

## Dramaturgies of the Gaga Bodies: Kinesthesia of Pleasure/Healing\*

### 1. Introduction

*«The language of Gaga originated from the belief in the healing, dynamic, ever-changing power of movement»*  
Ohad Naharin

“Gaga” is a movement language which Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin developed over the course of many years (since 1990s) and which is applied in daily practice by the Batsheva Dance Company members. It evolved simultaneously as a unique pathway of a world widely acknowledged choreographer, as a recovery process from dancer’s injuries and from deep personal loss, and as a toolbox both for dancers, interpreting his work, and for everyone else willing to experience and share dance movement.

Born in 1952 on Kibbutz Mizra, Ohad Naharin began his dance training with the Batsheva Dance Company in 1974. Recalling his early childhood and his first dance experiences, he underlines the importance of community spirit and the pleasure of physicality while expressing and sharing dance movement<sup>1</sup>. Gaga practice functions on the principle of empathetic share and mutual support in group work, as the inspiration is drawn from all participants, there is a constant circulation of somatic knowledge and the ability of tuning to listening, groove gets gradually developed. The idea of pleasure as necessary condition to dance and as healing tool has also particular importance in Ohad Naharin’s discourse and in his conception of training both for dancers and amateurs.

During his first year with Batsheva Company, visiting choreographer

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\* The references of the online documents were all verified on September 14, 2016 [editor’s note].

<sup>1</sup> «We slept together, we washed together, we ate together... The idea of physical pleasure connected to dance movement is natural for me...», quote from *Mr. Gaga*, Naharin’s work was documented in several movies. The rehearsal process with Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet during a restaging of *Decadance* was the subject of Tomer Heymann’s documentary *Out of Focus* (2007). In 2015, the Heymann Brothers’ comprehensive documentary about Naharin *Mr. Gaga* was released.

Martha Graham singled out Naharin for his talent and invited him to join her own company in New York. While in New York, Naharin studied on scholarship from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation at the School of American Ballet, The Juilliard School, and with Maggie Black and David Howard. He went on to perform during one season with Israel's Bat-Dor Dance Company and Maurice Béjart's Ballet du XXe Siècle in Brussels. The experience of a rich variety of new and different dance styles helped him to build a hybrid and determined identity as an artist of multicultural background, while nourishing his creative work from two melting pots; New York, USA, and Tel Aviv, Israel.

Naharin returned to New York in 1980, making his choreographic debut at the Kazuko Hirabayashi studio. He launched his own "nomadic company", based on changing projects while learning the craft of choreography and asserting his first aesthetic choices. From 1980 until 1990, Naharin was invited to create for different companies, including Batsheva, the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, and Nederlands Dans Theater. Simultaneously, he regularly worked in New York with group of dancers on different projects with his first wife, major inspiration and intimate collaborator, Mari Kajiwara, up to her death of cancer in 2001.

Ohad Naharin was appointed Artistic Director of Batsheva Dance Company in 1990 and has served in this role to this day. During his tenure with the company, Naharin has choreographed over 30 works for Batsheva and its junior division, Batsheva Ensemble<sup>2</sup>. Alongside his work as a choreographer, while recovering from dancer's injuries, Naharin has developed gaga, an innovative movement language, intended to help dancers understand and interpret his work, and to heal by the means of finding keys («the right word, the right time») as simple and efficient tasks for more listening and sensitivity while performing any gesture and tuning to self and others. The dancers of Batsheva Dance Company train with gaga on a daily basis, and it is also taught to dancers and the public worldwide by certified teachers. The all inclusive but yet precise nature of gaga practice is described in the following credo

<sup>2</sup> His works have been performed by prominent companies including Nederlands Dans Theater, Ballet Frankfurt, Lyon Opera Ballet, Compañía Nacional de Danza (Spain), Cullberg Ballet (Sweden), Finnish National Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, Balé da Cidade de São Paulo, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet (New York), Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Les Grand Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, Atlanta Ballet, The Royal Danish Ballet, Le Ballet de l'Opéra National de Bordeaux (France) and more.

statement:

Gaga challenges multi-layer tasks. We are aware of the connection between effort and pleasure, we are aware of the distance between our body parts, we are aware of the friction between flesh and bones, we sense the weight of our body parts, yet, our form is not shaped by gravity... we are aware of where we hold unnecessary tension, we let go only to bring life and efficient movement to where we let go... We are turning on the volume of listening to our body, we appreciate small gestures, we are measuring and playing with the texture of our flesh and skin, we might be silly, we can laugh at ourselves. We connect to the sense of 'plenty of time', especially when we move fast. We learn to love our sweat, we discover our passion to move and connect it to effort, we discover both the animal we are and the power of our imagination. We are 'body builders with soft spine'. We learn to appreciate understatement and exaggeration. We become more delicate and we recognize the importance of the flow of energy and information through our body in all directions. We learn to apply our force in an efficient way and we learn to use 'other' forces.

We discover the advantage of soft flesh and sensitive hands, we learn to connect to groove even when there is no music. We are aware of people in the room and we realize that we are not in the center of it all. We become more aware of our form since we never look at ourselves in a mirror; there are no mirrors. We connect to the sense of the endlessness of possibilities.

Yielding is constant while we are ready to snap...

We explore multi-dimensional movement, we enjoy the burning sensation in our muscles, we are aware of our explosive power and sometimes we use it. We change our movement habits by finding new ones, we can be calm and alert at once. We become available.<sup>3</sup>

Gaga has two tracks: Gaga/dancers, which is the daily training of Batsheva Dance Company members, now taught also for other dancers in Israel and abroad during summer intensive courses, as to broaden a transcultural perspective and Gaga/people, open to the public and available for anyone at any age, without the necessity of previous experience of dance or high technical skills: Gaga/dancers classes are open to professional dancers or advanced dance students ages 16+.

