

Editorial

Often we refer to feeling somatically in and out of balance, or speak of a balanced economy, which is ingrained in imperialistic class structures. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2010), reminding us of John Stuart Mill's commentary on balance in a talk given at The Mutual Improvement Society in 1834, notes that for Mill the word balance is 'singularity captivating', and stresses that what is referred to as balance 'must, for that reason, be necessarily good'. The urge to have 'a balanced economy', 'a balance of power', and to make 'balanced judgements' illustrates, Phillips points out, how unbalanced socio-economic infrastructures are (xi). This *Platform* issue, 'Balancing Acts', is the first devoted to dance and is published at a time when dance departments are being increasingly subsumed into other fields of the art. It investigates corpo-political approaches to balance through dance's artistic form. Dance is a bodily, agential performance practice that sometimes produces faulted or releasing moments, which make us unable to hold or move on to our understandings of balance: it can capitulate us into a state of being 'off-balance'. 'Balancing Acts' puts the foundationalism at stake of what is considered as morally being 'off balance' by foregrounding its ethical discrepancies. How can we shift physical ways of thinking to embrace the unknown, which might entail falling out of what we conceive of as balance? How can such moves pose challenges to modes of discrimination within society?

Putting moving bodies and their performed morals into the centre of a critical debate automatically implies that their identities have to be considered as part of artistic and materialistic issues. This *Platform* issue conceives of 'balance' as both a physical, political, and metaphorical concept to address the entanglement of 'situated', bodily experience (Haraway 1988) with economic and social mechanisms. This issue understands balance as a double-folded state: on one hand, the concept of balance historically and artificially re-produces an idea that there is something of an equilibrium, an ideal state of power, and

on the other hand, it conceives of balance as a corporeal surviving mechanism to sustain living organisms.

‘Balancing Acts’ brings dance and performance together to offer a site for a critical discourse about culturally ingrained, artistic body-based performance practices, as well as quotidian performances happening outside of theatres and art institutions. It is inspired by dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright’s reorienting approach towards dance. She suggests ‘instead of being nervous about keeping our balance in a world in which so many aspects of our lives are in danger of falling apart, we need to accept our falls with grace and learn how to land with intention’ (10). Her recent book, *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World* (2019), vitally foregrounds that bodily perception and social engagements are profoundly interconnected and are decisive for how we move through and think about the world. As a way to provoke somatic ways of thinking through dance and to question our individual relationship to gravity, Cooper Albright asks how we can realign ourselves ‘at the edge of our balance’ (22) in order to negotiate the social, political and economic unpredictability of the world. Daring to move off balance, Sara Ahmed suggests that disorientation can help us to understand the many cultural assumptions that lie beneath the surface of our lives (‘Queer Fragility’) by using a language of movement to describe how life choices are also conditioned by culturally produced somatic patterns (performative acts and gestures) which make us decide how to orientate ourselves.

This issue debates the entanglement of somatics, embodied perceptions of balance and politics, and how they are acted out attitudes. Its formation started in the early summer of 2020 when physical touch was restricted and dance performances mainly happened online, if at all. ‘Balancing Acts’ was also conceptualized around the time when dance and visual art organisations in the UK increasingly started to programme the work of people of colour as an urgent response to the BLM protests which sparked a move across art institutions to decolonise staff and curriculums, aligning with the decolonising turn, in the UK and US. While this was a welcome step forward for Global North

institutions and universities, it also exposed their sluggish response to the not-so-new question of decolonisation. Emerging from these specific historic moments lies the issue's core question of how bodies can come to perform—both as artistic and political subjects—inside and outside of arts organisations as a way to rethink ideas of social and economic balance.

This question is, of course, not a new one. How humans perceive balance is intertwined with the ways capitalism employs them productively, in a technological way, to increase the financial profits and wealth of a small number of people. Dancers can perform both, opting to stay in balance, (participate) with capitalist operations, or resist them by embracing the conditions of being out of balance. If these movement practitioners, like all precarious and mainly temporary employees, are merely regarded as labourers of capital, generating ephemeral cultural surplus values through their bodily capital, then dance is often generated without care, under exploitative working conditions, putting the performers off-balance. As Mårten Spångberg stresses, dance struggles precisely with keeping 'its autonomy and its possible impact, its independence and simultaneously its opportunity to care and install safe-spaces', and knows that 'neoliberal capitalism can and will instrumentalize everything, transform anything into a financial asset' (21).

