

BEFORE YOUR EYES

Seeds of a dance practice

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I think of the eyes.

Many moving parts.

I think of seeing.

There's more to it than meets the eye.

I think of vision and movement.

One gives rise to the other.

Dialogue comes to mind. That's how I experience their wedding. And how I experience my dancing—within my body and in society with people, things, and space. Now comes survival. Finding ways to continue to dance through the years has been as basic as that. And I am indebted for the initial inspiration of my work with vision, video, and dance to a question posed by Steve Paxton when he (I quote) "pointed out" Contact Improvisation in 1972. He asked, "What does a body do to survive?" In the midst of a dilemma about leaving or staying in the field of dance, a question arose: What do we see in a dance? To get to the bottom of this, I found myself reverse-engineering both the composition of my movement and the composition of my seeing. The following writing marks some of this journey.

We are experts at reading movement. We depend on reading the

details for our survival. The raising of an eyebrow embedded in a riot of minute shifts and holdings in the body means something to us. We even read actions before they appear. With an imperceptible glance, we can sense that someone whom we don't want to see us is about to turn to face us. Before we know it, we've composed our body to be invisible, or composed our eyes to be elsewhere on the chance that we'll be overlooked. We are constantly recomposing our body and our attention in response to the environment, to things known and unknown. This inner dance is a most basic improvisation—reading and responding to the scripts of the environment. It's our body's dialogue with our experience. With this natural fluency, the shift from reading movement to reading dancing might seem simple. Evidently, for many people, something intervenes, some other expectation comes into play. Communication, perhaps... What do we bring to reading that? I am reminded of the movement of people's eyes during conversation. With this flickering idiosyncratic dance, we show each other our attention, and intention. The listener juggles two balls, composing her body to hear and to appear to be listening at the same time. While the speaker juggles four—composing her body to think, to route her thinking to her tongue, and to see and be seen. This is a tricky negotiation between the design of our senses, our physical skills, and the rules of our culture. A performer's juggle is much like the speaker's. Then what of the spectator's? In the dark with one ball? To my eyes, a person dancing is the news, hot off the press. When a dancer pops into view, what do I look at? Light allowing, I look at what he looks like. I am curious about the appearance of human beings. Then I look for his eyes. I'm curious what he's thinking, where he thinks he is, where he thinks he's going. Even at a distance, I read a lot from the eyes of a dancer. I see their aliveness. And they point my attention. A dialogue begins between my reading of the dancer's intention and my own. Editing on the fly to make meaning from what's before me, I am also looking through my taste.

I wonder what people like to watch. I love to watch people sing. The way the face moves to tune the sound. The eyes look out, then in, then out, then somewhere I-don't-know-where. I can see the feedback looping from throat to ear to throat and back and forth. Sometimes the face seems to turn inside out. Sometimes it floats on a still pool of vibration, small shapings of lips, a glimpse of tongue. I see the sound shape the singer—the ear tuning the body as the body tunes the sound. When I watch this tuning, I see what I want from dancing. How is “tuning” an analogue for dancing and seeing dancing? First, it is physical—tuning is an action. It moves my body, my senses, and my attention. It's also sensual—I can feel it happening in my body. It's relational—it's the way I connect with things. And it's compositional—it puts things in order. Granted, there's more to dancing than this, as there's more to singing. Yet I was moved to translate the mechanics of tuning into a dance practice because I was curious, and because I could. This has illuminated many things, leaving the mystery of human expression intact.

The body is a tuning instrument composed of finely differentiated antennae. These are our senses, and they measure change. Soon after birth, we learn to focus our senses on what we need to survive. Culture adds a layer of instruction for constructing the perceptual filters it expects we'll need to make sense of the world. I've been startled by the wide open gaze of small children before they've learned to compose the small muscles around the eyes, the rhythm of look and look away, the proper distance between their face and mine. Our sensing behaviors are edited from a genetic palette—how our eyes detect light from dark, our ears locate the source of sound, our bodies move to explore by touch, our nose positions itself to smell—and we move to satisfy our curiosity about the world. Throughout our lives we draw from this palette to compose a repertoire of responses to constantly shifting internal and external environments. These patterns underly our choices and shape our opinions and appetite for movement. They give body to our imagination.

