

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

EXPRESSION AND BODILY FAITH IN NATALIE HELLER'S *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

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Artworks worth thinking about do not simply satisfy their audience, but also frustrate them by intimating ideas, questions, desires, or images, beyond those made fully visible in the work itself. They immerse us in problems and paradoxes over and above what can be resolved within the confines of the canvas, the stage or the gallery. This absence calls on us to seek resolution elsewhere and to follow an artwork's implications in different disciplines, in literature, history, philosophy, in our own lives and histories, and in dialogue with others. Netherlands-based



Natalie Heller, First Impressions. Photo by Murat Dürüm.

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movement artist Natalie Heller's remarkable recent performance, *First Impressions* (2013-14) brings us within this tension of the present and the absent. Its implications are given on stage but are also much wider than that space. We could follow its incitements and explore what the work alludes to in art history, dance theory, or performance studies, yet there is a deployment of motion and perception in this work that calls for a sophisticated conception of the body as put forth in phenomenology. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is very well suited for illuminating these aspects of Heller's choreography. His account of motor-perception remains one of Western philosophy's most rigorous explorations of the expressive body. Heller's performers enact a kind

of expression and a bodily form of faith, which are animated by a similar impulse to that which motivated Merleau-Ponty's project. Reading *First Impressions* alongside his philosophy does not simply *explain* her work: she engages with similar problematics, yet pushes some of the philosopher's ideas further by enacting them in the dancer's body, which makes visible aspects of motor-perception not as easily discernible in Merleau-Ponty's exemplars from the visual arts. That is, I will argue, her work extends rather than simply illustrates his phenomenology, making visible new aspects of motor-perception, expression and bodily faith.

The 1st Four minutes: Motion and Motionlessness:

The low droning sounds of Steve Roden's "Between Voices and Sky" introduce *First Impressions*. Three long bands of light illuminate the separate areas of the stage where the dancers remain still. Once these areas are fully illumined, it feels as though all of the bodies that will play out the drama of impressing and being impressed upon have been introduced, yet at the same time there is an absence accumulating, pointing to more than these bodies on stage. Following approximately four minutes of stillness, Lerna Babikyan, sitting closest to us on stage right, initiates slow and tentative sorting movements, arranging what appear to be delicate but invisible objects on the ground in front of her. She seems pensive, slightly confused, as though she is expecting to retrieve some important lost memory from these tiny objects. Her movements are miniscule, and yet at the same time there is a remarkable immensity to her delicate gestures.

While these gestures are the first explicitly discernible movements, to treat them as the un-ambiguous beginning of the piece would be to disregard important and subtle perceptual transformations that have already been set up before any of the performers begin moving in a conventional sense. To take Babikyan's gestures as the starting point is to miss a crucial aspect of the movements that follow. Instead of going forward from those gestures to explore how they resonate and evolve throughout the performance, I will take several steps back to look at the subtle motor-perceptual configurations established, which affect the performance space and the bodies within it, before any more easily discernible motions develop.

My initial curiosity about Babikyan's small movements, and how they could have such a significant impact as they arise from stillness, might already take too much for granted. To begin analyzing *First Impressions* in a phenomenological context, which I believe it demands, requires going beyond a set of dichotomies between motion and motionlessness, activity and passivity, visibility and invisibility, as they apply to motion and perception. The three minutes before Babikyan began her movements were not un-ambiguous stillness, a simple lack of motion, or a



Image by Can Eskinazi, Burak Cevik.

period of straightforward passivity. In this period, one finds many of the ambiguities and agonisms that explain a complex form of motion that animates the movements that follow. Heller explains that since arriving in Istanbul, she has been “touched by the sensorial richness of the city, the images and sounds, the architecture old and new, the poverty and wealth, the gentrification, the instability, the beauty, the duality”. Yet she does not take these dualities for granted. She wants to “explore the magic and poetry of a city suspended somewhere in the *in between*” (Heller 2014). To this end, she invokes the complexities of the moving body by working between and beyond many of the dichotomies typically used to understand motion, such as the binary oppositions between activity and passivity, motion and motionlessness, subject and object. In challenging these dichotomies, Heller achieves a highly charged context for bodily expression, which the performers exploit throughout the performance.