Underneath bodies' apparent 'balance'—their mental and physical positionality—lurks another question: how to practice and understand dance if the way we hold our bodies is at odds with how we relate to one another? Emerging before the academic field of dance studies, Marble Elsworth Todd's 'Ideokinesis'—a form of somatic education—provided us with key terminologies to develop a verbal language to describe physiological experiences and practices. In her 1937 groundbreaking book of human kinesiology, *The Thinking Body*, she explores notions such as balancing forces, posture, consciousness, old animal mechanisms, and mobilisation for movement. Her approach to the body in motion—an aesthetic experience—addresses questions of how subjectivity is performed, such as how habit and action interact and

are performed, embodied, and physiological objectives. The mobilising forces Todd addresses can produce their own support structures and networks, but also generate and feed into infrastructurally installed political tensions and universally accepted values and morals. How we conceptually approach dance depends therefore on how and where it is practiced.

In her philosophy of science, Isabelle Stengers describes the dialectics between disequilibrium and balance in relation to the laws of motion. Arguing for an 'ecology of practices' and 'poetic attentiveness to nature' (4-5), she reminds us that 'while capitalism has destroyed many practices [that] it feeds on', it also has the ability 'to redefine them' (9). She stresses that 'if the balance is no longer at equilibrium, motion occurs' (101). When the parameters and players of a system are falling out of their established equilibrium, then balance starts to shift. Being 'off-balance', in this sense, suggests being in-motion, and has the potential to bring about change. As this issue suggests, the potential of dance and dance studies lies in situations that critically explore balance by encountering moments of being 'off-balance'. In a similar vein, Randy Martin takes stake in the precarity of artistic work in relation to finance. He speaks of a decentered social kinesthetic of certain movement forms, such as skate-boarding or hip hop to address their physical and metaphorical shifts from vertical to horizontal levels. He considers dance to be able to move through states of disequilibrium and to dive 'ways through spaces made for infinite possibility' (63). Following Stengers' and Martin's critical and yet productive approach to corporeal movement practices, 'Balancing Acts' foregrounds dance's potential for moving away from stabilised ideas of balance and draws attention to its potentially shape-shifting role.

Despite dance's economic embeddedness and its reliance on institutional infrastructures, this *Platform* issue aims to prompt questions about how the poetics of performances can produce ways of dancing which are more attuned with oneself and others 'off-balance'. The replacement of culturally established understandings of balance

with a critical concept of balance rooted in somatics, as an agential 'balancing act', might help us to address imperially produced power relations, historically reproduced and ideological forms of agency, rooted in sexual and racial stereotypes.

This kinaesthetic awareness together with the idea of being connected with other bodies is discussed throughout the issue's contributions, which we have divided into four sections. The contributors each come to terms with what modes of disorientation can be generated by thinking beyond stereotypical concepts of balance. They use a range of tools and analyse artistic dance forms that allow bodies to speak to state institutionalisation, as well as to their and dance's identity-shaping mechanisms.

Historical Mobilisation: Disorientating White Performance

Living through a moment in history in which there is a dominating 'neoliberal impulse to include' performers of colour as part of a 'progressive racial politic' (DeFrantz 724), Tom Hastings's and Dylan Sherman's contributions put the inclusion of black bodies in art institutions and other public spaces under scrutiny. The urgency of disorientating white spaces becomes more acute in the light of light of BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd. Hastings's essay, 'Taking a Knee', focuses on recent happenings in the UK and conceptualises the 'coalitional politics' of kneeling, a gesture enacted by the south London rapper, Still Shadey, from a Black performance angle. Taking the liberal politics of the movement into account, he argues that the kinaesthetic pose of kneeling, 'a balancing act itself', can intervene into the state choreography and thereby initiate social mobility. While Hastings examines a recent cultural performance phenomenon, Dylan Sherman positions Brendan Fernandes' sculptural installation, *The Master and Form* (2018/19) and accompanying ballet performance seen at the Whitney Museum in New York City in relation to broader discourse around dance. He argues that Fernandes engages critically

with his ballet training and thereby puts his queer body of colour off-balance as he works with, against and beyond ballet's whiteness and heteronormativity. Sherman's detailed writing about the interaction between choreography, sculpture, and dance not only destabilises ballet's whiteness but also reveals how Fernandes' physicalisation placed in relation to the 'abstract sculpture' creates a non-normative space within the museum where an intersectional queer lack of balance can be represented.

Performing Beyond Balance: Bodily Liquids and Modernist Text-Play Relations

In this section the contributors reflect on the performance of bodies and text, and introduce ways of thinking beyond normative conceptions of balance. Christina Tente's essay, 'Spasms over balance', reflects on a particular style of voguing from a posthuman perspective. She focuses on 'possibilities for posthuman becomings' to draw attention to that moving beyond conventional understandings of balance. Tente illustrates how the performance of Vogue Femme disrupts normative understandings of balance through sweat, spasm and the creation of sticky atmospheres. Drawing on her observer-participation of Vogue Femme sessions in Berlin and Malmö, case studies framed through somatic practice and queer aesthetics demonstrate how the form's excessive performativity allows participants to move beyond the human as well as disturb heteronormative stereotypes and conventions of patriarchal and capitalist systems. She captures the materiality of the performative event in an affective language of movement description, arguing that vogue's aesthetics of excess, with its erratic spins, drops, floor performance (spasms) and the sticky space of the vogue spectacle (as sweat oozes off walls and passes from body to body) ruptures understandings of the straight, contained balanced body.

