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Tuning scores *an approach to materializing a dance*

Lisa Nelson, august 2010

Fragment of a tuning run (or, Inside the dance)

begin.....pause.....replace...pause...end
reverse....

Five people have organized themselves to stand in a casual curve, our backs a few feet from a stone wall. We face into a calm volume of space. The reach of our eyes is limited by tall walls of wood and glass, a floor of light satin wood, a peaked ceiling fancy with timbers. There's a presence of wind through trees, occasional inserts of whining engines.

Before arriving in this composition, we warmed up our instruments—the body and its imagination--and tuned in to the local conditions within our bodies and the space we inhabit. I have located my appetite for movement, for stillness, for engagement, for dancing. We are here to tune in a dance. Or to unfold a dance. Or to induce one. Or to make the invisible dance of this space visible.

A settling enters the curve. Or I feel the curve recomposing itself. Exit murmurs. Exit shuffling. I am tuning into the speed of listening. The weight of attention rolls into the space in front of us. Two breaths... four breaths.

A calm voice by my side says *BEGIN*.

My senses stream out in all directions at once. An expectant tone tints the silence. Two, three, four, five...

Waiting begins to muffle my organization for action. Six, seven...

I've missed the beat of this proposition to begin. I tune my waiting into listening for the beat to come around again. An abrupt *shh shh* passes behind me. Soft sound of fabric brushing on fabric. Then a quick dry slap slap of bare soles meeting the floor. A sprinter has taken form through my ears. A sudden slowdown. Green pants swing into the edge of my visual screen.

A woman is entering the space. Or I notice a woman entering the space. Her walking has kidnapped my eyes. Or she has inserted herself into recently empty room. My eyes have met her there. Or I see her now, she's entered my image space.

I arrive behind my eyes, join her here, see what's on my plate. I am watching a woman walking away from me. Or I am watching walking. Or my eyes are stalking her heels. I notice I have leaned forward. Or I notice I have begun.

I look at her retreating hips. Or I observe her breezy walk. This space is deep. Where is she going? My curiosity, taking its cue from her, is breezy too. I take time to look out a window. And back. I detect her elbow lifting slightly, a small crick of the wrist. She is banking a turn towards where I stand, soon I will see her face.

A new voice calls *PAUSE*. My eyes stop dead, two, three, four.

My future has crashed into the present. I hear myself inhale, feel the cells of my body expand into the stillness. No thoughts.

I restart.

My eyes have a spree, carom off the surfaces of everything, each glance causing the next. My attention swabs the space, moving to touch and pausing to taste the consequences of this disruption, knitting the fragments of my composure together. Five, six, seven, eight.

There she is. Still. She appears to be still, somewhat askew, one heel twisted, barely lifted from the floor. I feel my weight puddle in my left foot. I am looking at her spine. Or I am interrogating her back. No thoughts there. I am looking at an unnameable stance. I am intrigued by her poise. By the poise of the room. I am compelled to search for movement.

There's a waver of light on a puff of yellow hair. There's a tremble of fabric around her calf. The floor creaks beside me. I notice I accept this as stillness. I notice I'm grateful for incidental movement. I notice the pleasure of small perceptions afforded by this stillness. Or I affirm my appetite for singular events.

Nine, ten....twenty....no more beats.

I am absorbed by the invitation of time. Or I am absorbed in the sensuality of my floating attention. I am impressed with its freedom of passage through my body. The space inside expands. The space gets denser. Or I am imprinted with the invitations of the space. Or I read its instructions. I feel the rising of desires. Patterns appear. I notice I am breathing. I notice I am a pattern amongst patterns. Or I notice I am nested in the composition.

I am absorbed by the whole of it, the orchestra of watchers, space, and mover. I feel the amassing of our projections into the space. Or the space is populated with images. Or the space is a mirror to my desire. Behind my eyes...

An old man is kneeling behind the standing woman, poised to skip a stone in my direction.

There is a flight of stairs in front of her, a red table tumbling down it, making thunder.

