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## **Thinking on the move: Diffractive practices as embodied ‘agential intra-action’**

in cooperation with the two dancers: Sharna Fabiano and Sarah Jacobs

*Movement of thought and movement in actual space:*

| *Projection:*

### **Diffraction#0**

This presentation intends to develop along the line of what might be called *diffractive practices*, in order to stimulate and explore the notion of interference patterns within movement, including the movement of thought. My interest is in discovering the kinds of shared openings such “interference” may offer, through which to develop method *with* thesis.

The process suggests, in part, the setting of an experiment in interference patterns generated through the overlay of movements: A system of bodily measurements undertaken by dancers Sharna Fabiano and Sarah Jacobs, and this text, are considered as movements, where each is a reading through the other.

Set within this, is the recent piece by French choreographer L.Chétouane: ‘Sacré Sacre du Printemps’, a work, not only referencing the Stravinsky classic ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’, but equally appropriate to challenge if ‘thinking’ through or from, rather than about the body, already creates a non-representative space of knowing.

My approach is informed by the work of author and theorist Karen Barad and her concept of *agential realism*, that through the neologism of *intra-action* (instead of interaction) defines our practices of *knowing and becoming* as intertwined. I am interested to investigate if these recent ideas indeed provide a different sensitivity for the ‘unseen’, and the ‘Other’, as for that which is different in its very qualities, and does not yet belongs to our system of knowing.

### **Diffraction#1**

Though there is no significantly important difference between interference and diffraction according to the physicist Richard Feynman, there are some general definitions of *diffractio*n:<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Lectures in Physics*, Vol, 1, 1963, pg. 30-1, Addison Wesley Publishing Company Reading, Mass

- 1) refers to various phenomena which occur, when a wave, including sound waves, water waves, and electromagnetic waves such as visible light, X-rays and radio waves, encounters an obstacle.
- 2) if the obstructing object provides multiple, closely spaced openings, a complex pattern of varying intensity can result. This is due to the superposition, or interference, of different parts of a wave that travels to the observer by different paths.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) As physical objects have wave-like properties (at the atomic level), diffraction also occurs with matter and can be studied according to the principles of quantum mechanics. [...]

Iris van der Tuin clarifies diffraction as a method that is based on the definition first introduced by Donna Haraway as the attempt to gain “more promising interference patterns”<sup>3</sup>, offering access or analysis in order to disrupt linear and fixed causalities across various fields<sup>4</sup>.

Barad’s notion of *intra-action* has been developed out of emerging diffractive patterns as an approach of *turning around and inside out*<sup>5</sup>, that is in her definition the condition of *exteriority-within-phenomena* which results from ‘agential separability’. It does not define *exteriority* as separate or different, but as within the relations, that is the *phenomenon*. It diffractively builds a connection between words and things, allowing things and bodies to be active in processes of signification<sup>6</sup>. As a concept it thwarts representationalism<sup>7</sup>, defining knowledge not as a *matter* of applying pre-established standards to our experience, but rather as a *matter* of establishing and developing the reversible character of our bodily being in the world.

## **Diffraction#2 – ‘turn it around’**

In my example of ‘Sacré Sacre du Printemps’ the choreographer Laurent Chétouane demands from his dancers to be especially aware about their bodily reversibility in asking them to reverse their perspective: “It is the space looking at you and not you at the space. .. It is another relation: To relate first to the outside and then to you. First feel the outside and the outside will guide you. It is about you within that space.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffraction> (04.04.2013)

<sup>3</sup> D. Haraway, *modest\_witness@second\_millennium.femaleman@\_meets\_oncomouse*<sup>TM</sup>, 1997, p.16

<sup>4</sup> Iris van der Tuin, “A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics”: Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively, 2011, *Hypatia*, p.26

<sup>5</sup> K. Barad, *Intra-actions*, 2012, *Mousse 34*, p.77: “In particular, agential cuts enact a resolution *within* the phenomenon of some inherent ontological indeterminacies to the exclusion of others. That is, intra-actions enact “agential separability”—the condition of exteriority-within-phenomena. So it is not that there are no separations or differentiations, but that they only exist within relations.”

