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Choreography of the “non-human” The monstrous as the product of contemporary dance’s bodies “beyond codes”

Abstract

Xavier Le Roy’s performance Self-Unfinished (1998) is emblematic of how contemporary dance’s resistance to the submission of the body to a codified ideal body model manifests itself through the staging of bodies “beyond codes”, i.e., bodies that take surprising, sometimes even apparently “monstrous” shapes. The purpose of this article is to investigate the “monstrosity” of Self-Unfinished and to sketch out an analysis of it following Hermann Schmitz’s theory of the Leib and Tonino Griffiero’s account on atmospheres.

Keywords:

Bodies “beyond codes”, Monstrous, Felt-bodily communication

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1. *Contemporary dance and the critique of a universal body model*

A significant example of the encounter between contemporary dance and the dimension of the “monstrous” can be found in French experimental choreographies focused on the invention of “stratégies corporelles de résistance et d’émancipation face à diverses formes d’assujettissement des corps” (Walon 2011¹). According to their authors – Xavier Le Roy, Maria Donata d’Urso, Odile Duboc, Alain Buffard, Julie Nioche – the body as staged for ballet and experienced by society results from the submission to an ideal body model passed off by society as natural when it is instead a “standardized” body conceived to create an identity that is functional to the political, economic and aesthetic purposes of contemporary Western society (Walon 2011, Foster 1996). By rejecting the ideal bio-aesthetic (Huesca 2004) underlying the body model promoted by ballet and disseminated by the media –according to which bodies must be young, extremely thin and free of defects and anomalies – the French experimental choreographers do not simply reject a specific code but the very idea of an “absolute body” forced to conform to an “absolute code” imposed by society for ulterior motives. Contemporary dance itself arises from the rejection of the codes and conventions of theatre and music to which the art of dance has been subjected since its origins. The critical reflection on the role of these codes –e.g., the modes of choreographed production, the secular system of representation, the notion of choreography itself, begun in the 1980s (Mayen 2004), is marked by a refusal to identify the body as an objective and fixed entity (Perrin 2008) and by the intent to make the dancing body the very subject of this reflection, a subject that challenges the concepts of the body and of dance (Huesca 2012). In this way, “on [passe] d’un corps qui s’efforce mais s’efface au profit du spectacle, au corps qui devient lui-même le ‘spectacle’, ce qu’il y a à voir (esthétiquement) et à comprendre (philosophiquement)” (Walon 2011), namely the body becomes the subject, the object and the tool of its own knowledge (Louppe 2007). According to Catherine Kintzler, in fact, the history of modern and contemporary dance may be interpreted as the history of the “avènement du corps réflexif” (Kintzler 2010: 129), a body that frees itself from the virtuosity of the “glorified body” of ballet and reclaims the stage prior to the advent of the “universal” ideal body

¹ Bibliographical references that do not include page numbers refer to quotations of journal articles that could not be consulted in printed form.

model imposed by ballet, where the possibilities of the body are indeterminate and subject to constant updating (Frétard 2004).

The aversion to the body model of ballet is rooted in its refusal of the conception of the body as “un objet anatomo-physiologique à magnifier” (Walon 2011) that grounds the training of ballet students at ballet academies. Subject to strict discipline, ballet students are taught standardised sequences of exercises according to the pre-determined poses to which all bodies should conform (Foster 1996) and thereby acquire a sculptural dimension in addition to increasing the ability of the body to push its physical capabilities to the maximum. Forcing themselves to meet these standards², ballets students lose the “multi-perception” (Ginot, Launay 2002: 110) of their own body, that conditions the possibility of dance. Ballet academies are therefore like factories producing both a standardised body, “un corps ‘nettoyé’ de son hétérogénéité, purifié de sa voix [...] un corps idéal où toute subjectivité serait dissoute au profit d’une danse absolutiste” (Ginot, Launay 2002: 110) and the perception of it for the viewer, i.e., they transmit to the public the same axiology that governs this body.

A questioning of the virtuosity and spectacularity that characterise this body (Mayen 2004) and the desire to account for the potentialities denied by this body model, are at the core of the choreographic movement of “non dance” that arose in France in the mid-20th century (Burighel 2016) and whose protagonists, as in the case of Xavier Le Roy, often coincide with the authors of the above-mentioned experimental choreographies. Far from denying dance, this movement aims to encourage self-criticism³ through the creation of bodily practices that resort to the over-exposure, the under-exposure and deformation of the

² Not only do students have to go through a strict selection process to enter an academy and to move on to the next year but, for example at the Opéra de Paris, they are recruited before the age of eleven so that it will not be necessary to devote too much effort to correcting previously acquired defects (Sadaoui 2003: 68). Moreover, it is worth noting that in many ballet academies students are forced to remain severely underweight during the development age, with serious consequences for their mental and physical health.

³ It is worth mentioning the “Association of signatories of the 20th august” (1997) whose members – dancers and choreographers – denounced the disparity of institutional and economic recognition between the world of dance and the world of music and theatre as well as the misrecognition of the equality of their work with that of researcher, accusing the *Centres Chorégraphique Nationaux* of not supporting artistic projects that did not follow their procedures and rules (cfr. Roux 2009).

body thus relentlessly undermining any attempt to model the body (Mercier-Lefèvre 1999).

