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**(Non)-Discursive Space of the
Body: In-between Discipline and
Play**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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**(Non)-Discursive Space of the Body:
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Abstract

The present paper explores the creative space in-between pre-existing vocabularies and unknown encounters with improvisation. We propose to inhabit this space through the performing body and its various modes of communicating within and beyond discourses.

The philosophers Michel Serres and Michel Foucault approach the body from two rather opposing perspectives: at one side, Serres (2002) develops the notion of a body open to infinite possibilities and freedom; on the other side, Foucault (1975) proposes a bodily object tamed by social impositions and constraints. Looking from the perspective of artistic practice, we argue that creativity can be traced in-between these two situations: were the body presents itself both as subject and object, partaking in a dynamic exchange of roles, continuously negotiating between pre-given discourses and authenticity.

We suggest that pure improvisation does never take place, as experiences always imprint patterns in our bodies and thoughts; but neither will a body express a pure vocabulary, as vocabulary itself is continuously contaminated by personal interpretations and idiosyncratic actions. Therefore, it is precisely in this shared and interactive space in-between play and discipline that the contemporary performing body presents itself – displaying and (dis)-embodying (non)-discourses of today.

Finally, we place ourselves within this space as artists and revisit examples of contemporary performance and choreography, including the pieces 'Disfigured Study' by Meg Stuart (1991), 'GO' by Lisa Nelson and 'Self Unfinished' by Xavier le Roy (1998).

Keywords: Performance, Creative Process, Discourse, Embodiment

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Introduction

Suddenly, an eighteen months old child captures the piano sound of her mother playing. Her whole body starts to move, first somewhat disequibrated, then with more assurance, integrating the rhythm and the sounds of the melody. The body searches, in a highly concentrated state, for a precarious equilibrium onto both feet, while bending up and down, absorbed in the moment of sensorial experiences. The music stops and the child looks up, seemingly wondering about what happened ... She is not yet what we would call a dancer, but we sense a potential of becoming a dancer.

Some decades pass, after the obligatory passage through a classical ballet school as well as the acquisition of different modern dance techniques and styles, the child has become an excellent professional dancer. The body is able now to express and mediate choreographies through the different dance vocabularies it knows, mastering both syntax and semantics, like the polyglot communicates in different languages.

However, the first bodily experiences of the child re-emerge when the dancer suddenly questions herself and her use of dance discourse, such as in Anna Halprin's words:

I wanted to explore in a particular way, breaking down any preconceived notions I had about what dance was, or what movement was, or what composition was. I began setting up situations where we could rely only on our improvisational skills. (...) I was trying to eliminate stereotyped ways of reacting. Improvisation was used to release things that were blocked off because we were traditional modern dancers. (Halprin in Sandford, 2005, p113)

This narrative from child to dancer, and its inherent questions, brings us at the focus of this article. Interested in how artistic performance – theater, music and dance – exists within the borders of its own history and creation, we want to explore how performing bodies negotiate individual and common spaces through their presentation. We will argue that the body has the ability to carry and develop both intimate and acquired discourses, for it is capable of affecting and of being affected by the world through interaction. Through the body, internal and external worlds merge, from inside out and vice versa. In the act of performing, the body enters, or even creates, a common space that overlaps personal and collective realities. Such a space blurs limits between territories and exists in-between ephemerality and materiality (Gil, 2001).

Contemporary choreography constantly defies past vocabularies and searches to present authentic ways of experiencing the body's relation to the world. It explores new ways of feeling and affect, by reinventing ways for the body to relate with the environment through its intrinsic and extrinsic abilities. Increasingly, contemporary performances want to challenge the ephemeral conditions that refer to the past and deny the existence of the present. They

propose a body that is objective and real; they attempt to detach from known vocabularies, and thus, claim to achieve novelty (Lepecki, 2006).

