



When Dance Touches Us: meanings, ethics, and presence in practices with touch in the curriculum

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ABSTRACT – When Dance Touches Us: meanings, ethics, and presence in practices with touch in the curriculum – This article presents an excerpt of the research concerning six dance teachers in southern public Brazilian schools, describing dance classes within the Art curriculum through an ethnographic approach. The text analyzes dance practices in which male and female students touch each other. Based on Michel Foucault's theoretical perspective, this study identifies that such practices produce tensions with technologies of production of subject-bodies at the school, challenging hegemonic codes of skin and touching. The research points out the effects of dance practices with touch, mainly regarding: a) the suspension of embodied cultural meanings; b) emergence of the presence dimension; and c) ethical work.

Keywords: **Dance. School. Touch. Presence. Ethics.**

RÉSUMÉ – Quand la Danse nous Touche: pratiques avec le toucher dans le programme scolaire – L'article présente une partie de la recherche réalisée avec six professeurs de danse dans les écoles au sud du Brésil sur les cours de danse dans le programme scolaire d'Art, dans une approche ethnographique. Le texte analyse des pratiques de danse où les élèves se touchent. Partant de la perspective théorique de Michael Foucault, la recherche identifie que ces pratiques produisent des tensions avec les technologies de production du corps-sujet scolaire et avec la codification hégémonique du toucher et de la peau. La recherche souligne les effets des pratiques de danse avec le toucher: suspension de significations culturelles corporifiées, la dimension de la présence et le travail éthique.

Mots-clés: **Danse. École. Le Touche. Présence. Éthique.**

RESUMO – Quando a Dança nos Toca: significados, ética e presença em práticas com toque no currículo – O artigo apresenta recorte da pesquisa realizada com seis professoras de dança em escolas públicas no sul do Brasil. A pesquisa, de cunho etnográfico, estuda aulas de dança no componente curricular de Arte. O texto analisa práticas de dança em que alunos e alunas se tocam. Desde a perspectiva teórica de Michel Foucault, identifica que tais práticas produzem tensões com as tecnologias de produção do corpo-sujeito escolar e com a codificação hegemônica do toque e da pele. Mostra como o toque escapa à operação de normalização. Aponta efeitos das práticas de dança com o toque: suspensão de significados culturais corporificados; emergência da dimensão da presença; trabalho ético.

Palavras-chave: **Dança. Escola. Toque. Presença. Ética.**

Introduction

Go there and massage your colleague's back. Kitten's massage. Do you know how the kitten's massage is? Kneading, look. [...] Kids, that is the massage. Renan, do it right. [...] Sit here, Rui. Come here and do it on me. You don't want to. I'm going to do here, and you have to do the same in the colleague. Be careful not to hurt. Massaging the shoulder of the colleague. Massaging the head. [...] It's fondly. [...] Careful (Falkembach, 2016f, p. 67).

The moment transcribed above took place in a lesson of teacher Tereza at the 1st grade of elementary school (14 students from 5 to 6 years of age). Everything started with a circle game that turned into a centipede composed of all, in which the one who was behind was linked to the one in the front by holding their waist or shoulder. During the play, the centipede sat. Then, the teacher proposed that all, at the same time, did a massage on the colleague who was in front of them. At one time, being massaged and massaging, touching and being touched, learning how to touch and be touched *without hurting, without squeezing*.

This was one lesson among the many of which I could participate throughout the research with six dance teachers that teach the subject within the curricular component of Art in the elementary/middle school, in public schools in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In the second half of 2015, I followed the six teachers in their daily practices within the school, each one for about two weeks, by means of a methodology built from the Performative Ethnography (Pineau, 2013).

A single data file, named *Dossier*, was prepared for each teacher, following the chronological order of data production. Each document contains the transcript of videos and audios from the classes, the transcript of the interviews and my personal field notes. Files produced in this step are confidential and are indicated in the bibliographic references as *Dossier* plus the fictitious name of the interviewees (to ensure their anonymity).

In the classes of all six teachers, touch was recurring among the students. However, in sometimes, these practices produced tensions with the school. Throughout the research, I was able to identify that dance practices in the school exert tension on the technologies of production of the school body. I focused the data analysis on these tension points. I have chosen such tensions because, from a Foucauldian perspective, I understand

that it is in these moments that relations of knowledge-power become visible (Foucault, 2013). In these moments, there is a clash between games of truth. Tensions emerge because the body-subject of dance knowledge is not always the body-subject of the school – knowledge of dance is not always recognized as school knowledge. Dance teachers' conducts are not always the expected and naturalized ones.

Among the many practices I observed, the recurrent ones received closer attention. I chose and arranged three sets of practices: 1) composition practices and Labanian studies; 2) practices developed from the perspective of somatic education; 3) practices involving touch and contact (Falkembach, 2017). This article focuses on the latter.

While teachers were preparing different practices with touch, the school often did not understand the need for such. On the contrary, touching and embracing were even forbidden in one of the schools.

To the extent which the lessons were observed, it was evident how the tactile sense and the touch were present in the dance classes. My attention was drawn to these practices by the intersection of different situations: in teacher Tereza's lessons, different proposals with touch sought to sensitize; in Samara's classes there was a concern about children touching each other because they hurt themselves; Carla's lessons were focused on the attitude of *touching without problems*; in Rita's school the touch (embrace) was forbidden, which did not stop her from working the touching and the embracing in dance lessons; in Adriana's classes there was touching, as well as the idea that the touch *goes to the muscle and to the bone*; teacher Aline had Contact Improvisation practices in her class (Falkembach, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d; 2016e; 2016f).

