrelevant thoughts and judgements, and everyday worries and hustles. This means, as mentioned, that private emotional states are also put aside during work hours. There is a twofold bodily-affective decision-making going on in the dancer here – a decision to let go of parts of one's self, and a decision to fully open other parts of oneself. The latter is dependent upon the former. The process of "letting go" does not, therefore, imply self-forgetfulness. It implies focusing through the bodily-affective aspects of subjectivity, instead of the most common mode of focus in our culture and times; being more or less constantly conceptually reflective. In the coming section on the self, I shall elaborate on what "letting go" in this way does to the experience of being a dancing subject.

I meet Eleanor as she is choreographing a performance at the Royal Danish Theatre's experimental dance scene Corpus. She tells me about her notion of dance as a medium of thought, where the specific kind of thinking that dance allows is active. According to Eleanor, different mediums of thought reflect their respective fields. "If I'm doing math I can think certain things that I cannot think if I'm speaking in French. I can speak French and arrive at certain conclusions or expressions that I do not if I'm speaking Arabic. Different paths open up or different limitations reveal themselves in different media of thought. So how could we consider different artistic media also as media of thought? How am I thinking, or what kinds of thoughts are possible to arrive at or transmit in painting, or music, or dance?"

To Eleanor, thinking through dancing is not representational. "It's not referring to the thing, I am being the thing. I'm becoming the thing. (As a dancer) you're really not trying to show or represent those things as objects or forms." "I am *in* the actual situation."

As we learned in the section on intentionality, embodied reflection is directed towards objects, like any other reflection. But the object is not one specific thing upon which one's attention is directed, in the way we experience objects of conceptual reflection. Bodily

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reflection is directed towards a specified wholeness, or towards an assemblage of things being coordinated, to which one is openly attentive.

Eleanor sees thinking in dancing as a form of compositional coordination. “I’m coordinating things. I’m coordinating experiences, I’m coordinating senses, and I’m coordinating patterns and memories and habits that have been formed. I’m coordinating sensations of imagination, for example. What I’m doing, and what it makes me (dance-) think of, or what I’m (dance-) thinking of in order to shape what I’m doing – it’s a constant coordination. (It could be) weight, balance, timing.”

As she sees it, it happens in different ways in different styles of dance. Certain senses, for instance, will be more important or in stronger relationship to each other in different dance settings. In the ballet *Swan Lake*¹⁴ there’s a variation where the heroine is mourning. “The tears, the lake of tears - there’s a coordination of the emotional state of sadness and longing, and the physical vocabulary of ballet.” Needless to say, the physical steps are second nature to the dancer dancing this part, but the movements are still attended to. Besides the heroine’s emotional and physical aspects, there’s the larger traditional and affective aura of fairy tale fiction, which is “very referential, but not representational,” Eleanor explains. In other words, in this variation the dancer is “coordinating image and culture, with physical tonus and the sensation.” In addition to the mentioned layers, “I’m feeding myself the image of water, to feel this fluidity”, she explains, and moves her arms gracefully in front of her chest, as if her arms had turned liquid.

There’s a lot going on simultaneously. Eleanor talks of dancing as an intense form of “physical problem solving”. To her, this problem solving is by no means a stressful thing: “So much more comes to life in dancing, than any other kind of exercise”, she claims, and shares how she feels “physically boring” in periods where she doesn’t have time to dance.

When a dancer is in the wholeness-directed mode, the experience of wholeness and connectedness might comprise their living body and its movements, or themselves and their

¹⁴ *Swan Lake* is a classical ballet with music by Tchaikovsky, that tells the story of princess Odette, who is turned into a swan by an evil sorcerer’s curse.

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co-dancers, or the dancers and the musicians on stage, or the people on stage and their audience, or - as we have heard from Ole - it might comprise the dancing situation and the whole universe. Something definitely happens to the “I” of the bodily reflective dancer, and we shall take a closer look at that in the next section.

