

Embodied Learning: Pedagogy of Performance

by [Adam Zucker](#) December 29, 2018

"The importance of the body is indisputable; the body moves, acts, memorizes the struggle for its liberation; the body, in sum, desires, points out, announces, protests, curves itself, rises, designs and remakes the world... I think it's absurd to separate the rigorous acts of knowing the world from the body." -Paulo Freire, 1993

Kiss Solo by Gerard & Kelly 2012

Movement is an experiential activity that makes us aware of our three-dimensional space. We move for convenience, labor, pleasure, or to explore new possibilities. Putting our bodies in motion can also be a symbolic mode of creativity, which is evident in its long-standing history as one of the earliest art forms.

Although it has been difficult to trace the exact origins of creative movement, we fathom, from archaeological and historical research, that the

earliest humans incorporated gesticulation through dance, pantomime and theater (among other physically artful forms). Researchers believe that during the ice age, early Homo-sapiens and Neanderthals, utilized dance as a form of survival. For example, it is hypothesized that dance was likely an attractive way for a Neanderthal to gain the attention of a potential partner, which of course, was necessary to prolong the species (see: [Mithen, 2006](#)).

Movement such as dance, was prevalent in rituals (with spiritual and/or cultural intent) from the past, and remains a significant custom throughout the contemporary era. Performance (of which dance is a part of) is a type of embodied and experiential learning that enables us to communicate repletely through our gestures, contortions and physical expressions. When we engage in performative actions, we bring new meaning to the world we occupy through an exploration of time and space.

Acting out prior experiences or relating new knowledge in the form of 'whole body learning,' can make acquiring new knowledge and/or modifying existing knowledge more relevant and engaging. That is because it empowers the performers to connect significant meaning between their actions and the social, cultural, emotional and educational themes that envelop them on a daily basis.

In the educational sphere, students can be prompted to contextualize a lesson, by organizing a play, dance, or game, which makes the subjects that they are learning in the classroom more animated. Adding elements of excitement and collaborative participation is a very advantageous way to support students' lifelong learning encourage them to build upon their social skills.

In past *Artfully Learning* posts, I describe how performative projects by Lionel Cruet, Tania Bruguera and Jefferey Gibson, take into account issues of identity, collective culture, the history of marginalized people and the utilitarian function of art as a means for empowering and inspiring critical thinking and creative activity.

In the post [Embodied Learning Makes 'The Classics' Relevant](#), I discuss how Lionel Cruet's application of embodied learning helped to make Henri Matisse's *The Dance* (1910) more relevant to High School students in the Bronx, New York. Taking the impetus from the subject matter and title of Matisse's early 20th century painting, Cruet incorporated the activity of dancing into his art history lesson. He prompted the students to re-present the theme of the painting by choreographing themselves in an interpretive dance pose. The students appropriated the modernist painting in a very personal and relatable manner, by physically incorporating the visual imagery into their own aesthetic and symbolic language.

Other works by Cruet, such as his current installation *Reverb/Ensemble Space* (2018), on view at [Socrates Sculpture Park](#), invites the public to move about and interact with the sculpture in a multi-sensory manner. Visitors are encouraged to activate the space by moving their hands and bodies across a variety of materials, all of which are reminiscent of musical instruments. Moving across the sandbox styled floor and viewing the changing light, which gets refracted through the sculpture's translucent roof, adds to the complete embodied, multi-sensory experience.

Another [previous post](#) (see: [Performance of the Oppressed](#)), focuses on Tania Bruguera, a Cuban performance artist, whose work is rooted in community involvement and pedagogical models similar to John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Bruguera considers her artistic discipline to be "Behavior Art," which combines performance and pedagogy, and is more concerned with art's sociopolitical ramifications than with aesthetic or material outcomes.

Bruguera's performances are concerned with daily life and social interactions between groups of people within society. She is a steadfast and devoted advocate for art to be utilized for social reform, which gives marginalized voices a stage to be seen, heard and felt. Bruguera typically assumes a role as a choreographer, who is more interested in building relationships and co-learning experiences between participants and viewers

of her work. Bruguera states:

"I believe that education is the solution to all problems. I know it sounds a bit grandiose, but I think it should be everybody's priority. Education helps you deal with your feelings and it gives you options to act" – Tania Bruguera ([Petrik, 2017](#)).

