Alva Noë

Tuning the body

What do we see when we're looking at dance? What can art teach us about the mind? If art can help us understand the nature of the mind, then what does that fact tell us about art, or about some art? And what does it tell us about the mind?

You may know that in the last few years there has been an explosion of interest in the study of mind. In particular, there has been a blossoming of studies of consciousness, of the subjective aspects of our mental lives, of experience. Much of this work has been interdisciplinary. How could it not be? Philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, not to mention linguists, mathematicians, roboticists – and yes, artists have been getting in to the act. What is striking is that whereas for years consciousness lacked respectability as a topic – this was the influence of behaviorism and linguistic analysis – consciousness has now become respectable again. Some of the enthusiasm for consciousness studies is driven by philosophy, by new philosophical approaches. And some of it is driven by technology. In the last decades new imaging technologies have emerged that make it possible to begin to theorize about the neural basis of experience in the brain. Before the emergence of these technologies – CAT, PET, MRI – autopsy was basically the only way to bring the brain into view.
The imaging studies raise their own problems though. Just what do these computer generated pictures tell us about the brain and its processes? That's an important topic but one I won't discuss here. What I would like to mention is that in all the excitement about consciousness studies there has been relatively little attention to phenomenology – to the careful description of the phenomena of consciousness themselves, to the phenomena we want to explain. And sometimes at great cost. How can you study vision – what we see? – if we don't spell out, at least as best we can, what seeing is, what seeing is like?
Can art contribute to science?

I think this may be the place where art comes in. So often scientists or philosophers interested in art are really interested in using science to explain art, at least as far as they grasp the art itself. For example, perceptual psychologists like to try to explain why pictures can represent three-dimensional scenes. Some of this work may be worthwhile. It doesn't interest me though. I'm interested in whether art can contribute to science, whether art can make a contribution to the understanding of phenomenology. And so with whether it can contribute to the theoretical study of consciousness. In particular, whether it can contribute to the understanding of perceptual consciousness. I inherit this question from Lisa Nelson. Back in the early 1970s, together with Steve Paxton and others, Nelson helped originate the sort of interactive movement/performance activities that are sometimes referred to, a bit indiscriminately, as contact improvisation. Nelson devised what she describes as "an approach to spontaneous ensemble composition;" she refers this approach as Tuning Scores.

The tuning score

A tuning score is a simplified dance situation. It is a structure, or rubric, within which dancers are free to compose (to compose themselves). A tuning score has several elements: the dancers or players, the stage or, as Nelson calls it, the "image space," and rules that organize and constrain the play. As Jeroen Peters, a Belgian critic, writes, characterizing Nelson's project: "You enter the space with the eyes closed to take up a position in which you imagined yourself before entering. Once in the space, you listen for the time to begin an action simultaneously with the other performers." The players use calls such as "repeat," "undo," "enhance," and "end;" in this way, the image develops.
I have said that a tuning score is a simplified dance situation. No tuning score is so simple, however, that it is anything less than a complete dance situation. A score requires an image space, more than one person, and at least one call (e. g. "end") to govern communication among the different players. To be in the score you must be a dancer, and an observer of dancers. You must be performer and audience member. You must play, and watch. And you must understand. In this way, the tuning score mo-dels life.
Primitive games

Philosophers can usefully compare Nelson's Tuning Scores to Wittgenstein's Language Games. Wittgenstein believed that language is a medium for thought; that getting clear about the structure of language can be a way of getting clear about our concepts and intellectual values and commitments. He introduced the idea of language games in order to elucidate the nature of language. To appreciate what he had in mind, consider an important example from the "Philosophical Investigations." Close to the beginning of this book Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a language "meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block,' 'pillar,' 'slab,' 'beam.' A calls them out; – B brings the stone he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language."
Wittgenstein tells us to think of the language game of the builders as a complete, primitive language. What he seems to have had in mind is the thought that although language games – which he might have called job games or society games – are simplified, they nevertheless exhibit the elements essential to more complicated forms of linguistic exchange. Importantly, language games have a point, a purpose (in Wittgenstein's example, to facilitate building), they have players (the builders), they take place in a context (the building context, the aims and interests of the players, etc). They are linguistic in that they involve words.