The Western philosophic and scientific tradition and its mostly representational account of perception has perpetuated the idea that motion and vision are separate bodily phenomena. It therefore remains a common but mistaken prejudice that motion is distinct from visual, but also tactile or aural experience. As a student of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, Heller works beyond these assumptions. One of the starting points for Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology was the observation that different perceptual faculties such as sight, touch, and hearing are not experienced as discrete bodily events but encroach upon and insinuate themselves in each other, in what he considered to be a synaesthetic form of perception. One does not receive isolated sights and sounds, which are later combined through acts of cognition; there is a “sight of sounds” and a “hearing of colours”, and these are not exceptional phenomena: “Synaesthetic perception is the rule”, writes Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002, 266).

Not only do the various senses mingle with each other, they are also inflected by the motor orientation of the body. In *Phenomenology of Perception* ([1945] 2002) Merleau-Ponty explains that “every perceptual habit is still a motor habit” (135). Later in *Eye and Mind* ([1961] 1993), he writes, “All my changes of place figure on principle in a corner of my landscape; they are carried over onto the map of the visible” (124). We can, of course, analyze perceptions into discrete sensations, into seeing, touching and hearing, and we can divide away the motor aspects as we reflect upon past experiences, but all of these aspects are experienced first as a unified motor-perceptual stream. Not only do the motor aspects of our own experience impinge upon our perceptual experience, we also experience the “background” movements of the external world as “intertwined” with our own: “Movement and background are, in fact, only artificially separated stages of a unique totality,” according to Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002, 159).

This is how the body is experienced before it is reflected upon and before the deliberative intellect divides experience into separate motor and perceptual streams. Appreciating the pre-reflective synaesthetic nature of experience allows us to notice what happens in *First Impressions* in the first minutes before discernible motion begins. The performer’s bodies are not indifferent to the background motions suggested by the soundtrack. The music intimates a movement, which intertwines with and insinuates motion into the still bodies. The low minor tones suggest the struggles the bodies have gone through and will endure. A fully visible manifestation of the motion

is not given by the bodies or the sound, yet the cycling repetitions suggest movement, a very old motion, one initiated before Istanbul came into being and one that will remain in motion long after it is gone. At the same time one can't fail to hear an echo in the soundtrack of the movements animating the social-political fabric of Istanbul at the time of the performance. *First Impressions* was initially delayed because of the Gezi Park protests. The clashes of the demonstrators and riot police had ravaged the city throughout the historic Beyoğlu district and among the Ottoman era buildings lining Istiklal Avenue where the performance was eventually staged. Heller explains that "the city was in such a heightened state, people were being gassed, wounded, dragged away and beaten by the police" (Heller 2014).

Explicit representations of these struggles are not to be found in the piece; nevertheless, the soundtrack's motion is implicated within the performer's bodies, and these bodies—and many of the audience members' bodies—had been immersed in the tumultuous milieu of protest and violence. The dancers' do not act out these struggles, yet Heller explains that these events "breathed their way into the piece". "The feelings were still present... the inescapably, the tension, the weight, the helplessness" (Heller 2014). Even while the dancers remain still, an echo of the city's tumultuous movements is made manifest by the soundtrack. A strict dichotomy between motion and motionlessness, visibility or invisibility simply cannot do justice to what is experienced. The visible is "lined" with the invisible, as Merleau-Ponty suggests ([1961] 1993, 147). Likewise, the motionless bodies are experienced as lined with the invisible motions of Roden's soundscape.

Within this motor-perceptual ambiguity, we can begin to appreciate the impact of Babikyan's gestures. Her tiny movements feel much larger than expected, not because they are the first movements after a period of un-ambiguous motionlessness, but because they are the first visible manifestation to punctuate the tension skillfully set up between motion and perception. Thus, Babikyan's gestures are only the first in the sense of collapsing one aspect of the non-duality of motion and motionlessness, visibility and invisibility, and opening another. This opening will later provide for the possibility of feeling the force of the city's movements through the performer's gestures.

Before the 1st Four Minutes: Expression as Impressing-Impressed

Appreciating the form of expression operative in *First Impressions* requires going beyond the binaries alluded to above. To grasp the significance of the performance, however, demands that one looks in an even wider temporal horizon. Part of the work's impact is made possible by frustrating expectations formed not only before Babikyan initiates her gestures, but also before the performance begins, in a time when our beliefs and expectations regarding motion and perception are formed.

