

Can Improvisation Be Commodified?

Susan Leigh Foster

I had a dream last night that I decided to recount as the opening of this essay. In the dream, I, as a choreographer with a company of dancers, had just received a call from a famous programmer telling me his theater was going to produce my work. But, and this was the hitch, we had no time to create much less rehearse the dances since the concert was going to take place that same week. So, I convened the company and explained to the dancers that they would have to improvise the choreography but make it look as though it was already made up. Not only that, they would have to make it up and, at the same time, make it look spectacular. In other words, they would have to sell the dancing. I woke up laughing about this dream because it staged the very predicament I am hoping to explore in this essay: are there aspects or features of improvised dancing that can be commodified, that is, produced within a social matrix in which the creation, performance, and viewing of dance is analogous to the manufacture, sale, and consumption of goods for profit?¹

In the commodity form of exchange as envisioned within Marxist theory, the items sold in the marketplace are purchased for a sum of money that, hopefully, yields a profit above and beyond the initial costs invested in their making.

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¹ As John Frow observes: "Commodity form does three things. First, it channels resources of capital into an area of production in order to expand it to its fullest capacity [that is to whatever capacity will generate the maximum return on investment at a given time], at the same time destroying all productive activities which are not themselves commodified. Second, it transforms the purpose of production away from the particular qualities of the thing produced and towards the generation of profit; production is the indifferent medium for capital valorization, and the qualities of the thing produced are incidental to this end. Third, it transforms previously or potentially common resources (both raw materials and final products) into private resources; the allocation of these resources normally takes place according to economic criteria (ability to pay rather than moral or civic entitlement), and it may be either restrictive or expansive in its effects." John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 138.

In order to ensure their profitability, these objects are standardized in design, produced with maximum efficiency, and then promoted as desirable. The recent upsurge in services as well as goods for sale in the marketplace has prompted a re-evaluation of the nature and status of the “object” that is exchanged under such conditions rendering tangible goods and ephemeral events equally capable of commodification.² How, then might dance and dancing become commodified, and is improvised dance any different from dance that is prepared in advance of its performance?

One caveat here: all actions (and probably all objects, when viewed at the microscopic level) are improvised, since no action can be performed in exactly the same way twice. Any schema or plan or design for a movement, as it is translated into the movement itself, entails elements of uncertainty and spontaneous decision-making. The perfect balance that a dancer might deliver night after night in performance is always arrived at slightly differently, through the miniscule re coordinations and recalibrations necessary to enable the body to arrive just there, just then. And even in that pose, the body is in motion, continually re-adjusting for the subtle shifts in muscle tone, breath, and surrounding actions that all inform where the dancer is in any moment.

Assuming that all dance carries with it a certain degree of unpredictability, how might making a dance turn a profit? Karl Marx offers a rich and compelling answer to this question through his invocation of the dancing table that begins the section introducing Commodity Fetishism in *Capital*. The passage reads as follows:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its

² See, for example Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor” in *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 89-100; Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133-148; Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2003; and Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles, “Work, Work Your Thoughts, and Therein See a Siege,” in *Communization and its Discontents*, ed. Benjamin Noys (Brooklyn: Autonomedia: 2011), 131-150.

wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.³

The odd image of the table dancing actually refers to the spiritist practice of convening a group around a table, having everyone place their hands upon it, and then wait quite solemnly for it to begin to quiver, vibrate, and rock back and forth. Used to promote all kinds of propositions about various spirit worlds and their potential connectedness to “real” life, but also studied earnestly by scientists who observed and measured types of wood, atmospheric conditions, and noted the sociological make-up of participants, the dancing table, when viewed as a genre of performance delineates clearly how a commodity comes into being within the genre of live performance.⁴

Many of these séance-like gatherings were organized informally by individuals, usually women, who, motivated through a desire to treat the guests in their home to new forms of entertainment as well as to establish contact with the spirit world, experimented with the protocols based on what they had heard or experienced themselves.⁵ These most often ended in failure to produce any effect on the table. A number of the organizers, however, were professionals who attracted eager crowds willing to pay money to participate in the transformation of the inanimate into the animate.⁶ And, according to numerous exposés that claimed to reveal the shenanigans behind their apparent ability to contact the spirit world, these involved various ways of rigging the table so that it knocked, rocked, or otherwise came alive.

