



States of the body

Dancers frequently talk about “state of the body” in their conversations to convey the multitude of feelings that help work the movement. But, as the Quebec-based choreographer Mélanie Demers recently wrote: “Everyone says state of the body without thinking too much about it. We’ve heard the idea mentioned a few times. We think it’s wonderful. It sounds great. But it tells us nothing”.¹ How can we move beyond this cynical observation? What does this ever-so frequently used expression really imply? This is what we are going to look at in this *Parcours*.

The use of the expression “states of the body” (*états de corps*) has taken off in France, in artistic circles but also in press reviews. It is crystallized in particular around Odile Duboc’s work *Projet de la matière* created in 1993 [excerpt: Odile Duboc, A choreographic conversation]. For this creation, the choreographer focused on the sensorial experience, which dancers felt when in contact with the elements of the scenic space (sheet metal, air cushion, water bed, etc.). As such, the work highlights dance which, above all, thrives on feelings to develop its writing.

Yet, state of the body seems to be a portmanteau that exists in a myriad of disciplines, from physical branches to sport and even photography: depending on the fields, it is simply definitional of stability, availability, presence, movement quality and the way of appraising the body and using it... In dance, these various conceptions are influential. For example, the choreographer Eric Lamoureux talks about states of the body as being a myriad of physical feelings, “vapour of bodies and movements that are dance-specific”². However, states of the body also affect the spectators. Consequently, the choreographer George Appaix proposes preparation workshops for spectators and states that “our perspective influences *our state of the body*”. As we can see, this notion is quite fuzzy and reflects a dual aspect: when dancing, performers transmit feelings that stimulate their movement; feelings that, in turn, spectators are invited to assimilate by demonstrating empathy towards what they see on the stage. We are going to talk about these two points of view in more detail.

¹ Mélanie Demers, “Dare to Dance”, in *Spirales* n° 242, Montreal, autumn 2012, p. 35.

² Christine Roquet, *Fattoumi-Lamoureux. Danser l’entre l’autre*, Biarritz, Segquier, 2009, p. 27.



1. Focus

The meaning of the expression “state of the body”³ always seems to be implied, unspoken and sort of hidden inside the language, never commented, never explained. These highly-popular catchphrases (states of the body, of dance, of urgency, etc.) reflect something that is self-evident, denoting *that which* would determine a particular dance quality.

a. A core of experience for the dancer

In many scientific fields, a state denotes a stable disposition of elements. Consequently, a state entails a length, unlike a transition (which entails a transformation). As regards the dancing body, talking about a state presupposes, as such, that at the heart of a momentum of never-ending change, something must be stable. This *something* would denote that which triggers the desire to initiate a vigorous dialogue with the environment – just like the trapeze artist Chloé Moglia seeks to do in her solo *Rhizikon* by drawing together the memories of her work on this piece of apparatus: [excerpt : Chloé Moglia, *Rhizikon*].

Dancers confirm that a “core of experience” is created inside them, from these invigorating states. The dancer and philosopher Frédéric Pouillaude talks about the “eidetic heart”: in psychology, the eidetic image is vivid, detailed, with hallucinatory sharpness. This core – the result of hours spent in the studio – remains stable in performance and in improvisation⁴. We can compare this core to the idea of state. Discovering it or rediscovering it would represent work for the dancer, an effort to remember noteworthy experiences, whether they are rooted in dance or in life in general. Butoh is an exemplary dance from this point of view and emphasizes the precedence that imagination and feelings have on producing the gesture [Excerpt : Carlotta Ikeda, *Waiting*]. As such, refreshing these past experiences would reveal the intention that underpins the creation of a gesture. By seeking to stand out from dance where forms are imitated, modern and then contemporary dances focused greatly on using what was deep within the dancer. Although recent forms have popularized the notion of state, state is not specific to these aesthetics as Wilfride Piollet suggests when he evokes the various modes of expression, from classical dance to modern dance. [Excerpt : Interview with Wilfride Piollet] To the point that today, some teachers and

³ Laurence Louppe defines the states as “conditions of the body ranging from anatomical to symbolical” in “L’Utopie du corps indéterminé” (“The Utopia of the Indeterminate Body. United States, 1960s”) in Odette ASLAN (publications), *Le Corps en jeu*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 1994, p. 220.

