

1.

Each of the five performances of Jennifer Monson's dance work, *in tow*, at Danspace Project in October of 2016, were different from the others, structurally and materially, so by seeing two of them (as I did) you'd have seen two-fifths of the material comprising the piece. But rather than feel that you missed what you didn't see, let's suppose the piece identifies itself as a *quality* of work rather than any particular material by which that quality is achieved, such that, what happens in any one portion of the piece equally frames its defining qualities, and those qualities are more important to the identity of the work than any particular material framing it. Rather than presenting "different versions" of the work in each performance, the restructuring of the material lets the same work exist in the same way, each time. The work being done isn't measured by an aesthetic principle of order as much as by what's achieved within performance -- a quality of listening provoked by the uncertainty of changing circumstances. More evidence supporting this: when I entered Danspace (a little early), the performance was already in progress, because on certain nights a "pre-attack" was included. The piece is already in progress, but you haven't missed anything; it exists outside of the timeframe it's presented in.

The possible equivalency of two things that seem separate and different (e.g., different, equal versions of the piece) is a theme rephrased throughout *in tow*, and in a sequence that exists at the beginning of each performance, an equivalency between performer and audience member seems suggested. After the audience enters and settles, the performers (who've been onstage) leave the stage to join the audience; they describe the structure of the dance, its larger themes, the purpose of tasks, the length of sections, and what will be done within them. Phrases of text that'll be used later are shared. Many are koan-like, self-contradictory ("Anonymity knowing itself"), and suggest the notion that knowledge is greater than the form it's expressed by, and in particular, that the limitations imposed by language on an idea are greater than what the language seeks to express about that idea.

Sitting and talking with small groups of audience members, the performers' informal, conversational interaction seems intended to remove the performer/viewer divide, to remove categorical differences by creating a sense of co-participation, but the facts of the context (the viewer is attending a performance in which the performer is performing) still confirm this as part of a performance. So is this proposed equivalency true or false? We're unsure, and this uncertainty underpins the piece by inviting closer attention to its terms, creating the conditions for the kind of listening and inventiveness which was introduced above by the notion that the different versions of the piece are equal.

Consider, that if someone says a true thing, its truthfulness (the fact of its being true) is equal to that of any other true thing said at any point in history (both true things are equal in their fact of

being true). People saying true things are united *in their truthfulness* outside of Time, while still remaining individual people located within Time. The conflict inherent in this, between two notions of Time, is also seen as performers reckon with: 1) their circumstances, and 2) their ideals -- a conflict between notions of historical time, and the extra-temporal. In historical time we engage with other people, contingencies, past actions, chance, etc. In the extra-temporal we engage with ideals, such as truthfulness, existing outside of time's nodal limits.

In physical comedy, obstacles prevent the accomplishment of a task by limiting one's ability to follow through on an intention within a given circumstance -- creating a conflict between a person's (ideal) intention, and their actual surroundings, in which they try, fail, become inventive, and we see the obstacles overcome, or not. In *in tow* (as in clown), limitations are used to create uncertainty, which also dramatizes the strategies used to *overcome* obstacles, while highlighting particular qualities of character that *resist* those efforts, because limitations are comfortable.

For the clown, let's say, there are guidelines by which imagination is used, rules giving a particular "persona" access to the particular kinds of imagination by which s/he knows him/herself, and uses to overcome obstacles. Are these rules an understanding of social settings and the larger world? Rules by which to behave properly, as it's individually understood? A measure of what's considered appropriate, relative to which there's a corresponding idea of justice? Are they the limits of self-knowledge?

In this setting, how does jurisprudence (a theory of law, maintaining an equality between things through an understanding of their limitations) relate to one's own sense of individuality? Consider the relationship between the limitations that define a person (let's call it an individual jurisprudence) and one's own sense of history (in as much as history consists of an understanding of a jurisprudence developed for one's self over time); it's a relationship to time not just in how you relate to past experiences, but also to how you relate to the experiences of others, and to history as an authority. The historicism that Jennifer creates as context for *in tow* isn't about a relationship to Time in general, but to contingent time, with the way contingencies are shared between people being what Jennifer is primarily exploring here -- which she does by altering them throughout the piece to maintain a climate of uncertainty.

