

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jakub Wittchen

Falling Apart, Collectively

by Megan Bridge

In June and July, 2014, I traveled to Poznań, Poland, to participate in a two-week residency program made possible through Dance/UP (Dance USA/Philadelphia) and Stary Browar/Nowy Taniec (Old Brewery/New Dance). The Poznań side of this artist exchange happens during the city's annual Malta Festival, one of the largest performance festivals of its kind in Eastern Europe. In addition to the generous gift of time and space to concentrate on our own artistic research, as well as free tickets to all Malta Festival performances, my two Philadelphia colleagues (Christina Gesualdi and Gregory Holt) and I were invited to take part in a week of exchanging movement practices and ideas with twelve choreographers who are either Polish nationals or are currently based in Poland. Morning training was led by a different group member each day, and afternoon workshops were facilitated by the German choreographer/dance theorist Petra Sabisch.

How do individuals come together as a group with many voices and create a discursive framework that embodies that heterogeneity? How do we allow for differences in modes of practice and parameters of thought but allow our conflicting aesthetics to be generative, rather than divisive? Our discussions with Petra in Poznań circled around questions like this, and one of several tools she introduced to address these concerns was the side-by-side Skype interview. Two participants are in the same room, using Skype or another instant messaging platform as an intermediary for their real-time, typed conversation, "a way to have the issues we wanted to tackle written down, while still being face to face sharing the same air, eating from the same chocolate bar on the table..."¹

On one of my last days in Poznań, I sat down to Skype with Anna Nowicka, a Polish choreographer presently based in Berlin. Our discussion topic was her new solo, *I Never Fall Apart Because I Never Fall Together*, which I saw at Stary Browar/Nowy Taniec earlier that week. Through our discussion it became evident that Anna is working artistically with some of the ideas discussed in Petra's workshop, specifically of multiplicity and heterogeneity, but here as collected within an "individual" body. This mirroring of ideas points

out how seamlessly a fellowship like this one, with all its moving parts, really does bleed from workshop to performance to discussion and back again.

Anna and I started messaging at nearly 3pm [14:49:42, to be exact] on a Friday afternoon, and continued for close to two hours. What follows is an edited excerpt of our conversation.

[15:06:29] Megan Bridge:

I'm so happy to talk about your solo, *I Never Fall Apart Because I Never Fall Together*. For me this title brings up questions of subjectivity, of the mythology of a bounded "self" that is consistent, or persistent. We talk about falling apart but what gives us the idea that we were ever "together" in the first place? And if all the parts of us that make up our "selves" are perceived as being collected all together in one place at one time, is that just a coincidence? Of course, I see you there, one body, in front of me. You are all together, in one piece. But at the same time, not...your body exists as all the different perceptions that people around you have of that body. What else does the language of the title do for you, or for your piece?

[15:10:50] Anna Nowicka:

It was very important for me to think that "I am many," that I am not a coherent being, but full of contradictions and opposite forces. I feel that in society we are thought of as legitimate entities, responsible and able to execute free will. And this idea of free will, or a wish to perceive one as a coherent, understandable and "unified" being--stable, unchangeable--is what is very suspicious to me. This has to do with many inspirations: [Vipassana meditation](#), my own experience in life, performance work, texts of [Gurd?ijew](#), lectures of [Krishnamurti](#). I had a wish to move the image we create of ourselves, and the static projections we fix others in, and to disempower the idea of coherence. I am in general very interested in instability, opposition, and giving space for all our unimagined qualities to coexist. I think that theatre space is perfect for this, to allow those qualities to be present, even the ones we are ashamed of or scared of, and then to let them go. So the idea was to create very different scenes, and to work with a variety of bodily qualities.

[15:06:29] MB:

At the beginning of your performance we came into the space. The chairs were set up in a circle on the stage. You were inside the circle. We entered and sat, taking our time, choosing our seats, chatting with our friends, getting comfortable. You traversed the perimeter of the circle, smiling, playfully sitting next to people or sitting on the chair they were about to sit in, sometimes attempting to sit under them. This made some people laugh, and I think it made others uncomfortable....it definitely made people choose different seats. We settled and the performance more formally "began."