I have identified that in my perspective there was naturalization of the touch in dance classes. However, this was not the perspective of the school. Then, in a movement to *look at it in another way*, I started to ask myself: why is the touch something natural in a dance class, and why is it important?

With the aim of answering such questions, I rely on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's writings about the dimension of presence which combine literary theory and philosophy. This approach is used as a complement to the theoretical tools of the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. I

also reflect on the studies from the field of dance regarding dance practices and Contact Improvisation practices, including Neder (2010); Houston (2009); Sastre (2015); Suquet (2009); Tampini; Farina (2010).

Research data analysis discusses the hegemonic coding of the touch and skin and, from the classes observed, indicates possible effects of dance practices with touching: suspension of culturally produced and embodied meanings; the emergence of the dimension of presence; sensitive and ethical work.

Decoding the Touch and the Skin

The topic of touching also became relevant in this research due to the contrast: while one school (teacher Rita's) forbade the touch, the other (teacher Carla's) stimulated it. While in the first school the touch was interpreted as a possible sexual relationship, in the second the meanings of touching were not always relevant.

Although the embrace was banned at the school, I have witnessed a lesson by teacher Rita for a 7th grade class in which one of the activities consisted of hugging the colleague, in a long-lasting embrace. That class posed amazing tension: in addition to developing a proposal that is not common within that school, the teacher was transgressing the whole *modus operandi* of that institution. Such school rule, said the teacher, is a result of the students' attitudes with sexual connotation in a situation during the recess, in which they "crossed the lines" of what was acceptable to that school. The school board members' reaction was, however, hiding the word "sexual" and prohibiting affective contact. According to teacher Rita, "[...] hugging is forbidden, and there cannot be affective contact. Physical contact" (Falkembach, 2016d, p. 41). The school did not treat this event as a matter related to the students' sexuality, but interdicted questions about sexuality and shutout, as a precaution, any affection.

I understand that the institution decided to ban any physical contact because there is no clearness about the boundary between sexual and non-sexual contact. This attitude implies the idea that all physical contact, i.e., the action of an individual touching the other, may have a sexual connotation. The school cannot establish a norm for touching and, therefore, cannot set which behavior is the deviant one.



Normalization is one of the operations of the disciplinary technology described by Foucault (2004) that, together with surveillance and examination, produce the disciplined subject. The school, as the philosopher shows us, is one of the institutions established by this technology. The author explains the procedure of disciplinary normalization. According to him:

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. [...] there is an originally prescriptive character of the norm and the determination and the identification of the normal and the abnormal becomes possible in relation to this posited norm (Foucault, 2009, p. 57).

Such operation of normalization is allied to that of surveillance. Bodies are put under surveillance so that they follow the norm. The institution establishes what is normal and produces the possible behaviors from the convergence or deviation from the norm. Thus, the school educates the disciplined subject to control their mobility, in order to follow the norm. Therefore, when dance at school makes propositions unlinked to the norm, or in a space where there is lacks, there is tension.

The principal of Rita's school says, in an interview, that she does not understand why the teacher proposes that students touch each other to learn about the functioning of bones.

In contrast, in teacher Carla's lessons, the touch was recurrent, without any tension on the part of the school. Touching was a way to bring the student's attention to a particular part of the body during warming-up. Most of the procedures involving the touch in a dance class are related to the search for body awareness, a foundation of the somatic education perspective. "Somatics lessons often use touch to amplify sensory experience through the skin, the body's largest organ, and therefore more quickly awaken awareness" (Eddy, 2009, p. 8). Thus, while the students were performing the initial exercises, in all classes (from 6th to 9th grade), teacher Carla would walk among them, watching their bodies closely (lying or sitting) and touching specific points, with light and continuous pressure.



Sometimes she would perform a slight mobilization of the joints, such as a massage, seeking to release tension and stretch (through relaxation), to expand the movement of the joints.

Carla talks about the students' relationship with her touch: "No problems. [...] If I would get a new 6th grade class, the first contact being today, I would not touch them [...] [I would use] a little ball, something in-between [...]" (Falkembach, 2016c, p. 52-53). Carla's practice is a process that leads to touching. Reaching the possibility of people touching each other "without a problem" is part of the goal of the lessons. I have identified this goal from the way an 8th grade student praised the choreography of 9th grade colleagues. To explain why he had liked it, he said the dancers (a boy and a girl) "[...] they, let's say, they are not afraid to touch each other, he comes with his weight, you know" (Falkembach, 2016c, p. 37). His sentence tells me that the two students, when they dance, are not afraid to touch, to hurt each other, nor are afraid to fall: the dance mobilizes all these fears. I gather that there is no fear of touching because there is no fear on the possible meaning it produces, as these meanings are not relevant. His enchantment with the colleagues' dance had no relation with the building of meaning; it came from another dimension – the rapture by the touch. I do believe this had a relation with the mobilization of limits before life: of the colleagues' fears and, consequently, of his own.

Moreover, another evidence showed that the touch appears as a value in the relationship between people in this school, particularly between students and teachers. This was informed by the principal during a conversation about the role of dance classes in the students' education. The principal said that

[...] it is amazing what she [teacher Carla] can do with these students. It is amazing how they change, this [...] their relationship with people, with the space, the school, the teachers, with the body. [...] They have already changed, they changed with us, the way they talk to us, the way they react to us. [...] Now they are no longer that totally aggressive, you know [...] They can touch us, they can, you know, cope [...] we can deal with them otherwise, touching them in another way. I think their relationship with the body as well. I think this [the dance class] really moves them (Falkembach, 2016c, p. 48).



This stresses the role of dance (for already ten years in this school) in the construction of school as a non-violent space, even though it is located in a very precarious region of the city, with a high rate of violence. The principal tells me that dance promoted a transformation in the students' way of being.