A streak of blue blasts through the space, left to right.

I feel-see my body curled into a gangly sphere, rolling gently, rotating slowly, floating and bobbing above a shadowy figure who may be about to topple. Or lift its arms to swat me over a net.

Or I am absorbed in a dynamic dialogue with my body's imagination that feels like dancing. I notice I am elated. I notice I will grieve when it ends. What is the lifespan of this composition?

There she is. She is sustaining. Or she is enduring. Do I detect a change in the tone of her body? I am alert to signs of decay. I will call *End* to avert its inevitability.

Or I will call *End* to imprint this overture in memory. Or I will call *End* to frame this proposition of *Begin*, to acknowledge its singularity. Or I will call *End* so we can continue.

Or I will call *Begin* to redirect the energy of my looking. Or I will call *Begin* to provoke an illusion of action, of a future. Or I will enter without calling. I am feeling for the beat of when to insert my call or my action, whichever it may be, into the music of the room.

REPLACE, she says. Her body-time a half-beat faster than my measure. My head nods reflexively. I notice I'm grateful to become aware of her awareness. She has reinvigorated her stillness.

One beat.

A herd emerges from the curve. I feel the container folding into the contents of space. Amid a synchrony of footfalls, my body agrees to surge toward her island of stillness. I am alert to my distance from the others. I am heading to replace her, to embody her stance, but don't know where I'll land.

Four, five six. In the blur of action, my voice shoots out *PAUSE* and captures a flashflood of kinetic energy.

My arms are caught mid-swing, rear foot in the air, eyes locked on my destination, a body in front of me, one by my side. Bits of image, baroque, teetering, and intently forward. The composition is fragile. The silence is holding us up, two, three. A voice from the edge says *END*. Four.

Two full breaths. We all drop tone. Or I feel the space exhale.

We walk off directly and in different directions. I follow my feet in the direction they are pointing, to the wall that was once on my left. I turn to face a new arrangement. People are scattered loosely on two adjoining walls. The dynamic of an L appears.

The space is cleared, though not empty. After-image lingers in ears and eyes and bones. Threads to follow map my body's memory.

Two people enter rolling, shifting my attention to the carpet of wood. They are smoothing the space with a canon of long liquid phrases. Or they are erasing the place where the green pants woman stood, tsunami approaching. Or this looping action is the antidote to the arrested convergence of the space.

Or this is the Replace that never happened. A continuous ground wave recalls the ostinato of silence that dominated the image of Begin. I am re-balancing and at the same time feel my body about-face, my palms on the wall organized to propel me backward into the....

A voice calls *REVERSE*...

end fragment

TUNING SCORES

Tuning: the activity of bringing one thing into a sensible relationship with another.

Over the course of time, two aspects of practice evolved simultaneously under the general name *Tuning Scores*: a solo warmup, and group and duet composition games. The solo scores are a kind of pre-technique--a physical-attentional warm-up and the inner score of the games. Sometimes referred to as *tuning practices*, they can be done in the studio or anywhere one finds oneself. They tune the dancer to an observational state useful to engage in the games in any depth. Though there are a number of Tuning Scores with names of their own (e.g., *blind unison trio*, *multiple replay*, *single image*), the one referred to as *the* Tuning Score seems to use them all at once.

The Tuning Score is an ongoing research process. This writing offers fragments of explanation, describing a practice that is designed to teach itself by doing.

Tuning Scores arose from a desire to understand how dancers make sense out of the dance inside, around, and before them. This desire arose from my inability to read the movement intentions of my collaborators in an improvisational ensemble performance setting. What does it mean when movement is strewn into the space like loose change? Aesthetic judgement aside, though not insignificant, irritation is a great motivator to ask better questions. I wanted to know how dancers think, what they value—what's at stake in their spontaneous performance. I wished to unveil an improvisational dance language while preserving the mystery of human expression and unite the choreographic act with the experience of dancing. This has kept me busy.