We noted above that the work's organizing principle is less aesthetic than civic. It's located in a historical context, that combines the registers of both individual and shared history, within a shared place. Performers listen, try to take the measure of a moment, and try to determine what's appropriate in uncertain circumstances shared by individuals seeking connection while also isolated within their particular contingencies. Let's imagine Jennifer is building a civic narrative.

Jurisprudence is relevant to the civic program of *in tow* because without laws there can be no single, defined perspective, without which a second perspective can't exist and consequently neither can that primary civilizing activity, of empathizing with a perspective other than your own.

Redemption (here, read: exiting solipsistic isolation in order to communicate) is possible only through the ability to imagine a perspective held by someone else. Let's imagine this as the purpose towards which the changing nature of *in tow*'s structure is aimed.

Imagination relies on rules relative to which we're inventive; this is also true of any performer using constraints of style to sustain a performance form. It also applies to the personae of individuals who don't consider themselves performers. These constraints reflect values, virtues, a logical collection of rules. In reality and imagination both, a measure of what's right is established by proportion -- historical and physical, temporal and spatial. We know the measure of things through a private understanding of this, and also a shared, public one. This allows our pattern recognition to work, and our communication to be successful.

Let's say that one's perception -- the perception of a "persona," by which that persona orients itself in the world -- and the limits of that perception, define the logic by which that persona's experience is best communicated to others through language. Let's call this logic the "constraints of style" for the particular performance form that the language entails; the logic must be adhered to for the perspective it represents to be convincingly human. Because it's either convincing or not, that's the measure of correctness relative to that logic. If *in tow* is telling a civic narrative, how does this correctness relate to, say, civic morality or political institutions? It models the justice of perspective, in which, the particular perspective itself is used for power.

For example, the perspective expressed through commedia dell'arte, achieved by maintaining its formal laws, allows for a critique of power available only through that form. I'm not debating the justice of the critique, I'm arguing that either the form expresses the perspective correctly or it doesn't. Jurisprudence, in this case, is a code by which that appropriateness is known, and it contains a corresponding notion of justice. Which is just to say the very obvious: that there are laws and a sense of justice relative to a perspective, and in particular, the perspective you identify as your own. You can change these laws yourself, you can learn that the laws are incorrect, you can defy the laws, but laws define your home and defiance has consequences -- exile from the "land" defined by that perspective being the most obvious.

Consider this confrontation with limitations/obstacles in a physical comedy/clown context. Consider the perplexities of a locked door. One might A) fight through it (potentially becoming enmeshed in its concerns), or maybe B) not fight through and let it stand as an obstacle. But overcoming it isn't the only way to make it irrelevant. You might realize it's not an obstacle, there was a misunderstanding, you're just distracted from it, you turn away, you stop caring. Metaphor is another way, by holding two thoughts in the mind at the same time. This equals that. The car was a lemon; he drove a lemon. But the car wasn't actually a lemon.

The idea of justice in *in tow*, concerns the allowance for invention within language. Rule of law exists and it contains a principle that states we're allowed to invent regardless of limitations, and, that what's invented isn't as important as the fact that we're inventing. Moments of invention in *in tow* are meaningful not because of what's being invented but because, in the

spirit of invention the performers are inventing together and physical movements achieve a kind of metaphorical usage that both understand. Jennifer's not looking for particular metaphors but for the recognition of meaning that metaphor relies on. Shared inventiveness becomes a form of civic empathy, relying on shared assumptions that civilization is a good thing. So, is there equivalency between us? No. But we imagine there is, and if we say so it's the same thing.

A branch of Enlightenment historical writing pursued the examination and comparison of earlier forms of historicity that described power structures, e.g., philosophical history, monarchical history, theological history, etc., and how each form supported the institution it documented by reinforcing the laws and reality of that institution. If we accept that each of these historical modes is a way of dealing with the contingencies of the time period they took place in, consider that Jennifer frames contingent time here, through the "Practices", as a way of approaching individual history in a shared place, in which each performer's history is relevant.