A similar transformation process is reported by the dance researcher Sara Houston (2009), concerning a group of inmates who went through an experiment with the practice of Contact Improvisation (CI) in a prison for men in England. According to the author, the practice allowed certain prison behaviors to be broken and could help inmates to "[...] find a different way of relating to others that does not involve violence and revenge" (Houston, 2009, p. 112).

I mention Houston's research because it highlights the prohibition of the touch in the prison as an initial barrier to Contact Improvisation, named by the author as *touch taboo*. This is an extreme case of a dance experience that is based on touch within an institution that produces (and is composed of) untouchable bodies. Such research helps to think about the way the touch is codified in our society and, thus, confiscated – interdicting our tactile sensitivity. Through Houston's example of an experience within a prison, one can think about the conduct inside the school from the perspective of disciplinary technologies, which are part of both institutions. Foucault, in his studies on disciplinary technology conducted from the analysis of the prison organization, also describes constitutive elements of other institutions, including the school (Foucault, 2004). In both cases of disciplinary institutions – Houston's research and the principal's report – the subjects have learned they can touch others in another way without violence or sexual connotation.

I understand that the difference of the research contexts is not relevant here because I am not comparing experiences but bringing reflections on a situation to discuss another one, as well as bringing discussions about the CI to think the effects of the touch in different practices on a dance class.

Although I have not witnessed any CI session during the research in the schools, Teacher Aline claims that she works with CI with 8th grade students, and I was present when students were asked to perform a scene using CI elements. It is noticeable how teachers' practices embed CI

principles in connection with contemporary dance, as evident in a conversation between Tereza and a 6th grade class. She tells them to experiment the work with contact and:

[...] you will start to understand not only your own body, how you move, but also the body of the colleague. [...] There is a kind of work called Contact Improvisation, in which we really have contact with the body of the other, seeking support in the body of the other one (Falkembach, 2016f, p. 79).

Tereza states that, through contact, one can understand their own body and their classmates'. Furthermore, she points out that touching consists of an operation that produces a kind of knowledge.

Dance educators and researchers Marina Tampini and Cynthia Farina (2010) indicate that the CI can destabilize the disciplinary regime, to the extent that it explores possibilities of movement discarded by this technology. In this sense, they present the CI as a practice that deterritorializes encodings¹ and mobilizes subjectivities. The authors highlight the importance of uncertainty as an element of improvisation: to the dancer, the rules to be followed do not matter as much as being able to put oneself in a position of disorientation.

In this practice, uncertainty is produced by reciprocity, by the constant and erratic action of responding to the other's contact with/through the touch. "Of the five senses, the sense of touch is, in fact, the only one that carries inherent reciprocity: you cannot touch without being touched", says the dance historian Annie Suquet (2009, p. 533). In the CI, the focus is on the relationship. It is

[...] the product of this 'in-between' one and the other. Whether by contrast, by clash, by encounters or the lack of them, the fact of not circumventing the difference but predisposing oneself to a relationship with it is essential. It comes to establishing a relationship that is not always easy, instantaneous or successful, but able to illuminate areas of one, of another and of the relationship itself (Tampini; Farina, 2010, p. 23).

What happens is a result of reciprocity, of physical trading. It is a negotiation of physical relations, of an ephemeral and continuous pact that happens in the skin.

In the prison system, there is a rule – unwritten, albeit rigid and definitive – among inmates: touching the other is not allowed. The aversion

to touching is part of what is called '*prisonisation*', "[...] a process whereby inmates appropriate a way of behaving, acting, and thinking peculiar to the culture in the prison" (Houston, 2009, p. 98). Houston presents the conditions producing these untouchable bodies, which, in short, are a product of the modes of operation of the disciplinary institution, violence relations, sexist culture, and isolation. "Once a convicted criminal (judged by his actions) enters prison, his body becomes a site for the playing out of fears and enforcing the boundaries of coded communal relations and appropriately sanctioned male behavior" (Houston, 2009, p. 100). Also mobilized are the inmate's fear of being touched – both tenderly as violently – and the fear of others to touch them because no one dares (out of fear) or wants (out of spite) to touch a marginal, or because the rigid and muscular bodies (intensively cultivated in gymnastic training) intimidate the contact. There is an encoding process of the body, a process of fixating the codes that comprise this culture into gestures, postures, movements, muscles, body surface area, etc. There is a process by which the norms are materialized through the enforced reiteration of those standards². Such encoding makes the encoded body a sign of itself. Meanings, therefore, are forged in relations of power.

The encoding of the body surface through the game of affections and power relations is not exclusive to the prison system. As Tampini and Farina emphasize, the body surface, in our society, "[...] takes place almost exclusively in the sphere of eroticism and carries a high level of encoding that involves the restriction of movements and the ways of contact to certain repertoires and modes of use" (Tampini; Farina, 2010, p. 18). The authors identify that the CI "[...] opens an unencoded zone of experience that allows the exploring a territory without so many *a priori*" (Tampini; Farina, 2010, p. 18).

Furthermore, the sexist discourse is not exclusive to the prison system, being hegemonic in most instances of society. Houston's analysis on the prison culture stresses that the sexist discourse produces untouchable men. From this point of view, one may think that the machismo produces untouchable men and touchable women. Such statement converges, for instance, with evidence from the campaign against rape culture that grew in Brazil in 2016, i.e., against the naturalization of the possibility of women

being harassed and raped (Tiburi, 2016). In this culture, women are potentially touchable.

This task of moving from the touch is challenging in a society in which these meanings are so prominent. For the school, discussing these prejudices is very difficult because the school itself also reproduces such discourse.