This rupture is exactly what is achieved by French experimental choreographers to show alternative ways of being, perceiving and representing the body:

Ces chorégraphes cherchant, en réaction à ces modèles corporels uniformisants, à inventer des corporalités diverses en ouvrant la scène à des corps considérés comme étrangères, exotiques voire monstrueux à l’aune de normes en vigueur [...] en travaillant précisément par rapport à des normes qu’ils refusent, ces chorégraphes parviennent à créer “du jeu”, ce qu’il faut entendre dans les deux sens: ils parviennent à jouer par rapport aux normes et à ouvrir un espace, un latitude dans les représentations communes du corps. (Walon 2011)

It should be noted that the rejection of the heretofore dominant norms is neither a denial of the existence of norms nor an attempt to replace them with equally absolute norms, since this would reiterate the dichotomy between “coded” and “codeless” bodies. On the contrary, bodies “beyond codes”⁴ are bodies that do not conform to any absolute code, arising instead from their blending, assimilation, and simultaneous rejection of the normative aspects of relative and ever-changing codes, thus showing “la pluralité d’approches avec lesquelles on peut toucher au corps et la démultiplication des formulations relatives à la construction d’un code, et à la transgression de celui-ci” (Casale *et al.* 2017: 6). It is therefore not a matter of excluding the possibility of inventing new codes but of demanding the recognition of a dialectical relationship with codes and with the human body as a moving, unstable, reticular reality (Perrin 2008) in search of a liminal space, an “in-between” where bodies can manifest their singularities (Casale *et al.* 2017). It is the space inhabited by the imperfect and aged bodies who dance with children and young people in Jean-Claude Gallotta’s *Des gens qui dansant* (2006), where strangers to the world of dance take the stage in Jérôme Bel’s *The show must go on* (2001) and, lastly, where the “monstrous” body of

⁴ This denomination was introduced in occasion of the conference “Corps hors-codes. Dialectiques multiples entre pratiques dansées et techniques corporelles” that took place at the *Centre Nationale de la Danse* of Lyon on September 23-24, 2016. The use of the term “code” instead of “norm” is meant to evoke “les règles de l’apprentissage de la danse, de la construction corporelle et de la composition chorégraphique, qui tournent proprement autour d’une codification stylistique et esthétique” (Casale *et al.* 2017: 7).

Le Roy dwells between the “human and the non-human” in his *Self-Unfinished* (1998).

2. Self-Unfinished (1998)

A former microbiologist, independent choreographer and dancer considered among the representatives of the “non-dance” movement, Xavier Le Roy, denouncing both the inexhaustibility of the body concept conveyed by science and the rigidity of ballet (Le Roy 2002), treats the body like an instrument of critical practice tending to question everything we would prefer fixed in order to reassure ourselves (Caux 2001) and especially the representation and the perception of the body based on pre-existing conventional codes. The idea of *Self-Unfinished*, Le Roy’s first performance, comes exactly from the discovery, during his collaboration with the photographer Laurent Goldring for the work “Body Made”, of the ability to produce one after the other different images of his body. The performance is the result of Le Roy’s further exploration of this transformation of the human body, at the same time taking care to preserve the wholeness of the body during its transformation. Filming himself while improvising, Le Roy selects the images of his body that arise from certain movement sequences until he realises that his body can turn into something “other than human” (Cvejić 2014: 159). To give the spectator time to watch “how the body changes by movement, a multiplicity of other-than-human creatures and things [that] could arise in the human figure” (Cvejić 2014: 159), he situates himself in the ordinary ways that we look at humans, such as sitting, standing, walking and lying on the floor, creating a loop of postures, movements and still poses.

Initially, Le Roy sits rigidly at a table, watching as the spectators enter and take their seats; when all the spectators are seated, he stands and, moving his arms, hands and legs mechanically, while producing correspondingly mechanical noises, he walks up to a ghetto blaster and presses the start button. Nothing happens⁵. Continuing to walk, Le Roy becomes silent and, turning his t-shirt inside-out, he flips and pulls it over his torso, hiding his head. Then, he bends and begins to walk on all fours, with his head and the arms covered by the t-shirt, as if it were a skirt. Walking backwards, Le Roy reaches the wall and, facing it, he leans

⁵ The significance of this gestures lies in the effect it has on spectators who, expecting to hear a sound, sharpen their senses and thus their attention span.

toward it, bending his legs to form two right angles; upside down, he alternates walking with moments of stillness. Then, ducking under the table, he gathers himself and, moving beneath the table, he starts to undress until, when he positions himself facing the wall, he is completely naked. Here, the performer rearranges the parts of his body as if they were not parts of the same human body "exchanging the functions of arms and legs; arching the arms above the uplifted bottom in place of the missing head; facilizing the fists and palms in the air like sensors; rotating arms like legs on the floor by almost 180 degrees" (Cvejić 2015: 79). After a last still pose against the wall, Le Roy stands, dresses himself again and performs the loop of movements in reverse: he rearranges the table and the chair, resumes the seated position of the first scene, lies against the wall, presses the button on the ghettoblaster – this time music starts and it is, emblematically, Diana Ross' "Upside Down" – and he walks off the stage.

The peculiarity of this performance lies in the fact that, instead of trying to reproduce a certain image he has in mind thus predetermining what spectators would see, Le Roy explores "the ways in which the body could be decentred, shifting away from human figures" (Cvejić 2014: 159) staging not a series of metamorphoses from a human to a specific non-human figure but the oscillation between two potential images (Cvejić 2014). Le Roy, in fact, stages a series of "doublings" that are nevertheless only potential, as they are subject to different but equivalent interpretation so that two figures can be seen to coexist but, likewise, a single figure may appear. When, for example, Le Roy composes a human figure that is both masculine and feminine, he acknowledges that this figure could be seen as a man walking on feet and hands as well; likewise, his movements backwards are staged to be interpreted both as backwards and forward, according to the perspective of the viewer.

