



**On the Emergence of Choreographic Material in
*Silent Pact****

**Acerca de la Emergencia de Material Coreográfico
en la Obra *Silent Pact***

**Sobre a emergência do material coreográfico no
trabalho *Silent Pact***

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***Artículo de investigación:** Critical reflection upon a choreographic process that evolved working from an intimate affective trace as a driving force in the work *Silent Pact* (2018).

En este ensayo desarrollo un análisis crítico sobre el proceso coreográfico iniciado desde un *rastro afectivo* íntimo como fuerza creativa para la creación de mi pieza de danza y video-danza *Silent Pact* (2018).

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Abstract

In this essay, I critically reflect upon a choreographic process that evolved working from an intimate affective trace as a driving force. In *Silent Pact* (2018), I developed a practice of layering and distilling movement material as an improvisational practice that allows the affects of the dancing experience to be at the centre of the creative process. I define affective trace as an embodied felt-object, an imprint of an intensity that gathers in the dancing. Considering the implications of the perspective of the present in embodied research, I arrive at the idea of thinking dance improvisation as a practice of attending to the emergence of movement forming. Informed by a working approach that involves creating aesthetically stimulating choreographic spaces, I argue for the making of space as a form of choreographic thinking in which both movement and space are produced together (McCormack, 2015) from a process of “affective commotion” (Thain, 1998). I draw on the ideas of relational movement by Erin Manning (2013) and on emergence as an opened-futurity by Elizabeth Grosz (1998) to advance understandings of the experience of sensing as a choreographic tool. In addition, I suggest that Manning’s proposition of placing relation at the centre of analysis offers a model for advancing practices of seeing in movement research. The essay concludes with a reflection on the implications of a model of emergence for ways of doing in artistic practice. This text is supported by a visual exposition hosted by the Research Catalogue¹.

Keywords: affective trace; dance improvisation; emergence; relational movement.

¹ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/491597/491598>

Resumen

En este ensayo desarrollo un análisis crítico sobre el proceso coreográfico iniciado desde un *rastro afectivo* íntimo como fuerza creativa para la creación de mi pieza de danza y video-danza *Silent Pact* (2018). Describo un proceso de estratificación y destilación de material coreográfico como una práctica de improvisación que permite que los afectos de la experiencia de improvisar estén en el centro de la composición. Defino el *rastro afectivo* como un objeto que se puede sentir en el cuerpo, como la huella de una intensidad que se forma en el acto de movimiento. Al considerar las implicaciones de la perspectiva del tiempo presente en la investigación desde el cuerpo, llego a la posición de pensar la improvisación de la danza como una *práctica de atención a la formación del movimiento emergente*. Desde una práctica de creación de espacios coreográficos, propongo la idea de la creación del espacio como una forma de pensamiento coreográfico donde el movimiento y el espacio se producen juntos (McCormack, 2015) a partir de un proceso de ‘conmoción afectiva’ (Thain, 1998). Propongo el marco conceptual del *movimiento relacional* de Erin Manning (2013) y el modelo de ‘*emergencia*’ como futuridad-abierta de Elizabeth Grosz (1998) como modelos para avanzar en la comprensión de la experiencia sensorial como herramienta coreográfica. Asimismo, sugiero que la propuesta de *la relación* como eje analítico (Manning, 2013) para desarrollar *prácticas de ver* en la investigación desde el movimiento. El ensayo concluye con una reflexión sobre el *modelo de emergencia* y sus implicancias para formas de hacer en la práctica artística. Este texto es acompañado por una exposición visual alojada en el *Research Catalogue*².

Palabras clave: rastro afectivo; danza improvisación; emergencia; movimiento relacional.