Because of positivist and representational assumptions, it is easy to enter this work with the questionable belief that there must be a discernible or localizable agent behind motion and perception. The title of the piece tells us that impressions have been made. Even if it is misguided, it is possible that these prejudices lead one to desire some form of agency to be made visible, for

the agent of impression to be seen. When I sit down for the show I already expect that I am going to see action, and instinctually I search for the mover behind the motion to come. Because it is a dance performance, I expect that moving bodies will be implicated in the impression making. I also know that Heller has recently relocated her practice to Istanbul, that her performers are from this city, and that this new work is a response to the impressions the city has made on her in the eight months since her arrival. If something has been pressed upon and impressed, I expect that there will be something expressing itself, something pushing itself on and imprinting itself on the performer's bodies. While I know this agent is Istanbul, I do not expect Heller to give a city backdrop, props or any positive representation of the city. I do not expect Istanbul to arrive in full visible presence, yet for the performance to succeed within this absence, the city must somehow, while remaining invisible, implicate itself within the motion that will be visible. Such an event significantly problematizes common dichotomous assumptions about agency, motion and visibility, and calls for a model of expression that goes beyond the taken-for-granted understanding, which expects a discernible and un-ambiguous source of visible agency. This is precisely the challenge Merleau-Ponty took up in his attempt to re-conceive artistic expression in a phenomenological context. The account of expression based on a fully visible agent of action, over against a passive world waiting to be represented, cannot grasp the complex form of expression theorized by Merleau-Ponty and deployed by Heller.

To capture the phenomenological intricacies of artistic expression, Merleau-Ponty re-thought the relation between body and world in such a way that the active-passive dichotomy could not be indexed respectively to an expressive subject, such as a painter, and an expressed object, such as a landscape. Because "things and my body are made of the same stuff" ([1961] 1993, 125), the expressive relation between the two is much more complicated. Since body and world are two aspects of a single motor-perceptual fabric, which in his last work he names "flesh" (*chair*), expression is ambiguous regarding subject and object. There is no active, expressive subject over against a passive object: "Their landscapes interweave," Merleau-Ponty writes, and "their actions and their passions fit together exactly" ([1964] 1968, 142). Whether it is the painter facing a landscape, or a dancer engaged with the cityscape, neither is a straightforward active subject who merely represents a passive object indifferent to her expressive gestures. The cityscape/landscape is not passively waiting to be represented: it actively elicits the body's movements. Just as "it is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter" ([1961] 1993, 128), likewise Istanbul makes itself visible in a specific way, and therefore demands certain expressive orientations. While they are the demands of a metropolis like many others, they have their own specificity: they are not the demands imposed upon the body by New York, Mumbai, Dubai or Beijing. Heller explains how in Istanbul, while the protests were erupting,

... there was general discontent (among artists and intellectuals at least) and a desire to leave Turkey. There were feelings of impossibility and entrapment. Tensions were building... anger was also bubbling up. The gentrification project of Taskim meant there was construction happening everywhere, change everywhere... foundations were being uprooted and replaced within days... a sense of stability was missing and in its place was uncertainty and fragility. (Heller 2014)

This city, and all cities, have unique demands for the bodies that navigate them at particular times. Just as Merleau-Ponty's artists do not *represent* the landscape, Heller's dancers do not *represent* Istanbul, its buildings, its culture, or its conflicts; rather, they attune their bodies to its particularity, and go along with its specific motor-perceptual demand. They are led by it, and while expressing their own selves, in following the city's claim on their bodies, the dancers are at the same time expressed by the city-scape they have lived within.

An important question comes to mind at this point regarding the specificity of this dancer-city co-lining of movement: does *First Impressions* have to be performed in Istanbul in order to achieve the impact that it does? Following Merleau-Ponty and his conviction that reversibility obtains in all perceptual experience, we might actually conceive of heightened expressive possibilities through a geographical dislocation. While it is Istanbul that manifests through the dancer's performance, it is never *just* Istanbul. There is no invariable essence given to perception. This is because we do not experience the dancers' movements as co-lined only with the city's movements, we also experience those movements as lined with our own motor-perceptual histories. Reversibility always obtains, thus it is always a specific Istanbul that presents itself. The Istanbul I read from the dancers' bodies is inflected by my motor-perceptual background and is therefore differently perceived than it is for other audience members with their own histories. Because Istanbul comes to presence through the intertwining of the body-memories of the performers *and* audience, rather than through explicit city-representations, there is a possibility of heightening the piece's expressive potential through dislocation. If it were a question of "accurate" representations of Istanbul, then putting on such a performance outside of the city could be judged based upon the extent to which the audience sees the city, or is convinced of its presence. Yet, following Merleau-Ponty, the more appropriate criteria for judging the expressive possibilities of this work would be the extent to which the performance affords the audience the chance of intertwining their own motor-perceptual histories with the dancers'. Just as a delicacy of Istanbul might be more appreciable outside the city, or for someone who has never visited and does not take it for granted, likewise an invitation into the intertwining with the city issued outside of Istanbul could afford heightened desires and openness for engagement. If the intertwining obtains, the audience isn't simply "shown" Istanbul, but invited into the expression of its motions as expressed through the dancers' bodies.

