

# Unlearning to Draw Through Performance; A Willed Nakedness, and Henceforth, the Unknown...

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## Abstract

*The following writing intends to reflect the approach of Drawing to Performance, in order to rescue, from its contingencies, some form of freedom. This possibility is analysed here, both for artistic practice, and within the sphere of artistic education. The study does not aim to find didactics, methodologies, or solutions, but rather to decode the possibility of finding spaces to unlearn, or to voluntarily undress ourselves from the experience of our knowledge, where we take nothing for granted. With a look at different technologies, and different ways of connecting to the performance floor, the investigation proposes, as a starting point, some performances and installations made by several artists in the recent past, where the body was protagonist or agent of movement, and where drawing is inscribed as a graphical possibility.*

*Considering that the Drawing contains within itself a gesture or gestures and that can establish a form of potency, often evasive, it's in my interest to clarify this potency, inside and outside the limits that constrain it. The following study leaves open the possibilities of drawing in a performance environment, in a device made for movement mapping, to which I am intimate, starting from the reading of its technical possibilities.*

**Keywords:** Drawing, Creativity, Aesthetics, Performance, Experience, Movement, Unlearning.

“...he has unlearned to walk and speak, and is on his way to fly up into the air dancing.” (Nietzsche 1872, 5)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This approach to the subjects of Drawing and Performance goes back to my previous research, carried out in Portuguese secondary and higher education as a Drawing teacher. In this investigation I have tried to subtract the sheet of paper, of adequate dimensions, to the routine of the one who, only sees himself as a student “to the waist up” (Gomes, 2012, 43), and provide the opening of the Drawing to a physical territory of human scale in its entirety (Figure 1), in this way being able to revisit the haptic sensation of performances designed by Dennis Oppenheim, to the gastropod and anthropomorphic performances of Tony Orrico (Figure 2) (Gomes, 2012). The study led me here, to the feeling of nakedness that comes as we dismount from the instituted chair and table,

and strip ourselves into the empty space of a giant paper, or a stage, or any place that is not ours, where our academic clothes are not a wreath for us any more. From this experience we unlearn the logic of learning that allowed us to caution our experiences of discovering the unknown. One possibility for this space may be performance.



**Figure 1** - Students drawing with the body on a large scale, using their anthropomorphic metrics, Colégio Novo da Maia, 2014, Ricardo Gomes

<sup>1</sup> On the original quote, Nietzsche wrote *verlent*, which translates directly to *unlearn*: “...er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt und ist auf dem Wege, tanzend in die Lüfte emporzufliiegen.” (Nietzsche, 1872, p. 5, translated by the author of this paper)



**Figure 2** - Tony Orrico, *Penwald: 7: 4 3/4 turns left* | 2011  
Performance, graphite on paper 4 3/4 turns 120 x 120 inches

Some ideas that still flank the teaching of the Drawing in its different levels, seem to me a target of identification, in order to make possible an emancipation of Drawing as an area of knowledge, both for the student and for the practitioner. They are: their propaedeutic, their aesthetic burden and their creativity. Therefore, my interest in disassembling from the classroom chair is precisely to dismantle the drawing practice of the same chairs where our past echoes are heard. From the same chairs where Drawing assumed its propaedeutic function, from its teaching in the nineteenth century, resulting from the effects of the industrial revolution (Cabau, 2012, 74, 90). This way of drawing of the nineteenth century discouraged, subjugated to the instruction for a narrow training, for the acquisition of skills and competences of the professions to which it was destined, gave rise to a new branch of the Drawing directed to the academy of the Fine Arts, in the beginning of the Modernism, with different forms, for other purposes, like its use in Painting. The Teaching of Drawing, which from the sixteenth century was therefore destined for its artistic purpose, had undergone adaptations to the industrial revolution, which would separate the different ways of seeing it, in a cleavage that divided it between the serial drawing of artefacts, and the academic drawing (Cabau, 2012, 73, 74). However, even today, the training effects of the industrialization era, the teaching of drawing and the way in which it is used to calculate the students' proficiency might be visible. They might be seen in general, in the way education is shaped by policies based on measurement systems and evidence presentation, which brings education and social engineering closer together. (Baldacchino 2019, 11).