Given this context, how can one work the physical contact without continuing to reproduce a culture that divides bodies into touchable and untouchable? How can one work with the body, put the body and the sensitivity in the center of the curriculum, without considering this context? Teachers rely precisely on the role of dance and touch as practices that produce displacements from this code, that produce “[...] a physical, present and mobilized negotiation of politically embodied socio-symbolic forces” (Sastre, 2015, p. 68).

The CI mobilizes affections but in an unencoded dimension, as Tampini and Farina (2010) say, or deconstructing the codes, as Sastre (2015) claimed. The touch, in this case, is de-sexualized because “[...] the surfaces are used as communicators, not in terms of arousal, but for understanding where weight is being concentrated and where support needs to be given” (Houston, 2009, p. 105). The touch has no connotation of confrontation: neither violent nor sexual. Thus, there is the possibility of “touching without problems,” as in Carla's classes, where you can touch each other without fear, without considering the hegemonic meanings imposed on the skin.

From reports of some of the inmates who participated in the CI experience, Houston shows how this dance can shake the normalized behavior in prison. The participants speak of: loss of control over how the body is presented; the relief of putting masks aside; the realization that their lifestyle never dealt with trust; the understanding that everything one does affect someone else; the opportunity to see beauty in a movement despite its imperfection and to focus less on faults; the break down with machismo; the leaving of isolation, among other effects that highlight the mobility of the way of being.

When school teachers bring the touch as an element of dance classes, they mobilize the discourses producing the bodies, they shake the behaviors



naturalized at that institution and, consequently, the institution itself. When the school prohibits the contact, it contributes to the establishment of untouchable bodies, which work very well in spaces of violence, sexist discourse and restriction of life.

The researched teachers report that there is a relationship between the aggressive touch in spaces of violence and a tendency to think that another kind of touch can operate against violence. Teacher Adriana stresses the importance of responsibility, commitment, and confidence in the practice of dance, as one cannot dance alone. For her, such relationship, in which one depends on the other, is related to the touch.

The touch as a form of support and not of violence. [...] We work with a touch that is not violent. A touch that starts in the skin and goes to muscle and to the bone. It gives you some information. You are touched; you touch and are also touched. And then they do it, in this field, only to then realize they are touching that person they were dying of shame to do it (Falkembach, 2016a, p. 30).

Adriana specifies a type of touch that “starts in the skin and goes to the muscle and to the bone.” A touch that perceives the materiality, that communicates with the body, that “gives some information.” A touch that does not have a meaning, as it merely reports there are two living bodies in contact, in presence. The quality of this touch mentioned by Adriana is noticeable in her classes, in the way she touches the students.

This unencoded zone enables the appearance of two elements: first, ethics regarding the individual possibility of acting upon him/herself; and second, presence as the relationship with the other through minimizing the importance of meanings. Gumbrecht defines presence as “[...] this very feeling of being the embodiment of something [...]” (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 135). According to him,

[...] every instant we find ourselves in two dimensions, in two relations before the material objects of the world. First and inevitably – and there is no way to escape this – we find ourselves in a relation of interpretation, of attribution of meaning. However, by contrast – and we rarely notice that – we also find ourselves in a relation of presence – and my understanding of presence is in its spatial meaning (Gumbrecht, 2012, p. 117).

Gumbrecht develops concepts to understand presence as the foundation of a relationship with the things of the world, or rather, a

relationship that may oscillate between effects of presence and effects of meaning. He states that “[...] something that is ‘present’ is supposed to be tangible for human hands, which implies that, conversely, it can have an immediate impact on human bodies” (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. XIII). He explains that both the interpretation and the assigning of meanings mitigate together the impact of things on our bodies.

In his studies on what he calls nonhermeneutical field, Gumbrecht highlights the insufficiency of interpretation as the human way of appropriating the world. The hermeneutical field, according to Gumbrecht, is restricted to interpretation as the only form of accessing the world, producing the current loss of world reference and the dimension of perception. As stated by Gumbrecht, the centrality of interpretation is related to the epistemological configuration that human beings are eccentric to the world, which is a material surface to be interpreted. In a culture based on such epistemology, the mind is the predominant human self-reference and the body is part of the material world; hence, the dichotomies mind/body, spiritual/material are constituted.

In touching dance practices, we bring the things of the world closer to our bodies, including also other bodies as things of the world. Such practices carry the potential to produce moments that are located in the oscillation between the effects of presence and effects of meaning. These are moments that produce effects on both bodies simultaneously, reciprocally.

The Long-lasting Hug: suspension of meanings

What happens when dance, as a mandatory curricular component, proposes a time for students to stay embraced in the middle of a routinely afternoon lesson at school? What other fields of knowledge would make such a proposal? The aim of the activity was just embracing with no other goal beyond that. Such proposal occurred in a lesson of Teacher Rita for a 7th grade class, in which she proposed a long-lasting hug among students. The materiality of the body had been given visibility. Precisely the body which always remains in the background of all other lessons every day, throughout all afternoons, hidden by the focus on building intellect and, for this reason, it is veiled and full of mysteries. In this sense, the enigmatic desires of the body were put on display.

Rita tells she proposed the embrace inspired by the workshop *Stories of the Body – the Hug*, given by Heloisa Gravina and Dani Boff, because she saw that a long-lasting hug “causes estrangement in people” (Falkembach, 2016d, p. 16). The workshop was the development of a study called “Small Terrorist Actions” (Boff et al., n. d.). The First Terrorist Action was called *The Embrace* and consisted of a long-lasting hug between the two performers, in public spaces. “The game rule is the mutual weight release until some impulse generates movement. Whenever possible, we return to the initial position – the embrace” (Boff et al., n. d., n. p.).