Throughout this text, we will question this claim and the possibility to detach completely from acquired vocabularies, by exploring the in-between space of the body. We will discuss the separation and interaction of two (at first) distinctive bodies, which we call the inside and the outside body: one that develops naturally its own ways of communicating with the world, another that acknowledges the artificial discourses of culture. For the background of these two notions, we draw on the philosophical approaches of Michel Serres and Michel Foucault.

We then will consider both perspectives through contemporary performing bodies, coping with such inconsistent relationships. These examples of contemporary performance, alongside to our own artistic practices, will allow us to demonstrate how inside and outside bodies meet within this in-between space, where creativity emerges from a constant interplay between both extremes, mediating natural and embodied discourses. As such, we hope to establish practical grounds for further reflections.

Inside and Outside Bodies

In *'Variations sur le Corps'*, Serres (2002) presents a body that has an abounding capacity for adaptation and transformation, a potential originating in its own natural state, using intrinsic vocabularies. This (inside) body experiences the world through a 'semi-human' state: half animal and half biped. While it experiences the ambiguity of being both a sensitive creature and a rational individual, it can acquire knowledge through itself entirely and even generate new potential: it is capable of imitating itself and others, of acquiring social knowledge; but it can also learn through simulation and abstraction, transcending its own natural forms. Each encounter with the environment is negotiated by the body's inside – from its most sensitive and inner forces that are developed through such 'pre-human' condition (Serres, 2002, pp6-7, 19-21, 93).

By negotiating constantly between the inner instincts and the outside world, this body is in a permanent state of vertigo: it plays in a 'state of off-equilibrium'. However, such instability does not weaken the body but, on the contrary, empowers it by opening infinite possibilities and freedom (Serres, 1999, p43). Through a naive self-presentation, this body expresses itself and displays the existential fact of being and staying alive. In essence, unspoiled by culture, vices or intellectuality, it communicates without explicit awareness of societal discourses. While countering the vertigo, in transition and in movement, this natural body – which we designate as the inside body – transforms constantly its trajectory through the world by creating authentic discourses. Nevertheless, by staying faithful to its own inner senses and ignoring societal references, these discourses may be limited and remain underdeveloped.

Therefore, the inside body uses its adaptable powers to interact with the world, transforming itself in relation to pre-existing vocabularies.

From a different perspective, Foucault (1975) describes a body that is completely detached from its animal instincts and unconditionally submitted to culture. The Foucauldian body presents itself as a 'creation' of culture and it is even questionable if it can have an ontological and existential entity outside socialization processes and cultural expressions (Butler 1989, p602). These processes are not only omni-present, but also influence, impact upon and even imprint themselves on human bodies. Moreover, Foucault (1975) insists on the constraints of society on the body, as they are disciplined by rule and authority – as 'docile bodies' – affected by the materiality of social power. We consider such a body as an outside body – both imbibed by and expressing an outside discourse – that can be objectified, manipulated, transformed and improved in function of power.

I believe the great fantasy is the idea of a social body constituted by the universality of wills. The phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals. (Foucault, 1971-1977, p55)

The exercise of power through the body is material, for mastery can only be acquired through exhaustive investment of technique, training and discipline. Think of the bodies of gymnastics, muscle builders or perfect slim mannequin-models; they are instances of a Foucauldian body that is systematically dedicated to an established ideal from the outside – a projection of society. Likewise, the lightness and smoothness of a ballet dancer's steps can only be obtained by difficult and sophisticate training techniques that control the body's weight and effort. Through mastery and by taming the body's natural impulses, the dancer expresses the forms and vocabularies of a particular culture, which represent the discourse of classical ballet (Foucault, 1972, p170-177).

An outside body is a body that submits to external discourses, which shape both social institutions and influence every-day life. These discourses pre-exist the individual – body and subject – and pervade the individual. They coordinate and underline all social operations, by common agreement or inevitability. Embodied and reinforced through rules and discipline, they express themselves through unnatural, often implicit ways and constrain spontaneity, originality, adaptability and improvisation. However, as Foucault (1971-1977) mentions, once outside discourses are fully incorporated, they also paradoxically empower the body. Indeed, through discipline, discourses have power over the body; but by mastering such discourses, the body obtains the abilities to defy them in return. Thus, it can (re)-invent culture and refresh the rules it desires to follow.