Speaking of art in general, through education, it is domesticated in order to be useful and benign, so one expects results by its creativity, by the solutions it provides, by its capacity to be great, but these results are only for the great and powerful. When they don't fulfil these clauses as indicated, the artists are marginalized and declared mad. The domesticated ones are considered geniuses (Baldacchino 2019, 11).

Creativity, on the other hand, is seen today as the new vital force of the modern economy. Contemporary capitalism has appropriated creativity to secure its own progress. Capitalism turns its enemies into its promoters. Intrusive through advertising and technological industry, it is continuously searching into society for images, movements and experiences still to be commercialized. The "creativity" of capitalism empowers itself and feeds on any countercultural movement, activist protest, which threatens to destabilize it, and pacifies it into a potential movement to be exploited. Creativity is really preserved by market logic and competition (Mould 2018).

In this very chair where we learn to draw, we also feel the burden of the aesthetic heritage, of industrial training, and here to illustrate this idea as an example, I recall a particular work by William Anastasi: the "*subway drawings*" (Figure 3). The artist, a kind of human seismographer, is a man confined to his bench, who despite the limits of the scope of his gesture produces a record inside the space he has left, to randomly translate the disturbance of the environment moved by the metro carriage. His work has a value to the Drawing, which will partly stem from the absence of aesthetic preoccupation, that burden which aesthetic theory still weighs on the anxieties of the student of the twenty-first century, as far as the utilitarian efficiency of drawing skills is concerned.



**Figure 3** – frames from the video: William Anastasi *Subway Drawings*, Copenhagen -Holte 1999, Short Version Produced by Sam Jedig/Stalke Out Of Space 2009.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2FX3C7f6eI>

Anastasi is also the heir to the aesthetic conjecture of the eighteenth century, based on the Greek philosophy that human condition can be investigated from the perspectives of three domains: aesthetics, gnoseology and ethics. For Kant the artistic experience is a purely aesthetic experience, excluding the involvement of the cognitive faculty but implying the relevance of the ethical position. In postmodernism we saw the rebirth of the three faculties, and the result was the emergence of two new genres that in the 1960s and 1970s were somewhat unsightly in an attempt to promote previously neglected faculties. These new genres were conceptual art and performance art. Conceptual art relied on cognitive faculty and the performance art on ethics, and the importance of aesthetics dissipated (Levy, Rabaté and Anastasi 2005, 5). These aesthetic heritages, however, are still assumptions in the territory of the arts and artistic education, assumptions that art must be good, true, and beautiful (Baldacchino 2019, 6, 143, 154) and the fact that they survive as a burden in the learning of drawing today is one of the reasons that fuel my interest in the transplantation of Drawing into the territory of performance and body, where it seems possible and still feasible to focus on a manifestation of a sort of nakedness.

From my point of view, approaching the Drawing through artistic and teaching practices, seems to be a possibility of investigation when in a "graphic appearance", but not "necessarily graphic", transposed or adulterated into a "transdiscipline" that could begin in the watercolours of Rodin and pour into Cunningham's choreographies. I see Drawing as an essay on *mimesis* before it becomes mimetic; as a zone of error; a space of materialization of weakness and uncertainty; an endless, non-teleological medium; a form of research, and therefore a form of thought emancipated from the verbal, and thus freed from the commitment to communicate; an act without place in the assertive, and therefore a non-apophantic act, a state of eminence, and even an act of potency. By defiling through the traditional territory of the Drawing, an action takes place, that puts us in an uncomfortable place, that is before a commitment; where we suddenly assume the possibility of a representation, of a potency to do and know-how. This potency to do is indeed a matter of power, what Agamben interprets from the writings of Aristotle as a faculty, which arises

