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TANIA GONZÁLEZ

# STILL DANCE:

MOVEMENT IN TIMES  
OF EXHAUSTION



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PRACTICES



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**STILL DANCE:**

**MOVEMENT IN TIMES  
OF EXHAUSTION**

**TANIA GONZÁLEZ**  
**MA PERFORMANCE PRACTICES**

A Thesis presented by Tania González to Master Performance Practices,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts in  
Performance Practices, 2023.

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**2023**

## **SYNOPSIS**

This thesis closely examines the practice of stilling as a methodology to rest in dance. Developed against the backdrop of late capitalism and its current conditions of existence, this practice-led artistic research poses the relevant question of how to think (about) (as) the exhausted body in dance. To this end, it draws on a wide and complex range of theories and methods that include critical dance studies, affect theory, contemporary philosophy, and auto-ethnography.

Through a detailed conceptualization of stilling as a practice that approaches dance as potentiality, the thesis presents a comprehensive theoretical discussion and vividly reflects on the positionality of the researcher as dancer-anthropologist disrupting the divisions between theory and practice, thinking and doing. More specifically, it offers varied entry-points into the stilling practice through the description of some of its iterations, excerpts of embodied writing, and selected testimonies of research participants and collaborators.

By attending to the immanent, what is not yet but about to become so, the practice aims to shed light on dance as a (re) generative force and open up new possibilities for dancing otherwise.

Ultimately, in response to the compulsion of production imposed by the striving societies of today, this methodology points out the urgent need of de-disciplining the dancing body and demonstrates a firm determination to continue dancing still and despite.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to:

my dear supervisor João da Silva for guiding me with so much generosity, wisdom, and care into the unknown; my mentor Núria Guiu for making the time to be part of this journey, enriching the research with her vast experience and devotion to dance, and for all those long conversations in which she gently said to me *‘confía’*;

my fabulous peers Danielle, Ermis, Fay, Gab, Mar, Ryan, Steef, Thomas, and Vicky for being a constant inspiration in daring to do what they are truly passionate about; teachers, guest artists, and people from Home of Performance Practices for their dedicated work and commitment to learning and experimentation; all the research participants and collaborators for their trust, honesty, and openness in encountering the practice; my friend Andrew Champlin for thoroughly proofreading this text and for being such an enthusiastic reader; Marieta Rotariu and Smaranda Bubberman for their hospitality and kindness in welcoming me into their homes during the last two years, there are no words to express how blessed I feel to have met these beautiful souls; my family and friends for their infinite love and caring presence, *por mostrarme el camino de regreso*;

Alan, my little nephew, for reminding me to take breaks to play together, for bringing joy into my writing; Azúmara, *el pueblo*, for becoming my sacred place to be.

Gijón, August 2023  
Tania González

## **DECLARATION**

I, Tania González, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, 'Still Dance: Movement in Times of Exhaustion'.

No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

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# INTRODUCTION

## A METHODOLOGY TO REST IN DANCE

This artistic research draws on the field of critical dance, contemporary philosophy, and social anthropology. It proposes the practice of stilling as a way of feeling-thinking-bodily dance today. Stilling as a verb, rather than as a noun, is neither a negation of movement nor a departure from dance, but a sincere predisposition to examine dance as potentiality, or in other words, to research affect in dancing. In stilling there is not existing movement material or improvisational tasks to be executed, for it is a way to embody what has not-yet been produced. Although the practice came into being in response to a personal need to continue to dance, it expands far beyond the individual self. Stilling is grounded in the present moment and its starting point is always to acknowledge what is somehow already happening—in the body, in the space, in the existing relations. In this respect, it aims to elucidate that everything is contextual and situated (Haraway, 1988), nothing happens in a vacuum. In becoming a site of resistance against the compulsion to produce, the practice poses the question of how to think (about) (as) the exhausted body in dance. To this end, stilling invites us, both as individuals and as a collective, to explore the possibility of finding rest in dance by means of critical thinking and affective

attunement. As Susan Rethorst (2013) vividly describes this inward tuning in to affect involves “working with a profound trust that it leaves nothing out” (Rethorst, 2013, 27).

How to approach dance as a (re)generative force in times of exhaustion? Developed in the context of late capitalism, stilling is intended to be a resource for going deeper, further, and more fully into an embodied investigation of the potentiality of dance. The practice aims to focus on the encountering between the affective force of dance and the affective force of the dancing body. In its determination to be at the service of dance, stilling does not entail that the body diminishes its own capacity for action. In fact, stilling asks for a dynamic state of contemplation. To this end, slowing down reveals itself as a great entry point into the practice—although stilling is not about remaining still or moving in slow-motion, as I would argue. Additionally, it is important to note that for the practice of stilling the process is the result. Even when presented in the form of a live performance, stilling always remains open. By attending to the immanent, what is not yet but about to become so, the practice aims to conjure alternative ways of doing in the striving societies of today.

Stilling relates to many other improvisational practices which see unexpected happenings as openings (Midgellow, 2019). However, in stilling there is nothing to achieve or improve.

It may not mean anything, which can make it appear as meaningless dancing, and yet, it does something. Although stilling attempts to resist against the neoliberal scheme<sup>1</sup> that pressures the individual to such an extent that it can lead to extreme competitiveness and total exhaustion, it is quite easy to find oneself doing too much or falling into movement patterns while doing the practice. We might fail in stilling dance, and there is absolutely nothing wrong about it. For as Jack Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure not only turns on the unremarkable, but it quietly loses and “in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Halberstam, 2011, 88). To embrace failure enhances the practice.

Despite claiming that stilling might be a significant methodology for critically exploring dance, I do not want the practice to become something fixed. Its greatest value is that it is flexible. After two years of continuous practice, I know that stilling can be much more than what I might think or imagine. Language cannot fully contain it, for there are things in the practice that do not occur at the level of cognition. Stilling involves other planes of perception, pointing to the fact that “not all attention is in the mind” (De Spain, 2014, 168). Therefore, we cannot explain everything that we perceive about how things are happening. As João

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive overview on the development of neoliberalism see Harvey (2007).



da Silva interestingly points out, “language cannot fully capture either affect or the unknown” (da Silva, 2017, 18). In using unknowing rather than not-knowing, da Silva suggests another modality of knowing that deals with the ‘known’ in a differential manner, which might be a better way to shed light on what goes on in dancing. Similarly, in making a distinction between verbal and non-verbal awareness, Kent De Spain (2014, 54) highlights the fact that there are ways of thinking and knowing that might be hard or impossible to articulate in words because they do not belong to the linguistic side of consciousness, and yet they exist.

Stilling might seem very theoretical. Indeed, it is. However, the practice also knows that “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin” (Ahmed, 2017, 10). In this respect, stilling does not sustain the division between practice and theory, as it aims to overcome the dichotomy that keeps apart critical thinking and intuitive knowing. Being an embodied practice, stilling has an epistemic impulse (Spatz, 2015). It seeks to bring theory into and from the body, in particular the exhausted body in dance. Stilling is attentive but dynamic, acting with responsibility towards the other and towards dance itself. It is a form of responsibility without obligation (Burt, 2017a, 168), as it implies to dance beyond what the dancer already knows, remaining permeable to what is happening as it happens. In the practice, the dancing body is radically open to its surroundings, exploring what comes through, never finished

but in the process of becoming as it allows the potentiality of dance to be embodied. In this respect, stilling is always mediated by our positionality and corporeality (Grosz, 1994). For stilling does not neglect the fact that we are bodies.

## OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The present text has been structured into three parts. Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation of the research, presenting a comprehensive literature review on the ontology of dance, the philosophy of affect, and the so-called achievement societies in contemporary capitalism. Chapter 2 takes as its point of departure an auto-ethnographic account of chronic fatigue, moving into a detailed discussion of the practice of stilling and the exhausted body in dance. It depicts stilling as a methodology that approaches dance as potentiality disrupting the division between theory and practice, action and rest. Introducing its main principles, the various methods applied, examples from different iterations, as well as testimonies of research participants, the chapter unravels stilling as a situated practice that sheds light on what it entails to dance against the compulsion of production. Finally, Chapter 3 reflects on the limitations of the research and looks into the uncertain yet promising future of the practice of stilling in its determination to remain open and subject to change. Thinking about stilling as an expanded practice, it further illuminates how this practice-led research engages

with a critical approach to dance, and ultimately, attempts to set the ground for ways of dancing otherwise.

## CHAPTER 1 DANCE WITHIN

### THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF DANCE

To raise the never-ending question of what dance is may seem very philosophical, and yet it is deeply grounded in the body. A key reference on the topic is the book *Exhausting Dance* in which André Lepecki (2006) extensively discusses the construction of dance in relation to the project of modernity. As Lepecki (2006, 3) elaborates, from the Renaissance on, dance increasingly turned itself towards movement looking for its essence as an autonomous and representational art form in the West that produces disciplined bodies and subjectivities. Accordingly, dance and modernity ended up intertwined in a kinetic mode of being-in-the-world, what makes Lepecki pose the relevant question of “how to dance against the hegemonic fantasies of modernity, once those fantasies are linked to the imperative to constantly display mobility” (Lepecki, 2006, 11). Furthermore, Lepecki points out how since mid-1990s this understanding of dance starts to be questioned and disrupted by some experimental dancers and choreographers who deflate, pause, or slow down movement at the cost of having been perceived as a threat to the future of dance or even accused of betraying dance’s own identity. Among others the choreographic works of La Ribot, Jonathan Burrows, Xavier Le Roy, Ezster Salamon, Mette Edvardsen, Maria Hassabi, and Jérôme Bell deserve

special attention here for their contribution to rethink the political ontology of movement in terms of representation and subjectivity. Nonetheless, at this point it is important to note that in dance the critique of representation was one of the main characteristics of the emergence of North American postmodern dance in the 1960s. This entailed a radical redefinition of movement and dance-making that was clearly marked by Yvonne Rainer's *NO Manifesto* originally published in 1965<sup>2</sup>:

No to spectacle.  
 No to virtuosity.  
 No to transformations  
     and magic and make-believe.  
 No to the glamour and transcendency  
     of the star image.  
 No to the heroic.  
 No to the anti-heroic.  
 No to trash imagery.  
 No to involvement of performer or spectator.  
 No to style.  
 No to camp.  
 No to seduction of spectator by  
     the wiles of the performer.  
 No to eccentricity.  
 No to moving or being moved.

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Rainer revisited her 1965 *No Manifesto* in 2008. For a comparative reading see Rainer (2021).

This manifesto might be considered an influential reference, or at least an encouraging inspiration, for many subsequent critical choreographic approaches to openly go against the cultural, social, or political imperatives of their time. In this sense, I would like to highlight how the insertion of stillness in dance suggests a crisis of the image of the dancer as someone always oriented towards and available to movement. In destabilizing the traditional bind between dance and movement, the enactment of stillness transforms the ontological question of dance in consonance with Gaston Bachelard's notion of "slower ontology" (Bachelard, 1994, 215)—an ontology that distrusts the stability of forms, refuses the esthetics of geometry, and instead privileges addressing phenomena as fields of multiple forces, vibrations, and intensities.

In this context, the work of French choreographer Jérôme Bell is particularly relevant as part of an emergent group of choreographers in Europe who are very critical in their understanding of what dance is or could be. By including stillness and slowness in his pieces, whilst dramaturgically and compositionally distilling choreography to its most basic components—such as a closed room with a dance floor and at least one body willing to enact a given choreography, Bell tackles "how movement is not only a question of kinetics, but also one of intensities, of generating an intensive field of microperceptions" (Lepecki, 2006, 57). The question of

stillness—among other nonkinetic elements significantly present in Bel's pieces like *Jérôme Bel*, *Shirtology* or *Véronique Doisneau*—is not introduced as a complete absence or negation of movement. What it implies is a particular deflation of movement, that at the beginning of his long and successful career was certainly not always well received by the audience. In fact, in 2002 an enraged spectator sued the International Dance Festival of Ireland over his performance *Jérôme Bel* claiming that what people watched on stage could not be considered dance.

However, if there is someone who brought stillness into full phenomenological and ontological status as dance that was Steve Paxton, who in 1967 led by the experimental approach of the Judson Dance Theater, developed a movement practice based on the activity of standing:

*This is standing. Let your butt be heavy, relax the internal organs down into the bowl of the pelvis. Breathe easy. Feel the weight of your arms. Feel the spine rising through the shoulders and up to support the skull. At this center of standing, you observe some small movements. I call this The Small Dance. (Paxton, 2018, 35)*

As *The Small Dance* reveals, standing still is not actually still, we always move with gravity, for the body constantly adjusts to keep from falling. Whether we are aware of it or not, there is movement within stillness (see Lepecki, 2000). To stand still we must move; regardless how subtle and microscopic our movement might be. To be balanced depends, in fact,

on those micro-movements that move through the feeling of standing still. Following dancer and scholar Ann Cooper Albright, "The kinesthetic tuning that is acquired with this kind of practice encourages an awareness of the physical possibilities in which one's body is both grounded and yet open to moving in any direction" (Albright, 2019, 30). Tuning is a movement meditation. For a body that relaxes into standing still is not passive nor powerless, it is rather committed to the springiness of the stilling moment. And yet, as dancer and choreographer Jonathan Burrows (2010) accurately points out, there is a widespread compulsion to keep moving that ignores how strong stillness can be as dance material. For Burrows (2010, 91), it is the fear of being boring what prevents many choreographers to further explore stillness in their work, disregarding the fact that a choreography without pauses will become exhausting for the audience—not to mention the dancers.

Regarding the question of dance's ontology, in *Choreographing Problems* Bojana Cvejić (2015) introduces a slightly different claim than the one posed by Lepecki. For Cvejić, it is not the ontological status of dance as "being-toward-movement" that is being exhausted, but the movement-body bind upon which modern dance is historically constituted in the Western tradition—namely, "the relation of movement to the body as its subject, or of movement to the object of dance" (Cvejić, 2015, 20). While in the early years of modern

dance movement was conceived as an autonomous force expressed through the subjective experience of the dancer, during the 1960s movement was reduced to mere physical articulation and became an object in itself that, ideally, a 'neutral doer' would bring into action as described by Rainer (1974, 65). Whether it was by approaching dance first through self-expression or later through an alleged neutral movement, the fact is that movement and the body remained strongly tied over time.

In this respect, the subjectivation of the body through movement and the objectivation of movement exclusively through the physical expression of the dancing body constitute what Cvejić calls "the organic regime of dance", for they become inseparably connected. Through an exhaustive analysis of recent choreographic practices originated at the beginning of the twenty first century in the European context that clearly disrupts the onto-historical synthesis between movement and the body, Cvejić (2015, 228) concludes that dance can no longer be conceived as a natural and spontaneous self-expression of the body, for their conjunction is an artificial construction rather than a given bind. As this study is intended to suggest, dancing under the current conditions of existence of late capitalism implies first and foremost taking a decision to radically embody the potentiality of dance. Un(ex)poner el cuerpo, to make oneself available to what is already happening. However, this does

not mean neglecting the needs of the dancing body and its current state of being. To dance against this backdrop should not become another exhausting struggle, but a recharge. For dance is dancing after all.