Resumo

Neste ensaio desenvolvo uma análise crítica do processo coreográfico iniciado a partir de uma trilha afetiva íntima como uma força criativa para a criação da minha peça de dança e vídeo-dança *Silent Pact* (2018). Eu descrevo um processo de estratificação e destilação de material coreográfico como uma prática de improvisação que permite que os efeitos da experiência de improvisação estejam no centro da composição. Eu defino o *traço afetivo* como um objeto que pode ser sentido no corpo, como o traço de uma intensidade que é formada no ato do movimento. Ao considerar as implicações da perspectiva do tempo presente sobre a investigação a partir do corpo, chego à posição de pensar a improvisação *da dança como uma prática de atenção à formação do movimento emergente*. A partir de uma prática de criação de espaços coreográficos, proponho a ideia da criação do espaço como uma forma de pensamento coreográfico em que movimento e espaço ocorrem juntos (McCormack, 2015) a partir de um processo de ‘choque emocional’ (Thain, 1998). Proponho a estrutura conceitual do movimento relacional de Erin Manning (2013) e o modelo de “*emergência*” como futuridade-aberto de Elizabeth Grosz (1998) como modelos para avançar a compreensão da experiência sensorial como uma ferramenta coreográfica. Da mesma forma, sugiro que a proposta *da relação* como eixo analítico (Manning, 2013) desenvolva *práticas de ver* em pesquisa a partir do movimento. O ensaio conclui com uma reflexão sobre o *modelo de emergência* e suas implicações para os modos de fazer na prática artística. Este texto é acompanhado por uma exposição visual hospedada no *Research Catalogue*³.

Palavras-chave: trilha afetiva; improvisação de dança; emergência movimento relacional.

² <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/491597/491598>

³ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/491597/491598>

Introduction

This essay explores the emergence of choreographic material in my performance and screen-dance piece *Silent Pact* (2018), a collaboration with voice artist Una Lee. The piece evolves from re-visiting an intimate affective event. Back in 2015, I received a letter from my mother with a poem entitled *Silent Pact*. Her letter tells the story of having to keep me in secret, as she got pregnant three months before her wedding. I discovered my real birthday was three months earlier than the date I celebrated all my life. Three years later, I was commissioned to create a performance for the International Women's Day in Belfast; the theme was women's silenced voices. After considering various stories of women that were close to me, I remembered my mother's letter. This intimate personal event became the driving force for creating *Silent Pact*.

I chose *Silent Pact* for discussing the emergence of choreographic material as the resulting work emerged from a particular set of conditions that was a move towards defining my artistic signature. *Silent Pact* stands out from other work I produced through developing facial expression, integrating the dancer's voice, and by moving away from vocabulary of any specific dance style. The emerging movement material was charged with emotional physical nuances, and facial expressivity that avoided the often focused-like expression dance improvisers have in performance.

My underpinning research interest centres upon finding ways to amplify the affects of dancing. I use affect as both the *what* of my research as well as the driving force of the *how* in my methodological artistic process. By attending to the affective forces riding within the moving experience, I found a thinking tool for investigating performance-making at the intersection of a philosophical concept – affect – and an embodied practice – dance improvisation. Drawing on Deleuze's perspective on affect as a passage of intensities (1988), I articulate a compositional approach that involves working with the body in motion. In the dance studio, I oscillate between dancing and orality as a technique to gain awareness of affect. In addition, my performance-making practice encompasses the creation of aesthetically stimulating spaces, which I will critically address using the framework of relational movement proposed by Erin Manning (2013).

My choreographic process involves working through multiple iterations of movement improvisation, which I use for generating movement as well as structuring of the piece. From engaging with a multiplicity of past experiences, yet with a desire for allowing something new to emerge, I developed a practice of composing from layering and distilling movement material. I work with no set scores. After each round of improvisation, a distillation of movement

ideas starts to happen; a kind of filtering with only some elements reappearing. New movement material starts to emerge. Elizabeth Grosz's notion of emergence as an open-ended future that encompasses both 'constrained and undecidable' (Grosz, 1998, 40) helped me to expand my understanding of this process of generating movement material, as well as for considering the conditions necessary for stimulating choreographic creativity.