These classes last for an hour and fifteen minutes and are taught by dancers who have worked closely with Ohad Naharin. Gaga/dancers classes are built on the same principles as Gaga/people classes but also employ the specific vocabulary and skills that are part and parcel of a dancer's knowledge. The layering of familiar movements with Gaga tasks presents dancers with fresh

<sup>3</sup> Ohad Naharin, cfr. <https://batsheva.co.il/en/gaga>.

challenges, and throughout the class, teachers prompt the dancers to visit more unfamiliar places and ways of moving as well. Gaga/dancers deepens dancers' awareness of physical sensations, expands their palette of available movement options, enhances their ability to modulate their energy and engage their explosive power, and enriches their movement quality with a wide range of textures»<sup>4</sup>.

Ohad Naharin claims himself that Gaga is conceived to address professional dancers and amateurs in a very much similar way because «everybody, or almost everybody can experience a range of sensations and differentiate them, can take pleasure from movement and groove, ...the only difference are the skills, those of a professionally trained dancer»<sup>5</sup> (Tel Aviv Summer Intensive 2016).

The Gaga/people track was developed for everyone and at every age, and it is studied by an increasing number of people at the Suzanne Dellal Centre, in Jerusalem, and in other locations in Israel, New York, San Francisco, Paris, London, Belgium, Barcelona and around the world:

Gaga/people classes are open to people ages 16+, regardless of their background in dance or movement. No previous dance experience is needed. Gaga/people classes last for one hour and are taught by dancers who have worked closely with Ohad Naharin. Teachers guide the participants using a series of evocative instructions that build one on top of the other. Rather than copying a particular movement, each participant in the class actively explores these instructions, discovering how he or she can interpret the information and perform the task at hand. Gaga/people classes offer a creative framework for participants to connect to their bodies and imaginations, increase their physical awareness, improve their flexibility and stamina, and experience the pleasure of movement in a welcoming, accepting atmosphere.<sup>6</sup>

The work instructions for both tracks share similar principles:

Never stop: The class is one session, no pauses or exercises, but a continuity of instructions one on top of the other. Each instruction does not cancel the previous one but is added to it, layer upon layer. Therefore, it is important not to stop in the middle of the session. If you get tired or want to work at another

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. <http://gagapeople.com/english/about-gaga/gaga-dancers/>.

<sup>5</sup> Another interview from Summer Intensive 2016, held with Alessio, 25, professional dancer, points out a fundamental similarity of both tracks, for he underlines the sensation of pleasure when dancing, experienced when amateur, and later lost for professional stress reasons when working for dance companies: competition, tension, conflicts, stage strain and so on. The topic of pleasure in gaga is discussed in part 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. <http://gagapeople.com/english/about-gaga/gaga-people/>.

pace, you can always lower the volume, work 30% or 20%, float, or rest, but without losing sensations that were already awakened. Do not return to the state your body was in before we started.

Listening to the body: It is important that you take the instructions gently into your body while being aware to its sensations, abilities, and limitations. Do not seek excessive effort on your first time – seek the quality of the movement, the sensation to which we are aiming, but with less intensity in the work. Go to places where the pleasure in movement is awakened and not to places of pain. Maintain the connection to pleasure especially during effort (effort is different than pain). If you have any limitation, restrictions, or physical pain – permanent or temporary – talk to the teacher before the class starts, and be aware throughout the session.

Awareness: Be aware. Get inspired by the teacher and by other people in the room. Be aware of people around you, the space that they need, and the interaction if any.

Silence: During the session we do not speak unless instructed to use our voice or words. If you have any questions, you are welcome to bring them up at the end of the session.<sup>7</sup>

This study addresses the “never stop” movement experience in gaga as continuum phenomenon (see Part 2), quite similar to automatic writing in surrealism or tuning to and embodying the stream of consciousness in poetry in action. However during Gaga practice the role of the guide interferes with the subjective experience of the participants as to transform it into a dynamic interaction (discussed in Part 2). Dancers from the company claim the transmission originality to reside in a difference both from formal dance training, such as ballet, codified modern and contemporary dance techniques, and from somatic approaches, which develop listening abilities, but do not always bridge immediately with creative movement<sup>8</sup>. The emergence of a “form”, given by choreographer’s choices, from the Gaga sessions, held with company members, and its changing nature as a contradiction to “formalism”, way of being both in training and in choreographing, in any dance style nowadays, is discussed in Parts 3 and 4, quoting some examples from The Batsheva Dance Company repertory.

The research method focuses on a multilayer analysis model of the dramaturgy of gaga bodies, both during gaga people (open classes) and gaga dancers (intensive courses) training and during the audience experience of assisting to the repertory work of the company. Its based on empirical

<sup>7</sup>Cfr. <http://gagapeople.com/english/about-gaga/work-instructions/>.

<sup>8</sup> Batsheva Dance Company, *Gaga training and groove at Batsheva Ensemble*, in «Danceconsortium», October 8, 2012, video, <https://youtu.be/ZzXhcNFXwYM>.

experience of gaga language such as “practice as research” and reflexive embodiment. The main perspective is phenomenology of perception, linked to the immersion method of inquiry, but it also combines elements from cultural studies, anthropology and sociology, applied to the case study. For thorough historical perspective in gaga research, as emerging field in dance studies, we can refer to Deborah Friedes Galili’s work<sup>9</sup>, and for deeper understanding of social policy and economy, related to gaga practices, to that of Meghan Quinian<sup>10</sup>.