### **TRACING, NOT-KNOWING, BECOMING**

Over the last decades, in the field of critical dance studies, the old debate about what dance is, what it means, or for what purpose we dance, has gradually shifted to the broader and wider question of what dance could become. As philosopher and dramaturg Bojana Kunst argues, "dance discloses itself as a generative force" (Kunst, 2017, 133), understood as a capacity of different human and more-than-human bodies, which certainly challenges ideological hierarchies and former conceptualizations of dance. In a similar vein, the choreographer and researcher Paz Rojo (2019) proposes a dance withdrawn from the neoliberal scheme, a dance without name nor rules radically reduced to its own existence. As Rojo further elaborates, in dancing within this framework the withdrawal would be double, "a withdrawal of the dancer from her desire to dominate dance, and a withdrawal of dance from the risk of being assimilated by anything that is not it" (Rojo, 2019, 56). Although dance needs a dancing body to perceive and receive it, the dancer cannot self-contain the affective force of dance nor completely let go of control while dancing. To dance is a continuous negotiation between the current bodies and present forces.

Moreover, dance conceived as potentiality is intimately linked to the emergence of some-thing that has not-quite-yet been produced nor expressed. It is an entity outside the reach of dancer's comprehension that remains as an unknown horizon and companion, "a mystery we can honor" (Chauchat, 2017, 40). Consequently, its presence can only take the form of a gap, an opening, a threshold, or a passage. Being in a gap is what Nancy Stark Smith described in relation to improvisation as a place "where you are when you don't know where you are [...] like being in a fall before you touch bottom" (Smith, 1987, 3). Hence, dance is not about what one can do or can achieve when dancing, it is rather about what one allows to happen by letting go of expectations, preconceived ideas, and excessive actions. It is to dance continuously with the forces already present. Dancing then implies to withdraw or detach from what we think dance is or should be, and at the same time, preserve the possibility for dance to become some-thing. As Rojo put it:

*It is not about dance being something, but about letting something become dance [...] In other words, what we do is not at the service of producing a meaning out of something, but it is rather transforming ourselves. We become something. This is our first approach to dance: we must become. (Rojo, 2019, 201)*

Therefore, dance is clearly conditioned by the context and conditions in which it takes place, and yet it remains de-centered in as much as it begins outside the limits of the body dancing it. In this sense, it is important to question the image of the performer as the one that is always in the

spotlight holding the attention and mediating the experience of the audience (Edvardsen 2017, 218). Moreover, although dance as potentiality is always unfinished, it does require a material enabling presence and relationality—or in Jaime's Conde-Salazar words a strong determination to be in present continuous giving in to what happens: "*Es la danza en gerundio*" (Conde-Salazar, 2018, 14). Formally, it comes to the surface through the materiality of the body dancing it, which seeks nothing in particular but the encounter with dance itself.

The interesting issue here is that this critical take on dance and dancing entails rethinking dance and choreography, and the strong causality traditionally associated between the two, in new ontological and philosophical terms. As Swedish choreographer Mårten Spångberg (2017, 358) notes, dance and choreography are two distinct capacities which are not causally related. This challenges the common understanding of choreography as the craft of making dances whereby choreography would be the means and dance the end (see Humphrey, 1959). For Spångberg, choreography "is a matter of domesticating or taming movement" (2017, 360), a matter of providing a structure and some sort of systematization, whether it is extremely formal or purely experimental. One of the possible expressions that choreography can take on to gain representation is certainly dance, but it can also be a score, a text, a drawing, or a film. Seen this way, choreography

is not exclusively linked to a single form of expression. In contrast, dance is an autonomous force and intensity that carries its own agency, knowledge, and potentiality into the world. It is “a non-organized some thing” (Spångberg, 2017, 370) that can only be experienced.

Thinking dance and dancing in terms of potentiality, lead us to the theoretical notion of affect and its relevant contribution to philosophical discussions of movement, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century. As we know, affects (as relational moving forces and emergent intensities) are extremely difficult to grasp, yet they remain a fundamental issue to consider in the context of dance and performance. Because when a dancing body dances, it does so together with the surging affects that propel and shape its dancing, and vice versa. In this way, dance reveals the body’s capability to assemble. And so, it is hard to feel lonely *cuando bailamos en/con/junto con lo que (nos) está tras-pasando*, when we move along with what comes through, what affects.

### **AFFECT AND THE NOT-YET**

To attend to affect is not an easy endeavour, for it entails to trace the unfolding of present forces through unforeseen pathways, scenes, and encounters. On some occasions affect hits us quite forcefully, on others, it can be extremely subtle—as anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) so vividly

conveys in the book *Ordinary Affects*. Although affect makes itself palpable through “a vague but compelling sense than something is happening” (Stewart, 2007, 4), we cannot fully comprehend what or how is happening when it happens. Often described as energies, impulses, or intensities that generate an impact, and therefore resonate, affect belongs to the uncertain domains of the invisible and the unpredictable. In short, affect expands beyond the limits of knowability. Complex and ordinary at once, puzzling and captivating, there is something clear about it: affect moves (us). That is, affect circulates in-between and across bodies of all sorts, even when they might seem compact, hermetic, or dead—bodies of matter, bodies of thought, bodies of text, bodies of movement, bodies of dance. Affect, as relational moving forces, reminds us that we are connected to one another and the situations we are embedded in. In affect we are never alone nor apart, it rather implies being always with and more intensely right where we are. And so, this study sets two important questions concerning affect and its potential entanglements: To what extend are the theoretical discussions of affect imbricated in the idea of dance as potentiality? How can the notion of affect contribute to problematize dance under the actual living and working conditions imposed by neoliberal capitalism?

Scholarly, the extensive work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), and in particular their reading of philosopher

Benedictus de Spinoza, have been seminal in the development of the so-called affect theory and affect studies (see Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). In fact, the notion of affect is indebted to Spinoza's *Ethics*, which characterizes the body according to its capacity to affect and be affected. For Spinoza, what a body can do is not fixed nor predetermined, since *affectus* rules "the modifications of the body by which the power of action in the body is increased or diminished" (Spinoza, 1970, 85). As Deleuze and Guattari point out in:

*We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 257)*

Therefore, affect implies an encounter in-between the affecting and affected body, with its consequent change of capacity. As Brian Massumi explains, affect is a "directly relational concept" (Massumi, 2015, 151). In affecting something we are opening ourselves to be affected in return, what means being actively available. In a way, it is a double be-coming, changing something while changing with it. However, we cannot know for sure nor anticipate what will happen, or what we will become, since affect is the entry point into an event "already active, and still open-ended" (Ibid.). Playing out differently each time, all we can do in relation to affect is to remain finely attuned to its emergence, so that we can respond accordingly.

The notion of affect has its own autonomy and agency, dissolving into experience and pulling people into unexpected places. However, although affect certainly works through the feelings and emotions it evokes, it follows a different logic and cannot be reduced to emotion or a personal feeling: "It's transpersonal or prepersonal—not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities" (Stewart, 2007, 128). In contrast, feelings and emotions are a very partial expression of the way in which the depth of an affective experience is personally registered, and thus, anytime we try to confine affect within our bodily sensations and emotions there is always something lost (Massumi, 2002, 35).