The improvising dancer is in a challenging position of making decisions from three simultaneous perspectives: a spectating-self, a composing-self, and a performing-self. From which self does one make choices? Which of these decisions are aesthetic, which arise from physical ability or necessity, how many are conscious or intentional? What is the palette we choose our actions from? How do we compose ourselves for this task?

In a study of the process of sensorial perception, I found a filter for looking at the roots of our dance behavior. Genetic and learned skills of survival—our deepest patterns and habits--give instruction for what we need to know, *how* we look at things, and the subconscious process of editing spontaneously in order to make meaning out of any moment. The Tuning Score is extrapolated from this study.

As a practice of real-time editing and instant replay, Tuning is an aesthetic game and a self-balancing system. The resulting dance is imprinted with layers of memory, a three-dimensional manuscript criss-crossed with patterns of opinion.

TUNING THE BODY

Tuning Scores— *a laboratory on composition, communication, and the sense of imagination*

The research focusses on the physical base of the imagination. Improvisation is the method we use to stimulate our dialogue. The question: how does composition arise in the body and its environment?

We begin by tasting the sensation of the movement of our attention--the "attentionography" of the body. Practices include tuning the senses to follow features in both the "inner" and "outer" environment, 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.

By altering the way we use our senses while moving and watching movement, we can begin to tease apart the innate and acquired movement patterns our senses use to construct our experience. We look at the ways these patterns influence how and why we move, shape our interaction with our inner and outer environments, and inform our desire for action and what we see when we are attending to anything.

The warmups are a pre-technique that any body can do: provoking sensation in the body by organizing one's movement to touch skin, bones, muscles, eyes, ears with the contents of the environment; sampling the feedback afforded by local conditions of the space and our own movement; tasting sensations entering and exiting the body's theater of awareness; tuning to the speed of listening; and locating one's appetite for movement, stillness, and dancing.

Focussing on vision, touch, and hearing, the scores provoke spontaneous compositions that make evident our opinions about space, time, and action, and provide a framework for dialogue. Tuning scores offer tools that cross disciplinary lines and give insight into and practice of dance and performance-making processes.

TUNING IN THE DANCE

Tuning Score Observatory

The Tuning Score is an improvisational composition practice that is a performance in itself. It offers a communication-feedback system to an ensemble of players that makes apparent how each one senses and makes sense of movement, initiating a dialogue between inner and outer organization, about space, time, movement, and the desire to compose (a satisfying) experience.

The activity of the score is tuning. There are two kinds of action tools: movement and simple vocal calls (e.g.: "end," "pause," "reverse," "replace," "report," etc.). The underlying intention is *replay*--showing each other what we perceive. Each player acts equally as performer, director, and spectator to tune the image into focus for themselves while clearly communicating their desires to the others. Together, our opinions uncover the form as it arises and set the dance in motion.

Calls are uttered by players from within and on the perimeter of the space, making the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the action constantly fluxing and simultaneous conditions.

We begin by sending our senses into an image space from its borders, taking the time to read the movement and stillness within it. We scan the instructions of its architecture, its context (what's happened here?). We taste the current conditions, its atmosphere, and our internal weather (what is happening now?) and intuit the invitations of the space (what can happen here?).

Each player measures how long it takes for the image we are a part of to come into focus, to organize into a phase of meaningfulness that invites the participation of our imaginations and

motivates desire. At the same time we track the sensation of an image's decay within our bodies and within our interest.

The first action, or series of actions and calls, becomes a proposition that is unfolded and recycled until a next chapter or a final end is called. A run can last two minutes or hours. The number of calls can be few or many.

Though the actions are not predetermined, the intention of the activity is, and the tools of the score provoke and challenge the specificity of every moment as the dance unfolds.

Some notes about the calls

Calls are vocalized desires that arise while observing dance. They unmute silent prayers I noticed while witnessing performances: *pause. repeat. sustain. end. end. end...* I began to look at what happens when an action is actually arrested by *Pause*. How much time passed before I wished movement to resume?