⁴ Frédéric Pouillaude, “Vouloir l’involontaire et répéter l’irrépérable”, in Anne Boissière and Catherine Kintzler (publication), *Approche philosophique du geste dansé. De l’improvisation à la performance*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2006, p. 159.



choreographers are distrustful of what they see as new routines. As such, Mathilde Monnier wrote:

*“All too often, it would seem that we harbour illusions of an inner dance, related to diverse subjective states, which are intended as [...] states of dance. These states are, more often than not, body memories against which we need to fight”.*⁵

Moreover, dancers are aware of how space influences gesture: dancing outdoors, changing the performance space in a room, using lighting to modify the dance space are all variables that can affect how movement is produced [Excerpt : Ana Rita Barata, Mergulho]. But space, is also the other as dancer Sylvain Prunenec confirms:

*“The dancer’s movement is initiated elsewhere than in their own body. Or, their own body extends beyond its visible surface to incorporate the other. The other then becomes part of the dancer’s self. The dancer’s porosity is their ability to be constantly modified, formed even, by the presence of the other”.*⁶

Basically, the state of a dancer’s body would reflect this blend of intentions, postures and emotions – the core of experience – which punctuates the performer’s personal experience and would unfurl through time and space, but also through the relationship with others and through other conditions specific to each performance.

b. A performance for the spectators

Spectators, whether they are professional critics or simple amateurs, still face the difficulty of saying what they actually see; and they – yes, they too – are tempted to sum up what they feel from the dance by using the generic expression state of the body. The use of this notion indicates that above and beyond the simple perception of the body-form, spectators make sense based on what they figure out from the dancer’s innermost variations. Spectators would use the expression state of the body so as not to have to explain in more detail this subtle and complex mixture of feelings [Excerpt : Odile Duboc, A choreographic conversation]. For spectators, the state of the body is, therefore, not an objective quality but the result of the confrontation of two corporealities, that is to say the level of porosity of their own sensitivity vis-à-vis the dancer’s body. For example, in *Pororoca*, Lia Rodrigues’ dancers seem to be focused on precise actions: carrying, sliding, pushing... The spectators perceive more a sort of permanent movement, quite similar in fact to the intention of the choreographer who seeks to reproduce the movement of shoals of fish [Excerpt : Lia Rodriguez, Pororoca]. This aspect is developed in more detail in the document that accompanies this *Parcours*.

⁵ Mathilde Monnier and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dehors la danse*, Lyon, Rroz, 2001.

⁶ Julie Perrin and Sylvain Prunenec, “Le geste dansé et la déprise”, *Recherches en danse* n° 2, published in 2014.



We also assume that a recall scheme exists for the spectators, but one that differs in composition from the dancer's. This would mean that the spectator watching should be attentive to the performance and, at the same time, manage to reconcile this state of receiving with the ever-present context and its choreographic culture, which occasionally assail the spectator and cannot be easily differed. This would mean that two distinct functions, as such, exist for the performer and for their spectator, but which would be analogous in their relationship between the present and the past, and would focus on this confrontation between the artist's intention and the spectator's attention.

2. Attempted definition

Dancing and watching dance are two different activities yet which stem, on a number of points, from the same desire for movement. This is why we propose a definition that takes this dual aspect into account. *State of the body*, for us therefore refers to all the tensions and intentions that develop inwardly and resonate outwardly (state of the dancing body). This greater awareness of the sensitive body, inducing a particular quality of movement, helps every spectator to understand – in the sense of taking upon themselves – the gesture (perceived state of the body).

These considerations illustrate that the term “state of the body” partially covers other notions, which are just as imprecise, and which exist in the sphere of performing arts, like “scenic presence” and performance. These portmanteau words, which are used for ease of reference, if we were to look just a little more closely, reveal a richness that enable us to clarify and specify the practices related to movement. These various aspects are developed in more detail in the document that accompanies this *Thema*, entitled “About the expression *State of the body*”. This supplement also seeks to validate our assumptions, which we submitted to artists and practitioners whom we questioned.



To go further:

BERNARD Michel, *De la création chorégraphique*, Pantin, Centre national de la danse, coll. « Recherches », 2001.

BOISSIÈRE Anne et KINTZLER Catherine (eds.), *Approche philosophique du geste dansé. De l'improvisation à la performance*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, coll. « Esthétique et sciences des arts », 2006.

DAMASIO Antonio R., *L'Erreur de Descartes. La raison des émotions*, Paris, Odile Jacob, coll. « Sciences », 1995.

FORMIS Barbara (ed.), *Penser en corps. Soma-esthétique, art et philosophie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. « L'art en bref », 2009.

LABAN Rudolph, *La Maîtrise du mouvement*, trad. J. Challet-Haas et M. Bastien, Arles, Actes Sud, 1994.

LOUPPE Laurence, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, Bruxelles, Contredanse, 2000.

MONNIER Mathilde et NANCY Jean-Luc, *Dehors la danse*, Lyon, Roz, 2001.

PERRIN Julie, *Projet de la matière – Odile Duboc*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel / Centre national de la danse, 2007.

RABANT Claude, (ed.), « Etats de corps », *Revue internationale de psychanalyse* n° 5, 1994.

SCHULMANN Nathalie, « Le danseur est une personne », < <http://www.sens-public.org/spip.php?article170> > [consulté le 07.03.11].



Credits:

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