Energetically, affect moves bodies in and out of states of being (Stewart and Lewis, 2015: 237) nurturing a circuit of potential connections. Affect, then, is the felt quality of a relational field of complexity that is always more-than-one and more-than-human (Manning, 2012). This means, firstly, that affect can be transmitted, since moving forces are constantly exchanged, and secondly and most importantly, that the capacity to affect and to be affected is not exclusive of the human body. The transmission of affect reveals that "we are not self-contained in terms of our energies" (Brennan, 2004, 6), bodies are indeed interdependent, which challenges individualistic and anthropocentric views of the world that are still so dominant in the West. As Teresa Brennan further elaborates:



*The subject is palpably not the source of all agency if it's energetically connected to, and hence affected by, its context. The hubris of the modern subject finds this notion unpalatable; this subject clings to the notion that humans are energetically separate; that they are born this way, within a kind of shell that protects and separates them from this world. In fact they have acquired this shell, which is also called the ego (Brennan, 2000, 10).*

Furthermore, the human body is never finished, but in a constant state of be-coming. As Sarah Ahmed (2006) extensively argues in *Queer Phenomenology*, bodies take shape by finding orientation, that is, through their own tendency to move towards or away from other bodies/objects inhabiting space. To get in contact certainly leaves an impression on the body, affecting relations of proximity and distance between selves and others. And so, orientation involves at the same time “the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where’ of its dwelling” (Ahmed, 2004, 8), taking the relationality of the body one step further, as it is not only affected by its surroundings, but also shaped and transformed by what the body finds around itself.

As previously noted, the pull of affect can make bodies move. When it comes to examining the affective dimension of movement, the extensive work of Erin Manning (2009, 2016) has been an influential reference throughout the research. Through a very well-articulated theory of how movement becomes thought and thought becomes movement, Manning consistently problematizes the notion of the moving body by shifting the focus from the body as an individual subject to the taking form and relational movement of the body-

becoming—a body that becomes-toward and always moves with. For Manning, there cannot be beginning nor end to movement, “Movement is one with the world, not body/world, but body-worlding” (Manning, 2009, 13). Hence, movement as a qualitative multiplicity is always incipient, pure potentiality, a dance of the not-yet. Through its radical openness to being affected, the moving-dancing body can experience dance as a vital art that carries kinetic knowledge and as a way to participate in the rhythm of bodily becoming (LaMothe, 2015). Ultimately, it means to embrace and celebrate dance as an emergent phenomenon by drawing attention to how the movements we are making are at the same time making us. Call it a dance-bodily-becoming.

Moreover, as Petra Sabish (2011) accurately notes, choreographic practices have a potential to create new singular relations with the audience that are not fixed but rather extremely changeable and subtle—relations to objects, relations to music, relations of movement, relations between bodies. For Sabish (2011, 19), in each performance, choreography creates highly complex relational assemblages whereby specific encounters and becomings of all kinds can emerge. As it deals with contingency and change, assemblage is not a static term describing certain arrangement or organization, but the constant (un)making process of arranging and organizing elements together (Macgregor, 2005, 77). Therefore, applying the notion of assemblage to

choreographic and dance practices—understood in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms as “every constellation of singularities” (1987, 406)—reveals the remarkable capacity of the body to enter into new relations and transform itself qualitatively. Likewise, it pinpoints how the audience is intrinsically involved, affecting and being affected, without having to be asked to participate or behave in any specific way.

Dance reveals and generates affect. To trace affect and its encounters leads to a place of immanence, “always there, always to be made, never still” (Seigworth, 2011, 168). Hence, attending to dance as potentiality requires an affective engagement from the point of view of the dancer but also of the audience. It demands a particular form of attention that is sensitive, for example, to the affects accumulated during a live performance. In this sense, in *Being in Contact: Encountering a Bare Body*, Mariella Greil (2021) argues that a better understanding of these processes can be provided by dance and choreographic practices that take into consideration the encounters between wit(h)nesses and performers, as well as the subsequent forces generated between bodies. These entanglements of performativity and receptivity stretch out between the agency of performers and wit(h)nesses revealing the shared but at the same time separate experience. Therefore, Greil suggests shifting the whole discussion about the involvement of the audience towards “acts of wit(h)nessing” (Greil, 2021, 89). However, this

study would not limit the action of witnessing to the audience, since the dancer is the first one that needs to contemplate what is actually happening whilst remaining available to what is yet to come.

## TO DANCE OUT OF EXHAUSTION

*Still the need to dance.*<sup>3</sup>

When we dance, we do so in a constant inter-dependence on the present conditions of the world and its impact on our flesh and souls. Dance is deeply embodied. By using embodiment, I want to highlight a wider terrain of possibilities, ones that go far beyond the physical, including the mental, emotional, spiritual, somatic, interpersonal, and more (see Spatz, 2015). Dancing demands from the dancer a strong commitment and arduous labour that is not only physical, but also affective. According to Lepecki “a dancer’s labor is nothing else than to constantly embody, disembody, and re-embody, to incorporate as well as to excorporate” (Lepecki, 2016, 15). It means the dancer is permanently refiguring corporeality and proposing alternative modes of affecting and being affected. Following Kunst (2017), although it might look like dancers have progressively abandoned the labour done with their bodies, this apparent refusal of the dancing labour and

<sup>3</sup> From the portfolio *Stilling: Studio Notes* (June 2023).

virtuosity only means a transition between different labouring processes, which entail the appearance of new skills rather than an actual abandonment of labour. These new dancing skills, as Kunst writes, “appeared in parallel with the expansion of communicative and affective labour, mirroring the centrality of the production of subjectivity in contemporary capitalism” (Kunst, 2017, 127).

Today it seems dancers, as everyone else, need to do more than ever, continuously having to produce to sustain the illusion of growth and self-achievement even when it has become evident that is possible to do less. The cost of hyperactivity and multi-tasking is certainly high: anxiety, fatigue, physical injuries, or neuronal illnesses such as depression and burnout. The compulsion to produce and perform well stresses and isolates people to the point that it might lead to total exhaustion. However, getting sick in this context is not an individual matter. Making ourselves feel responsible for being exhausted is the ultimate form of violence. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) exposes so well in *Burnout Society*, twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. New forms of violence which are immanent in the system itself emerge due to an excess of positivity that derives from overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication.

As Han elucidates:

*Auto-exploitation is more efficient than allo-exploitation because a deceptive feeling of freedom accompanies it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Exploitation now occurs without domination. That is what makes self-exploitation so efficient. The capitalist system is switching from allo-exploitation to auto-exploitation in order to accelerate [...] Freedom and violence now coincide. (Han, 2015, 49).*

Now people have become achievement subjects, which implies being entrepreneurs of themselves and victims of self-exploitation. If the feeling of having achieved a goal never occurs, then there can only be restless rest. And so, to really care about dance, that means looking at dance as a creative force, we must find a way to prevent dance and dancers from falling into the contemporary trap of self-exploitation and excessive self-referentiality. In this regard, this artistic research aims to bring attention to the urgent need to slow down, that is, the need for a slower pace of production that might offer modes of doing and dancing that “are not unproductive, but differently productive” (Ulmer 2017, 201), or simply put, that defy the imperative to be productive at all costs. And so, the stilling forces that this study investigates encourage us to continue dancing, but to do so differently. To stop dancing is certainly not the proposal presented here. It is not a question of withdrawing from dance, but rather of cultivating a particular attentiveness towards it. That is, to make dance a radical practice, one that considers the state of being of the dancing body and confronts the current conditions of existence through the interruptive and at the same time

generative gesture of dancing against the compulsion of production.