<sup>6</sup> Iris van der Tuin, “A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics”: Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively, 2011, *Hypatia*, p.26

<sup>7</sup> that also being established within the emerging field of ‘new materialism’

<sup>8</sup> Interview with choreographer L.Chétouane, 07.04.2013, Berlin

The apparent consequence is a movement that lets the dancers re/act ‘diffractively’, that means they send and receive slight impulses of interferences and interactions from and with the motion of another. It is not necessarily about being in contact, but about an acceptance and allowance for the emergence from the ‘inbetween’, an *intra-action* in Barad’s words.

Chétouane speaks about the challenge his particular method means for the dancers as to give up a certain control. “It is about reacting and organizing the space by perceiving the outside. [...] The perception of the outside organizes you. To give up the centered idea, also for the others around you - you have to find a relation to it, ... you have to let these things be guiding you.”

Michele de Certeau, in his comparison of the voyeur with the walker, analyzed the illusion of gaining an overview as “the fiction of knowledge” that hallucinates itself at an impossible outside position, “(for the lust) to be a viewpoint and nothing more”<sup>9</sup>. This objectification of the world as seen from a detached eye neglects that “all cultural practices and objects are embedded in society, since it is the body that inexorably links the subject to his or her social environment”<sup>10</sup> states M. Bleeker.

A necessity to conceive of this absent presence of the body in much more abstract terms than suggested so far is pointed out by Bleeker in her article *Mapping the apparatus*. She especially demands to acknowledge that the ways in which both the sense of the world and sense of self (as of being a body) emerge from the encounter of bodies within the world “is not the body we know and are aware of...”<sup>11</sup>

In her concept of *agential realism* K.Barad attempts a renewed possibility “to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role “we” play in the intertwined practices of *knowing and becoming*”<sup>12</sup>.

It is the ontological concept of representationalism, she indicates, that “disjoins the domains of words<sup>13</sup> and things”<sup>14</sup>, while inherently demanding for (their) linkage, as the postulation of knowledge. “The knowing subject is enmeshed in a thick web of representations such that the

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<sup>9</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984, p.92

<sup>10</sup> M. Bleeker, Passages in Post-Modern Theory: Mapping the Apparatus, *Parallax*, 2008, p.59, 66

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.66

<sup>12</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.812

<sup>13</sup> and ‘words’ are here taken in the wider sense of ‘accessible expression’

<sup>14</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.812

mind cannot see its way to objects that are now forever out of reach and all that is visible is the sticky problem of humanity's own captivity within language, ..”<sup>15</sup>

K. Barad's account of posthumanist performativity, offers an insightful though abstract understanding in the intertwining of *worlding*<sup>16</sup>. It will be perused to considered if it is applicable for the body's and the mind's tools mingeling with the environment, that means for the creation of *phenomena*, which – if hallucinated or not, to use Bleeker's words - leave their 'marks on bodies'<sup>17</sup>.

### **Diffraction#3 - movement**

The acceptance of the inevitable 'enmeshment' in how we build *meaning*<sup>18</sup> leads to question if the conception of *intra-action* allows to create a different awareness, a 'thinking' through or from, rather than about, materiality<sup>19</sup>. One that includes the body<sup>20</sup>, not necessarily as the center, but as the de-centered, absent 'Nullpunkt' of all the dimensions in the world<sup>21</sup>, that allows to *dis-cover* the object<sup>22</sup> and enables a non-representative space for 'an/Other knowing'. It even might include as an option the inherent ethics, that denotes the field of possibilities of Barad's notion.