almost irremediably when we stand before the experience of doing something (Agamben 2005). This faculty, by placing ourselves before this action, gives us the possibility of doing or not, and the deprivation of this action, this non-doing, is itself a possibility, and therefore a form of potency. Thus, to possess the faculty of Drawing, or to know how to draw, also means to have a form of deprivation, to deprive ourselves of doing, even if we can do so (Agamben 2005). What is at stake here is the nature of the potency of the Drawing; which exists in the prevalence of this deprivation, the presence of this deprivation is the power of the Drawing. In the same way that darkness is the colour of potency, for without its deprivation there would be no light, for the darkness makes such privation available, it even makes available the possibility, the power, the faculty, of not seeing. However, according to the author, the passage to the act in itself, does not eliminate the potency, because it is conserved in that act, changing only its imminence (Agamben 2005).

Understanding this notion of potency is what interests me, particularly in the development of a subject, in a learning process that may be fragile, such as the one used in designing in a performance environment, where, if unknown, its territory will also be unknown areas of fragility and power. I am interested in perceiving the potency of Drawing, in this nakedness, or in other words, in this fragility. I do not mean that Drawing must necessarily strip away any aesthetic, propaedeutic, or creative values, I consider only that if Drawing becomes too dependent on these three, it runs the risk of being sad and boring, where it cannot be more than the evidence of the expectations in pleasing their subjects and / or spectators.

### High-tech based possibilities for drawing

When trying to understand the presence of Drawing in Performance, there are some well-known and relevant possibilities of performance that are already experienced, in which the Drawing occupies a space, quite clear, either in its scenic structure, its aesthetic quality, or its visual language inherent to the movement gestures. Some very relevant cases of this approaches are those of *Ghostcatching*, by Bill T. Jones, Adrien M / Claire B's *Pixel* performances, and Carlos Guedes's *WILL.0.w1sp* installation.

*Ghostcatching* was a digital art installation in 1999, which merged music and computerized

composition, by Paul Keiser and Shelley Eshkar, with performance dance designed by Bill T. Jones. The movements of Bill T. Jones that originated the drawings were initially choreographed, captured by optical motion capture devices, and then edited, recoded, and reenacted in the reenactment itself, or, reenacted until they meet the desired composition, for the final installation where Bill T. Jones is remapped by the computer in a similar way to the matrix composition (rehearsed by a script). The performance (Figure 4) takes place live, metaphorical and suggestive of immateriality, over 7 minutes, reminiscent of a human landing on a multidimensional planet (Brody 2008, 133). The movements are therefore objectified by a choreographic story, which repeats in the same way, as expected for the performer (and for those who saw the installation a second or third time...).



**Figure 4** – *Ghostcatching* digital art installation, 1999  
Paul Keiser, Shelley Eshkar, Bill T. Jones

Adrien M / Claire B, are a performative dance company, in which they developed the famous performances Pixel<sup>2</sup>. Created in 2004 by Claire Bardainne and Adrien Mondot (the latter known before as a computer scientist at the Grenoble Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et Automatique, where he developed graphic design tools, to investigate possible relationships between technology, sound, digital art and human movement). The dance company gained notoriety for the presentation of digital art shows, choreographed and then executed in symbiosis with projections and dancers, in spectacles of visual amusement, made for the general public. The graphic language is analogous to drawing in a

spectacularization of technology, and in the service of entertainment. The duo seeks in minimalist compositions to mix successively the real with the virtual, in scenarios that privilege human language and metrics in a context of contemporary signs that fit the contemporary culture of street art and nocturnal shows (Emmer 2013, 182, 183). The entertainment level and involvement with the public places took the duo at a point of intersection between art and circus, where stardom does not dazzle them yet, in the humility of wanting to share with the public their scientific discoveries in motion-design, through the creation of workshops available on show days (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** - PIXEL - By Kâfig, France: *Dance, HipHop, Circus with 3D video technology*, in Herzliya June 2016.  
Adrien M / Claire B, Choreographer: Mourad Merzouki