I've long been enchanted with dancing. Not just the broad gestures, the painting in space, or the visualized music. But the details of an extruded inner life. When I appeared in the dance scene in New York in 1971, I had already shifted from years of crafting choreography to crafting improvisational performance. I came there to join Daniel Nagrin's improvisation company, The Workgroup, and I brought with me my imagination and the movement patterns of my training. As for my own work, the prospect of creating frames to make my peculiar movement forays meaningful on the NY stage was daunting. Although the dancers of that time were temporarily cut loose—sweeping the movements of daily life, “natural” movement behaviors, and athleticism onto stages and proposing new frames for looking at dance—I yearned to see something else. Something underneath the dancers' interaction with each other and the architecture of the space, something of the dancer's interaction with herself—the internal dialogue that shapes the surface. I noted jealously that the audience for animated film, where the human figure (and space itself) are mercilessly morphed, expected to have their imaginations poked and to read between the lines. Feeling that boundless physical mutability was dance's natural territory, I wanted dancers on stages to claim that space—to articulate the once-magical dialogue with the physical world our culture carves us out of then bids us forget. Consumed with the desire to reveal this in my own dancing, I felt the filters of my training clouding my vision. Not knowing what else to do, at 24 years old I stopped dancing. By chance, I picked up a portable video camera and over a four-year immersion I found my way back to dancing, through my eyes.

Perhaps because the body is simultaneously the medium and the product of dance performance, I slip from one side of the mirror to the other, back and forth, from considering seeing it to considering doing it or feeling it. Shooting and editing video placed me on both sides of the mirror at once. By making me a spectator to my own seeing, video was a catalyst for inverting

the inner dance of seeing into the space. Eventually it became a model for exploring with others how we make meaning out of dance, from inside and out. Though we use our eyes differently while dancing than while learning or watching dance, they play a central role in each. While dancing, the eyes, whether open or closed, function to balance the body's movement—good reason for their design of extreme mobility. When open, they are our first defense against the future—the quickest sense to discern obstacles in our path. While observing, the eyes are the window to our kinesthetic sense—they take the dance in. Dance, not incidentally, is a visual tradition. We learn it, for the most part, by looking and imitating. For dancers, it is both a blessing and a curse that we are genetically wired to imitate the movements we see from the moment we are born. The blessing is a world full of free performances. A toddler with a paintbrush, people in a crowded subway car, starlings exploding off a tree—no lack of models to observe and embody. The curse is that this reflex is hard to control. We are as helpless not to duplicate the dance models on our stages and classrooms as we are to avoid picking up mannerisms from people we know. Yet there are mysteries in this mechanism. Why does one child embody the limp of her father and her brother the perpetual smile of his mother? Somehow we choose. I've been surprised by my own choices. Working with video showed me that mirroring the content of what I saw was only part of the story. It became apparent that minute movements within the mechanism of the eye exerted profound influence on the movement patterning of my body. In the '70s, video-editing technology was more physically interactive than now. For some years, planted in front of two video screens, sitting almost preternaturally still except for button-pressing fingers and ping-ponging eyes, I made split-second insert edits of single phrases of movement, patching and folding bits of the phrases into themselves. Over time, a quality of seamless but abrupt transitions, like jump-cuts in film, infused my dancing. Though not unwelcome, this learning from visual repatterning and its

