

*Performing Alteration:
On the Relationship Between Sensing, Perceiving, and Reflecting in Dance
Performance*

Introduction

My name is Joa Hug, I am postgraduate student at the Performing Arts Research Centre, Department of Dance, at the Theatre Academy Helsinki.

SLIDE 2 The subject of my doctoral artistic research is the relationship between sensing, perceiving and reflecting in the process of dance training and performance. I am approaching the subject from the perspective of the performer-as-researcher, that is I am doing research in and through my own artistic practice. The point of my investigation is to come to terms with the issue of *change* or *alteration* of perception and the role of the body in this process.

In this lecture-performance, I will introduce an artistic dance training practice that is designed to explore and *perform* the process of *alteration*: the so-called *Manipulations*. I will soon say more about the artistic background of the *Manipulations*, and how my research is situated in this practice, but first I want to briefly outline what is at stake in my investigation **SLIDE 3** Based on my experience and some practice-as-research, I am proposing the idea that it is in the performative enactment of the relationship between sensing, perceiving and reflecting in and through the *Manipulations* that a process of *alteration* of the body takes place. I suggest that the *Manipulations* create an epistemically open and receptive body with an expanded frame of perception, and that this body is both the subject *and* the object of alteration. Furthermore, I would say that moving between the processes of sensing, perceiving and reflecting enables a performative production of *knowledge in, through and about* the body, a knowledge about how the body relates to itself and its environment. **SLIDE 4**

The main questions that I want to address here and now are: how, actually, *does* alteration of the body happen? What, specifically, are the physical and material grounds of alteration? What are the effects of the process of alteration on the materiality of the body?

So these are the key points and questions I want to address in this presentation and this is how I will go about: First, I will very briefly talk about the artistic background from which the *Manipulations* emerged and give a brief description of how they are practiced. In the second part, I will offer a *close reading* of how the *Manipulations* alter the relationship between sensing, perceiving, and reflecting. In the third part, I will perform a research score that is based on the *Manipulations* and that explores what and how the altered body thinks – and how it moves. After that I will very briefly round up my presentation, and then there will be time for questions and comments. **SLIDE 5**

Part I: My artistic approach - *Body Weather* and the *Manipulations*

Artistically, my research is grounded on *Body Weather*. *Body Weather* is an approach to training and performance that investigates the intersections between bodies and their environments. *Body Weather* evolved in Japan in the late 1970's out of the context of *butoh* and was founded by dancer/choreographer Min Tanaka (*1945), who was strongly influenced by Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-86), one of the pioneers and leading figures of *butoh*. In the late 70's Tanaka developed *Body Weather* in collaboration with an international group of dancers, actors and performers who came to Japan to live and work with him, first in Tokyo, and since the 1980's on a farm in a small Japanese village a couple of hours from Tokyo. Nowadays, "Body Weather" is being developed in several laboratories worldwide under the leadership of experienced practitioners (Australia, Denmark, France, The Netherlands, Spain, USA; <http://www.bodyweather.net/>). I have closely collaborated with *Body Weather Amsterdam* since 2002, and the approach to my research is significantly informed and shaped by this background.

The *Manipulations*

The *Manipulations* are one of the main elements of *Body Weather* training practice. Let me show you a little clip that gives you some idea about how the *Manipulations* are practiced. **SLIDE 6**

VIDEO, 8'30 - What you see:

- The very beginning of the *Manipulations*, No.1. The MP's are practiced in pairs, one person is giving, one is receiving the *Manipulations*
- The laying person, the receiver, on the out-breath, makes a hissing sound, on which the giver applies a **specific** manipulation on the body of the receiving person.
- The giver uses her hands to either give weight onto the body of the receiver, or she twists, rotates or stretches body parts with a clear direction, carefully listening to the resonance of the touch-manipulation in the body of the receiver.

This is what is **visible** and what you can **see**. But what you **cannot** see is the whole range of **internal** tasks and **points of attention** that both the giver and receiver are concerned with. And while it's impossible for me, here, to give you a complete account, I **do** want to go a bit more into **detail** about some of the tasks of the **receiver** of the *Manipulations*, as it is the part of the receiver that I am actually focussing on in my research at the moment.

I want to highlight 3 tasks or directions on what the receiver works:

- **Minimizing Muscle Tension:** The receiver works on getting as close as possible to a point of ZERO muscle tension. Therefore, the receiver is constantly checking the body: Where do feel muscle tension? Can I let go of this tension? Where are places of holding, i.e. of tension that I cannot let go of? Where am I stand-by, meaning: ready to move by myself? The receiver is constantly working on switching off muscle tension, cutting the impulse to move by himself, and allowing to be moved by the giver.