The core themes discussed in this analysis evolved from a process of producing a spoken improvised commentary while watching the edited film documentation of the development of my own performance. Juxtaposing layers of movement improvisation with orality allows the semantics of the work to speak back to me, producing knowledge about my compositional process that moves between the artistic and the academic register. In the sections that follow I address the emergence of choreographic material, develop the notion of affective traces as an embodied experience, and finally, reflect upon the conditions required for the emergence of movement ideas.

The Emergence of Choreographic Material

In *Silent Pact*, the choreographic material emerged from a process of composing movement taking-form where I explore the possibilities for dancing afforded by a wedding dress and the spoken version of my mother's letter. Drawing on Deleuze's notion of *becoming*, Massumi defines *taking-form* as making that emerges through interaction (Massumi, 2002). Massumi's concept of *taking-form* serves to consider a choreographic process that focuses on working with dance material in motion. He argues that,

[w]hen a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation. The range of variations it can be implicated in is not present in any given movement, much less in any position it passes through. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own non present potential to vary. (Massumi, 2002, 9).

Massumi's idea of the body in transition is useful to reflect upon a compositional practice that doesn't aim to organise the body into a set movement vocabulary, but instead strives to work with the formation of corporeal expression as it unfolds through time. While other approaches to choreographic improvisation involve refining and perfecting movement, with the aim of stabilising the choreography into set material, I work with movement in the flow, never stopping to define shape or to set movement phrases, allowing the choreography to continue to be transformed in performance. In contrast to the work of improvisers who have influenced my work, such as Rosalind Crisp and Lisa Nelson, my interest on improvisation evolved to include the relations the body forms as it moves in space. In

dancing, my attention is on the poetic imaginary that emerges from the relationship between movement, objects and the female body. Using repetition, I allow the build-up of intensity of a dance movement, until it provokes a new pathway. Each project involves a unique assemble of materialities, which in turn requires the development of particular sensibilities. For *Silent Pact*, I was interested in the performative textures in Una's performance of the letter, and on the action of dressing up with a wedding dress.

In the dance studio, my strategy was to dance improvise over and over again with Una's voice, and the choreographic space. Manning offers a conceptual framework for thinking of this moving-with where relation is the

[...] making apparent of a third space opened up for experience in the making. This third space (or interval) is active with the tendencies of interaction but is not limited to them. Relation folds experience into it such that what emerges is always more than the sum of its parts. (Manning, 2013, 31).

Manning suggests that relation exceeds the elements that partake in the coming together, and from the excess something new emerges. In this sense, my choreography emerges from the excess of relational movement. Through this strategy of moving-with, I established a conversational practice of dancing from attending to sensations within my body, as well as moving-with the constructed choreographic space. Moreover, by applying Manning's proposition to my reflective practice of layering spoken commentary over the video documentation⁴, I found a viewpoint for seeing movement, extending the perimeter of the sensing body to the edges of the room, seeing the dancing within a wider field of relations. Integrating this new way of watching dance made me notice how the qualities of the dress affected my feeling of gravity and informed my movement.

What emerged from this relational movement approach? In the initial explorations of moving to voice, my dancing was bound to the meaning of the words, with moments in the narrative punctuating the rhythm in my improvisation. As we progressed in our rehearsals, Una's voice started to unfold new textures, offering me a musicality that provoked a fresh encounter with the text. Later in the process I found myself dancing to the performative and expressive qualities of her voice. Drawing on Daniel Stern (1985), I recognised a process of dancing from an 'affective attunement' to Una's performance, where spontaneous responsiveness of movement and voice were privileged over other forms of composition. By affective attunement, Stern offers a term for referring to the inter-relational dynamic of sensing and responding to the affect of others. This practice of attuning to each other's affective forces evolved into a choreographic practice of working from the affects that carry on within the process of multiple sessions of dance improvisation.