As we have seen in the section on intersubjectivity, the connection between dancers working together can be both strong and subtle, and assist the dancer in getting immersed. As a dancer, one also relates to the audience. Let’s take a closer look at this relationship.

By the end of a rehearsal period it can be really dissatisfying not to have the audience, Antoinette tells me. “I can feel I need someone to share this with now”. Yael has the same need. “An audience makes me more concentrated”, she claims, and reveals: “Sometimes when I work in the studio by myself, I imagine that I’m being watched. Because, at the end of the day, a performance is existing for other people to watch it. So it has to communicate on that channel.”

When Yael is in front of an audience at the theatre, she connects to a much larger crowd than the one she sees. “In butoh you perform not only for the audience, but also for the spirits of the ancestors, for the universe.” She feels that their relation, as well as her consciousness of their gazes, makes her more aware. “It makes things more edited. It clarifies things. You can’t mess it up with unnecessary noise.”

Sharing her work with the audience is essential to Antoinette, as well. “I see their shadows, and I feel their concentration.” “It gives a feeling of satisfaction when they experience it (the performance) with me. I’m not alone, even if I stand on stage alone, because through me, they go through what I go through. In a way it’s empathy. They follow my emotions, my journey there.”

Performances do not always go as planned. Antoinette once experienced a stage lamp falling down in the middle of a show. “Technical things can fail. While dancing I thought: “How do I fix this? What comes next?” In the end, she just hung the lamp back up. “I tried to do it as natural as possible: “My task is to hang up this lamp”, and then I went on. I didn’t make a fuss about it.” She managed to stay in flow and in character, and was present throughout the performance.

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The experience is stressful in a different way when the audience and you as a performer are not on the same page. Antoinette has a solo piece where she has to talk to the audience. “Sometimes they just don’t enjoy that. I can feel how they distance themselves from me. And it’s so easy to get into that spiral, where I try to convince them. Instead of just ... abstracting. It’s difficult.” Her reaction is natural: “Then I start observing myself from the outside.” She normally avoids objectifying herself on stage, because “that doesn’t work.” “One can not see oneself from the outside, while being there. Then a part of one’s concentration is elsewhere.” If the only thing left is the form - her physical body performing the steps as second nature - she feels the dance becomes an empty shell, she says. She loses the freedom to perform the form with her own timing and dynamics, which are “all the things I value, the meat on the bones”.

Antoinette’s absorbed work mode has, then, been replaced with the experience of seeing herself as she imagines her audience sees her. The latter is what Sartre describes as “the third ontological dimension of the body”. The first and second dimensions of the body are the body-for-me and the body-for-others, which are both direct perceptions of existence. The third way of experiencing one’s own bodily existence is the objectification of oneself through the eyes of the other, where I “exist for myself as a body known by the other” (Sartre 2003, p. 460).

Like during Antoinette’s lamp accident, there are occasions where one has a double attention, where one is attentive through the bodily dance work and simultaneously thinking of practicalities. This might work fine on stage. Glimpses of conceptual thought can occur in parallel with an overall bodily focus. Antoinette remembers a dance situation where she, momentarily surprised by her own bodily abilities, thought: “I had no idea it would express itself like this!”

While performing, Yael sometimes notices parts that could be improved. “I can note to myself, a place (in the choreography) where I think: “Ah!” The noise marks that something is not working. But I don’t start to think about what it is, not at that moment.”

Even though, as we see here, conceptual reflection and bodily reflection are not always mutually exclusive, worrying, or being thrown out of context by uncontrollable thoughts, might interfere with the flow of the performance.

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In the past, Yael has experienced rare occasions of being distracted by thinking conceptually while dancing. This happened as a consequence of being extremely bored or tired, she says. Being only partially present in this fashion, she felt she “had disappeared”. To her, the lack of correlation between what she is doing and what she is conscious about equals “losing herself”. In the expertise debate, many talk of “self-forgetfulness” in skilful performance (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). To them, the forgotten self must be the self that is identified with the conceptually reflective mind. The dancers I have interviewed do not feel that their selves are forgotten when they are immersed in bodily activity. On the contrary, it is having involuntary conceptual thoughts while dancing that can give them the feeling of forgetting or losing themselves. This form of conceptual thinking interferes with the flow in embodied reflection. It delays the dancer and disturbs her sense of immediate presence, hence the experience of losing touch with oneself.