In the posthumanist performative account the production of material bodies emerges from a causal relationship between exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world. As a causal enactment<sup>23</sup> ("the cause") *cuts or measures* are expressed in affecting and marking the other ("the effect")<sup>24</sup>. These *agential cuts* are defined by discursive practices/ (con)figurations rather than "words", and material *phenomena* that create *relations* rather than "things".<sup>25</sup> From these relationships that define *agential intra-actions* evolve diffraction patterns that materialize as insightful and productive constellations in the making of *spacetime mattering*.<sup>26</sup>

This conception marks a shift that will be laid out in the following assumptions:

<sup>15</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.811 - 812

<sup>16</sup> E. Manning, *Relationescapes*, The MIT Press, 2012, p.6 (a.o.)

<sup>17</sup> K. Barad, *Meeting the Univers Halfway*, Duke University Press, 2007, p.340

<sup>18</sup> How matter comes to matter. See: K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter , *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003

<sup>19</sup> T. Ingold, Towards and Ecology of Materials, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2012, p.437

<sup>20</sup> Farnell, Brenda, Getting out of the Habitus, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2000, p.413

<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 248-249: "... my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*sentit*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping This also means: my body is not only one perceived among others, it is the measurant (*mesurant*) of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world."

<sup>22</sup> Verhage, Florentien, "The Body as Measurant of All: Dis-covering the World," *Symposium (Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy)*, 2008

<sup>23</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p. p.824

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.824: Indeed, the notion of "measurement" is nothing more or less than a causal intra-action.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.814

<sup>26</sup> K. Barad, Intra-actions, 2012, *Mousse* 34, p.80

The body is not conceived as being independent from its sensual/perceptive devices and or as apparatus itself as in Bleeker's view, but as a processual *instrument*. It is part of the *entire apparatus settings*<sup>27</sup> in the process of *worlding*<sup>28</sup>. *Agential cuts* define the act of *measurement* within these *phenomena* as the very moment of perception throughout the ongoing intra-active differentiating of the world. It designates the body as an 'embedded' part of the apparatus of *measurement* that creates its own relations. As for the choreographer Chétouane the involvement of the *essential reality of the body* is defined and defines itself in the enactment of motion.

#### **Diffraction#4 - measurement**

The movements in 'Sacré Sacre du Printemps' often seem to translate as an obvious search for a relation to space, as *measuring*. An observation that brought me to enquire the correlation *measurement* has with *matter* and *mattering* i.e. *meaning*.

*Measurement* is an action that always includes the body as partaking in some way within a wider range of measuring /apparatus settings. *Measuring* requires the application of a measurant or to be more precise to be brought in relation to what it *measures*. *Agential* involvement into *measurement*, does not appeal to any specific or standard of *measure*. It delineates relations rather than things in addressing the inevitable mingling of things and bodies as the dimension through which the world is experienced.<sup>29</sup> It does not offer any setting that could specify a repeatable position (space) - time relation. The *fixation* of 'position' or a certain moment as enacted through an *agential cut* is a cutting together-apart<sup>30</sup> of an exclusionary moment within the ongoing intra-active differentiating of worlding. As a property of the materialized/observed *phenomena* within this *apparatus setting* it is marked by the inseparability of object and observing agency<sup>31</sup>. An *agential cut* enables the condition of a momentary *exteriority-within-phenomena* in their iterative becoming.

"I am foreign to myself. The limit between inside and outside, the border is running through us. The Out in, and the In out"<sup>32</sup>. L. Chétouane defined this simultaneously the inside and outside experiencing body as the *foreignness*, the foreign that is if not in us, but lies at the center of an experience of exteriority that has to be allowed in. The acceptance of the 'border in us' as

<sup>27</sup>This is based on a reading, that diffracts M. Bleeker 's corporeal literacy through Barad's scientific literacy.

<sup>28</sup> E. Manning, *Relationescapes*, The MIT Press, 2012, p.6 (a.o.)

