

**O'Donnell's 'Open-Form Composition' ('OFC'):
A Possible Stance to Abridge the Divide Improvisation-Composition in Dance?**

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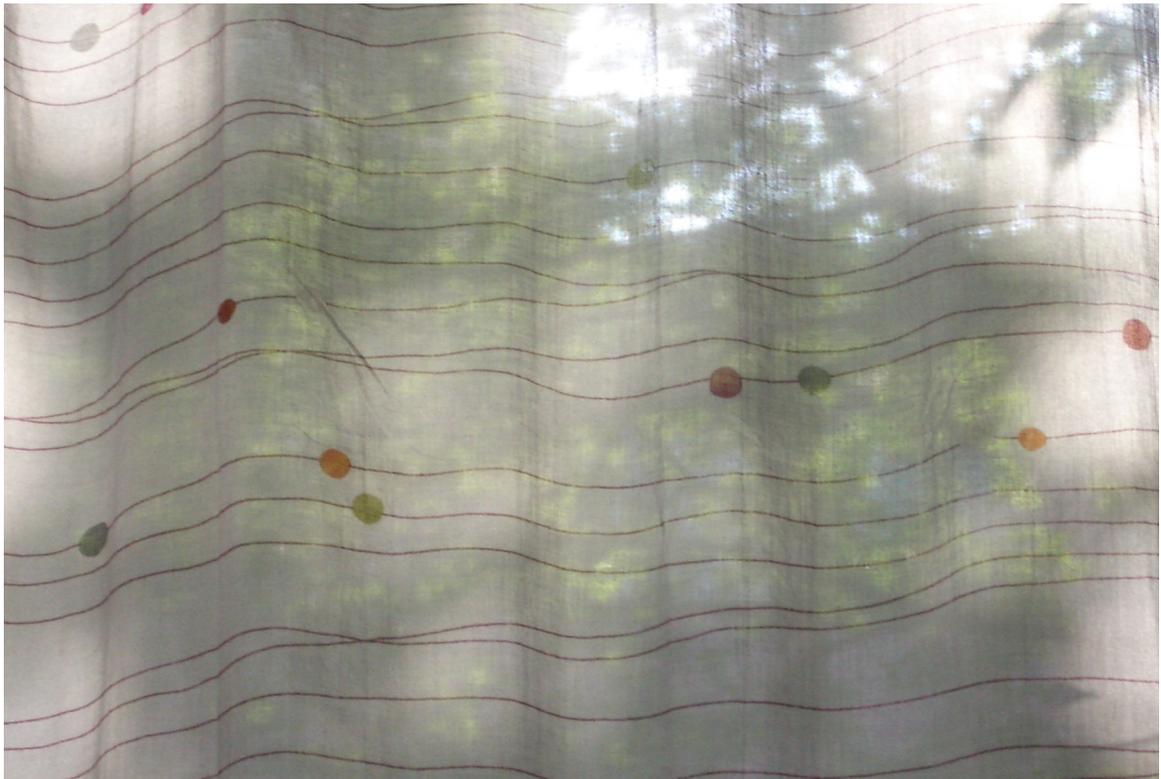


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Preface

Where does dance begin?

A body is both singular and plural, particular and general, a unity and an assemblage, a solo(ist) and an ensemble. It is in-tense and ex-tense, in-scribed, circumscribed and ex-scribed. It is discourse, narrative and also beyond exhaustive descriptions. It is too little and too much. It exfoliates. Not however to reveal a center. It is beginning and end. Articulately chaotic. Stubbornly sense-full. It is also a limit, a myriad of thresholds. It is many space-times simultaneously.

A body *is* because it is *another* already. Bodies (forms) are always in a process of alteration, altering and being altered. A body is also a cluster of forces or an energy field cultivated with seeds of otherness. It surrenders and resists and in surrendering and resisting it creates a rhythm. In its abandonment, the body is here and there, now and then, so intimately so that the feeling of distance and separation seems to disappear, to collapse, and in this (un)real proximity an uncanny distance appears, a strangeness perhaps so unbearable that only death would equal it. How to deal with finitude?

When does a dance finish?

Helene Cixous says that “there is no invention possible without being in the inventing subject an abundance of the other”¹. In order to invent then, the other has to be already there, accelerating its body through and towards the limit of its ‘host’. In this acceleration there is a fusion of cells, atoms and molecules, so infinitely small one cannot see it with the naked eye. But the change is there.

When and where does the encounter of these two bodies begin? How much movement has been there already? Did it begin *ex nihilo*, spontaneously?

She also says that in order to allow for the presence of the other one needs to risk losing oneself. Necessarily. To risk to immerse oneself fully and willingly into the unknown. Is this improvisation, composition or both?

A conscious leap into the void is called, a void populated by the paradox of distance and intimacy, of knowing and not knowing, of a body like any other and, precisely because of this semblance, so foreign, so strange.

Could form then be investigated through their latent or incipient movements of both

¹ Cixous, Helene in: Blyth, I. & Sellers, S. (2004), *Helene Cixous. Live Theory*. New York, London: Continuum p.27

opening and closing? Are we ready to feel the world through the senses and the 'making sense' of the other?

Following Cixous, bodies, also the bodies of art, cannot be fully penetrated or scrutinized, for they are always already permeated and blurred with the time and space of their being other.

Introduction

Motivation for the Subject of this Thesis

Personal Experience

I have for quite some time felt ill at ease with most available oral and written discourses about improvisation and composition in dance. My experience as a dancer both in so-called improvised and composed pieces and as a teacher of improvisation and composition classes in a number of professional settings that choose to make a distinction between the two has mostly been one of relative dissatisfaction, which, I now understand, has been caused by the strong feeling, on my part, that the distinction made between dance improvisation and composition has often been, and still persists to be, a distinction apparently more based on a not always explicit ideology or on a somewhat nostalgic stance to the past and celebratory idea of freedom than on a rigorous analysis of the ‘felt’ experience of dancing itself, or, differently said, of the live or real-time production of movement forms, that is, on what psychophysically happens when one produces or performs any movement, be it called improvised or composed.

The Divide Improvisation-Composition in Dance

In a considerable number of discourses about improvisation there is an overwhelming focus and claim placed on the ‘authentic’, ‘non-habitual’, ‘new’, ‘unprepared’ or ‘unconscious’ mode of dancing, all arising from or being generated by a manner of engaging with what is at hand which is often articulated and communicated as ‘spontaneous’.² A dancing supposedly uninhibited and unhindered by, for instance, the notions of form, training, technique, habit and the ‘old’ often understood as tradition. A dancing also seemingly not embedded in or informed by ‘rational, deliberate, conscious thinking’. In short: a form of dancing said to be ‘free’ from the weight or burden of the past and ‘free’ towards the ‘excitement’ of the future. A negative and a positive freedom encapsulated in the now-and-here of a ‘full’ present. In most discourses on composition, on

² A very good record of how improvisation has been defined or written about from the 60’s up to the late 90’s as well as how it differs from composition can be found in Kent deSpain’s PhD dissertation (1997) *Solo Movement Improvisation. Constructing Understanding Through Lived Somatic Experience*, UMI

the other hand, there is a tendency to lay the focus on craft, pre-planned action, before-hand thought, the repetition of the ‘same’, permanence, precision, reproduction, rehearsal, technique, know-how, expertise. The identity of a composed movement, or of a (fully) composed piece, should be recognized through and through as *this* or *that* particular movement or piece. Rules of style, execution, and particular codes of behavior and composition must be obeyed, dramaturgical lines strictly followed, protocols kept, or else intentionally and consistently broken. In short: an understanding of the prefigured constraints intrinsic to the composed movement or form is essential. Improvisation is also often regarded as an ‘open form’, whereas composition as ‘closed’.

The ‘Problem’ of Spontaneity and its Relation to the Divide Improvisation-Composition in Dance

This divide is in this thesis considered to be a problem, for it tends to capitalize on a difference which is here apprehended as being more of degree (of freedom and constraint) than of type. I will therefore make an attempt to argue that the traits that normally characterize the one are not exclusive of the other. Moreover, it must be said from the start that my difficulty with the notion of spontaneity is connected more to the way it is ‘talked’ about and how it tends to be interpreted than with the notion itself. I can, without a doubt, consider and accept spontaneity as *an* important element in the generation of movement in dance. However, for spontaneity not to become an atrophy of language and therefore lose its capacity to produce the kind of empowerment it appears to promote, it is here deemed necessary to investigate it in more detail. The language of spontaneity and its focus on unplanned, immediate, unconscious thought *alone* does not suffice to mark the difference between dance improvisation and composition.

Mary O’Donnell and ‘Open-Form Composition’ (‘OFC’)

Intrigued by my persistent dissatisfaction with the above mentioned dichotomization of improvisation and composition in dance and the discourse on spontaneity employed to reinforce it, I began a search for other possible ways of thinking through which I could find confirmation of my enduring intuition that both forms, or practices, are deeply and

intrinsically interconnected processes, rather than fixed and separate identities. This search led me towards embarking upon a closer reading of North American choreographer and teacher Mary O'Donnell's³ artistic-intellectual trajectory in general and how she understood and employed improvisation and composition in particular. I encountered in her definition and articulation of 'Open-Form Composition' ('OFC')⁴ a mode of thinking capable of bypassing the above mentioned divide, and therefore capable as well of affirmatively answering the main question of this thesis: Is O'Donnell's 'OFC' a stance capable of abridging the improvisation-composition divide in dance? How she has described 'OFC' will consequently be a central element in the development of my argument against the colloquial *discourse* surrounding spontaneity and its usage to differentiate dance improvisation from dance composition.

Development of the argument

O'Donnell's Trajectory of Ideas and their Relation to Belgrad's 'Culture of Spontaneity' and to a Selection of her Contemporaries across the Decades from the 50's onwards to the 90's

In chapter one I begin with exploring the relation of O'Donnell's work to Belgrad's exposition of the 40's and 50's and what he calls a 'Culture of Spontaneity' in art. Mary O'Donnell is widely known and respected as an educator and she has been cherished as someone who has continuously encouraged and implemented in her educational and artistic practices what one could call a politics of inclusion. If she has ever rejected anything, it has been prejudice arising out of ignorance. Dualism has not been a frame of mind she has easily endorsed. The complexity arising from her non-dualistic stance has inspired and challenged me in the writing of this thesis. Not to adhere to either-or constructs of thought demands that one realizes the relational nature of movement, that any one 'self' or 'thing' is

³ Mary O'Donnell (Fulkerson), BFA, MFA, University of Illinois, Urbana, and Fellow of Dartington College of Arts, teaches Release and choreography. She choreographs, particularly using open-form strategies. Her solo and group works have been performed in twenty-one countries. She is the author of the concepts "Responsible Anarchy" and "Ethical Reformation" which she has promoted through performance as both concepts and aesthetic positions describing our time. For more on O'Donnell refer to www.releasedance.com

⁴ She had for many years also experimented with both 'closed' and 'open' forms in dance, but it was only in 2000 that she proposed and coined 'OFC' as an educational term. Earle Brown has coined the term in the early 50's, inspired by Pollock's Action Paintings of the late 40's, in which the immediacy and directness of 'contact' with the materials was of great importance. O'Donnell is aware of this lineage. Brown's conducting techniques and experiments with "time notation," improvisation, and 'Open-Form Composition' as structure have become part of contemporary compositional usage. This is thus a notion that already existed prior to O'Donnell's use of it. 2000 is the year the ArtEZ Master Program in Choreography Dance Unlimited was set up. For more on Earle Brown refer to <http://www.earle-brown.org/> and for Dance Unlimited to www.danceunlimited.wordpress.com

already plural from the very beginning. Dance begins always already in dialogue, in negotiation.

O'Donnell is the pioneer of Release Technique in Europe, which she has extensively used as a practice and language to help her describe her understanding of dance as process, to promote the empowerment of the individual's imagination therein, and to bring forward her view that dance forms, also when seen as products, are themselves processes (never *fully* finished). Her consistent preoccupation and engagement with the notion and creation of 'processes' is here understood as being very proximal to how Daniel Belgrad has described the development of what he calls the 'Culture of Spontaneity' of the 40's and 50's in The United States. Process is a notion central not only to O'Donnell's 'Open-Form Composition' but also to the ideas of the period prior to the performative turn of the 60's⁵, when compositional forms in dance (and other arts) were 'opened' or broken on many levels. This was a period in time that, in a number of ways, has laid the foundations for what was to happen in the decades to come, not only in the work and ideas of O'Donnell but of other dance artists as well. Much of what Belgrad describes as taking place in the 40's and 50's finds various articulations in the decades to follow. The 40's and the 50's have nevertheless been relatively under-explored or used as a key reference to demonstrate the becoming of contemporary dance. Most recent discourses on contemporary dance tend to begin not earlier than the 60's; therefore I find it here pertinent to make a direct reference to it. Anchoring O'Donnell's work and ideas in Belgrad's description of the 'Culture of Spontaneity' is an attempt to demonstrate that her work has consistently concerned itself with a profound interest in inter-subjectivity, the notion of a mind-body holism, and a strong interest in nature, all features key to the description of the post-war 'Culture of Spontaneity' Belgrad presents. Features also key in identifying how O'Donnell's work has aligned itself (or not) with the work of her contemporaries over the years. Features that I think deserve more relevance or attention today.

It is important to note that Belgrad brings spontaneity in conjunction with the notion of culture, which implies that spontaneity is cultivated and that this cultivation or practice takes place within a particular context, not in isolation. This entails that spontaneity's early definition (17th century) as 'of one's own accord' becomes for Belgrad, and for this thesis, 'of one's accord in relation to', not a celebration of free self-expression, which is what

⁵ A good account of the performative turn in the 60's and its impact in the following decades can be found for instance in Lehmann, Hans Thies, (2006) *Post Dramatic Theater*, trans. by K. Jurs-Munby, London: Routledge

improvisers often attach to improvisation. Consequently, I present and weave O'Donnell's trajectory of thought about the key terms presented in this thesis, that is, improvisation and composition (and her conflation of the two by means of 'OFC') into Belgrad's exposition, additionally placing her thinking in juxtaposition with a selection of how other practitioners and scholars have articulated the very same notions. These articulations are here historically (sequentially) contextualized with the aim to shed light on what might have been at stake in dance improvisation and composition in the different periods (from the 60's up to the 90's). This allows, on the one hand, for a wider exposure and contextualization of O'Donnell's work, that is, her definition of Release, Process, Improvisation and 'Open-Form Composition', so that one can observe how similar or different it has been to her contemporaries, and, on the other, for the opening-up of a space for further discussion about the production of today's dance forms and their dissemination, in particular how spontaneity as a notion is still colloquially used to legitimize dance improvisation and differentiate it from composition.

I bring O'Donnell's ideas forward because I want to more poignantly place her thinking into a history to which she clearly belongs and which perhaps has evaded her. I also use her ideas as an example of how the complexity of movement in dance can be made more productive, how the language to describe it can become less reductive, how her inclusive attitude towards life in general and dance in particular can be exemplary of a more ethical way to engage with dance today.

