

## Stillness, silence: impossible moves.

*Collaborative togetherness cannot simply rely on the direct exchange of ideas or on the clear communication of opinions; it always requests the challenge of a transformative act. (Stamatia Portanova, 2008: 2-3)*

We wanted to start from a zero point. Nothing known, nothing thought, no habits brought, nothing organized. To begin everything, unfold everything, collectively. Can we even imagine such stillness or silence?

In search of sincerity, one day the affinity group through a mix of ambition, curiosity and some dissatisfaction with the mediated nature of activities that had become bogged down in negotiation, discussion and choreography, attempts a different approach. The tactic: to negotiate nothing, rather to invent a technique of submitting more fully to the event. Not to speak about what might happen, not even to think it, but to find a collective moment of attentive nowness. To discard all known beginnings, middles and ends to the activity. Or, at least, to come as close as possible to generating such an impossibility.

Stillness: to wait to be moved by the event. To wait, however long it takes – to accept the void, the uncomfortable lack of certainty, not to rush to fill the empty moments. Silence: to quiet collective voice's urge to reflect and negotiate. To quiet the internal voice's questions – what am I doing, what will I do next, what have I just done, how should I act?

The quest is filled with contradictions – we have devised a non-task that is now in itself a task, all be it a nebulous, slippery one (is not the a-choreographic also a kind of choreographic tactic?). An attempt not to reflect on the activity in process brings with it a second level of reflexivity – a thinking-about whether I am thinking-about. And is not a certain level of reflexivity inherent in activity – the perceptive qualification or comprehension of sensation at least. And do not all movements have to start from some place – habitual posture, ingrained co-ordinations – even if they arrive somewhere new. The paradoxes of the situation have to be negotiated, lived with rather than resolved; the pursuance of which would collapse the activity under its own impossibility. We have to accept – even if it remains unsaid during the process – that habits will intrude, thoughts will arise, attempts to control the process, to place ego again in control of event, will occur, and that we will shift more or less in and out of the nowness and sincerity that we are trying to foreground. We have to invent on-the-fly techniques to keep the process as close to the impossible, to stillness and silence as we can. Impulses to reflect cannot be discarded as such, but attention skewed more towards the unfolding moment with thoughts and habits displaced rather than actively resisted – which would create an oppositional, reactive process. Or perhaps, as Varela suggests (*The embodied mind*: 27), the nature of the reflection can be shifted from an 'abstracted, disembodied activity' to a 'mindful, open-ended reflection' that is in itself understood as experience, performed with awareness and without loss of attention to the now.

Choreography- a pre-planning, a mapping, a rehearsal a curtailing of potential into the 'doable', the unknowable into the understood. But can we collectively devise an event

outside of choreographic? To replace the ‘choreographed’ with the ‘improvised’ is not enough; they are two sides of the same coin. Improvisation – in jazz, music, theatre – brings more often restrictive structures: prescribed progressions and parameters, an over reliance on common languages, habits and understandings as it desperately tries to avoid any confrontation with anything truly chaotic or spontaneous. It rarely embraces failure, stutters, repetitions, wrong notes, silence or stillness. Improvisation exhibits such high anxiety levels about falling apart that it grabs for any common path, seeks first and foremost to improvise its way back to safety - towards structure, habit and precedent. What lies outside the choreographic and the improvised? What could be in that black hole that resists pre-planning, thought or agreement?

Or, what can exist in parallel with the choreographic – the paradox of Noh theatre, spontaneous while repetitive to the nth degree. Every detailed gesture is passed down through generations of actors, memorized and polished over a lifetime of performance, but acts as a tactic of intensification, attention, contraction and constraint that conditions the event to allow such mindfulness - each movement performed with absolute sincerity, coming from a place of mindfulness – an embodied nowness that despite its repetition exists without the reflexivity of the ego that subjugates the unfolding event to its own survival.

Mindfulness here might be understood, as Varela et al. describe it (1992: 22-25), as a special state of being intensely present with ones experience, a detailed attentiveness to the unfolding of bodily/mental/physical activity. This concentrated holding of attention in the present event is not knowledge about anything as such (26). It is purposeless in that its attention to the unfolding event is its only aim, it seeks to relinquish the abstraction both of reflection of the past moments and anticipation beyond the unfolding moment in order to more fully experience the present, allowing the event to drift through interactions of forces of relation, prehension, accident, un-circumscribed by coherent anticipation or the search for stability: mindfulness is by its nature a-choreographic.

Stillness: a point of exhaustion of choreography, habit. Silence: the moment of exhaustion of knowledge, thinking, reflection. Stillness, silence: a momentary exhaustion of intent, ego, an intensity of attention, not *to* attentativeness.

