
LOL : an experimental environment of choreographic composition

(an essay by Myriam Gourfink / écarts #2, 2000/2001)

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 a musical thinking and that is even before any sound is produced. While I tried to find a similar functioning fitted to dance thinking, I became interested in the Notation Laban. While learning it became quite obvious to me that as 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 (presented in Coutrai on 14 September 1999 and interpreted by Jerome Bel) whose trial stage of the movements was extremely short : three days. Usually the so-called workshop stage is a time when we search or improvise and it lasts two or three months or even more. So most of the time, the choreographer uses the interpreters to compose directly. As far as Glossolalie is concerned we did not intend to create miraculous movements but only to give shape to the development to Jerome very personal language. Nothing was rejected, we did not want to make any aesthetic choices, we just wanted to favour the structure. Alone with three pages of footnotes and to sustain my reflection, I resorted to new technologies like computers in order to make uncertain draws or recursive reasoning for instance.

I was simply trying to define the parameters which I considered being 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)

Looks (r)

Well I thought it was too bad to favour form and orientation in the choreographic composition and I was curious to know what the most secret and less visible parameters in breathing, thoughts, looks could generate, so I decided to structure the dance and calculate a few combinations (defining moments) chosen randomly from the possible combinations of 6 parameters (f,b,o,i,e,r) assuming that each of the draws could be a combination of these elements from 1 to 6 and knowing that a combination could only be withdrawn once and that the value of each parameter (found during the workshop session) should be calculated at the same time within an uncertain function. 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, these calculations were just a reflection mean. I deciphered (knowing that this would be danced) a great deal of draws and I did not hesitate to rewrite some of the passages.

From then we started to think about the conception of a dance writing software "LOL" with the help of Frederic Voisin (a computer scientist, a music assistant and an ethnomusicologist who works for the IRCAM), the help of Laurence Marthouret (a choreographer who follow the Notation Laban syllabus at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse in Paris) and the help of Kasper T. Toeplitz (composer). We intended to invent a tool to write the movement and to compose an a priori choreography and not to note down an already existing dance.

We soon started programming the "beginning of a software", I used it to "a priori" write a second solo interpreted by Laurence Marthouret, Taire was created in Lucca on 27 September 1999. At that time the workshop stage was almost inexistent, we started with ten forms taken out from daily life and I set a two-hour dance session. The first form generation produces a second one to gradually end up with an infinite number of possibilities of movements. This is possible if we analyse each starting form with the logic and structure of the Laban language organized by classes. A form is defined by parts of the body , supports, directions, levels, amplitudes (ranges of flexions for instance), rotations, a connection of positions between two parts of the body, a contact and so on. These classes are evaluated with the LOL programme for each of the ten basic figures. For each given form we get a new figure if we modify just one value within a class. At that level computing opens up the field of research thanks to its calculating power.

For Taire, I chose with the programme LOL 26 forms without trying it first. Laurence Marthouret translated them into Notation Laban and then we marked them down on the floor like 26 scattered points. Laurence Marthouret uses the floor as a score, she moves from one point to another, invents the passages and the moment. These pre-determined forms are just a stimulus used by the interpreter to give shape to his own language, the device gives him the opportunity to try an infinite number of trajectories out.

The LOL programme does not have the same purpose as Life forms (a software programme used by Merce Cunningham to write choreographies), it rests on a sign language yet completed and known like the one of Merce Cunningham, it also rests on any other dance vocabulary. 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, if he wishes to, may work with the "thoughts" parameter and deal with "thoughts" as a part of the body. He chooses a "direction", a "level" and a "contact" for "thoughts" and he evaluates "thoughts" in the software like he would do for a "right foot" or a "left hand". Nowadays it is hard to reduced the art of choreography to the physical possibilities of the human body for the different reasons we have mentioned above, that is to say : wishing to use more subtle parameters such as for instance "the direction of thoughts outside the body". I found Life forms being a limited programme because the only graphic representation of a little person implies a space which, according to me, has more to do with the analysis of movement than with creation in choreography, obviously the LOL programme does not keep Life forms to be used, but we cannot reduce the second programme to the first one.

Besides a part of the LOL programme is about LOL the environment of choreographic composition which is different from an offer to write movement, it uses composition processes and allows the choreographer to write a series of movement according to his personal preferences and to create his own processes or to inherit pre-existing ones. On this account such a programme can be related or be inspired by the programmes developed by the IRCAM in assisting musical composition. Such programmes as PatchWork or Open music are huge thinking machines used to explore, develop and give shape to one's own language, to compose according to a tree-like process, to recursive reasoning, to uncertain generations or controlled by rules and so on.

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 exploration. The idea is to allow the choreographer to bounce back in new issues in order to consider dance in a different way.

As I used this new-coming software (we started thinking about LOL in July 1999 and it has started working since November 1999), I have noticed that simply reading the results leads me to very precise perceptions. So the further I go, my initial desire becomes more refined and a language is taking shape. Without LOL it would take months, hours of workshop to get the words of a score like the one in "Demonology # 5" (a choreography created for a musical installation by Kasper T. Toeplitz at the Menagerie de Verre in Paris in February 2000) Besides I do not see why a methodological production of movement during a workshop could be interested since the interpreter is not an instrument but he is responsible for a poetic act.

However, I do notice the poorness of improvised shows allowing the interpreter to dance as he wishes. According 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 during a work of pure improvisation, we are confronted to our usual way to move (and rarely to our inventions). These schemes reveal the way we function and it is quite a fulfilling personal experience. Improvisation is a very great learning tool but we can wonder what its link is with artistic creation.

I do not argue for a rigid dance writing and if for me thinking is at the heart of the choreographic process, thinking does not mean conceiving a series of inflexible and obsolete indications which enclose the bodies. The score and the device are offers submitted to the sensitivity of the interpreters inciting to a kind of elasticity.

Adapted from a text by Myriam Gourfink.