

Regarding Vulnerability and a Creative Process

1.1 Defining Vulnerability.

The direction of this creative/investigative process and the construction of an art work that departed from the concept of vulnerability led me to look for its meaning and then choose whether to feed from those words or -alongside the group of dancers- try to make a definition of our own. The research of the concept was focused mostly on the physical, emotional, physiological and spiritual aspects of the word, since I believed those paths would offer an easier access to vulnerability. Some descriptions were helpful and we kept to them, while others were discarded since they didn't fit the purposes of this investigation. Amongst several annotations that psychologist James J. Messina Ph.D. -member of the American Psychological Association- has granted to the term, he refers to vulnerability:

- a) allowing of oneself to search and probe the past for hidden or unresolved emotions, feelings or grief responses that lie at the root of current immobilized emotions, feelings or actions;
- b) feeling of being fragile, weak or susceptible to emotional pain and suffering;
- c) opening of yourself to the possibility of growing as a person in your emotional and spiritual dimensions;
- d) relating of your innermost feelings and fears to others with the possibility that they might use those feelings and fears against you;
- e) willingness to take chances and try new experiences, challenges or activities even though the outcome is unsure. (LiveStrong.com)

These definitions gave me a much clearer understanding of the word and clarified the path I wanted to follow in terms of the creation of the exercises and in leading the process; they helped to create strategies that would be an opportunity for the dancers to access hidden emotions, fragility, pain, etc.

It was also after these definitions -and some others which were not included in this document- that I was able to shape in a better manner the definition of vulnerability that I coined for myself to then share with my dancers in the hopes there would be a resonance:

Vulnerability and being vulnerable are about letting go of a sense of safety, comfort and control. Vulnerability can be the greatest strength you will ever have to live your life when you accept that you are, have been and always will be vulnerable. Vulnerability is

life-saving in the sense that accepting it can make your life fuller, it adrenalizes, it makes the heart beat faster, it makes life worth living; it is accepting life and being open to it, to everything it can give and take away from you. Vulnerability is not life-threatening -though this attribute has sometimes been assigned to it. It is life-affirming and life-giving.

As Madeline L'Engle writes in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, “It is easier to be safe than vulnerable (but)... to be alive is to be vulnerable” (193). Actress Elisabeth Shue also speaks of vulnerability and her conception of it in a similar manner as L'Engle and myself: “...the vulnerability I've always felt is the greatest strength a person can have. You can't experience life without feeling life... being vulnerable is not a weakness, it's a strength” (Shue).

1.2 Defining Body & Bodies.

Before taking on this research project, I was already keen -and had started- to explore vulnerability by using my body as the primary means for its investigation. After carefully examining the definitions found and after reading what Messina, Anne Bogart, Kazuo Ohno and many others spoke about both vulnerability and its direct bonds to the body, the mind and the spirit, I decided to focus the approach via bodily experiences that I would develop for the dancers to try out. In order to have more clarity and give more clarity to the reader as to what body meant for me and for this paper,

I investigated several meanings of the word; the first is a mere anatomical notion found in the website OxfordDictionaries.com that speaks of the body as “the physical structure of a human being or animal including the bones, flesh and organs” (“Body”). I also came across French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thoughts about the body and how he speaks of it as “a living organism by which we body-forth our possibilities in the world... (and) the current of a person's intentional existence is lived through the body” (qtd. in MythosandLogos.com). The importance of this last definition lies in the fact that it helped me in figuring out how we might be able to 'body-forth our possibilities' with the exercises that were developed for the dancers; furthermore, if 'a person's intentional existence is lived through the body', then the simple will to exist implies that a person -whether knowingly or unknowingly- is bound to face some sort of vulnerability throughout the course of their existence, which is at all times supported by the body, since it is the body itself the one which connects us to the world, our own interface. Therefore, this investigation about vulnerability had to be lived through the body.