⁴ Refer to visual exposition of the process of making *Silent Pact* in the Research Catalogue for watching an example of the spoken work commentary over the video of the documentation.

Affective Traces

In practices and writings on somatic and improvisational dance are often references to paying attention to the present moment of moving. They place a particular emphasis on being in the present, and on the presentness of the activity. Sondra Fraleigh talks about the practice of present-centered awareness, which integrates teachings from phenomenology, somatics and Zen meditation (Fraleigh, 2015, 63). As a mindfulness tool, the notion of the present moment offers a way of grounding the mind, pulling it away from thinking about the future, the past, or from daydreaming. However, in my movement research, I found the concept of the present is problematic as a perspective for knowledge production. Is it possible to grasp a present moment of improvising in dance? Looking at the problem of the present in music improvisation, Michael Gallope suggests that '[t]he instant cannot be presented as a form of absolute knowledge without recourse to a mediating network of remembered or 'absent temporal intervals...'' (Gallope, 2016, 146). Gallope draws on philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch who argues that the now might be articulated as an instant formed by its just-before and just-after moments, together making an interval. For Jankélévitch, in the instant we get access to a consciousness of the present. Based upon this idea, Gallope suggests that '[t]his leaves us with access only to the uncertain and approximate poetry of the "almost inexistent"' (2016, 146). Gallopes' reflection resonates with my experience that the performances I create only exist in the moment I am performing them. Therefore, I want to argue for a definition of dance improvisation that integrates the interconnectedness of the tenses in lived experience and propose dance improvisation as *a practice of attending to the emergence of movement forming*, which constitutes —borrowing from Massumi— 'a field of emergence' (Massumi, 2002, 9).

Drawing on Massumi's perspective on the field of emergence, I can better articulate the doing that takes place in embodied research in dance improvisation. Emergence and formation of movement suggest working with the body in motion, thus, involving something of all three tenses of lived experience—past, present and future. In motion, I can sense a temporality that centres around what I'm doing in a particular moment in time. However, I encounter an impossibility in trying to recreate fully the present of movement improvisations. For instance, as in a 'pause and reverse' call —from Lisa Nelson's Tuning Score—, or when retrieving my movements by looking at video footage, I faced the challenge of re-inhabiting the exact same movements. While I cannot claim the skill to recuperate a present moment of dancing, I can attempt, perhaps more successfully, to re-enact the movement qualities that became noticeable through the sensing of an intensity. As in the example of a graceful movement, Manning suggests that,

[a] graceful movement is one that feels like it already carries the fullness of the movement passing within the preacceleration [meaning the virtual force⁵] of the movement taking form. Time collapses into an intensity of process, and what we feel is not the object of the experience but the flow of experience itself. (Manning, 2009, 96)

The idea of time collapses suggests the feeling of timelessness through the fulness of an experience that merges all three tenses. It is when the dancer experiences gracefulness in motion that a mark of intensity is formed; flow gets registered as it travels in the body. Thus, in trying to articulate the knowledge that emerges from embodied research, I find the idea of being in the present can be misleading. As a result, my work became about the traces of affects of the dancing experience.

I think of the trace as an accumulation of instances that register on the body because of their intensity. The experience of the affective trace is different from memory recovery. Drawing on Spinoza's perspective of affection as a trace, Massumi suggests that '[t]he trace determines a tendency, a potential, if not yet the appetite for the autonomic repetition and variation of the impingement.' (2002, 32). The concept of the affective trace appears to offer a felt-object to attend to when improvising; an object of attention that is embodied and belongs to my experience of dancing. As for intensity, Massumi describes it as

[...] the incipience of mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression, all but one of which will be inhibited from actualising themselves completely. (Massumi, 2002, 30).

Massumi's idea of inhibiting and actualising pathways offers another way of referring to the processes of layering and distilling that I endeavour to refine both practically and conceptually in this essay.