An Analysis of Spontaneity in Dance: Language Matters

In chapter two I will argue that a clear-cut distinction between dance improvisation and composition does not fully reflect what happens in dance and that spontaneity, and its adherence to unplanned and unconscious action, cannot function as their major differentiating feature. A more fruitful differentiation between the two and a more detailed specification of each can only be arrived at when what is at stake in the particular work is clearly revealed and understood. What an artist commits to, when and where he does it, and his ideology must clearly come to the fore.

Even though the taxonomic, recipient-centered aspect of a work is of unquestionable relevance, I will here focus on the generative pole, that is, its emergence or production by

the dancer and his relationship to the language of the choreographer, what he might demand or desire from the dancer. Why choose to improvise, or say one improvises, as opposed to compose? Or inversely, why choose to compose, or say one composes, instead of improvising?

These are questions that are inexorably bound to issues of language and the assumption here is that particular language ‘games’ are the site of specific struggles for power, acceptance and recognition. Part of my argument will be to show that the practice of improvisation has indeed been differently engaged with depending on the time period it has been called forth and on who used it, as will be shown in chapter one, but the language used to speak of it has not changed accordingly, or not sufficiently allowed for the diversity of approaches to improvisation. O’Donnell’s ‘language’ of ‘OFC’, on the other hand, is here argued to be more consistent and non-dichotomous, that is more inclusive, from the very beginning, therefore allowing for a fuller and more articulate experience of the ‘in-between’ relational space binding improvisation and composition. Her language is here read as having strong roots in and affinities with how Belgrad exposes the artistic climate of the 40’s and 50’s, as has already been suggested. Remarkably she has seldom used spontaneity to describe the kind of agency she expected from her dancers or students.

Similar to O’Donnell, scholars Susan Foster and Gary Peters have also ‘grappled’ with this in-between space and the tension between improvisation and composition, even though both of them ascribe, by means of the language they employ in their writing on the subject, a leaning towards improvisation.

What will here be denominated ‘Open-Form Composition’, following O’Donnell, is in many ways closely related to how they define improvisation, especially Peters. However, to escape the language traps the discourse to describe improvisation often creates, which both Foster and Peters recognize, composition, when considered as constituted by forms which are by default always open and closed simultaneously, is a more accurate and suitable notion to describe movement in dance. It clearly includes the ‘openness’ of improvisation at the same time that it does not reject the necessity of closure of form associated with composition. Moreover, the colloquial parlance on improvisation brings with it too many language habits or atrophies, which are here thought to be detrimental to dance in general. Chapter two is therefore a more systematic analysis of the already

mentioned, usually used, and commonly accepted differences between dance improvisation and composition.

Also in chapter two Regina Wenninger's account of artistic authenticity and her critique on Danto's take on the subject will be relevant. In particular her critique on how he differentiates Style from Manner, how for him an artist's style expresses the artist's way of seeing the world spontaneously and immediately, and that, additionally, it is not acquired or learnt. Danto's explanation of Style and Manner is here seen as very similar to how dance improvisation and composition are normally explained and legitimized. Therefore I will here read Danto's Style and Manner as synonymous to improvisation and composition respectively.

Wenninger posits, in contrast to Danto, that Style and Manner must be seen in a much more dynamic relationship. This is precisely how I would like improvisation and composition to be perceived. My argumentation, by means of splitting the notion of spontaneity up into three (inter-related) adjectival categories, intends to show that O'Donnell's 'Open-Form Composition' does promote a more dynamic reading or stance towards dance improvisation and composition.

I will furthermore weave Wenninger's ideas into a fabric of thought that will include Belgrad's reading of Whitehead's ideas on process, Peters's and Foster's thoughts on improvisation and Lehrer's ideas on decision making in the hope that they will further strengthen and substantiate my argument in favor of O'Donnell's encompassing 'OFC' and against what is considered to be an over-determined and insufficiently challenged understanding of spontaneity.

O'Donnell's 'Open-Form Composition' in Relation to João Fiadeiro's 'Real-Time Composition'

In chapter three I will compare the language of O'Donnell's 'OFC' with João Fiadeiro's⁶ 'Real-Time Composition', a method that clearly aims to distance itself from practices of improvisation that aim to produce the 'new' or non-habitual by means of authenticity and spontaneity. I will show that despite the similarities, his 'Real-Time

⁶ João Fiadeiro was born in Lisbon, Portugal (1965). Besides his main activity as a choreographer, dancer and artistic director of RE.AL, João Fiadeiro has imposed himself as researcher in improvisation and composition. The "Real Time Composition" method is the centre of his research which has been slowly but surely structured and reduced to a system through workshops, conferences and master classes in Portugal and throughout Europe since 1995. [http://www.sommerlabor.de/web/English/João_Fiadeiro\(P\)/](http://www.sommerlabor.de/web/English/João_Fiadeiro(P)/) Accessed on May 3rd 2010

Composition', as opposed to O'Donnell's 'OFC', remains caught up in a dichotomous mode of thinking and therefore the method does not really provide the difference it calls for, but rather a repetition of the same. The language of O'Donnell's 'OFC' confirms not only her visionary thinking but also that the gap between improvisation and composition can indeed be abridged.

In the end, at core, what I mostly attempt to overcome are too quickly arrived-at either-or dualisms in general. The improvisation-composition divide in dance, and the language used to maintain it, happens to be the one with which I have been involved the most intensely in my professional practice so far.

Either-or constructs of thought tend to over simplify the abundance, potential and complexity of the production and dissemination of dance forms. It is my wish that this thesis will be able to reveal and allow for some of this complexity. My call for a stance or mode of thinking capable of moving through the divide improvisation-composition in dance is not fueled by the desire to annihilate or annul either. It is to more strongly affirm the specificity of both. Accepting that improvisation and composition are always simultaneously present, always in negotiation, always involved in argument, asks for and facilitates a more rigorous and work-specific definition of both terms, and perhaps a reassessment of what spontaneity might mean today. O'Donnell's 'OFC' seems to me to be a good start.

Chapter 1

O'Donnell's Trajectory of Ideas in Relation to Belgrad's 'Culture of Spontaneity' and to a Selection of her Contemporaries across the Decades from the 50's onwards to the 90's

The whole point of modern poetry, dance...performance, prose even, music, was the element of improvisation and spontaneity and open form...⁷

In this chapter I present O'Donnell's formative and artistic trajectory of ideas concerning improvisation and composition and anchor it into Belgrad's exposition of what he calls the 'Culture of Spontaneity' of the 40's and 50's. Additionally, I place her trajectory in juxtaposition with a selection of how other well known practitioners and scholars have articulated the same notions between the 50's onwards till the 90's. Their ideas have influenced O'Donnell's thinking and work to different degrees, sometimes by opposition and some other times by congruence. I am very aware that what I present here is but a 'glimpse' of what has taken place in the 50 years this chapter humbly attempts to cover. This chapter is a relatively short, condensed, and without a doubt partial and incomplete account.

I begin with laying out Belgrad's understanding of 'spontaneity' because it brings spontaneity into what I consider to be a more complete and complex matrix of thought which importantly differs from the more colloquial and, here argued, more vitiated understanding of it. An understanding that has repeatedly been used as key in describing the practice of improvisation in the arts in general and in dance in particular, often characterizing it as being distinct to the more ideology-and-history-loaded notion of 'composition'. O'Donnell's thinking is here perceived as aligning itself with Belgrad's. She has continually perceived her work, since the mid 60's, as being distinct from improvisation, because for her, in my reading of what she has written about it, the notions of openness and freedom frequently present in a number of discourses on improvisation seem to pivot around a premise which posits that in improvisation there are no pre-determined formal or thought structures that direct attention and meaning to a particular end, be it called a 'product' or not. Form, if it is completely open in the sense of not being

⁷ Ginsberg, A. quoted in Belgrad, D. (1998) *The 'Culture of Spontaneity'. Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, The University of Chicago Press, p.1

determined, can never achieve an ‘openness of form’, for it is open already. In order for a form to be opened there must consequently be in it a degree of determination, closure or necessity. In dance, particularly, the ‘possible’ and the ‘necessary’ work hand-in-hand.

The notions usually associated with spontaneity such as immediacy, free determination, self-expression, naturalness and authenticity must include the specific historic context, the place, space and time in which they occur. This means that no individual artist, act or notion exists in isolation. Immediacy, free determination, self-expression, naturalness and authenticity are all relative and relational notions. They are always compositional in that they are ‘in com-position’, in negotiation, and therefore intrinsically argumentative, for argumentation, as Lehrer posits, “is a defining feature of the decision-making process; even the most mundane choices emerge from a vigorous cortical debate. Even though most of this argumentation is done at an emotional, not logical level.”⁸

⁸ Lehrer, J. (2009) *How We Decide*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company p.199

1.1 The 40's and the 50's: The Emergence of a 'Culture of Spontaneity'

In the 50's, when Mary O'Donnell began to dance, one could say that improvisation, as we colloquially know it today, was in its infancy. Very radical was the performance that allowed for real-time choice making. According to O'Donnell, "dance was considered 'expert' through its communicative values, formal structures, and inherence of movement vocabulary. Improvisation in the fifties was not [generally] considered to be a part of composition."⁹

At that time there was much discussion about how to keep within art products (finished works) the spontaneity, and the feeling of freedom or openness associated with it, in the process leading to products. Among those artists whose work included this interest and whose ideas helped define what Belgrad calls a 'Culture of Spontaneity'¹⁰ were the artists of enclaves, or 'hot spots' such as Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the bohemians of North Beach, San Francisco, and Greenwich Village in New York City, including poets Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg, musicians Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, painter and sculptor Adolph Gottlieb, painter Jackson Pollock and dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. These, he says, "were places where many artists would be found engaging in discussions regarding the increasing massification and bureaucratization of culture in the USA and the high culture establishment of the postwar period."¹¹ These artists shared the belief that "the cultural conditioning functioned ideologically by encouraging the atrophy of certain perceptions and the exaggeration of others. They took it upon themselves to articulate and arouse perceptions that were denied or truncated by the dominant culture."¹² They also "developed an oppositional version of humanism, rooted in an alternative metaphysics embodied in artistic forms. The basic attributes of this alternative metaphysics can be summarized as inter-subjectivity and body-mind holism."¹³ This practice or mode of thinking "was adopted by American artists at the outset of World War II as a technique for bringing ideologically inadmissible possibilities

⁹ O'Donnell, M. (2006), *Open Form to Responsible Anarchy: Autobiographical Thoughts*, p.1

¹⁰ Belgrad, D. (1998) Op. Cit. p. 261. The title of Belgrad's book plays on the word 'culture' to suggest 'cultivation' and the paradox that spontaneity is an art that improves with practice.

¹¹ *ibid* p.5

¹² *ibid* p.4

¹³ *ibid* p.5

into awareness.”¹⁴ It also “rejected existential philosophy’s vestiges of a mind-body dichotomy in favor of a more radical ‘field’ theory of subjectivity. Spontaneity embodied [thus] a strategy of entering into improvisational dialogue with one’s materials.”¹⁵

Moreover, for this emerging avant-garde, “spontaneous composition answered the question of how to engage in cultural politics in an era of mass culture and advertising. It avoided the falsifications introduced by a conscious mind that internalized ideological standards. It provided unmediated access”.¹⁶ It found in the unconscious mind “the locus of possibilities whose legitimacy was denied by the prevailing ideology.”¹⁷ The aesthetic of spontaneity “emphasized honesty, awareness and authenticity over the mastery of traditional forms and techniques stressed by the established institutions of high culture.”¹⁸

Despite spontaneity’s privileging of the unpremeditated act in the 50’s it had roots in a number of formidable intellectual prior sources, namely, “the works of John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Carl Jung, in addition to Existentialism, Surrealism, Gestalt psychology and Zen Buddhism. The logic of the philosophies that informed this aesthetic implied that socially useful ideas would no longer be articulated in conventional intellectual forms.”¹⁹

Different artists, however, understood differently the potential of these sources. Hawkins, for instance, in contrast to Cunningham, did not use Zen philosophy to prompt him “to separate dance, music, and stage design into discreet elements in a formal discontinuity.”²⁰ Rather he “found in Eastern Philosophy an affirmation of the concept of wholeness.”²¹ His target, in his dances, was “inchoate subliminal consciousness.”²² His work was, paradoxically, “harked back to viewpoints as old as modern dance itself, i.e. , Duncan’s theories of religious exultation, Laban’s rites of cosmic integration and cultural rejuvenation, and the strident individuality that produced the prime movers of the heroic era in America.”²³

¹⁴ *ibid* p.9

¹⁵ *ibid* p.10

¹⁶ *ibid* p.29

¹⁷ *ibid* p.15

¹⁸ *ibid* p.16

¹⁹ *ibid* p.6

²⁰ Reynolds, N. and McCormick, M. (2003) *No Fixed Points. Dance in the Twentieth Century*. Yale University Press, p.372

²¹ *ibid* p.372

²² *ibid* p.373

²³ *ibid* p.373

What this brief account indicates is that different artists, though contemporary to one another, had distinct interpretations of what they thought would be a move away from the dominant ideology and its dichotomous approach to the making and appreciating of works of art, of making their artistic practice socially relevant, and used different formal strategies to arrive at it. Their practice, though different, shared nevertheless a common feature: they faced and reacted to an oppressive dominant ideology. Their practice was enacted over and over again, therefore necessarily rooting themselves in the ‘past’ of their particular, singular emergence, not in a ‘suspended’, isolated, un-reflected space-time.

