

Myriam Gourfink

Laura Porter Blackburn / Published in Contact quarterly – Winter/Spring 2003

Choreographic Questionings

A presentation of a research by Myriam Gourfink.

With interview by Laura Porter Blackburn.

Weight, Slowness and Breathing. These three factors raise the question of pre-movements. Our most hidden and deepest motor resources. By focusing on these movements, further ones and changes of direction, then called micro-movements, appear. The researching process I apply, including a computer software program I have been working with called LOL, offers an extensive range of gestures. As a result; the space, the body, the skin, the cells and the living are being thoroughly explored. Each one of them, down to the very last millimetre.

The work around the different postures is being distorted, deteriorated and put out of line by the micro-movements. The passing between two postures is being filled by these actions. The continuous interaction of data (weight/breathing/slowness) creates a kind of general sweeping inside the body as well as in the space around it. This constant flow begets an important, unnameable state of mind shown on the face and the body. Here, we are in a poetic state before language (or after?).

I am interested in the quality of the concentration, the awareness to every psychological and corporeal movement, the performer's personal inner upheaval and the moment itself.

(from the essay, « TOO GENERATE », M. Gourfink, june 2000)

Interview with Myriam Gourfink

1. How did you get interested in working this way?

Yoga was the starting point of my work. I began to be aware of my breath, and I decided to move only sustained by it.

2. Is your idea of slowness also an influence of yoga?

I wanted to invest the body with breath and concentration and as a result the movement seems slow. Maybe because you have another perception of time : you are aware of very tiny movements of the body, aware of everything around you, aware of the atmosphere inside and outside, aware of your inside story. Your perceptions become more and more subtle. . . Am I slow ? I don't know, there is so much going on ! But for sure, I am lost in the elasticity of time.

So, this way of being that appears as slowness comes absolutely from yoga and, I would say, from the notion of "Sthira Sukha," which means a certain line of tension or tonicity of the body coming from the release.

In that state, release and tonicity overlap continuously and are parts of the same thing. I have the feeling that the slowness, the breathing, and the concentration are kneading me, and make me give the deepest and the rarest of myself. . .

3. Have you had experience in dance improvisation? Or contact improvisation?

"Yes. I began improvisation and contact dance with Greg Lara, and then worked with Odile Duboc (who uses both), and I followed classes with Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson and Simone Forti. Of course all those experiences are very precious."

4. You say in one of your writings that your process is the opposite of improvisation. How do you see that? Especially if there are infinite small changes that the body can make through any given trajectory...How do you make sure that you don't improvise...or do you?

I think I do not improvise because I use a written language, or metalanguage, to compose, so the first thing I do is to sit at the table and turn on my computer. The computer helps me to create and define an environment: structures, systems, movements, focus, etc. What I define are open scores. Everything is not predetermined, the dancer has to make his own choices, but within a range of possibilities. And it's different from improvisation, even if there are similarities."

Sometimes improvisation which allows the performer to dance as he wishes, doesn't please me. To me, putting the body at the heart of the choreographic process is a mere illusion; what is relevant in the so-called body process is the way we "think" our body and how it is situated in space. Often in improvisations without structure, we are confronted with our usual way to move (and rarely with our inventions). This reveals the way we function and it can be a very great learning tool. But I don't think free improvisation is sufficient to be a work of art."

5. How does "chance" figure into your choreographies?

To define a choreographic score, I first define several elements that I want to work with. For example : a posture, a concentration of the mind inside the body, a particular breath, a particular trajectory of the eyes, a particular orientation of the body, a particular spot for the dancer in the space, etc. Then I ask the computer to give me all the possible ways of combining them. I call These combinations "moments." And then I make choices. So I am making choices in a very open field with a lot of awareness.

Or the computer can help me define an order of phrases of movements. For example, first: the direction of the right arm is in front of the dancer; second: the weight is supported on one knee and one elbow; third: the direction of the eyes is upward; fourth: the breathing has an anal contraction during the exhalation, etc.

Or the computer can help me define a series of operations the dancer has to do: change the level of one of your arm three degrees higher, etc. These processes help me to decide if I want to be very precise or leave a range of possibilities open.

For the final structures, sometimes I create operations on the space that will define a new structure for each performance of a piece (TOO GENERATE), or the dancer can choose his own combining of moments for each performance (TAIRE), or an operation done just before the performance will determine both the chronology and choice of moments to be danced (MARINE).

So, I use chance on different levels: to create and make choices in an open field, to communicate with the dancer in an elastic way, and to avoid fixing a choreography too formally."

6. Could we consider LOL as creating a new syntax for dance writing?

LOL is just an experiment, still the choreographer has to create a new syntax, LOL helps. Certainly, the most interesting part of LOL is the discussions between the people who have created it.

7. I have seen you perform your own work and I have seen your choreography on other and the power of the experience was very different for me. Why do you choreograph on others, and what do you hope to see, achieve, create?

I want to create a written language that can be read by the dancers. I believe in the freedom of the writing process both for the choreographer and for the dancer. Exactly the same freedom you have when you are reading a book: you always find something of yourself between the lines. Exactly the freedom of an author writing - and freedom of course requires the structuring of personal thoughts, requires one to make choices. So, I invite dancers to give their interpretation of the text. Of course, I give them keys – training essentially with yoga - but I don't want to show them the right movement to do. I want them to find themselves in this dance, so it's taking time.

