

Breathe through your vagina!—An attempt to catch ineffability

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Abstract

This article is an experimental journey witnessing one moment of my 20-minute performance, where I deconstructed pole dance with the symbol of a cross to analyse intricacies of the female body. I chose to explore one moment as it holds a range of indefinite interpretations. This one moment offers multiplicity, where I introduce my female body as speaking subject and parody the male gaze associated with pole dance. Further, I highlight the meanings I derive from the symbol of the cross and the crucifix coloured by my Catholic upbringing. Additionally, I share an exploration of a feminine imaginary and the fluidity of deconstruction. During my investigations, I question how undisciplining dance relates to my experiences. This writing implements artistic linguistic structures and word usage to sense destabilisation and unexpectedness.

Keywords

Performing female body; pole dance; the symbol of a cross and crucifixion; feminine feminine; deconstruction

Introduction

Breathing through your vagina is undisciplining dance. When I attended a pole dance class I tried to hang upside down elegantly by holding on to the tiny cylindrical surface of the pole with my hands, arms bent, buttocks high up in the air, legs split, feet pointed, and face red like an overripe tomato, then the instructor cheered, “Breathe through your vagina!” This moment struck me like lightening, I was electrified and confused by the thought and possibility of breathing through my vagina.

In this state of tangled amazement, I dreamed that French philosopher Hélène Cixous (2001) took me emphatically by her hand declaring that woman senses her body as a stranger due to phallogocentric and logocentric language. Cixous

continued that woman could rediscover her alienated body by communicating via body and called to “write yourself. Your body must be heard” (p. 630). Although this concept of *l’écriture féminine* (feminine writing), where the body is the source of inspiration and power, relates to linguistic features, I was eager to explore how this *writing yourself* could be expressed via movement.

Then, possibly, at first sight, seemingly disjointed, I was invited to a funeral, where somehow, most likely due to my personal beliefs, the symbol of a cross appeared in front of my eyes. This unusual experience kindled the thought that the symbol of a cross might be an ideal tool to deconstruct pole dance with.

Finally, my inquiry was born, where the engagement with pole dance as a recreational activity, Cixous’ appeal, and the unusual invitation to a funeral began my research. With a practice-based methodology, I critically analysed intricacies of the female body by deconstructing pole dance with the symbol of a cross. The outcome of my study was a 20-minute choreography, which I presented at the Undisciplining Dance Symposium in 2016 in Auckland, New Zealand. Upon reflection, I believe that I innately undisciplined dance with my study, where undisciplining dance is “allowing space to imagine different futures and ways of moving and creating” (Undisciplining Dance Symposium, 2016).

In this article, I examine *one moment* of my choreography, which provides space to share my experiences of the female body, pole dance, the symbol of the cross, the crucifix, a feminine imaginary and deconstruction. During my investigations, I question how undisciplining dance relates to my understandings. I analyse only one ephemeral moment as it holds multiple interpretations coloured by my subjectivity, socialisation and values. At times, I employ artistic language and script to mirror subversion and unexpectedness, which were characteristics of my performance. Supplementarily, I implement repetition and variation of words to emphasise aspects of my choreographic practice.



Figure 1: One Moment.

Figure 1 shows where I execute the pole dance trick *crucifix*, on my self-designed pole-cross construct at The Auckland Performing Arts Centre in Auckland, November 2015. I aimed to embody my inquiry of ‘how might deconstructing pole dance with the symbol of a cross reshape my body image?’ This single moment speaks of multiple interpretations, some of them I verbalise on the following pages. To start with, I explain how I gave my body a voice.

speaking subject (the female body)

The body,
and by extension
‘the female body’,
in postmodern dance is
unstable, fleeting,
flickering, transient—

a

subject
of
multiple representations.
(Dempster, 2010, p. 235)

Connotations of body, a “primary sociocultural body” (Grosz, 2001, p. 31) or a “dynamic conceptual blueprint” (Cahill, 2003, p. 255), naturally represent culturally specific visions. Therefore my presented female body, in this instance, barely dressed, in a black bra and hot pants, evokes and presents *some-thing*, which depends on one’s socialisation and the environment they live in. For instance, my female body might represent a critical tool to challenge preconceptions of gender and sexuality. More concretely, my female body can become a “speaking subject” (Carlson, 2004, p. 185), in this performing moment obtaining a voice of its own and subverting a dominant symbolic order allowing body to threaten a patriarchal culture.