Jeffery Gibson's multicultural and multidisciplinary artworks (see: [Tapping into who we are, what we know and who we know](#)), incorporate movement as a way to express intersectionality. For example, Gibson's [Like A Hammer](#) installation and performance combines club culture, Civil Rights era messages and a traditional Native American pow wow dance, which conveys his multifaceted identity as a Native American (Cherokee-Choctaw nation), an artist and a gay man.

Judson Dance Theater (Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, et al), Gerard & Kelly and [FluctT](#), engage in creative practices that combine dance, performance and visual art. Each of their unique styles address socially engaged issues by pushing the physical boundaries of aesthetic and symbolic representation.

Judson Fragments (1964)

Many of Judson Dance Theater's founding members met in Merce Cunningham's studio, while participating in a class taught by [Robert Dunn](#). The group's inaugural performance took place on July 6, 1962, and featured performances by Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Alex and Deborah Hay, Fred Herko, Elaine Summers, William Davis and Ruth Emerson. In addition to avant-garde dance, the collective frequently collaborated with experimental visual artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Rosemarie Castoro, Andy Warhol and Robert Morris.

Judson Dance Theater's style of performance was largely based on interpretation, and gave preferential treatment to the artistic process over the actual aesthetic product. The idea of process over product is a very important concept in both art and education. While we can reflect and access the final product, it is through the process that the best learning takes place. Ingold (2013) states that we 'think through making' rather than projecting an idea onto a readymade material. Through artful improvisation and experiential activities, we web together a series of experiences that lead to mindfulness. Then, during that moment of making, we gain insight to phenomena via an exploration of materials and techniques (see: [Making Our](#)

Another unique contribution realized through the collective's performances is the utilization of everyday actions and movements as dance steps. By incorporating daily routines and familiar activities into aesthetic and symbolic forms, Judson Dance Theater presented multi-media performances that were rooted in the day-to-day experience. In addition to developing dances based on commonalities, Judson Dance Theater was open and inviting to both trained and untrained dancers alike. For example, Yvonne Rainer's seminal performance *Trio A* (1978), which emphasizes routine motions and gestures, was taught to "anyone who wanted to learn it – skilled and unskilled, trained and untrained, professional and amateur."

The fundamental movements introduced through Judson Dance Theater's performances, makes contemporary dance and avant-garde art relatable to the general public. By centering on individualized improvisation and rudimentary motions, artful forms of expression are accessible to a large audience, and can be performed (improvised or appropriated) by practically anyone. The broken down instructions, simplified techniques and improvisational mindset, which are required of the performer, is indicative of instructional scaffolding and differentiation within the educational environment.

Tino Sehgal's Kiss

The Judson Dance Theater's influence can be seen in the work of Tino Sehgal, who incorporates both ordinary and intimate actions in his participatory based artworks. Like Judson Dance Theater, Sehgal's work is largely about the process over product. In fact, Sehgal's art is ephemeral in that it is only realized in real-time through performance. While Sehgal sets up and designs the parameters and choreography for each work of art, the presentation and delivery changes each time because the performers and venues are interchangeable. Sehgal generally works with volunteer performers who he trains to act out the movements within his works of art. The pieces are also heavily reliant on the participation of the viewers within the venue where the work is performed (see: [Participatory Learning: Artworks as Experiences](#)).

The common theory that Judson Dance Theater, and similarly artists like Joseph Beuys, Tania Bruguera and Tino Sehgal imply, is that anyone can engage in creative activities, which, with the support of instruction and peer-to-peer learning, is the crux of art education.

Artist/choreographer duos Gerard & Kelly and FlucT, also implore us to

rethink what we know about dance and art by blurring formal elements between the two disciplines, and using the body as a sensual harbinger of social justice. Within their compositions, each duo boldly confronts (and trounces) status quo characteristics of art and art history, such as the male gaze and the portrayal of femininity.

Gerard & Kelly was formed in 2003 by multidisciplinary artists Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly. The two collaborating artists work in a variety of media, which includes film, installation art and performance. They seek to examine, dissect and reconfigure the aesthetics of dance, subjectivity of personal memory, gender and sexual identity.

Gerard & Kelly's work challenges binary relationships within Western dance and visual art. Their work includes playfully poignant appropriations of contemporary artist Tino Sehgal's *Kiss* (2002), where they critique the longstanding tradition of heteronormative and gender roles within art history. While Sehgal's original performance re-presented iconic kisses between men and women, as seen in canonical works of art, Gerard & Kelly's *Kiss Solo* (2012) deconstructs the binary narrative with a performance featuring one solo performer enacting both male and female parts.