For the development of the process I decided to attend to the body and its conceptions as *physical body*, *emotional body*, *mental body* and *spiritual body*. Interpreting Barbara Ann Brennan's words, the physical body is an extraordinarily complex machine that allows all the higher levels of consciousness to manifest within the physical plane of existence, while at the same time not actually being those higher aspects of consciousness. It also has its own consciousness, distinct from the mind and emotions... the consciousness of the body as a whole. She considers the emotional body as the one that is “associated with feelings” (50) and as for the mental body, she states: “this body extends beyond the emotional and is composed of still finer substances, all of which are associated with thoughts and mental processes. The mental body is also a structured body. It contains the structure of our ideas... Habitual thoughts become very powerful well-formed forces that affect our lives” (50-51). Lastly, the spiritual body is the one described as the carrier of the will. It is also described as the locus of higher spiritual emotions, such as the unconditional and universal love for all life and, it is the body “through which we experience spiritual ecstasy... we combine the love of humanity, our basic human love for our fellow humans in the flesh, with the spiritual ecstasy found in the spiritual love that goes beyond the physical reality to all the realms of existence” (53).

Before moving on, I would also like to state my own definition of body:

Body is a vessel. It is the carrier and container of mind, thoughts, emotions, feelings, sensations, will and history of a person; I even dare say that one body can contain much of the history of all the physical world. Body is the physical means through which I experience life and what it has to offer at every specific moment. Body is my connection to the world and to other inhabitants of the world -whether inanimate or alive. Body is the entity through which I can live, experience, learn, love, feel, see, perceive and understand what happens around me and within me. Body is not just physical, it encompasses the emotional, the mind, the esoteric, the etheric and the spiritual. And yet, body remains a mystery to me, one through which I continue to learn and one that I am in constant awe and discovery of.

1.3 Development of the Investigative/Creative Process and the Tools Used.

In this section I elaborate on the main approaches used to structure the process. Lastly, I include a reflection on what vulnerability meant for this process to then lead the way to the methodology.

1.3.1 Butoh.

One of the paths I chose to structure the investigative process was the incorporation of Butoh-informed practices that were emotionally intense and physically challenging. Butoh is a movement language that began in Japan in the late fifties, developed by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno -they parted ways later and kept on their own explorations of what it was and meant for each of them. Butoh was born out of post-war Japan as a search for a new identity, to establish meaning for a society after defeat. Butoh is regarded as 'the dance of darkness' and it is an exploration into the unconscious, into the realm of the imagination and shadows. It also investigates the pre-history of man and the primordial, the soul and the spirit.

I was originally introduced to Butoh in 2005 by Diego Piñón -a direct disciple of Kazuo Ohno- at Butoh Ritual Mexicano, located in Tlalpujahua, Michoacán, Mexico. Diego refers to this type of dance and training in this manner:

As human beings used the energy of nature to survive, they created the first primitive forms of movement. In the Butoh dance we relive the sense of these primitive forms as a way to rescue all the lost parts of the human being. Butoh questions our habitual actions, expectations, and judgments.

Butoh challenges us to awaken and explore all human qualities ranging from the subtle to the outrageous, both beautiful and ugly. Butoh seeks the emergence of the deeper self, to touch if only for a moment, the inexplicable matter of the human soul.

Through this process of transforming our daily life by transforming our dance, we can offer more creative energy to our community. (ButohRitualMexicano.com)

I must clarify that Diego's version of Butoh -though deeply connected to its Japanese origins and to Ohno's work- is at the same time distant from them. Diego has given it a meaning for himself, for his artistic quest and for his context as a Mexican Butoh dancer and choreographer. He has often talked about how Butoh can connect body, soul and spirit; how they can be deeply touched by it and ultimately

freed and brought out in the open, thus achieving a higher, more loving and more honest recognition of ourselves as human beings and of the world we inhabit. It is Diego's type of Butoh work that I've learned and with which I am working with in this thesis as one of my tools.