In this ambiguity of expressing and being expressed—or what amounts to the same thing, impressing and being impressed upon—*First Impressions* engages a comparable impulse to the one Merleau-Ponty follows in his attempt to articulate a phenomenological account of expression. For Merleau-Ponty, an artist or performer does not simply impose her expressive desires onto her medium, or in space, but she is at the same time taken by the world, allowing its expressive desires to move her body. The cityscape, landscape, or a face to be painted are not passive objects but are infused with a meaning which, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "is capable of demanding *that* colour and *that* object in preference to all others" ([1952] 1993, 92). For this to be a viable way to understand expression requires that we go beyond understanding the human body as an individuated and autonomous agent: the world itself initiates motion, and is an active participant in expressive movement, even while remaining invisible and appearing motionless. It is not, however, that the

body is expressive at one time and allows the world to be expressive at another time; each gesture is at once expressing while being expressed. I do not receive in one moment and take in another: "I am receiving and giving in the same gesture," writes Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 10). This is the temporality of the artist's expression. He neither simply *gives* to tradition nor *takes* from tradition, but with each "single gesture he links the tradition that he carries on and the tradition that he founds" ([1952] 1993, 100).

Returning once again to those initial movements of Babikyan's, their impact becomes further discernible. It is not by accident that they appear simultaneously tiny *and* huge, micro *and* macro. The looping movements of the soundtrack exacerbate the desire for the bodies to initiate motion. Habitual expectations may lead one to want to see the origin of motion, yet if Heller had provided the agent desired, and had relied on a simple un-ambiguous form of motion—where body and city were discrete movers, one active, another passive, one impressing the other being impressed upon—then I suspect that these small motions would not have had the large impact they did. Instead, Heller draws out this period of stillness, such that the desire to identify a discernible agent of motion is skillfully frustrated. As the soundtrack moves forward a subtle perceptual shift happens. With the continued absence of a discernible impressing agent of motion, and the continued expectation of its presence, the perception of the bodies on stage is able to transform. Even though my phenomenological studies tell me otherwise, I still find myself with a desire for bodies in motion to arise out of motionlessness, and a phenomenologically inappropriate desire for a visible agent to arise out of the invisibility. However, because Heller invites us to question these expectations, this period of stillness facilitates the perceptual shift needed to bring the audience beyond those desires and into the ambiguous mode of expression where motion can be felt as ambiguous regarding city and body. While this idea can be derived from Merleau-Ponty's writings, Heller's choreography pushes his thought further by affording an actual experience of the dancers' moving bodies, and our own perceiving bodies, beyond the dichotomies reinforced by representational thinking.

Despite the lack of explicit movement in the first four minutes, in complicating the distinction between motion and motionlessness Heller has given her audience the chance to feel bodily exertion on stage in this period of stillness. This also extends Merleau-Ponty's thinking by allowing us to feel how intertwinement of motion obtains between our bodies and the world they move within. This feeling might be possible when viewing the famous artworks Merleau-Ponty studies, such as Cézanne's, yet for those of us not familiar with the painterly gestures that went into their production, the motor-perceptual intertwinement with those works will not be as readily available as it is when viewing moving bodies on stage. When we see a painting, we generally only see it after the expressive gestures have ended, whereas when viewing a dance performance, the work does not come after but is coterminous with its movements and gestures. The ambiguity between motion and motionlessness is, therefore, more palpable in such a case because, even if the spectators are not professional dancers, they are, nevertheless, given the possibility of experiencing an aspect of motor-intertwinement not as readily available in static works of visual arts such as paintings. Heller's work, therefore, takes up Merleau-Ponty's contention that stillness is not un-ambiguous motionlessness, yet affords her audience a heightened experience by

experimenting with the relation of movement and stillness in the bodies of her performers. This makes it possible to feel how one's own stillness is a means the city has to act on and impress itself on the body, a feeling that might be more difficult to achieve by depicting a city in a painting. Because the ambiguities of motion and motionlessness are enacted on stage, rather than referred to in texts, the performer's gestures invoke one's own motor-perceptual history. I know the feeling in my own body of how various cities have expressed themselves through my motions, but even more so when their enormous infrastructure and architecture, not to mention police forces or tear gas have stopped my body, held it in stillness, attention, awe, wonder, fear and other kinds of motionlessness.