Considering the current political context, the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies analysis has to open with the question of how dance movements and forms and events perpetuate and challenge social ideals and values? Israel is a cultural melting pot as many immigration waves overlapped in recent past. It’s also a young country which while being permeable to new elements, holds altogether a strong identity for self defense necessity issues, evolving in a hostile political climate and surroundings and being under the constant threat of war destruction. This extremely sensitive and complicated question, which inevitable influences contemporary dance culture in Israel, is discussed in some of Judith Butler’s writings and in numerous dance journalist papers giving account or the complexity of artistic collaborations under these circumstances. While Judith Butler takes a radical position based on protest against inequality, expropriation and exploitation, claiming for boycott, divestment and sanction of Israel, other politics philosophers discuss the artist’s unique resistance role, by the means of art, and not that of a politician, in such complicated regimes of power, as uncomfortable and extremely challenging place to be. Einav Katan-Schmit<sup>11</sup> proposes that there are alternatives to discussions of war by quoting Goerge Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*:

Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently [...] we have a discourse form structured in terms of battle and they have

<sup>9</sup> Friedes Galili, Deborah, *Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century*, in «Dance Chronicle», October 29, 2015. A selection of journalism based papers about Gaga is available on the same site.

<sup>10</sup> Quinian, Meghan, *Gaga as Politics: A Case Study of Contemporary Dance Training*, PhD, Riverside, CA, University of California, June 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Katan-Schmit, Einav, *Embodying Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin’s Movement Research*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

one structured in terms of dance.<sup>12</sup>

This dramaturgy of these specific dancing bodies functions both as training and performance: the gaga practice provides a unique movement language and the Batsheva repertory uses it to write onstage stories (Ohad Naharin and other choreographers inspired by gaga: Sharon Eyal, Gai Behar, Danielle Agami, Yasmien Godder, Roy Assaf). Ohad Naharin states these stories to be impossible to identify in a clear way as they are always hidden and melted through the creative process, as to open the narrative for any interpretation possible. He uses the raw sensual physicality of the dancers as first medium of self and group expression, with minimum hints for underlying signification. So if dance functions as recognition of personal power through the body as «the first representation of the world as a realm of mystical forces»<sup>13</sup>, the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies is developing and affirming the sense of a mobile self in unstable environment: by the revival of ever-changing matters (experiencing «earthquakes», «lava», «magma», «boiling spaghetti») in a dance studio, and with collective support during the shared experience. A certain idea of «materialistic embodiment» brings to life so many funnels, pulleys and bellows, vital fluids, touch, affects and passion as the gaga script is meant to grasp the dynamic flowing character of the living body. Thus the processual nature of the gaga experience is after what produces life rather than what is its basic structure.

## **2. Tuning into continuum: «connect to the feeling of plenty of time», «listen to the traveling stuff inside your body»**

There is a subtle link between the way gaga dancers train as daily practice in dance studio and the way they perform on stage: dancers, teachers, choreographers and audience tune into continuum of shared time and space, under the ongoing verbal instructions, based on poetic language and imagery, shifting attention every few minutes. Each participant embodies and interprets the body-mind story being told in his/her own version, navigating through the flow of words and moves<sup>14</sup>. The performative gaga script is a permanent

<sup>12</sup> Lakoff, George - Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors We Live By*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> Langer, Susanne, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York, Charles Scribner's Son, 1974, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> There is also a continuum of music, accompanying gaga practice, often a collage of free

bridging between phenomenological and semiotic approaches to movement and gesture: drawing on personal memory and “here and now” occurring bodily sensations and mental images and translating them into verbal expression, as John Austin has suggested in *How to do things with words*<sup>15</sup>. Following the contemporary performance research concept of Austin, of unpacking performativity of words into embodied experience, Gaga movement language places a special emphasis on words-into-images choices made during practice by the guide, for a figurative word can become literal, and all discourse evokes and gets physical at the same time.

Thus in gaga practice the usual dance training - a succession of body shapes, steps and spatial patterns - is replaced by an access to kinesthetic autobiographies, revealed by personal invention of scripts which go through radical shifts of body states, from the peaceful “float” to the burning “climaxes”. During these singular narratives «a delicate sensation can turn into something wild»<sup>16</sup> or what has been tamed transforms into a sense of the body as a source of kinesthetic pleasure more than just specular display («first listening to the body before telling it what to do»<sup>17</sup>).

“To be in the flow”, “to keep into the continuum”: the current linguistic inquiries about the suffix “in”<sup>18</sup> would refer gaga’s introspective movement research, close to meditative practice<sup>19</sup> to the “in” of “inside” or “in” of “into” as all the instructions require diving deep within oneself’s perception as a necessary condition to relate to others. This way “in” of the dramaturgies of the gaga bodies becomes a “place seeking”, not “place being” for a dancer. Immersive and nomadic practice of words and images in motion, gaga depicts a certain way of being in the world as ever transforming physicality of thought and feeling, a singular migration in dance. That way the constant “on stage continuum” takes the audience to new places through and by shared motion: multi layered, multi tasking, multi centered, multi sensory. On stage, with not

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choice by the guide (from pop to classic), inducing different moods, rhythms, more layers of verbal and kinesthetic images as to engender specific gesture. An interesting phenomenology of creativity study can focus on that particular functioning of gaga suggestions.

<sup>15</sup> Austin, John, *How to do Things with Words*, Boston, Harvard, 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Naharin, Ohad, *It’s about making the body listen*, in «The Guardian», November 14, 2013, online: <http://bitly.com/UvkFpD>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> Ness, Sally Ann, *The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance*, in Noland, Carrie – Ness, Sally Ann (eds.), *Migrations of Gesture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, pp. 1-30.