1.3.2 Performance Practices.

Another key element for the development of the work was the concept of Performance Practices created by dance artist Deborah Hay. I was introduced to them in 2009 by choreographer and dancer Jesse Zaritt. In the foreword to Hay's *My Body, The Buddhist*, Susan Foster -Professor of Dance History at UC Riverside- refers to Performance Practices as explorations of a specific theme that allows the dance to develop from its daily practice. One of the things that interested me most about the performance practices was that Hay talked about the possibility that the body could become “a site of exploration to which the dancer must remain vigilantly attentive. Body does not succumb to the dancer's agency -striving, failing, mustering its resources to try again. Instead it playfully engages, willing to undertake new projects and reveal new configurations of itself with unlimited resourcefulness” (xvi). With each different performance practice proposed by Zaritt, my body arrived to a place of constant physical and emotional risk and surprise; it strongly followed new impulses, new ways of moving and I found that my body did not 'succumb to my own agency'.

A performance practice is always an experiment. You can take whichever theme interests you, no matter how ambiguous or possibly senseless it may be, and work on it. You can create the one that you want to investigate, one that ultimately moves you into action. The time of the it is usually 40 minutes, but it can vary. A performance practice is never set.

What deeply piqued my interest was that these performance practices had a reward that came less from mastering specific skills and more from the sense of the body unfolding as a site of infinite possibilities. If one was able to not impose one's own will and desire for certain results or experiences, anything was possible -from finding new ways of moving and being constantly surprised in the improvisation and research to remaining still for the whole practice, the possibilities were unlimited. I wanted to create practices that aimed for this kind of surprise in the work and in the development of

material. I wanted to see how the performance practices would affect each dancer in her own personal process as well as in the collective.

1.3.3 Use of Voice.

I fed the process with vocal teachings by Italian actress María Teresa Dal Pero and Peruvian actor's trainer and pedagogue Daniel Prieto Bravo -both of whom I worked with years before. I chose to work with the voice because I found it was, as Dal Pero stated in a 2005 workshop, “a very personal channel of investigation in which you know and discover yourself and in which you understand that you can go beyond the borders of your physical body” (qtd. in Herrera Larios 20). It was through the voice -and by extension of the rest of my body as a whole speaking entity- that physical, spiritual and emotional fibers were discovered, touched and ultimately expanded, offering me a richer creative palette. French psychoanalyst Denis Vasse said, “through the voice, consciousness opens up to the unconscious at the time that man opens up to himself and to others” (qtd. in Pavis 145). The vocal exercises I experienced -and from which I fed for the creation of some strategies in the process- freed the energy and the imagination, the voice went through the whole range of its possibilities. I discovered how feelings were directly connected to sounds and wanted to explore with the dancers the potential that the use of the voice would have in them. I believed that the use of their voices would offer them a new possibility of exploration of their bodies from a different perspective -one that they were not used to practicing.

1.3.4 Improvisation.

Improvisation has been one of the tools I have been most frequently exposed to during my dance training and education and it has provided me with learning that you can't find in a technique class. I believe improvisation can show you who you are, a way in which you can just be and move like you are -regardless of any technique or learned movement. I believe that improvisation constantly gives the opportunity to discover one's true way of moving, “because with improvisation you aren't right or wrong, you just are” (Halprin 44).

I decided to use improvisation because what interested me most about exercising it with the dancers was the opportunity that there existed for being surprised and for encountering the unknown. Susan Leigh Foster, in the book *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, says that

the improvising dancer tacks back and forth between the *known* and the *unknown*, between the familiar/reliable and the unanticipated/unpredictable...

The *known* includes any predetermined overarching structural guidelines that delimit the improvising body's choices...

The known also includes an individual body's predisposition to move in patterns of impulses established and made routine through training in a particular dance tradition as well as the body's predilection for making certain kinds of selections from a vocabulary or a sequence of movements...

The *unknown* is precisely that and more. It is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be 'taken by surprise'. Yet we could never accomplish this encounter with the unknown without engaging the known. (3,4)

I was also interested in breaking patterns in the performers through improvisation, not out of rebellion but in order to try to see if new paths would open up to them. As Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. describes, in dance improvisation the mind can “break away from constraining patterns of thought to facilitate divergent thinking” (185) and thus new and unexpected ways of moving.