When exploring this with a group it was clear that when people were measuring the time through a sense of musicality, there was much agreement. But if we measured through our visual sense (how long does it take to peruse the stillness?) each person measured differently. And then there was the dancer, maintaining her composition, who also had an opinion. This was a starting point for the Tuning Score. We named our desires as they arose consequentially from *Pause* ad infinitum, and observed how we survived each intervention from within and outside of the action to cultivate guidelines for our communication.

It is evident that spoken calls provoke consequences in the intention and attention of the body and the perceived image space and that both take time to tune in. So we wait for a change to become visible before calling again or taking new action. The dancer develops physical strategies to sustain a seamless flow of action when a call enters the space.

Movement is proposed by the dancer. It is both the other tool of the score and initiates its content. It puts something on our plate that can be tuned, re-directed, or interrupted in the midst of action. The frame of the game excludes the option to call for specific movement from the dancer. To call *Jump* to a dancer who isn't jumping is like asking the chicken on your plate to be noodles. If one desires to see jumping, one has recourse to jump oneself, should that satisfy one's vision.

By focussing on formal operations of composing, the calls offer choices to the players on both sides of the action. Dancers and observers replace each other throughout and calls are made by each.

Specific calls evolved to affect the organization of the space, the time, the quality, the rhythm, the dynamic, the form, or the interior experience of the dance. To differing degrees, most affect them all. Though there are basic choreographic calls offered as a starting point, the palette of calls is not fixed. They are meant to originate from the players as need arises and are often re-defined by their consequences or invented spontaneously each time of play. We freely borrow terminology from our common experience of other media, disciplines, or living: *escape* or *restart* can effect a fresh beginning; *tab* can cut to a near future; *begin chapter two* or *begin third movement* can effect a new proposition, etc. As they are meant to be communications, agreeing on their definitions is practical.

A call is a wish, a direction, request, question, and challenge to the organization of the moment. One thing it is not is an order. It is a tool to shape the action that can't be communicated by action itself. Since the idea is to make something together that we couldn't or wouldn't make

alone, we agree to take the calls literally at the beginning of a run, in order to taste each of our appetites and sense of composition and establish a ground of form and content. As the run proceeds, players take liberties with their responses within the framework they perceive.

Limiting the palette of available calls increases the use of action. Also, when we disallow calling to individual players, calls are addressed to the space, which keeps everyone's attention focused on the whole image.

Calls are part of the music of the space and we attend to the tone and punctuation of their delivery. Like editing a film, the exact timing of the call affects the musicality of the dance. Whether followed or not, calls are an indelible action in the space and part of the choreographic whole.

We learn the immediate predictable consequences of the calls through practice. Many can have the same basic effect (e.g. *end*, *restart*, and *exit* can empty the space).

The same call can be used to satisfy different desires, stemming from which aspect of the dance one is attending to.

For example, I might call *Pause* if:

- while *tracking my experience*, I notice I'm overloaded and need time to re-engage my imagination.
- while *tracking space*, a moment of relationship is stunning and I want to savor it.
- while *tracking a dancer's experience*, I sense he is moving automatically or out of sync with the present conditions, to give him a chance to integrate and restart.
- while *tracking the composition*, I see the inevitable and want a shot at an alternative future.
- while *tracking the form*, I notice the pause call has become a rhythmic marker, a repeating motif.
- while *tracking the movement*, I perceive a hesitant or unintentional move I'd like to give value to.

Some basic Tuning calls

The commentary cites some predictable consequences of calls from my point of view at the time of this writing. Each player would articulate these differently, and that is the point of the practice, although likely we would discover we share impressions, which is also the point.

I: *from the dancer Inside the action*

O: *from Observers on the perimeter*

Pause *as long as you like or as long as you can*

I: intense physical engagement to maintain stillness; attention extends into the space in all directions; feel for the moment to reactivate or release into movement in relation to whole and body's circumstance; opportunity to renew musicality of the space.