I believe that my female body, an alienated scripted body, became an active subjective voice. Writing myself as my body must be heard, by visualising and subverting *sociocultural blueprints*. In the *one moment*, my body highlights gender performativity in relation to a Catholic iconography (see section *crucifixion*). At this stage, I wonder if a female subjective speaking body becomes undisciplining dance?

the male gaze & staging (pole dance)

The vertical dancer constantly shifts positions in her attempt to
inhabit a space of multiplicities
where her hyper-perceptive body might become
a locus of the understanding and conception
of intersecting knowledges.
(Lawrence, 2010, p. 50)

I connect the *one moment* to pole dance as I perform a slightly altered classical pole dance move, the crucifix (see section *crucifixion*). Further, I parody the male gaze, where women are sexually objectified (Mulvey, 1975), which can be considered a *side-effect* of pole dance (Attwood, 2009). The consciously chosen traditional audience setting aims to reflect dynamics of the male gaze, where I was, as the performer, on one side as an acting, moving, presenting, possibly

sexualised and objectified entity and the spectator, on the other side, seemingly subjectified, passive, maybe voyeurising, but definitely consuming.

With my curious stare, and by illumination of the audience at this moment, I intended to bring the observer, and their anonymity, out of the darkness and into a conspicuous mode of gazing. I attempted to defuse the male gaze by confusing the aspect of ‘who is watching whom’, by stating that “[t]he audience sees me seeing them seeing me” (Colin Poole cited in Edinborough, 2012, p. 264). In other words, I could say that the object becomes the subject and vice versa, where the role of opposites might be blurred or even declared as null and void, as we (performer and spectator) become at least both (see *feminine feminine*). On this note, I question how the setting of a live performance influences the spectator’s perceptions, as well as the performer’s. Can the staging of a performance undiscipline dance?

For the sake of completeness, I encourage you to engage with the following artists, who have also employed pole dance and a specific environment to destabilise traditions of this dance style. These artists and their work are Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, 2015, *P.O.L.E* (People, Objects, Language, Exchange); Brigit Binder and Jodra Planellas, 2007, *Varsity of Maneuvers: Street pole dancing*; Olivier Dubois, 2006, *Pour tout l’or du monde*; Eisa Jocson, 2013, *Death of the pole dancer*. However, none of these artists have related their analyses of pole dance to the symbol of a cross.

my socialisation (the symbol of a cross)

Some might be intrigued as to why I associated the symbol of a cross with the occasion when I was invited to a funeral and connected it to a deconstruction of pole dance. I believe this process happened partly due to my upbringing in a Catholic environment, where I was exposed to the symbol of the cross all the time; for example, by attending Mass every Sunday, bible studies, and receiving four of the seven holy sacraments. This religious socialisation has cultivated and permanently ingrained the significance and understanding of the symbol of the cross within *myself* aligned to Catholic standards. For example, the tattooed cross on my shoulder is a reminder to bear my cross, indicating any difficulties and suffering throughout my earthly life, with integrity, faith and hope awaiting redemption.

Evidently and unavoidably, my understandings of the symbol of the cross tinted my research, where the symbol of a cross-represented multiple traits, such as strength, authority, power, suffering, death, absolution and redemption. On

further investigation, I discovered other scholars who have acknowledged how religious experience might be influential in their academic work. Here, scholar Angela Coco (2013) investigated how meaning making has altered her participants' life due to their Catholic childhood and Luce Irigaray (2004) explored her spirituality by reflecting on her experiences in the Catholic Church. Now, I query how important one's religious socialisation is to create and observe undisciplining dance.