1.3.5 Music.

Music was an important element to the development of the research process and the exercises. Many of the strategies proposed were aided by it. Music served as a provocateur of emotions which manifested themselves in the dancers' physicality, after a particular sound or sounds elicited movement. Rolando O. Benenson speaks of the biological effects of sound and music in people:

- a) muscular energy increases or decreases according to rhythm stimuli;
- b) breathing is accelerated or changes in regularity;
- c) a marked but variable effect on the pulse, blood pressure, and endocrine function is produced;
- d) the impact of sensory stimuli is reduced in different ways;
- e) fatigue is reduced or delayed, and consequently muscular hardening is increased;
- f) voluntary activity such as typing is increased, and the muscular reflexes used in writing, drawing, etc., are lengthened;
- g) changes may be induced in the electrical leads of the body;
- h) changes in the metabolism and the biosynthesis of various enzymatic processes may be induced. (25, 26)

The purpose of using music in the exercises was to facilitate accessing into certain physical states and states of consciousness that I wanted to investigate. I believed that the use of music would help in findings new states of being and perceiving within the dancers. Music is a language that I believe speaks to a more sensitive and spiritual part of our beings rather than just to a more intellectual aspect of who we are. Therefore I chose to use music so it could speak to the dancers, elicit in them whichever associations and feelings, and ultimately bring them all out via their own physical movement.

Many are the choreographers and directors who have also employed music to accomplish certain states of sensibility in their performers and profit for the creation of their scenic work; amongst them I can name artists I have worked with in the past like Kathleen Jewett, Zap McConnell, Mayra Morales, Dahlia Nayar, Diego Piñón, and Susana Wein; I can also mention renowned artists Peter Brook, Anna Halprin, Ohad Naharin, Claudio Valdés Kuri and Robert Wilson.

1.3.6 The Words of Other Artists.

Reading Anne Bogart and Tim Etchells, I found myself closely empathic to what they wrote about creating an art-work, about the role of the performer and everything that needed to exist and be taken into consideration in order to make work, as well as everything that needed to be discarded.

Anne Bogart spoke of seven concepts -memory, violence, eroticism, terror, stereotype, embarrassment and resistance- that she found as recurring ones in her creative process; it appeared as though they were essential for any act of creativity. As I read her on, I realized how vulnerability was present in her writing and her experiences; I was eager to continue reading and start our work.

The following is a brief selection of what she speaks about each concept. The role of memory is that of an informant of one's artistic sensibilities; it plays a huge role in the artistic process, "the act of remembering connects us with the past and alters time. We are living conduits of human memory" (22). Violence is a necessary element in the creative act, not only regarding physical violence but a violence that distorts things one believes to be set and known, the violence of undefining, "removing the comfortable assumptions about an object, a person, words, sentences or narrative by putting it all back in question" (53). Regarding eroticism, Bogart mirrors it with the seduction a work of art and a performer conjure in front of an audience, "an authentic work of art embodies intense energy. It demands response. You can either avoid it, shut it out, or meet it and tussle. It contains attractive and complicated energy fields and a logic all its own" (62). As far as terror is concerned, she speaks of its use in the artistic endeavor, "the energy of individuals who face and incorporate their own terror is genuine, palpable and contagious. In combination with the artist's deep sense of play, terror makes for compelling theatre both in the creative process and in the experience of an audience" (79). She talks of stereotype in a positive manner, she advises the creator/reader to not fear it and reject it but rather to make it an ally, "you do not embrace a stereotype in order to hold it rigid; rather, you burn through it, undefining it and allowing human experience to perform its alchemy" (105). She connects embarrassment to the artist's capacity to keep him/herself open to the present moment and to whatever happens throughout a creative process, "embarrassment is a partner in the creative act -a key collaborator. If your work does not sufficiently embarrass you, then very likely no one will be touched by it" (113). Of the last concept she says

If resistances are a daily given and necessary ingredients to the flow of creativity and life, what is the best way to work with them? Here are a few ideas: first, recognize that the resistances that present themselves will immediately intensify your commitment and generate energy in the endeavor. Resistance demands thought, provokes curiosity and mindful alertness, and, when overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation.

