

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

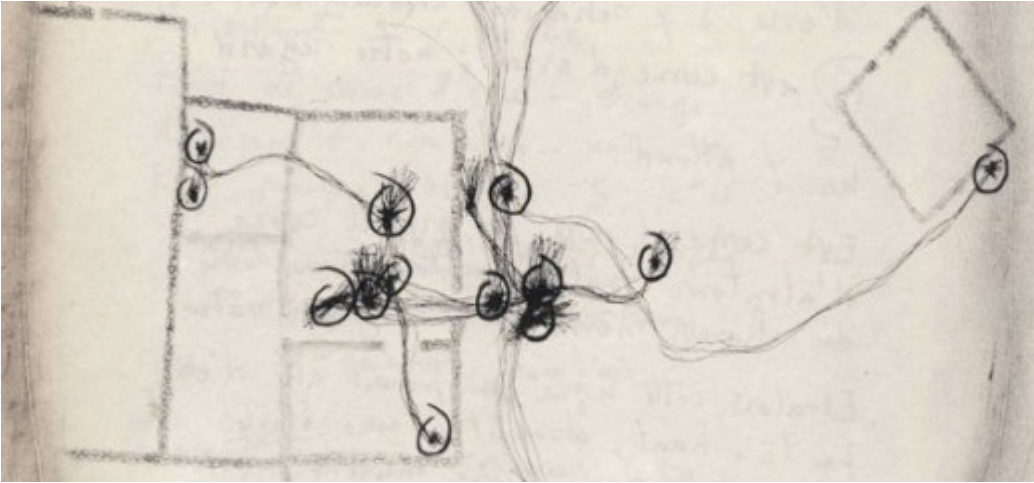


Photo: Erin Manning

Dance's Shimmering Call

by Megan Bridge

This article was originally published in Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts in 2014. This revised version appears on thINKingDANCE with full permission from Dance Chronicle and its publishers, Taylor & Francis. See below for full bibliographic information.

It is a call to attention. Erin Manning's *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* invokes dance, choreography, philosophy, film, and even autism to advocate for a richer relationship to the world around us. Steeped in the process-relational philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, Manning's book speaks to both theorists and practitioners with words that "are never just what they seem to mean: they dance, they gallop, they rest, they tune in or out, they call forth and efface" (p. 164). Manning introduces artwork and neurodiversity as two realms of human experience emblematic of her proposition that life be lived more "relationally." Through inventive language and a deep engagement with continental philosophers, including Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, her authoritative text pushes thought to the limits of expressibility, and presents to the reader a world that shimmers with potential.

The book's first chapter, "Toward a Leaky Sense of Self," starts with the infant. Traditional child development theory suggests that skin-to-skin contact is key to infants developing a healthy sense of "self" and self-sufficiency. But what if the skin is conceived as porous, rather than as a limit or container of a bounded self? What if, through relation, we could experience the ineffable, the world as more than the sum of its parts? Psychologist Daniel Stern claims that relationality is at its most intense in infancy. In reference to Stern's work on infant psychology, Manning posits the "relational as the very core through which any sense of self is constituted" (p. 3). Expanding on this notion, Manning points out that autistic people do not lose the ability to live in "intensive relationality—a lived experience of affective attunement at its preconscious limit" that "gets backgrounded in most adults" (p. 8). Manning celebrates the neurodiversity that allows autistics to experience the world through nonhierarchichal and intensive relationality, as opposed to the "neurotypical" approach, which

uses cognition to sort, classify, and filter out much of what shimmers around us. Manning clearly defines her terms when talking about autism in order to avoid a glorification of what many experience as a debilitating disorder: “while all autistics I have encountered prize this mode of perception, none of them would ever create a simplified relay between autistic perception and the everyday experience of an autistic. For autism is a complex world at once full of perceptual richness and replete with painful misalignments to everyday neurotypical existence, many of them of the motor variety that make independent living if not impossible, then very difficult” (p. 218). Many autistics are unable to communicate in language. While some researchers might classify them as “non-relational,” Manning posits the autistic person’s special perception as an example of “hyper-relationality,” an ethics of relation that is missing from our hurried and “fully-functional” pathways through life.