O: outer space halts, sudden interruption of flow, expectation, and rhythm of my attention; attention revives to follow its nose; measure relationships with eyes and ears; imagination hobnobs with the future.

End *dancers exit directly*

I: let go of the image; feel the organization dissolve in my body and in the space; decide to where on the border I'll exit.

O: space empties of humans; unison on the periphery: all facing into the space, tasting the after-image, anticipating the next proposition.

Close eyes *and continue your activity*

I: relieved of responsibility to the future, I shift to the other senses, memory, and my imagination to live in the composition.

O: the tone of the space is alert, dancers' bodies are more present; unpredictable and organic synchronicities arise; increased empathy as I reach into the imagination of the dancers; attention to measure the near future, ready to keep the dancers safe.

Open *eyes and continue your activity*

I: flood of contextual information; effort to sustain my navigation through other senses; opportunity for broad gestures through space and unfettered energetic release.

O: change in players' energy of engagement with the space: more direct or more lost; attend to players' choice-making with renewed curiosity.

Reverse *your movement as far as you remember without effort, then continue in real time from the new starting point*

I: going reflexively, I let my body retrace its steps; where have I been?; pass through crystals of memory and zones of forgetfulness, noting differences in synchronicity with others in the space; notice when I am reversing my movement or my experience.

O: musicality of the space is recapitulated in a curious variation; attention shifts to details of movement; surprising departures and synchronicities of my memory with the dancers'; time flows forward and backward at once.

Repeat *a unit of recent action*

I: consider the musicality, intention, or narrative of my action at the moment of the call to guess the intention of the caller; start an immediate reverse to let my body decide what unit of action to repeat—a single movement or a phrase.

O: a movement that would have passed by has been imbued with intention, rhythmicity, or formal significance.

Repeat...Repeat *a unit of recent action for as long as you can*

I: as above... repeat as long as I can to taste its specificity and rhythm before decay or transformation caused by physical fatigue, excitement, or perceptual boredom.

O: rhythms appear to unify the space; new content arises from stabilized relationships of players.

Sustain *current activity/intention/attention as long as you can or want to*

I: sustaining my activity in the direction it is going, I come into unfamiliar relationships with others and the space.

O: time to see details and small changes in the illusion of a stable field of action; anticipate incidental conjunctions of players' pathways.

Replace *observers' choice to replace a dancer's activity as faithfully as possible; all dancers exit whether replaced or not*

I: sustain my activity to give time for observers to read and enter; feel space converging toward me; does someone desire to take my place?; curious to see a version of my circumstances from the outside.

O: parts of the perimeter fold into the space directly toward its contents; some forms multiply, some are displaced, resituated, or abandoned, while original image cross fades into the borders, leaving a new organization of some of the same elements; enter to replace someone either to experience their movement or, by reading the intentions of the others entering, choose to balance or unbalance the density of the image.

Next or Digress or Shift *instant change of activity, behavior, intention, energy*

I: quick snapshot to determine what I am NOT doing with the other players, what the space is NOT expressing, and tune in to that channel.

O: witness the composition vanish, with relief, grief, or curiosity; or enter the space to affect the change.

Go *signals all the elements are in motion, the dance can play out with no more calls*

I: carry or follow the dance to its natural end.

O: inhibit desires to call; be alert for an imminent end.

Reduce or Exit *dancer's choice to remain or exit*

Exit “_____” *name something you perceive in the space you want to erase: Exit “blue”/ ”trio”/ “objects”/ “tantrum”/ “thinking”...*

Resituate *observers move to wherever they choose*

Report *verbalize/vocalize local conditions while sustaining activity*

Restart *drop everything and start afresh*

Enter

Enter sound

Enter light

Insert *a brief digression until ‘End insert’*

Multiply or Join *enter to unison with any dancer*

Return *to a previous event of your choice*

Store *this moment of activity*

Restore *the previously stored moment*

Begin *signals a shift of attention*

Begin chapter two *announces a next proposition*

Collect *all players gather around the caller for brief discussion*

Begin epilog

End end

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