But the words are displayed as tools or instruments of the whole practice of the game. (The words play a role in the game like the slabs, blocks, pillars, themselves.) It is in this setting that Wittgenstein could argue, famously, that the meaning of words in a language is just they way they are used in the game. And of course their use depends on the larger context of the players and the game. To specify a language game you need to describe all this – context, point, players, activity. You have to describe a way of living – what Wittgenstein sometimes called a form of life (Lebensform).

Now, Wittgenstein thought that looking at language games can help us understand language, that is to say, it can help us understand what is in effect the medium of our thinking and the source, sometimes, of our intellectual puzzlement. And it isn‘t hard to understand why language games can help us in this way. Language games exhibit in the small the basic features of language in the large. For example, one thing that reflection on language by way of language games can teach us is that the meaning of words can not be thought of apart from the contexts, needs, goals and problems facing people.
Why do we need language games to get at the basic features of language as a whole? The problem with language is that it is complicated. Wittgenstein sometimes said that language is like a city. “ Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.” – Crucially, to be a competent speaker, or thinker, or resident, you need to know your way around. Wittgenstein recommended that language games can help us to find our way around in language itself.
Language games

I think it is helpful to compare Nelson‘s tuning score method, to Wittgenstein language games method. And when we do so, we can begin to appreciate how Nelson’ dance method can serve also as a practice for coming the better to know our way around. Consider that to be part of a tuning score ensemble with Nelson is, as one member in the collective, to learn one‘s way around jointly imagined spaces, spaces that are projected imaginatively in the real space of the studio and that are occupied, in reality, by the bodies of other dancers. To learn your way around in the tuning score is to communicate skillfully and effectively with the others; to be sensitive to them; to find your way around a shared world with them, with them, thanks to them, and in spite of them.
A striking feature of Nelson‘s own understanding of the tuning score is that she thinks of it as a research tool -- for the study of movement and performance and, crucially – for me, given my interests – for the study of perceiving. Let us ask: How can an improvisational dance activity be a research tool?

The kinship with Wittgenstein‘s language games may be helpful here. Language games cast light on the nature of language by letting us appreciate, in the small, the workings of the sorts of embedded, contextualized practices that, in the large, make up our use of language and our intellectual spaces. Tuning scores are like language games, I am suggesting. So let us ask: What is it that tuning scores cast light on in the way that language games cast light on thinking?
What do we see when we’re looking at dance?

A first answer that comes to mind is that tuning scores cast light on dance itself. They inform us of dance possibilities. This may be so. But it is not the answer I am looking for. It doesn‘t satisfy. For one thing, it is not surprising to learn that the tuning score method will teach us about dance. The question is whether dance, explored using tuning scores, can teach us about something else (e.g. about the mind). Think of the Wittgenstein case again. We might say that it is not surprising that language games can teach us about language. What is surprising, and what interests us, is the fact that

language games, by helping us understand the structure of language, can actually help us gain clarity about the intellectual worlds we inhabit. – What then?
To answer this let us return to the question with which we began, Nelson's question: what do we see when we're looking at dance? Keeping the tuning score project in mind, we can venture an answer: when we look at dance, we look at a situation into which we can, into which we are invited, into which we need, to enter.
That's a beginning. But can we say more? When we look at dance, we see opportunities for movement; we see obstacles; limitations. We see the world, but we see it as a world-for-movement, that is, the world as a domain for action. To put this another way: when we see when we look at dance is the environment. I use this term in Gibson's sense. Gibson is the most important twentieth-century theorist of perception, outside of philosophy at least; he is also an important source for Nelson. Nelson reads Gibson. The environment, in Gibson's framework, is not the physical world. Two different species of animal, located beside one and the same tree, may occupy one place in the physical world, but they inhabit different environments. The environment, for Gibson, is the animal's surroundings. The German word captures the intuition. It is the Umgebung; that is, the world given around the animal. It is the world as it makes itself available to the animal as a domain for the animal's activity. Animals and environments are inseparable terms; animals and environments are co-determining.
The environment