As we've seen, this motionlessness is not straightforward passivity. Well aware of this, in the show's brochure, Heller quotes fellow choreographer Akram Khan: "to achieve stillness requires a great amount of discipline and energy, you don't just stand still on stage, you are trying to say something through that stillness" (Heller 2014). The bodies are not simply still through a lack of their own volition. It becomes palpable that they might be held there by the city, and are therefore neither simply passive nor active. Because the city operates in its own absence, those bodies and their being held motionless discloses how they are infused with an invisible source of motion. Movements no longer present themselves as simply given by or received by the individual dancers themselves, and the distinction between the two is complicated such that their gestures can be experienced beyond the distinction between expressing and being expressed, moving and being moved. At this point, one can begin to let go of the expectation that some external agent will be impressing itself on the bodies from outside. The dancers themselves are both those who express the city and are impressed by it. Because this is how the body is felt in a city-scape, by instantiating these complexities, Heller invites her audience beyond the prejudices that hold motion and perception as separate bodily phenomena. In the next section we will see how, in working between these binaries, one can experience an "ecstatic" form of motion that extends beyond the performer's bodies, and likewise beyond the audience's bodies, affording a heightened expressive and perceptual encounter between the two.

Ecstatic Motor-Perception

As Babikyan continues her sorting movements, all three dancers remain on stage right. The space should appear to be drastically off-balance with the bodies and the potential for movement all located on one side of the stage. Yet, while in one sense this seems obvious, at the same time it feels as though a curious balance is achieved throughout the space. Su Güneş Mıhladı stands looking across the stage into the dark empty space of the theatre, and while she does not cross over to the other side of the stage, I am left wondering where the sense of balance comes from. Her body is not there. She is not acting on anything remotely. The only thing of hers passing into the other side of the stage is her field of vision as it projects from right to left. As she waits, body erect, staring intensely and straight into stage left, we are invited into another complexity of the moving perceiving body: it becomes palpable that it is the direction of Mıhladı's gaze and the action of her vision that balances what otherwise appears to be an un-balanced stage. The

perceptual field itself has become much denser, almost with a weight of its own as the bodies extend out beyond themselves into the space they fill.

This curious balance is felt, yet in order to explain this feeling we must strive to go beyond assumptions that treat vision and motion as two separate bodily phenomena. For Merleau-Ponty, motion and perception are not distinct, but are one single phenomena often referred to as “motor-perception”. As early as his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty explains that “vision is an action” ([1945] 2002, 438). To modulate one’s *vision through* space is a way of modulating one’s *body in* space. According to his “ecstatic” conception of perception, in perceiving the body transcends itself and stands (*stasis*) outside (*ek*) of itself: the body “constantly outruns its premises and is inwardly prepared only by my primordial opening upon a field of transcendence, that is, once again, by an ek-stase” (438).

This description of an extended body is further articulated in Merleau-Ponty’s writings in two ways, in a perceptual and then a *motor*-perceptual ecstasis. First, the account is enlarged such that the body-world dichotomy is more fully overcome regarding perception. The body does not simply stand outside the non-perceptual world; the entire world, the “flesh”, is thought to be a single perceptual fabric. This fabric has a perceptual “depth”, which in *Eye and Mind* he writes, “is either nothing, or else it is in my participation in a Being without restriction, first and foremost a participation in the being of space beyond every particular point of view” ([1961] 1993, 134). Secondly, this ecstasis is further expanded by going beyond a perceptual to a *motor*-perceptual ecstasis. Highlighted in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of Cézanne, movement is also taken to be an event initiated and sustained beyond the individual’s body, and diffused throughout the motor-perceptual fabric. Artistic expression is “solicited” by the landscape. The cause of the artist’s gestures is not indexical to a self-contained, individuated volition, but operates from outside the self as what he calls a “distant will” ([1961] 1993, 147).

Like vision, motion also arises beyond any single point in motor-perceptual space. Motion is an event of a general motor-perceptual fabric with which body and world are intertwined. Because “action and passion [are] so slightly discernible,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted” ([1964] 1968, 129). Likewise, with Heller’s dancers, it becomes impossible to discern whether they are expressing something about the city, or if they are giving in to its vast movements, and allowing the city to express itself through their bodies. Working in this multi-stable condition, Heller provides the occasion to feel how the dancers’ movements cannot be reduced to a localizable or entirely visible form of agency. Movement is felt to traverse the body-world, visible-invisible distinctions.