- **Distributing attention:** The receiver is constantly directing and distributing the attention not only to the place where the *Manipulation* is applied to, but across the whole body, actively **observing sensations** like touch, tension, pain, temperature, relaxation, weight, pressure, a stretch, a release of a tension etc. etc. - **constantly** checking the body not as a **whole**, but **part by part, dissecting** the body, as it were, **bit by bit** into its microstructures.
- **Reflecting on the process of sensing and enacting perception:** the receiver is constantly and very actively constructing the process of observation by sensing, perceiving and reflecting on what happens in and with the body. This process of reflection needs to be actively maintained at all times, for otherwise, there is a tendency to collapse and to become merely passively receptive. If we look at the video registration, it maybe looks like the **giver** is the one who is the more 'active' person and that the receiver is just letting happen whatever happens. But the receiver is very active in collecting and processing sensory data, reflectively enacting the process of perception at all times.
(8'00) → much more to say, but for now I leave it here....

Part II

I am coming to the second part, to a *close reading* of how the *Manipulations* alter the relationship between sensing, perceiving, and reflecting: How does the *alteration actually* happen? (I leave the video running)

First, it is impossible to say *where* it is that the process of alteration actually *starts*. The *Manipulations* are a pretty complex and multi-layered practice. Although there clearly is a *linear* progression in terms of the *form*, the processes of sensing, perceiving and reflecting are *non-linear* and contingent; these processes are distributed in a non-hierarchical network of relations. But if I would *have* to choose, I would begin to map the process of change and alteration approaching from the perspective of *attention*.

The continuous re-distribution and re-placement of attention across multiple and changing parts of the body *shifts* and *expands* the frame of perception. The attention zooms in and out of sensing the body in ever greater detail, shifting back and forth between macro- and micro-perceptions, the molar and the molecular, fragmenting, isolating, disconnecting and differentiating the body part by part.

The continuous shifting of attention fosters a process of differentiation of the body, a process in which one becomes aware that one's body is not a single and separate entity, but a multiple and open system. There is a process of fragmentation of the body's material organization that, subsequently, makes possible a process of recombining the relations between body parts. This process allows the practitioner to develop an understanding of how body parts may relate *differently* to each other, thus creating knowledge about the performativity of the body.

For example, by minimizing muscle tension, the tonus of the muscles is reduced and the texture of the body is changed. The body becomes more soft and permeable, body parts become more available to be isolated and to be moved by someone or something else other than the 'owner' of the body. As the body is being decomposed into ever smaller units, the body's sensory capacities are increased and refined, changing the depth and the content of sensory perception, in particular proprioception. The body is rendered open and more receptive, allowing new sensory perception of previously silent and unperceived areas. This sort of collaborative re-'creation' of a (new) body with new sense-abilities calls into question the sense of ownership, authorship and agency. The physical boundaries between the body of the giver and the body of the receiver become increasingly blurred. What emerges is a form of co-embodiment, where bodies and their environments intersect and permeate each other, where the agency for movement is re-negotiated and where the authorship for sensations is constantly re-distributed.

In the *Manipulations*, the process of alteration is something that not just *happens* to a body, passively, it is something that is co-enacted in and through a *reflective* body. Reflection, in other words, is not a detached process of thinking *about* the body and its experience, but of thinking *in, through* and *from* the body. Reflection is *in touch* with sensory perception; it *emerges from* and at the same time it also *intervenes in* the processes of sensing and perceiving. (12'00)

Part III – Performing the Research Score

I'm coming to the third part of my presentation. How does the altered body think? How does it move and perform?

Help: a word that has caught your attention???

PUT BACK ON VOLUME!!!! SLIDE 8

Off: I have pointed out that reflection plays a key role in altering the processes of sensing and perceiving. The question is: How does this altered mode of sensing and perceiving feed back on the process of reflecting? What and how does the altered body think? I have explored these questions through a research score that is based on the *Manipulations*.

In this research score, I am practicing a solo-version of the *Manipulations* where I *imagine* to be manipulated. Based on my memory and imagination, I am working on re-creating the sensation of being manipulated. In addition to observing sensations, I am paying equal attention to thoughts and I am making notes. (1 minute)

Rounding Up

To round up, very briefly: this was a performance of the research score based on the *Manipulations*. The word you gave me was an orientation point in the landscape of thinking. After the research score, I added a short movement improvisation taking the altered frame of perception into movement. The video images were pictures from my notebook of the notes that were written during a previous series of explorations, and the words that you could hear me speaking were based on the notes I took during previous times of performing the score.

Thank you for your attention.