

Book Review: Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Kieft, E 2016, 'Book Review: Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation' *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, vol 8, no. 1, pp. 105-107

https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jdsp.8.1.105_5

DOI 10.1386/jdsp.8.1.105_5

ISSN 1757-1871

ESSN 1757-188X

Publisher: Intellect

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Book:

Full title: *Landscape of the Now. A Topography of Movement Improvisation*

Author: Kent de Spain

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Place of publication: Oxford and New York

Date of publication: 2014

ISBN: 978-0-19-998825-9 and 978-0-19-998826-6

Pages: 189

Paperback

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1152 words

Landscape of the Now explores how the complexities of improvised movement can be structured and negotiated. For this study, De Spain discusses a set of questions inspired by his own practice and experience with eight of the big names in the American, 'postmodern' improvisation landscape, each of whom developed and disseminated one or more distinct movement improvisation approaches: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, Ruth Zaporah, Barbara Dilley, Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Lisa Nelson and Nancy Stark Smith. The book is based on interviews with each of these practitioners. Rather than describing their improvisation approaches in detail, De Spain draws on the experience, insight and understanding of these practitioners to learn about the complex and ever changing nature of improvisation. He masterfully darts forth between the fathomless depths of improvisation on the one hand, and rigorous structure on the other, holding this tension lightly between his fingertips.

The book is structured around two concepts: 'issues', which are complex ideas and challenges that an improviser is likely to encounter, and 'resources' that focus on more or less tangible elements or impulses that may inspire improvisation. 'Issues' include topics such as underlying agendas or macro-level reasons for improvisation, tracking of movement choices, the lens of language and (non)verbal awareness, the exchange between audience and improviser, intentionality and what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' improvisation. They also address encounters with the transpersonal, which seem to come neither from inward nor outward attention, but rather from somewhere that 'is not recognizably from either of those worlds' (p. 81). The twelve 'resources' discussed in the book (body, movement, the senses, space, time, artistic form, images and the imagination, cognitive skills, emotion, memory, structures and attention) provide an interesting basic framework to which practitioners perhaps could add a few of their own. Context, for example, is addressed between the lines in chapters such as 'What is good?' and 'Space'. However, the different experiences brought about by dancing in a studio, urban or natural environment, or the differences of moving solo or in a group, could have received more attention. Other sections that could afford further elaboration are the resources of 'sounds' and moving with(in) parts of the natural world (included in respectively 'the senses' and 'images and the imagination'), and the discussion on the use of exploring strategies such as repetition, mirroring, moving with opposites or still shapes.

De Spain carefully addresses some of the limitations of his study, including the small number and choice of interviewees. As a qualitative researcher, I agree that aiming to grasp the almost limitless nature of improvisation as a phenomenon is better served by a rich, in-depth inquiry with a few highly experienced key informants, establishing an initial framework for understanding. This way, challenging threads can be intricately followed through the experiential core of a few people. That the group homogeneously reflects the postmodern white American 'face' of movement improvisation can similarly contribute to the solidity of that framework, although in this case I would stress this to be a starting point, and encourage further explorations to emerge from this framework in order to include insights from other improvisation communities. It would be an intriguing exercise to discuss 'issues' and 'resources' as they arise in other traditions. Investigating, for example, notions of dancing for and with the gods, other sensorial realities, possession trance, or relating to the spirit of a place would further deepen the understanding of (and, therefore, the possibilities of) improvisation.

One of the main things that stand out in this book is the difficulty of defining improvisation, and the disagreement, even among such a small yet elite group of practitioners, on whether or not their activity can be called improvisation. Although they seem to share an assumption that 'making something' – a score, choreography, or performance – is crucial for it to be improvisation, not all of them use this term for their work. When they are *not* improvising in that sense, they describe the activity in rather ambiguous and vague terms such as 'understanding' (Deborah Hay), 'explorations' (Anna Halprin), 'streaming' (Nancy Stark Smith), or even 'dancing' (Lisa Nelson). Here I have a confession to make: it is really these non-performative intentions that I am most interested in, even though it seems insinuated that these are merely considered as a fruitful starting point from which more substantial work is supposed to develop. Unfortunately, limiting improvisation to being an outcome-oriented process to inform or create a performance excludes both several other agendas as well as groups of people that may benefit from the practice.

As the book clearly underlines improvisation as a tool used by artists for 'creating something', it would be unfair to judge it by the absence of other agendas. However, I would advocate translating these artists' valuable insights to benefit people who have never danced before. To name a few, other agendas could include 'community building', 'healing', 'knowledge creation', 'life skills practice lab', 'empowered action', 'soulful presence' or 'spiritual practice'. Although some of these are hinted at, and some clearly figure in the bodies of work that these practitioners have developed, in this book they seem to be considered as more of a coincidental side effect rather than a deliberate or desired focus. This does not so much dilute the power of the practice, but equally does not justify its full potential and strengths. Most of the 'issues' and 'resources' would still be relevant to and deeply inform these additional agendas.

It would be interesting to address questions such as whether the effectiveness of improvisation for these alternative agendas and groups depends on a certain level of experience of the mover, or how well the resources are utilized. Although improvising as a skill is obviously valued in various settings, it is not something we are generally taught in ordinary school curriculums. Hence, many people seem to feel uncomfortable with the spaciousness and 'lack of direction' available through improvisation, perhaps not even recognising that a space to simply 'play' and 'explore' can be meaningful. A crucial starting point would be to create a sense of permission and encouragement in order to help people feel safe with(in) the not-knowing and be comfortable with improvising as a reliable and exciting vehicle for exploration and knowledge creation.

Nevertheless, this is a great book for anyone who is interested in a thorough and detailed 'thick description' of the nuts and bolts of movement improvisation, including students, performers and academics. It provides a delicious set of 'ingredients', tickles curiosity to learn more, and offers ongoing inspiration for any improvisational practice. Movement is tangible, both in the interview quotations as well as in the writing style and presentation. Words and sentences flow like a brook, sometimes turning back to its source, finding side rivulets, widening to a river, and never staying still. The joy of and almost reverence for the mystery of movement is tangible in and between the lines. De Spain succeeds in 'opening up' the variety, vastness and intangible-ness of improvisation as a practice, so that it expands rather than diminishes. That is no mean feat, especially considering the topic's complexity.