What creates both the oscillation between two potential images and the coexistence of several different figures, are Le Roy's movements, which, not fitting the performing body, call to mind a different figure from that staged. As the scholar and choreographer Bojana Cvejić points out: "The movement which transforms the body isn't applied to it [...] nor is the body the result of movement –the two are fused in a snapshot" (Cvejić 2014: 158). According to Cvejić, in fact, between Le Roy's body and movements, a series of "disjunctive captures" (Cvejić 2015: 74) occur rather than a synthesis, as they temporally converge to "'capture' and 'steal' from each other, evolving in 'a parallel' way" (Cvejić 2015: 74). Le Roy's doublings thus result from the staging of a pure po-

tentiality of undifferentiated alternatives as the brief encounter of two potential images which, at the same time, is the point of departure for a bifurcation into as many figures as each spectator will see. This is what grounds the operation of “becoming multiple” (Cvejić 2015: 81) that characterises the whole performance, manifesting itself not only in the doublings – a human and a robotic man, a masculine and feminine human, a man both alive and dead during still poses and a non-human body that disjoins and reassembles its body parts when he gathers himself upside down in front of the wall – but also in the multiplicity of human, animal or other non-human figures that spectators may see in the space left by the disjunctive captures from which doublings arise.

As this potentially unlimited multiplicity arises from Le Roy’s attempts to discover to what extent the human body can turn into something other within the limits of the human, spectators, unable to “delimit the form of figures or their relationship or single out one without taking the others all together at once” (Cvejić 2015: 79), are also unable to see the non-human figures separately from the human one from which they arise. This is the source of the monstrosity of Le Roy’s body, which stems from a body “beyond codes” body that hyperbolically but emblematically stages a challenge to codes, suggesting a dialectical relationship with them, made up of continuous entanglements and exchanges among relative and ever-changing codes, trying to overcome the dichotomy between the single and the multiple conceptualisation of the body not as something pre-determined but as the result of a continuous problematisation (Cvejić 2015: 75). Bodies “beyond codes” aim to trigger an alternative way of perceiving and experiencing oneself (Huesca 2015), depicted here in the staging of a body that continuously negotiates its identity with an illogical and paradoxical multiplicity of non-human figures and thus submits to a “pure processuality” (Huschka 2012: 325), an “anamorphic” process where no metamorphosis occurs. Precisely the absence of a final metamorphosis into a non-human entity makes this body appear “monstrous”, an unclassifiable hybrid entity that systematically escapes every attempt. As Cvejić points out:

“monstrosity” here reveals its more archaic etymology of “demonstrating”, “exhibiting” and “pointing to” what normally remains hidden. If Le Roy’s performance were to be captured in a series of snapshots, the multiple photographs would surely “exhibit” or “show” a body in transition, on its way to becoming other, that is to say, non-human (Cvejić 2011: 191).

It is therefore not the representation of a specific figure that leads spectators to define Le Roy's body as “monstrous” but rather the staging of a body “in transition” between the human and the non-human dimension of a body that does not belong to either and yet is somehow both. The continuous problematisation of the human image marks its systematic divergence from the habitual ways of identifying performers' bodies, revealing Le Roy's intent to challenge the tendency of society to categorise people through the attribution of an identity that puts an end to the process of becoming, which should characterise every individual, here represented as a process of becoming other than human. What usually remains hidden and is instead exhibited here is precisely what underlies this process, the “desire for transformation” (Cvejić 2014: 163) that, according to Le Roy, drives life itself and therefore “la puissance de transformation qui traverse [toutes les] formes [de vie]” (Le Roy, Cramer, Manchev 2009: 101).

As will become clearer later, the monstrosity of Le Roy's body emerges from multiple aspects that characterise the exhibition of such transformative power, strictly depending on how Le Roy's body appears in the eyes of the spectators, a way dictated by Le Roy's intention to make “unlearn” (Lista 2013: 28) the habitual ways of perceiving the human body. Le Roy, in fact, focuses on creating a “situation of escaping identification” (Cvejić 2014: 163) which is realised by the juxtaposition of contrasting elements, starting from the place where the performance is staged. Usually staged during a contemporary art event or dance festival, in a space illuminated by neon light also on the audience side, this place is unlike the “illusionistic space” of the theatre (Huschka 2012; Siegmund 2006) also because of the apparently everyday elements on the stage: a wall, a ghetto blaster, a table and a chair where an ordinary man is sitting. As Le Roy starts to move, however, the contrast of this performance with the everyday setting becomes tangible, marking the incongruence of these objects with the context in which they are placed, that seems more and more like that of a science laboratory.

It is, in fact, an experiment that Le Roy is carrying out, in the attempt to discover how movement transforms the perception of the human body, exploring how his body “moves in space and the point of view moves as well. If my body changes while moving in space, it is no longer the angle from which the viewpoint is constructed that produces the changes. It is the thing itself – i.e., my body that transforms independently of the viewpoint” (Cvejić 2014: 161). The transformation of Le Roy's body is therefore not merely the result of an optical illusion due to

the position it occupies in space, but is generated by Le Roy himself purposely moving in ways that will produce different perceptions of the same pose or movements.

The recognition of the body as Le Roy's is therefore impossible; Le Roy, in fact, never remains in a position long enough for the spectators to form an idea of it since the form suggested by his bodily configuration is immediately contradicted by the next one. This is so that spectators discover that “il y a d'une part l'impossibilité de fixer, et puis, d'autre part, il y a le fait que sans fixer, on ne peut pas comprendre, on ne peut pas avancer” (Le Roy, Cramer, Manchev 2009: 111). Immobilised by this paradox, deceived by their own attempts to solve the riddles posed by Le Roy's protean body, spectators watch helplessly as Le Roy destroys the whole recognition process:

Since no shape or configuration established itself long enough to become a recognizable image, recognition was inevitably frustrated [...] the spectator was constantly invited to think about the monstrous body in front of what it was supposed to be representing, while being forced to accept that no answer was forthcoming. Le Roy notes [...] “I wanted the question to be ‘what is that?’ and so invite the audience to ponder the meaning of these things placed in front of it [...] the richness of the performance was found in the way that the spectator could attribute different meaning to the same object (or same movement), and that each individual spectator would regularly remind himself/herself that the body s/he was gazing was both human and inhuman at the same time”. (Cveijć 2011: 191)

The “monstrous” appearance of Le Roy's body seems therefore closely linked to the spectators' experience of it, namely from the fact that Le Roy continually suggests a certain identification and then suddenly changes into something very different. This creates the aforementioned paradoxical situation where experience causes the spectators to end up in a seemingly dead-end situation in which they have no choice but to witness Le Roy systematically disregarding the expectations they cannot help forming. It seems possible, therefore, to claim that the spectators are affected by the same transformative power possessed by Le Roy's body, witnessing how it alters their view and experiencing their attention being “riveted, waiting for the next stirring. Like watching a spider or a snail” (Rainer 1999)⁶.