During my study, I was confronted as to where my solo performance would have the right to exist due to the implementation of the cross, where Professor of Pedagogy Svi Shapiro opined that my piece might be banned in some states in America. Next, I also felt resistance due to possible public moral objections and queries raised around my safety to perform my piece in a site-specific setting. Then, shortly after I had finished my study, Madonna toured in New Zealand, where pole dancers performed on a pole-cross, which evoked responses of offense (Tan, 2016). This leads me to believe that "art that hits a nerve and confronts inequity is the art that sincerely contributes to change, and censorship cannot hold it back" (Janet McKenzie cited in Cherry, 2007, p. 63). Where has undisciplined dance the right to be performed? Who dictates its presence?

The British dance company DV8 also intrigued and inspired my implementation of the symbol of a cross in combination with a female body, where, in their piece *Strange Fish* (1992), a sequence presents a topless female Christ on, around, and with a cross. Similarly, to my work, the symbol of a cross is essential and in the *one moment*, the readings of the crucifixion become more obvious.

death of associations (crucifixion)

a form of capital punishment
used by various ancient peoples including
the Persians, Carthaginians, and Romans
for criminals,
usually applicable only to slaves and other persons with no civil rights.
The victim, nailed or roped to a crossbar.
(Wright, 2006)

As mentioned earlier, in pole dance there exists a pose called 'crucifix', where the body is aligned with the pole, holding on with one's legs by squeezing

them together with arms extended to each side. It is notable that I am behind the pole at the presented moment. There has been controversy with other conventional illustrations of crucifixions, where the person is in front of the cross. Regardless, this little difference in positioning of this pose on my pole-cross construct reminded me of being crucified. The execution of Christ by crucifixion within the Catholic Church is a significant aspect of its belief system, which, due to my discussed upbringing, coloured my research interpretations. What might this image—a female representation of the male crucified Jesus—provoke?

Art historian Kittredge Cherry (2007) explains that a woman as Christ breaks “historical facts in order to express a deeper truth” (p. 13). I intended to disrupt gender performativity, where gender manifests through repetitive performativity (Butler, 2006). Scholar Karen Trimble Alliaum (2006) explains in more detail that the body of Jesus and women are mutually constructed and influenced by Catholic values due to conventions of culture and society. She continues to say that Jesus is often cited by a male figure, possibly implying that males are strong and redeem humanity, and that women as the mother, virgin or prostitute, embodied in Mary and Mary Magdalene, infer that women are caring, innocent and available. These gender specific traits might be still fostered by current society, as Alliaume believes that these citations are not a simple duplication of the past or conventions but are an actual process through which reality materialises, where gender is performed. On that note, I query, does dance follow a similar process as gender performativity, where repetitive performativity creates a particular, maybe disciplined, dance style? Can undisciplining dance destabilise a *dance performativity*?

Besides challenging gender performativity, I also expected to crucify associations of pole dance. Here I experienced that this dance style would predominantly be for women and it would seek to construct a sexualised, gendered body (Attwood, 2009; Holland, 2010). As crucifixion signalled aspects of death and transformation, I wondered if the embodied playful death might have contributed to end prejudgments and generalisation of women in relation to pole dance.

Revisiting the thought of gender performativity, dance analyst Janet Adshead-Lansdale (2007) thinks that a representation of a female mimicking the male Jesus on the cross simply represents a male’s world with its one-dimensionality and power, and only aims to equalise woman with man. Philosopher Luce Irigaray, however, declares that the mimicking of stereotypical signs and

symbols is a process to create multiplicity in the shape of a *feminine imaginary*, also referred to as *feminine feminine* (Irigaray, 1985).

slippery like a wet fish & visible like a footprint (feminine feminine)

The following undisciplined writing aims to verbalise the ineffable feminine feminine:

point point point these toes of yours
 push push push your right shin
 squeeze squeeze squeeze your left calf
 and both of your thighs tight
 tense tense tense your buttocks
 suck suck suck your belly in
 smile smile smile with all your lips
 I am becoming my body
 painfully heroically instinctively
 hanging speaking shouting wordlessly
 on the pole-cross construct
 to breathe difference.