In this section, we have learned of dancers’ experiences of their most profound bodily attention - the performance situation. Dancing can be understood as a non-representational medium of thought, where a number of co-ordinated aspects constitute the problem solving within this form of thinking. Dancers relate to and direct their attention at various facets of wholeness, from their living bodies to their partner work, to their audiences, an even to the universe. The audience can be an important facet of dancers’ experiential wholeness and can affect the different states of consciousness experienced during a performance.

SELF

In the state of consciousness I aim at describing, embodied reflection, the bodily concentrated subject has let go of conceptual reflection, and is fully focused through and absorbed in the bodily and/or affective activity one is performing. As we have seen it in the interviewed dancers’ descriptions, as a dancer one might search for this state of absorption, because it frees one as a body to do one’s dance work without delay and interruption, and because it allows one to go deeper into one’s bodily and affective intelligence and make full use of these capacities in one’s work.

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The immersed dancing self is open-minded and open-bodied, and is open towards one's co-workers and their common environment. This is not a naïve, pre-reflective openness. It is an active position that is deliberately chosen, that enables them to do their artistic work, through which they constitute subtle and profound knowledge and understanding.

The founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, describes two forms of bodily consciousness. There is the pre-reflective, unthematized experience of being a living body, *Leib*, and the experience of one's body as an observable physical entity occupying space, described as *Körper* (Husserl 1952, pp. 55-89).

Even if the bodily reflection that dancers experience fall outside these classical distinctions, we get closer to a characterization of embodied reflection through Husserl's distinction of *Leib*. Dance thinking is happening through the living body, and is experienced with the same immediacy or "straightforward mode" (Husserl 1960, p. 34) as experiences of *Leib*.

In Husserl's descriptions of (conceptual) reflection, we learn how the subject turns its attention to its pre-reflective experiences and enters "the noticing of what was previously unnoticed" (Husserl 2012, p. 68)

Reflection (...) is an expression for acts in which the stream of experience (*Erlebnis*), with all its manifold events (phrases of experience, intentionalities) can be grasped and analysed in the light of its own evidence. It is, as we may also express it, the name we give to consciousness' own method for the knowledge of consciousness generally.
(Husserl 2012, p. 152)¹⁵

A bodily reflecting dancer grasps material from her stream of experience. Bodily and affective aspects of her second nature, of her life and environment as such, of other artwork, and more, are transformed through her dance reflections.

¹⁵ "Reflexion ist nach dem soeben Ausgeführten ein Titel für Akte, in denen der Erlebnisstrom mit all seinen mannigfachen Vorkommnissen (Erlebnismomenten, Intentionalitäten) evident fassbar und analysierbar wird. Sie ist, so können wir es auch ausdrücken, der Titel der Bewusstseinsmethode für die Erkenntnis von Bewusstsein überhaupt" (Husserl 1976, p.165).

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In his essay “Eye and Mind”, the phenomenologist of art and perception i.a., Maurice Merleau-Ponty, mentions a mode of thinking in art:

“This philosophy, which is yet to be elaborated, is what animates the painter - not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instance when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne’s words, he ‘thinks in painting’.”

(Merleau-Ponty 1970)¹⁶

Thinking in painting, or dancing, the senses are sharpened to their utmost. Sensuous and emotional states might be instrumental in the choreography, and as emotions and moods are important parts of the living body, dancers in this state will openly allow emotional expressions in their work.