application to my dancing were unintentional on my part. It's important what we feed our eyes. In other cases, the repatterning was not intentional, but my application was: I had become intrigued with the idea of the "moment before action" during many years of videotaping movement educator Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's work with brain-injured infants. At that time she called it "pre-motor planning." With the lens-cup fixed to my eye, my body filled with the image of a baby's face, very close. When Bonnie offered him a toy, I could see minute shifts of attention in the focussing of his eyes and, I thought, in the tone of his skin. It seemed I entered his nervous system, behind his eyes, or his entered mine. I could see his desire when, with Bonnie's helpful touch, he marshalled his nervous system to reach for the toy, and I saw his eyes come into focus before he reached. Somehow, years of observing this pre-motor planning in the eyes of the babies gave me access to my own. The first time I reversed my movement, it came unbidden while dancing. It was a reaction to recognizing that an action I'd just made was a habitual pattern irrelevant to my current circumstance. Suddenly I found myself reversing the action as if I could take it back, undo it. Then, as soon as I realized I'd begun to reverse, I was helpless to keep from reversing back again, caught in an existential groove. However funny this felt, it clued me in to the fact that my body was recognizing its behavior a mere split second after an action began. If I could roll back my awareness just another split second, I might recognize the moment of organization before the action blurted. So I reached to feel this moment behind my eyes, as I had perceived it in the babies'. I made a practice for myself to redirect the shaping or intention of an action before it appeared, the instant I felt it become organized in my body. The result was as surprising as falling down a rabbit hole. This became a personal technique for provoking new movement patterns and a useful strategy for repositioning my imagination.

Video combines two powerful learning tools: a mechanical eye to dissect the moving parts of looking—focussing, panning, tracking,

zooming—and instant playback to show the cause and consequences of your actions. It set me up to explore how the body composes itself: first to focus the senses, then to orchestrate its movement around its imagination and desire for meaning. It was a small step to translate my learning experiences with the camera into working with my senses in the environment, and I did this along the way, integrating them into my daily life, teaching, and dancing with others. In the beginning, I had nothing to guide me but my body and the tool itself. Placing the camera over my eye magnified the sensations of looking and the movements my body made to support my seeing. The physical disorientation was as extreme as learning to drive a car. I watched my body tune its shape to the handheld camera like a baby's hand is shaped by the cup. It took new instructions for movement and stillness from its dialogue with my desire to see. Satisfying my eyes involved my whole body and all of my experience. To support my new eye, my body assumed stillnesses it hadn't experienced before. Though the viewfinder was barely three inches from my eye, I could feel my focus anchor me in the actual space beyond it, while what I was looking at funnelled deeply into my body, seeming literally to hold it up. I entered a dialogue between my attention and my physicality. My interest in what I was looking at either held them in counterbalance or swept me off my feet. In the act of shooting, every movement I made altered the movement I was looking at. When I turned my head, the edge of the frame seemed to push, follow, pull, or lead my subject through space. Against a textureless background, tracking a jump in the direction of the jump erased its movement through space. My own speed could overwhelm the speed of the subject. The familiar principle that the act of observing changes the observed was evident and the inverse was as palpable—what I observed changed me. Most compelling, I came to see, was that how I observed changed both me and what I was looking at.

Which was the figure, which the ground? When my eye explored something still, the movement of my seeing was the figure. When

both my framing and the subject were moving, however, it shifted back and forth. This was most interesting. While dancing, figure/ground translated to mover/environment or moving/being moved. Which was which was determined by how I directed my sensing. In stillness or movement, when I thought I was touching a wall, I was the figure. When I perceived the wall touching me, I became the ground. My body became the environment of the space. I felt my movement reorganize around these perceptual shifts and change quality, building new inner templates for my dancing. Looking through the camera, what was leading me? Sometimes I followed my eye's appetite. This experience was the most sensual, as my eye tracked the seductive edges of light and dark, unconcerned with naming, playing with rhythm and pattern. Sometimes the content within the frame captured my curiosity and I would organize the movement of my looking to make sense of it. Intermittently, my body's needs became the director, when I'd sneeze or abandon looking to relieve a cramp in my foot. Sometimes my eye followed my ears, or my attention wandered to recuperate from the ferocity of my focus. The leadership shifted constantly from sense to sense, from what was before me to what was inside me, from sensing to making sense. This phasing of attention was equally evident while dancing and observing with bare eyes. Often I retired the camera. I observed my eyes' activity while eating, laughing, thinking, walking through familiar fields, down foreign city streets, dancing, and watching anything. Noting their patterns, I played with altering them. On entering a crowded room, I observed my eyes instantly seek out the empty spaces, safe paths to navigate through, a pattern I forged when very young. When I redirected them to focus on people first, the muscle shift was tiny, but my future in the room was profoundly changed. Left to their own devices, as they are in Western dance, the eyes move automatically to counterbalance the movement of the body. When I inverted that relationship by redirecting my eyes in the midst of dancing, I was astonished by the power of two small balls of fluid, moved by twelve small