In *in tow*, "Practices" take place throughout Danspace (on the mezzanine, bleachers, beside arches and windows), they happen in various groupings, they include drawing, moving, hosting, image making, and speaking, and they often explore the use of a material, costume, prop, or object found in those places. Shifts between Practices, places, and materials occur throughout the piece and dancers working together seldom perform the same Practice. One may be drawing while another moves an object around the stage. Skill levels vary; a more-skilled performer might have more sophisticated language and rhetorical power available than a less-skilled performer who relies more on ingenuity, but in this context the confidence that skill brings isn't an advantage; when dancers rely on what they know, the self-assurance it brings has the whiff of vanity, though it can also be a relief.

Geometric shapes are used in parts of *in tow*. These objects, roughly 3'x2'x3', are unlike other objects on stage whose place in the world we know; geometric shapes are idealized -- there's no "use" reference for these, and performers aren't looking for their usefulness. When they're dropped, slid, put in danger, and played on or with, what's communicated is a considered unpuzzling of the thing, through the manipulation of it. As viewers, we wait to see if they find that unpuzzling, which, when it happens, feels like an opening, an amusement, a metaphor recognised. While the "vocabulary" available to each performer within their respective forms have little overlap, they all have equal access to the inventiveness needed for unpuzzling, and within it to irony, metaphor, wit, humor, etc. The repetition of an action might not have a purpose other than entertainment but amusement itself is enough to signal its meaning, and that *sense* of meaning (while not any meaning in particular) is shared between performers as a kind of amused, caring attentiveness that the piece cultivates. When the performers are being inventive, with each other, in their respective languages, they feel united in common cause. The geometric shapes exist in two versions: cardboard and wood. One is mutable and the other is not. One shows effects of time and event, the other doesn't. For one, humans are a contingency, but not for the other.

Sections of the piece are often timed; they begin with a timer and stop when “time” is called. There’s a designated timekeeper but performers also use their phones, emphasising their individuality in contrast to the time that they and everyone else in the world is keeping. When the timekeeper calls “time,” the piece is reset by the performers. When one section ends the performers drop whatever action they’ve been doing and speak to each other “conversationally” while preparing objects and costumes for the next section. They’re “not performing” but the viewer (me, this author) still measures them by the performance ethic established by the work’s earlier intentions. In these in-between sections, the *performance* of uncertainty exists in a mode it simultaneously denies using. Are they “not-performing”? The question can feel like a thrill and/or false equivalency, a metaphor and/or failed premise. The vanity of skill lies in the comfort of certainty. Is the performer’s inventiveness, often the quiet opposite of performance vanity, foregrounding uncertainty, or not? Is it literally or metaphorically non-performance? From one perspective it’s a false equivalency, from another it’s a metaphor. Looking at these moments between the two modes, performative and non-performative, what do we make of the instability? Let’s say that Time is the dimension of instability, and instability is the characteristic of being a particular entity; if we are unstable in time it’s because we emphasise our particularity, and this is the problem of maintaining a particular existence. What we’re seeing in these in-between sections is the instability of persona when the pretence of a fixed time is enacted.

2.

So here we are, watching performers move through Practices, having seen that in the Practices, the performer’s personal histories and fluency with performance languages seem less relevant than their ability to be inventive within that Practice’s particular contingencies, through which, communication (freedom from the individual isolation of those contingencies) is possible because the ability to invent is an expressive possibility shared between performers and Practices. Practices are designed to create instability, putting performers in conflict with limitations, from which the freedom (communication) found through invention is dependent on close listening to personal contingencies and shared circumstance.

We’ve seen that the piece deals with historical imagination on an individual level (as the skills, experiences, and performance languages essential to each performer), and a collaborative level (the printed program tells us that some of the performers share career-long collaborative relationships) and we’re trying to reconcile that reliance on history with the suggestion that one’s own sense of historicity, of a historical self, is important here for how it’s given up. Because we’ve said that communication, here, de-emphasises self (as known from prior experience) and history (through self-sacrifice i.e., being uncertain). A sacrifice of one’s sense of personal history occurs in exchange for freedom from one’s own historical self-consciousness. Watching the performers with longer working relationships adds a thrill; the stakes are higher and their shared history is made powerful by the scale of what’s given up. We see people at the center of a historicity of which “they” are not now at the center -- the virtue that associates them with others, dissociates them from themselves. It’s from this conflict that the vocabulary of *in tow* emerges. It’s from the metaphorical imagination -- imagining equivalency, and imagining someone else

imagining an equivalency -- that the shared vocabulary is drawn. In order to connect freedom, imagination, and individuality, an element of individuality is let go -- *certainty*, is what's let go. This is also true in clown.