Rebekka Jolley's essay focuses on Gertrude Stein's first theatre play, *What Happened A Play in Five Acts*, from 1913. Branded as unperformable because of its text, her early play has only been

performed five times since the 1960s, and this, notably, not by Stein herself. Jolley offers an original reading of *What Happened* by undertaking a comparative, linguistic analysis of its recent staging by Radio Free Stein in 2019 in relation to Stein's original play-text. Jolley 'rebalances' Stein's ingrained reputation from that of a modernist writer towards a playwright, and argues that *What Happened's* collage text style operates as a 'hybrid genre of literary cubist theatre'.¹

Performing as Political Turmoil: Notes from the Field

This section brings together voices of a dance scholar and performance art scholar as they respond to racial, gender, and political silencing that political economy's equilibrium brings. At stake here is the visibility of performance artists in Singapore and an exiled Iranian dance artist. Maryam Bagheri Nesami's performative writing is an oblique orientation around dance and dance writing as she reflects on her 'counter-gaze' positionality in her solo work *Effortless Power on the Edge* (2019). Performing and writing as a displaced subject of dance - a migrant dancer, forbidden to dance in her own country - her solo work negotiates alternative modes of appearance. Her intertextual approach to performance seeks to embrace failure and falling out of a system as she releases dance from codes of western artistic representation, and her wrestling with forces of gravity in pursuit of grounding. Bagheri Nesami's political, somatic, and poetic writing enables her to communicate the felt conditions of being in-between the global and the local, the invisible and visible, as she experiments with alternative somatic and aesthetic strategies.

Adrian Tan's insightful discussion of performance art's growing presence in the globalised city of Singapore, situates performance artists in a delicate 'balancing act' with cultural authorities and audiences. Tan's report takes the establishment of the Cultural

¹ The author does not, due to the scope of this article which focuses on Gertrude Stein's early literary theatre technique in *What Happened A Five Act Play*, include a reflection upon her political stance towards non-white people.

Development Committee in 1980 and a public policy statement from 1989 as its starting point to negotiate the possibilities and relevance of performance art amidst Singapore's transformation into a global city. He examines the work of five performance artists, such as Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng, and Ulrich Lau, and argues that performance art's revolutionary potential operates as a 'balancing art' within Singapore's cultural industry framework.

Balancing Subjectivities: Creative Contributions

The following contributions by practitioners question the physical sensation of experiencing the world through multiple states of being in and off physical balance. Debbie Green's and Clare Park's photographic image, 'July Supporting', constitutes part of a visual journal (*Series Blue*, 2017) recording a year of their lives. The image featured responds to the unpredictability of life during the pandemic and imagines multiple definitions of balance. The artwork depicts two women pulling away from each other, evoking a precarious state of counter-balance. Words playfully scribbled over the image are drawn from the language of contact improvisation, grappling with the complexity that a balancing act implies.

Choreographer Angela Woodhouse and film-maker Caroline Broadhead's visual essay reflects on the making of their collaborative video installation *Thermal Duets* (2019) where they describe the tension, balance, and release between technology (thermal imaging), and the sensorial (of both dancer and spectator). They extend the sensorial beyond the screen by recording the trace of touch on the bodies of the dancers. Their work catches the viewer in a state of holding and release as it negotiates the tension between what is being seen and what is being felt. Describing the installation both from the dancers' perspective and the experience of the spectator, Woodhouse argues that the technology of thermal imaging creates a form of rebalancing of our relationship with our surroundings as we renegotiate the porous boundaries of our bodies.

Hand balancer Natalie Reckert tells us from her experience of performing extreme balancing acts, being in-balance 'is just one out of many possible states. It is the most unlikely state, the million other off-balances will eventually win' (138). How, then, can we think more playfully, and engage creatively with balance's multiple meanings and opposites?

Completing the original contributions' section, Carolien Hermans, a photographer and dance practitioner, envisions the state of being between one position and another as 'the body in-between', one which hovers in the liminal space between balance and off-balance: a state of suspension. Hermans' photos of her children and a student taking a dance improvisation workshop emphasise bodies moving in between vertical and horizontal planes. She writes:

The in-between that enables us to engage with potentialities, where the self (as a fixed identity) is suspended, in favor of a floating, unstable state of being. The in-between reveals the groundlessness of ourselves.
(147)

Her interest echoes Adam Phillips's words, 'what we do when we are off balance tends to be more morally interesting than what we do when we are unbalanced' (xv). As we fall, Hermans points out, we give up our vertical, upright position and with the pull of gravity we have to engage with the horizontal plane. This is perhaps not such a bad place to land, and implies that we need to expand narrow understandings of balance and our desperation to cling on to just one definition.