muscles, to draw my 110 pounds through space. I looked at micromovement patterns, like the composition of my eyes' movement and the posture of my body while walking backwards. Sustaining that organization while walking forward did more than provoke funny walks. It made a creature out of me, showing that how we tune our senses is at the root of character, and transformation is easily accessible through recomposing the eyes.

Playback made apparent that every movement of the camera was a choice, conscious or not, whether from the physiological desire or habits of my senses, my need to make meaning of what was before me, or from my body's circumstance. When I viewed a tape right after shooting, I could remember what caused the shifting of my attention in and out of my body and see the consequences. I came to recognize distinct qualities arising from each of these organizing principles, and noted my preferences. Sometimes I saw things on playback I hadn't noticed while shooting, but on second view had clearly guided me. Evidently, my movement was shaped by reactions to signals from the space that were invisible to me. This cast a light of doubt on the idea of "spontaneous" movement impulse. And changed my perception of space while dancing: I was swimming in signals. Operating with open eyes had kept me at a distance from my environment. To bring the space closer, I needed only to close them. New instructions for navigating through space arose from touch and hearing and reinforced my dancing with eyes open. To read space this way imprinted it on my body, made an impressionist of me. And the inverse—my movement held a mirror to the space, making its hidden life visible. In watching dance, as in watching anything, an image is built from the input of many senses and each measures time in its own way. With eyes closed, it takes a long time to learn a movement from someone. The imagination inserts itself into the flow of time. Relying on touch and hearing, odd physical predicaments arise, calling up memories of interactions with the animate and inanimate world as I flip through the whole of my experience to make sense out of what's in my hands. Sometimes what I remembered savoring while

shooting was not visible on playback, or barely so. The time it takes to see is a factor. Time passes differently in a small frame. I recall my irritation during live performance when complex movement streams by faster than I can read it. My senses reach for a richer involvement, perhaps to reading the negative space or the sound; or they take leave of the theater for my thoughts. The hierarchy of the senses is another factor. When there was music around me while shooting, I saw on playback how my eye entrained to it, either blinding or drawing me to the details of the movement before me.

Video is a time machine. A recording facilitates memory and mimics its imperfections. The idea that a recording is fixed has been of little use to me. I see something different each time I watch. What's more, the recorder puts time in your hands. An event on tape has plasticity. You can make it go backward and forward again. You can go faster, condensing form. Or slower, stretching the tissues of content. You can leap randomly from one moment to another. Begin anywhere, end anywhere. Within the body, these operations gain complexity. Moving with or without a camera, when I ask my body to reverse its journey as far as it can remember, mnemonics arise spontaneously, in no particular order, from many sources—from my physical organization, my relation to the space, my sensations, or my thoughts along the way. As I tune my attention into the recent past, I travel through time in two directions at once, following my body to where I've been while meeting myself where I am. This is not so much a test of memory as a question of awareness. Where have I been? What did I taste there? When someone observes my efforts or I watch theirs, we can compare our memories. Ever curious to know how dancers look at a dance, I ask them to assume the role of the video recorder with their bodies. We watch a dance, then a group of us, all at the same time, immediately show what we have perceived to the performer(s). To accomplish this playback faithfully, we access all our physical skills and all our experience. What each watcher has found notable in the dance is

placed before us. Some have been drawn to the design in space, some to the relationship to the architecture, some to the psychology, some to the quality of movement, some to the action, some to what they imagined while watching—what they wished to have seen. What is pictured is a collective perception of the dance, a dance of opinions. Watching these second-generation dances is like watching the sky. We invariably take note of peculiar manifestations and the broad form over time. Points of consensus among us are striking. Yet there are no conclusions here. This exercise of perception leaves the question What do we see in a dance? open. It's a seed that puts vision on the line and in the field of play.

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