

## Writing on T-Dance

### A touching journey in four parts

Danae Theodoridou on *T-Dance* by Vera Tussing (in Field Notes workspacebrussels June '13: 6-11)

#### 1. 'Show Your Hands Now!'

When I was growing up in Greece, one of my favorite TV commercials was one for a dishwashing liquid that involved a fascinating ballet of hands, seen in close up and in diverse variations and formations set to the sound of the jingle 'Show your hands now!'. I loved it! I tried to mimic those hands, their dances, their sequences, their touches as they appeared out of the water, moved in the air, leaned toward each other. I imagined a whole city showing their hands, touching each other, creating great choreographies of dancing hands. I considered it an aesthetic masterpiece of the beauty and gentle sensitivity of hands, of the way their movements can work. I am not sure to what extent the publicity managed to achieve its commercial objectives, but it definitely managed to leave vivid images in my head, and these are the first that come to mind as I talk with Vera Tussing about 'T-Dance'. Starting from a similar imperative as 'Show your hands now', Tussing departs on an equally fascinating journey to 'hand-land', exploring the way tactility moves our bodies. The exploration of the senses constitutes a unifying theme in Tussing's work. After focusing on auditory and visual perception and their intersections ('Trilogy' with Albert Quesada, 'You Ain't Hear Nothing Yet', 'Sound Bed'), 'T-Dance' expands this investigation to touch – 'the most profound and philosophical' of the senses, according to Diderot. What does it mean to touch and to be touched? How do we engage with each other in acts of physical closeness? By asking these questions, Tussing imparts on a journey with four stops.

Quite early in our discussion I attempt to challenge Tussing with what probably constitutes an obvious question: how does 'T-Dance' relate to the technique and practice of contact improvisation? Ever since Steve Paxton, this by now renowned dance technique takes physical contact as the starting point for the exploration of movement. Haven't concerns with touch and haptic perception been shared and explored by choreographers since the 1970s? How does 'T-Dance' connect to these historical precedents, and what does it contribute to them? Tussing's reply is clear and immediate: in what may seem to constitute a common ground, there are fundamental differences. 'T-Dance' departs from practices that may resemble those of contact improvisation exactly in order to question and expand its main principles by

offering alternatives. Contact improvisation is largely understood as a dance form that relies on the continued physical contact between specific parts of the body. It has elevated these concrete contact points, which connect the *specific* bodies of *specific* participants to a pivotal level. ‘T-Dance’ aims to question the limits of the ways in which bodies connect, and to achieve a form of contact not restricted to specific bodily points, which also expands vocabularies of physical practice.

Therefore, if a physical connectivity similar to that of contact improvisation will occur in ‘T-Dance’, it will always point in other directions, taking our understandings of the body and the way it touches and connects farther through space and time. We thus first see bodies standing at a distance from each other using wooden sticks that sit just below chest height, to connect. The contact point is not on the body anymore. Nevertheless, the bodies are still connected – perhaps even more so this way since the force that keeps them close is understood as an attention, as the strong effort of the body to be attentive towards the other and its movement in order to stay connected. What keeps the performers together *is* this effort and attention, this care with which they treat their points of connection using a mediating stick that holds its place with nothing more than the pressure of one performer on another as they move together. It connects them only if they take care of it and continuously negotiate their individual spaces

and their common movement. As I discuss the understanding of connectivity with Tussing, I start to think about the letter T itself as a base of ‘T-Dance’. A vertical line supporting a horizontal one that stands at its centre point; two sticks that stay in contact only due to the pressure they put on each other; only because of the support each one provides the other.

And this is the first stop of our touching journey.

## **2. If Languages Are Tongues, Then Tongues Are Bodies.**

Is it only through bodily connection that we are able to touch? Tussing relentlessly pushes this question further. What about the way physical aspects of language operate and the way that they connect us?, she asks. What would a contact improvisation of speech look like? In the second stop in ‘T-Dance’, and in what seem to be familiar contact techniques, the performers do indeed touch each other physically, using their hands and their whole bodies. Instead of restricting the aims of this action to a deeper awareness of the very specific bodies involved in it, they propose this bodily experience as a collective one that belongs not only to the bodies directly involved in it, but also (if not even more so) to the audience members who are observing it. As they move and touch, the performers use language to continuously project these moves to different spectators: “Woman in the red T-shirt, front row, second from the right, I am placing my hand on your shoulder”, one of them says as she places her hand on another performer, revealing in a wonderful way through the eroticism of language,

the proximity involved in tactility and touch. (Of course we need not even comment on the highly erotic way that descriptive language works in intimate encounters).

In *Scandal of The Speaking Body*, Shoshana Felman describes linguistic actions “not so much [as] what is *said* or could be said but [as] what is happening, taking effect, producing acts, what is being *done* or could be done between speaking bodies, between languages, between knowledge and pleasure”. Much more than a mere instrument for transmitting knowledge, as dominant views maintain, language is first and foremost tantamount to doing, to *acting* on the interlocutor, modifying a situation and the interplay of forces within it. Played on the stage of the speaking body, language continuously performs acts. And if languages are tongues, then tongues are bodies. Felman argues that these acts are played between tongues and bodies that share the time and space of an event. The act of the speaking body problematizes, or rather destroys, from its inception, the dichotomy between the domain of the ‘mental’ and the domain of the ‘physical’. It breaks down the opposition between body and mind, between matter and language. We may thus talk about the speech act as being material, as a relation between the matter of language (bits of sentences, phrases, signifiers of the speaking body) and energy – between bodies, things and events. The matter itself, Felman suggests, ceases to be a ‘thing’ and is now considered an event that is also made of speech acts. This is the event of the second destination of the journey in ‘T-Dance’. A destination full of speech acts made of touches, full of the materiality and physicality of words that exist not only in the individual space of the body who speaks them, but in the shared time and space of the performance. Words become events by moving between the performers and spectators, from mouth to hand, from body to body. As Felman suggests, these words are no longer simple instruments that transmit truths, but are cast as projections, explosions, vibrations and devices. It is amongst such vibrations, forces and projections that the second stop in the journey of ‘T-Dance’ is experienced.