Yet, there is a difference between private emotions and emotions appearing during embodied reflection. Ellen explains it this way: “The movements need a space for resonance, and a certain lightness around that resonance. It’s not just an arm being stretched out.” Moving one has to facilitate a resonance-space for the movement’s vibrations to swing, a space or openness that allows for the content to “speak back” from the movement, both to the dancer and to the audience watching the dance. “The movement material needs space to vibrate in.” If I believe it is all about what goes on inside of me, Ellen clarifies, the dance “kind of collapses.” This is an important part of letting go, she states. When dancing, it’s important to be able to detach oneself from the private emotional realm, “and simultaneously be completely involved”.

Antoinette also talks about the need of “a professional distance”. “I can see clearly on stage, if a performer is too private.” “I might give space to some emotions, in a way so that the audience can recognize them in me, through being preoccupied with a task. In my experience it (emotional expression on stage) is often based on the senses, and is very present.” To her, it is out of respect for the audience and the experience they get from seeing her dancing: “I give the audience so much more if I am not totally involved emotionally. Feelings and emotions

¹⁶ Or, cette philosophie qui est à faire, c’est elle qui anime le peintre, non pas quand il exprime des opinions sur le monde, mais à l’instant où sa vision se fait geste, quand, dira Cézanne, il “pense en peinture” (Merleau-Ponty, *L’œil et l’esprit*, 1961).

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might appear, and that's fine. But it's better if... I think it's easier to watch when it comes from the sensory realm." This also allows the audience their own emotional space and individual interpretation of the dance.

Eleanor shares how she is interested in calibrating "the felt sense" that one gets to know through meditative practices, into dance. "Calibrate it in a way that opens the spectrum between sensations and emotions in a non-divisive way. So that making sense with the felt sense, is allowing every experience." To her, the emotions are sources of knowledge - media of thought – and "knowing through feeling" thus an interesting aspect of dance investigation.

Not merely private emotional reactions and states, but also private bodily feelings are left out by dancers focusing through the state of embodied reflection. Some years ago, I interviewed Indian dancer Lucy Bannon for another project, and this is her story: "In the beginning of a performance on an unfamiliar stage, she all of a sudden felt something sharp in her foot. While she was dancing, she reflected upon whether to stop and remove the thing or to go on dancing. She decided to carry on. "It was a big piece of glass. I did the whole thing and afterwards I felt really ill (...) One thing is that you've got the stress hormones, the adrenalin will cut out the worldly concerns. You see, just before the performance...that's why you have this prima donna caricature, I just see it as if you are cutting off from the outside world and going into this inner thing and it's all about that. So you're not so concerned, you could hurt yourself, but you won't feel pain, you don't feel those things. You might feel them afterwards" (Buttingsrud, 2014, p. 55).

As a professional, Bannon distinguished between her private physical body and her lived performing body, and she was able to continue her explicit and attentive work through her living body throughout the performance, and at the same time pragmatically and deliberately close down her private bodily feelings of pain.

Summing up so far, the bodily reflecting dancing self is a subject who has let go of conceptual thoughts as well as of private emotions and private bodily feelings. She has an open mind and her bodily and affective self is actively open and moving freely.

Many of the interviewed dancers feel that they are "more purely themselves", or "more themselves", when immersed in dance activity - and other activities where the body leads the

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way. Some speak of “authenticity” and “core”. Thinking about the basic bodily structures that we all share as human beings, it’s no surprise that dancing touches us, Antoinette remarks. “There is something deeply human about it. Something we all recognize.”

The openness and freedom from “the hustle and bustle of everyday life” that one experiences in embodied reflection makes it easy to connect with the world and with other people, when one is in this state. Antoinette feels that “it is generally very easy to get to know each other through the body, and come close. You feel you know the other after having worked together, even for only a short time.” As Eleanor puts it, the dancing self is “an interrelated, interdependent, sensitive, receptive, active, perceptive, responsive agent in a network of relations.”

CONCLUSION

Husserl describes reflection as being *attentive, intensely and explicitly aware of the other and the world*, and *intensely self-aware*, and that is what dancers immersed in their dance work are – on a bodily and affective level. Remember the attention Antoinette and Ole experienced and shared in the improvisation situation. They sensed the whole surface of their moving body and were equally aware of the room, how their movements transported them around in this space, and they were aware of the other living body moving with them. At the same time they solved a problem, the theme of the improvisation.