When the teacher proposes a hug in a school in which the embrace is forbidden, she makes a transgressive action against the rule of the institution. Nonetheless, from the performative role, she makes an artistic intervention or a “small terrorist action,” as it is conceptualized by the performers, “[...] something that erupts in daily life and, infiltrating the gaps, breaks an established system” (Boff et al., n. d., n. p.).

The class in which the activity was proposed has a lot of age disparity: 12-year-old boys and girls aged 15 to 16 years. On the day of the embrace, coincidentally, the youngest were absent. Therefore, the work was developed in a 7th grade group, but with students between 14 and 16 years old, a moment when sexuality issues tend to be paramount.

The activity started with students walking through the room space, in various directions. Under the command of the teacher, they should stop and look into the eyes of someone who was around, keeping the look for about a minute.

Then, they continued walking until the next command. Later, the instruction changed to shaking the colleagues’ hands. Finally, the task was to hug the colleague and, then, remaining embraced. The students were surprised by the proposal. As some students laughed and others evaded the hug, the teacher insists:

Come on, guys, everyone participating with everyone. [...] Try to find a position in the colleague’s arms that will be comfortable for you to stay. (laughs) Let us focus now? Please focus, close your eyes [...] and stay embraced. (A student says ‘I’m going to cry’). You are not supposed to talk, guys. [...] Stay. If it is hard to focus, close your eyes, lay your head on the shoulder of your colleague [...] and stay (Falkembach, 2016d, p. 13).



The effect of meaning related to sexuality and sexism is inevitable – it is not said but expressed through laughter, postures, gestures, attitudes of constraint, embarrassment. The teacher then explains such meanings:

Boys who are embraced are not less of a man because they're hugging other boys, ok? [...] The couple embraced, man and woman, will not necessarily date. So, guys, you are colleagues, you're working in a group, let's move on, let's keep embraced, let's try to focus. This is a challenge I'm posing to you. Try to feel the weight of the colleague's body (Falkembach, 2016d, p. 13).

When she evidences the sexual connotations of the embrace, there is a certain relief with the release of tension in the environment as if the meaning related to sexuality was relevant only while not explicit but related to something supposedly hidden. At the same time, the teacher asks them to realize the weight of each other and, thus, to shift the focus to physicality.

The embrace takes longer than the students' expectation. Cultural meanings produced in such action do not hold up for long; after the first minute, they begin to blur. The relation subject/meaning is destabilized. When the meaning seems to have form, it did not come true, as the embrace does not end.

In their project *Small Terrorist Actions*, Gravina and Boff seek precisely “initiate reflective cutouts in everyday reality through the clarification of mechanisms of construction of meaning present in everyday actions and artistic works” (Boff et al., n. d., n. p.). Through the perspective of meaning, in the case of the long-lasting embrace, time is a decisive element of the sign. At this moment, the length of time is different from the usual standards: it is not the time of a friendly hug nor a hug from their mother, father, or boyfriend/girlfriend. The embrace becomes unrecognizable; it is an embrace that does not exist. It is not an embrace, but it is – two human bodies in touch, in a position of embrace.

The interpretation (and judgment) concerning sexuality remains in those who cannot embrace, who look at the hug in a distanced manner and only observe without getting into the game. However, at some point, those who only watch also participate in another way: becoming a spectator of such no-embrace-that-is-an-embrace in a school where embracing is forbidden. The estrangement or rupture with an established system (the



artists' proposal) happens in the classroom from the perspective from both: the one who acts and the one who watches.

Rita, once again, asks them to pay attention to the perception of the other's body, to the physicality: breathing, heartbeat, temperature, weight.

They held three different hugs, with different classmates, each one for more than two minutes. Next, they sat on the ground, in a circle, to talk about the experience. Rita insisted, several times, that they named what they felt and perceived, that they described it with one word; the students, however, remained silent. Most said, "I don't know," a few whispered words like "hard," "drowsy," "exciting," "unusual." As much as Rita provoked them, they were not talking. After two rounds with no one talking, I spoke precisely about the impossibility in naming that "unusual" experience.

From this silence, I perceive two things concerning the experience: first of all, the prolonged duration of such embrace suspended meanings and, therefore, destabilized the possible nominations. Just as in the Contact Improvisation, the embrace opened an uncoded zone of experience. Also, it produced effects of another dimension than interpretation, the dimension that Gumbrecht calls the presence.

In the conversation circle, students were invited to name, interpret, and share their perceptions so that they could be interpreted by the others: a process of access and appropriation of their experience through the articulation of language. However, at that moment, the silence and the difficulty of articulation revealed the inadequacy of these operations. The silence also spoke of the embarrassment in naming intimate sensations, but I tend to think that it was not just that, as if there was nothing to talk about. There was nothing to interpret. There was only embracing, touching, the heat, the pace. For one to speak, something needed to be articulated regarding the cultural encodings of the skin, the touch. However, that was not about it indeed. It was a hug without any intention.

In this proposal, much of the body is in contact. Just as in the CI, the touch is not mainly given by the hand – there is support and weight release. However, there is no quest to occupy the space through a game with weight transfer and momentum; there is no deviation of the attention on the touch. Whereas in the CI the kinesthetic perception is the primordial one,

in the embrace the tactile perception is placed first: there is a tactile perception of the other and myself because the other is also perceiving me and him/her at the same time. It is the perception of the other that perceives me, perceiving me as other. From an allegedly immobile action – the embrace – there is the perception of intense movements. The perception of the movements is tactile, based on the contact without any need for the visual nor the kinesthetic sense. The movements are thus based on the in-between bodies, the fusion of bodies, or in the oscillation between the in-between and the fusion. After some time, because the embrace is long, even temperatures of the bodies are equalized, after the breath rhythms are settling together, the tendency is that there is no further distancing. There is one body that absorbs the other body and becomes one.