We have reformulated Foucault's and Serres' perspectives on the body as outside and inside bodies and pushed their positions to the extremes. However, this puts the performing artist in an impossible position. At one side, we are confronted with the performing body that is colonized by external discourses and incapable of its own creative, transformative and improvisatory expression. At

the other side, an inherently natural and creative body leaves us with the paradoxical tension between that spontaneity and the fact that 'high level art' requires systematic and detailed training of cultural practices in order to acquire the desired postures, movements, skills and aesthetic taste.

To counter this paradox, we propose an in-between space that is occupied by both outside and inside, discipline and play, which allows us to experiment with both oppositions and opens infinite possibilities of coexistence and confrontation. The performing body inhabits this space by articulating imagination with creation, personality with culture, sensibility with abstraction and fiction with reality. As a live art form, the body's performance presents both the subject and the object that composes it. It constantly explores the possibilities of communication and existence beyond pre-existing vocabularies, while also remaining inevitably embedded in society and culture.

Placing the Performing Body In-between

Where discipline and play encounter each other, inside and outside qualities of the body merge and emerge, recreating and inhabiting space, time and imagination in new ways. By exploring the tension between pre-achieved knowledge and yet unknown possibilities, these elements are no longer imposed to the performer, but are dynamically (re)-created. Moving in-between inside impulses and outside structures, natural and cultural features, the body can create meaning and communicates without denying its own primeval essence.

Contemporary dance and its many complex languages demonstrate how technique influences the way a performance is interpreted, enacted and represented. It is possible, for instance, to immediately identify the distance between the classical technique of ballet and modern dance training – such as Martha Graham technique. The codes that define posture, movement qualities and even the use of accessories, reveal all together the essence of a certain technique (or style) and the discourse it imposes on the body. Looking backwards into the history of dance, these contemporary vocabularies appear to be developed with the intention to break with traditional taxonomies and experiment the spontaneous and authentic expressions of the body. Dedication to technique is clearly no longer a priority for contemporary choreography: it does not seek for stereotypical dance discourses or for utopian body images, but explores un-artificialized presentations, joining existing discourse and the performer's subjectivity.

The contemporary performing body acts through feelings and intuitions in a process of self-discovery, searching for its own hidden potentials, while it also relates to common knowledge, to the world and, by doing so, affects others bodies. For example, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's 'Body-Mind-Centering' technique offers an improvisation method that draws on the understanding and embodiment of anatomical, physiological, psychological and developmental principles. Through touch, hearing, proprioception, spontaneous movements, memory and imagination, the dancer relates her/his own natural explorations —

the inside — to a shared scientific map and vocabulary of the human body — the outside. Through the development of awareness of each of the body's systems (muscular, bones, circulatory, visceral), discourses emerge from the inside, in relation to the body's organic physicality and structures (Cohen, 1993). At the outside, a scientific discourse of anatomy is offered as a potential input for a bodily reflection of individual sensations and the improvisatory possibilities that such awareness opens.

This 'openness' towards both the inner and the outer, however, can also lead to situations of tension and conflict, as in the choreographic piece 'Disfigured Study' by Meg Stuart (1991). Here, Stuart (2010) expresses the relationship between the body's inner vocabularies and outside impositions, opposing its tacit discourses to those in common society. As the dancers are faced with the duality between presentation and representation of their own bodies, different individual and collective moments unfold in a natural, almost unconscious or visceral way. These moments are achieved by exploring bodily and emotional reactions, desires and constraint. In opposition to the integrated and virtuosic bodies presented by traditional modern dance, 'Disfigured Study' creates multiple divided and sectioned bodies, which enter unforeseen sensations and connections. These real situations involve contradictions between the dancer's impulses and detached embodied references; they allow unexpected spaces to open and uncommon behaviors and odd relationships to happen, overwhelming senses and reason.