Particularly significant for this research is the power of stillness to generate new forms of potential in late capitalism since it aligns to another now that is not necessarily bound to productivity. In this respect, stillness is able to shock and disrupt, confronting the temporality of the world and allowing a new form of agency that is, above all, attentive and sensitive. As David Bissell and Gillian Fuller write, whilst “neo-liberal capitalism assures pride in the achievement of doing harder, better, stronger, faster, stillness is toxic: a failure of self-management, a resistance, a dragging of one’s heels” (Bissell and Fuller, 2011, 7). To give in to stillness, dwelling in the state of suspension that it opens, functions as a rupture and the promise of the new, for it creates an affective gap into which something else might be conjured: “It is a reflective interval that is ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’, that exists *between* times” (Cocker, 2011, 103, emphasis in the original). Hence, the decision to stop, to pause, to not-do, might become a generative source of inspiration for dance and choreographic practices (Greil, 2021, 308), since it contains the seed of doing things differently.

In times of exhaustion, dance “shall still involve itself tenaciously” (Rojo 2019, 38) by engaging in open processes that at some point crystalize generating events or iterations

rather than finished pieces, thinking and practicing its own present and future even at the risk of embodying that which aims to criticize and regardless of remaining vague, precarious, hard to grasp, or impossible to name. In this respect, dance has the extraordinary capacity not only to be theoretically critical, but to demonstrate in practice, through the material presence of the dancing body and its circumstances, other ways of living, moving, imagining, feeling, thinking, knowing, being, and becoming. Within this framework, what this artistic inquiry firmly manifests is the determination to keep dancing despite being all exhausted, the body of dance and the bodies dancing it. Perhaps it is time to stop the race and let dance still dance.

## CHAPTER 2 STILLING

### I MAY NOT MOVE, BUT I CANNOT STOP DANCING

It's 8:00 am. I am awake, but I cannot move. Time passes. I remain still, I have no choice. My whole body is aching. Everything about me hurts. I cannot move. When I try to convince my body to make a little effort, its only response is pain. I surrender. "*No luches más*—stop fighting", I say to myself. I feel emotionally, mentally, physically exhausted. A chronic disease is claiming its place, and its place is me. I am tired of being tired. How can a 50 kg-body feel so heavy? I find my way out of bed, slowly. It does not matter how long it takes as long as my body does move. Every micro-movement counts. Feet on the ground, hands on the knees, head thrust forward as if pulled by gravity, toes attempt to do a timid dance when they finally reach the carpet. Here I am, facing again the consequences of non-stopping on time, of not respecting my own limits. I feel out of place and out of sync. When I finally manage to stand up and keep my balance, I put a blanket over my shoulders and go to the bathroom. The cold in the hallway makes me tremble. Washing my sleepy and swollen eyes, I look desperately into the mirror hoping to find someone to comfort me. But solitude hits me fiercely. After taking a deep breath, I turn around and go downstairs. The kitchen is dark

and empty. I make some coffee, sit down in the living room, and try to drink. Today I cannot even swallow my morning coffee. My body is at war with itself. Tears pouring. I cry out of tiredness, out of frustration, out of fear. I cry the fact of being sick and my resistance to carry this burden. I talk to my under-active thyroid. Touching it gently I ask for compassion. Being diagnosed years ago with hypothyroidism, a condition where the thyroid does not create and release enough thyroid hormone into the bloodstream, totally changed my relationship with my body and my understanding of what is dance, and ultimately why I dance. Since then, I have been wondering how we can find sustainable ways of working, of doing things differently. This is an urgent matter. For the compulsion of productivity is making us sick!

Right here and now, as I sit at my computer struggling to finish this text, my exhausted body keeps talking about the growing need to slow down, to unlearn old patterns, to let go of expectations, to be kind to oneself, to dance on our own terms. It is screaming at me. I cannot ignore it anymore.

The body knows things I do not know I know. This time I have to be humble and listen.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This auto-ethnographic vignette is an edited version of the one presented in the assignment of the elective module 'Autoethnography: Composing experience through performance' led by Zoya Sardashti in January 2023.

## PRACTICE (IS) THEORY

*For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. (Anzaldúa, 2015, 5)*

Stilling speaks about theorizing practice whilst practicing theory. It approaches dance as knowledge and proposes dancing as an 'embodied way of knowing' (Barbour, 2011), since in dancing we can experience ourselves as already embodying knowledge, but also as capable of creating and exhibiting knowledge anew. Following Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1981, 400), in improvisation there is nonseparation of thinking and doing, thus dancers' experience is to be thinking in movement. Such a way of thinking implies a particular form of intelligence, one that comes from the body and its capacity to know. To improvise is to destabilize the division between body and mind, for in improvisation you can sense yourself thinking and moving at once. In stilling there is not existing movement material, and yet what I seek in this research is to shed light on dance as potentiality, to research affect in dancing, rather than to focus on improvisation as such. For stilling, improvisation is a very useful tool, for it can help us to be open to not making choices, instead being chosen by circumstances and energies beyond ourselves (De Spain, 2014, 11). However, although in stilling there is not a predetermined choreography, I would argue that we are not improvising—in the sense of composing or making a

piece in real time. We are doing something else, or rather, we are not doing something, but simply allowing dance to make its appearance.

Methodologically, this artistic research implemented different strategies in various stages of the process, which mainly included auto-ethnography, studio practice, performative experiments, and open laboratories or workshops. Worth mentioning are the durational works *Not-Yet* (January 2022) and its revisited version a year later with a group of performers in which we explored the idea of not producing movement<sup>5</sup> by simply witnessing what came through when standing still for hours; and the final first- and second-year performances *Stilling* (July 2022) and *Still Dancing* (May 2023), both in the form of a solo but with collaborators<sup>6</sup> on stage doing live music and lighting. In addition, I had many informal conversations with people related to the topic but also conducted in-depth interviews with peers, workshop participants, and collaborators who came to know the practice first-hand. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. For me, these conversations were especially relevant, as they helped me deepen my own understanding

<sup>5</sup> The event took place at Eusebius Church as part of *Uitnacht Arnhem* in January 2023, where my fellow students Clàudia Ferrando, Clio Van Aerde, Feli Navarro and Lisa Hofmann from the first-year cohort of *Home of Performance Practices* joined me in a 3-hour experimental performance.

<sup>6</sup> The sound designer for both works was Mar Esteban Martin, while the lighting for *Stilling* was done by Doron Gallia-Kind and for *Still Dancing* by Ryan O'Shea.

of the practice. Overall, sharing the practice was a turning point in the research process. Because it is such an intuitive and embodied practice, I found particularly difficult to relate to it in a way that could be shared. It only started to happen during the second year of the research. People were enormously supportive in this endeavor by joining the practice with remarkable generosity, diving into it, and then reflecting on what they had experienced. As it was practiced and discussed collectively, stilling definitely became a more solid and substantial practice.

Day after day I went to the studio without a plan, driven by my passion for both dance and research. Rather than to anticipate or expect what should happen, I firmly committed to the practice registering how it might unfold. In a way, I was with the practice of stilling even before I could name it as such. Every day I started by slowing down and contemplating what was already there, tuning outwards and inwards, so that I could integrate it into the practice. For example, if I felt tired or slowed I worked with it, asking myself how my state of being could help to deepening the practice, but without getting attached to it. Affective attunement implies a particular state of attention that acknowledges the present forces, but it also gives space for things to change. For months, despite the discomfort of not knowing exactly what the practice was about, I gave it time, trusting that something significant was occurring even if I could not grasp it. I never worked with rules

or tasks, but with curiosity and intuitive knowing that dance is a force that we all can connect to and channel. Indeed, many times I entered the studio feeling drained and after practicing I left rested and energized.