<sup>19</sup> Naharin, Ohad, *It’s about making the body listen*, cit.



much scenery and with simple costumes, the moving gaga bodies create their “placeless” mostly out of “no-where” and “no-thing” by imagination work filtered through physicality: from loose preparation “just float”, “melt all tensions” to playful grooving: “shake and quake”, “giggling shoulders”.

Mark Johnson<sup>20</sup> states recognizing meaning is to be an essential event of human understanding abilities and current cognitive studies consider structures of rationality, including logical thinking, to depend on processes of ordering bodily experience via imagination. The poetic gaga scripts challenge the embodiment capacity of the participant to react to images and to indulge in kinesthesia experience by multi tasking and by the many layers of nonverbal experience already there to stir up. For Kant<sup>21</sup> imagination mediates between perception and reflection a prelinguistic cognitive capacity to structure experience by organizing perception into patterns. The figurative patterns that emerge from and give structure to perceptions become “image schemata” or “embodied schemata” as result from cross modal extrapolations. The imagination names the extrapolating, abstracting and synthesizing process by which we build embodied schemata: “up and down”, “rushing”...

Thus in sharing and performing together the gaga script the imagination is not merely a mental operation working reproductively to duplicate or reflect experience but perceptual/cognitive process which works productively and creatively to configure embodiment experience. If western aesthetic tradition is based on the polarity of “sensibility and intelligibility” the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies experience as performer and audience works as a constant bridging between the two.

The cross pollination between words and moves becomes a source of both lucid and blurry moments of kinesthesia awareness, pleasure, turbulence<sup>22</sup> and many other experiences according to each personal point of view or research question. The idea of performing continuum which allows shifting of place as an action of resettlement, brings awareness to the movement transition and the

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Mark, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 272.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique de la raison pratique (Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, 1788)*, Paris, Editions du Minuit, 1989, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> Carter offers an overview about the poetics of turbulence in performance practice. Carter, Paul, *The Poetics of Turbulence*, in «Performance Research», vol. 19, n. 5, 2014, pp. 3-9. In a similar way the American choreographer William Forsythe has developed the notion of «residual movement» which derives from the complexity of coordinations, almost impossible to perform, as to generate an «accidental outcome» of unconscious movement.

places it connects: molecules, body parts, other bodies, coexisting dance cultures. The numerous migrations inscribed in the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies in motion can actually bring «realness, areahood, placeness into existence» («measure distance between body parts») and create place as another consequence of a movement continuum based perspective («create room for more movement to occur»). Thus places as well as gestures and body shapes are understood to emerge out of movement, rather than the reverse: “listen to traveling stuff”, “riding the echo”, both on molecular, sensitive and on sociological, political scales; as gaga as collective movement involves many individuals. That seems to be one of the reason for the multi centered organisation of gaga class: «shuffle», «you discover you are not the center of the room», «yield», «I’ll go your way»<sup>23</sup>.

### **3. Diving into flesh: «make it full body experience»**

#### *3.1. Western aesthetics, eastern practice: «juicy flesh», «connect to your passion to move»*

The dramaturgy of the gaga bodies blends the conception and the experience of pleasure in local Israeli context as social and cultural phenomenon of emancipation and “empowerment” and the notion of it evolving in the aesthetic tradition of western societies. In the west the conception and recognition of pleasure as subjective experience is rooted in the 18th century construction of the modern subject, and appears in a number of specialized gestures. In a similar way, gaga practice aims producing certain altered states of consciousness («connect effort to pleasure»), induced by refined knowledge of bodily techniques exploring how the pleasure functions. This use of “pleasure” experience is inspired by poetic language which gives the overwhelming feeling of blossoming flesh (and sometimes shatter the western taboos of suppressing sexual flesh expression): «juicy flesh», «gently squeezing inner thighs», «dip into honey, feel it pouring inside», «butterflies on nipples».

These representations of sensuality, beyond the religious concept of incarnation, can in a certain way be linked with the origin of the “pleasure” western aesthetics as far as its hedonistic issues are rooted in the the libertarian and libidinous culture of the French philosophy and the legacy of the Prussian

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<sup>23</sup> The asynchronous synchronicity between the dancers allows giving oneself to being seen and preserves the liveliness of the subject matter the way it is presented to the beholder.

court. On this basis Baumgarten tried to establish a new philosophy of beautiful thought and sensual cognition which nowadays has become also a method of knowing<sup>24</sup>.

A core theme in the dramaturgy of the gaga experience is the art of pleasure, appealing the body in its physicality without censorship, linking sensing and imagining: «there is a bit of testicle at the bottom of our most sublime sentiments, and our purest (feelings of tenderness)»<sup>25</sup>. The western aesthetic tradition considers pleasure either as “absence of pain” according to the epicurean ancient Greek legacy, which offers a number of life style strategy prescriptions, aimed to achieve body and mind harmony (Gaga methods conceives «effort» to be «different from pain», Summer Intensive 2016), or as a phenomenon of “electrification”: the famous Sade’s *Histoire de Juliette* describes how an electric fire flows in the body and sensualises it, promising the lover of pleasure that a «devouring and delicious fire will slip into your nerves, it will light up this electric fluid in which the life principle lives»<sup>26</sup>.