As in the 50’s, there have often been pockets of resistance to the mainstream of culture. This is what allows culture at large to continue to move. Not however in a direct, straightforward line. The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ repeatedly meet, not to reproduce the past, but rather to ‘make sense’ of it in the present. If spontaneity as a notion is not to be trivialized to the point of becoming meaningless, or a mere excuse, ‘making sense of the past in the present’ must be a fundamental part of what spontaneity means, and this, consequently, does not necessarily need to exclude ‘mastery of traditional forms and techniques stressed by the established institutions of high culture’. If one chooses to follow Whitehead’s model of human experience as defining the individual as an organized event in the flux of energy through space and time²⁴, this event then, which we tend to call a ‘self’, artistic or not, emerges through the interaction of the *totality* of the human organism with its environment, and this indeed, does not happen as a function of reason alone. Reason and emotion, consciousness and unconsciousness, ‘grapple’ with what is at hand, also in acts called spontaneous. As Neuroscience by means of Lehrer confirms, “there is always an argumentation going on in the brain.”²⁵

²⁴ This makes reference to how Belgrad reads Whitehead’s influence on the ‘Culture of Spontaneity’ of the 40’s and 50’s. Belgrad refers to Whitehead’s *Adventure of Ideas*. Belgrad, D. (1998) Op. Cit. p. 124-5

²⁵ Lehrer, J. (2009) Op. Cit. p.196

1.2 The 60's

In the 60's "the dominant culture continued to preach the panaceas of consumerism and technological progress, but a growing number of dissenters demanded a reorientation of cultural attention and a redistribution of social energies."²⁶ Even though the 'Culture of Spontaneity' instilled in the 40's and 50's with its skepticism towards the mental atrophies engendered by the homogenization of high art continued its trajectory forward, it had already in the 50's and into the 60's been "significantly recast as it was popularized, politicized, and rebelled against in its turn."²⁷ Robert Rauschenberg, for instance, "had come to suspect the emotionalism, philosophizing, and 'projecting of the unconscious onto canvas."²⁸ John Cage used a "variety of methods to circumvent any conscious or unconscious communication of his own subjectivity through music."²⁹ "The cachet of art was used simply as a framing device to entice viewers and audiences into an aesthetic awareness of their own everyday reality".³⁰ In this way Cage's and Rauschenberg's works "made an ironic gap between artist, art, and audience that the 'Culture of Spontaneity' had sought to foreclose."³¹ "Abstract Expressionism gave way to Pop Art, Rock overshadowed Jazz, and a youth counterculture transformed Beats into Hippies."³²

In the early 60's the Judson Church revolution was born, spurred by Robert Dunn and including, among others, Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, who had both studied with Cunningham. It led to the possibility of performance within dance of so called de-codified, or pedestrian, ordinary movements. Typical of their work was the "repetition of a situational movement or game-like structure that could last either for a specific period of time or for a time determined live during the performance, until it seemed to be completed. Steve Paxton, for instance, walked on stage, and very slowly put on a jacket, and then left."³³ These artists, well acquainted with the canon of Modern Dance, rejected its confines. Exemplary of this, Robert Dunn encouraged "inventive scores, in the belief that laying out chance or other intuitive possibilities and determining materials and spatial considerations in advance were ways of generating improvisation free of old habits and

²⁶ Belgrad, D. (1998) Op. Cit. p.247

²⁷ *ibid* p.249

²⁸ *ibid* p.251

²⁹ *ibid* p.253

³⁰ *ibid* p.253

³¹ *ibid* p.253

³² *ibid* p.260

³³ O'Donnell, M. (2006), Op. Cit. p.2

premeditated solutions.”³⁴ Also typical of this time was the interest in “alternative performance spaces like art galleries, lofts, and site specific works. Explorations like these rapidly spread to Europe, through the Fluxus movement and theater groups such as the Living Theater.”³⁵

O’Donnell was then a graduate dance student at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana, where she studied improvisation with Willis Ward, “whose work on improvisation was focused on ‘process’, as a means to describe and define what happened within improvisation in order to lend formal concerns to the work. Detailed movement descriptions and limitations of vocabulary were verbally employed and converted into movement language within real-time explorations.”³⁶ In Illinois, she also encountered John Cage’s use of chance scores, which allowed for choice, arrival at a new point, and then another choice. This process was similar to the use of flow charts, as originally developed in the 20’s and further implemented in the late 40’s with the advent of computer programming. Flow charts, O’Donnell says, “enabled for planning the flow of information, allowing choice making, with consequence to structure, wherein any one choice defined a path to at least two other choices. This process could be repeated, indicating potentially infinite development.”³⁷

In 1966 O’Donnell created her first dance company. She did not use chance operations in her work, as these “seemed confined to less complex choice making in real time.”³⁸ Even though she “greatly admired the work of Cage and Cunningham she knew that she yearned for something more filled with what she called the ‘texture of humanity’, rather than the pristine clarity of chance based decision making”³⁹, like the throwing of the dice or casting of the I Ching. Choice making, ‘choosing from this or that’, or ‘choose from the following options’ and ‘repeat or continue until a decision is offered to change’, became for her “evaluative decision making tools for dancers in real time performance.”⁴⁰ Her works at that time were highly structured, with “processes embedded in other processes, where individuals were asked to take responsibility for the overall evolution of the form.”⁴¹

³⁴ Reynolds, N. and McCormick, M. (2003) Op. Cit. p.397

³⁵ O’Donnell, M. (2006), Op. Cit. p.2

³⁶ *ibid* p.3

³⁷ *ibid* p.3

³⁸ *ibid* p.3

³⁹ *ibid* p.3

⁴⁰ *ibid* p.3

⁴¹ *ibid* p.3

Also in 1966 O'Donnell, like many other young dance artists in the 60's, had the opportunity to study with Anna Halprin in San Francisco, whose works were "guided by the sense-making of ordinary procedures and were formally coherent through purposeful activity."⁴² After studying with Anna Halprin she felt "far greater confidence in the forming of processes into what she saw as "Open-Form Compositions."⁴³ O'Donnell's work, however, was not "logically rooted [that is purposeful] in everyday, [non-dancerly, uncodified] processes as was Halprin's, but rather in the formal consistency of threads of individual energetic response, as well as based on emotional shifts in audience perception".⁴⁴ O'Donnell did not use the "tools of improvisation out of which she would arrive at scores for performance based on the 'real experience' of her dancers, as Halprin did."⁴⁵ Instead, beginning from concepts and pre-arranged image-based scores, she allowed for the 'real experience' of the dancer to occur real-time within the particular, pre-arranged constraints of a performance. Thus improvisation for O'Donnell was not a method *leading to* 'real experience' in performance, as for her every experience was real, nor was she preoccupied, as Dunn was, with getting rid of old habits or avoiding premeditated solutions. Improvisation, a term O'Donnell located within the parameters of composition, was the intersection between the previously known (rehearsals and the given goal of the piece) and the result of dancers' real-time explorations within the particular performance. In addition, Halprin's "belief that the processes of art are more significant than its end products, ideas woven into the fabric of the postmodern revolt [of the 60's]"⁴⁶ is not a belief O'Donnell has shared. For O'Donnell process is inherent in the product, and product is itself a process, and even if taken as separate entities, they were equally important.

In a similar vein, Steve Paxton, debunking 'free' improvisation as a theoretical impossibility, prefers to think of improvisation's 'openness' in a dialogue with 'set' or 'closed' materials. He speaks of a spectrum which includes both of them at the extremes. He says that "to be free of a circumstance only means to be in another."⁴⁷ He also says that improvisation, when entertained as part of the set-improvised spectrum, can be a means to "help [one] realize how [one has] adopted systems of thought or behaviour."⁴⁸ This

⁴² *ibid* p.3

⁴³ *ibid* p.3

⁴⁴ *ibid* p.3

⁴⁵ Reynolds, N. and McCormick, M. (2003) *Op. Cit.* p.396

⁴⁶ *ibid* p.396

⁴⁷ Paxton, S. (1987), *Contact Quarterly*, 12(2) p.4

⁴⁸ *ibid* p.15-19

realization is what enables one to begin to move away, through thoughtful and engaged practice, from habitual patterns of moving and thinking, not through so-called unreflected, unconscious, undetermined, 'free' or spontaneous acts.

1.3 The 70's

By the early seventies, the Judson Church had become notorious for its dance experiments. Its members, looking for new structures, formed the 'Grand Union', a collective initially led by Yvonne Rainer. Nancy Reynolds and Malcom McCormick describe the work of the 'Grand Union' as

“an ongoing experiment comprised of interchangeable units of accumulated material carried out in a sequence determined by participants during the performance itself. Until 1976, the collective created rambling events in which role-playing could shift from the creation of totally fictional characters to the presentation of the 'real' self or to a level of performance in which, as themselves, their private foibles were exposed. Writer Sally Banes found it unsettling while others found that the Grand Union events resembled anarchic games that were boring or dissatisfying in their lack of resolution.”⁴⁹

In 1971 O'Donnell formed a group, The Tropical Fruit Co., with which she began to explore “process-based work *within overall defined but not set forms*, with [both] openness and closure occurring on four levels of composition, as described by French (Greek descent) composer Iannis Xenakis, namely: 1) moment-to-moment; 2) moments grouped together forming short units; 3) short units compared; and 4) total unified forms.”⁵⁰ Mostly she considered the opening of forms within the first and second structural levels, keeping however the overall organization of pieces as a recognizable totality, thus preserving identity. Her understanding of Open Form in the early 70's was one of a paradoxical oneness, where 'form' and 'open' were considered to be both adjectives and nouns simultaneously. Every moment, be it considered to be closed or open, is itself viewed as process, that is, in flux. In any one moment a dancer has the agency to *further* close or open a particular form, however minimally. The viewer might not clearly see it. The change however is felt by the dancer, and feeling the change affects the dancing. Every form then can be looked at with regard its potential for either further openness or closure. How this potential will be actualized will depend on the personality of the dancer (which was, and continued to be, very relevant to O'Donnell) and on the specific kind of dramaturgy or teleology a piece requires or aims at. An artistic project always aims at something, even if the aim is to not have an aim.

The challenge for O'Donnell was to create “discreet processes that could be reinvented every time they were performed, but would nevertheless have coherence overall

⁴⁹ Reynolds, N. and McCormick, M. (2003) Op. Cit. p.406

⁵⁰ O'Donnell, M. (2006), Op. Cit. p.5

as communication.”⁵¹ Processes would be only *approximately* the same, thus always different, even if only slightly. Acquiring awareness to these sometimes minimal shifts has been central to O’Donnell and to ‘expert’, experienced improvisers alike. She was interested in

“detail within process, in which each dancer would have a different route through the piece, and these would dove-tail at certain moments, though these moments did not always occur within a set time-frame. Some times these were group processes that evolved differently each time they were performed, and they stayed on the level of the work of Yvonne Rainer, which involved choice making between pre-determined different possibilities. O’Donnell saw her work as different than Rainer’s in that the range of choice [making] dancers could engage with was not limited to pre-determined specific activities, but rather based on individually complete ‘horizons of meaning’.”⁵²

An example of the kind of instructions dancers received in O’Donnell’s work was: “Explore a different emotional context each time you travel this distance. Travel mostly upright, using arms, legs and head to interrogate the emotional journey. Deviate from upright, though temporarily.”⁵³ The spatial path remains the same every time. Its articulation, however, will greatly vary. For O’Donnell the urgency and the body-mind ‘fullness’, not necessarily the spontaneity of the individual’s journey, have been paramount ever since.

O’Donnell thought of Open-Form as “sequenced (in the sense or ordered in time), process-based forms where choice making of dancers was *based on their own intuition, judgment and abilities*. Works were created within a circumscribed sphere of activity, that could, [to different degrees], include both openness and closure.”⁵⁴

A contemporary of O’Donnell’s, American choreographer Richard Bull, shared similar thoughts. According to Susan Foster, Bull spoke of ‘structural improvisation’, as a term to speak of choreographic work that involved improvisation not as a preparation tool. Rather as a sort of synthesis, amalgamation in performance, of known and unknown materials. He also thought of it in terms of “using structured scenes, rather than predetermined phrases of movement, which means that instead of measuring the dancer’s competence against a standardized vocabulary, it embraced their diverse talents and invited them to contribute significantly to the creation of the piece.”⁵⁵ Bull pointed also out that he did not want his work to be associated with the work of choreographers who “used

⁵¹ *ibid* p.6

⁵² *ibid* p.6

⁵³ *ibid* p.6

⁵⁴ *ibid* p.6

⁵⁵ Foster, S. (2002a), *Dances That Describe Themselves. The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*, Wesleyan Press, p.24

improvisation as a tool for *self-conscious spontaneity in performance*.⁵⁶ This seems to suggest that Bull then identified a certain difficulty with the bringing together of spontaneity and self-consciousness under one single umbrella, for this ‘marriage’ promoted an exaggerated celebration of the individual self rather than an expression of the dance.

By the time O’Donnell moved to Devon, England, in 1973, to take up a position at the Dartington College of Arts, she was “using process to open forms and to create simultaneity of thought within overall form. ‘Open-Form Composition’ became entirely different from openings for choice making within linear, formal structures.”⁵⁷ An ‘Open-Form Composition’ then meant to her “the creation of structures that would allow for real-time decision making on several compositional levels, through overlapping processes and formal structures within performance.”⁵⁸

Well ahead into the development of her ‘Release Technique’, and inquiring into the firmly grounded distinction between the openness of a process and the closure of a form (product), she got to the conclusion that, “on an interpretative level, form is always open and process is continually and stubbornly closing itself as it finds roots in ‘history’, as it is repeated.”⁵⁹

Umberto Eco’s seminal book ‘The Open Work’ written in 1966 offers an account consistent with and supportive of O’Donnell’s thinking at the time. Eco’s book concerned itself with the evolution and values of art works, where ‘openness’ is related to the sense of freedom of interpretation and meaning making as one engages with a work of art. According to him, “‘openness’ is dependent on the freedom for an observer to interpret or explore meaning within a work.”⁶⁰ O’Donnell’s Release Technique, which she defined as a “body-mind integrative technique through which engagement with imagery enhances and inspires imaginative responses and bodily movement”⁶¹ aimed at facilitating such freedom.

Ana Vujanovic’s 2005 reading of Eco’s ideas posits that ‘The Open Work’ “explained, verified and encouraged new, investigational art practices that interrogated and

⁵⁶ *ibid* p.24

⁵⁷ O’Donnell, M. (2006), *Op. Cit.* p.7

⁵⁸ *ibid* p.7

⁵⁹ *ibid* p.8

⁶⁰ Eco’s “The Open Work” is also a reaction against Croce, a predecessor of his, who was a product of Italian fascism, who strongly emphasized the idea of pure meaning and authorial intent.

⁶¹ O’Donnell, M. in “Release Dance Curriculum”, to be found at www.release.com. She says that images for consideration in Release are initially anatomical, and are created from physics principles applied to dance, and later may arise from any sources, including personal history, human emotions, dreams, wishes, memories, future projections, social protests, and strong reactions.

‘destroyed’ traditional and complete forms of art work, often referred to as a ‘piece’.’⁶² O’Donnell’s work, by means of Release, indeed explained, verified, interrogated and encouraged new, investigational art practices. However, it did not aim at ‘destroying’ traditional and complete forms of artwork. Rather it enquired into the formation of art works and observed how incomplete or ‘open’ an artwork actually is, because of history’s incessant reassessment of it. ‘Destruction’ seems to allude to a language and attitude of ‘resistance’ reminiscent of an either-or attitude O’Donnell has not subscribed to. O’Donnell’s radicalism can perhaps be best described through her philosophy and politics of inclusion, by means of her thinking and practicing (as teacher and choreographer) of Release and ‘Open-Form Composition’.

⁶² Vujanovic, A. (2005) “The Openness of the 1960’s as the Closeness of the 1990’s and 2000’s: The Discursive Trap(s) of the Recent Practices of Alternative Theatre in Belgrade” in: *Maska, Volume XX, no. 5-6 on the Open Work*, p.81

1.4 The 80's

Susan Foster describes a good deal of dance made in the 60's and 70's as events whose artists "worked hard to kill the choreographer and empower the audience. Their dances took theatrical space and opened it up, moved it around, or brought it down."⁶³ In the 80's however, there was also work being done which did not necessarily "deny the effects of theater but rather reflexively commented on them."⁶⁴ She is speaking of Bill T. Jones and O'Donnell's work fits well into this mind-set.