<sup>29</sup> Verhage, Florentien, "The Body as Measurant of All: Dis-covering the World," Symposium (Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy, 2008,p.175

<sup>30</sup> K. Barad, Intra-actions, 2012, *Mousse* 34, p.80: means entangling-differentiating

<sup>31</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.814

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the choreographer L.Chétouane, 07.04.2013, Berlin

Chétouane names it, might be read as retraction from the Cartesian cut. It certainly acknowledges *agential* involvement and inseparability of *intra-action* from its agent that is enacted through an *agential cut* as *exteriority within*. If there is a foreign inside, it cannot strictly be repelled as a thing or other belonging to an unaffected outside.

The *agential cut* that *measures* ‘embeds’ the body in action, that dances, enacts and by this builds *matter* and *matters*<sup>33</sup>. It is *intra-actively* enmeshed as “a doing, a congealing of agency”<sup>34</sup> that emerges in the differentiating experience of *worlding* - not along predefined borders, but as relating exteriority within *phenomena*.

The challenge for Chétouane’s dancers lies at the core of the action that stipulates the body, and is reflected in an understanding that it never can be fully mastered. T. Ingold writes that the body enacts experiences through movement and by being moved in an ongoing response, as “a gathering together of materials in movement, the body is moreover a thing. [...] People are also “processes, brought into being through production, embroiled in ongoing social projects, and requiring attentive engagement.”<sup>35</sup> The body is regarded as having a reaction of its own, that can be sensed in its chiasmic structure<sup>36</sup>, expressed by the border that cuts right through it.

In ‘*Sacrè Sacre du Printemps*’ the dancers are reminded to this reversibility of and as the Other, the ‘thing’, that is supposedly looking back. *Foreignness* or unknown *phenomena* emerge from the chiasmic structure of *intra-action* that in the process of materializing its properties as “things-in-phenomena”, inherit their relation.<sup>37</sup> It demands to accept the unknown as part of the agent, which always includes the body in action.

### **Diffraction#5 – knowing and being**

L. Chétouane’s ‘*Sacrè Sacre du Printemps*’, shows visible correlations but also hidden divergences to V. Nijinsky’s seminal staging of I. Stravinsky’s ‘*Le Sacre du Printemps*’<sup>38</sup>, and I will briefly build on why these two versions exemplarily transport some of my arguments referring to K. Barad’s thoughts.

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<sup>33</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.814

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.817

<sup>35</sup> T. Ingold, Towards an Ecology of Materials, *Annual review of Anthropology*, 2012, p. 437 – 438; quoting: Pollard 2004, p. 60

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty defined our perceptive ability as one that is entangled through its chiasmic structure as the *flesh of the world*, in which the human body serves as a “mesurant of things”.

<sup>37</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003, p.822

<sup>38</sup> the seminal staging of ‘*Le Sacre du Printemps*’ has been first performed as a collaboration between I. Stravinsky, V. Nijinsky and G. Roerich in 1913

Both versions are marked by an attempt to understand the moving body in its uncontrollable and thus frightening *reality*. This reference to L. Chétouane, can also be found in the review J.Rivière wrote 100 years ago; “the return to the body, the attempt to follow more closely its natural bearing, to listen only to its most immediate, most radical, most etymological intuitions.”<sup>39</sup>

Chétouane, on one side rightfully remarks that Nijinsky’s basic relation to dance is one of being a ‘dancer who dances’, which becomes obvious in the attitude to fix for the work a basic position of the body<sup>40</sup>. Though it has to be acknowledged that this method guided him towards the ‘turned-out’ dancer<sup>41</sup> that at his time “inverted the meaning of ballet [...], through inverting the postures and gestures.”<sup>42</sup> J. Rivière in 1913 enthusiastically praised Nijinsky’s approach as the reduction of dance to the inclinations of the body to produce movement<sup>43</sup>. Yet this intention appears in its basic patterns of movement, walking, jumping, etc... - modern, if not ‘postmodern’. The resulting search for an appropriate posture from which to construct the dance and the larger shape of the ensemble in space, rather lead to develop a method for a technique for making movement than a movement technique.<sup>44</sup> Likewise of some relevance are still aspects as a certain asymmetry of the gestures, the fragmentation of movement when each member of a group might begin at a different time, the falling in and out patterns (or rhythm). These strategies, subversive at Nijinsky’s time, still shine through not only in the geometric face paint of Chétouane’s staging. Though, according to Barad, as substance *of and for matter* measured by an ‘agential cut’ within its shifting space and time constellations<sup>45</sup> in *spacetime mattering* they ‘materialized’ very differently in 2013.

