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Improvising with Twigs and Cells: Paradox in Transversal Practices (Lecture demonstration)

This presentation investigates the potential of dance improvisation to offer performance-based philosophical frameworks for posthuman and trans-species identification (Haraway 1991, 2003). A paradox is a proposition which seems absurd, contradictory or impossible, but which actually is or may be true. In dance improvisation practice, paradox offers a way of associating seemingly dissonant elements in theory and action. Drawing on dance artists who work specifically with perception of non-human bodies in their work, such as Deborah Hay, Simone Forti and my solo form *Twig Dances*, I offer a consideration of how the use of scores involving paradox can operate according to Felix Guattari's notion of transversality, a key element in his 'ecosophy' (2000) to bring about experiences of inter-subjectivity for dance improvisers. Impasses in phenomenological and ecological debates often involve the difficulty of distinguishing the natural from the cultural, and the implications of ethical judgments broadly applied across fields (see Chappel 1997, Soulé and Lease 1995, Macnaghten and Urry 1998, Tiley 1994, Fox 1995, Kershaw 2007, Oelschlaeger 1995). A performance lens that includes paradox as practiced in dance improvisation (Parkinson 2006, Hay 2000) can offer frames for identification of the human self with an other, or a nonhuman body. I suggest that such improvisational investigations can offer a route toward an eco-phenomenological (Brown and Toadvine 2003) working process that sees experience as grounding interrelationship, and suggests the performative, posthuman potential of the dancing body. By using 'a tactic of paradox' to destabilize notions of both margin and center, performance scores can function as a playful, perception-based enquiry into changing relationships between response-able yet multistable organisms. Examples in dance improvisation evidence this. Deborah Hay supposes her body, as a collection of sixty-five trillion cells to have a kind of 'wisdom' in its ability to respond to paradoxical scenarios that perceive a place or moment through movement (Hay 2000). Improviser Simone Forti describes an element of animism in her practice of responding to natural phenomena such as ants, dry grass, or lizards via movement (Hayes 1986). Similarly, 'What if I perceive and dance the unique character of this plant, here and now?' is the score used for my *Twig Dances*: What if, rather than my eyes seeing a juniper bush, every cell in my body perceives the bush and performs the possibility of its shapes in space and time? What if the texture of this bush is explained through the movements of my feet? Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that understanding an object involves seeing it, not as an amalgamation of visual impressions, but as 'a structure accessible to inspection by the body' (1962: 320, 369). He describes this inspection as a lived experience, and, drawing on Henri Bergson's ideas of intuition, implies that the body has an instinctive, paradoxical tendency by which it links itself, in movement, to objects, 'like a hand to an instrument' (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 5). To illuminate the paradox in bodily relationship with the world can be to break from a conditional, objectified understanding of action as mediated by circumstances, but also to recognize the potential of the body to interpret or 'live' the world in new ways. I propose that improvisational scores for movement offer this possibility, and conclude with recommendations for

transversal practices which develop perception of intersubjectivity by taking seriously the offerings of improvisation as a research strategy.

Malaika Sarco-Thomas is a dance artist and Lecturer in the Dance Studies programme at the School of Performing Arts, University of Malta. Through performance and curatorial projects she investigates how performance practices can alter attention to site, physicality and place. Her collaborative 2006 peripatetic PhD research project TWIG: Together We Integrate Growth investigated links between 'ecological practice' and dance improvisation through an overland journey from England to China that included guerilla tree-planting and Twig Dances, solo performances with living plants. Since 2011 she has co-organised Contact Festival Dartington and Conference with Richard Sarco-Thomas, an annual platform for the development and exchange of CI practice, and co-teaches Aikicontact, or aikido and CI principles in movement. Since 2007 they have led weekly contact jams at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, Falmouth University in Cornwall, where Malaika was Senior Lecturer and course coordinator for Dance & Choreography at the Academy of Music and Theatre Arts, and now in San Gwann, Malta. With Misri Dey she recently co-edited issue 6.2 of the Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices 'on Contact [and] Improvisation' (2014) and is a chapter contributor to the book *Moving Sites: Investigating Site Specific Dance Performance*, edited by Victoria Hunter (forthcoming 2015).