In a similar way the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies, often implies the instructions «bring to life» the flesh of the dancing body as opposed to the idea of «dead flesh»<sup>27</sup>; which is to say involving all the layers between our skin and bones such as under skin, connective tissues, liquids and so on. During gaga training skin and flesh are activated and explored in numerous creative ways: «connect to skin sensitivity», «feel the skin on molecular level», «melt flesh», «engage flesh to grab bones». This way gaga aesthetics leads to a new mode of disciplining (all “concepts” of how to engage the flesh are to be worked out physically), of forming and producing sensuality capable of, first of all, matching bodies and minds, and second, empowering individual expression in a group context. Often gaga aesthetics blends with politics, such as religious censorship and social reactions to it as *Anaphase* (1988) show protests<sup>28</sup>, healing

<sup>24</sup> Hemmermesiter, Kai, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance* (1760), edited by G. Roth, 16 voll., Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1955-1970, vol. III, p. 216.

<sup>26</sup> Sade, Donatien Alphonse François de, *Histoire de Juliette ou Les prospériés du vice* (1797-1801), Paris, Editions du Minuit, 1976, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> For Denis Diderot, the sentiment of the flesh (*sentiment de la chair*) becomes a central quality of painting which prove its liveliness. Engaging flesh, «bringing life to numb places» is as much important in the gaga experience.

<sup>28</sup> Batsheva performances involve the polemics of visibility and invisibility of the flesh in social and political relations: *Decadance* was targeted by the censorship of too much flesh revealed on stage and the risk of nudity became a national debate issue, rising support manifestations to the original version of the performance, which the government tried to adapt for political and

issues as pointed out by Ohad Naharin's interviews: figuring out what is to be healed<sup>29</sup>? and so on<sup>30</sup>.

The gaga script explores the ambivalence of the flesh as resistance to be disciplined («pull and stretch», «feel the burning sensation of muscles») or as enticement to explore and yield to («give in», «listen to inner flow», «enjoy your weight», «connect to pleasure»). The “magic” blending gives that unique sparkle of tension and delight, magnified in their coexisting extremes. Thus dramaturgy of gaga bodies' approach to flesh eludes its social normalization cut by enunciation and discursive norms and permeates both dancers and audience to enjoy it in a comprehensive and direct manner: the hand as flesh turns into a metaphor enlivened in all layers of colors and visibility of the textures. The cartesian mechanistic conception of body is sometimes “quoted” on stage as lucid critique of reality of the everyday routines, usually in groups which repeat small rhythmic codified gestures such as female codified labour in *Humus*, January, Opéra de Paris 2016, or by ironic quote of dancer's labour and habits which sustain ideas of “normality” of the flesh in life or on stage. These quotes are usually countered by vivid performances on stage of «What the flesh can do?», as to change the Spinoza's question: «What the body's capable of?».

### 3.2. *Liquid flesh*

If any culture is an order of sensory preferences, as Marshall McLuhan<sup>31</sup> states, the dramaturgy of gaga bodies questions also the use of different sensory modalities in different cultural communities: for example the use of skin expression it offers, from inner layers to outer spatial relating and listening, is rare to be seen in western contemporary dance of more formal legacy such as the American postmodernism and conceptual contemporary art. The notion of “flesh” becomes a paradigmatic intersection: as flesh does not

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religious propaganda reasons in 1988.

<sup>29</sup> Naharin, Ohad, *Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga*, in «Danceconsortium», October 25, 2012, online: <https://youtu.be/OGPG1QL1vJc>.

<sup>30</sup> The skin and the flesh have been used as artistic material during last few centuries (De Kooning claims the oil paint was invented because of the flesh) mostly in contemporary arts performances and exhibitions - illness, excess, politics and contemporary hedonism have been questioned that way by Orlan, Starlac, Chinese contemporary artists, invention of cyborgs ... On more common ground by inquiring skin rhetorics human integrity and identify can be claimed.

<sup>31</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, *The Media is the Message*, audio recordings, 2016, online: <http://marshallmcluhan.com/>.

directly relate to beauty, but to life, liveliness, a gaga performance is inscribed in the fundamental, metaphorical horizon of the flesh as a metaphor of sensuality opposed to the ideological charge of sinful, weak or dead, flesh in atrophy. The visible, tangible, smellable, and even hearable flesh in gaga is a starting point of self experience of each individual as carnal and flowful being: in the childhood like games in *The Hole* (2013), the ecstatic interactions in *Last Work* (2015).

In many contemporary feminist studies working and representing feminine flesh is considered as an act of self determination of one's body against an objectifying and reifying male gaze. But sometimes the way this work staged, even by a male choreographer, is already an act of resistance such the *Humus*<sup>32</sup>, conceived by Ohad Naharin in 2005, and performed by a multicultural ensemble of female dancers going through diverse states of "exposing" their way of being women, embodying and sharing intimacy. The mediums to treat flesh imply skin as surface in motion, fluctuating, undulating, shivering and breathing. The bodies give the flesh tone often associated with the feminine «when it is connected to matter, softness, beauty or the allure of color»<sup>33</sup>. Same quality is to be observed in male ensemble as the gender issue in the dramaturgies of gaga bodies reveals similar nomadic indeterminacy. The femininity as carnality and sexuality (mouths open, underlined swinging and sweeping movements of the pelvis<sup>34</sup>) reveals an archaic material, a pause in the process of over civilizing bodies and behavior modes of expressing and communicating gender. The voluptuous volumes are fully enlivened by a range of contrasting gestures as to transform the poses<sup>35</sup> into women in actu thus abolishing the distribution of roles between male activity (form/mind) and female passivity (material).

*Humus* articulates corporeality in a feminist way (even though conceived by a male choreographer who assumes openheartedly multiple identities overlapping and inspiring his creativity urges, as the movie *Mr. Gaga*, by Tomer

<sup>32</sup> Humus, as a thick, always moist and fertile layer of earth, refers to the abundance and the grounded quality of feminine energy in motion.