Figure 1. *'Disfigured Study' (1991) created and performed by Meg Stuart (performance participation of Carlota Lagido)*



By performing the body's most intimate urges, fears, habits and inconsistencies, Stuart (2010) creates within this conflict. Social realities are represented and disfigured in the exploratory space where recognized and automatic behaviors meet unconscious discourses of the body. In one of the piece's moments – a duet – one performer takes over the other partner's head dragging her around and condemning her to the role of victim of another's choices and actions. The duet reveals a dualism between active and passive

bodies, both striving to develop their private discourses, while immersed in the conflict between inside and outside. In another, the choreographer experiments through her own body with distorted versions of herself, by imitating her own bodily images on a mirror. By confronting herself – face-to-face – with her own inner discourse, she decomposes and transforms her body's natural and established vocabularies, creating new versions of herself and her already embodied discourse. A self-reflective point of view emerges: receiving her own discourse from the mirror image forces her to distance herself from her private vocabulary and to consider it as an outside discourse.

I tried to let the body and the image speak. If the shoulder stayed up and the back was hunched, there was something about an inner world that was being expressed physically. 'Disfigure Study' consisted of images animated into movement and narrow studies. Francisco Camacho, Carlota Lagido and I tried to find a way to expose the unspoken tensions of relationships and interior violence. Each situation or image lasted slightly too long, things were edged and stretched beyond the comfort zone. We knew clearly that we were somehow speaking of the body and its capacities. There was a lot of internal conflict boiling in the images we made and showed. We resisted expectations of virtuosity and grace, which I feel are issues particular to my generation. (Stuart, 2013/1991)

Stuart (2010) attempts to make internal impulses visible and to develop a profound confidence in the body's natural intelligence and memories. By 'turning up the volume' on the body's 'inner-voices', she searches for physical and emotional states, 'dancing states', which are explored through the presentation and representation of the performing body (Stuart, 2010, pp15-20). By choreographing these bodily states, she undresses inner monologues, revealing the body's most primitive and fragile features. At the same time, these same monologues express individual representations of society – transparent versions of a social body with repressed desires, inappropriate behaviors and impossible dreams. In this sense, the choreographed body presents a reality in which we are all embedded, without ignoring its own desires and wonders. It transcends its own (and other) predictable discourses by bringing its tacit qualities into different levels of awareness (Stuart, 2010).

The body is a field in which certain mental streams, emotions, energies and movements interact, betraying the fact that actions and states are separated. The internal friction and rubbing creates unexpected relations and by-products, revealing and concealing, expressing how people tend to control their mind and reactions most of the time. In the case of complete harmony, nothing is being revealed. (...) The partial opacity provokes the imagination of both the performer and the spectator. (Stuart, 2010, p21)

This ambivalent relation between inside and outside discourses of the body is also noticeable in 'GO', a duet by dance-maker Lisa Nelson together with performer Scott Smith. The resulting tools of an extensive research process, 'Tuning Scores' offer a score for improvised encounters between bodies and the environment that unravel idiosyncrasies of human behavior, which normally remain unnoticeable in common everyday life (Van Imschoot, 2003).

Resembling the Chinese board game 'Go', the dance performance is scored to allow the (players)-performers to choose (tune) the composition of their dance – including its images, time and space. Like the game, the performance offers a simple system of communication between (players)-performers and space through a flexible set of rules permitting infinite possibilities. The two performers, sustained by the score, enter into an almost free play, as they make their intentions gradually visible within the unpredictability of composing lively. An improvised framework unfolds, in which the dance movements are initially unset and unknown to the performers until the very moment of action – or play. Here, the dancers become equally directors, performers and spectators: they can choose to create, embody and challenge the specificities of every movement that unfolds. Through the open score and the absence of strict rules and fixed structures, the performers compose a space between the arbitrary and the inevitable – joining infinite unexpected possibilities and predictable patterns of human social behavior.