In the early 80's, a time strongly reflecting the failure of master narratives and the modernist myth of progress, micro-narratives or micro-politics continued to strive to dismantle universal truths. This was also a time to re-think the ordinary, pedestrian body, and how it was presented on stage.

At this time O'Donnell met French philosopher J. F. Lyotard and his writings became a fascination for her. Her understanding of his views on postmodernity in general and his discourse on paganism in particular⁶⁵ instigated her towards finding a new language to describe what she understood as the "complexity of process within product."⁶⁶ She intuited that the "complexity of life could be a model for 'Open-Form Composition'."⁶⁷ She then went on to make pieces that intended to "expand consciousness for performers and audience alike, often taking risks with regard the time scale-duration of a piece."⁶⁸

The strategies she employed in order to achieve this 'expanded consciousness' were:

- 1) Real-time exploration of imagery, which for her was not the same as making a choice between one and another known outcome. Such journeys' provide frameworks for continual renewal of method and experience, with points of arrival being occasionally fixed, and sometimes, later on, with points of arrival being cued through logical development of the piece in unspecified time, or in specified time through response to musical cues which were necessary to the flow of information within the auditory world of the piece.

⁶³ Foster, S. (2002b) Walking and Other Choreographic Tactics: Danced Inventions of Theatricality and Performativity in *Substance* #98/99, vol. 31, no. 2- 3, p.127

⁶⁴ *ibid* p.138

⁶⁵ A full account of Lyotard's discourse on the 'Pagan' and the 'Just' can be found in Lyotard, J. F. and Thebaud, J. L. (1985) *Just Gaming*, translated by Wlad Godzich, University of Minnesota Press

⁶⁶ O'Donnell, M. (2006) *Op. Cit.* p.9

⁶⁷ *ibid* p.9

⁶⁸ *ibid* p.9

- 2) Assigning specific, individual parts for performers, each separately described and ordered in process, though not set formally.
- 3) Performance as a series of processes [and therefore the performance itself is to be considered to be a process as well].
- 4) Open Form individual emotional journeys, based in arriving at points of understanding within personal history, including the person's history of rehearsing the [particular] work⁶⁹.

By the late 80's O'Donnell could no longer subscribe to the prevailing postmodern discourse. It no longer seemed to suit her work nor conform to her beliefs, as it proved to her to be "inadequate in the face of burgeoning irresponsibility for environment, health, welfare and global visions."⁷⁰ She then "became more and more concerned with density of information and resources, and the links between imaginary and real landscapes. These remained, for her, deeply involved in aesthetic, compositional explorations, [not in improvisations]"⁷¹ A piece she made in the early 1992, Faust, epitomizes these concerns.

⁶⁹ ibid p.9

⁷⁰ O'Donnell, M. (2003) *Release. From Body to Spirit, Seven Zones of Comprehension From the Practice of Dance*, CD-ROM, p.279

⁷¹ O'Donnell, M. (2006) Op. Cit. p.10

1.5 The 90's

Ramsay Burt, writing about the influence of the Judson tradition at the end of the 20th century and the start of the current, observes that within a younger generation of choreographers in the 90's there was a strong interest in the 'new' dance of the 60's and 70's. He mentions the works of the French-based group Quattor Albrecht Knust, "which included Christophe Wavelet, Jerome Bell, Boris Charmatz, Emanuelle Huyn, and Xavier Le Roy, who performed 're-readings' of Steve Paxton's 'Satisfying Lover (1967) and Yvonne Rainer's 'Continuous Project Altered Daily' (1970)." ⁷² He also says, quoting Andre Lepecki, that these dance makers have taken the ideas of the 60's and 70's "in radical directions, namely a distrust of representation, a suspicion of virtuosity as an end, the reduction of unessential props and scenic elements, an insistence on the dancer's presence, a deep dialogue with the visual arts and with performance art, a politics informed by a critique of visibility, and a deep dialogue with performance theory." ⁷³ They were seeking something new by working *through* rather than rejecting older ideas. They were not learning from dances considered to be masterworks from the canon. Rather they were engaging in what appears to be well-informed investigations of the archive of dance history. Along with these artists, "Rainer resisted the idea of a closed, concluded canon, seeing dances of the past, instead, as an unfinished archive that is still open to addition, modification, and citation." ⁷⁴

O'Donnell's work in the 90's did not harbor the distrust and suspicion Lepecki assigns to the work of the above mentioned choreographers. In the early 90's O'Donnell continued to think of the composition of open forms in terms of the relationship between the simultaneously present openness and closure of forms. Thinking in these terms, according to her, allows for "more complexity of perception at the same time that it allows for some level of continuity." ⁷⁵ In this time she brought forth one relevant concept: 'Responsible Anarchy'. It was meant to further illustrate or more clearly describe her paradoxical definition of 'Open-Form Composition'. Responsibility, she writes, "came about through the need to create a recognizable, understandable linear structure that would allow performers to navigate through a piece in such a way that they would be able to

⁷² Burt, R. (2006) *Judson Dance Theater. Performative Traces*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, p. 186

⁷³ *ibid* pp.193-4

⁷⁴ *ibid* p.201

⁷⁵ O'Donnell, M. (2006) *Op. Cit.* p.11

transport the aimed-at meaning of a piece of work consistently and reliably.”⁷⁶ Dancers were responsible for themselves, for the other dancers, and for the piece. Anarchy, on the other hand, “came about through the need to provide individual dancers with ‘significance’ and a field of experience that situated the work differently each time it was performed. Responsibility was likened to a river bed and Anarchy to the river, with both carving out the identity of the work simultaneously.”⁷⁷

By the late nineties, O’Donnell realized that in order for her to explore ‘Responsible Anarchy’ further it would be necessary to better define, within her projects, a social code of behavior. An ethical, shared, basis for choice making became for her necessary. She began to investigate more systematically what “level of guidance and freedom is necessary for essential, repeatable, zoned meanings of composition to develop in shared, real-time creation.”⁷⁸ According to her this process will “depend on the ability of individuals to grasp the [choreographer’s] master plan, to master the [individual] process of discovery and arrival at fixed points, and to balance individual ethical choice making process with the demands of the total need of a performer’s ‘society’. It will only succeed if her, the choreographer, finds ways to more precisely communicate the ‘Holding Forms’⁷⁹ and the anarchic potential of each dancer’s involvement.”⁸⁰ That is to say that the *modus operandi* of improvisation and composition must simultaneously be present.

⁷⁶ *ibid* p.10

⁷⁷ *ibid* p.10

⁷⁸ *ibid* p.12

⁷⁹ O’Donnell, M. (2003) *Op. Cit.* p.254. O’Donnell defined ‘Holding Form’ as “the forward progression of information necessary for the many-faceted meaning of a piece to be transmitted to the audience.

⁸⁰ O’Donnell, M. (2006) *Op. Cit.* p.12

1.6 Conclusion to Chapter 1

O'Donnell has in her career maintained a continuous interest in inter-subjectivity, in the notion of a mind-body holism, and a strong bond to nature. These have been here apprehended as congruent with how Belgrad has described the 40's and 50's as a 'Culture of Spontaneity'.

Belgrad's bringing of spontaneity in intimate proximity with the notion of culture, and by extension cultivation, may lead one to think that spontaneity was indeed a *necessity*, an agency to be cultivated, a means to challenge the high-culture and socio-political values of the time, and to re-empower the individual in such a way that an individual or a work of art could be both this *and* that, rather than this *or* that. Spontaneity was therefore placed in a clear relation to the context where it took place, or, following Olson, to its *field*⁸¹.

Spontaneity was thus circumscribed but not fixed as in a formula. Moreover, it was not an isolated agency, or a personal 'whim'. It grew out of cultivation, which entails that it arose from external constraints and therefore it was not exclusively self-generated, which is how spontaneity is 'normally' understood. Spontaneity was a means to make sense of the difficult past (World War II) in the present. To make the present both significant and perhaps a valuable resource for the future.

One could infer that in how Belgrad has identified, paradoxically, spontaneity as a cultivation in the 40's and 50's provided an understanding of spontaneity as an inclusive, encompassing, non-dichotomous notion. It allowed for individual consistency, diversity and difference. It is in this inference that O'Donnell's 'OFC' is here understood to be attuned with what Belgrad describes as the 'Culture of Spontaneity' of the 40's and 50's.

As we have seen in this chapter, O'Donnell has described 'OFC' as *process-based* structures, not fully fixed, in continual flux, that allow the dancers, by means of their *intuition, judgment and abilities*, for real-time decision-making on several compositional levels, through overlapping processes and formal structures within performance. 'OFC' works for her were created within a *circumscribed* sphere of activity that, to different degrees, included both openness and closure, freedom and constraint. This simultaneity has made explicit a *complexity* here thought to be closer to the one found in life and nature, where things are not as black and white as they at first may seem, and precisely because of

⁸¹ Notion influenced by William Carlos Williams who proposed to compose in the sequence of a musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome. Olson, C. in *A Charles Olson Reader*, Maud, R. (ed) (2005) Carcanet Press Limited, pp.39-40

such simultaneity the individual subject when called upon to make decisions in a dance is necessarily and more immediately implicated. O'Donnell thus understood spontaneity as relational. Her unwillingness to subscribe to either-or constructs of thought has allowed her work to escape clear-cut categorizations, especially those based on the divide improvisation-composition in dance and all the ramifications their respective individual discourses entail with regard spontaneity: old versus new, conscious versus unconscious, rational versus emotional, learnt or determined versus indeterminate, direct versus mediated. *How she has described* her ideas and work, by means of 'OFC' is what is seen as the primary difference between her ideas about dance improvisation and composition and the ones from the other artists mentioned in this chapter, not their aims or work themselves. This *linguistic* difference is what has been here perceived as the means to 'read' O'Donnell's ideas as strongly anchored into the 40's and 50's , as presented by Belgrad, and perhaps, unexpectedly, less to the work of her contemporaries from the 60's onwards. It is also the means through which an investigation of whether her 'OFC' may be used to analyze and rethink how the practice of dance improvisation today is described and legitimized, and whether hers and Belgrad's understanding of spontaneity would be worth 'resuscitating' today.

If we agree with O'Donnell, Belgrad, Foster, Bull, Paxton, and others that dance improvisation is learnt, that it requires practice, and that it is enhanced by critical reflection, why is it that so much of the discourse on improvisation, especially by younger practitioners themselves, still insists on an idea of freedom and spontaneity which tends to be dissociated from what is normally an intrinsic aspect of any learning, practice and critical reflection, namely a conscious relationship, be it pro or contra, to the past and tradition? Why is it that acting of 'one's own accord', spontaneity's original meaning from the 17th century, tends to stress self-determination and self-expression in such a way that 'self' and its expression can apparently not include the 'other'? Could it be that spontaneity, the Trojan Horse improvisation has used to break open or challenge the iron doors of the establishment of high culture, has become so over-determined, so everyday, that it has lost its original contextual and political power? If one agrees that the past is unavoidable, how then to make sense of it in today's present?

In describing the 40's and 50's as a 'Culture of Spontaneity' Belgrad has identified in Whitehead's 'Process Philosophy' a "distrust of conventional forms of communication, as

everyday language proves inadequate because it denoted the superficial variables of experience, because it could not articulate complexes of thought and feeling beyond the socially constructed reality that it helped to maintain.”⁸²

In the second chapter I will, distrusting what is here thought of as a superficial and inadequate understanding of spontaneity, embark upon an analysis of the *language* used to convey spontaneity as the main differentiating factor between dance improvisation and composition in dance, arguing that O’Donnell’s language of ‘OFC’ more accurately describes the tension (and the imbrication) between the two.

⁸² Belgrad, D. (1998) Op. Cit p.124

Chapter 2

An Analysis of Spontaneity in Dance: Language Matters

In chapter 1 O'Donnell's description of 'OFC' has been proposed as an inclusive, non-dichotomous notion. These features have been suggested to be the ones which bring her ideas on the one hand in close proximity with Belgrad's description of what he called the 'Culture of Spontaneity' of the 40's and 50's and the ones that have differentiated how she described her work from her contemporaries on the other. In chapter one an indication was made that perhaps the impact spontaneity had in the artistic environment of the 40's and 50's may have lost resonance over the years. It has been suggested that a possible reason for this diminished resonance may be related to how improvisation and its bond to spontaneity is communicated, talked and written about, and that what in the 40's and 50's was contextually evident as a necessity may have become more a nostalgic celebration of 'freedom' than a critical (contextual and relational) affirmation of it. How O'Donnell has described 'OFC' has been proposed as a more accurate way to illuminate the tension between dance improvisation and composition and the role spontaneity plays in it.

In this chapter I will make an analysis of how improvisation has been described by my dance students at the ArtEZ School of Dance. They were asked to answer, prior to the beginning of my teaching period with them, the question 'what is improvisation?'⁸³ Their answers have to a good extent been read to be congruent with how spontaneity is usually described⁸⁴ and how it tends to be used as a key in differentiating dance improvisation from composition.

Spontaneity is here identified as a 'cluster' linguistic notion and it will be broken down into three inter-related adjectival categories, that is, the first dealing with 'unpreparedness', the second with 'novelty', and the third with 'unconsciousness', each in a separate section.

I will argue that how the divide improvisation-composition in dance is usually communicated and legitimized, by means of how spontaneity is understood, does not

⁸³ Please refer to Appendix at the end. Classes took place between January and April 2010.

⁸⁴ An action happening or arising without apparent external cause; self-generated; arising from a natural inclination or impulse and not from external incitement or constraint; unconstrained and unstudied in manner or behavior; growing without cultivation or human labor. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/spontaneous?qsrc=2446> Accessed on May 24th

accurately reflect neither their similarities nor their differences. O'Donnell's inclusive and non-dichotomous description of 'OFC' better allows for an understanding of the degrees of similarity and difference. Both in dance improvisation and composition there is unpreparedness, novelty, and unconsciousness, but in each, depending on the particular project, they are present in different degrees.

My argument will be supported, in addition to O'Donnell's description of 'OFC' and the students' answers, by five other sources:

1) Belgrad's reading of Whitehead's 'Process Philosophy', as a means to further expose O'Donnell's inclusive and non-dichotomous 'OFC',

2) Lehrer's discourse on how decisions are made in order to offer a neuro-scientific backing for the argumentative workings of the human brain,

3) Foster's understanding of improvisation as transcendence, as an antithesis to how the 'new' attached to improvisation is not found in the reading of 'OFC' proposed,

4) Peters's understanding of improvisation as an 'eternal return' as a means to both counter Foster's view and further substantiate O'Donnell's 'OFC', and

5) Wenninger's critique on how Danto differentiates Style from Manner in order to demonstrate that Danto's dichotomy not only conforms to a colloquial understanding of how dance improvisation and composition are distinguished, by means of spontaneity, but, most importantly, to show that Wenninger's proposal for a dynamic relation between Style and Manner (here understood as improvisation and composition) is in congruence with 'OFC'. Each source will be more in evidence depending on the adjective connected to spontaneity being analyzed.

At the end of the chapter, before its conclusion, I bring all sources together in a relational 'movement of thought'.