### 3. Magic leaps

Tussing talks to me about the way that the body of the performer affects the body of the spectator in ‘T-Dance’, or rather about the way that the body of the spectator inspires and moves the body of the performer. She talks about a kinesthetic *empathy* between them, that expands the reach of their bodies to the whole of space and time, so that they are connected in a common space without leaving their individual space. This is visible both through the use of language in the work and in the movement of the performers. In our third stop the performers stand apart from each other no longer using the sticks. They attempt to connect and move together, exploring what remains and continues to resonate in their bodies from their earlier states of physical connectedness. As I listen to Tussing, I think about the particular qualities that Richard Sennett attributes to ‘empathy’, which he clearly distinguishes from ‘sympathy’, in his book *Together*. Most commonly, we imagine awareness of others as a form of sympathy, he notes, which suggests an identification. A person must see him or herself in the

other, not just as a fellow human being, but also in incidents that often diverge greatly from one's own concrete experience. In the frame of the performing arts, however, another form of engagement seems to be more useful: that of empathy. Here, we see and hear in an entirely different way. Instead of looking for ways to identify and imitate what another does (i.e. to sympathize), we register the difference that takes place. The empathic response says: "You do this, I do that." This difference may be left hanging in the air, but a sign of recognition of what you are doing has been given. Empathy is thus expressed by maintaining eye contact even while keeping silent, conveying that "I am attending intently to you" rather than "I know just what you feel". In this sense, empathy constitutes a more demanding exercise. 'The magic leap' toward the other, as Sennett puts it, takes place, in this case, not through processes of identification but through a careful attendance to another person on our own terms. It respects our individual space while opening it up to our interlocutor. Tussing puts it this way: in the performing arts it constitutes a common tendency to destroy the fourth wall (the distinguishing line between audience and the stage), to blur the differences. This, however, is not one of her aims. In 'T-dance', the performers stand on stage while the audience is seated opposite them, and there is no reason to try to convince any of them differently. What Tussing seeks is a way for both to 'inhabit' this wall, to recognize the divisions and transcend them by connecting them to each other. Although both sympathy and empathy are necessary at different times and in different ways, Sennett concludes, empathy has a particular political application: by practicing it we learn from, and thus connect with, others rather than simply speak or feel in their name. Both sympathy and empathy forge a bond, but the first is an embrace, while the second is an encounter.

It is through one such encounter that the third 'stop' of our 'T-Dance journey' takes place.

#### **4. Where Are The Edges Of Your Body?**

According to André Lepecki, contemporary dance continuously questions the belief that the subject-self constitutes a closed entity contained by the limits of the body, which has dominated the cultural logic of Western thought. The self and its body in these works are thus clearly shown as an open collective – a multiplicity not contained by the legal enclosure imposed by a name, but by a number of names and bodies. Tussing definitely shares such concerns, and places her work in the middle of such discourses. Towards the end of the journey, 'T-Dance' constructs 'connecting organisms' comprised of the bodies of both the performers and the spectators – larger organisms made of smaller ones, bigger bodies made of our bodies, connecting our bodies in their space. After exploring touch in its different

modes, Tussing now questions how far it can reach, how big can it be, and its relationship to proximity and distance. How do we communicate, how do we connect and how do we 'stay in touch' from afar? How do we construct a common body and how does this body move?, Tussing asks.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sarah Ahmed refers to the explicit physicality involved in our contact across distance – a physicality that works on our bodies through the perception of emotions. Deriving from the Latin word ‘movere’, meaning ‘to move’, the etymology of the word ‘emotions’, according to Ahmed, is suggestive of movement, and questions what connects us and moves us towards things. Emotions work on bodies to materialize the surfaces that are lived as worlds. For all these reasons, they constitute bodily sensations and cannot be separated from them. In close connection to emotions, Ahmed also proposes a reflection on the word ‘impression’. What is involved in impression is the action to ‘press’, to mark a surface— the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. From a distance, I am touched without even touching, Ahmed implies, and Tussing seems to be fully aware of this fact and to work with it. Is this what the use of sticks that connect audience and performers is all about in the last stop of our journey? Could this be an effective metaphor for the way we stay connected through our emotions and *impressions* – nothing other than the pressure our bodies put on and receive from other bodies when living together? Towards the end of the piece, one may realize that Tussing is primarily interested in another kind of body. This is not the individual human body anymore, but the collective social one. Let’s consider for a moment how far out of our body we go when we become a social body, a body that has other features and another weight and height than our own. Let’s think about how long it took (and still takes) to learn our own body; to learn to walk, to hold our own weight, to learn not to fall etc. A body as large as a collective one, which encompasses so many emotions and impressions, definitely requires much more careful manipulations. How do we approach a body that includes so much more than ourselves? With what kind of attention and care must we treat it? How do we connect to it? Tussing proposes such questions, and then experiments with possible replies.

Think of it then as a journey that departs from physical contact and closeness to gradually go farther and farther away from individual bodies, only to bring us closer and closer to the social one.

Show your hands now, allow yourself to experience touch and enjoy ‘T-Dance’!