We hesitate in beginning and allow ourselves one moment of pre-planning – simply that we will walk out of our discussion room. No other plans are allowed, no objects collected, a sincere attempt is made not to think ahead. Its an anxious moment – to attempt this we have to accept the inevitability of failure, that it will collapse, that ego will overtake event, that the predictable and habitual will arise. But perhaps this anxiety is in itself enabling, a sign of a vulnerability that pushes us to a sensitivity, a cautious, groping-toward-the-unknown, a kind of heightened prehensive tension, a creative space for pre-articulate forces to accumulate and effect events.

We walk outside. Somebody picks up a ball as we pass it. We wander slowly – a deliberate purposelessness. Each is trying not to lead or be lead, not to talk, not to go

anywhere. We drift to an empty exposed space – a kind of dead space in the camp that has seen little attention, an unpreposing, uninviting area.

The given – habits, environment, internal group dynamics and dynamics between groups, qualities each body brings, and so on – exert various strong and weak influences on our process. Other unfolding (i.e., outside this particular event) and existing relations intersect with and condition aspects of the assemblage/s we create, establishing lines of connection with other events. Rope used links us with another group's use of the material – body memories for those involved in both, differences and similarities of intent, frustrations, the shapes we find and leave it in – and colours any future usage. The space is adjacent to a cabin, it connects us to the occupants, pulls towards the particular atmosphere of that cabin, establishes relation through lesser or dis-connection to other more public space, other activities or people. Gatherings of similarities - but also, as importantly, emerging difference and disruption to rhythms, thoughts, connections and directions - are at work to shape the collective machine and the game. A mindful approach allows such given forces to 'float' –there is an awareness of their conditioning that is somehow different to the usual pull of connections, a sensitivity that allows play within and outside their influence. Not a reactive resistance to forces but more an attention to each moment of invention, an awareness of their combining/unfolding, a sense of these forces as malleable, excessive: playful within the event. Our activities connect through extension into the potential of the objects/space/relations of other events, even as events we actualize are in themselves singular.

A game emerges with ball and long ropes discarded in the space. It is in itself inconsequential, dumb, but enough that it engages eyes, ears, movements, feelings enough to allow the unseen, unheard, unsaid event to occur in the periphery, in some dark inarticulate, silent place on the edge of recognition/perception. The game operates perhaps as a technique of distraction, operates to keep consciousness busy with a useless but demanding task. It distracts in its urgency from the always pressing-in questions of what we are doing, whether it is working, what will happen. The game allows us to adopt a third position, as point of disturbance in the personal/interpersonal relations, playing off the habits/histories/intentions that arise, as noise that invents new relations as it interferes with existing dynamics.

Our collective unfolding dynamic exists on a knife-edge, always in danger of collapse, of overstepping its limit and either falling back into negotiated, articulated space/movements on one side, sinking into the chaos of no relation or felt communication on the other. It balances on the edge of the impossibility of maintaining the immanence of the relations, the intense attention to the now. But the edge itself moves. What at one instant is the event, the unfolding negotiation of the moment, becomes in the next a structure, what was immanent becomes a habit, a platform that must be dissolved, reinvented or reactivated. It has to remain propositional - tactical – to avoid becoming habitual, to remain in a state of reconfiguration. It has to remain always malleable, collapsible: fragile.

There is a need to make structures – the game’s rules, relations, one’s body/subjecthood – precarious, hypersensitive, over-responsive to external stimuli, to bring them to that destabilized point where they can be moved by the barest stimuli: a breath, an affect – like the fragility of sickness where the merest noise, smell or touch can overwhelm the body. A point of literally being blown by the wind, of surrendering the sense of control, but more of painful hyper-awareness than romantic swoon or dramatic actions. The trust in the group allows a degree of surrender to such fragility that is unsustainable in the larger world, allows vulnerability to be expansive, inventive rather than destructive. It highlights also to the degree to which we usually shield ourselves from such possible moments of openness.

For a few moments the group seems to achieve a collective mindfulness, an ability to be reinvented by the event. In these moments with - egos distracted; body fragments, spaces, relations quickly and lightly constructing potlatch assemblages - perhaps we do begin to consciously feel the forces of the event shaping our collective body.

Stillness: another kind of movement, a limit at which choreography collapses, transforms into something else. Silence: another kind of sound, a limit at which thinking collapses into nowness. Stillness, silence: a waiting, open, for pre/trans/post personal forces to activate and reconfigure what was my body.

A kind of sustained tentativeness is attained: a tentative game, tentative relations, movements, time-spans, and tentative objects of attention or distraction, tentativeness of movement, of relation, of intent. What we create together becomes a kind of tentative space (Arakawa & Gins 2002: 45). Like navigating an unknown darkened room, where the layout and furniture are never really solidified or contained, but must always be speculatively reassessed and re-experienced. In such a space I can feel the edge of an object – as a resistant force - gain information but never really know the object – a hard edge could as well be a table, bookcase or doorway, I must respond only to the immediacy of its hard flatness, reinventing the object and body in relation at the next cautious groping forward. This tentativeness requires a heightened attention to the moment and the sensory and affectual information – not so much a reflective attention (what was that, what should I do/know?), but a willingness to respond, to remain on the edge of not knowing, not seeing. It is willingness to be turned around by the next moment or move, reshaped by the next surprise. But not a blind, overconfident striding boldly on into the dark or unified, cohesive movements - rather that sensitive, quiet turning out of ears, skin, awareness towards the environment, slowly seeking to gather fragments of information from all angles and sources.