2.1 ‘Unprepared’ versus ‘Prepared’

“Rather than placing improvisation and composition in opposition, Lacey argues for placing both on a continuum defined by the kind and amount of time spent in preparing the exact specifications of the performance”⁸⁵

“In 15 seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what you say in 15 seconds, while in improvisation you have 15 seconds”⁸⁶.

Both quotations above explicitly mention the amount of preparation time prior to a performance as a crucial factor in differentiating improvisation from composition. They posit that the less time one has to prepare for a particular performance the more improvisatory it will be. This indeed seems to conform to the colloquial understanding of improvisation. It follows then that when one stretches time to ponder and ‘think’, or prepare, our performance or understanding of improvisation becomes more compositional, less spontaneous.

The first quotation does not present improvisation and composition as antithetical, oppositional terms. The image of the ‘continuum’ used in it, that is in sequence, is in line with how O’Donnell has described ‘OFC’ as process. It also recognizes that “the performance of any action, regardless of how predetermined it is in the minds of those who perform it and those who witness it, contains an element of improvisation.”⁸⁷ The reverse could as well be understood as possible, that is, that the performance of any action, regardless of how undetermined it is in the minds of those who perform it and those who witness it, contains an element of composition.

The second quotation, however, seems to miss or obliterate an important point. Having ‘all’ the time to prepare assumes that there are no time constraints involved in a preparation. This seems to be far from how the majority of performances are made nowadays, where production time has steadily become shorter. This shorter production time does not however necessarily entail that the performances emerging from it are to be seen as improvisations, unless one would equal the ‘shorter preparation time’ usually associated with improvisation to a kind of performance whose shorter preparation induces it to be assessed as being less valuable than in composition; if to improvise is connected to a mode

⁸⁵ Foster, S. L. (2002a) Op. Cit. p.300

⁸⁶ *ibid* p.300

⁸⁷ Foster, S. L. quoted by Peters, G. (2009) in: *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, The University of Chicago Press p.115

of production in which one does not have at hand all the ingredients one needs in order to achieve or produce what one wants; if, in other words, to improvise is directly related to a lack.

The quality of a performance, improvised or composed, is not necessarily dependent on how much time has been spent on preparing for it. Artists who make improvised performances may indeed use shorter amounts of rehearsal time prior to the performance, and this may be, for example, due to budget constraints, availability of the performers and other logistic reasons. This, however, may also well be that this is exactly what the artist wants, that is, to reduce or limit time in order to investigate what happens when such a constraint is implemented. Either way, the artist has decided to share the work with an audience, who will not necessarily know, or need to know, about the process leading to the performance. Therefore, the shorter preparation time of improvisation is no excuse for the possible lack of completion or preparedness of a performance. Good improvisation depends, in fact, on prepared minds. This is what neuroscience⁸⁸ and, as indicated in chapter 1, experienced improvisers teach us.

Regardless of how much time one has spent preparing, or how much time one has to perform any action in real-time, one still needs to produce or actualize the action, to ‘make it happen’, and in producing and actualizing it, there is no guarantee that the action will be performed exactly according to how it was planned or envisioned. A margin for error, surprise, difference, or deviation is necessarily involved. This is the nature of the human body⁸⁹, not just in dance, but also across the border. The human body is not a machine that immaculately performs following the ignition of a start button. It’s psychophysical predispositions and moods continually change. The body is affected by the context in which it is located and therefore it needs to constantly negotiate the givens it brings with it with what is there at hand at any one time. The givens it brings with it are for example the experience and awareness of its instrument, the body, involving all that it remembers, as for instance the “parameters of the work’s structure, the idiom with which it engages, and the idiom’s history”⁹⁰. This takes place both in improvisation and composition. What may indeed differ is the *degree* of error, surprise, difference, and deviation the work can invite,

⁸⁸ An accessible and illuminating account of how decisions are made from the brain’s perspective can be found in Lehrer, J. (2009) *How We Decide*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company

⁸⁹ Steinam writes that each day is new in finding out how one’s body moves. Each joint tells a story. He also says that we are our bodies, and we are not the same, week in week out. Steinam, L. (1978) quoted in deSpain, K. (1997) Op. Cit. p.52

⁹⁰ Peters, G. (2009) *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, The University of Chicago Press, p.82

allow or endure. In the 15, 30 or however many seconds one has to act, to make the possible actual, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ decisions are being engendered, be it in a moment called improvised or composed, and the quality or *timing* of these decisions together with the intentions of the artist, rather than the amount of time they take, is what defines the moment of their performance as right, full, powerful, persuasive, convincing or not.

Spontaneity thus, if understood *solely* as a non-planned, unprepared or punctual (isolated) temporal agency, cannot be a sufficient criterion to differentiate improvisation from composition. When engaging with the predetermined, by means of the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ decisions prior to the ‘now’ about to begin, as the argumentative nature of the brain demonstrates⁹¹, there is always a moment of reflection, hesitation, or wavering, however short, consciously perceived or not, and in this moment all of the memory of what is given is concentrated, amalgamated. Not however to go beyond the known, as one often hears in milieus of improvisation⁹², but rather to enter it again and again.

There will never be a pure improvisation or a pure composition. These limits are never to be obtained in live performance because “no improviser can avoid the previously learnt material, and no re-creative performer can avoid small variations specific to each occasion”.⁹³ This is precisely the tension that O’Donnell’s description of ‘OFC’ brings forth: The dancer, in each particular occasion, negotiates in real-time the given, pre-defined parameters of the work, which not only explicitly include the individual’s history in relation to it, but also ask him, in the moment of negotiation, to open, or carve a space into and within the pre-defined form. The pre-defined form will therefore necessarily ‘suffer’ variations.

⁹¹ This is in reference to how Jonah Lehrer explains how decisions are made from the perspective of the brain.

⁹² This is in reference to how Peters criticizes the discourse on improvisation by a great number of improvisers.

⁹³ J. Pressing quoted by Kent deSpain in deSpain, K. (1997) *Solo movement improvisation. Constructing understanding through lived somatic experience*, UMI, p.69

2.2 ‘New’, ‘Non-Habitual’ versus ‘Old’, ‘Habitual’

“Improvisation, in the celebratory sense, conceives of itself as transcending these outmoded structures and threadbare pathways through acts of spontaneity that inhabit the moment, the instant, the pure futurity of the “now,” without history’s “spirit of gravity” (Nietzsche) weighing upon the shoulders of the creative artist”⁹⁴.

When asking a number of beginning practitioners of improvisation⁹⁵ about their view on what improvisation is and what it can provide or generate one can deduce from their responses that through improvisation they can more easily become or feel ‘free’. Free from a sense of aesthetic responsibility (how it looks) or duty towards the confines of the past. Not being preoccupied with how a movement form looks like entails that in improvisation they feel they are not bound to correctly executing a particular code or technique. Being free from one’s own movement habits means that they are free to move or express themselves in a more uplifting, emancipating, creative manner. This seems to be congruent with how improvisation has been communicated and legitimized in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s. In chapter 1 a few examples of it were given. However, one could ask, are these reasons, today, strong enough to produce the new and is the new necessarily better?

Before a habit or tradition can be broken they must first be known or recognized as such, and attaining a heightened or shaper awareness of one’s habits and the traditions one belongs to takes a considerable amount of time, a time of practice and a time to critically reflect on it. Without these the new will not be really new, for it would not know in relation to what it is felt or thought of as new. Inhabiting the moment ‘spontaneously’ in improvisation must therefore contain within it the knowledge or a memory of what has been. A knowledge the improviser can afford to ‘forget’ or momentarily put aside. This is what very experienced improvisers consistently attest to. This is for example what Steve Paxton posits, as seen in chapter 1. He has not spoken of improvisation as ‘transcendence’ or of spontaneity as the sole means to explain the *kind* of time of an improvised action. He spoke of improvisation as a means to help one understand and come to terms with one’s past, with how one’s habits have become habits, and that as being crucial for improvisation. Often words like ‘awareness’ or ‘attention’ come into play as well, as Barbara Dillely recognizes. She says that “in improvisation forms, we connect very clearly to the constant shifting that exists in our perceptions. This awareness becomes the ground for spontaneous

⁹⁴ Foster, S. L. quoted by Peters, G. (2009) OP. Cit. p.17

⁹⁵ Please refer to Appendix at the end

dance improvisations.”⁹⁶ I would, following Whitehead’s notion of process, add that not only our perceptions shift. The world ‘out there’ shifts as well, as it is in flux, in a process unfolding always, every time, in real time. A flux between appearance and disappearance, creation and destruction.

To become an ‘expert’ in any area is a process that indeed takes time and practice. Once one has developed expertise one can perhaps stop ‘thinking’ about all that which has been learnt. One could say that what has been learnt has also become habitual, it has become a ‘second skin’. One does not have to ‘think’ about what one needs to do because the action one has to do has, through practice, become automatized, like the riding of a bicycle. This ‘thoughtlessness’ or momentary ‘forgetfulness’ seems to be crucial to the colloquial notion of spontaneity. Thinking too much about what one already knows certainly will not help a dancer perform a technically difficult, rehearsed, composed movement sequence, neither will an improviser be able to enter a space where he will be asked to make complex decisions, like in cases of more demanding, risk-taking, body-integrity threatening kinds of improvisations. Habits are thus not necessarily bad⁹⁷. Because the rational, censoring mind can relax habits can actually allow psychophysical space for the new, provide one has a positive and confident relationship with how habits have actually become habits. One could perhaps infer from this that a technically skilled dancer who has had ‘bad’ teachers and suffered the ‘tyranny’ and ‘inquisition’ of mindless form will most likely not want to think of habit, or the dance culture he is (has been) a part of, as positive and therefore he will do everything possible to escape it. Improvisation must be more than an escape *from*.

If this is so, why then the insistence on freeing oneself from habits if habits appear to be an essential element in the logic of spontaneity a good number of experienced improvisers seem to claim? How can the new claimed for in improvisation arise as new if not by *also* a good degree of habituation? How not to repeat the same, or differently asked, how to create difference in improvisation if not by *also* engendering with a good amount of habit and repetition?

⁹⁶ Dilley, B. (1990) “Creative Process and Meditation: Two streams” in *Contact Quarterly*, 15(3) p.40. Kent deSpain, making reference to Csizsentmihalyi’s view on ‘The Flow of Experience’, offers a revealing account of awareness as that which interprets the contents of information. In: deSpain, K. (1997) Op. Cit. p.101

⁹⁷ Lehrer says that If we can’t incorporate the lessons of the past into our future decisions, then we’re destined to endlessly repeat our mistakes. In: Lehrer, J. (2009) Op. Cit. p.39

A tentative answer may be that it is first of all by coming to terms with the past and looking at habit as a reservoir of information, and not primarily as something to reject. Rather something to robustly encounter. Not every rejection leads to something new and not everything new is necessarily better. It is also, following Peters, by sharpening a “listening to the ‘calling’ within what is there”⁹⁸ that one might discover difference within the same, and this ‘listening’ needs to constantly be called upon, produced, tuned, rehearsed and assessed. Over and over again. And again, this production indeed takes place every time ‘spontaneously’, in improvisation and in composition, under the proviso that the ‘instantaneity’ of spontaneity include all its relations, not only a ‘suspended’ and isolated slice of time. Consequently, the difference between improvisation and composition is not that the former is spontaneous and the latter is not. They can both be said to be either *always* spontaneous or *never* spontaneous because in dances that present the body live on stage both are always produced real-time, and a production, like the language used to communicate it, is not personal or individual, because it itself carries with it the knowledge, meanings and the values of the culture it exists in. Meaning is not ‘ours’ alone to command. The ‘of one’s own accord’ of spontaneity must be brought in relation to where, with whom and when ‘one’s own accord’ takes place. There one may find more specifically how dance improvisation and composition differ.

Improvisation could become less ‘celebrated’ and more fully affirmed. In a more rigorous and affirmative understanding of improvisation, the new is to be found or felt in the ability to recall, inhabit, revise and renew the old, which, when called upon, is always there in the present tense. The new of improvisation is not “the embodiment of freedom, but rather a search for it in the here-and-now of the work’s becoming.”⁹⁹ A search that requires a psychophysical effort and discipline paramount to any freedom wishing to be capable of willing the future, a “future always past”¹⁰⁰, because of its being dynamically anchored or rooted in it. For something to be forgotten, something must be first remembered. This is not exclusive to improvisation. It is an essential part of composition as well. It is, in fact, an important characteristic of any dancer or performer who is able to embody freedom positively. A freedom *to*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Peters, G. (2009) Op. Cit. p.5

⁹⁹ Peters, G. (2009) Op. Cit. p.72

¹⁰⁰ Peters, G. (2009) Op. Cit. p.167

¹⁰¹ Peters offers a philosophical analysis of the difference between a ‘freedom from’ and a ‘freedom to’, considering the former ‘negative’ and the latter ‘positive’ in: Peters, G. (2009) Op. Cit. p.141-2

O'Donnell's description of 'OFC' as a process which includes both discussed and rehearsed guidelines in advance (the past) as well as the invitation to 'anarchically' challenge the boundaries of what has been previously discussed and rehearsed in the present-tense of a performance recognizes that the outcome (the future), even if it aims to communicate particular meanings, will always be different, precisely because it is irrevocably rooted in its past.

2.3 ‘Unconscious’, ‘Authentic’ versus ‘Conscious’, ‘In-authentic’

“Artistic authenticity asks of the artist something he can not give. The ‘conscious’ effort to express oneself spontaneously is a contradiction in itself.”¹⁰²

Descartes, Lehrer posits, “divided our being into two distinct substances: a holy soul capable of reason, and a fleshy body full of ‘mechanical’ passions.”¹⁰³ This dichotomizing of the body and mind, of doing and thinking, has strong, long-standing roots, and it persists to this day, despite the rigorous attempts to abandon or overcome Cartesianism in dance and dance training in the 20th and 21st centuries.¹⁰⁴ What could the reason(s) for this be? A possible reason for this is that some practitioners have perhaps become overly seduced by the power of certain ‘catch’ words and, seduced, started employing them in such a way that an original interest in abridging the gap between mind *and* body, reason *and* emotion, became, instead, a reinforcement of the gap. Perhaps seduction led these practitioners to ‘stop thinking’. ‘Don’t think’ may well mean that what is desired by the one saying it is in fact an invitation for the recipient to allow the ‘body’s intelligence’ to take over, to allow sensation to eloquently ‘speak’ its language through the body, to avoid unnecessary ‘rational’ censorship, to be ‘released’ from unwanted or unnecessary constraints. If this is so, why say it in the negative form?

Can a healthy person actually not think?¹⁰⁵ What one can perhaps do, if appropriate and wanted, is to learn how to think differently.