The experience of the long-lasting embrace, analyzed from Gumbrecht's perspective, has elements that can intensify the effect of the presence of the other's body and the immediate impact of one body on the other because it minimizes the space between the bodies, removing the reference of time and suspending meanings. When meaning is suspended, the effect of presence may emerge. However, Gumbrecht reminds us that our culture is predominantly a culture of meaning and, therefore, the effects of presence are always within *clouds of meaning*; what we perceive is an oscillation or tension between effects of presence and effects of meaning:

For us, presence phenomena always come as 'presence effects' because they are necessarily surrounded by, wrapped into, and perhaps even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning. It is extremely difficult – if not impossible – for us *not* to 'read', not to try and attribute meaning [...] (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 106).

In the case of the embrace, the immediate impact of a body on another is minimized because it is *wrapped* into meanings produced by the encoding of gestures and behaviors. It is also *wrapped* by the meanings attributed to the touch in our culture, operating new meanings. However, the evidence of silence indicated the *immediate impact* could be perceived, but it could not be named.

Developing the concept of a dimension of presence, Gumbrecht (2010) works on the notion of two different ideal cultures basically



different from ours: the culture of meaning (closer to modernity) and the culture of presence (closer to the medieval culture). He singles out differences between these two cultures (Gumbrecht, 2010, p. 104-113). Some of them can reveal the tension produced in the school when the dance class deals with touching.

While in the culture of meaning the predominant human self-reference (the self-view) is the thought, in the culture of presence it is the body. In the latter, bodies are part of cosmology because they are not seen as eccentric to the world but as part of it. More specifically, bodies are seen as a thing of the world.

The self-reference of a dancer passes through physicality, through recognizing oneself as mass and volume in movement; as something that supports itself, as a matter that has certain qualities. The feeling of being a thing of the world is no stranger to the dancer. In the long-lasting embrace, as well as in the CI, this perspective is highlighted by the touch, by that kind of touch that "starts in the skin, goes to the muscle and goes to the bone", as described by teacher Adriana.

The culture of meaning is that whose knowledge is given by the subject's interpretation of the world, while "[...] legitimate knowledge is typically revealed knowledge" to an idealized culture of presence (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 80). In other words, revealed knowledge is a knowledge that does not come from the subject, but it is self-unconcealment of the world, being the "[...] substance that appears, that presents itself to us (even with its inherent meaning), without requiring interpretation as its transformation into meaning" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 81). This definition of knowledge relates to what teacher Adriana defines as *information* when she describes that touch "gives you some information". In short, the information a body conveys to another through touching is revealed knowledge.

Gumbrecht calls moments of intensity the situations where there are effects of presence such as aesthetic experiences. According to him, "[...] there is nothing edifying in such moments, no message, nothing that we could really learn from them" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 98). He exemplifies the moment of intensity with the response of an Olympic athlete who describes the moment of competition: "[...] the feeling of being lost in

focused intensity” (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 104). Thus, he claims that the idea of intensity brings the difference of quantity with daily life.

The sensation of artistic creation relates to such sensation described by the athlete. According to Cibeles Sastre, when describing performative practices, “[...] we are talking from within the art production, by which we must be enraptured when performing and through which we produce rapture in others” (Sastre, 2015, p. 233).

The embrace of artists Gravina and Boff produced ruptures in the daily routine of the public through the construction of moments of intensity. When the embrace is taken into the classroom, the perspective is reversed because the focus is on the perception of who acts. Contemplation and production of epiphanic knowledge are posed as part of the process of artistic creation. According to Sastre, the “[...] production of knowledge through shared practices, which, when embodied, conveys in the body the intuitive knowledge of the instant that is done in a sense” (Sastre, 2015, p. 233).

As already mentioned, it is not usual for the school to promote such procedures. School practices are, above all, interpretive: the student learns to interpret and give meaning to the world. From the typology proposed by Gumbrecht, we can understand the school as a place of the culture of meaning. Therefore, there is tension when the culture of presence emerges.

The Touch as a Sensitive and Ethical Work

The recurrence of touch in dance classes also leads one to think about ethics in these classes because the effects of touching are not given *a priori*: the touch can both save and potentiate life as much as being one of the cruelest acts of violence.

What is the boundary between such extreme effects? When does the touch cease to be aggression and becomes tenderness or vice versa? Such a limit is not defined by law. This ambiguity is the reason why touching is an example of a situation where ethics need to emerge.

When asked about the inclusion of dance as a compulsory curricular component within the subject of Art, the principal of the school where teacher Rita works listed some problems, emphasizing the fact that Rita



proposed activities in which the students needed to touch each other. She reported that some students did not accept to participate in the teacher's proposal of one student touching the joints of another to understand the anatomical functioning of the body. According to the principal, this activity was an object of complaints by some parents who questioned why their children were forced to let someone touch them or to touch someone. The principal also added that she did not understand why the students could not touch themselves to know the body. The reason why the principal does not understand the teacher's proposal and does not give support to the development of her class relates to two aspects. The first is that there is no justification for touching another person without a utilitarian reason to do it, to the principal; and there is the inability of the school to operate in a different manner rather than the discipline or the law (see the case of the embrace prohibition).

In the perspective of Rita's principal, a pedagogical activity only makes sense when it produces knowledge (meaning), i.e., when it has utility and achieves a result. Thus, if one can identify the joints of the body with one's own touch, there is no use in the action of being touched by another person, as well as in touching another person – therefore, if there is no meaning to be produced, there is no pedagogical function.