That is me hanging on the pole-cross creating an undefinable feminine feminine. She is active, subjective and multiple. She is woman as woman sees her. She can be awakened through a vigorous individual language, a feminine multiple sexuality, and mimesis of the men's images of women (Irigaray, 1985). She is often not described as what she really is, but more likely what she is not. There is the need of humans to define and categorise their environment and themselves to identify and orient themselves in this world and sense notions of belonging, structure and meaning. She is not from a patriarchal world, where the art of meaning making is characterised by signs, definitions, binaries, logic and one-dimensionality, where I was raised and currently live in, by the way—you too! She is not the inverted penis, where “the womb and vagina were the penis and scrotum turned inside out” (Lorber, 2010, p. 14). She is not *the other* (of what anyway?). She is not the shadow of the superior male. She is not “the second sex” (de Beauvoir, 2009). She is contradictory but only in a situation of comparison. In the moment, she is multiple, universal and true. She is a speaking subject. She is slippery like a wet fish and visible like a footprint in the sand. She is ineffable. She

is connected. She is united. She is provocative. She is unpredictable. She is messing with your head. She is self. She is breathing through her vagina. ‘Breathing through your vagina’ is undisciplining dance, as she is, as Irigaray (2000) would say, “at least two, man and woman, a two in relation that is not biunivocal” (p. 6). Becoming at least two: transient, subjective, reflective, conceptual, contextual, unpredictable, I would say. Might undisciplining dance be similar to a feminine feminine?

multiple representation (de-construction)

Initially I started this paragraph off by trying to explain what deconstruction is, what and how I deconstructed with, in and within my work: ‘With my performance, I deconstructed constructs of the female body, pole dance, and the symbol of a cross. This original collaboration of the female body, pole dance and the symbol of a cross enabled me to analyse, reduce, and defer ...’ During my practice, I reflected on my meaning of deconstruction and translated the German term (German is my mother tongue) *auseinandernehmen*, which literally means to dismantle. Therefore I thought: ‘the only moment of deconstruction in my piece is the disassembly of my pole cross in my performance’, but did not deconstruction happen within my whole piece, in every moment and *the one moment*? Here, I have to stop to define and understand, as I realise that deconstruction is a similar process as feminine feminine, which is a practice that cannot and should not be captured in explanations or descriptions, as this would make the essence of deconstruction (according to Jacques Derrida, 1978) meaningless or non-existing, where deconstruction questions language and meaning. Hence, I chose to reflect on the aspect of deconstruction in an artistic format and using another female speaking subject to approximate deconstruction.

Deconstruction is fluid, playful and complex (sometimes also painful):

| | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| dig | chain of signifier |
| deeper | différance |
| layer by layer | write yourself |
| pull apart | laugh with all your lips |
| aus-ein-ander-nehmen | democracy |
| trapped | multiplicity |
| in the habit of | unpredictable |
| defining | constant |
| to make meaning | movement |

derrida
cixous
irigaray

vergaenglich
volatile
infinite

the journey is the reward
context and contrast.

The explicit body deconstructs by:

“pulling back velvet curtains
to expose a stage,...
peeling at signification,
bringing ghosts to visibility,...
interested to expose
not an ordinary,
true,
or
redemptive
body,
but the
sedimented layers of
signification.”

(Schneider, 1997, p. 2)

The tool of deconstruction might raise consciousness about sociocultural traditions and their implications on our lives, to subvert and affirm them, and more importantly to bravely bear the space of more questions than answers. What did I deconstruct in the presented moment? What would you deconstruct looking at the presented moment? What ghosts have I disturbed? Does deconstruction always play a role in undisciplining dance?

The end

Breathing through your vagina might be a way of undisciplining dance. Breathing through your vagina becomes undisciplining dance. Breathing through your vagina is undisciplining dance, an approach to make meaningful, provocative, inspiring art. It cannot be defined nor described. It can only be lived. You become it as you breathe the present moment. It is unpronounceable, creative, subjective, fleeting. It is an experimental journey delving into one moment to discover multiplicity,

represented by a performing female body, pole dance, the symbol of a cross, a crucifixion, my feminine feminine, and deconstruction. At the beginning and the end it says, “breathe through your vagina—an attempt to catch ineffability”, where it leaves you with confusion and confidence. Breathing through your vagina might be a way of undisciplining dance. Breathing through your vagina becomes undisciplining dance. Breathing through your vagina is undisciplining dance. Breathe through your vagina—an attempt to catch ineffability.

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