

## dora smék

the dance of the headless body

27.03 – 22.05.2021

### For How Long Can a Headless Body Dance?

Veronica Stigger

#### *Dance*

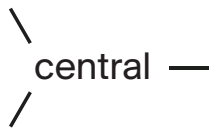
Before focusing in Fine Arts, Dora has devoted herself to dance for many years, having gone through a variety of techniques. Out of all those techniques, the ones that made an impression on her were traditional Irish dance, which she has practiced for over a decade and a half, and Flamenco. While the former took her to the air, the latter brought her back to the ground. In Irish dance, told me Dora, all strength lies on the rectus femoris area that pushes the body up. It's a light, bouncy dance in which the torso barely moves while the legs look like engines in a repetitive rhythmic movement. It's a straightforward dance. Flamenco, for instance, never loses its connection to the ground. The foot strongly stamps the ground and then is raised only to come down stamping again, as if expecting a reaction from the ground. While feet are planted down the ground, arms and hands twirl around the twisting and turning body. It's a spiral dance. Contrasting to Irish dance, which is based on continuous movement, the Flamenco *bailaor* suddenly upholds the step only to vigorously resume it the very next moment. Like Dora herself has defined, there's energy upholding and explosion in Flamenco – two aspects that seem to be essential to her artistic practice.

In the transition from dance to fine arts, the “explosion” in Dora's work turns into “extravasation”, “overflow”, or as expressed in the neologism created by the artist to name one of her earliest pieces, through which she emphasizes the very action of spilling over the edges – “transbordação” (“extravasaction”). The idea of something that bursts out, that can't be contained, that overflows, that won't fit, is maintained; and it cuts through the noise. Limits are crossed, but quietly so. In *Extravasaction* (2010) a group of women lined up in contiguous rows urinate in their pants, as if they can't hold it any longer. According to Dora, her subsequent pieces are nonetheless developments of this performance. Most sculptures gathered in *The Dance of the Headless Body* are based on this tension between limitation and extravasation, contention and expansion. Like a duo performance in which dancers confront each other instead of dancing together, tables and pipes seem to try and constrain the body, which, for its part, attempts to escape the constraints imposed.

Maybe, for Dora, the solution for contention has always been in dancing, i.e., on the moving body – but not in a routine move (like walking, running, opening doors, grabbing something from the closet, going up or down the stairs, etc). The origin myth of this play on contention and extravasation possibly stems from a remarkable event from her personal life, which she doesn't recall, yet it was conveyed by family accounts. A painful, tragic and cautionary tale like every “orthopedics of form”: when she was a little over a year old, she's been in a car accident in which her tiny body broke through the windshield and was flung over 50 yards ahead. Since her legs were broken, they were enclosed in a shoe box for a long time. Once recovered, she had to learn how to walk again. However, her first steps were not for walking, but for dancing. That is the “Dionysian magic” as advocated by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher communal nature: he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is well on the way to dancing himself aloft into the heights”.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Douglas Smith, Oxford University Press Inc, New York, 2000, pp. 23.



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#### *Body*

In the pieces here presented, the body is not displayed at full-length, but in fragments. At times, glimpses of fingers (*Duplo*), a fist (*Agulha*), a foot (*Garganta*), a hand (*Arma*), are offered at one of the ends of a twisted tube cast in iron – a material often used in handcuffs and prison bars. Not incidentally, the Portuguese saying “estar a ferros” (something like “being ‘at irons’” when taken literally) means “being imprisoned”, which is a more brutal way of saying “being restrained”. In *Canibais*, a femur seems to get away from the appetite of an iron tube supported by a long rod. In three additional pieces, the agent of action is a pelvic girdle – the center of the body and the main fulcrum in dance. In *Duplo* and *Colo*, the twisted tube is embraced and compressed by the pelvis. In the former, one of the ends of the tube reveals three red fingers. In *Barra*, the pelvis chokes the barre, commonly found in dance studios, like an enraged revenge for all the physical exertion suffered. Meanwhile, on a slightly curved aluminum table, the series *Dobras* displays sectioned body parts – all made from casts of the artist’s body, like her hands, fingers and feet. *Dobras #1* features a row of a knee, an elbow and a heel; *Dobras #2*, a shoulder, a knee and a heel; and *Dobras #3*, five incomplete fingers. The fragments – particularly the ones from *Dobras #1* and *Dobras #2* – are barely determinable, like pieces of meat tossed on a table.

Made of polished aluminum, which gives them an aseptic look, the tables resemble dissecting tables, where the chopped-up body volunteers to the study of anatomy. There’s a hint of that broken beauty<sup>2</sup> mentioned by Georges Didi-Huberman about the dissection table. Recalling the famous passage from *Maldoror*, in which Lautréamont says a character is “beautiful like the fortuitous meeting on a dissecting table between a sewing machine and an umbrella”, Didi-Huberman notes: “the two surprising objects, the sewing machine and the umbrella, are not what is most important; what matters is the support for engagements that defines the table itself as a resource of beauties or new knowledge – analytic knowledge, knowledge through cuts, reframings, or ‘dissections’.”<sup>3</sup>

The table from Dora’s piece is so overly polished it also functions as a mirror. The body parts see their reflection on it: Narcisus faces the dissection table, a broken Narcisus, a Dionysus-Narcisus. Let’s not forget that before being mangled by the Bacchae, Dionysus – god of ecstasy, of frenzy –, had been torn apart by the Titans, who had caught him staring at a mirror.