This ecstatic motor-perceptual account of the body provides the context for understanding how a dancer’s vision can balance an otherwise out-of-balance area. Action does not need to manifest visibly in a particular point in space for it to impact our experience of that space. Vision is a distal form of action; therefore, it can manifest throughout the motor-perceptual fabric without the dancer having to inhabit the space in which the motion is felt. Because the performer’s perception impinges upon the space, as does the audience’s, with only a few subtle movements, the entire



Photo by Serdar Kurt.

area of the theatre can be felt as a unified motor-perceptual fabric, as a single flesh. There is no motor-perceptual neutral or empty space. Mihladız's actions allow us to experience the whole theatre, audience included, as infused with and pervaded by perception and motion.

Babikyan brings this fabric to a more palpable expression with her following movements. She makes her way slowly into stage left, and although she does not make contact with Mihladız, it feels as though

there is an encroachment into the space in which Mihladız's vision extends. If this were experienced simply as empty space, not as space filled by her body's motor-perceptual ecstasis, Babikyan's entry into her field of vision would have little dramatic impact. However, as she moves into that field, there is a tangible effect as though she is entering into and implicating herself into the external musculature of Mihladız's body. If seeing were a representational event limited to the human visual apparatus, there would be no feeling of encroachment or intertwining. Yet such a representational account cannot describe the relation between these performers, which is felt so strongly as their bodies extend beyond themselves and intertwine with each other.

Babikyan continues to lumber her way through Mihladız's perceptual field, through the flesh they share. She then drops heavily onto the floor. While she appears to do this from her own desire to explore a different orientation for her body, it appears just as likely that she has given in to the city's desires for her body. Her actions bring us into some of the greatest manifestations of the ambiguous forces that animate the dancer's motions. Now on the ground, Mihladız is balancing on her haunches and reaching forward to keep herself suspended between rising up to whatever she is reaching for, or falling back, defeated and exhausted. She is balancing but expresses a remarkable ambivalence such that it is not clear if she is grasping something she wants, or if she is being grasped by something she wants to free herself from. In the first three minutes the performers brought us into the non-duality of activity and passivity through one aspect of motion, now Mihladız brings this to a higher pitch through her struggles and contortions. Leading up to some of the most intense moments, she begins to tear and pull violently at her body and lets it fall back to the ground. The audience is shown the fullest expression of the agony and ambiguity that obtains as one attempts to enter and become continuous with a city's tremendous motions. While Mihladız is



Image by Ersin Erçin.

brutally pulling herself away and slamming her body back onto the floor, it is not clear whether her body is moving from her own control, or if the source of movement is dispersed throughout the space around her. I don't know whether she is impressing herself into that space or being impressed upon by it. This is the way a body intertwines with its surroundings, as part of the flesh of the world or the massive moving power of a city. Mıhladıız brings the invisible motions of the city to visibility as she wrenches at her body and lets it collapse to the ground. Because it is her own arm that is fighting against herself, she beautifully presents the truth that it is through our own bodies that the city acts, and that in the struggle to be continuous with the city's fabric and its movements, it is never appropriate to maintain a simple distinction between what is internal and external, what moves and what is moved, what is body and what is city.

Depth of the Body and City-scape

As an invisible source of motion, Istanbul arrives more fully in Heller's depiction because this is how a city's movements are engaged. We see cars, trains and crowds moving in the city, or barricades impeding movement, but never is the city itself fully visible. We can see the boundaries on a map that distinguish Istanbul from the regions surrounding it, yet our lived experience of a city is an experience of a formless entity. Neither the performer's bodies nor Istanbul can ever be fully circumscribed because the expressive human body is an aspect of the expression of the city it is in, possibly the most important loci through which the metropolis expresses itself. To know the city, we have to put our bodies into it, and to do so, as a tourist, a resident, or as an artist newly arriving to make a home for her practice, is already to be part of the city's body, to be its expressive medium, and to be however minimally intertwining one's own motions with its motions. As a painter relative to a landscape, or a resident navigating a cityscape, those bodies are the city, making while being made, impressed upon by the city while impressing upon it with one's body.

By taking on this approach to expression and impression, Heller's performers offer something importantly different than a representation of a city, its inhabitants, its infrastructure, its culture, protests or history. In the same way that the dancers are not simply representing the city, but allow its movements to come to presence through their gestures, Heller's choreography invites its audience to engage in the motion animating the performance. As Merleau-Ponty writes regarding great works of art, "the work which reaches its viewer invites him to take up the gesture which created it" ([1952] 1993, 88).