As an anthropologist I know very well how important is letting the field speak, but above all one must be fully in it and with it, willing to adjust the research project or even improvise when needed (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). Indeed, there is much in common between anthropology and art since both are “ways of knowing that proceed along the observational paths of being with” (Ingold, 2011, 241). And so, I spent many hours in the studio dancing, meditating, doing somatic work, and taking very detailed notes of everything that happened, almost compulsively. New ideas and questions presented themselves to me (and through me) when practicing.

After two years of research, I had two studio notebooks full of handwritten thoughts and reflections in a mixture of Spanish and English, material that I scrutinized throughout the process, maintaining a sort of intense dialogue between this body of the text and the practice itself. For my portfolio, I carefully selected and brought together fragments of this material in the little book I made entitled *Stilling: Studio Notes* (June 2023). For me, this was a way to present an essential part of the research, sharing pieces of my embodied writing as they came about, and intentionally leaving blank pages for others

to contribute. Because research is something you always do with others, human and more-than-human.

In the studio, besides the dance practice, I often did desk-work. Reading theoretical texts, writing short autoethnographic accounts, or reflecting on the overall process at the same time-space in which I was practicing revealed how important it was for this research that practice and theory stopped to be addressed and experienced in dichotomic terms. It was something that I did quite intuitively though, and I think that my background as dancer-anthropologist was key in this respect. For once, I brought together what I was used to do separately. I felt like a ‘vulnerable observer’ (Behar, 1996) more than ever before. The auto-ethnographic aspect of the research was very present from the beginning; however, it took me a while to understand where this practice came from, to what extent my personal experience of burnout and chronic fatigue was embedded in the development of the stilling practice.

At this point, it is relevant to note how auto-ethnography disrupts traditional ways of knowing and writing, since ethnographic research in general has an important creative aspect (Elliott and Culhane, 2017). It engages with the epistemological question of how we know what we know and demonstrates the transformative power of researching and writing the self. Auto-ethnography has been defined as



an autobiographical genre that displays multiple layers of consciousness and connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis et al., 2010, 739). As method, it goes beyond the biographical to place the 'ethnographic I' within a broader socio-cultural context, seeking to reveal the structural dynamics at play. In doing auto-ethnographic research, we are constantly moving back and forth, opening a transitional space of understanding between me, myself, and others; and therefore, those stories are never only ours. That is exactly what happens with the practice of stilling. Despite arising from a personal need to rest in dance, stilling is not about me or my exhausted body, rather about what I came to understand in dancing this way. Thus, auto-ethnography is applied here as feminist method (Ettorre, 2017) to connect the personal, the theoretical, and the artistic, so that we can voice and attend to our bodies' needs both in dance and in life.

## TO BEFRIEND TIREDNESS

*Bodies speak to us. Your body might tell you it is not coping with what you are asking; and you need to listen. You need to listen to your body. If it screams, stop. If it moans, slow down. Listen. Feminist ears: they too are in my survival kit.*  
(Ahmed, 2017, 247)

In the hyper-accelerated times we live in, many of us are experiencing an increase in anxiety, fatigue, and fear about the uncertain future. Overloaded with work and social activities as we are today, our bodies can feel extremely tired

or become seriously ill when persistent stress builds up over time. That is exactly what I went through during the latter stages of my doctoral research back in 2018, for I was burned out and diagnosed with a chronic autoimmune disease. When I finally got my PhD. I was totally exhausted, feeling drained and depressed most of the time. Despite medication and a long-term break, it took me months to recover. In the midst of hardship, I was still in a privileged position that allowed me to stop for real. I put my academic career on hold and, instead of looking for a postdoctoral position or seeking a job at the University, I returned to my dance practice. However, it was not easy for me to come to understand that even in my state I was still able to dance, tiredness and all.

"Who decides what body is capable of dancing and how and when?", writes Gabriele Brandstetter and Nanako Nakajima (2017, 2) in the introduction of the edited book *The Ageing Body in Dance*. Following their argument, an aging body should not be seen as personifying a disappearance of the ability to dance, but marking the emergence of a different ability, which is a gain, an access to new possibilities, rather than a loss to mourn. In a similar vein, this study intends to turn down the constructed separation between the perfect dancer's body and the allegedly inefficient body due to its age, physical conditioning, or mental health. Whether you are a professional or non-professional dancer, in stilling there is nothing to achieve, what is already happening is enough.

The pressure of having not only to perform well but to be better, to continuously strive for improvement, might turn unbearable. Therefore, when the idea of self-improvement has become so dominant in neoliberal societies, what translates into messages that insistingly encourage people to push their limits and get out of their comfort zones, the practice of stilling claims the right to rest, to do less, to be slower. Stilling means to dance with our precarious bodies, never against them.

It is now well known that dance can be used to promote healing or for therapeutic purposes, partly thanks to the extensive work of American choreographer and dancer Anna Halprin, who described dance as a healing art (Halprin, 2000). However, it seems less obvious that exhaustion or unidealized bodily states could offer something crucial to dancing. The stilling practice is intended to draw attention to the exhausted body in dance, a body that may feel too weak to produce or make dances, but it is perhaps more sensitive than ever to embrace what comes while dancing. For an exhausted body cannot afford to overact, overthink, or overdo. It is too drained to cope with anything excessive or unnecessary. Thus, in its determination to still dance, the exhausted body can become a site of resistance against structural powers that in contemporary capitalism are transforming life into a matter of profitability and growth. In this respect, I would like to examine Yvonne Rainer's 1967-piece *Convalescent*

*Dance*. Within the frame of the Vietnam War, Rainer danced *Trio A* while recovering from a major surgery. Through her persistence in just being there, Rainer proved that her body remained an enduring reality resisting against the state and its war machine (Burt, 2017b, 44). Because weak bodies are situated not in the center but on the margins, by continuing to dance they can begin to question the logic of progression and growth that our compulsively goal-oriented culture imposes on us.

Stilling never demands the body to dance in ways it cannot afford or that could be harmful. It rather tries to open up new possibilities for dancing bodies, alone and together, in motion and in stillness, immediately and in the long term. We need to care of the body, care for the body and care about bodies, which requires a specific ethics (Phelan, 2005, 323). In this sense, the practice calls for an ethics of care (Tronto, 1994; Gilligan, 1995), as it entails listening to the present forces, as well as attentiveness and responsiveness not only to what is happening, but to all dancing bodies. Because bodies are vulnerable, we are vulnerable inasmuch as we are "flesh, substance, matter" (Alaimo, 2010, 24). Being permeable and interdependent, bodies carry traces of where we have been and what we have experienced. The interdependency of bodies and their "fleshy vulnerability" (Ibid.) challenge individualistic notions of the self and reminds us how human bodies are not only affecting and being affected by one

another, but also by more-than-human bodies, physical landscapes, and affective flows.