The ostensible purpose of the most popular of the performances of dancing tables was to communicate with the dead. As the table started to jiggle or rotate, a medium directing and supervising the encounter would often gear the action towards questions posed by participants specifically designed to elicit affirmation that their dead loved ones remained connected to them and the world from

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977): 163f. It is worth noting that the translation of this passage posted online at the free access *MarxArchive* site, substitutes the term evolving for dancing.

⁴ For a good overview of how the dancing tables functioned in Spain, see Lisa Abend, “Specters of the Secular: Spiritism in Nineteenth-century Spain,” *European History Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 2004): 507-534.

⁵ The account of one Mrs. Guppy who, with her guests, trained in vain to illicit any manner of response from the table is typical of these grass roots efforts to reproduce the magic that everyone was raving about. See John Cordy Jeaffreson, *A Book of Recollections* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1894), 43-46.

⁶ See, for example, the account of the Foxx sisters, who, the author claims, made more than \$500,000 by table rapping, a variation on table turning or table dancing. John Henry Anderson, *The Fashionable Science of Parlour Magic: Being the Newest Tricks of Deception, Developed and Illustrated; to which is Added an Exposure of the Practices Made Use of by Professional Card Players, Blacklegs, and Gamblers* (London, R.S. Francis, [1839?]), 55-79.

which they had departed, or more generally, to comment, if very vaguely, about contemporary events. Notable historical personages, including Socrates, St. Peter, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were known to have made appearances, and these characters sometimes made pronouncements that incited or confirmed the various religious, social, and political inclinations of those in attendance.

Seen as a type of theater, these events advertised, sold tickets, staged a lavish and evocative scene within a drawing room-like space, and choreographed a specific set of behaviors for the performer/participants to execute, as directed by an impresario, who ensured that the action that was unfolding did not go awry. As the table and associated voices came to life becoming the performers, and the participants assumed the role of audience, a reassuringly standard set of responses issued forth, confirming the immortality of the soul as well as the astute choices of the consumers who witnessed the spectacle. Their desires to believe in a specific version of the world were well met through the inexplicable virtuosity of the table-performer connection. No one could explain how it happened which made it all the more breathtaking and marvelous. At the same time, the entire production was reliably repeatable, with slight variations, from night to night. Thus, the spiritists who became expert in this genre of performance devised a way of seizing upon a social situation with inherent instability in it and routinizing it such that it became predictable time after time. Specifically, they learned to guide and control the physical actions performed by the participant/audience, the kinds of questions asked and responses delivered, and they channeled and interpreted the participants' feelings throughout the process of witnessing their interaction with table and voices, all in order to achieve a stunning if not seemingly miraculous effect. They therefore transformed a semi-improvised event into a thoroughly reliable and repeatable transaction.

As a descriptive analysis of the process of commodification, the dancing table also sheds light on a second argument that Marx makes in *Capital* concerning the way that the human labor that goes into the making of things becomes erased during the process of commodification. Marx argues that human labor creates a trace of itself in the congealed form of the objects that it produces. However, in the complex social relations of capitalist societies, any given thing becomes equivalent to lots of other things, making it difficult if not impossible to keep track of the labor that went into its creation:

Since no commodity can stand in the relation of equivalent to itself, and then turn its own bodily shape into the expression of its own value, every commodity is compelled to choose some other commodity for its equivalent, and to accept the use value, that is to say, the bodily shape of that other commodity as the form of its own value.⁷

⁷ Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 148.

Insofar as every object becomes equivalent to so many other objects, all labor becomes equivalent as well, and any specificity or individual connection that a laborer had to the object is no longer detectable.