In the dance studio, I begin the practice finding stillness, from there I can sense movement impulses arising, which start to reduce as I choose and follow one particular dancing pathway. The next iteration, activating an affective experience of dancing requires establishing particular conditions for emergence, in which the choreographic space plays an important role. The creation of an aesthetically stimulating space as an environment fertile for choreographic improvisation is a central condition for the emergence of movement in my performance-making practice. The construction of such space evolves together with the choreographic work. Creating the choreographic space comes from motional impressions that involves a specific organisation of objects, colours, textures, and bodies in space which, together with the dance, provoke the unfolding of poetic meaning. In the following section I will argue that the making of spaces is a form of choreographic thinking that involves a co-creative process of working with dancing bodies and spaces.

⁵ In her book *Relationescapes* (2009), Erin Manning proposes the term 'preacceleration' to refer to the virtual –as that which is not yet happening– force of movement's taking form (2009, p. 6).

The Conditions for Emergence

In *Silent Pact*, I imagined the dance would take place in a bedroom, moments before the bride dresses for her wedding. In the room, there was a wardrobe and two women: myself as the dancer embodying the re-lived memory of my mother, and voice artist Una Lee as her silenced voice. The image evolved from a poetic relation among the bodies and the space where Una's voice is heard, but her body concealed, and the dancing body is seen, but her voice is not heard. Starting from this imagery, the central theme I wanted to explore was the story of a woman torn between her maternal feelings, and the religious and conservative values of her time, in the 1980s in Argentina. It was later that the idea of a mirror hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room (as seen in the image below) emerged as a more compelling, and practical way for conveying the silenced voice. Interestingly, during the performance, I discovered that, at times, the audience would see themselves in the reflection of the mirror, possibly becoming aware of themselves at watching the dance.



Figure 14. Choreographic Constructed Space in *'Silent Pact'*, PS Squared Gallery, March 2018. Photo: Una Lee. 2018.

In reflecting on the relation between the choreographic space and the dancing, I noticed that both processes informed each other, though their unfolding happened at different rhythms. During the rehearsals, the choreographic space mutated in response to the dancing happening within. This resonates with Derek McCormack idea that bodies and sites are produced together (2015). He draws on Alanna Thain's notion of 'affective commotion' (2008) to argue that 'rather than thinking about bodies and sites as discrete entities pre-existing the relations of which they are being composed, we are better understanding both as being produced together: the form and the force of bodies and sites emerges through and as relation-specific events.' (McCormack, 2015, 81).

Watching the video documentation, I could appreciate how the space informed my dancing by applying Manning's lens of relational movement. I observed my body extending to the edges of the fabric, my dancing reaching towards Una's voice, my moving in space conditioned by the objects in the scenography. Building on both McCormack's perspective of body and as space, and Manning's relational model made me consider the sculpting of the choreographic site as an affective response to my mother's letter that involves choreographic thinking as much as the dancing does.

Conclusion

In this essay, I articulated a way of thinking dance improvisation as a practice of attending to the emergence of movement forming and suggested that such perspective has theoretical as well as practical implications. Addressing the notion of the present in movement research, I proposed the concept of affective traces as a felt-object of attention that offers a choreographic tool for improvisation. I defined affective trace as an embodied imprint that forms within the dancing experience, different from cognitive approaches to memory. The creative proposition of layering and distilling extends as an approach to composition, working from the affects of movement forming. I advanced the idea that choreographic thinking can include other forms of creating, as the making of choreographic spaces. Looking into the future of the paradigm of emergence, it is important to examine 'the roles of the accidental, chance or the undetermined' (Grosz, 1998, 40) play in artistic processes. When we become skilful at any practice we may incur the risk of cultivating habits of doing-thinking. Therefore, the complexities of open-ended futures in modes of doing in artistic practice will continue to be the task of the artist-researcher.

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