⁶ This quote is taken from the text of an email addressed to Le Roy by the dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer, quoted in Le Roy's personal website.

An explanation of how this de-formation of spectators’ viewpoint might affect their vision of Le Roy’s body and thus contribute to the detection of a monstrous body in it, is provided by the exponent of the non-dance movement Jérôme Bel:

Ces formes me sont apparues [...] monstrueuses. J’y ai vu un homme sans tête, une tête d’éléphant, un poulet prêt à rôtir [...] Il semblerait que Xavier Le Roy ne fasse que rendre visible des formes archaïques issues peut-être du reptile que nous fûmes il y a quelques millions d’années [...] Mais la plus déstabilisant de l’affaire, c’est qu’en tant que spectateur nous avons l’impression d’être les voyeurs, les regardeurs qui génèrent ces images [...] Nous éprouvons la très réelle et désagréable impression que nous projetons nos propres visions sur son corps qu’il nous offre comme un écran [...] Ce corps, globalement identique à celui de chaque spectateur [...] est monstrueux [...] Il possède des faces cachées. Mais revenons à cette idée de monstrosité pour la débarrasser de sa connotation négative, le monstre étant entendu comme un être qui dépasse ses propres limites. (Bel 2002: 92-7)

In this case, the performance seems to have deeply affected the spectator’s view to the extent that the vision of Le Roy’s body is inseparable from the disagreeable sensation of being the producer rather than the witness of these forms, which Le Roy limits himself to display as if on a screen⁷. The association of Le Roy’s body with the exhibition of something that is usually hidden recurs over and over here, and seems to concern the surfacing of humanity’s primitive, non-human past and a reawakening of the hidden fear of becoming non-human again.

The identification of the monstrous with something hidden leaking out is yet underpinned by the second meaning of monstrous is what Bel recognises at play in *Self-Unfinished*. Echoing the incompleteness suggested by the title of the performance, Bel emphasises how Le Roy continually exceeds limits: the human limit, in the staging of a robotic man, the sexual limit, in the staging of both a male and a female body and the limits of the body itself during still poses. The role of the spectator in the generation of Le Roy’s monstrous forms returns since, according to Bel, the performance culminates with the overcoming of this limit by the spectators themselves who, crossing the boundary between spectator and actor, have now the task of “assurer le spectacle [...] poursuivre le délire [et] laisser son imagination remplir l’espace de la scène” (Bel

⁷ A similar thesis is formulated by Gerald Siegmund, who claims that the spectator, unable to identify with what he perceives, designates it by resorting to his imaginary and thus producing illusions of aliens, monsters or mythical creatures (2006: 73).

2002: 96). Although it seems that the identification of the monstrosity of Le Roy with the overcoming of limits does not count for Le Roy's and his body's "beyond codes" intent to go beyond the dichotomy between what is inside and what is outside the limits, showing bodies that arise just from this blurring of the limits imposed by codes, it seems that the idea of the continuation by the spectators of the transformations tagged by Le Roy touches a key feature of *Self-Unfinished*.

In this regard, it is useful to focus on the still poses, i.e., those long seconds where Le Roy, cyclically, stands with his back turned to the audience facing the wall or lies in the fold between the floor and the wall, and are conceived by Le Roy as a strategy to disappear from space, becoming a vertical and a horizontal line, and to mark the repetition of the loop of movements that composes the performance. As regards his assimilation with the inanimate objects on the stage, this is revealed to be the expression of a process begun as the performance started, namely of Le Roy's attempts to be part of

the composition with the chair and the table, my legs being the additional legs of the chair, extending the objects. I try to make one entity out of three: the chair, the table, and myself [...] either I try to become an object, or I assemble in a composition with other objects. Hence the image isn't about stillness but about recomposing relations between the human figure and the things. (Cvejić 2014: 166-7)

During still poses, it thus becomes evident that Le Roy's transformation never concerns his body alone but its relationship with the objects and the surfaces on the stage. Still poses simply uncover this reticular relationship that connects Le Roy to these elements, marking an inversion between Le Roy and his surroundings, which comes to the foreground as Le Roy, by ceasing to move, forces the spectators to take an overview of the scene and to compare his stillness to the inanimate quality of the other objects. In this way, Le Roy appears to be the ganglion of a network which links him to all the elements of the scene, and which becomes more visible with each repetition of the loop of movements.

Conceived to reinforce the structure of the composition, these loops give the performance a circular structure, as if to highlight the different perceptions solicited by the same image. When Le Roy, executing in reverse his initial movements, sits down at the table to recreate the first scene, *Self-Unfinished* appears like a "palindrome" or a "Moebius strip" (Cvejić 2014: 167). However, the palindrome is "incomplete" (Cvejić 2015: 82) as it makes the spectator think that the performance is only

now ready to start, and thus making the previous events on the stage appear to be “a recollection of a lived past, or the memory of a past that never was” (Cvejić 2015: 82). Confused, the spectators are induced to think about this past, to rewind the performance in their own mind, as if it were their turn to continue the loop that composes the performance, thus creating a duality of the entire performance.