Moreover, this research aims to reflect on the necessity of de-disciplining the dancing body. Particularly, in relation to what I consider to be self-destructive patterns, such as perfectionism, self-criticism, or an excessive need for control. Most likely, those who received a formal dance education have developed similar habits. “Dancers are very disciplined people, but sometimes having the discipline to stop is the greatest discipline”, as rightly suggests Burrows (2010, 55). But how can we know that it is time to stop, to take a break? Practicing self-awareness and inward listening become vital here. As dancers, we need to constantly tune in to the extraordinary wisdom that our feeling-thinking bodies possess but remain untranslated (Hay, 2000, xxv; see also Lansley and Early, 2011). In both my academic and artistic work, I address the feeling-thinking-dancing body as a site of knowledge and exploration. This somatic intelligence or inwit-knowledge from the interior (Rethorst, 2013, 67)—has repeatedly proved to be a powerful and reliable tool. For example, after a prick of stress it is very common to get sick. Bodies recognize when the stressful moment is over and force us to rest through a caring response that seeks to prevent further harm. In my case, due to my chronic illness, I have more than once reached the point of collapsing. In fact, my last health crisis occurred only a few months ago, during the weeks leading to the presentation of my final performance *Still Dancing*. Those days, when I finally managed to get out of bed and go back to the studio, the compelling need to rest

in dance made me realize that the political dimension of the stilling practice was much stronger than I had considered.

The dancing of exhausted bodies is crucial today, not despite the fact that they are exhausted, but because they are exhausted. We are those bodies. What would be the present and future of dance if exhausted bodies are excluded or forced to dance against themselves? In my view, the exhausted body can contribute to a critical discussion of the notion of dance, shedding light on the present socio-political context in which it happens, and making visible ways of dancing that confront the unsustainable logic of productivity and self-achievement. Our bodies have the capacity to extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them. Indeed, there is no dancing body as such: there are only bodies dancing and becoming through dance. If nowadays bodies feel constantly tired, instead of asking them to rest first and dance later, we should create the conditions for them (for us) to rest in dance.

## STILL DANCING

An exhausted body is dancing to find rest.<sup>7</sup>

Stilling only exists in being practiced. It is not intended to produce works as such, in the sense of a finished choreographic piece, but only iterations of the practice. Over the last two years, some of these iterations have been

<sup>7</sup> Excerpt from studio notes. 01/03/2023, Madrid.

presented in different milieus, including live performances in which the practice took place on stage. These performances were always practice-led, I did not have a score. In *Stilling* and *Still Dancing*, there was a clear invitation for the audience to slow down and dive in, as people were asked to enter one by one or in small groups while my collaborators—the sound and light designers—and I were already in the space. In fact, the sound and light desk were both situated on stage to make evident that we all were in constant relation with each other. For instance, in *Still Dancing*, people were guided to access the theater through the stage, joining us in wandering around and contemplating the space in silence. The moment of encountering the audience is crucial in my work. Lengthening the moment of coming together, I intend to draw attention to each other's presence and the shifting energies between bodies. In this way, I am asking for an active affective engagement. Because the audience brings a strong power and a very generous presence, in stilling our intention is to remain permeable to these forces, acknowledging the fact that the audience also has the capacity to affect and be affected.

While in the first year's performance, *Stilling*, sound and lighting were intended to help me as I practiced, in the final performance, *Still Dancing*, I invited my two collaborators to bring stilling into their own practice and see what it elicited. To do this, I introduced them to the research and the practice

itself, then we had the opportunity to practice together several times in the studio and discuss our insights. On the night of the performance, we practiced on stage for an hour, just before the audience came in. We took time to be with the practice. Stilling does not rush. Most importantly, by making all decisions—dramaturgical, choreographic, technical—through the practice, I was able to begin to think of stilling as an extended practice.

Here are some testimonies of different people about their lived experiences when practicing stilling in the context of the research, whether during an open workshop or a live performance. Clearly, their responses enrich the account I provide throughout this text and the research itself, fleshing out memories and realizations that I could have never reached alone. This is how they described their encountering with the practice:

*There was something very strong about trying to be available, to be present in a way that allows, so that the presence that I'm offering does not become hermetic. Because in the end we were offering our bodies. The performance we did was a kind of offering: Here I am for whatever is happening in the space. [...] After doing this work with you, something changed and influenced my own artistic practice, allowing stilling in some moments. That means giving time to something that has no apparent movement, because that can be an opening for something else. [...] It's about these little moments where the door opens and then something can happen, but for that to happen, well, there has to be a particular attention or disposition, a possibility for stilling so that suddenly you can create space for some-thing to come through. (F. N.)*

*It was really interesting for me how easy it was to let go. I didn't know these people and it felt safe. I felt that also people trusted me back and I gave them trust, so it was a nice balance. To be honest, I was not expecting this at all when I came to this workshop, I was impressed because I've never taken a workshop where I didn't have to do anything, I've just had to be there, and that was enough. [...] During the practice there were moments in which I got this strong sense of mobility, but I was not moving in any way. Just the awareness towards it, towards what's going on, was really an opening for me. (I. G.)*

*I think there is something in the existence of stilling that just gives legitimation to connect to a part in me, which is related to this need to stop and to stay, to stay with things. [...] I think if I would participate in this today, I would take much, much more time to rest. This is also connected to what I've been through, but also that the more I see you the more I understand that you are not strict, because aesthetically it looks as it has rules, but when you see it a lot of times you understand that there are not. But it stays with you because there is something clear. It is not exactly tasks, it's slippery, which I appreciate. [...] I think the practice of stilling contributes to the need to stop the race, to do less, to connect to yourself, but from a place that is more... I want to say 'womby', a place that just contains, that just approves, that your skin is in the right place, that you can start movement from a different place, not from a place of awareness to improvisation, somatics and that, more a personal need in dance. [...] (It's about to) Rest in dance and then let the dance change (you). (D. G.)*

*My encounter with this practice, first of all, was something that continued with me until the day after. [...] During the workshop, my tiredness somehow was transformed into acceptance. That gave me the opportunity to be more aware of what was happening. In that state, I was looking to my surroundings and myself a bit differently. [...] Most of the time movement was not forced, it was not because now we have to create a sculpture or whatever. My hand is here because there is no other place for it to be. [...] I don't want to expect something or wait for something, I want to be with what is happening. (F. K.)*

*In the performance Still Dancing, the slow entrance of the audience and this first moment of being together wandering on stage was quite decisive. I think it generates a starting point that comes from sharing. We are all here, encountering each other. It brings us closer, perhaps because there is physical proximity, or because we are under the same light, or because we do the same thing as it is walking, or because we are blurring, and I don't know any more who are the performers. And so, the first thing I do will no longer be the technical thing—now I am going to move because I am a dancer, or now I am going to make sound because I am a musician; it will not be this, it will be 'we are here, and this is already something.' And that's an important statement of the practice (M. E.)*

*The focus of the practice is really key. You have to be in this focus place, grounded, but also looking around, being responsive. It is a lot about energy, I think [...] Doing the lighting with the stilling practice was very different. The practice is that I'm no longer just reacting to what is happening on stage, I'm instead using impulses. [...] it's actually about listening to the room and listening to what the room is giving you. But it's different from reacting to something. It's not like if you move into this corner of the stage then this corner of the stage should be lit. For me practicing stilling is about being aware of and responding, but through your own intuition of how that situation presents itself. (B. O.)*

To conclude, the practice of stilling is held by the following principles:

*Allowance*, to become a channel for dance instead of striving to dance. Allowing entails to welcome what surfaces in its

rawness. Dance is a generative force to be embodied. You do not make it happen. Because to constantly make things happen is truly exhausting. This is intrinsically connected with the principle of simplicity, which entails to strip back the excess and all the unnecessary doings. As Lisa Nelson beautifully describes, while improvising is to make something, dancing is not: "To dance is to channel, and you don't have to know what you're channeling. It's something that moves you that's invisible. You're following something" (Nelson as cited in De Spain, 2014, 84). Therefore, stilling implies to be both receptive and responsive, cultivating trust in the presence of something that you cannot completely grasp or comprehend. That is, to allow something to come through without being able to command it. Stilling is a leap of faith.