With the city coming to presence in its invisible but still expressive state, as audience members we can partake in its motions, and take up the gestures of the performers as an echo in our own bodies, in a way we might not be able to if the work reified distinctions between activity and passivity, motion and motionlessness, or offered a visible manifestation of the city's moving power. This phenomenologically enlarged context Heller achieves draws on the perceptual depth spectators bring to the performance. To see this piece is not to simply witness bodies moving in a space indifferent to our own, but is to import one's own horizon of motor-perception into the event.

Regardless of one's particular histories or philosophical orientations, we all come to performances with memories of the ways a city moves our bodies. Most know how a metropolis such as Istanbul inspires and exhausts us, stimulates and bores us, puts us in motion and frustrates our desires for all kinds of motions. We bring these feelings and expectations to the performance as what Heller refers to as "body-memories". Because of the complexity of the visible and invisible sources expression, those memories intertwine with the city's motion as they arrive refracted through the bodies, volition, history and desires of the performers. Motion is not felt as anonymous or abstract: the bodies on stage are experienced as lined with the audience's body-memories with their own depth. What I experience is not a representation of a body-city relation indifferent to how I have struggled in the past to be continuous with the various cities I have moved in. I do not represent the city. Just as Merleau-Ponty's artist "lend[s] his body to the world," ([1961] 1993, 123), likewise Heller's performers lend their bodies to Istanbul, and in so doing afford the possibility of the audience finding a refraction of their own motor-perceptual history within the dancer's gestures, their movements and in their stillness.

Implicated in how the performer's gestures are seen are the audience's previous sorting motions, possibly those that have unpacked important objects carefully chosen to bring to a new city from a previous home. Perhaps there is an echo of the struggles felt in victories or failures to be harmonious with a new city. This explains part of why the performer's subtle gestures manifest more than they appear to give. The audience are all, however minimally, part of this movement since they are all in Istanbul at this time, and are all in this theatre, part of an event expressing itself through the co-mingling of our bodies with different desires, and capacities, some of which complement each other, some of which clash violently. Within the performer's small actions, or their immense exertions, there is a reverberation of a much larger power that we have all struggled with: this is an immeasurable and un-representable agency, which, as tourists or residents of Istanbul, we have witnessed carrying trains across the city's landscape, steel to the top of skyscrapers, populations across the Bosphorus, and protesters away from their park. Even if I do not consciously evoke any of these experiences, I perceive other's bodies as infused with the memory of the city's various motions, which reach into my flesh and find expression in my motion and stillness and my perception of other's motion and stillness. When I see Babikyan or Mıhladıız moving throughout the space, I do not simply receive a visual representation of their gestures, but add my own body's temporal depth to the perception.

Motor-Perceptual Faith

As *First Impressions* nears its end, some of the last moments evoke ideas Merleau-Ponty was working with in the final stages of his career. In his un-finished and ostensibly most important work, *The Visible and the Invisible* ([1964] 1968), he explores his concept of "perceptual faith". Because the body is ambiguously intertwined with the world, there is no clear demarcation between the two. As such, there is always a blind spot, a constitutive invisibility implicated within the visible. This is different from a blind spot that can be eliminated, such as the blind spot in a car. It is a constitutive blind spot that moves and eludes the body as one tries to see it. If we try to

represent this blind spot, it evades us and changes from invisible to visible. Appreciating this perceptual conundrum, Merleau-Ponty asks, “since the perceptual faith is a paradox, how could I remain with it?” We must think the pre-reflective, but as soon as we reflect upon it, that action “renders impossible that openness upon being which is the perceptual faith” ([1964] 1968, 88). One cannot eliminate the blind spot, yet neither should one disengage or ignore this aspect of the visible. The proper orientation towards the blind spot is to modify one’s reflection by acknowledging the necessity of perceptual faith, which remains because of the ambiguity of the visible and the invisible.

The blind spot Merleau-Ponty alludes to is more than a *perceptual* blind spot: there is likewise an aspect of our *motions* that is inaccessible to us. Since perception is always intertwined with motion, because perception is always motor-perception, perceptual faith must be a perceiving *and* a motor form of faith. A perceptual blind spot is already a blind spot of the moving body. A *motor*-perceptual blind-spot means we are never fully in control of our own moving bodies. Just as the visible is “lined” by the invisible, likewise our activity is lined by passivity. Because our bodies and their movements are an expression of the environment and the space they are immersed within, a facet of bodily movement is given to us by the world, which is how it expresses itself through our bodies. Just as we must have faith in the perceptual world as it is perceived at the intersection of visibility and invisibility, so too must we have faith in our motions because, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “my activity is equally passivity” ([1964] 1968, 139). Every motion exceeds the mover’s control, because every motion both impresses itself upon the motor-perceptual fabric while being impressed by it.