In light of these considerations, it seems possible to point to two aspects of *Self-Unfinished* that characterise the whole performance. First, as shown by the still postures, Le Roy’s movements and postures are not “non-human” as such but appear to be because of the peculiar way they are carried out, which manifests itself in the way Le Roy reacts to the touch of the objects and surfaces of the surroundings. Secondly, it seems appropriate to investigate in more detail how Le Roy’s body affects spectators leading them to define it “monstrous”.

These two aspects will be analysed through the notion of felt-bodily communication elaborated by the author of the new phenomenology Hermann Schmitz and through Tonino Griffero’s notion of felt-bodily resonance. In fact, to fully grasp what kind of interaction with the surroundings Le Roy introduces to transform the representation and the perception of the human body, it seems appropriate to analyse these aspects taking a neo-phenomenological approach. Although the art of the dance is not a central issue in the new phenomenology inaugurated by Hermann Schmitz, the valorisation by the latter of the dimension of the bodily experience as not reducible to that of the physical body through the notion of “felt” or “lived” body and a series of categories related to it, allows us to identify in this approach some useful tools to investigate the bodily experience at play in the dance. The categories introduced by the new phenomenology, in fact, offer an unprecedented insight into how decisive the role of the felt-bodily experience is, not only for the dancers but also for the spectators, especially in the introduction, typical of contemporary dance, of original ways of conceiving the body and its relationship with the surroundings.

3. To be touched by the surroundings. The role of embodied communication in Self-Unfinished

Focused on restoring access to the spontaneous life experience – “everything that happens to humans in a felt manner without being intentionally constructed” (Schmitz 2019a: 43) – after it had been denied by

Democritus, Plato and Aristotle⁸, new phenomenology rehabilitates a range of aspects of life experience obscured from these philosophers and since then neglected by the prevailing intellectual culture in Europe. At the centre of this rehabilitation there is the notion of felt body, the bodiliness that is not reducible to the anatomical body, coincident with “what someone feels in the vicinity (not always within the boundaries) of their physical body as belonging to themselves and without drawing on the senses, in particular, seeing and touching as well as the perceptual body schema (the habitual conception of one’s own body), derived from the experiences obtained through the senses” (Schmitz 2019a: 65). The felt body has a dynamic structure pivoted on a “vital drive” consisting of the interaction between opposite tendencies to contraction – whose extreme pole is narrowness – and expansion – whose extreme pole is expansiveness. According to the continuous oscillation between these tendencies, a range of positive or negative states – e.g., fear, anguish, pain, effort, pleasure – arises depending on whether contraction or expansion prevails, respectively (Schmitz 2011, 2019a). Correspondingly to these affective states, “felt-bodily isles” are formed, dissolved and transformed; these are indivisible, pre-dimensional and surfaceless areas – through which the felt body probably guides the physical body – correspondent to some areas of the physical body – e.g., to the chest, back, stomach, soles – but without being reducible to the anatomical organs they contain.

The first aspect that allows us characterise Le Roy’s experience on stage in terms of a felt-bodily experience is Le Roy’s way of moving, which forces us to think that he does not find himself in ordinary space, i.e. the “local” space of the physical body, “a space consisting of *relative loci* that define themselves in a three-dimensional grouping by means of position and distance” (Schmitz 2002: 492) but in the pre-dimensional,

⁸ Crucial, in this respect, is the distinction these philosophers made between mind and body and the consequent “grinding” of the external world: “Thinking in terms of matter and form already begins as early as Democritus (in the image of the shaping of man) and, in Plato and Aristotle, becomes a motif that foreshadows a technical orientation. According to this schema, man is divided into body and soul. Here the body functions as materiel and servant, while the soul is its shaping force and helmsman. The soul becomes a closed-off inner sphere with an enclosed mind, which can only be accessed from the outside through the five senses. With the exception of a few standard types of features, i.e. unspecific sense qualities (size, shape, number, motion, position, order), and their posited carriers (atoms), the external world is ground down. The remainder of this grinding down is, quite literally, disposed of in the soul or ignored and then furtively dragged along in it” (Schmitz 2019a: 55).

surfaceless and dynamic volume underlying that, where movements follow suggestions of motion and felt-bodily irreversible directions reaching or moving from the absolute narrowness of the felt body to undefined vastness. Le Roy's movement in so-called “felt-bodily directional spatiality” seems to be evident particularly in the ease with which Le Roy moves backward, which can be explained only by referring to the absence of any need of vision to orient himself and thus for the habitual orientation system – the perceptual scheme – based on the visualisation of relative positions and distances in and from relative places (Schmitz 2019b: 69-71). On the contrary, dance movements backward resort to the motor scheme, the orientation system related to the felt-bodily directional-spatiality, based on felt-bodily irreversible directions and on the felt-bodily isles which arise and organize themselves accordingly.

In dealing with backward dance movements, Schmitz refers to the considerations of Erwin Straus on this subject, which we briefly summarize. According to Straus, the difference between backward walking and backward dancing lies in the different spatial modes where these movements take place (Straus 1960). In everyday life, we move in an “optical”, “historic” space, carrying out goal-directed movements from and to definite positions. This space is divided according to the main directions of front and back, following the distinction between the battle-field and the escape field. Thus, backward movements are directed against the impulse actually triggered by the space and are therefore perceived as forced and as uncomfortable so that they are carried out with a constant fear of encountering obstacles. On the contrary, when we move backward while dancing, we do not perceive this dynamic and thus our movements do not run counter to the dynamic impulses imposed by space. Dance movements, in fact, are spontaneous movements that take place in homogenous space and are free of directional differences. They are “acoustic” spaces engendered by the music that guides them. Unlike Straus, Schmitz does not think that the different need for orientation found in non-purposeful dance movements derives from the lack of perception of countering the dynamic impulse of space. This is true not only because when one flees, he does not turn back on the direction he is going but, above all, because the difference in the need for orientation is due to the fact that those who walk backwards lack vision, which is not necessary while dancing backwards (Schmitz 2019b: 69-71). Moreover, the space where we move while dancing is not characterised by the absence of direction but by the presence of felt-bodily directions that move from or to the felt-bodily narrowness in

relation to the undefined vastness and according to which felt-bodily isles arise and organize themselves.