At no time during the process would anyone be able to state with certainty ‘we are doing *this*’, or ‘we are doing it *here*’, or ‘we are trying to...’ or ‘we will continue for ... minutes’. The process requires not just openness, but also cautiousness, a constant feeling out of the options. Small adjustments – of position, dominance or submission, focus – are constantly required. Each one of us is seeking neither leading nor being lead, to repeat habitually nor break with the momentum; but rather seeking to collectively, blindly unfold. This tentative approach demands of us a certain hesitancy, a stuttering rhythm.

We have to reconfigure awkwardly, stop and start. We expand and contract rhizomically – in all directions but directionless – stepping cautiously into spaces of least resistance. It requires a constant attentiveness - that we remain sensitive to the pressures created by the group on the space we occupy, to be easily affected by transpersonal forces and sympathetic to their effects on us - a technique of giving in to the event.

This is a kind of meta-stillness made up of constant adjustments of no particular weight, a meta-silence consisting of noises disturbing noises, disturbing noises.

The game intensifies, rhythms of interaction and response quicken. And then it all collapses, literally, as a body crashes into another, balance is lost, talking and laughter erupts. The kind of special collective focus that has held the activity together - an outward reaching held intensity, a suspension of normal interpersonal relations in favour of fluid body-with-body part-with-evolving space-with-part object assemblages devolves back into the more usual social and personal dynamics of the group. What was for a moment a series of evenly spread fields of energies and relations in flux – light, quick, adaptable – that created an even meta-balance (constantly unfolding yet stable) without obvious focus or dominance of ego over ego, body over body part, object over ground, collapses back into the usual groupings and personalities, privileged and background relations, acknowledged and resisted forces.

Having reached certain limits – of bodies to move fast in ever more complex configurations, of attention spans, of abilities to suspend critique and self consciousness – the exercise evolves into discussions: reflections and surprise at the achievements, and questions of what to do next. Habit immediately rears its head. For me at least – I think for others too – there is a natural urge to ‘capture’ what has been done, to somehow render it repeatable, to create from the spontaneous a formula that allows more such moments of dynamic connection. However, as discussion proceeds it becomes evident that it was the very act of stepping innocently into the unknown that has allowed the activity to succeed – permitted dancers to shed known movements and non-dancers to abandon inhibitions.

The unexpected arose from our blind jump into unthought activity. Even the mundane might be spontaneous - surprising and destabilizing - when unplanned. That is, there is no longer need to actively seek the unusual, the new or the difficult to achieve invention, the banal, ordinary and everyday can be allowed back into play, experienced anew as collective unfolding.

To achieve further moments of mindful creativity we must be prepared to strip everything back again, to erase anything learnt, organized, rehearsed, thought. The acts performed have in a sense now become just one more thing that cannot now be done –, already transformed from impossibilities to eventualities, lost their special qualities of potentiality in being actualized. The techniques invented to bring mindfulness to the group cannot sustain such repetition.

The group struggles with this: how to start again, not to think forward or plan yet collectively create. Every layer of planning we peel back reveals another layer (we each to some extent planned to participate, planned to attend the conference, planned a time and place to meet even if it was done on the fly), we can never erase all planning - again, this is a paradox that has to be lived with rather than resolved to continue. But we can push hard towards the unplanned, towards inventing activity which can resist being imagined or named prior to its unfolding, exhibit a willingness to situate ourselves as far as possible into mindful presence that will allow the event to drift, not to be pre-emptively curtailed or have agency seized from the event into the service of ego: to situate ourselves so as to remain as open as possible to potential and the ability of the event to shape bodies rather than visa versa.

Initially the group solves these dilemmas by dispersing; drifting through the space for a few days making relatively spontaneous and ad hoc connections with each other, other groups and individuals in a way that sidesteps preplanning more or less successfully, but certainly avoids the pull to attempt a repeat of the previous group activity. Eventually the energy arises to attempt another group experiment, this time also inviting others to participate. Much planning and debate ensue; the process is weighed down by discussion, expectation, anticipation.

A new tactic is proposed – to lie down and read a text collectively, with one single breath. It is a literal stilling and silencing: to exhale oneself violently into the environment, to push hard towards an impossible, unimaginable task. Its tactic is to dissolve all intent through the extremity of the physical and mental exertions that force one into the present moment, stilling one's body to the event of unfolding/unending exhalation, silencing through the event of unfolding text linked violently to escaping breath/life force.

Stillness as kind of silence, silence as stillness. Stillness, silence: an impossibility of moving, a moving towards the impossible: an impossible move.

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