Ultimately the quality of any work is reflected in the size of obstacles encountered. If one's attitude is right, joy, vigor and break-throughs will be the results of resistance met rather than avoided. (141)

Tim Etchells referred to two concepts: risk and investment. “Risk is the thing we are striving for in the performance but not a thing we can look for. We look for something else and hope (or pray to the gods we don’t believe in) that risk shows up. We know it when we see it... Risk surprises us, always fleeting -we're slightly out of control.” (48). Regarding investment, he wrote:

Investment links to passion, politics and rage. It slips out in laughter, numbness, silence. Investment happens when we're hitting new ground, when we don't quite know, where we can't quite say, where we feel compromised, complicit, bound up, without recourse to an easy position...

Investment wants us naked, with slips and weaknesses, with the not-yet and never-to-be-certain, with all that's in process, in flux, with all that isn't finished, with all that's unclear and therefore *needs to be worked out*..

Investment forces us to know that performative actions have real consequences beyond the performance arena. That when we do these unreal things in rooms, galleries and theatre spaces the real world will change. (49)

Every planning, rehearsal and conversation was imbued -sometimes consciously, sometimes not- with what they both said. Their words became invisible teachers who always accompanied all of us in the process and showed us a path to follow when in doubt.

1.4 Vulnerability Within the Creative Process.

All of the aforementioned techniques, approaches, exercises, concepts and practices were of great significance to the construction of the research process and to the creation of the piece. Making a process and a piece be about vulnerability meant that I would not always abide by what choreographic rules and guidelines stated. I didn't necessarily follow a traditional dance making process -in which I would take the role of choreographer, come up with movement, set it to music and then give it to the dancers to learn and perform it. There were times in which I didn't have complete certainty of what I was doing and I believe that that was unconsciously showing myself as vulnerable and raw -defined in Dictionary.com as “unnaturally or painfully exposed, as flesh, by removal of the skin or natural integument; painfully open, as a sore or wound; crude in quality or character; not tempered or refined by art or taste” (“Raw”). My creative process was more closely linked to experimenting, to trial and error.

One doesn't want to be vulnerable intentionally. You make a choice that you want to come to that place or it just comes to you, or you allow it to come to you and accept it. Vulnerability informed this process constantly in many ways, i.e. sometimes I had everything planned out and because of any given reason I decided to throw it away and change it at that moment; other times I didn't have anything planned and little by little figured out what to do in the studio. I tried to be open to changes, to be sensitive to them.

Vulnerability was not just a concept to be explored, it also became a concept that informed my creative process and my way of creating and directing in an open and many times undefined manner -in which I responded more to intuition, desire, will and feeling, rather than just to set rules and reason-, following particular hints of where to go according to my background and the influences I had as well as according to the will I had of creating from a place of vulnerability, truth and honesty. When I speak of honesty I don't relate to a supposed sense of “fairness and straightforwardness of conduct (nor of) adherence to the facts” (“Honesty”), I speak of a will and a task of remaining truthful to what the process unveiled, to what I wanted to do and to what happened throughout. And by truth I speak of my intentions and about who I am, who I have become as an artist, performer and creator; about remaining vigilant, responsive, attentive and faithful to the reasons why I set out to do this project in the first place.

The primary tool in a creative process is interest. To be true to one's interest, to pursue it successfully, one's body is the best barometer. The heart races. The pulse soars. Interest can be your guide. It always points you in the right direction. It defines the quality, energy and content of your work. You cannot feign or fake interest or choose to be interested in something because it is prescribed. It is never prescribed. It is discovered. When you sense this quickening you must act immediately. You must follow that interest and hold on tight. If the interest is genuine and large enough and if it is pursued with tenacity and generosity, the boomerang effect is resounding. Interest returns volley to affect your life and inevitably alter it. You must be available and attentive to the doors that open unexpectedly. You cannot wait. The doors close fast. It will change your life. It will give you adventures you never expected. You must be true to it and it will be true to you. (Bogart 76)

This quote by Anne Bogart sums up what drove me to investigate vulnerability. I also went by it whenever I was in doubt during the process. It helped me in the creation of the work. With it I now give way to the Methodology section of this paper.