*Contemplation-in-action*, to dance within this framework implies a constant oscillation between the interior and the exterior, between contemplation and action. That is, to witness what is happening rather than how you are dancing. The feeling-thinking-dancing body slows down in order to clear things up and tune in, so that it can perceive the potential of dance as it manifests through itself, without holding movement back or forcing it. In stilling to contemplate does not mean to be passive. In this particular state of attention there is immediacy in the body, for stilling not only entails heightened sensitivity, but also readiness towards taking form.

*Affection*, to draw attention to the circulation of affect and the interdependency of the dancing body and the body of dance. For one does not impose itself on the other, rather they support each other in their becoming. Dance affects the dancing body as the dancing body affects dance. For instance, the exhausted body embraces what unfolds during the practice whilst the practice embraces the exhausted body. There is mutual acceptance and recognition. Although the practice asks the dancing body to be at the service of dance, this means neither restricting its capacity to affect nor neglecting their own needs in dancing. Stilling is caring.

*Potentiality*, to honor dance as an affective force that cannot be predicted, owned, or contained. Nothing closes. Stilling is a continuous openness to what remains unknown, to what is about to come. The intention is not to create a score or to repeat what already happened, but to acknowledge how the practice keeps changing over time. One should support the practice in finding its own way out into the world. As practitioner, you become the medium for dance to expand. But stilling is not a practice of solitude, it is relational. And so, it is vital to value the encountering with and through the practice, for everyone present—audience included—is involved in the dancing as it happens. Indeed, to practice in front of other people is to practice with them. Ultimately, being a dance practice that goes against the compulsion to produce, by approaching dance as potentiality stilling aims

to transform hostile exhaustion into restoring tiredness. A tiredness that does not isolate, destroy, or divide, that is not violent. In short, a tiredness that makes us permeable and open, that brings us together, a “tiredness that trusts the world” (Handke, 1994, 33). Consequently, stilling is intended to make us capable not only of continuing to dance, but to rest in dance. What if the energy we need to dance was always at our disposal?

## CHAPTER 3 TO DANCE OTHERWISE

### AN OPEN-ENDED NOTE

*Que la danza no exija ni desgaste,  
que la danza se revele como una fuerza anti-productiva.<sup>8</sup>*

This thesis has thoroughly examined the practice of stilling as a critical methodology that investigates dance as potentiality. Developed against the backdrop of contemporary capitalism, stilling elucidates how we can rest in dance by tuning into its (re)generative force. As it tackles the exhausted body in dance, stilling opens up new possibilities for dancing and doing things differently, in ways that question and confront the current conditions of existence. Attempting to overcome the division between practice and theory and to reflect on my positionality as dancer-anthropologist, this artistic research was carried out at the juncture between different disciplines, combining distinctive approaches from the fields of dance improvisation, the philosophy of affect, and (auto)-ethnography. As a framework for thinking-feeling-bodying dance in times of exhaustion, far from remaining closed stilling seeks to expand. This is an open-ended

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<sup>8</sup> Translation: When dance does not demand or exhaust, when dance reveals itself as an anti-productive force. From the portfolio *Stilling: Studio Notes* (June 2023).

project. Therefore, I am firmly committed to the sustainability of the stilling practice, to its present and future, through a continuous practicing and inquiring, in which others must become indispensable. For it is not only methods that have limitations, but also researchers.

To be and dance with what is already happening, to allow things to come through; that is stilling dance. Here, it is important to note that in practicing stilling the body may dance quite differently each day. However, there is something specific that has nothing to do with following a certain aesthetic or technique, but with the dancing body and its affect. Stilling follows specific principles rather than rules or tasks. It does not seek any kind of achievement, nor does it create meaning. Stilling does not provide closed answers or perpetual certainties, but further and deeper questions. Its approach to dance is intuitive yet rigorous. Situated in the social, cultural, and political context of its time, stilling lingers in the affective gap of what is not yet but about to come.

Although towards the end of my two years at Home of Performance Practices I managed to involve more people in different iterations of the practice, for example leading workshops entirely based on the methodology, this certainly happened quite late in the process offering me just a glimpse of the new directions that stilling could take as a methodology. However, I am very grateful that it happened because it

made me realize some of the strengths and weakness of the practice, such as its elusive nature and the difficulties in articulating a practice that delves into the realm of affect, as well as its potential benefits for all sort of dancing bodies that eventually may find challenging, discouraging, or even harmful to continue to dance as they used to do.

In drifting away from the compulsion to produce, stilling brings into light alternative rhythms and temporalities, and ultimately, promotes opportunities to embody dance otherwise. That being said, to conduct slow research is time-consuming. It is not an easy endeavor, especially when your work must fulfill certain standards and meet specific deadlines. Over the course of this study, I often felt lost or overwhelmed, at odds between the research topic and how I was actually handling things. More than once I wished I had more time to continue working on an assignment or a performance, including the writing of this thesis, as if things were never good enough. However, the practice kept reminding me that sometimes it was far more important to pause rather than to move forward. While I have repeatedly pointed out that the stilling practice arises from a personal need, and therefore the research has a clear auto-ethnographic element to consider, its scope extends far beyond myself. Stilling is not about me as individual. And yet, in conducting this research I relied on my embodied knowledge and lived experience of the practice, that is, on all the insights my body-becoming gained from



stilling dance. Although in the early stages of the process I practiced mostly alone, I also had the opportunity to share the research with others. Those moments of practicing with other people and listening to their own realizations about stilling were decisive in the development of the practice. For me, the future of stilling lies in being practiced collectively.

Furthermore, being at the core to several practice-led-performances presented over the last two years, stilling revealed its creative impulse and its capacity to travel across artistic disciplines. As I already noted, in the final performance *Still Dancing*, my collaborators were invited to work with sound and lighting through the practice itself. Thanks to this little experiment, for we did not have the proper time to dive together into the practice, stilling emerged as an expanded practice—clearly more research is needed in this regard. To practice stilling in other places besides the dance studio, especially in nature but also in more or less crowded public spaces in the city, is also an idea that I have not yet been able to implement. Another limitation of this study has to do with performing in different venues and for various audiences outside an art educational institution. Although I have already begun to communicate the practice in other settings, I truly believe that stilling has a long way to go in this respect. Similarly, how to bring stilling into writing is an open question that I would like to explore in future iterations of the practice.

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to prioritize the discussion of stilling as a methodology. To do so, I decided to include, firstly, a quite extensive literature review, and secondly, a detailed account of the theoretical underpinnings of the practice, to demonstrate how stilling is about practicing theory and theorizing practice. Consequently, I was not able to give further details of the different performative experiments or iterations. Despite their significant role in the research, I was determined to shed light on the practice itself. Leaving things out is always problematic, and it has been very hard for me to condense such an intensive process in the present text. Whether I have succeeded in unveiling the practice of stilling or not is for the reader to conclude.

Lastly, the end of this thesis is nothing but a new beginning. It is impossible to predict what will happen next, and yet further research remains to be done on the stilling practice. It might take months, perhaps years. In the meantime, whenever I feel exhausted, I may drop everything, including the researcher inside me, and turn myself to dance.

May dance continue, still and despite.  
*Que siga el baile.*

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