What we experience, what we see, when we are looking at dance, in the setting of the tuning score at least, is the environment. Our environment. Not the physical world. Not mere things. We see, that is to see, we encounter, the meaningful world of our possible action.
Gibson wrote that "Every animal is, in some degree at least, a perceiver and a behaver." Nelson might have written that every dancer is to some degree at least a behaver and a perceiver. What does a dancer see when she looks into the image space, or when she tries to find a path in it? She experiences the environment, the world as it correlates with our embodied perceptual orientation to it.
If language games are tools for laying out and making perspicuous intellectual spaces, or linguistic cityscapes, then tuning scores lay out and make perspicuous our mode of perceptual being-in-the-world, our perceptual attunement to the cities in which we find ourselves, to our environment, and to the ways – this is a new point – in which our environment is not merely affected by what we do, not merely transformed by it, but is actually brought forth by us. The point is not merely conceptual – that is, the point is not that without the person or animal there is no environment at all, only a meaningless physical world.
The point is more textured than that, and more realistic. The point is that the environment in which we find ourselves, the space itself, is one whose meaning is always specified relative to us and the situation in which we find ourselves, to our relation to each other, to the environment.
When we as dancers enter the image space, when we perform actions, when we issue calls and respond to calls, when we listen, and watch, we make the environment. We enact our environments thanks to our skilful engagement with them. We enact our perceptual world by attuning ourselves to it. Nelson's tuning score – recapitulates this fundamental fact about our lives – that our worlds are made by us through our dynamic coupling with our surroundings.
Image space

This is an important lesson, one that matters not only for dance, but for philosophy and also for the empirical study of perception.
We see things, objects, facts, but we also see opportunities to do this or that. The world shows up for us as a domain for movement and action; as an “image space” or playing field.
An account of perceiving, whether in science, or philosophy, must reckon with these facts. Nelson‘s work thus complements and contributes to new developments in the science of consciousness and the theory of perception that emphasize that perceiving is active, in so far as we our active, and in so far as our ability to achieve perceptual contact with the world depends on our practical mastery of the ways what we do can open up the world for us.

What do we see when we are looking at dance? It turns out that the answer to this question also give us the answer to the more general, more fundamental question, what do we see?
For what we see, in general, is just what the tuning scores enable us to see when we look at dance: we encounter a world or environment that is meaningful for us, always and already, in part because it is a world whose pathways and possibilities are traces of our actions and projections of our capacities.
We see a world made meaningful by our capacities for movement and exploration.

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Composition, Communication, and the Sense of Imagination. Lisa Nelson on her pre-technique of dance, the Tuning Scores

1. What di I teach
This research focusses on the physical base of the imagination. As dance is the medium of my studies, I offer physical practices that put questions on the table. By altering the way we use our senses while moving and watching movement, we can identify the genetic, cultural and idiosyncratic movement patterns our senses use to read our environment and contribute to constructing our experience. These patterns inform both our desire for action and what we perceive when we are attending to anything. Practices include tuning the senses (vision, hearing, touch, kineasthesia, intuition) to follow features in both the “inner“ and “outer“ environments, sensing and measuring stillness and movement through each of the senses, and shifting from sense to sense and sensing to action: activities we engage in every waking moment. Fuelling this research is the perception of the body as both proscenium and performer, as container and generator of imagery, as thought and feeling, beginning with the composition of the body – our home, spaceship, time capsule. An organization of biological matter (skin, bones, muscles, eyes, brain, water) and experience: memory, desire, feeling, imagination, expectation, opinion, perceived environment, movement. These contents are compositions in themselves. Try: body as the container – the environment – of the imagination, and vice versa. Intention and attention are agents of the body’s changing composure. Composition: organization, perception, patterns,

meaning. How does “composition” arise? Is design a surface value? Tuning practices are a pre-technique: maps to follow with feedback systems to help one observe one’s patterns, processes, strategies and appetite for becoming physicalized, i. e. awake, alert and available to dance. Also, a tool to taste ones creative body before doing formalized technical practice like ballet, tap dance, contact improvisation, flamenco, yoga etc. The Tuning Scores provoke spontaneous compositions that make evident how we sense and make sense of movement, exposing our opinions about space, time, action, and desire, and provide a framework for communication and feedback amongst the players.

The scores draw from genetic and acquired skills of survival: how we look at things, what we “need to know,” the perceptual process of editing spontaneously in order to make meaning out of any moment. With the scores, we play with our desire to compose experience, to make our imaginations visible, to develop a sense of ensemble, and to transform our movement into dancing.