<sup>33</sup> Bohde, Daniela - Feld, Mechthild, *Weder Haut noch Fleisch. Das Inkarnat in der Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin, Gebr. Mann, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> The 1929s scandal related with pelvis on floor, sliding when German choreographer Mary Wigman created and presented *The Witch* as other women choreographers "monsters" in early feminism movements.

<sup>35</sup> Performed in Opéra de Paris, January 2016, *Humus*, both greets and renews the rhetoric of ballet inspired by the Italian perspective and based on a succession of poses.

Hayman, released in 2015, shows insides of work in progress); for the choice of movement language implies the “visual pleasure” of what the western dance audience feared: liquidity, bodily materiality, «just as they were conversely obsessed with control and spatial limitation», Mira Schor, discussing the erotics of visibility<sup>36</sup>. «Dissolving in liquid, the fear of abject, of regressively and the loss of identity, and further top associated with painting as fluid, slimy substance, and following Julia Kristeva’s conception of abject - to femininity»<sup>37</sup>. As a feminist philosopher Julia Kristen has explored in a meticulous way a great number of conventional representations and beliefs about gender and social ways of being. The ambivalence of liquid flesh as sensitive receptivity and as constant danger of unreliable mobility is partially discussed in *Soleil noir*<sup>38</sup>, in a psychoanalytical perspective of how women react and relate on a deep unconscious level, including the complexity of “body mind images” mirroring reflections as fleeting sunbeams on and inside water.

Most of the gaga movement language is liquid based: its the “float base” which allows to built different kinds of “grooving”. The body fluids and their kinetic qualities are directly related to the joy of movement and its spatial potential of multidirectional expansion. A rich range of gestures use the liquid imagery as to embody and enliven the flesh in dance. Femininity is no longer merely an object of contemplation, but directly connected to the materiality of liquid flesh, to all the possibilities of its unformed substance. In this respect, the dramaturgies of “liquid” gaga bodies, is a discourse about the contemporary borders of dance and about going beyond dance cultural habits and norms of perception<sup>39</sup>. The audience does not need a special or specific education to access the gaga flesh experience, offered on stage, because it addresses directly the ability to sense and to make sens out of it<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Schor, Mira, *Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism - An Intergenerational Perspective*, in «Art Journal», vol. 58, n. 4, Winter 1999, pp. 8-29.

<sup>37</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, *Formless - A User's Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1999, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Soleil noir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, p. 265.

<sup>39</sup> How the female body can cast a gaze back? *Virus* (2001) and other plays from Batsheva repertory use the dancers gaze as to address the audience in reversed roles.

<sup>40</sup> Naharin is adamant that one does not need to be a dance specialist to enjoy his works: «Someone who has never seen dance can be a great audience, because he may have a great sense of mathematics, be very connected to his senses, have a big imagination, like to watch multilayered tasks, or be stimulated by sensations», he says. «Others may think of themselves as experienced in watching dance, but may be hampered by their points of reference, only able to see things if they remind them of something else already seen». Naharin, Ohad in Perkovic, Jana, *Going Gaga is the difference between dancer and gymnast*, in «The Guardian», March 8, 2014, on-line: [www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/08/ohad-naharin-going-gaga-is-the-difference-between-dancer-and-gymnast](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/08/ohad-naharin-going-gaga-is-the-difference-between-dancer-and-gymnast).

### 3.3. *Touch of flesh*

The dramaturgy of gaga bodies evolves also on diversified practices of inner touch: how external impressions and inner feelings come together becomes particularly tangible through touch. «Wrap each bone with flesh» as to link with oneself, to create first person matrix relation to movement and sensations as irreducible features of self perception acquirement. Merleau-Ponty<sup>41</sup> described the touch of both his hands as simultaneously an external and internal experience, in a similar way gaga dance experience explores this particular conception of touch: «rub your bones with flesh», «grab bones with flesh», «feel the friction between the bones and the flesh», «connect to the liquid in your flesh, swim the bones».

Experiencing the changing contours of touch within our own bodies gives a special place and function of the kinesthesia in the sensorium, with eyes always open as not to cancel the experience of taste and smell but to enhance multimodal movement perception. Thus the daily gaga training or seeing a performance engineers new emotions by diving into deep inner research.

The dramaturgy of the gaga bodies creates sensitivity to inner touch and to inner sensation by being together in action, not in shape, but in mutual momentum with a partner's touch or being touched at the same time during partnering work. Touch is seen as both aggressive and creative principle («drumming on oneself», «opposing to each other as wrestling with thick textures») which undermines the hierarchical dichotomies between the own and the foreign: how much of other's bodies to integrate? By progressive choices, between the center and periphery: on micro level everybody has a place which changes with invitation «to shuffle», «to find new space and new options» and on microlevel the dancers develops accurate perception of the «traveling stuff» in the body, between progress («sophistication») and idleness («do your silly dance»). Touch is also related to idleness as to interrupt, to capture attention, to show confidence or to unmake tight knots into relational gestures. Contact becomes flesh through liquids as contact medium through which the body touches: feeling the air in between bodies as liquids evaporate, travel, sweaty spots appear, skin steams («it's all about sharing the sweaty flow», Tel Aviv Summer Intensive 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

During gaga performances the experience of contact by the direct medially of flesh gives the possibility of a tactile, affective, somatic reception of the sensualised and sometimes sexualized dramaturgy, sexualisation when the shapes and interactions being attributable to gender. Enabling the participants to capture the pulsing flesh under skin (listen to the flow, when electrification achieved) opens access to what's informal, to image-bodily zones which are broken open as well as to desire shifts: «we do not touch and feel with the surface and at the surface, we touch and feel with the flesh which redoubles the surface. one touches with the heart, ultimately, but only through the medium of flesh».