As we already mentioned, complete detachment of the body from whatever external reference — from an outside discourse — seems to be unconceivable or at least poorly creative. However, by exploring the paradoxical coexistence between inside and outside, a shared space emerges that allows for originality precisely in-between play and constraint. The body exploits both sides: it is empowered by freedom and unexpectedness and it acknowledges and reveals what it has embodied from the world. This body makes its own rules as it follows, directs, copies, simulates, transforms and is affected by its environment. Relying upon its instincts in order to transcend what it perceives, it knows itself as much as it knows the world, through the experience of its materiality and uncertainties.

In another performance example, 'Self-Unfinished', Xavier le Roy presents an undefined body that morphs between human, animal, machine and other surprising forms. He presents a body contorting between various unusual poses, suggesting a world of multiple, infinite and unfinished possibilities. By representing reconfigured images of his own body that follow unwritten laws and inhuman rhythms, Le Roy (1998) unveils a field where social behaviors are transferred and imprinted in and out of imaginary representations of the body. When performing such a body, he not only presents unlimited interpretations and meanings for others, but he also faces with the incomplete, unknowable and vast potential of his own body. Through a genuine exploration of ordinary social tasks, such as walking, sitting, turning off a tape player, unordinary relations are made between body and environment. As a result, the performer's gestures loose their common meanings and reveal an extraordinary hybrid creature that alternates from insect, extraterrestrial creature, chicken, watering can, caterpillar

to cocoon and so forth (Le Roy, 1998). Through such presentation, the performer's body is continuously questioned, in a process that confuses inside and outside – the primitive body and the culturally shaped body – at the point of loosing its definition for itself as for others.

Figure 2. *'Self-Unfinished' (1998) performed and created by Xavier Le Roy*



It is precisely in this shared space in-between inside and outside that the bodies in contemporary performances are presented: through embodied social discourses, which are disciplined and transformed, discursive and non-discursive, imitated and transcendental. Double-sided bodies emerge, which are continuously challenged by desire and the struggle for expression. While they cope with their immersion in pre-achieved and constantly re-established knowledge, they also have the desire to break out of these conditions and return to an ineffable originality. In this state of vertigo, the performing body opens spaces that exist beyond traditional expectations. This in-between space of the body is constantly in dynamic reconstruction as an unfinished place full of confrontations and encounters between bodies and the world. Not quite knowing exactly where to be, it opens undefined scripts to explore.

Negotiating the Body and its Arguments

As performers and creators of and for the body, we constantly face the task of reflecting upon and anticipating our actions and presentations. When in this situation, we feel the need to ask: How will my body react to this idea? Or how will another person understand my gesture? How can I provoke myself to do something I don't normally expect? By making references to the world and to our own bodies, we tend to establish a balance between familiar concepts and un-experienced ideas. Creating such conditions in which new bodies can be re-invented and re-presented, we run the risk of collapsing, which leads to a continuous search for equilibrium. This provokes and traces infinite interpretations of which, most of the time, not even the artist himself is totally aware.

Consequently, unsolvable questions arise regarding the forces and potential of the body. How can this contemporary performing body find its equilibrium within so many distinct capacities? How does it create new art and develop its unique discourses? How do we challenge and unravel these potentials? Why do we choose to inhabit the fragility of such instable situations? We can only suggest some answers from our experiences as artists.

Imagine carrying something heavy inside your body, not as a heavy feeling, but by imagining that you have literally swallowed tons of heavy stones collected inside your belly. And then, try to move...
(Loureiro, 2012)

In this first score, a dancer develops from the idea of heaviness a specific collection of sensations, almost like a story that seduces one to move with a particular quality. The instructive text can be interpreted in many ways, by its author or by another dancer, even a non-dancer. It directs ones attentions and intentions in a rather free matter, offering a pathway to follow or to begin a creative journey. By creating scores that can be interpreted and challenged through the dancer's personal creative experience, we propose to open a confrontation between awareness and spontaneity, passiveness and action, declarative and procedural organizations – the outside and the inside aspects of the body. When the dancer translates his bodily experience into other forms of expression, he re-creates his relation with his own discourses, provoking future unknown engagements. With this, new possibilities of perceiving and presenting the body's creativity are open.