When we heard of the way Eleanor created the swan princess in the ballet Swan Lake, we learned how dancers *thematically transform or articulate something grasped from the stream of pre-reflective consciousness*, which in the Swan Lake could be certain cultural understandings, emotional associations, and the ballet steps and movements. Dancing is coordinating all these, as well as other aspects into a compositional whole – the dance performance. These are all, according to Husserl, reflective processes.

Being bodily, embodied reflection is experienced with immediacy, temporally seen. Spatially it opens towards the chosen wholeness of the context, characterized by the enlarged experience of being present. Some dancers feel that this presence and the consciousness of wholeness encompass “humanity”, or “the universe”.

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The objects reflected upon in embodied reflection are found within the realm of the activity that constitutes the state of consciousness, which means, it does not imply the dichotomy found between a conceptually reflecting subject and the object this subject reflects upon. The switch from implicit, pre-reflective embodiment to conceptual reflection creates a slight time delay that is not there in embodied reflection. The change in the way the object appears to the subject happens and stays within the embodied/affective realm.

Embodied reflection is an active state, and its attitude is both open and receptive. Dancers don't feel that they "forget themselves" or "lose themselves" when they get absorbed in their dance work, even if remembering or verbalizing the experience afterwards might prove challenging. Experiencing profound bodily reflection equals a profound bodily presence through the living body, and after that kind of absorption one might feel joyful, elated, and even "high".

As Yael explained to us, there are situations where dancers feel that they "lose" or "forget themselves" while dancing, but these are not situations characterized by heightened bodily attention. These are rather pre-reflective modes where the dance is performed automatically, on autopilot – a possibility for the skilled dancer whose choreography is second nature. Thinking about other things while dancing, the dancer's attentive consciousness is far away from the performance at hand. Yael shared with us how this lack of correlation between the doing (the dance activity) and the thinking (the conceptual reflection) had made her feel lost in the past. "When I'm connected to myself, I flow with myself - and am aware of everything", she concludes.

In this article we have phenomenologically "gone to the things themselves", and listened to the experiences of professionally working dancers. We have seen how the interviewed dancers operate in their everyday work lives, when it comes to tuning in and becoming a bodily "white canvas" ready for work, how their intentionality is directed towards wholeness rather than focus points, what their intersubjective work amounts to, and how choreography is created, learned, and performed within different frames of consciousness. We have taken a closer look at the performance situation itself, and the dancers' relationship to the audience,

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and we have learned of the transformation of the self, that characterizes the experiences of being absorbed and attentive through the bodily and affective aspects of one's subjectivity.

Throughout the article we have seen how these bodily experiences might be understood as a form of reflection, or sense making, at a bodily/affective level. I call the consciousness, which enables these experiences, embodied reflection. In this article I have presented evidence of this state's existence through empirical, as well as theoretical sources. Through this evidence I have showed how the embodied reflection dancers experience through their skilful work is a state of consciousness in its own right - experiences of embodied reflection cannot be reduced to being pre-reflective or conceptually reflective experiences.

A plumber came to my house one day, and after he had fixed my bathroom we started talking. He revealed that he knew the state of embodied reflection very well - from his missions as a soldier. In Afghanistan he had been conscious in the same attentive, present, and wholeness-oriented way that dancers are performing. Crawling in a minefield he was naturally extremely alert. He told me that he knew exactly where the other soldiers in his unit were situated, also the ones who happened to be out of his eyesight. He felt their presence.

Embodied reflection is an important ingredient in dance and skilful performance. Nevertheless, I believe embodied reflection is a resource we all have access to, also in non-expertise situations: being bodily immersed in a physical activity, being absorbed in nature, during sexual fulfilling activities, playing, and during the performance of sports, yoga, and creation of art on any level.

By presenting the profound experiences of skilled dancers, I hope to disclose these common, human, bodily abilities to a larger audience, abilities that to many may be temporarily hidden resources.

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