Spontaneity seems to be a word that, in its common, uncritical usage, tends to more emphasize the mind-body, thinking-doing gap than help it be either abridged or diminished. Wenninger’s quotation in the beginning of this section clearly points to this. Spontaneity is often conflated with an immediacy that seems to exclude, or ban altogether, conscious thought. Consciousness, or how it is loosely associated with rational thinking, seems to, especially in improvisation, corrupt the ‘naturalness’ provided by spontaneous action, making it look in-authentic, fake or mannered. Consequently, dancers, especially

¹⁰² Wenninger, R. (2009) *Künstlerische Authentizität. Philosophische Untersuchung eines Umstrittenen Begriffs*, Koninghausen & Neumann p.34, translation is mine

¹⁰³ Lehrer, J. (2009) Op. Cit. p.10

¹⁰⁴ There is here not enough space to go over this fascinating history, but as indicated in Chapter 1, much of what has happened in the 50 years covered by this thesis, had, in a very direct way, to do with a mind-body holism, even though one could certainly note that, at different times, a side of this binary has been more strongly examined than the other.

¹⁰⁵ Jonah Lehrer, following Damasio, presents the incapacity to think as a pathology. In: Lehrer, J. (2009) Op. Cit. p.15

improvisers, travel incredible distances in order to try not to think, so that they can look authentic, real or natural. But to whom one may ask?¹⁰⁶

Wenninger's quotation suggests that in order for an artist to be authentic he must act spontaneously and that the conscious effort to act spontaneously, according to her, is an impossibility, for spontaneity as a notion seems to demand the absence of conscious thought or reflection on the part of the artist.

In the book from which the quotation has been taken, Wenninger embarks upon a lengthy analysis and critique on how Danto differentiates Style from Manner. Here but a very brief summary: For Danto, according to Wenninger, an artist's style expresses the artist's way of seeing the world spontaneously and immediately, and it is not acquired or learnt. An artist is also, in some sense, blind to his Style, and therefore unconscious of it. Manner, by contrast, is separated from the artist; it is acquired by technique and hence presupposes that the artist is aware of it. Style can transform into Manner insofar as becoming conscious of one's style destroys the immediate, spontaneous relation to it. The artist stands in a non-reflexive relation to his style. Manner on the other hand, presupposes reflection.¹⁰⁷

If we conflate Danto's Style with the colloquial language of dance improvisation and his Manner with the one of dance composition we arrive at revealing similarities, namely:

1) Improvisation is often equated with a practice motivated by a drive or need for self, real or authentic expression, and that in order for expression to be of the self, real and authentic, one must be able to 'inhabit the moment' without concern or thought for how the self has actually become the self, that is, to its history, preparation, including the acquisition of technique. One acts of 'one's own accord'. The self is in this way essentially free, or phrased differently, this particular kind of freedom is essential for the spontaneous, unhindered, unconscious, immediate and unmediated expression of the self.

2) Composition, on the other hand, is often equated with a practice not primarily motivated by a drive towards self-expression, as the artist, if concerned with expressing something, he rather expresses a pre-determined set of goals or intentions, usually someone else's, the choreographer's, and in this way the dancer is more a medium who, through his

¹⁰⁶ Peters, asking for a more rigorous and Kantian approach to the notion of 'community', that is by means of Kant's 'sensus communis', criticizes not only how improvisers tend to claim that improvisation promotes freedom, but also that such freedom is legitimized by the community improvisers are part of. One could infer that this legitimization is not critical enough.

¹⁰⁷ Wenninger, R. (2009), Op. Cit. pp. 57-80. Translation is mine

technical and cognitive abilities, learnt and remembered, expresses the particular identity of the work, *not* himself.

3) In improvisation the artist is also often seen as creative and active, whereas in composition as re-creative and passive, and because of being re-creative and passive, less capable of spontaneous acts of thought or imagination.

We have already seen that experienced improvisers consistently attest to the contrary. For an improviser to be good (qualified as such by the recognition he is granted by the community he is a member of) he needs reflection and practice, not only prior to the act, but the act itself does not exclude reflection or thinking. One could also say that the notion of consciousness, by means of language, is itself the product of the meanings we learn and reproduce. What happens in improvisation is “*fast and articulate thinking*.”¹⁰⁸ The improviser needs to have an understanding of what matters at any given moment in time in the frame of the improvisation, and commit to his decisions, even if to “decide not to decide”¹⁰⁹ and this will change from improvisation to improvisation. This commitment is not a commitment to himself, but rather to the improvisation, to the project at hand.

The complexity in composition of doing particularly *this* at a particular time in a particular pre-determined (or pre-conditioned) relation also asks the dancer to think and make fast and articulate decisions, as they conjure up the ‘known’. This however gives no guarantee that the known, predetermined or pre-conditioned, will happen exactly as planned. Dancers of composed pieces are aware that no movement or moment will ever be fully the same. A large part of the work of such a dancer is to find ways to get, through rehearsal, as close as possible to what the movement was or should be. One ‘goes after’ exactitude with the knowledge that the ‘exact’ is never to be achieved. What one does is calibrate one’s psychophysical actions on a *scale of approximation*. An approximation to an impossible ‘exact’ and therefore always not-the-same. The difference, therefore, is not that in improvisation one does not think and that in composition one does. In both one always thinks, but one might be invited or required to think differently. The difference is intrinsically bound to the particular constraints of the work and the kind of opening, or freedom, the work asks for, allows or facilitates. This is paramount when attempting to

¹⁰⁸ Kent deSpain, analyzing Nettl’s argumentation that composition is slow and improvisation is fast, agrees that the transmission is indeed fast, but one needs to take into account the months and years involved in the ‘programming’, ‘contexting’ that produces this fast response. In deSpain, K. (1997), Op. Cit. p.75

¹⁰⁹ Burrows, J. What is Choreography to be found at <http://www.corpusweb.net/answers-2935.html> Accessed on May 10th 2010

define or 'pin' the difference between dance improvisation and composition and to 'pin' the differences between one improvisation and another, and one composition and another.

Weninger posits that Danto's distinction between Style and Manner (and here improvisation and composition) does not hold, because it bases itself on a static, reductive either-or cognitive relation. She proposes a more dynamic, inclusive relation, in which Style and Manner (improvisation and composition) are profoundly enmeshed.

In order for spontaneity to become more than a worn out trope and a notion capable of more fully and meaningfully affirming the 'spur' of moment, either in improvisation or in composition, one needs to expand one's understanding of spontaneity to include in it the moment of spontaneity's temporal-spatial-ideological-attitudinal-intentional relations. This is how Belgrad has, paradoxically, understood spontaneity as cultivation. This is an understanding O'Donnell's description of 'Open-Form Composition' enables.

2.4 A movement of thought: Lehrer, Whitehead through Belgrad, Fosters, Peters and O'Donnell

Lehrer says that “the default state of the brain is indecisive disagreement, and the mind, like an editorial board, is an extended argument. It is arguing with itself”¹¹⁰. If the brain is always disagreeing with itself, he then asks, how can a person ever make a decision? His answer is that, *at first glance*, “the rational parts of the mind force a settlement, intervening and putting an end to all the emotional bickering”¹¹¹, but taking a closer look at the problem one concludes that the brain is much more dynamic and relational than that, and that different situations require different cognitive strategies. Except in cases of illness or pathology, emotion *and* reason are always active, only in different degrees and relations. How one decides should depend on what one is deciding. Simple problems, the ones with well-defined options, the mundane problems of daily life, are best suited to the conscious brain. Complex problems on the other hand require the processing of the emotional brain, which does not mean that one “can just ‘blink’ and know what to do. Even the unconscious takes some time to process information.”¹¹²

Is dancing then a simple or a complex problem? Is dance improvisation more complex than composition? As demonstrated so far in this chapter dance improvisation and composition involve both consciousness *and* unconsciousness, thinking *and* feeling, knowing *and* not knowing. The simplicity or complexity of the one and the other becomes more clearly manifest when what is desired or aimed at by the artist in relation to his project, and what the project requires, is accordingly revealed. How such revelation (communication) occurs conditions the outcome. What particular, different decisions serve and generate must come to the fore, even if they begin with and lead to ‘indecisiveness’. The means through which these decisions are facilitated play a crucial role in the fulfillment of the artist’s project.

Belgrad’s identifying Whitehead’s Process Philosophy’s influence on the ‘Culture of Spontaneity’ of the 40’s and 50’s may lead one to think that Whitehead already knew what recent findings in Neuroscience demonstrate about thinking, feeling and their relation to the brain. Whitehead’s Process Philosophy emphasizes ‘becoming’ and changing over static

¹¹⁰ Lehrer, J. (2009) Op. Cit. p.199

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p.203

¹¹² *ibid*, p.238

being. It argues that the language of development and change are more appropriate descriptors of reality than the language of static being. In *Process and Reality* Whitehead posits that “every real-life object may be understood as a series of events and processes. In his philosophy the subject emerges from the world and not the other way around.”¹¹³ For Belgrad, Whitehead’s ideas were congenial to the avant-garde of the 40’s and 50’s because it “entertained alternatives to conventional thinking and his insistence that empiricism [knowledge derived from sense-experience], not arbitrariness [based on random choice or personal whim], was the means to discover such alternatives” and, as already mentioned, “because of his distrust of conventional forms of communication.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, the body in Whitehead’s philosophy takes center stage. Belgrad concludes that, for Whitehead, the “primary act of identity consists not in a Cartesian self-consciousness, but in a vaguer sense of environing realities pressing on us, mediated kinesthetically by the body, including the nervous system and the sense organs. Individual experience is not a hopelessly self-referential monologue, as the organization of the body testifies.”¹¹⁵

O’Donnell’s most recent description of ‘OFC’ posits that “ ‘OFC’ is arrived at through the creation of a series of processes, some set [closed or pre-determined] and some improvised [open or undetermined] in ‘form’ for each dancer. These lead dancers to experience live decision making on stage while [*also*] giving them definitions and outlines that act as ‘Holding Forms’”¹¹⁶. O’Donnell’s bringing together of the ‘known’ and the ‘yet-to-be-known-again’ which have to be continually negotiated real-time in a series of processes (therefore never fully closed, always in flux) and her emphasizing of the experience of the dancers as central to how decisions are made in real-time, experiences of *both* thought and feeling, are congruent to how Lehrer and Whitehead (by means of Belgrad) present the complex and non-dichotomous nature of human agency. Therefore, the colloquial language of spontaneity, in order not to be a ‘dead end’, exhausted and over-determined, nor a mere reproduction of ‘silent’ and invisible systems of thought learnt, must itself be brought into a process or flux of continual negotiation as well.

¹¹³ Sherburne, Donald W. (1995) “Whitehead, Alfred North,” in Robert Audi (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. From Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whitehead/> Accessed on May 9th 2010

¹¹⁴ Belgrad, D. (1998) Op. Cit. p.124

¹¹⁵ *ibid* p.126

¹¹⁶ O’Donnell, M. (2010) *World of Proximity. Dance is to Be Found Everywhere*, unpublished but freely available at www.releasedance.com pp.143-145 Accessed on May 1st 2010

Scholars Susan Foster and Gary Peters, like O'Donnell, understand the dynamic space between the closed *and* the open, the composed *and* the improvised, the 'known' and the 'unknown'. Foster positing that through the 'openness' of improvisation, that is, a "composition done extemporaneously, on the 'spur of the moment', one goes beyond what one knows, because in improvisation one makes use of all one knows plus what one could not know before, and in this one is 'taken by surprise'"¹¹⁷, and Peters, not fully agreeing with her, positing that, instead, through improvisation one is asked to engender, over and over again, in an 'eternal return', a return to the open, originating, emerging space of art. A return that does not create the 'new' implicit in the 'beyond' of Foster. Rather a renovation of what has been there already. Peters in a way asks us to get to know something anew, whereas Foster lays focus on the new. He asks us, by liberating the concept of freedom from discourses of emancipation, to rethink freedom in a way that, once remembered, it is preserved in the artwork. Memory, and the prioritization of the past, he says, "is able to be conceived in conservationist rather than conservative terms: the conservation of freedom understood as the infinite opening of the artwork"¹¹⁸. Given spontaneity's strong bond to discourses on improvisation we need to get to know it every time anew, over and over again.

This is what O'Donnell's 'OFC' encourages and facilitates. Her 'OFC' brings both Foster's and Peters's understanding of improvisation *as* composition together without, in practice, privileging either. Its language, from the start, brings the dancer into a position in which he needs to more fully commit to both himself *and* the work at hand, where 'freedom' is always already constrained, and constraint always already necessarily a condition for freedom and an opening wherein difference occurs.

¹¹⁷ Foster, S. "Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind" in: Cooper, A. & Gere D. (2003) *Taken by Surprise. A dance Improvisation Reader*, Wesleyan University Press pp.3-4

¹¹⁸ Peters, G. (2009) *Op. Cit.* p.2

2.5 Conclusion to Chapter 2

Improvisation and composition in dance are known through one another and are therefore inseparable. Spontaneity, if understood and communicated without reflective and contextual rigor, without being understood as a practice or cultivation as Belgrad suggests, will not be able to do justice to the complexity and potential of dance, be it considered to be improvised or composed. The spontaneous in dance needs to be more than a ‘slip of tongue’, supposedly un-thought, unconscious or un-reflected. How one makes and disseminates (communicates) one’s work and ‘forms’ one’s desire must be taken into account. If the spontaneity and the ‘openness’ commonly attached to the practice of dance improvisation is to be understood as being intrinsically connected to (more) freedom, and consequently to augmented forms of movement and mobility, then it comes at a price: enhanced responsibility.

O’Donnell’s ‘Open-Form Composition’, because of the complexity imbued in and engendered by its ‘inclusive’, ‘both-and’ character, precisely because the outcome is never to be fully predicted, more clearly asks or forces its ‘agents’ to consciously take and inhabit the necessary time to consider what the best course of action is, to recognize “unspoken relations, unsaid hierarchies, undeclared demands of particular subjectivities and positions”¹¹⁹. Consciously taking and inhabiting the necessary time may lead one to need to ‘stretch’ time in a process of production, calling for more (enhanced) patience, perhaps different skills, a particular type of rigor and control, and a distinct relationship to risk, that is, to what is worth taking a risk for, the kind of risk, with whom, where and when. This is what roots O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ into the 40’s and 50’s as described by Belgrad. O’Donnell has also not rejected the past, neither has she harbored an anti-sentiment towards dance tradition(s). Rather, she has critically, but positively, made use of them in order to make sense of a *particular* work’s becoming. A becoming that changed in accordance to the conditions and circumstances of her work over time.

My analysis in this chapter has been partially informed by how less experienced dance artists today describe improvisation. In order to check whether this analysis would

¹¹⁹ The Committee for Radical Diplomacy, “Radical Diplomacy” in: *Vocabularies*, Rojo, Zechner, Kanngieser (eds.) 2008, p.103

hold when scrutinizing how a more established and experienced dance artist today describes improvisation, and its tension with composition, it is important to choose such an artist.

My choice is João Fiadeiro. The choice for him, as but one of a number of choreographers, young and less young, who critically engage with the practice of improvisation today, is not gratuitous. His explicit critique on forms of improvisation which claim to enable or generate authenticity and spontaneity appears, on a first reading, to be very close to how I have here criticized, with O'Donnell's 'OFC', the colloquial usage of spontaneity as a means to describe and legitimize dance improvisation as distinct from dance composition. Recognizing how 'seductive' the description of his method is, and committing to remain aligned with Whitehead's distrust of languages that exaggerate a perception in detriment of another, I find it crucial to engage in a closer reading of what he writes about his work.

