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# *“Speaking Body”, Political Body: A Plunge into the Perceptible Weft of Reality*

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# "Speaking Body<sup>1</sup>", Political Body: A Plunge into the Perceptible Weft of Reality

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*Gestes en éclat : art, danse et performance*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2016, (Nouvelles scènes). Sous la dir. d'Aurore Després

Diana Taylor, *Performance*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2016

Janet Adler, *Vers un corps conscient : la discipline du mouvement authentique*, Brussels: Contredanse, 2016

Meredith Morse, *Soft Is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 2016

- 1 Like a store of meanings, the body is never simply what it is in its purely material nature. It is what it does, what it makes of itself, and also what it invites us to do and think. Four rich and stimulating works illustrate as much. The list includes the biography and work of a dancer, Simone Forti, the analysis of a somatic technique (conscious movement) by Janet Adler, and lastly the examination of artistic worlds which are as multi-faceted as they are plural, to wit: "performance" and "gesture." So there are different objects and areas of study, but the emphasis is on a shared quest: plunging into the perceptible weft of reality in order to assess how, in their own way, certain forms of self-involvement work on ways of perceiving and constructing the world by re-enacting or thwarting those involvements. This vigilance paid to sensations has antecedents. The history of bodies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has revealed how self-perceptions and perceptions of the world have gradually interfered at the heart of intimacy by turning what is perceptible into a way of being determinedly critical. Well removed from the ideal approaches to forms of

disembodied reason, the word is thus given to the "speaking body". A plural body that is part of imagination and reality, a body which, with its rich past, present and future, its hopes, its life history and the history of bodies, is constantly signifying something. In this world, bodily awareness thus becomes a place for perceiving the world, where sensations enable a nimble way of thinking to have a second wind. Highly sensitive and at the heart of sensibility, this physicality thus gives rise to novel ways of life and introduces unusual forms of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> This is what we must take a look at right now.

2 **A Politics of Friendship<sup>3</sup>**

3 The body remains protected from a whole host of words emerging from the sphere of sensations. In her approach to *conscious movement*, Janet Adler makes this the condition for an encounter between a "mover" and a witness. The dancing body, offered as something to be shared, becomes the "pretext" for a discursive and conscious appointment between two beings (and later on between an individual and a group), articulating a share of expression found in places other than already formed languages. Taken from the folds of the body, a living and singular word is thus invented at the heart of immanence. Coming into being from these many different sensations, each word tries to recount the bodily states of the moment. The body shifts from being spoken about to "speaking", because in this interplay of "you see me so that I may see myself" and "I watch you closely without judging you", witness and "mover", in their own ways, exhume the trappings of a sensory world. Every word stops the "mover" from merging with his sensations, his affects and his emotions. It is time to distance oneself from oneself by way of oneself. In reinstating experience through the filter of his memories and his feelings, the witness formulating "what has moved" in the other becomes aware, at the same time, of what has moved within himself. At the heart of the exchange, the intention of one informs the body of the other.

4 Drawing from the depths of experience and from the presence of the perceptible, extracting language from its instrumental status, and returning one's body made of flesh to words: in their own way, these approaches to movement re-visit the programme launched by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, promoting the introductory word at the expense of something already there, language-wise.<sup>4</sup> So in this interplay of "you see me so that I can see myself" and "I observe you closely without judging you", witness and "mover" advance, at the whim of words, into the world of the perceptible and the sensory, to facilitate the emergence of meaning. However, as a conveyor of singular and multiple life stories, by exchanging them everyone becomes aware of their relation to the self and the other, and of the gap which, implicit in the word, unites and divides them. Because the perceptible, which is actually elusive, is only ever offered in an allusive way. Far from being a flaw, this enables everyone to see themselves all over again, and invent themselves thanks to the other and based on the other; and in this relation of identity and difference, to perceive themselves in a state of perpetual development.

5 Feeling responsible for oneself and for someone else, while at the same time becoming aware of one's state of separation with the other, conditions the ethics of these special relations. It is time for a politics of friendship based on responsibility and mutual respect, because yielding in this way to the other's way of seeing things, while criss-crossing the lands of vulnerability and fragility,<sup>5</sup> is not always an easy thing to do. As an apology for the perceptible and for aesthetic community, "friendship" makes this possible. Treading in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant and Aristotle, Jacques Derrida showed, in his *Politics of Friendship*, how, in a democracy in the offing, the particularly political operation was

tantamount to creating as many friendships as possible. Friendships made of respect and attentiveness, an ability to listen and responsibility, friendships taking the other into account as Other, at once identical and different, friendships, last of all, granting no place for merging. This is what is proposed, modestly but adamantly, by the discipline of "authentic movement", that momentum towards the advent of a "conscious body".