In my recent works, a solo called "Marine" for Cindy Van Acker and a group work, "Rare," I've found all the performers extremely strong. I think it's just a question of meeting the right persons, which took me time, certainly because this quality of movement is not so evident. It's different to write a score for myself than to write a score for someone else, and of course I like both. But what I prefer right now is to write for a group of people, this is more exciting.

8. What is your desire with music? What is your ideal music and why do you use it?

I usually work on the music with composer Kasper Toeplitz. I like his waves of electronic sounds and vibrations. I have the feeling that this music creates virtual walls and ground, and that every cell of my body is filled with pure electricity just hearing it. It sustains and supports the continuous line of energy of my dance.

Music is always a volume of space, like an immaterial space, like another place. I can be in relation to the "other place." Either emerging from inside this place, or completely in the interior of this place (like amniotic fluid), which gives me something to push against.

6. Are you educating your audience?

Absolutely not. I'm also the audience... I'm just proposing something, and maybe some people can feel it.

-Excerpt from "LOL : an experimental environment of choreographic composition"

an essay by Myriam Gourfink

"Music has developed a metalanguage which creates a distance between musical thinking (composition) and sound producing. We can consider music without considering the sound as its result. This seems to be a great source of invention because it means that music is relevant as soon as there is musical thinking, even before any sound is produced. When I tried to find a similar function suitable to dance thinking, I became interested in Labanotation. While studying, it became quite obvious to me that since I used computing tools, it could be possible to use this (very structured) language in my choreographic composition and in my a priori writing of a choreography. Dance is not a movement but a score, an abstract place, an immaterial link between the choreographer and the interpreter.

With this idea of dance writing, I wrote a first solo called Glossolalie (1999) for dancer Jerome Bel. The research stage for the movement was extremely short : three days. As far as Glossolalie is concerned, we did not intend to create miraculous

movements but only to give shape to Jerome's very personal language. Nothing was rejected, we did not want to make any aesthetic choices, we just wanted to favour the structure.

I was simply trying to define the parameters I considered to be the origins of dancing:

Form (f)

Breathing (b)

Orientation of the body within space (o)

Direction of thoughts inside the body (i)

Direction of thoughts outside the body (e)

Regard/orientation of the eyes (r)

I thought it was unfortunate to favour form and orientation in the choreographic composition and I was curious to know what the most hidden and least visible parameters present - in breathing, thoughts, regards - could generate. So I decided to structure the dance by calculating a few combinations (defining moments) chosen randomly from the possible combinations of 6 parameters (f,b,o,i,e,r). To go further in this direction, I also randomly chose the order of the possible combinations.

However this did not keep me from making a final choice. I deciphered (knowing that this would be danced) a great deal of random draws and I did not hesitate to rewrite some of the passages.

From there I started to conceive of a dance-writing software " LOL " with the help of Frederic Voisin (computer scientist and ethnomusicologist at IRCAM in Paris), Laurence Marthouret (choreographer and Labanotator) and Kasper T. Toeplitz (composer). We intended to invent a tool to write movement, to be used to compose an a priori choreography, rather than to notate an already existing dance.

LOL utilizes concepts from Labanotation. Labanotation is organized into "classes": parts of the body, supports, spatial direction, levels, joint flexion, rotation, relation of body parts to each other, contacts, and so on, which can be used to define and analyze movement. With LOL, it's not only possible for the choreographer to create his own parameters, to define the elements he wants to work with, but he can also invent new classes with which to evaluate them.

With an early version of LOL, in September 1999, I wrote a solo, "Taire," for Laurence. I used LOL to choose 26 body shapes, obtained by a random combination of classes, without trying it on the body first. Laurence translated them into Labanotation, which we marked on the floor as 26 scattered points. Then, using the floor as a score, she moved from one point to another, inventing the pathways and the movement. The predetermined shapes are simply a stimulus for the performer to give shape to her own language, as the device gives her the opportunity to try out an infinite number of trajectories.

LOL is not a software formatted according to the anatomical limitations of the human body. The choreographer has to imagine the body constraints and he has to invent the body he wants to see dance. Thus, the choreographer may, for example, work with the "thoughts" parameter, and treat "thoughts" as a part of the body. He'll choose from the classes a "direction", a "level" and a "contact" and evaluate "thoughts" with the software like he would a "right foot" or a "left hand."

I think that the first thing the choreographer thinks about is space. This space, invented by the choreographer, considers the body, the connection between

bodies or between objects or words. In the conception of this choreographic space, LOL is like a partner suggesting calculations and inviting the choreographer to explore, develop and give shape to his own language. The idea is to allow the choreographer to consider dance in a different way.

When I began using this new software, I noticed that simply reading the results led me to very precise perceptions. The further I go with it, the more refined my initial desire becomes and the more I see a language taking shape. I do not argue for a rigid dance writing. For me, thinking is at the heart of the choreographic process, but thinking does not mean conceiving of inflexible directions which enclose the bodies. The score and the setup offer a kind of elasticity to the sensitivity of the performers.

I want LOL to allow for dance writing that is as open as music or poetry. I have a sense of dance that is about touch, not visual or image-based, but through the interior touching of the body. It's energetic. It gives me an awareness of movement which is pure poetry. "