

## Movement Observation Guidelines

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"Since all dance is different, all viewing must attempt to start with an open field. We don't work from a checklist of effort qualities or body parts -- or steps in a vocabulary of movement, or anything else. We look at what's "there" -- meaning, what claims our attention. Legs might claim our attention but not arms. Quickness but not strength. Jumping but not standing still. Groups but not individuals. A prop or a set piece. If a group of observers lists these things in the course of watching the dance -- I usually have students do it in the first five to ten minutes of the dance -- without passing judgment on them or trying to sort them out, we come up with a bunch of more or less miscellaneous items we call the lexicon of that dance. We can check everyone's list against everyone else's to make sure we haven't left anything out and that we've listed things at the most condensed but comprehensible level. Without burrowing into minutiae or smothering in the obvious, we try to list what's used prominently and most often." Marcia Siegel, "Accessing the Nonverbal -- Again," unpublished ms., 1991.

The first question to ask yourself is:

*What stands out for me?*

Also pay attention to the following aspects to help you arrive at deeper insights:

### Setting: Overall event

Where is this? (Environment): Indoors or outdoors? such as: theatre, plaza, streets, etc. What is the layout or ground plan of the space? What other activities is the space used for? What is the relation of people's movement to surrounding space; are there boundary markers?

When is this event? Time of year, day, season. Is it part of a larger cycle? (like school year; ritual cycle, calendar). Does the event mark a special time? (like a birthday, holiday, etc.) Is it done for a purpose? How long is the event and are there special movement segments within it? If it is a dance event, what kinds of other activities surround the dancing? At what points in the event does dance occur? How many times? What is the sequence of activities within the event? How does time ebb and flow?

Who's moving/dancing? Who's there and not moving/dancing? (Consider both participants & spectators). Who's not there at all? Is anyone allowed to participate? Are there special social relationship between participants or between participants and observers? (like family, tribe, age group). Are there hierarchical relationships expressed? How so? Who leads the event? Are there specific roles? Performance roles? Are there support systems? What is expected of people at this event?

### Time: The beat

Dance is always organized by a beat or pulse. Often, non-dance events also have hidden patterns of rhythm and synchronization. Try to register the beat or pulse of the event. How fast or slow does it move and/or change? What is its characteristic rhythm? How is the pulse elaborated or orchestrated in movement patterns, gestures, sounds? Is there a continuous flow in time or does time seem to be punctuated? How are time changes created? Are there boundaries in time?

Is there someone who seems to initiate or determine the pulse or beat? How? If it is a dance, how is the beat given? By musicians? What instruments? Vocally? By the dancers? Do they make sound?

Do people move with the beat/pulse or against it? Are they "in synch"? Try to move into synch; try to move out of synch. Is there a lot of rhythmic repetition? What kinds of moves do people do in relation to the overall rhythms?

How does the rhythm or pulse effect you? What is its mood? Can you find words to describe its energy? What is the feeling of time passing for this event?

### Shape

What is the characteristic shape, or body posture, of individuals? Is there any "correct" or "incorrect" posture? What is the basic position of the trunk (silhouette)? Is it consistent in the whole group? Is it different for different people? Men and women? Young people and old people? People with different social statuses? Are there characteristic body types?

Are body shapes changed by clothing? By things held or worn? Do interactions make shapes? How do body shapes change through the course of the event? Is there any pattern to this?

What are the characteristic gestures? Close in or extended out from the body? Are gestural patterns continually repeated? (Hands/arms, legs, head)

What do postural and gestural shapes reveal about individuals? About the group?

### Space: Floor pattern

(You can think here of physical space, social space, and sometimes spiritual space).

Space refers to the way setting (space, scale, furniture, other people, etc.) influences people's actions and attitudes; it may influence movements, moods, habits, or interactions. What is the "feeling" of the space? (constricts, channels, expands action, calms, excites, etc.) How does the space, and the objects within it, "choreograph" human action? Note how the environment works on people and how specific individuals respond to the environment. What seems to be the "comfort zone" of "personal space"? How do people turn "space" into "place"?

What is the ground plan? Where is the furniture, the pathways, the open spaces? What spatial patterns do people follow? What designs in space? Emphasis on individuality or group? Are there dominant individuals? How many people are there? What is the spatial relationship between people? (group circle, couple formation, line, etc.) How does it change? Note entrances and exits, changes of direction. Are there different spaces for doing different kinds of things? Performance space vs. viewing space? Specific roles associated with specific spaces?

### Focus of attention

On what are people focused? For example, are they attending to material objects (such as the surroundings or people)? Are they performing "for show" as if for an audience? Directed inward? Is there a "functional focus" (such as where am I going to put my feet)?

What direction are they looking? What direction are they facing? Does direction-facing make you change *your* focus?

### Making connections

While observing, consider the possibility of symbolic, social (power, identity, etc.), and sacred meanings for what you notice, the relation between the details of action and possible cultural meanings. All movement forms and habits have social significance. What might these be?

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