Turning on the radio – discovering a first sound. Walking around in nature - collecting another sound. Listening in a dark room – embracing a sound of night. Exploring the activity of your heartbeat; and the rhythm of a conversation; adding a measure of time and process. (Coessens, 2011)

This second score, for musicians, pushes performers to explore the boundaries between private life and artistic skill. While embodied expression is much more explicit in dance than in music, the body is still the musician's first tool. A musician learns a musical discourse by gesture, by long hours of training the body. Seeing a musician playing, even without the sound, gives you a quite good idea of the musical discourse he or she is articulating.

The aim of this score was to understand the kinds of transformations that might occur between embodied experiences of everyday life — private discourse — and the artistic domain — the outside discourse of music. In October 2011, seven musicians of different cultures and playing different instruments came together in Ghent to create a collaborative version. They had prepared the score individually, negotiating their respective inside and outside discourses. Some of them ignored the traditional use of their instruments in favor of exploring totally different bodily actions, like scratching the piano chords, playing percussion

with found objects or using the voice for breathing, complaining and vernacular sounds. The first rehearsal resulted in a chaotic mix of different cultural and instrumental discourses, hiding the more subtle spontaneous and inside vocabularies. They became aware of dominant discourses related to instrumental and expert gestures and had to negotiate ways to communicate differently. During the first rehearsal, everybody wanted to 'play' the own acquired discourse and to 'display' the own powerful musical gestures. Frustrations and confrontations emerged, rapidly followed by the alternation between resistance and adaptation. In contrast, in the second rehearsal the waves of music became much more introverted: different embodied patterns started to emerge. Everybody 'listened', in-between the intentions and gestures, to the embodied sounds. Both improvisatory rehearsals were completely different from each other, and in a certain sense, both were somewhat unbalanced, as unexpected confrontations of gesture and sound disequibrated the musicians — and their gestures — in this in-between of inside and outside discourses.

In our individual and group practices, we constantly seek for these confrontations, by establishing encounters between the ephemeral experience of improvisation and the concreteness of trying to grasp its sediments. In these examples, we expose the performer to written scores, descriptions of sensations, ideas and fantasies that give form to a specific physical and emotional state of the body. These scores are not just an outside story thought by an outside author choreographing or composing ways to express, but rather, they are created from the performer's improvised experiences, their bodily histories and imaginations.

When working through improvisation processes, the focus of the performer's awareness goes to the intentions leading his creative experience. These intentions may involve from a shape or soundscape in space, sensations inside the body, a story one wishes to tell to an interaction with another performer. Nevertheless, a principle from the outside and/or the inside of the performer's body is indispensable; no improvised performance develops itself randomly. A dynamic movement occurs between what the performer already has embodied — the very condition of its own body — and what ever can happen — the creative potentials of not knowing what course a creation may take. It is precisely within this mobility that we choose to score our improvisation practices: by creating an expression of the artist's attempt to negotiate with these two qualities – knowing and not-knowing.

By placing the body in unknown places, provoking it to express states, we can perceive its true creative potentials. These capacities are not necessarily presented in ways that the body would commonly imagine or remember, but rather through a middle ground that transits from tacit inner layers to explicit outside references.

Through improvisation, we open the potential of these unexpected connections between body, discourse, remembrance and the unknown. When leaving the performance scores open to multiple interpretations and shared lived experiences, unforeseen worlds open within the moment of presentation, in the here and now of experience itself. We are then freed from the need to define which extreme to accept or deny (inside or outside) and open to all possible

constellations of what may happen and what can be created. A body emerges that speaks in-between inside and outside discourses.

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