My analysis, although from a different perspective, is benefited from Rodrigues and Roble in their contribution to a reflection on the instrumentalization of the senses in education. These authors start from the theorization of Michel Maffesoli and Christoph TÜRCKE to think about the value of the sensible dimension of existence, searching for a sensible intelligence “[...] in the human senses, as a power in the educational process” (Rodrigues; Roble, 2015, p. 211). They are concerned about the capture of our sensitive experiences by market interests, pointing out that there is a common association which restricts the concept of tactile sense to the perception of touching with the hands in the daily work. They also show the constraint of the sensory experience, which, in the current society, “[...] occurs in imaging clashes, therefore visual, through screens and interfaces that separate us from the corporally experienced world” (Rodrigues; Roble, 2015, p. 207).



Rodrigues and Roble draw attention to the problem of the exclusively rational and abstract relationship with the world. Such relation, according to Gumbrecht (2010, p. 167), is the result and the producer of loss of world reference, generating a lack of feeling by ourselves the embodiment of something.

Then, within a culture that establishes the instrumentalization, restriction, and curtailment of the tactile sensitivity, it is natural that the school board members do not find reasons for the teacher to propose to students to touch each other, as this sense is not worked in the school – on the contrary, it is prohibited. Moreover, in this culture there is no place for an activity that does not presuppose an object to know; there is no place for a disinterested proposal, which is not intended to teach something but to enable the emergence of *small epiphanies*.

The school, inserted in the culture of market and utility, cannot understand an activity without a product to be quantified, compared, examined, evaluated. School culture does not conceive touching as part of the dance operations that deal with knowledge originated from another order, which is not conceptual. The procedures that convey a type of knowledge that depends, inevitably, on the relationship created through the touch, on the contact with another for sensitizing the skin and mobilizing affections. It is the sharing of sensations that produce the feeling of presence as being a thing in the world. An embodied knowledge, such as Sastre describes the knowledge experience in the Contact Improvisation:

What I do embody/destabilize, re-train, re-theorize in the body, is put into play with the *other* with whom I interact. It is, therefore, the interaction that shapes the contact to be agreed upon in this improvisation. The refinement of this practice surpasses the tendency to constantly show what is known in the presence of another (Sastre, 2015, p. 68).

This practice is a kind of knowledge that does not appear, that does not produce.

Thus, this school chooses not to support the teacher's proposal, suppressing the touch to avoid issues with the parents. The choice is, therefore, not to problematize, not even to include the reflection on the meanings of the touch in the society, for instance, as part of the curriculum. It is not possible for the school to establish a norm for touching because

there are no instruments to measure deviations. It is assumed that the body is a personal, untouchable space, denying its sensitive and affective dimensions, which are increasingly departed from the educational process.

Otherwise, regardless of the school's regulation, when the touch remains an element of the dance class, and not all students want to touch or allow to be touched, an ethical question is posed. Thus, the practice of touching reveals that the way dance deals with rules is different from the dominant thought in the school. Such a mode of dance converges with the ethical conduct described by Foucault (1998).

According to Foucault, "Every morality, in the broad sense, comprises the two elements [...], codes of behavior and forms of subjectivation" (1998, p. 29), which are not disassociated. The moral code, or simply code, is "[...] a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth" (1998, 26). The forms of subjectivation, or forms of moral subjectivation, are ways in which individuals relate to rules, becoming their own behavior according to the established rules, and constituting themselves in this relationship as moral subjects.

When the process is *code-oriented*, there is no room for inventing the way to relate to this code.

[...] the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behavior. With moralities of this type, the important thing is to focus on the instances of authority that enforce the code, that require it to be learned and observed, that penalize infractions; in these conditions, the subjectivation occurs basically in a quasi-juridical form, where the moral subject refers his conduct to a law, or set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offenses that may make him liable to punishment (Foucault, 1998, p. 29).

When the process is *ethics-oriented*, the possibilities of construction of this process are multiple: the ways for individuals to shape their own behavior according to the rules are multiple.

[...] moralities in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self. In this case, the system of codes and rules of behavior may be rather rudimentary. Their

exact observance may be relatively unimportant, at least compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship he has with himself, in his different actions, thoughts, and feelings as he endeavors to form himself as a moral subject. Here the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being (Foucault, 1998, p. 30).

In the ethical-oriented conduct, the emphasis is not on the moral code, but on the relationship of the individual with the set of rules in the constitution of itself as a moral subject. I understand the creative processes, therefore dance classes, as spaces in which the rules are rudimentary and established throughout the process as a conduct that the individual constructs in seeking to transform its way of being.

I think the touch is possible in dance classes because the ethical behavior is no stranger to this place. Which defines whether I should, if I may or may not touch someone (implying being touched) is not a law, not a regiment, but the current arrangement of the ways those who touch relate to their touch. The rule, in this case, is not rigid; it should be built every second.

Even in a delicate position in relation to the board school members, Rita insists on the touch. I identify, thus, that the tactile contact is the basis of her classes. This fact also appears in her saying. She mentions the topic of the touch in the interview precisely when I ask her about what the rules of dance would be:

Rita: Well, as I work a lot in groups, rules. The rules of dancing are interconnected with the rules of coexistence, I guess. Because I'm not very attached to rules [...]

Researcher: Do you follow these groups rules because you think this is crucial to create dance?

Rita: Yes! It's one of the fundamental things. [...] At the beginning, as there was a great disrespect and a matter of not knowing how to approach the other, of having difficulty to approaching and touching other body. That's why I start to create with the classes, along with the classes, the coexistence rules, the contact rules. As far as I can.

Researcher: So, one of the rules of the dance would be the possibility of contact.



