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Margarita Delcheva
delcheva@ucsb.edu

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Notation That Considers the Body: the Glyphs of Nancy Stark Smith

by Margarita Delcheva

While dozens of dance notation systems exist, many focus on the visual experience of the inscriber who is observing the dance and translating it into symbols. Approaches like these, along with semiotic theory, have been criticized for disregarding subjectivity, an essential aspect of embodied expression. In her essay “Writing the Moving Body,” Ann Cooper Albright discusses a freer and more flexible notation method, which borrows from drawing an involvement of the individual body. The hieroglyphs of Nancy Stark Smith were born of lines and squiggles that dancers are often encouraged to write themselves. “Though there is no one-to-one correspondence to specific movements in these hieroglyphs, there are indications of rhythm and motions in their shapes and lines.”¹ Albright compares the method to the one of an artist drawing the movements of Albright’s dance class in Paris in 1980. The visual artist had used sweeping motions that originated in his spine. He was drawing not the figures of the dancers but the quality of their movement. Smith’s own hieroglyphs were inspired by her experience working with contact improvisation in the 1970s.

Smith’s education at Oberlin college propelled her to develop the notation that transcended forms. She studied both dance and writing. Inspired by the work of Judson Dance

¹ Ann Cooper Albright. “Writing the Moving Body: Nancy Smith and the Hieroglyphs.” *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013, 77.

Theater and its consequent sibling, Grand Union, Smith participated at some of the first contact improvisation performances in New York in the 1970s. A choreographer committed to writing, she also founded the American improvisation journal in 1975, called *Contact Quarterly*, which continues to be produced.

For Smith and many other improvisers, the vantage point for dance moved to the dancer's subjective experience. "Smith's hieroglyphs are somatic stream-of consciousness movement reflections that are inspired not so much by the outside shape or appearance of the movement as by its internal motion and sensation."² Albright describes one of Smith's exercises where dancers imagined "a writing instrument" on top of their heads, which they used to write on the sky.³ The head's connection to the spine ensured a full-body movement, though "leading" with other body parts may also produce a similar chain of motion. The improvising body is both choreographer and audience, inhabiting a full, spherical space, without privileged angles.

While the body had been treated as a sign, pointing to something outside itself or as a stand-in for the archetypal characters in narrative ballet marriage-plots, in postmodern dance the somatic assumes the authorial. Smith's system of hieroglyphs is "a signature that validates the body as a source for writing."⁴ Albright points out that dancers were able to guess whose hieroglyphs they were looking at after seeing that person dance because there was "a recognizable connection between how a person moves and the 'signature' of her hieroglyphs."⁵ Smith's dance notation is not alphabetic and its power to help re-stage dances might be stronger where the feeling or dynamic of the movement is concerned and not so much the precise limbs or

² Ibid, 78.

³ Ibid, 80.

⁴ Ibid, 78.

⁵ Ibid, 83.

direction used. It seems that Smith was less concerned with reproduction than with subjective inscription.

Her drawings sometimes resemble figures and other times—clusters of energetic and sweeping lines. Albright says the hieroglyphs “originated in her handwriting.”⁶ The physicality of handwriting or free drawing may be points where dance and the line on paper are able to converse through their somatic commonalities.

Smith’s methods might not have been “self-consciously feminist,” according to Albright, but like the work of many other postmodern choreographers of the 1960s and 1970s, her hieroglyphs confronted the process of social and political inscribing of women into language. Albright connects Smith’s work to Hélène Cixous’s “écriture féminine” and argues that “[b]y inscribing the experience of the writer..., the hieroglyphs subvert the...relationship that many women have with the language of a culture that often denies or conceals the importance of their somatic experiences.”⁷ The issue of the body as writer is inextricably linked to the feminization of dance and the misperception of dance’s unintellectual nature.

Cixous’s impassioned 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” marks an uncompromising and deliberate feminist position on the woman’s body and its role in the process of writing. She mobilizes a somatically-engaged approach to writing for the purpose of making space for women in discourse. “By writing her self,” says Cixous, “woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.”⁸ The first step for Cixous’ “woman” is to claim her own alienated body and self, which have been distanced from her through objectification. The objectified image and the social projections on it

⁶ Ibid, 83.

⁷ Ibid, 83.

⁸ Hélène Cixous, et al. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 880.

are not the real woman. Cixous thinks this image must be replaced with the actual woman, who so far has often been afraid to write, but now must do that and, by doing so, reinvent writing.

“We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.”⁹ The violent metaphor in Cixous’ statement reflects the urgency and visceral nature of her quest. The breath is also a vital image—it is presence and it continually renews itself. If writing counts on the breath, it would only inscribe what is alive now.

The use of Cixous’ essay as a theoretical tool in dance scholarship is not arbitrary. Cixous envisions a renewal of somatic signification in writing. As choreographer Trisha Brown has said, “Do my movement and my thinking have an intimate connection? First of all, I don’t think my body doesn’t think.”¹⁰ Brown and Cixous theorize the body in similar ways, though Brown’s vision of the thinking body, which generates and processes on its own, might be even more radical. Cixous argues that woman “physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body.”¹¹ The descriptions of this new type of writing resemble a discussion of a dance where the body is a stand-alone sign.