Following Schmitz, Le Roy's movements follow the felt-bodily directions coming from the surfaces and the objects on stage. Although a non-improvised dance performance is not a typical example of spontaneous life experience, the sequences of movements of *Self-Unfinished* result from an improvisational compositional process so that it is not improbable that the felt-bodily directions have had a decisive role in actually determining the movements staged. Moreover, as the performance is the occasion for Le Roy to go further in his investigation and also to test the efficacy of his strategies, it is possible that Le Roy exposes himself even more to the stimuli coming from the surroundings, allowing them to define the quality of his movements. These stimuli are provided by the qualities of the objects on stage, which act as “synaesthetic characters”, i.e., intermodal properties inherent to specific sensitive qualities that occur even in the absence of synaesthesia and that are transferred from what is seen to the felt body (Schmitz 2011: 34-5; 2015: 54-7), triggering an immediate adaptation of the way in which movements will be carried out.

The relationship thus established between Le Roy and the objects on stage is a case of a “felt-bodily communication”, i.e., “a kind of interplay between a person and a partner that need not be alive [...] it is motor and sensory and involves the felt body due to intermediate qualities [...] Thus cooperation without any interval between receiving a signal and reacting to it becomes possible” (Schmitz 2002: 492). The interplay that occurs between Le Roy and the objects and the surfaces he interacts with is a case of embodied communication, the felt-bodily communication that emerges from the straddling of the dialogue between contraction and expansion⁹ that occurs in one own felt body as “a form of communication between partners” (Schmitz 2019a: 67). As Le Roy interacts with the objects and the surfaces around him, he is affected by their synaesthetic qualities, his vital drive unfolds in a felt-bodily communication giving rise to a shared vital drive. Since it is the objects that affect Le Roy, leading him to respond to their qualities in his gaits, and not the other way around, this is a case of “antagonistic unilateral embodiment”, where the pole of felt-bodily narrowness of this vital drive

⁹ When we are affected by a pain, we experience such a dialogue in the form of a conflict between “the partly expansive (crying, panting, rearing up) and the partly contracting (clenching fists, clenching one's jaw) pain gestures” (Schmitz 2019a: 66).

common to two partners arising from their interaction is held exclusively by the objects, which guide the direction of the embodiment from narrowness to expansiveness.

This characterisation of Le Roy’s interaction with his surroundings effectively accounts for the above-mentioned “network” that connects Le Roy with his surroundings, allowing us to identify in the objects he interacts with the source of his “dualities”: Le Roy’s own body and, in general, the compositions he forms with the objects on stage. The synaesthetic characteristics of the latter act “protopathically” or “epicritically”¹⁰ on Le Roy’s felt body, soliciting respectively an expansion – which triggers the arising of the felt-bodily isles – and a contraction – which keeps the felt-bodily isles together, maintaining the unity of the felt body (Schmitz 2011).

As regards the “dualities” staged at the beginning, the man and robotic body, it seems to result from an epicritical contraction that involves Le Roy, provoked by the hardness, the rigidity and the angularity of the table and the chair, transmitted to Le Roy’s posture and movements, through which he tries to “extend” those of these objects (Cvejić 2014: 166). In the male and female body that appears shortly afterwards, it is instead particularly evident how this duality derives from the differentiation of the movements of the arms and the legs, to which the effects solicited by the synaesthetic characters of Le Roy’s clothes considerably contribute. While leg movements benefit from the greater range of motion provided by the trousers worn by Le Roy, the movements of the arms are constrained to a more limited range of action granted by the degree of elasticity of the shirt that covers his arms like a skirt. The fluency of Le Roy’s backwards walk greatly depends on the influence exerted by the synaesthetic characters of the floor; its being flat and unobstructed, smooth but not slippery, act protopathically on Le Roy. The soles of the feet and the palms of the hands, pressing on the floor as if they were webbed, drawing a slight impetus from the floor which invites all movements to fluently flow, as if they were “dragged” backward by an invisible force.

¹⁰ With these terms, borrowed by the neurologist Henry Head, Schmitz designates a dimension of the felt body additional to that constituted by contraction and to contraction and expansion, consisting of the epicritic tendency, which is pointed and sharp – e.g. a stabbing toothache – and closer to narrowness, the protopathic, which spreads in a dull and diffuse manner, is closer to expansiveness – e.g. the dull radiating abdominal pain (Schmitz 2011: 23-5).

The action exerted on Le Roy's body by the surroundings becomes visible in still poses, which emblematically exemplify Le Roy's aim to “merge with the environment by my posture and type of presence” (Cvejić 2014: 165). Particularly, here Le Roy tries to become “the contact between the wall and my body, and the floor and my body” (Cvejić 2014: 166), allowing us to identify in his still poses the result of the unilateral antagonistic embodiment of the wall and the floor vehiculated by the synaesthetic characters of these surfaces. Specifically, when Le Roy tries to appear as a vertical line, an epicritic contraction seems to prevail and keep his felt-bodily isles united as he props himself up with his knees and the side of the feet against the wall to maintain balance, while, when Le Roy lies in the fold between the wall and the floor, a protopathic expansion seems to pervade his felt-body, soliciting the formation of felt-bodily isles correspondent to the soles, of the palms of the hands and of the chest.