Dance artists and scholars have similarly critiqued the privileging of language over embodiment. In *A Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings* (2012), choreographer Susan Rethorst writes that dance and choreography need not rely on analytic thought to ensure intellectual rigor (pp. 33–36, 53). For Rethorst, a dance’s ability to “work” on a viewer is inherently bound up with a body’s knowledge, a physical “knowing” that comes before cognitive thought. But in opposing physical knowing and cognition, Rethorst’s theories appear to reinforce the Cartesian body/mind dichotomy. Manning, however, claims that “‘The body’ is a misnomer” (p. 16). What we experience as “body” is a collection of processes that collide and emerge to give the illusion of a fixed form at any given point: “The body is infinitely variable, not subject but verb. And as verb it persists, infinitely” (p. 29). Choreographer Deborah Hay’s teaching embraces this concept. In workshops I took with this choreographer in 2008 and 2012, one of the mantras she regularly returned to was, “What if where I am is what I need?” Hay spoke this phrase repeatedly as the dancers moved through an improvised physical practice together, using the mantra to place the “body” into a processual relationship with space, creating what Manning calls “experiential spacetimes.” In Manning’s concept of body, as in Hay’s, the “body” is a “fleeting landing site,” part of an infinite process of individuation, a process in which the relationship between form and matter is unstable (p. 19).

Much as the concept of “the body,” for Manning, is a fleeting landing, choreography too is mobile, relational, processual. In her chapter “Choreography as Mobile Architecture,” she proposes that “what makes a work work” is when choreography becomes relational, when it expands beyond individual bodies moving, “when the choreographic begins to shift toward a wider fielding of movement where spacetime itself begins to vibrate with movement expression” (p. 101). The work outlasts itself, haunting the viewer long after the performance is over, but, “It’s not the *form* of the work that stays with you, it’s the *how* of its capacity to dislodge the you that you thought you were. It’s the *how* of the work’s capacity to shift the ground that moves you” (p. 102). This open choreographic field is made up of the movement of individual bodies, but it operates across many bodies that move together. Rather than individual dancers making individual decisions, or responding to individual cues to carry their “own” part of the dance forward, the dance carries and shapes the dancers. The process of cueing and the dancers’ real-time relation to those cues creates a feedback loop in which the field is continuously realigned. We witness a shifting, not “simply the body in space, but the space bodying” (p. 136). Space and time become entwined. Our experience of space is completely shaped by the duration of what unfolds before (or within) us, and our experience of time is inseparable from the environment that contains us: “spacetime.”

While Manning writes extensively in *Always More Than One* about choreographer William Forsythe, and mentions Hay in passing, the choreographer I think of most while reading this book is Lucinda Childs. In 2013 in Philadelphia, I was privileged to be part of a group that reconstructed and performed several of Childs’s dances from the 1970s, including *Melody Excerpt* (1977). In Childs’s work, there is a slippery and expansive relationship to space and time. In her early minimalist works, Childs distributes a limited number of movement phrases across a certain number of bodies, using her understanding of space and tight, repetitive, looping structures based on music or on intricate visual scores that determine how those phrases interweave. As a performer in Childs’s work I experienced directly what Manning refers to as “a relational movement that exceeds the terms of the dancers’ individual bodyness” (p. 210). Manning claims that the viewer, when watching choreography that “works” in this way, senses that the dance “is happening with and across bodies rather than on them” (p. 101).

Manning refers to cues in dancing (and living) as “landing sites.” Cues are wrapped up with memory and time, but they shouldn’t be linked with mere functional repetition or with a “stable notion of recall.” Rather, “The cue functions not as a simple tool for the memory of

a rehearsed past, but as a call toward the future” (p. 105). In Childs’s *Melody Excerpt*, three simple movement phrases wrap and weave across five dancing bodies in endless permutations, building rhythmic relation through cues and alignments that densely pepper the score, the dance, and the consciousness of the dancers. This moves toward what Manning refers to as “event-time ... a miring in the multiplicity of nows—the now that has passed, the now that is passing, and the now that will have been, each phase of nowness contributing to the occasion at hand in a time-loop that resists the organization of experience into a linear continuum” (p. 80).

Art, in particular dance and choreography, and autism are lenses of experience through which Manning asks us to encounter her propositions. Just as time and space ripple through the bodying of a choreographic field, Manning repeatedly reminds the reader that the individual “body” is not fixed: “Like all bodies, but perhaps more experientially so, the autistics’ body is always already more than one, expressive not in its parts but across the registers of its emergence in co-constituting spacetimes of experience.... [F]or many autistics the body does not feel precomposed, with preordained roles: it travels, shifting, changing, recomposing with events of experiences” (p. 153). Manning’s concept of “body” extends beyond its skin boundaries and is always constituted in relation to other bodies. Movement, thought, and experience itself are also constituted relationally and are thus “always more than one,” always exceeding a fixed or singular form. Through this multitude, individuation is never actually achieved, but rather experienced as an infinite process, a call to awareness that shimmers and shifts, a never-ending dance of attention.

Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance, By Erin Manning. 295 pp. Illustrated. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2013.

Dance’s Shimmering Call, by Megan Bridge. Originally published in *Dance Chronicle, Studies in Dance and the Related Arts* 37, no. 2: 267-71, 2014. Copyright 2014 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis LLC (<http://www.tandfonline.com>).

By Megan Bridge
February 5, 2015