In the next chapter I will therefore embark upon a close reading of Fiadeiro's current¹²⁰ description of his 'Real-Time Composition' and attempt to show that it differs from O'Donnell's 'OFC' in that his 'Real-Time Composition', despite its efforts, is here apprehended as remaining 'caught up' in a Cartesian, dichotomous mode of thinking, which her 'OFC' is not.

¹²⁰ Current because Fiadeiro seems to regularly update/upgrade the blog on which he presents his 'Real-Time Composition'. For any changes after the date it has been accessed (May 3rd 2010) please refer to <http://atelierealttextctr gb.blogspot.com/>

Chapter 3

O'Donnell's 'Open-Form Composition' in 2010

Improvisation in the early days had a clear stance as to the reasons why it was being practiced. What it wanted to 'move', open or change was evident. Also why it had to be seen as outside the high-art realm of composition. What is at stake for a number of the artists who today choose to call their practice improvisation is here perceived as not always as evident. Perhaps, one could think, improvisation has become more a life style, or another commodity one can purchase or 'swap' as experience in the neo-liberal economy of self-fulfillment or self-creation, than an artistic practice or project per se. Or improvisation (and the freedom it has allowed) has been replaced by other notions, such as 'experimentation', 'pragmatism' or 'research'.

Since the mid-90's, there have been substantial efforts to demystify or critically reassess the allure of the language and works of the pioneers, as for example with Burt's reading of the influence of the Judson Church in the late 90's and early 2000's, by means of the arguably 'conceptual'¹²¹ works of Xavier Le Roy, Jerome Bel, Boris Charmatz and others, or with Forsythe's highly compositional and main-stream 'Improvisation Technologies' and his subsequent call for a more cognitive kind of literacy for dancers and dance audiences alike in 'One Flat Thing Reproduced'. Have these attempts not been powerful enough to enhance or further illuminate the understanding of spontaneity's 'marriage' to improvisation? Are we today not being asked to, given how the world at large has been developing (climate issues, scarcity of resources, globalization's standardizing and homogenizing machinery, financial market's volatility and its highly speculative methodology) perhaps take a step back, stop, reflect and reconsider what being on the 'spur of the moment' of spontaneity might mean and the kind of freedom it provides and the constraints it might demand? Could it be that Belgrad's and O'Donnell's inclusive views on inter-subjectivity, body-mind holism, and an interest (respect) to nature may need to be recovered today as essential concerns for artists and non-artists alike? Could it be that

¹²¹ Bojana Cvejic offers an illuminating account of the attachment of 'conceptual' to the practice of some of these artists in Cvejic, B. (2006) "To End with Judgment by Way of Clarification". In: M. Hochmuth et al. (eds.), *It Takes Place When It Doesn't. On Dance and Performance*. Frankfurt: Revolver

O'Donnell's 'OFC' may be relevant today as it indicates that one may now indeed need to find ways to move through either-or constructs of thought because the world at large has become more complex? Could it be that we may need today to recall the exigency Belgrad has assigned to spontaneity in the 40's and 50's? Could it be that Fiadeiro's 'Real-Time Composition', in its pungent attempt to "imagine the world as if for the first time"¹²² so that "creativity can assert itself"¹²³ in such a way that one is able to, "instead of worrying [about what is to come] or about what [one has] left behind, 'waist' time listening to the signs of time and the signs of the body so that the rest will come by itself"¹²⁴, is in fact a move 'around' the urgency the world today might ask of us?

¹²² Fiadeiro, J. (date unknown) <http://atelierealtextoctrgb.blogspot.com/> Accessed on May 29th 2010

¹²³ ibid

¹²⁴ ibid

3.1 ‘OFC’ in Relation to João Fiadeiro’s ‘Real-Time Composition’

“The method of “Real-Time Composition” sustains that ‘to act freely’, even under the constraint of ‘real time’ (or rather because of it), presupposes a “distanced” reading of the context in which we are interpellated to act, as well as the control of the conditions of visibility of that movement. In a word, it presupposes that we are responsible for our actions. In our view, this is the only way in which a positively free gesture can take place. This kind of discernment and “cold-blood” [attitude] towards our own emotions and convictions, especially when confronted with the speed associated with real time, requires a training that calls for the mechanization of an “operation mode” whose ultimate goal is to “save time”, so that the most important element within the process of decision[-making] – intuition – may arise.”¹²⁵

The quote above is how João Fiadeiro’s describes his ‘Real-Time Composition’ method. On a first reading, it is very close to my understanding of O’Donnell’s ‘Open-Form Composition’ and to the stance towards spontaneity I have so far attempted to articulate. His is a method that aims to clearly distance itself from practices of improvisation that aim to produce the ‘new’ or non-habitual by means of a claim to authenticity and spontaneity.

What he names a ‘cold-blood’ attitude to one’s emotions and convictions is akin to the ‘slowing-down’ of time I suggested at the end of chapter two. Movement, in order for it to be generated, needs resistance. For a muscle to stretch, for instance, another muscle must contract. Fiadeiro’s call for a ‘distancing’, which implies repressing the emotional because of being ‘cold-blood’, his claim that such distancing is the *only* way in which a gesture can be free, and his positing that the ‘mechanization of an operation mode’ is the method through which a free gesture can be achieved need however critical attention. How he describes his method and its aims are here perceived as overly mechanical, high-brained, procedural, and most importantly, extremely prescriptive. Even though the ‘operations’ of his method aim at facilitating intuition, it over-emphasizes the rational. His description is consequently very Cartesian, that is, the ‘reasoning’ charioteer, the mind, has the reigns over the emotional horses by default. The ‘mechanization’ of his method, one could read, is also not far from how traditional technical dance training has been repeatedly criticized: First one should endure the constraints of form and then, and *only* then, one becomes free. The ongoing argument in the brain, between reason *and* emotion, has, in his method,

¹²⁵ Fiadeiro, J. (date unknown) found at <http://atelierealttextoctrgb.blogspot.com/> Accessed on May the 3rd 2010

already been settled from the start. Whatever is to happen is already rationally conditioned, and if one agrees, following Chaos Theory,¹²⁶ that original conditions affect the result, though they are never to be fully predictable, one could imagine what the result might be.

Fiadeiro's 'Real-Time Composition's' call for an 'arresting' of time by means of a well-thought, controlled, and 'distanced' holding-back from 'spontaneous', unplanned action into the never-to-be-fully-known future is similar to the notion of 'inhibition' present for instance in the practice of 'Alexander Technique', through which one learns how to perceive a habitual (detrimental) psychophysical pattern and at the same time 'inhibit' it so that, through Ideokinesis¹²⁷, one is able to reconfigure the pattern in such a way that it becomes, over a time of diligent practice, a pattern more beneficial to one's body (less pain therefore more mobility, beneficial). This appears to be similar to the practice of 'stillness' in 'Release Technique' as proposed by O'Donnell, with its "Constructive Rest"¹²⁸ position as the usual position from which one starts to engage with a thoughtful exploration of imagery, except that, importantly, in O'Donnell's 'Release' images for consideration are *only initially* anatomical and postural. Later on these images may arise from *a number of* sources, including personal history, human emotions, dreams, wishes, memories, future projections, and strong reactions, and do not necessarily aim at something 'better' or more beneficial. Rather at individual body-mind integration (holism) and at consistent individual creativity, whatever this may mean to the individual in question. This is how 'Release' has directly influenced and in-formed her articulation of 'Open-Form Composition' as an inclusive, encompassing notion, which, as already seen, involves one's intuition, judgment and abilities, all called upon when deciding whether to *further* open or close a form depending on the *particular* art project at hand.

If 'Open-Form Composition' is at all to be considered a method, it is then a method for understanding, measuring and coming to terms with one's particular artistic desire *in relation* to the context one's desire exists in. Desire, however, is here not to be understood

¹²⁶ Chaos as defined scientifically, that is, systems in which long-term prediction is impossible, where however their future dynamics are fully determined by their initial conditions. <http://www.universetoday.com/guide-to-space/physics/chaos-theory/> Accessed May 23rd

¹²⁷ An educational approach to posture and movement which makes use of visual and kinesthetic imagery to point the student towards healthier posture and movement.

¹²⁸ This is a position of biomechanical 'neutrality' that aims at promoting three dimensional breathing, visualization techniques, circulatory enhancement, and a pain-free positioning of the spine. A person lies in supine position with a one-inch book or a folded towel under the occipital ridge; knees are gently bent with feet planted on the ground. Lower back is flat, chin is tucked and the hands rest on the pelvis.

as the Lacanian notion that portrays it as the “impossible relation that a subject has with the *object petit a*, that is, a fantasy that functions as the cause of desire”¹²⁹, rather as the strong feeling of something already intensely there. Desire in ‘OFC’ is engaged with as being ‘real’ and positive, not as ‘fantasy’ and as a lack. ‘Open-Form Composition’ is a way of thinking and a mode of looking at the incipience of form in dance in which there are no ‘grand’ narratives or prescriptions, rather individual guidelines which are continually in flux because of continually being brought into negotiation. It is a stance one takes, in which one consciously grants time to the observation and contemplation of desire *already there*, psychophysically, ‘ratio-emotionally’ embodied, as well as time to observe the possible consequences of what one does with one’s desire. This seems to be similar to how Fiadeiro describes his ‘Real-Time Composition’. There are however, on a closer examination, important differences, namely:

1) Fiadeiro says that in his ‘Real-Time Composition’ “the body observes what it is doing while doing it, therefore the focus is not on body experience but on its representation”¹³⁰. O’Donnell says, as seen in chapter one, that the journeys engaged with in ‘OFC’ provide for continual renewal of method and experience. Fiadeiro binds observation to representation and posits that precisely because of this bind the focus of his method is not on experience. In other words, he separates observation and representation from experience. However, is an observation not an experience? Is an experience not the observation of facts and events and the realization of the impressions it leaves on someone? If so, how can then the representation of an idea, image or feeling not involve experience? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his method might favor *some* experiences more than others. O’Donnell, on the other hand, acknowledges from the start that experience is always there and that all experience is real, and that depending on the situation, a method may need to be renewed, for if experience changes, the method may need to change as well.

¹²⁹ Kirshner, Lewis (2005) Rethinking Desire: The Object Petit A in Lacanian Theory, in: <http://www.apsa.org/Portals/1/docs/JAPA/531/Kirshner-post-p.83-102.pdf> Accessed on May 14th 2010

¹³⁰ Fiadeiro, J. (2007) If You don’t Know Why do You Ask? An Introduction to the Method of Real-Time Composition, in: Gehm, S. , Husemann, P. and von Wilcke, K. (eds.) *Knowledge in Motion, Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance*, Transcript Verlag p.102

2) Fiadeiro says that he (and consequently ‘Real-Time Composition’) “struggles with the trained body of the dancers and with the linguistic conventions of dance.”¹³¹ O’Donnell has never had a ‘problem’ with the trained bodies of dancers. How she describes ‘OFC’ is evidence of her appreciation for ‘trained’ bodies as well as for non-trained. Fiadeiro appears to want to replace the linguistic conventions of dance with another convention. O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ more clearly enables a plurality of narratives to emerge, as it does not prescribe overarching criteria neither for the creation nor for the assessment of works. Instead, it asks for the clear communication of criteria that are specific to the project at hand. The criteria of the choreographer and the criteria of the individual dancers.

3) Fiadeiro says that ‘Real-Time Composition’ is “not a style, but rather a tool, a work ethic, a way of looking for different ways of representing things, an openness to the various possibilities of art making.”¹³² O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ is, as here suggested, also a work ethic, and as seen just above, an openness to the various possibilities of art making. However, one must be critical when Fiadeiro states that ‘Real-Time Composition’ is not a Style. The choice of one’s tools inevitably affect what one is able to produce, and since his tools are so clearly determined from the start, one may wonder whether the works which emerge from his method are also not determined. Perhaps what he means is, following Wenninger’s critique on Danto’s Style of chapter two, is that his method realizes that consciousness and reflection are indeed *sine qua non* conditions in a generative, creative act. This is in line with O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’. However, his critique on the ‘spontaneous’ and ‘authentic’ of some discourses on improvisation, because of his call for an ‘extreme consciousness’ does not, precisely because of being extreme, allow for the dynamic relation Wenninger and O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ call for. His method may aim at facilitating a variety of possibilities of art making but the language he uses to explain it may lead one to question it. His language is dichotomous from the start, and therefore it hints at a bias.

4) His ‘Real-Time Composition’ aims to “protect the interpreter from what he wants, because what he wants is exactly what prevents him from listening to himself, to others, and to the space that surrounds him.”¹³³ This again seems more to accentuate the ‘gap’ between the ‘one’ and the ‘other’ than facilitate the union it aims at. ‘Protecting’ one from

¹³¹ *ibid* p.103

¹³² *ibid* p.103

¹³³ *ibid* p.104

what one wants also clearly understands ‘wanting’ in the negative. Despite the honorable Zen leanings of ‘working on not wanting’, one may ask who can actually achieve this. O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ brings the ‘one’ and the ‘other’ into dialogue as an initial condition.

5) ‘Listening’ for Fiadeiro, is a “basic condition for the ‘correct’ application of the method, and as a consequence the only way one is sure that things come as a revelation, a discovery, and not just as a virtuous exercise or confirmation of what one already knows.”¹³⁴ His ‘listening’ can indeed be seen to be aligned to Peters’s call for a ‘listening’ in improvisation, to the listening of O’Donnell’s ‘Release’, and to the ‘listening’ or ‘awareness’ many dancers attach to improvisation. However, his ‘correct’ application implies that there is a ‘wrong’ application, and that he, because being the founder of the method, is the one to have the qualifications to judge whether his method is applied appropriately or not, whether one ‘listens’ correctly or not. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with Fiadeiro ‘wanting’, one could infer, to mark a territory for his thinking. However, does how he describes his method ‘prevent’ him from what he himself wants? Is his method itself not a virtuous exercise of what he already knows? His being ‘certain’ that what emerges out of his method is a revelation may be precisely the determination he attempts to counter or refute.

6) In ‘Real-Time Composition’ one begins from a mode of doubting, which Fiadeiro calls the ‘critical zone’ to move on to a letting go of the “extreme consciousness associated with the critical zone which he calls ‘Dig in’.”¹³⁵ Once this has been established the interpreter will be in a “position to let go of wanting to ‘produce meaning’ without losing his ability to differentiate what he does and how he does it. This allows the interpreter to acquire complete freedom to act within a referential cartography.” The freedom to act within a referential cartography can be said to be synonymous to the agency of O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’, in that one is simultaneously free *and* bound at the same time, given the particularity of a project. One’s freedom is framed so to speak. However, the ‘completeness’ of his freedom seems to subvert what he actually claims. How can freedom be complete if it is already bound? Besides, how can one ‘let go of producing meaning’ if the focus of his method is on representation, and not experience, as seen above? Does representation not entail an opening to meaning or significance precisely because it is re-

¹³⁴ *ibid* p.104

¹³⁵ *ibid* pp.104-105

presentation? O'Donnell's 'OFC' not only strongly focuses on experience. It also does not begin with a mode of doubt, that is Cartesian, as does Fiadeiro's 'Real-Time Composition'. It starts with one 'being with' one's desire, which, as already mentioned, is apprehended as positive and not as lack. One's desire is already an encounter with an-other.