## **Diffraction#6 – conclusion**

Movement in both versions is set as an emanating practice that leads to a certain unpredictable discovery of being *of and in the world*. In Nijinsky’s version the chosen one is *othered* and has “to bear the singular focus of the tribe, to perform in spite of her fear, ...”<sup>46</sup> in the one of Chétouane any member of the group has their chosen moment, and exemplarily experiences the border, the cut running through them according to the contemporary setting.

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<sup>39</sup> J.Rivière, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (essay), Nouvelle revue Française • 1913, in Kirstein, Lincoln (ed.), *Nijinsky Dancing*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1975

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.66

<sup>41</sup> The painter W. De Kooning in Denby, Edwin, 'Notes on Nijinsky Photographs', Looking at the Dance, in Magriel, Paul, *Nijinsky: An Illustrated Monograph*, 1946, p.16

<sup>42</sup> M. Hodson, “Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky’s Choreographic Method”, *Dance research*, Vol.4, no.1 1986, p.73

<sup>43</sup> J.Rivière, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (essay), Nouvelle revue Française • 1913, in Kirstein, Lincoln (ed.), *Nijinsky Dancing*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1975

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.75

<sup>45</sup> K. Barad, Posthumanist Performativity, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2003., p.815

<sup>46</sup> M. Hodson, “Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky’s Choreographic Method”, *Dance research*, Vol.4, no.1 1986, p.75

While certainly approaching from a centered position, Rivière's experience of seeing the original version had some insights that seem quite in accordance with Barad's queer performativity of nature<sup>47</sup>. As she rightfully states, that there is not much in nature to be 'natural' the way representationalism established the notion. Rivière writes: It is "spring as seen from the inside; spring in all its striving spasms, its partition. [...] we witness the obtuse movements, the senseless comings and goings, all the haphazard swirls by which, little by little, matter rises to life"<sup>48</sup>.

The secret of *the rite of spring* – as which 'Sacré Sacre du Printemps' translates - appears as a possible recognition of an allowance for an act of rupture of the known, an emergence, an *intra-action* in acceptance of a temporary superposition that evolves from diffraction. *Foreignness*, to follow Chétouane's view, interactively acknowledged, needs work, at least on a daily basis, but not necessarily sacrifice.

It is at first still a meeting with 'the other' body, the other 'object' as a *thing* that for Rivière in 1913 emanated as "man's movements at a time when he did not yet exist as an individual"<sup>49</sup>. Nevertheless he interpreted grace in that movement as "merely the outward emanation of an absolute necessity, only the effect of an impeccable inner adjustment"<sup>50</sup> to explain the unacceptable to his contemporaries. A point that certainly resonates in Chétouane's understanding that grace is something that you cannot control but appears by itself.

Diffraction moving does not lead to a final conclusion, but initiates iterative openings for processes of renegotiations. These *intra-actions* can lead to ever different 'measurement' results in terms of *matter* and *meaning*. As measuring that happens on a constant basis without a fixed ruler, it does not guarantee any preconceived resolution. In *thinking on the move agential intra-actions* attempt to define processes between *things*, as a form of discourse between human, as well as non-human agencies, that enable a different outlook onto the environment and the 'Other'.

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<sup>47</sup> K. Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity", authorized version, 2012

<sup>48</sup> J. Rivière, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (essay), Nouvelle revue Française • 1913, in Kirstein, Lincoln (ed.), *Nijinsky Dancing*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1975

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.