In this panorama, the interactive installation with the design of Carlos Guedes in 2005, conceived by Kirk Woolford, entitled WILL.O.w1sp where the attempt to reproduce the figure of a fatuus fire (lat. ignis fatuus, natural phenomenon of spontaneous ignition) that wanders dancing near people, but then vanishes in the dark when they approach the scene. WILL.O.w1sp reproduces through light movements in the dark, the gestures of a dancer (visibly human but diluted in a trace), whose body is detectable by computer and recoded in luminous spectra. This spectrum is previously recorded in segments of samples, that interact with the public, by fleeing from the people. If people are willing to stay some quiet time, the spectrum then approaches and interacts with them (Guedes, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuAZDCEWEpk>



**Figure 6** - Interactive installation conceived by Kirk Woolford with music and sound design by Carlos Guedes. Premiere: March 16, 2005. De Waag, Amsterdam

In the cases presented above, an attempt is made to capture something spiritual from the body, something phantasmagorical, gestural, that becomes uncountable through technology ... However, these projects seem trapped in a logic of construction, that for the Drawing in particular, seems useless, and serve only the cheer, still caused by the old technology that illuminates us from out of the medieval darkness, whose odour still emanates from the uncertainties of our ignorance before its brightness. Little can be learned from *Ghostcatching*, in our interest, but an alternative reading of human movements in contemporary dance mode, compulsively manipulated until they achieve the desired or pleasant effect. Equally anchored to a sense of aesthetic duty are *Pixel's* digital performances, which by serving the large audience whose destination was a night out, will not be able to reach in the territory of the Drawing, never less than the expectation launched by their television advertisements, which precede the great night of fun. The latter performance project includes a possibility of what seems to be understood as, sharing knowledge in a workshop, not from a “do-it-yourself”, but perhaps from a “do-it-like-myself”...?

Although impregnated with aesthetic sense and having a visible structure evocative of the Drawing, which is propaedeutic to the materialization of its technological ostentation, these previously detailed projects are not, therefore, the places in the performance where it will be possible to discover the unknown. As we will motivate in the next chapter, our goal could be reached, either by the unlearning of the body in drawing, or by the willingness to experience a subject's nakedness in learning.

## Unlearning in performance environment

### The *Sonorium* example

So why is it important to unlearn the drawing? Will it really be compulsory? I believe that it won't be, but I also believe that by practicing unlearning as an exercise, be it in drawing or any other artistic and research practice, we can reach other destinations that we were not predestined to perceive in performance, like Drawing as a form of freedom.

“It's an *educational* prerogative for art to teach us nothing, and for us to *unlearn* everything” (Baldacchino 2019, 1)

Baldacchino points out that we constantly prevent ourselves from unlearning, and that it is better to unlearn what we have been taught, in order to understand the only thing we can account for in this world, when we are disposed to displace ourselves: our nakedness, or in other words, our fragility (Baldacchino 2019).

We can only perceive our nakedness, if we are willing to experience this displacement, it seems to me that it would be this disposition that Dewey spoke about, to say that experience is not only received, that we are also part of it, we also do it in a certain way because we foresee it. (Baldacchino 2019, 92)

“...any person who is open minded and sensitive to new perceptions, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them, has, in so far, a philosophic disposition.” (Dewey 1966, 325 apud Baldacchino 2019)

Trying to draw as a form of performance is actually an act of transference, transmitting our knowledge, our memory, (our “clothing”), and a form of identity through gestures (Almeida 2012).

There is a possibility to draw in a performance environment, where we may not feel as close to the aesthetic duty, nor to the designed function of the Drawing, nor to the obligation to be creative, it is a place created to submerge in a universe of sounds that respond to our less movement, without us knowing its previous result, without foreseeing an end.