The peculiarity of the still poses lies in the ambiguity of Le Roy's stillness which, rather than marking an interruption of the transformative flow staged, manifest a key aspect of it. In watching these scenes, in fact, spectators realise that they are unable to interpret Le Roy's stillness with that of, for example, a man performing an act of balance or a sleeping man, finding rather more analogies with the inanimate objects around him. Thus, they experience the inversion we have already mentioned, between the background and the foreground, which marks Le Roy's withdrawal from space as an acting person and his emergence as a person “acted upon”. The exhibition of the transformative power that drives the process of becoming other than human staged here, and in which Cvejić identifies the monstrosity of Le Roy's body, seems ultimately to coincide with the exhibition of the transformative power that surrounds us in the lived space and is continually exerted upon us.

4. Monstrosity as the product of felt-bodily resonance

The role played by the involvement of *Self-Unfinished* spectators in the ascription of “monstrosity” to Le Roy's body will be analysed, investigating how spectators are felt-bodily affected throughout this performance¹¹ resorting to the notion of “felt-bodily resonance” elaborated by

¹¹ Although I acknowledge that the analysis of the relationship that occurs between the performer and the spectator lends itself to be analysed following the recent stud-

Tonino Griffero (Griffero 2016; 2020a)¹² Schmitz’s conception of felt-bodily communication.

Focused on the manner in which we are affected by involuntary life experiences, following Schmitz’s neo-phenomenology and the project of a pathic aesthetic ontology (Griffero 2014; 2017), Griffero considers the felt body a “sounding board” (Griffero 2020a: 108) for atmospheres which are “feelings poured out into lived and pericorporeal space” (Griffero 2020a: 97) that constantly invite us to act or perceive something. Following the thesis that our pre-reflexive, felt-bodily relationship with atmospheres is the in-betweenness that ontologically precedes the existence of the subject and the world, this view acknowledges the power exerted by atmospheres upon us defining them as “quasi-things” (Griffero 2014; 2016; 2017), i.e., “half-identities that, for their intrusive expressiveness, affect us like partners” (Griffero 2016: 1).

Felt-bodily resonance is the experience we live when something unpredictable happens to us, generating an atmospheric feeling that resonates in our felt-bodily isles and thus triggers a felt-bodily communication with that which affects us. As regards the kinds of atmospheres that exist, Griffero, differently from Schmitz, admits the production of atmospheres, beyond the “prototypical” atmospheres (the objective, unintentional external atmospheres that for Schmitz constitute the only atmospheres), which may also be “derivative” (external, produced from the interaction between individuals and between individuals and objects) and “spurious” (subjective and projective) atmospheres (Griffero 2014; 2016; 2017).

Before analysing the resonance triggered by the atmospheres that occur in *Self-Unfinished*, it is necessary to stress that a dance perfor-

ies on empathy – as I intend to do in the future – I will limit myself here to an analysis based on the lexicon and the categories of new phenomenology and particularly to Tonino Griffero’s account on felt-bodily resonance.

¹² The recurse to the notion of resonance to describe the relationship between the performers and the audience according to a new-phenomenological approach is provided by Undine Eberlein (Eberlein 2011; 2013; 2017) and Hilge Landweer (Landweer 2013; 2015). While Eberlein identifies resonance as a special for of felt-bodily communication based in a sort of passage of the performer’s movements to the spectator, who experience on his own felt body the intensity and the quality of these movements (even without being able to perform them), Landweer points out that resonance, beside this felt-bodily communication, also involves the generation of an atmosphere by the artist occurs. Although worthy of attention and investigation, these accounts do not seem to provide the tools able to explain what role resonance could have in leading spectators to describe Le Roy’s body as “monstruous”.

mance is not a typical involuntary experience but rather an experience influenced by a series of factors that precede the performance and concern, for example, the familiarity with Le Roy's or other contemporary performances as well as the context itself where the performance takes place such as a contemporary art event or dance festival. The component of involuntariness of the spectators' experience of the performance lies therefore in the way in which the expectations generated by these factors are confirmed or disregarded.

As *Self-Unfinished* is conceived to solicit in spectators a continuous self-interrogation about what they are seeing and, pivoting on their inability to solve the riddles Le Roy poses to them and on the consequent feeling of self-contradiction, focuses on preventing spectators from feeling a “syntonic” encounter with the atmosphere generated, namely a “felt-bodily state of well-being that momentarily prevents some particular isles from emerging and promotes an uncritical fusion with the external reality” (Griffero 2020a: 110). Systematically disregarding these expectations, continuously taking spectators by surprise and misleading them, *Self-Unfinished* provokes the alternation of different moods that modify the spectators' first-impression atmosphere – the first atmospheric feeling felt – correspondently to the self-interrogation solicited by him. The atmospheric feelings felt by spectators are therefore always connected to a cognitive component, which comprehends both their expectations related to their previous knowledge of contemporary dance and the unanswered questions about Le Roy's identity and next moves.

Depending on the degree of involvement of the spectators as well as on the moment of the performance, it seems possible to detect the following kinds of felt-bodily resonance: 1. a discrepant resonance, 2. a syntonic resonance related to 1., 3. a syntonic resonance felt by less involved spectators, 4. a resonance solicited by an “antagonistic” atmosphere.

As regards 1. this resonance, that inhibits a “fluid bodily behaviour [...] induc[ing] an epicritical contraction giving birth to individual felt-bodily isles of which the subject was previously unaware” (Griffero 2020a: 110), seems to affect mainly those spectators who are more immersed in the dominant atmosphere and thus more susceptible to changes in mood according to every single change in Le Roy's way of moving. This resonance, in fact, seems to be responsible for the ascription of monstrosity to Le Roy's body, which seems to be the outcome of a sort of *crescendo* that characterises the succession of atmospheric

feelings that fuels the spectators’ sense of uneasiness and discomfort. Specifically, astonishment, curiosity, frustration, helplessness and a sense of alienation and generic uneasiness are the principal atmospheric feelings that seem to recur cyclically throughout the performance, triggering a discrepant felt-bodily resonance, which seems to increase in intensity as it builds up. At the very beginning of the performance, the atmospheric feelings triggered by the cold lighting and colours of the scene, in strong contrast with the everyday objects on the stage, generate a sense of surprise, to which is added a sense of disorientation that increases as the apparently reassuring presence of these everyday objects is definitively knocked out by Le Roy’s continuous transformations. The uninterrupted vision of the series of distortions, disjunctions, and reassemblies that compose Le Roy’s “performative body” (Huschka 2012: 325) has a key role in the generation of a sense of discomfort and uneasiness in one’s own body that seems to coincide with the arising of felt-bodily isles of which spectators were not aware before, likely corresponding to the parts of Le Roy’s body that he disjoins and reassembles, as if they were detachable parts. Spectators may feel as if they were being dismembered and reassembled, “acted upon” by the same transformation that possesses Le Roy’s body.