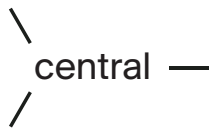
#### *Headless*

The body which dances in Dora’s work is not just any body, but a headless one. Among images that inspire her, there’s the chicken running around with its head cut off. But for how long can a headless body dance? When faced with a body sectioned by a guillotine – a deadly tool and a novelty of his times – writer Victor Hugo has asked himself: “Will the head or the body be the ghost?”<sup>4</sup> In our conversation, Dora told me “When I danced, I wished to see myself from the outside”. If, from her perspective, dancing represents a way of coming out of herself, then the body is the one who becomes the ghost, achieving further existence beyond the materiality of the flesh. In a passage of his book about the brilliant re-inventor of Flamenco, Israel Galván, Didi-Huberman recalls that Domenico da Piacenza, master of

<sup>2</sup> Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Atlas, or, The Anxious Gay Science*, translated by Shane Lillis. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem, ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Hugo, Victor, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, translated by Arabella Ward. New York: Dover Publications, 2009, pp. 69.



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Renaissance dance, once stated that “dancing is a kind of art that transforms the body into a *phantasm* or into a *phantasmal shadow*”, thus establishing “a direct link between flesh and air, body and psyche”<sup>5</sup>. *Phantasm* could be a substitute word for image here.

But why making a headless mangled body dance? Georges Bataille would reply: because the acephalic body is a free body. In an essay published in 1936, in the first edition of his magazine *Acéphale*, Bataille stated: “Man has escaped his head like a condemned man escaping from prison”. The acephalic being is the one who doesn’t conform to “our world of cultivated vulgarity”; it’s the Dionysian being, if you will: “Life has always proceeded in a tumult with no apparent sense of cohesion, but finds its splendor and its reality only in ecstasy and in ecstatic love. Whoever tries to ignore or disregard ecstasy is an incomplete individual whose thinking is thereby reduced to mere analytical processing. Existence is not only a restless void – it is a dance that compels us to dance like fanatics.”<sup>6</sup>

It’s significant that *Virada*, one of the pieces here displayed, has been based on Blanche’s hand gesture in the painting *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* (1887), by André Brouillet. The painting shows a lecture delivered by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot’s, who is portrayed next to one of the diagnosed women during her hysterical seizure, made evident by the contraction of the muscles of her arm. In one of his early essays about hysteria, written while he worked with Charcot, Sigmund Freud realized it wasn’t a disease caused by some physical disorder, since the stiffness and contraction of the muscles during a seizure wouldn’t follow the organism’s regular paralysis: “in its paralyzes and other manifestations, hysteria behaves as though anatomy did not exist or as though it had no knowledge of it”<sup>7</sup>. What this meant was that, if the hysterical convulsive body didn’t behave like the physical body, then it was an untamable body, who wasn’t ruled by neuroanatomical tenets or rationality; a body that, from Bataille’s perspective, could be considered acephalic; in essence, a free body, despite being restrained in a psychiatric institution, another variant of a prison.

Surrealists André Breton and Louis Aragon saw hysteria not as a disease, but as a “supreme vehicle of expression”<sup>8</sup>. Dora sees in hysteria the same movement of “energy upholding and explosion” that is present in Flamenco. Out of the whole painted picture, Dora focuses on the contorted hand – a hand that seen alone may resemble the *bailaor*’s contorted hand. One can identify both in hysterical women as they were seen by surrealism and in Flamenco dancers a modern survival of the ecstatic retinue (*thíasos*) that followed Dionysus. The torn yet dancing bodily parts created by Dora update the god’s mystery and his maenads’: they still dance on the dissection table. This Dionysian triumph over death via dancing has been masterfully illustrated by Rainer Maria Rilke in his “Spanish Dancer” (later appropriated by João Cabral de Melo Neto in his “Estudos para uma *bailadora* andaluza”). Rilke writes:

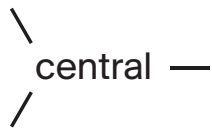
*As in the hand a sulphur match, sheer white  
before it flames, will stretch out scintillating  
tongues on all sides, her round dance, in the tight*

5 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Le danseur des solitudes*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2006, pp. 47.

6 All quotes are from Georges Bataille’s *The Sacred Conspiracy*, translated by Natasha Lehrer, John Harman and Meyer Barash. London: Atlas Press, 2017, pp. 123-126.

7 Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Pre-Analytic publications and unpublished drafts (1886-1897)*. London: Hogarth Press, 1953. v. I, pp. 169.

8 Aragon, Louis and Breton, André, “Le cinquantenaire de l’hystérie (1878-1928)”, in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, n. 11, mar 15th. 1928. Translation by Jean-Michel Rabaté, in “Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, XXV, 3/4 (Summer 2002), pp. 44.



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*ring of spectators, hasty, hot, alight,  
has started scintillatingly dilating.*

*And suddenly it's only flame that's there.*

*With one glance she has set alight her hair,  
and all at once with daring artfulness  
spins her whole dress into this fieriness,  
from which, like serpents terribly abashing  
her naked arms stretch out aroused and gnashing.*

*And then, as though her fire would not suffice,  
she gathers it all up, and in a trice  
flings it away with proud gesticulation  
and gazes: still in raging conflagration  
its writhing on the ground unyieldingly. –  
She, though, inflexible and with a sweet  
saluting smile, looks up victoriously  
and stamps it out with little steadfast feet.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria, "Spanish Dancer", in *Possibility of Being*, translated by J.B. Leishman. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1977, pp. 45.