Now bear with me and consider that, as an expression of shared ideals, a democratic republic has to be reshaped by every generation because there's no enduring extra-government modeling tool, as opposed to, say, monarchy which is modeled by monotheistic religions. Here, Jennifer uses the group of particular dancers to create a civic narrative, with extratemporal idealism represented by the communion they seek through a spirit of invention, that they share despite not speaking each other's language, through the acceptance of formal limitations, by which virtues are established, a corresponding jurisprudence emerges, and attention paid to it aligns with a morality.

I imagine that you, movement-informed reader, accept the notion that humans physically describe their own individual idea of space as they move through their individual surroundings. Here, let's take that idea of space (an abstraction) to also be a personal understanding of land (an experientially verified object), and let's consider an equivalency between people and land on the understanding that "land" use has a unique, individual system of rules (patterns, habits of use, guiding principles) that reflects back paradigmatically how each person understands him/herself -- a system of rules for *being* land, as defined by Self, with an associated history and idealism, relative to which one can be inventive.

As we (performers and audience) are asked to consider a place where private imagination and public communication intersect, to consider the impossible equivalency between individuality and universality, in order to ask how personhood relates to 1) individual idealism and 2) the shared compromises of city life, what does this shifting between an understanding of individuality and an understanding of shared place allow us to ask about an equivalency between people and land?

Let's suppose that Jennifer's looking for the perspective from which an equivalency between land and people can be held. And as she's looking for how those terms can be held simultaneously in mind, terms against which individuality can still be measured, and by which a kind of compassion is nourished, in order to share a sense of historical time with others while simultaneously holding ideals placing us outside of Time's measurements, is this in an effort to represent a new duality of contemporary civic life? If the piece shows displacement from a prior historicity, what *place* are we arriving to now?

The answer, here, is Zeena Parkins. In *in tow*, Zeena occupies positions of both land and individual. She's involved musically, and in movement tasks, as an individual participant and in a historicizing role. By the occasional presence of rhythm she suggest a temporal continuum letting us place what's past in context, while also imagining a future. (Whether or not rhythm is present in what you're hearing at a given moment is irrelevant, because heard just once it suggests itself to the ear as something to listen for at every other moment, making it's presence

felt even when absent.) In *in tow* these vectors come only from her. She underpins the structure of the piece as a musician by the measure of certainty the music brings, and she underpins it as a mover through her association with the music (attributing to her movements the gravitas of special knowledge (music)). In both of these, and in contrast to all other performers, she brings a measure of certainty to the work. At the same time, moving back and forth between modes, she embodies an uncertainty principle of her own; she's seen as both a wave, and a particle, but not at the same time and the paradigms of each are mutually exclusive. When the music stops, the memory of the architecture it provided remains active in the viewer's mind as a kind of structural imagination, making itself felt even in its absence. Two musical elements that were noteworthy, and pervasive, were the use of portable tape recorders (circa mid-1980's), and small bells. The tape recorders, with prerecorded material, appear frequently. In addition to being historical artifacts we know the tapes they run occupy physical space, and deliver sound as the tape moves, unspooling physically through time. In contrast, the bells are nearly instantaneous, might seem to exist outside of time, and certainly have the association of a symbolic extra-temporalism.

We're looking at the way personal history has redemptive possibility within a civic sphere relative to the isolation of solipsism, as, within uncertain circumstances people listen to others more than themselves, invent, and inventiveness itself becomes a language that communicates. Shared invention requires care, playfulness, and trustworthy structure can be built on it. Performers are released from the solipsistic aspects of one's own idealism through attempts to hold the perspective of another person in mind while also holding their own. Uncertainty is essential to the trust required, and *in tow* is a kind of training for this. Happily, we're not alike as particular beings, though we are alike as citizens.