What does it mean for the piece that it was already started as we were entering? How did you see us as performers complicit with you in the space from the beginning? Next you became someone's "shadow," lying on the floor in front of that person in a pose that sort of mimicked them. The pose you took, from my view on the other side of the room, seemed quite vulnerable or even suggestive. Because I think it was a man, and he was sitting with his legs apart, so you were basically lying on the floor in front of him with your legs spread open and your knees bent. Then you again traveled around the inside of the circle, making eye contact with people as you came close to them. I think this was my favorite part. I really loved watching you see people, and watching them being seen and seeing you. I want to talk more about this moment and what you experienced from the inside as a performer.

[15:21:36] AN:

At the beginning, the piece has been going on because for me there is something about the continuity of the flow before and after we live... there is something about the circle of emergence, so one becomes something (like Anna Nowicka), and then dissolves into non-material beingness (death), and then is reborn in another form. That's why I started as the one who finds one's own place (a shadow -- of a parent, of someone), and then expanded into my own form. The scene you liked is for me about finding my own beingness -- forming, reshaping and landing into a body.

[15:30:27] MB:

I have encountered the phenomenon that the unified subject is a myth in continental philosophy, and I've definitely experienced it physically as a dancer and tried to work on it in my own works. But I know very little about meditation and eastern philosophy. From the outside, I've always understood meditation as a practice that helps one get *more* grounded in the physical body or the present moment, but somehow simultaneously connected to some kind of universal consciousness or unbounded body. I feel like certain movement practices, like authentic movement maybe or Deborah Hay's practice, are meditative in this same way, "tricking" us into staying in the room, in the present moment, but at the same time expanding the notion of what that "present" can contain.

[15:35:02] AN:

Yes, and I feel that this presence in every moment (which I experience strongly in Rosalind [Crisp]'s work), is what is so important in meditation. So, one is not in future expectations, or past resentments, but is awake to the changes happening right here, right now. This is what we do in Vipassana, simply observing the changes, not influencing them, just allowing them to happen. Not judging as better or worse, just observing the flow of changes, and our habitual reactions to them. "This will also change," they say. And paradoxically, I find that following this flow is what makes us "whole"... or expands us into the multiplicity of our potential.

[15:37:55] MB:

I want to ask more about how you attempt to consciously bring in other versions of your "self" to the theatrical space. I imagine that this is the section where you took out the lipstick...you were wearing this wacky bright multi-colored unitard, and you were wearing a fanny-pack, and out came this tube of bright colored lipstick. Also I remember a clown nose but I think that was later. So at first I thought you were just making-up, but then you continued and I thought you were making yourself into a clown. The space got really dark. The piece went in a very different direction, it was very experiential for me and I'm having trouble conjuring up specific descriptive images of what was going on. After the performance my friends and I were talking about it as being somehow shamanistic. I'm not sure if you were working with the idea of a shaman, but I certainly felt like some kind of ritual was being invoked.

[15:43:20] AN:

Yes, I actually was. We were inspired by Joseph Campbell's "[The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#)," and all the things he says about shadows, the unconscious, heroes and the lack of myths in our society. The question of becoming whole is related to that--as the idea of a hero, or conquering beasts, winning a princess, is a metaphorical description of the individuation process. So, for me this work is a very personal process of individuation, and a wish to make a pathway for the audience to go on such a journey with me, and through induction -- or closeness of experience -- get something from it. My biggest wish, for the future, would be to make works that really bring change, or transfer something onto the people, so that certain channels of thinking, experiencing, being can be opened.

The lipstick section is one of the oldest parts of this performance. I created it in May last year in Bucharest. It has to do with how I was thinking of images, of saturating them, intensifying their contrast, their inherent qualities. Since I was working with real pictures of women with red lips, the lipstick came in, and then -- when thinking how to amplify the work with it -- came the "smile" painted over a face, a smile that both speaks for me about the smiling, obedient woman, about a joker and about some weird monster. I don't know if I can explain everything, contain it all into a simple sentence... it seems more like a poetry of associations that oscillate around islands of topics: femininity, monstrosity, the unknown, shadow, something we repress, an oversized blonde made-up woman. How to face all that, and understand that this is all part of us, of me, how to accept the darkness and emerge from within with the light of new imagination and new possibilities?

1. *Relations on Paper* by Paula Caspao. Ghost, Lisbon, 2013, p. 7

I Never Fall Apart Because I Never Fall Together, Anna Nowicka in collaboration with Ivona Šijakovi?, Stary Browar, Poznań, June 26.

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