Emblematic, in this respect, is how Le Roy’s nudity affects the spectators; when Le Roy, completely naked, facing the wall, disjoins, reassembles and moves his limbs mechanically, his unequivocally human body appears as disturbing to the spectators’ eyes, as it emphasises how Le Roy’s withdrawal from the human dimension occurs within the human dimension itself: “Il n’est plus question de reconnaître, un bras, un pied, une fesse, un homme ou une femme. Sans visage et sans sexe, ce corps dénudé déjoue les figurations traditionnelles de l’identité humaine” (Huesca 2015: 46). In this way, in fact, the human body no longer looks the same and not only the body on stage but also the spectators do not feel their bodies in the same way. In fact, Le Roy’s nudity produces “[un] état [...] de corps proches de l’usuel, mais suffisamment dissemblant pour faire apparaître un autre réel” (Huesca 2006: 581) that triggers in spectators a sense of alienation and unease in their own body characterised by a series of felt-bodily isles that arise in the parts of the body hidden, disjoined and reassembled by Le Roy. Decisive, in the perception of a “monstrous” creature in Le Roy’s body, seems to be the mingling of these feelings with the sense of insecurity and frustration that characterises their self-interrogation about Le Roy’s identity and culminating with the paradoxical situation of not being able to rec-

ognise what they see and at the same time of not being able to prevent themselves from trying to identify it. Thus, the feelings of discomfort, uneasiness and alienation in their own body seem to increase as spectators realise that they are not able to cognitively control Le Roy's continuous escape from attempts to identify him.

The accumulation of these feelings seems to trigger a feeling of widespread discomfort that marks the occurrence, at the end of the performance, of a syntonic encounter (2) with the atmosphere generated by Le Roy's body. The accumulation of sensations that increases Le Roy's sense of unease seems to culminate in this resonance, characterised by the absence of engagement of specific felt-bodily isles and by a generalised state of malaise, for which spectators would not be able to attribute a precise cause. This sensation seems to be closely linked to the acknowledgment of being unable to explain what kind of figures Le Roy is representing during the performance thus leading the spectators to find in the definition of “monstrous” the most appropriate way to characterise Le Roy's body and his way of acting on the spectators. The connection with the monstrosity of Le Roy's body and the sensation of being acted upon in an uncontrollable process of transformation seems to culminate in the final scene where, in front of Roy who returns to be the ordinary man of the beginning of the performance, spectators cannot help thinking back to previous deformed body of Le Roy, thus realising the existence of a monstrosity that no longer belongs to him. This seems to be the consequence of the felt-bodily discrepant resonance that best characterises the experience of the whole performance and that now, operating in the background, prevents spectators from feeling the way they felt at the beginning of the performance.

The third case of felt-bodily resonance concerns spectators who, likely because they are less familiar with contemporary dance or art, are involved only at a distance in the performance (3). What we have described so far, in fact, does not necessarily happens to all viewers of *Self-Unfinished*; as already mentioned, in fact, it seems that spectators who, not responding to Le Roy's provocations as he would like, are less felt-bodily involved and thus less inclined to see in Le Roy's body a monstrous body. For example, there might be spectators who, despite focusing on Le Roy's body, do not begin to wonder what Le Roy is staging but rather what kind of strategies of movements he is exploring. Although these spectators might feel a discrepant resonance corresponding to a particular configuration taken by Le Roy's body, it seems that a syntonic

felt-bodily resonance prevails, particularly during Le Roy’s fluid backwards walks or still poses.

An extreme case of the former seems to be represented by those spectators who experience the fourth felt-bodily resonance identified (4), i.e. spectators who, viewing Le Roy’s provocations, right from the first scenes or from a certain point in the performance onwards, emerge from the dominant atmosphere and experience a different atmospheric feeling and the syntonetic or discrepant resonance corresponding to it (for example, Le Roy’s provocations might make spectators feel annoyed, bored or even leave them indifferent)¹³. It is a case of “antagonistic” atmosphere (Griffero 2016: 25) according to which the person in question, although able to recognize and even to describe the atmosphere generated (Griffero 2016; 2020a; 2020b) resists it for generating “a relatively different atmosphere from the one expected” (Griffero 2016: 25). In the third and in the fourth cases it seems that the monstrosity of Le Roy’s body might appear only in part or not at all; although the spectators in question might acknowledge that others could see Le Roy’s body as “monstrous”, it does not seem so to them. It seems, in fact, that their felt-bodily disposition, influenced by the degree of their knowledge about contemporary dance or art, does not allow them to feel the general feeling of uneasiness that derives from the accumulation of negative sensations caused by the sight of Le Roy’s transformation together with those derived from the acknowledgment of not being able to rationally grasp what they are watching, and which is acting upon them.

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¹³ Another possibility is that the spectators maintain a certain detachment so that, instead of trying in vain to solve the riddles posed by Le Roy’s ever-changing body, they let themselves to be amazed by the continuous transformations of the latter, feeling only a sense of curiosity and maybe even a pleasant feeling.

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