7) In 'Real-Time Composition' there is a "main axis in the action to what all subsidiary, peripheral actions are subordinate, and that is the only way in which the coherence and logic of the preceding action can be maintained during a change of 'order', a coherence that is preserved despite the fact that there is no script and no pre-established future. A future that, in reference to Derrida's 'avenir' is not foreseeable, but simply surprises us."¹³⁶ Fiadeiro's main axis can perhaps be seen as similar to O'Donnell's 'Holding Form' and 'Responsible Anarchy', both intrinsic to her understanding of 'OFC'. The 'Holding Form' being the forward progression of information necessary for the many-faceted meaning of a piece to be transmitted to the audience; Responsibility being likened to a river bed and Anarchy to the river, with both carving out the identity of the work simultaneously. However, the preserved coherence Fiadeiro claims, one which does not have a script nor a pre-established future deserves scrutiny. Fiadeiro's method "puts the interpreter in the position of mediator and facilitator, blocking his impulse to manipulate the event, so that, his creative act, should there be any, amounts to the mastery by means of which one lets 'things happen' by themselves."¹³⁷ What does exactly 'letting things happen by themselves' mean? Can one 'self' ever be fully emptied out? Is a mediator or facilitator not always 'implicated' by the simple fact that he mediates or facilitates in a particular way? If Fiadeiro's method is indeed primarily focused on representation, how can the self, the entity which actually enables representation, not be involved? Is his focus on representation rather an attempt to go beyond it?

¹³⁶ *ibid* p.107

¹³⁷ Fiadeiro, J. (date unknown) found at <http://atelierealttextocrgb.blogspot.com/> Accessed on May the 14th 2010

3.2 Conclusion to Chapter 3

Fiadeiro's method rigorously aims at drawing one's attention to the in-between, argumentative space-time in which decisions are made, decisions between what 'is' and what 'is not', 'yes' and 'no', between appearance and disappearance, presence and absence. A space-time where everything seems to be possible, at the same time that, after a decision is made, there can only necessarily happen *this one* thing, until a new space-time emerges and, consequently, a new decision is bound to be made. This is in line with how Lehrer shows how the brain works, that is, always in negotiation, as well as with O'Donnell's 'OFC'. What is here perceived as problematic is the discourse he uses to describe this space-time of negotiation, or decision-making, as it so clearly favors the rational brain. If one agrees with Lehrer that simple problems, the ones with well-defined options are best suited to the conscious brain and that complex problems on the other hand require the processing of the emotional brain it follows then that Fiadeiro disguises the simplicity of his method with the language of a potential complexity (emotion) the method does not seem to allow.

As has been the case with spontaneity, following Whitehead's suspicion of discourses that exaggerate a perception in detriment of another, I have also regarded Fiadeiro's discourse with suspicion, as this chapter has demonstrated. His language has been seen as dichotomous throughout, and that subverts what he seems to aim at. His positing that his method provides the 'only' and 'correct' way to produce the revelatory 'new' appears to ignore the fact that different artistic problems, if they are indeed different, need different solutions, and different solutions may need different methods. The creativity one needs today in the world, so that diversity and difference may have a chance, does not happen by itself as the result of an apparently disinterested 'wasting' of time as he posits. One should instead learn from the past in the present-tense, and, with care, contribute to the creation of a future less impregnated with waist.

Conclusion Overall

This thesis has been written in such a way that each chapter has contained both an introduction and a conclusion. Each conclusion, however, has not been understood as a finality, as a ‘fait accompli’, but rather as a key moment in the larger process of affirmatively answering the central question of this thesis, namely: Is O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’ a stance capable of abridging the improvisation-composition divide in dance? This process has been divided into three inter-related realms of enquiry.

Chapter one being the historical positioning of O’Donnell’s ‘Open-Form Composition’ and its anchoring into Belgrad’s exposition of what he calls the ‘Culture of Spontaneity’ of the 40’s and 50’s. This has been crucial for several reasons:

- To introduce spontaneity as a notion and its central position in discourses that differentiate dance improvisation from dance composition.

- To demonstrate that O’Donnell’s ideas in general and her ‘Open-Form Composition’ in particular have consistently been congruent to how Belgrad describes what was central to his ‘Culture of Spontaneity’, especially the influence of North Albert Whitehead’s ‘Process Philosophy’. This has allowed me, from the start, to present O’Donnell’s thinking as non-dichotomous, a characteristic she has maintained throughout her career so far and that has differentiated her work from other artists having similar concerns.

- To present the 40’s and 50’s as a time of extreme importance for the becoming of contemporary dance. A time not much used as a source to explain or verify recent developments in dance.

- To position O’Donnell in relation to well-known practitioners and scholars in the field because of my conviction that her work and ideas deserve a place of more prominence.

- To present, by means of O’Donnell’s ‘OFC’, the colloquial understanding and communication of spontaneity as problematic and therefore as deserving attention. Spontaneity must be seen as part of culture, not in isolation. It is a ‘cultivation’.

Chapter two being the critical analysis of dance improvisation and how the notion of spontaneity is communicated in order to explain and differentiate it from composition. Spontaneity was divided into three adjectival categories: The first dealing with ‘preparedness’, the second with ‘novelty, and the third with ‘consciousness’. This division

was a means to facilitate my argument, not to present the adjectives as independent from one another, as they have been understood to be deeply enmeshed one in the other. My analysis has been based on the answers my dance students have given when asked what improvisation is, on Belgrad's reading of Whitehead's 'Process Philosophy', on Jonah Lehrer's views on how decisions are made, on Susan Foster's and Gary Peters's understanding of Improvisation, and on Wenninger's critique on the difference Danto makes between Style and Manner, all as a means to affirmatively answer the central question of this thesis. The choice for these references has been relevant for the following reasons:

- My students' answers because they are here assumed to be representative of the main-stream Dutch Dance Educational System. Their answers have also been important because there are not many available sources concerning definitions of improvisation coming from young practitioners themselves.

- Belgrad's reading of Whitehead's 'Process Philosophy' enabled me to find a philosophical backing for my distrust that the colloquial, superficial communication of spontaneity in dance does not do justice to the complexity involved in dance, be it improvised or composed, a complexity which O'Donnell's 'OFC', understood as process, better allows for.

- Lehrer's positing that the healthy mind is always argumentative allowed for a neurological explanation that how one decides depends on the situation, therefore how one makes decisions in dance, be in improvisations or compositions, must take into account a number of relations, including what the artist commits to, with whom, where and when, not just the 'spur of the moment' of spontaneity as an isolated 'slice' of time. O'Donnell's 'OFC' enables one, from the start, an encounter with the plurality of relations just mentioned.

- Foster's and Peters's well-informed discourse on dance improvisation and how it differs from composition brought to light how the practice of improvisation is often associated with fostering a 'beyond' of what one knows. The former confirming it and the latter arguing against it, as instead of moving 'beyond' of what one knows, one rather enters the known again and again, which has been understood to be congruent with O'Donnell's 'OFC' and her positive and inclusive relationship to the past.

- Wenninger's critique on how Danto differentiates Style from Manner demonstrates that how he distinguishes the two, that is, unconsciousness being attached to Style (authentic) and consciousness to Manner (in-authentic) is based on a dichotomous, static relation between the two. She furthermore identifies that in Danto's Style spontaneity plays a key role, as it is apprehended as being crucial in the production of the authentic. She argues that it can not hold, for such a view can not account for a number of art practices in which reflection plays a central role, a role also key to O'Donnell's 'OFC'.

Chapter three being a critical analysis of how João Fiadeiro's describes his 'Real-Time Composition' method and its aims. This analysis has been important because:

- Fiadeiro's description of what he aims at by means of 'Real-Time Composition' has been interpreted as being very close to my reading of O'Donnell's 'OFC', especially his distrust towards forms of improvisation that claim to generate a 'spontaneous' and 'authentic' agency on the part of the performer or interpreter and his explicit recognition of how important thinking is in dance.

- It helped me locate O'Donnell's ideas in the 'now' of dance production and dissemination. First by identifying apparent similarities and then, on a closer reading, by observing crucial differences, which have been established based on how their ideas are communicated. This has served my argumentation in favor of 'OFC' as a stance capable of abridging the divide improvisation-composition in dance in that it demonstrated how extremely important the use of 'language' is in the production and dissemination of an art work and that dichotomous, 'exaggerated' discourses must be more thoroughly and critically scrutinized, rather than celebrated and popularized. The most 'extreme' and challenging position one could perhaps today take is one of a thoughtful awareness of how 'caught up', implicated 'in the middle' one actually is.

How I explored and exploited the referential materials of this thesis has allowed me to affirmatively answer my central question and to contribute to a debate in dance that has been perceived as not settled. This thesis has, hopefully, made a point concerning the relevance of re-igniting the debate. Not however to safely and clearly place dance improvisation and composition in separate taxonomic, hermetic 'boxes'. Rather to demonstrate that they are indeed different, but at the same time intimately, inextricably connected. In order for the differences to be more fully articulated the language employed

to communicate them must be critically and rigorously assessed. An invitation to a fuller articulation is what the image of the 'bridge', in its verbal form, has attempted to generate in the formulation of my central question. 'Abridging' recognizes the two sides of the duality, acknowledging the differences at the same time that it connects them. It is also a transitional plane one must necessarily go through in order to move from one pole to the other. I hope I have been able to show that O'Donnell's 'OFC', as a mode of thinking about dance improvisation and composition, provides such an articulation.

Even though an answer has been found to my central question other important questions have arisen. These questions have here not been explicitly answered. This indicates that there is still work to be done, and this is good. Besides, this thesis has not fully capitalized on the amount of knowledge already existent in the field, in particular Whitehead's 'Process Philosophy' and its applications in the art field today, how the notions of authenticity and spontaneity have historically come to form a 'language bond' in the arts, and Neuroscience's recent findings concerning decision-making. All three would, on their own, deserve a much larger project. Nonetheless, I humbly foresee possible implications and applications of what I have been able to 'gather' in this thesis, namely, that how dance improvisation and composition come to be produced and disseminated may come to need to be critically reassessed, especially when apprehended as separate identities. This entails that the avenues of production and dissemination of dance improvisation and composition (education on all levels, production, criticism and scholarship) may also come to need to rethink how they communicate, verify and legitimize the difference. I foresee also a stronger alliance between science and dance, where the advances of Neuroscience and technology for instance would enable one to more specifically identify, understand, and communicate the differences and similarities between the generation of dance improvisation and composition.

Finally, I recognize that one cannot avoid 'taking sides', even if for just a moment, provisionally. In writing this thesis I have deliberated and taken the side of O'Donnell's 'OFC' because it more positively and constructively recognizes how provisional the body and dance actually are. This is here deemed to be a more ethical stance not only to dance making, but also to one's being in the world. The responsibility her 'OFC' lays on the dancer acknowledges that freedom is always precarious and, because of that, it needs to be

handled with care, a care that needs to be present as well in how one disseminates, for instance, a call for freedom itself.

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Appendix¹³⁸

“I think improvisation is a way to express oneself in a way that has not been planned before. Improvisation can be used to create something, solve problems and it can help one to get out of difficult situations (but it can also get one into difficult situations). Improvisation happens all the time. Every day one improvises something.”¹³⁹

“Be there. At this moment, at this place. Make choices or choose not to choose. Take time.”¹⁴⁰

“To improvise is to move from an inner source, mentally or physically, out into concept, context or not at all.”¹⁴¹

“Improvisation is a way to move without thinking beforehand what to do. The movement that comes out of you in that moment because of the mood, task, thoughts, etc.”¹⁴²

“Improvisation is action and reaction with a specific sensitivity to a moment in a specific moment in time and space. Specific in ideological terms, but un-specifically open in terms of how an idea becomes concrete.”¹⁴³

“Improvisation means the ability to move in space and time without having a plan of how one will move. It is to be able to be open for any kind of situation on a mental and physical level. Through improvisation one can get to know qualities and emotions from a different perspective. Improvisation is the greatest way to find myself, to rediscover my personality and its different colors. Improvisation makes me feel satisfied.”¹⁴⁴

“On the one hand improvisation means to let go of one’s habits and on the other to use habit in order to improvise. I like to improvise only if I feel emotional or when I feel that I have something to say. I prefer to improvise on my own. Improvisation also means relaxation.”¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ This appendix consists of the answers given by the 3rd and 4th year dance students of the ArtEZ School of Dance to the question ‘What is Improvisation?’. Students were asked before the teaching actually began. Classes took place between January and April 2010.

¹³⁹ Carita Lahteenmaki, guest student from Finland

¹⁴⁰ Irene Cortina Gonazales, 3rd year dance student from Spain

¹⁴¹ Debbie J., 4th year dance student from NL

¹⁴² Laila Luukkonen, guest student from Finland

¹⁴³ Barbara Ebner, 4th year dancer-maker student from Germany

¹⁴⁴ Elisa Marshall, 4th year dance student from Costa Rica

¹⁴⁵ Ornella Marcwicka, 3rd year dance student from Poland

“Improvisation is a platform to experiment and experience with all that is new. It is to combine the mental/intellectual with the movement/physicality.”¹⁴⁶

“Improvisation is the basis of dance. A foundation where everything in dance is created from. It is a playground where the connection between the brain and the body and the emotional experience all comes together.”¹⁴⁷

“Improvisation means for me to show emotions and the state one is in in the moment. To dance how one feels and to express that emotion. Also to feel free in how and what one is expressing and to play with your body-mind connection within seconds to decide.”¹⁴⁸

“Improvisation means for me to rely on my intuition and to do what at each moment seems to me to be the best. It is to use my surroundings as inspiration source and develop from there. Above all it is to not be afraid of how it looks like.”¹⁴⁹

“Improvisation for me is a space where everything is possible, at the same time that there can only happen this one thing that takes place, after a decision is made. And that is what needed to be.”¹⁵⁰

“Improvisation is to make choices in the moment. Doing something that is not set before it happens. Following the movement until it is completely finished, and even further, or breaking it, in the middle. Improvisation is doing your thing and doing the opposite. To go into the uncomfortable, unfamiliar places and stretching borders, but especially to indulge in the task at hand and enjoy.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Denise Klevering, 3rd year dance student from NL

¹⁴⁷ Myriam Silevis, 3rd year dance student from NL-Pakistan

¹⁴⁸ Dirk Jeukens, 3rd year dance student from NL

¹⁴⁹ Romanna Delauw, 3rd year dance student from NL

¹⁵⁰ Katharina Malong, 4th year dance student from Germany

¹⁵¹ Eline van Ark, 4th year dance student from NL