Kiss Solo reflects a somewhat similar discourse as Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985). Rainer's experimental film turned the framework of the 'male gaze' on its head by completely removing the physical portrayal of the female protagonist from the screen, leaving viewers with just the sound of her voice. Rainer uniquely cast two actors to play the lead male character, a misogynistic and philandering Manhattan professor. The two-faced, fluctuating male profile, along with eliminating the spectacle of feminine imagery makes damning commentary on the film industry's conventional chauvinism.

FLUCT at The Queens Museum

[FlucT](#), which consists of choreographers, [Monica Mirabile](#) and [Sigrid Lauren](#), are steering a bold movement of empowering dance and visual art. Through an amalgamation of personal experiences, collective consciousness, social and emotional learning and current events, FlucT explores the balance of power and its affects on the human psyche.

Mirabile and Lauren's aesthetic relationship imitates interpersonal relationships, in that their work is largely about the intimate interaction between two or more people. Sometimes they exhibit tender moments, while other times they express vicious turmoil. The performers, which include Mirabile, Lauren and occasionally a coterie of dancers, often build up momentum towards a climactic 'freak out,' where they gyrate and flail around in an improvised fervor. FlucT's enthralling performances are acts of catharsis and self-care, that comment on abuses of power. Therefore, the success of the duo is reliant on close their knit relationships, trust and good communication.

The aforementioned artists all use their bodies in an experiential learning process, seeking to make connections to the world around them, and

creating new meaning by exploring ways to make a profound sociocultural impact. To have self expression through sensuality is what enables us to have humanity. It is our "medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

While some schools have a unique dance curriculum, it would behoove all educators to consider the benefits of including movement such as performance and dance in their own curriculum maps. Creative movement can supplement more traditional visual art techniques like painting and drawing (i.e. the artistic processes of [Yves Klein](#) and Rosemarie Castoro, who incorporated gestural motions, inspired by dance, to realize the aesthetic forms and symbolic expression in their paintings and sculptures), or make art history lessons come alive.

Through embodied learning, students react to their world in a meaningful way, because they're exploring, relating and making insightful connections to outside stimuli within their own physical realm. When students are empowered to make use of their unique corporeal and cognitive resources in tandem, understandings derived from educational subjects become more passionate and impactful.

References, Notes, Suggested Reading:

Banes, Sally. "[Judson Dance Theater](#)". *International Encyclopedia of Dance*.

Dally, Jenny. "[In and Out of Line: Gerard & Kelly at the Farnsworth House.](#)" *Modern Living: The Farnsworth House*. 13 Dec. 2018.
<https://modernlivingfarnsworthhouse.wordpress.com/2018/12/13/in-and-out-of-line-gerard-kelly-at-the-farnsworth-house/>

Darder, Antonia. "Schooling bodies: critical pedagogy and urban youth." *Fine Print*. 35 (2) 2012. pp. 3-10.
http://www.valbec.org.au/fineprint/archive/2012/fp_2012-02.pdf

Freire, Paulo. 1993. *Pedagogy of the City*. New York: Continuum.

Guenther, Mathias Georg. 'The San Trance Dance: Ritual and Revitalization Among the Farm Bushmen of the Ghanzi District, Republic of Botswana.' *Journal, South West Africa Scientific Society*, v30, 1975-76.

Ingold, Tim. 2015. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

Mackrell, Judith. "Choreography is Dead. Long Live Dance." *The Guardian*. 27 Nov. 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/dance-blog/2013/nov/27/choreography-is-dead-long-live-dance>

Merleau-Ponty, M. 2002. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge.

Mithen, Steven. 2006. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Petrik, Jeannette, "Education is always about the future: An Interview with Tania Bruguera." *Temporary Art Review*. 20 Jul. 2017. <http://temporaryartreview.com/education-is-always-about-the-future-an-interview-with-tania-bruguera/>

Rainer, Yvonne (Winter 2009). "Trio A: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation". *Dance Research Journal*. 41 (2): 16. [JSTOR 27764529](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764529)

Stosuy, Brandon. "Performance duo FlucT on using your body to tell stories." *The Creative Independent*. 10 Sept. 2018. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/performance-duo-fluct-on-using-your-body-to-tell-stories/>