Cixous is calling for the invention of a new language, needed for a new kind of discourse, which would allow women actual agency. “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes...”¹² This language would subvert social structures and disturb scholarship, especially the purely theoretical, through the grounding force of the body.

⁹ Ibid, 880.

¹⁰ Brown, Trisha. “Trisha on Her Work.” *Trisha Brown Dance Company*.
<https://trishabrowncompany.org/trisha-brown/trisha-on-her-work/>

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, et al. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 881.

¹² Ibid, 886.

Ann Cooper Albright sums up Cixous' argument to say that what is really at stake is "the difference between writing that takes its impulse from and includes the body and writing that negates it."¹³ It is not possible to write unless one has a body. Dictation is speech. Writing involves mark-making or, even simpler, touch. Writing, which cannot acknowledge its physicality must be partially in denial of what it is doing. Even the latest experiments in artificial intelligence have named embodiment necessary for learning. What would it mean to grasp the tool, to touch the page, to press the piano keys, to drag the foot through the sand in a gesture that allows somatic impulses to enter the semiotic act of writing? How could we envision the somatic and semiotic enmeshed in the game of signification?

For Albright, the battle for the inclusion of the body in writing is especially important to women. According to her, what Cixous does is "to break through representations of the female body that address its physicality only in a distanced, objectified manner."¹⁴ If women have been socialized to see even their own bodies, as if, from afar in countless representations in the arts and everyday life, how may they learn to re-inhabit those distant selves? If "female bodies have historically been overexposed and under-self-represented," might this self-representation be reclaimed if the body is given a voice through somatic writing?¹⁵

Nancy Stark Smith's hieroglyphs performed this subtle task when she applied them to dance improvisation. She writes,

I want to be able to write from inside the movements of an improvisation and tell from there how things look, how they feel... putting a finger on what isn't there. It's like

¹³ Ann Cooper Albright. "Writing the Moving Body: Nancy Smith and the Hieroglyphs." *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 85.

talking about a hole... we're trying to say what shapes the hole from within... Where you are when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation... I call this place the Gap... this momentary suspension of a reference point...¹⁶

Smith is less interested in what the dance looks like to the observer. She wants to generate writing from the place of pre-conscious not-knowing, before the movement unfolds from the body. The “hole” she is referencing is likely the absence of dance, yet not the absence of dance that has passed, but the absence of the dance that is yet to come—the dance that has to germinate in the body at any moment but has not yet travelled through the space. This gap, which Stark compares to an empty page, is a disorienting place of endless possibilities. To write this absence while being present in it is the challenge of Smith's unusual dance notation.

In a 2013 video workshop, Smith, who used for many years what she later called “little glyphs,” guided the participants through a lie-down meditation and short improvisation.¹⁷ The movement prepared the body for the writing. “Extending” from the body's energy, Smith's glyphs remotely resembled stick figures twirling into clouds of line, except that the lines were at times sweeping, at times interrupted at angles.¹⁸ Smith invited the viewers, “look at what you wrote,” then referenced “reading.” To her, the glyphs were writing. To others, they might have looked like drawings, yet she was placing them from right to left in lines, forming a grid of glyphs on the paper. Smith “wrote” on the page with her body's energy at that particular moment. Moreover, the purpose of her glyphs was not necessarily to preserve movement for re-

¹⁶ Nancy Stark Smith qtd. in *ibid*, 87.

¹⁷ Nancy Stark Smith. “Nancy Stark Smith Teaches "Hieroglyphs"- Embodied Activity #1 for Meta-academy(at)bates 2013.” *Meta-academy Lab*. Video, Jul 25 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hS1MUpltx_M.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

enactment or to arrest dance in a static form. The glyph inscription is an act of somatic expression, an end in itself.

Smith is not just inciting ruptures in a fabric that already exists. She is interested in creating a fabric that is constructed already having punctures. Smith's glyphs are "an attempt to weave a fabric that invites one to slip through its openings."¹⁹ She would like to leave space for the writer or viewer and build a more flexible and interactive experience of reading and writing somatically-inspired glyphs. Albright sums up the visions of the critic and choreographer, saying that "the hieroglyphs contain within their form the gaps... that Smith and Kristeva believe encourage a fluidity of perception—both visual and imaginative."²⁰ The meeting place of the semiotic and the somatic, when they enter a porous fabric, can motivate a new type of seeing. Unlike other stick-figure-like notation, the glyphs of Nancy Stark Smith "represent the body not in a static position of pose, but rather in fluid variable state."²¹ This view transcends the idea that writing puts a stop to dance and extends the movement in a continuation on the page. In this case, writing could also be viewed as a form of dance.

Smith's intuitive dance-writing or writing-dancing is not driven by the need for preservation or re-enactment. This is what allows the writing and the dance to meld together. Notation as an expression without the goal of archiving is different from notation for the purpose of re-staging. While these two modes are not mutually exclusive, in the latter, translation between dance and writing is difficult to avoid. This relationship of translation positions dance and writing in a strained discursive power arrangement.

¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

²⁰ Ibid, 89.

²¹ Ibid, 90.

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