Performance Responses and Book Reviews

Balance is further scrutinised through the performance and book reviews that embrace not only the techniques of physical, body-based artistic practices that push movement beyond balance and the human, but also other identities that shake up conservative and capitalist notions of being in balance. The four book reviews cover academic and

practical approaches to balance. Katherine Grace Holden revisits the edited book *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation* (2008) that collects key ideas of Nancy Stark Smith's dance practice and understanding of contact improvisation in relation to physical balance. Their review historically contextualises the book and takes us back to initial ideas of contact improvisation, months after Stark passed away. Rachael Davies reviews Harmony Bench's book, *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures and the Common*, which explores dance's relationship with digital media from 1996 to 2006, putting into question what bodily experience comprises. *Disabled Theatre*, (2015) edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, and reviewed by 'Tunde Awosanmi, stems from Jerome Bel's performance *Disabled Theatre* (2012/13). The essay collection gathers responses from leading dance scholars about performances that intersect with disability studies. It interrogates closely how disabled people are publicly perceived and staged and makes a collective call for a critical engagement with both disability studies and performance. Christina Regorosa reviews John Lutterbie's *An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences* (2020). Focusing on overlaps between arts and science, the book opens up interdisciplinary discourse and fosters further exchanges.

Two of our performance responses dwell on the existential implications of the act of falling, where a conceptual and live artist—making work decades apart—perform falling as a way of finding meaning and even momentary euphoria in spite of the fear and damage that it can bring. Lilly Markaki revisits a series of short films by Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader in which he falls repeatedly in different locations. Markaki questions whether the falling speaks of Ader's resignation and despair, or rather as an attempt to find some sort of eternal truth in his art. For Amy Sharrocks, a voluntary act of falling into the waters of the Thames in her live artwork *Landscape with Fall of Artist* (2020) felt like an attempt to liberate herself both physically and emotionally from universally oppressive conditions, further exacerbated by the pandemic. Reflecting on the motivations for her performative act, a whole bodied

response to a fractured world, she considers the multiple implications of falling. In their discussion of Sarah Kane's play *Crave* (1998), live streamed in November 2020, Alex Watson and Kit Narey consider the notion of 'balancing acts' in relation to the play's traumatic subject matter of isolation and its affect on the audience. The actors performing on treadmills through much of the play physically negotiate balance as they act out personal narratives of violence, abuse, and suffering between victim and perpetrator, while the audience's empathetic and emotional relationship with the actors is tipped further off balance as they watch online from the seclusion of their homes.

Similarly affected by the pandemic, the production process of this issue was accompanied by the workshop, 'Unravelling the Everyday', funded by Royal Holloway and led by Prof. Alexandra Kolb (Roehampton University, London) last May. Despite being held on Zoom, the session enabled us to connect with and discuss ideas of 'balancing acts' in the everyday and in the performing acts with some of the issue's international contributors. During the workshop Prof. Kolb invited us to find a position in our homes overlooking the street and document everything we saw. Through this kinaesthetically activating exercise we had to pay close attention to think about the entanglement of somatic rhythms and how people move through the urban landscape. The issues addressed in this workshop transverse between understandings of being 'in balance' and being 'off balance', and are echoed in the issue's collective exploration of performances operating inside and outside of enclosed arts institutions. Sometimes, as 'Balancing Acts' fleshes out, being in balance is physically more risky than losing it. If we are ready to let go and give in, we lose our understanding and sense of balance, and this is precisely where thinking and moving differently becomes possible.

If dance performances do not only represent subjective, as well as collective, body politics through movements and gestures, but are also taken seriously as poetic, kinesthetic practices, there seems to be no way around investigating how we physically and intellectually

perceive of balance, not as a fixed idea or form of practice, but as spatial and body-shifting ‘balancing acts’.

With this issue the functions of the current editorial board, comprising of Meg Cunningham, Josephine Leask, Lisa Moravec, and Clio Unger, which was formed over summer 2018, ends. At this stage, the journal is already in the hands of Alex Watson and Lianna Mark—who are working towards the next special issue ‘Within Limits’ with Gwyneth Donlon as Notes from the Field editor, and the three new incoming editors Chris Green (editing Performance Reviews), Grace Joseph (editing Book Reviews), and Milo Harries (as editorial assistant).

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- Josephine Leask and Lisa Moravec, issue co-editors

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