6 **Creating awareness through the perceptible**

7 As they hold forth about the uses of performance, Aurore Després, Meredith Morse and Diana Taylor have respectively shown how, in performance circles, artists (but not only artists) transgress standards; how they thwart things that are obvious by upsetting the most immediate and ordinary perceptions and meanings. In these presentations of bodies, it is time for the de-framing, de-formation, de-construction and de-territorialization of knowledge and representations. The idea? To focus attention on an event by situating it outside its context, disturbing our way of looking at things and, in the end of the day, staging life styles which contest the initial partitions of the world. In removing bodily awareness from its traditional environments, performers deconstruct a "something already there" with regard to the body, usually imagined as inevitable. With the selfsame gesture, they introduce something reversible into uses and thinking. The hope implicitly surges forth of seeing unusual and special meanings emerge from the body. By giving pride of place to soma and re-injecting some intensity into the heart of nihilism, these presentations of the body have worked, and are still working, like a tremendous "store of meaning".<sup>6</sup> In subverting the most commonplace perceptions, they are inventing novel social and cultural forms. From now on, these bodies are creating yawning gaps in the world of meaning, and their reasons for being at the heart of these fissures. Because in performance, the body is not simply what it is; it sidesteps the primary interpretations which organize it and give it meaning. Thanks to the body, it presents other relations between things and thoughts by offering the eye different arrangements. On the programme: the denunciation of the effects of power, of the most abstruse forms of conformity, of poverty, homophobia and sexism in its various guises, of insidious kinds of domination, and of ordinary kinds of barbarity, etc. For both Diana Taylor and Aurore Després, these performative and iconoclastic attitudes sometimes spill beyond the narrow framework of art. We just have to think of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, those Argentinian mothers holding weekly gatherings, silently, but stubbornly, walking around a square in Buenos Aires, demanding that the military junta return their kidnapped, "disappeared" children. Their approach went all round the world! Whether arousing and taxing consciences, turning fragility into strength, making complaint a weapon,<sup>7</sup> criss-crossing territories of tears, laughter, and mockery, or working in the thick of things ephemeral and lasting, performance has no standards apart from those aimed at foiling invariably historically situated normative powers. Offsetting this, performances have a history.

8 In the 1960s, a decade marked by transcendental ideas nurturing the desire for a future that would be decidedly radiant and *unambiguous*, it was a time of utopias, rebellious attitudes, and a philosophy of saying "No": no to institutions, technology, hierarchy, the establishment, and so on. In the 1980s, just when representations of the future were gradually dwindling,<sup>8</sup> presentism was introduced, mixing customs and steering consciences. It was the moment of deconstruction, recycling and its challenges,<sup>9</sup> and questioning the validity of foundations. In expanding the present in order to slip snippets of hopes and futures into it, micro-utopias duly found their place, upstage centre. This is

a time for exchanging, for presenting a world where everything is invariably being informed by the multiple,<sup>10</sup> a world to be endlessly chosen and re-directed. Who is going to complain?

- 9 We have all understood what is afoot: deliberately disobedient fans of performance enjoy being engulfed by the practices of irreverence. As advocates of recognitions going against the grain, in the folds of the body they re-direct ways of being and ways of doing things. With the selfsame gesture, they hallow the advent of the immanent subject, that being made up of choices and freedoms assuming its own finiteness through the ceaseless surpassment of itself. In exploring the world of possibilities, imposing new representations, and drawing up novel images of the world and of ways of thinking, these "speaking bodies" thwart what readily pass as forms of obviousness that are as natural as they are everlasting. But without defining what should be, for all that, they are trying to re-define the relations between things and between people. It must be noted that in the mazes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world of the perceptible did gradually acquire dignity. Since Friedrich Nietzsche, and at least up until Gilles Deleuze, arguments and practices have adorned it with special virtues. The loss of belief in the allpowerfulness of reason and progress created a breach. In criticizing the *logos* and making the rationalism bequeathed by the Enlightenment a favoured target, various "deconstructions" have become engulfed therein with, implicitly, the hope of seeing the emergence of new meanings from which, thanks to the body, a new way of talking about things might be extracted.

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## NOTES

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