In the final moments of *First Impressions*, Esra Yurttut exhibits a bodily form of faith, which evokes Merleau-Ponty’s understanding. She makes precarious attempts to balance the competing forces of the space she struggles within. The soundtrack takes a pessimistic turn. Mıhladı convulses on the floor, showing how her body has taken a toll in its attempts to negotiate the city’s and her own desires. Yurttut mounts the back of her chair in a precarious orientation where it appears that the city’s gravity could assert itself against her. As opposed to the kind of balance Mıhladı experimented with, Yurttut’s motions are bolder, possibly foolishly challenging the potencies saturating the space. Previously, it felt as though the dancers were exploring this space but not necessarily risking anything. As Yurttut mounts the chair she appears unsure how her movements will turn out, and to the extent that she proceeds with those movements without knowing how they will result, she moves in tacit acceptance of a motor-invisibility that will only resolve itself after she has acted with a faith that accepts the risks she takes on.



Image by Can Eskinazi, Burak Cevik.

In having her performers assume these risks, Heller extends Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith by making the motor-aspect of faith discernible: a connection that remains implicit in his work. The chair Yurttut is perched upon suggests that a danger, possibly the danger on the streets of Istanbul, implicates itself as a need for faith in all aspects of life, even our private lives, our domestic and our work life. We have a pre-understanding of these struggles, not just because of being in Istanbul with the performers, but because we are also sitting in a seat, facing in the same direction Yurttut is facing, mirroring her situation and struggling with her. When she lifts herself up and balances on the top of the chair, the precariousness of her orientation is palpable. She is perched completely on the back of the chair, a micro-shift of her own weight away from collapse and possible disaster. Through my vision I feel for the tactility of the floor, hoping it will hold its grip on the chair's legs as she lifts clear off the seat and places all of her weight on its back. Instantly the chair tips, she falls forward but the legs hold, and she is let down gently on the other side. After a soft landing she returns to a graceful balance on the other side. She has pulled it off; she has redeemed our desire to take risks with our bodies and to push a city into new orientations; yet it still feels as though she has risked something, and despite her safe landing, the droning music indicates that nothing has been resolved. The need for faith has not been reduced. She has transgressed the city's own desires and has risked taking its forces out of balance, and although she has succeeded, it seems that she knows that it could have gone otherwise. She tentatively tests the new ground she is on, and sits on her newly oriented artifice waiting to see how her intervention will turn out. While Mihladız appears safe, the space feels as though it bears the weight of her risk, thus making visible the intimate connection between body and cityscape, and the faith demanded by the spaces our bodies move within.

Babikyan now returns to her original position after having walked freely among the other dancers. Mihladız is going through one more agonizing convulsion and collapses onto the stage floor completely defeated by the energies that tear at her from inside and outside. Yurttut appears to have perverted her space in her experiments with the chair and is caged under its legs and writhing violently. In one last desperate attempt, Mihladız lifts herself up to her feet again and tries to balance herself as she reaches out for something, which her desperate facial expressions suggest she needs badly. She steps forward slowly, and, as though she were walking on the thin edge of a fence, her tiny optimism appears naïve as it blends with the music's gloom. Mihladız further expresses the competition of the body and city's motor-perceptual forces as we wait to see how this tension will resolve itself. She falls to the ground once again, appearing initially defeated, yet her position on the ground appears to be one of strength. She spreads her body out on the floor, and her previously frail arms now grasp powerfully at the ground in front of her. In giving into the energies that run through the space and her body, she has taken on the lowest and most powerful position. The three dancers remain in these orientations and the lights dim. As the



Image by Murat Dürüm.

performance began with several minutes of stillness while the soundtrack established the context for motion, so it ends with the cycling and droning sounds as the bodies return to a new stillness. The three dancers have gone through their trajectories and are now exhausted, yet the continued drifting of the music suggests that the larger agent, the city of Istanbul, the ancient mover, then beset by conflict and violence, will continue well beyond its having animated these bodies on stage or those on the streets. Nothing is resolved, yet the city has expressed itself, and in tandem with Heller's choreography, it has heightened the ambiguities between motion and motionlessness in the performer's bodies, and through the bodies of the audience.

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Biography

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