2. What are the sources of your work?
My first source was the experience of shifting disciplines from dance to portable video in 1974. By teaching myself a new medium (and by chance, teaching others at the same time), I was able to track my own peculiar learning process and discover the sense of vision and the profound part it plays in the act of dancing. Chronologically, my next source was the psychologist/philosopher J. J. Gibson, who first suggested the “ecology of perception” in his book, “The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems” (1966). His title suggests a mosaic of behaviors that underlie our movement. Gibson observes the movement of the body and the sensory organs from a functional viewpoint, as both exploratory and performatory. He examines the physiology of the multi-sensorial activities of looking, listening and touching.
Through this lens, he revisions the basic orienting/vestibular system, auditory system, haptic/somatic system, tasting and smelling, and the visual system. Gibson’s creative dialogue between physiological investigation and experiential inquiry set his book somewhere between a text book, a workbook, and a live performance. The latter, because the basis of his theory of perception unites the observer and the observed, and he unravels his ideas from concepts of awareness and attention, concepts that appear in any serious discourse about the craft of dance improvisation, construction, and performance. His direct observations of physical behavior and open spirit of inquiry led me to look at the role of the exploratory behaviors of our senses in shaping our opinions or aesthetic appetites regarding how we move and what we see when we‘re looking at dancing. This stimulated my construction of myriad scores and explorations of dance behavior which I’ve enfolded into my teaching and dance-making. A third source is my study of the experiential anatomy of Body-Mind Centering with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, beginning in 1977, which added the dimension of dialoguing body systems through an intuitive approach to a convincingly concrete and comprehensive analysis of anatomy from both Western and Eastern medical perspectives.

3. What is the context of your teaching?
By choice, I am an itinerant teacher. I pass through cultures, languages, dance behaviors, urban and rural environments. In relatively short bursts of a week to a month of intensive studio work, I offer my proposal to (sometimes mixed, sometimes

homogenous) populations of dancers, dance-makers, movement enthusiasts and performing artists of many disciplines.

Perhaps rightly, over the last decades, the development of improvisational dance practices and the deep body-mind investigations that have informed their little-seen applications to contemporary performance have happened outside of institutions. The freedom to follow my nose has been supported by dialogue with the relatively few dance artists who have -taken this route, some translating their discoveries into pedagogies for technique, bodywork, improvisation or performance, all committed to a spirit of open exchange. Dancers who've wanted to find alternative studies in dance have had to ferret them out, often frustrated by the lack of consistent exposure and practice of any single approach. This condition, added to the fact that improvisational dance performances are seldom given airtime, leaving a vacuum of models to challenge and be inspired by, prevents the performance field from maturing. The new body-mind techniques for physical training of dancers have valued empowerment of the dancer as an individual, if not as an artist, rather than solely as a servant to a choreographic style and within the principles of their trainings have done much to bring dignity to the term "improvisation." Yet improvisational dance itself is an idea. It has no intrinsic substance, cannot put a picture in your head. It is descriptive of a methodology that has potentially as wide an application and manifestation as the word "choreography." As more dancers and audiences become interested in improvisational dance performance – a thing apart from technical trainings – it becomes crucial to resist over-defining it by institutionalizing its pedagogies without exposing the creative works, in their specificity, of individual artists who identify with their methodology.

4. What are your aims in teaching?
Practically speaking, two things: to create a learning environment that is the essence of performance and to unite dance and the performance of observation. In order to make relatively short workshops meaningful in the long run, to offer internal dance practices that can continue outside of the studio, anywhere, at any time, and that can be applicable to the study of any artistic discipline. Idealistically, three: to energize the corner of the field of dance that values the art of movement, the particularities of movement and dance behavior, the details of human movement that are made invisible, edited out by our cultural conditioning, dance trainings and marketable Western concert dance. By loosening the bonds of perceptual conditioning in the relative safety of the dance studio, grounded in the play of the body, to revisit the magical world of the child, pre-naming, invoking responsibility and a more direct, flexible and compassionate construction of reality with which to face the challenges of our ailing planet. It is my hope that the spirit of dialogue that is at the root of improvisational efforts in dance will inspire action and individual initiative in pursuit of a life that is worth living, in the theater and out.

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