### 3.4. *Flesh as empathy*

But the metaphor of touch in the dramaturgy of gaga bodies even goes beyond that: from the concrete touch (self or partnering) to letting oneself be emotionally touched or affected and thus experiencing one's own body as a space of resonance for specific experiences. The sensation of touch in the dramaturgy of gaga bodies is simultaneously experience of communion and intersubjectivity: «Being of one flesh is a kind of *basso continuo* of all being, which under the sign of finiteness allows one to think in correspondences, affinities and analogies instead of divisions»<sup>42</sup>. Continuum in gaga as infinity utopia experience coexists with those *saillances* which is to say perception of sublime moments appearing which can take any form: to hear a sound, to sense a move, to indulge in sensation, to thrive on an image.

In a similar way the continuum as access to unconsciousness and as a paradigm of knowing does not operate in separation but in correspondences and analogies. The Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh as the tissue of the world can be related to the constant transitions between "inside" and "outside" in gaga practice, especially as understanding subjectivity as a reciprocal positing of resonance: the neither two nor one, and the intersubjectivity matrix as a specific relation. In the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies the contact that does not function only as a sight or touch and is therefore not subject to the primordial division (as to be touched by art means to break through the otherwise tediously upheld borders) with not danger of dissolution but as reciprocal engendering.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, p. 69.



The concept of flesh in Merleau-Ponty's late work may offer a perspective for the gaga training and onstage performances: «the flesh as a medium of commonality, inter corporality, of being together as a “shaping milieu” in which the members simultaneously individualize and socialize themselves, train their sensual and emotional experience and at the same time lead an interminable, intelligible discourse on exposing oneself to the dark, raw and wild forces of being, with the intention, however, of placing them in a form, in a scene, in meaning»<sup>43</sup>.

Thus the dramaturgy of gaga bodies brings in studio and on stage several metaphors of the flesh: a metaphor of liveliness, a metaphor of sensuality, a metaphor of force, a reservoir of energy and a metaphor of body politics. Its purpose can be defined as to evoke and display the Dionysian forces and at the same time direct and sublimate them which has already been «a constant source of discontent in modernity and triggers a dynamism of transgressions»<sup>44</sup>.

#### 4. Delicacy and vitality

##### 4.1. *Small gestures*

«Connect to delicacy, delicate sensitive hands, fold and unfold fingers, palms of hands, decorate space, curl and uncurl fists»: in a way gaga experience reminds us that Adorno<sup>45</sup> is worried that the loss of even the smallest gestures, involving the wrist of forearm, which reveals a “withering of experience”, a change in the «most secret innervations» of human beings as they navigate an intersubjective and object world. Dance and somatic gestures offer opportunities for kinesthetic experience; they “innervate”, or stimulate, the nerves of a bodily part, and thus allow the body to achieve a certain awareness and knowledge of itself through movement. Retrieving gestures from the past (personal memory or sharing collective memory), or by borrowing gestures from another culture, subjects can actually produce new innervations, discover new sensations to feel.

Gestures migrate and that in migrating they create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences.

<sup>43</sup> Lefort, Claude, *Fortdauer des Theologisch-Politischen?*, Vienna, Passagen Verlag, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, Theodor, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, in «Telos», n. 31, Spring 1977, p. 12.

In a world of inescapable global circulation, gestures too, undergo appropriations and enjoy new lives. Dance culture evolving nowadays in Israel, carries forward overlapping waves of dynamic migrations and takes place in the globalisation phenomenon of eased traveling and information share.

Gaga training offers the necessary conditions for the withering experience to appear and take value as opposed to the current technocratic tendency of expelling from movements of all hesitation (industrial rationalisation versus creative delirium). In that way the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies becomes resisting to homogenisation, a way to place pressure to routines.

The gaga dramaturgy of the bodies is potentially engineering meanings that bear that past towards an unpredictable future following the migration of dance gestures across many fields: geographic, disciplinary and medium specific to provide a narrative ways in which bodies exert agency. The very idea of “past” in Israeli body culture is highly charged with the necessity of inventing resilience strategies and dealing with suffering bodies issues, as many citizens inherit exile and extermination policy, combined with political instability in frequent wars regions proximity. Langer links agency with «an immaterialist model of substance as a structure of powers and capacities in which the natural powers grounded in the human organism make possible the realization of personal powers that are grounded in, and thus afforded by, social life»<sup>46</sup>.

How to fight? How to unfight? How to connect? By drawing on the kinetic energies of a moving self, the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies «searches for gestures that penetrate beneath a dancer’s skin to... most durable connective tissues. ... that mold, carve, and otherwise impress their ways into ligaments, muscles, liquids and even bones, so as to bring about a transformation»<sup>47</sup>. The gaga creature which emerges from them is centerless, riding on «traveling stuff» (listening), hedonistic and “connected to pleasure” (body techniques), self inventing (free interpretation) and ceaselessly adaptive (other presences to take into consideration). Its availability implies distance senses: sight and hearing as well as approximate senses: taste, smell, touch, and multi crossing them as to achieve raised consciousness as the French dance theorist Michel Bernard has

<sup>46</sup> Langer, Susanne, *Feeling and Form*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ness, Sally Ann, *The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance*, in Noland, Carrie – Ness, Sally Ann (eds.), *Migrations of Gesture*, cit., pp. 1-30.

discussed the notions of «sensory chiasms»<sup>48</sup> at the heart of dance experience and mastering the art of performing.