This possible environment is called *Sonorium* (Ângelo, Rodrigues and Gomes 2016), its a technology applied to a public space of performance, created by Digitópia (of the Educational Service of Casa da Música) with which I am familiar to, since several years, being

one of the areas of my work place. Digitópia is a digital music platform, based on the Casa da Música Foundation in Porto, which encourages listening, performance and musical creation. Based on digital tools, though not exclusively, Digitópia emphasizes collaborative music creation, software design, music education, social inclusion, with the goal of emerging multicultural communities of artists, composers, curious people and music lovers. Digitópia as a team, is called Digitópia Collective, which consists of artists with strong ties to new technologies. In their work, the collective expands processes and models as diverse as designing digital instruments, and other musical hardware, multiplying circuits, exploring the relationship between image and sound, practicing VJs and DJs, the digital medium, or interactive digital systems. Digitópia intends to be an open and communal "space" to share information, ideas and contents. As such, all work is strongly contextualized in an open source perspective (Ângelo, Rodrigues and Gomes 2016).

The *Sonorium* allows the experimentation of a deictic gesture, a movement whose purpose is to signal and point objects and scenes, not with the gratification of a sound sample, but with the response of the same movement, in unforeseen and sometimes imposed sounds. Unlike imagery, deictics are not based on images, although they are often committed to the place occupied by an image (Almeida, 2012). This device seems to put its subject into a state of exit, out of itself, in gestures of exit from that to an area of freedom, outside of what everyday seems to imprison us, and, in a certain way, to submit to this experience is a form of unlearning. The device was created a decade ago by the Japanese video game company Xbox, which improved an already existing technology in the market, for mapping and body detection, infrared cameras; and created a camera for capturing and modelling three-dimensional moving objects to serve the gaming market.

### **Sonorium architecture and tools**

*Sonorium* was entirely developed using MaxMSP/Jitter version 6 (Max), using only one external object – *jit.openni* – which is not part of the standard Max library. This external object was developed by Dale Phurrough and is an open-source project based on OpenNI (Open

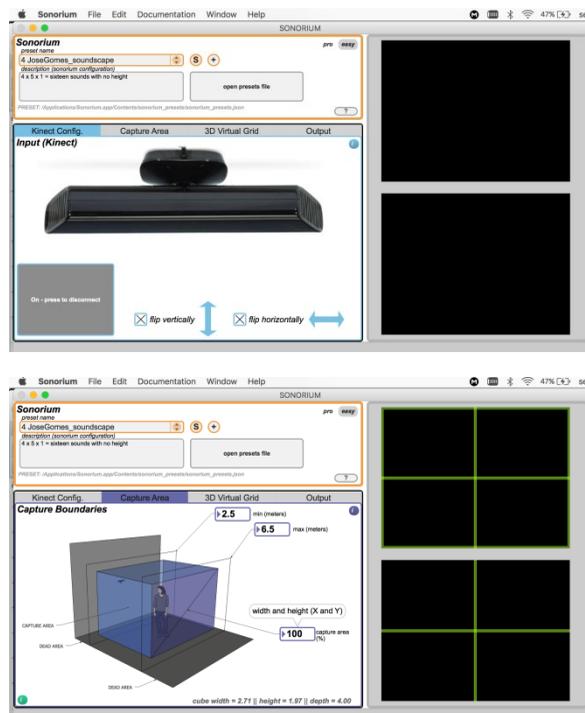
Natural Interaction), which allows us to access data from the Microsoft Kinect device in Max.

Max was the choice for the programming language by providing accessible ways to work with audio, MIDI and a Kinect camera, while being able to develop a working application in a short period of time. (Ângelo, Rodrigues and Gomes 2016)

The *Sonorium* is a virtual musical instrument that interprets the drawing of participants in a physical space, as big as a stage, inviting the free expression of the body and creation of spontaneous choreographies that result in musical compositions.

The software makes use of a Kinect camera to map a three-dimensional space in allowing users to interact and compose musically, individually or groups, using the space and movement of their bodies as a medium (Ângelo, Rodrigues and Gomes 2016).

The possibilities of this apparatus are uncountable, and the potential of the machine is huge, insofar as the software before translating movement into sounds, makes a translation of light into binary code, which materializes in a spectrum image, further translated into sounds, coming from a sound bank chosen by the user (Digitópia 2015) (Ângelo, Rodrigues and Gomes 2016).



**Figure 7** - Printscreens of *Sonorium* programmable software and its sound adjustment zones.



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## Biographical note

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