Rita: Having contact. Being able to touch, to know how far my colleague allows me to touch them. How should it be? More aggressively, more delicately? For me, it was important to work that with them. So, I consider it a rule. This issue of approaching. Knowing how to approach others, how to not hurt others. I'm there dancing and having respect for each other's body. Because I can dance without respect. That is what I tell them, it's always a question of approach. Look at your partner, know if they are allowing your touch. How can you touch? If they don't like when you touch the hair, well, how can I do it differently? How can I get close? Can I touch the ear, then? Can I touch the shoulder? Because exercises are adaptable. Nothing there is a truth (Falkembach, 2016d, p. 44-45).

Reflection emerges precisely when the rules are more rudimentary. When touching is not forbidden, one must *know how*, asking oneself *on the best way*. Touching leads to practice the relationship with the other *on the best way*. It implies a work upon oneself, upon the own body, and mobilizing the body in the act of touching. I can, therefore, understand touch as a technique of self, in the sense of what Foucault (1990) called technologies of the self in his study on the Antiquity: active practices that produce a relationship between the subject and him/herself as an ethical subject. The touch is a work upon oneself, in relation to the other, consisting of a work of self-production.

It is necessary to emphasize touching experiences in the production of subjectivity, of work on oneself, in the "project of making the human better" (Icle, 2010, p. 83). Furthermore, these practices of the self enable the constitution of ways of being that resist the hegemonic codifications and modes of existence.

In his analysis on the moral reflection in Greek Antiquity, Foucault identified that the ethical work lay in the moral problematization of practices with no prohibition. In this sense, the reflection and practice upon someone's conduct is a problematization of free individuals about themselves. Foucault's study about sexual austerity showed that, unlike what one might think, "[...] these themes of austerity did not coincide with the lines of demarcation that may have been traced by the great social, civil, and religious interdictions" (Foucault, 1998, p. 24). Foucault emphasizes that this moral reflection did not attempt to define a field of conduct and a domain of valid rules. "It should be understood, not as an expression of, or commentary on, deep and essential prohibitions, but as the elaboration and

stylization of an activity in the exercise of its power and the practice of its liberty” (Foucault, 1998, p. 25). Therefore, it is in the reflections on the behavior within freedom spaces that Foucault finds the ethical work, of reflection and practice on oneself: “[...] for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (Foucault, 1998, p. 29).

On the one hand, when teacher Rita worries about bringing up the questions about how to touch in a dance class, she makes room for the ethical work. The school, on the other hand, by interdicting the touch, stops promoting the problematization of behaviors and chooses the path that removes questions about the body from the curriculum.

Final Remarks

There is the emergence of a dimension of the body within dance classes – the tactile body – and, at the same time, there is a complexity in dealing with that body in the school environment. By dealing with such body, the dance class causes tensions in the school. It shows that the touch in the school, from the viewpoint of teachers and the school board members, is often a sign of violence and sexual intercourse and it claims other meaning for the touch.

It is like a strange conduct in the school, which is *different* and *meaningless*, that the touch is often natural in dance classes and might produce the unexpected. It produces both a rupture with the relentless repetition of codes as well as a new relationship with the world through the skin. The impact of one body on another, in reciprocity, is fuel for creative processes that can generate intense dance movements, even in the quasi-immobility. It can convey what is meaningless, which cannot be interpreted but produces in us the feeling of being alive, of being part of life, of being part of one another.

The research data highlight that the work of dance teachers in schools is part of a context, of conditions of possibility that, today, seek to counter dance practices to the subjection to the dominant discourse. The teachers’



daily routine puts the dance in the game of knowledge/power relations, in a way its other-truths may emerge.

The Brazilian National Core Curriculum – BNCC (Brazil, 2017), a new proposal of the federal government for a common national curriculum for the whole Brazilian territory, establishes the dance as a language in the field of Art. However, as it has been developed here, the art also operates in a dimension other than the language, the meaning: in art, we find the possibility of a relationship with the world, in which there is an oscillation between effects of presence and effects of meaning. By placing the dance as a language within the curriculum, it emphasizes its dimension of interpretation and meaning. Nonetheless, when one deals with art, the dimension of presence emerges. A dance class that proposes to practice dance as an art cannot interfere with its dimension of presence.

At the same time, the moments of oscillation between effects of presence and meaning are ephemeral and comes out of nothing (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 111), and nothing ensures that they will indeed happen. According to Gumbrecht (2004, p. 113), “[...] we never know whether or when such an epiphany will occur. [...] If it occurs, we do not know what form it will take and how intense it will be [...]. It undoes itself while it emerges”. These moments do not correspond to the school curriculum geared towards results and skills that can be evaluated.

I understand that it is from the artist viewpoint that teachers do not elide making choices in the curriculum construction: even when there is tension with school technologies, they believe on the power and importance of the touch in their dance classes. Touching is a constant political action, as artists who put themselves on the limit, trampling on and mobilizing these limits – sometimes their own limits, sometimes that of students or a class, and often that limits of the school or even of parents and the community.

The research highlights the ethical conduct of the teachers. This conduct is also understood, under the perspective of Foucauldian studies, as a way of summoning to a given knowledge. Through propositions of dance practices with the touch, this conduct leads to a type of knowledge (on the self and the other) that may produce transformations of the self and the



group. A kind of knowledge of the body-subject that is constructed in spaces comprising ethics-oriented conducts.

Notes

- ¹ Foucault (2004, p. 118) shows that the disciplinary technology operates by a codification of gestures, attitudes, movements from the “thorough control of body operations,” in producing a docile and useful body.
- ² Judith Butler (2000, p. 111) writes about how the reiteration of regulatory norms materialize the ‘sex’. According to the philosopher, “... That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. ... [What] constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect”.

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