#### 4.2. *Available*

«We move slowly, sometimes very fast, shifting attention, from the chatter of words heard and inner thoughts, to the subtleties of somatic sensation awoken. Breath slows down, spreads through the skin, facial muscles ease appears, landscapes of awareness evolve».

The dramaturgy of the gaga bodies calls attention to different sensory modes, explores ways of seeing the move from different angles and distances, noting particulars of shape and spatial relationships, sharpening hearing (including music and words). By letting the kinetic sensation claim the body and awareness, riding on the echo, reorganizing deep muscles core, hyper stimulating brain activity by increased speed and complexity of multitasking the dramaturgy of the gaga bodies expressive means get close to certain Asian zen philosophy by the idea of achieving a state of “being available”.

Availability in gaga practice is closely connected to a number of somatic modes of listening and attention such as

- touch: between inner body parts and imaginary environment calling on sensory memory,
- movement: the idea of multiple kinetic layers, which add new momentum during a continuum which never cancels what’s already there,
- balance: the never ending quest of reshaping the body’s possibility of mobile balance points, not related to perfection and exclusion but the emergence of new asymmetrical arrangements,
- pressure: the effort connected to pleasure implying tonus power to be measured and mastered in a qualitative manner,
- tension: as opposed to western somatics practice which tends to eliminate any trace of tension here it is entirely included and given place as a possible background of diversifying sensations,
- temperature: the burning sensation of muscles as necessary condition of being available to move also on survival level: to jump (from 10 to

<sup>48</sup> Bernard, Michel, *De la création chorégraphique*, Paris, CND, 2001, p. 27.

1), to run («happy feet»).

While digging for sensations of movement beneath conscious awareness: «to be in mediated states of multiple or diffuse awareness»<sup>49</sup> by multitasking, the gaga puzzling over the senses reactivates and rearranges our stored biographies.

The dramaturgy of the gaga bodies is based on a rich, fluid, personal sense of what it is to be in a body and everyday renewed question about which properties of the soul (mind) manifest themselves clearly in the body and how to be available to them? As the movement languages is developed by insights (dancers claiming the right word will enact the move they feel right<sup>50</sup>) one needs to be available by and in the interiority of selfhood and sense(s) making. Its both an immediate sensation and a migration of somatic memory over time, and the feelings staged imply mastering somatic sensations and kinetic perceptions.

The swift punch of the light, the soothing touch of air, partner: what is the speed, the rhythm, the force and the amount of muscular relaxation necessary? With what spatial parameters and shapes of movement? The gaga gesture performs as power, actual physically exerted power, but also by appearances of possible agency created by virtual (symbolic) intentions. The piece *The hole* in its both versions, a group of girls circles by boys and vice versa, with the audience in between, conceived for the original architecture of a round room space of one of the Suzanne Dellal performances halls implies the idea of being available as to enter into the “circle”. The bodily patterns and sensations are enacted because of conscious awareness of «habits and boxes to break» and if «*habitus* disguises cultural and historical predisposition, social schemes of perception and thought»<sup>51</sup> than how and why are we get available to enter the *habitus* of other dance culture?

Exploring and staging kinetic vitality by the dramaturgy of gaga bodies questions the migration of qualities of vitality across sensory modalities and their configuration as cultural aesthetics schema. Across contemporary media

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis, Lowell, *Genre and Embodiment*, in «Cultural Anthropology», vol. 10, n. 2, May 1995, pp. 143-269.

<sup>50</sup> Batsheva Dance Company, *Gaga training and groove at Batsheva Ensemble*, cit.

<sup>51</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 24.

and mediations «every gesture has a ghost», states Lesley Stern<sup>52</sup>. What is a gaga ghost?

Claire Baybiss Nagar, rehearsal director of the company claims the audience will recognize gaga dancer by her/his specific qualities: animalistic, natural groove<sup>53</sup>. The cross modal apprehension of kinetic dynamics as they are differentially developed in different cultural communities according to cultural construction of embodiment, which David Howes calls «sensory profiles»<sup>54</sup> and Deirdre Sklar «vitality profiles»<sup>55</sup>, includes choices of dynamic factors of rhythm, speed and duration, force, degrees of muscular tension or relaxation and degree of giving in to or resisting gravity (weightless and lightless). They encode cultural dispositions for the shapes and spatial patterns. In the dramaturgy of gaga bodies the vitality affects are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms such as: «collapse into horizontal movement», «float», «be ready to explode», «connect to vulnerability» and are better revealed in event that have «no content» such as recognizable story. They also oppose to “normality” framing and fear of excessiveness by the applied concepts of “exaggeration” and “licence to fake”. The visibility of “jouissance” involves performing what’s new and risky for dancers and audience, as sensual expression is constantly reexplored and renewed, and the transformation of the mimetic function during the training and performing goes in the sense of singularity and hybridity. The desire for freedom and the art of practice encounter, in the dramaturgies of gaga bodies, are closely related to the «as yet no law»: the idea of abolishing attribution of the observed, lived, experienced phenomenon to a known law such as «harmony, naturalness» but a creative act of giving oneself to be looked at and to share what’s explored from within.

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<sup>53</sup> Batsheva Dance Company, *Gaga training and groove at Batsheva Ensemble*, cit.

<sup>54</sup> Howes, David, *The Variety of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of Senses*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> Sklar, Deidre, *Remembering Kinesthesia: An Inquiry into Embodied Cultural Knowledge*, in Noland, Carrie – Ness, Sally Ann (eds.), *Migrations of Gesture*, cit., pp. 85-112.

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