As vivified in the dancing table, whatever the actual physical actions that served to put the table in motion, they were both suppressed and masked over by the choreography of the evening: the rigging of the table by the backstage technicians, the transition from pedestrian life to the specialness of the séance table as enhanced by the mysterious mood of the room and its inhabitants, present both in bodily form and as spirits; the unusual behavior of collectively placing one's hands on the table; the subtle prompts of the impresario, and equally canny interpretations of the table's motions and noises; and the general experience of having undergone something strikingly special. The entire production and marketing of the event, its commodification, transformed the participant/viewers from people who were improvising its creation into people who believed that their own ideas and labor played no part in shaping it.

What is particularly intriguing about dance, and what makes dance quite distinct from the situation of the dancing table, is the potential to see the act of creating the dance at the same time that we see the dance as something that is made and presented. In other words, a dance is both the same as and separate from the person who is dancing, and thus any given dance performance cannot conceal all of the labor that goes into its performance. Nor can it entirely obscure the labor that went into composing the dance and teaching the dancer how to dance. These prior acts of exchange generate traces whose residue is evident in every moment of dancing along with whatever actions the dancer undertakes to present the dance. Each moment of dancing embodies decisions that have been made concerning the selection and sequencing of movement. It also demonstrates the cultivation of physicality that enables the dancer to perform. In addition, it manifests the dancer's act of interpreting and conveying the dance. Dance thus offers a unique opportunity to examine the labor that goes into its making. So, what does that labor look like if and when the dancer is improvising and is that performance different from the one executed when delivering a danced commodity? Let us look, as Marx frequently does, at the conditions of production under which a dance is created, exchanged, and consumed.

In order to turn a profit, a dance needs to be made cheaply, transmitted to dancers efficiently, and sold as a popular item to viewers. What conditions would assist the process of making dances quickly, delivering them with minimum effort for maximum effect, and satisfying the customers, or better, leave them clamoring for more? Judging by the range of dance fabrication sites that are currently garnering millions of viewers and churning out substantial profits from advertisers and ticket sales (think *Black Swan*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *A Chorus Line*), the production process must rely on standardized vocabularies of movement that embody clear criteria for virtuosity and can be marshaled

to construct familiar narrative progressions that incorporate reliable techniques for constructing eye-popping spectacle.

Within such a system of fabrication, dancers must be trained to be able to execute well-established sets of steps and sequences of those steps, and they must also excel at copying such sequences quickly and remembering them. In that way choreographers can rely on familiar levels of facility and virtuosity and work quickly to develop the dancers' common repertoire of skills into innovative patterns and sequences that display those skills in new and arresting ways. Once combined with costuming, lighting, and other theatrical effects, and sometimes as framed within the camera and subsequently projected onto a screen, the dancing should wow the audience. The final product should provide a careful balance between newness and familiar kinds of displays that both reassures and impresses viewers. In addition, this same spectacle must be reproduced faithfully night after night and then delivered with the same dazzle once again after it has been packed up and shipped to a new location.

This was, more or less, the machinery of dance production into which I, as the choreographer in my absurd dream, was being summoned. But what, exactly, would I have been demanding of the dancers? How well might dancers trained as improvisors be able to fulfill this set of specifications, and how might a choreographer invested in exploring the unknown and the unpredictable provide the guidance necessary to meet the programmer's and viewers' expectations in such a context? Certainly, spectacular events occur during improvised encounters, but can these be reproduced reliably? Does an aesthetic investment in improvised action foreclose the possibility of making a profit from dancing?

To investigate these questions, I begin with what happens in the studio during the processes of training and then rehearsing for a dance performance. When working to achieve a production consisting of pre-determined sequences of movement cultivated for spectacle, choreographers often sketch out a sequence of movements that dancers then replicate. In most cases they do not repeat exactly what the choreographer stipulated, since many times the choreographer is not as highly skilled as the younger, powerfully athletic dancers. Instead the dancers work to produce a perfected version of what they saw by extending or amplifying the movement in accordance with what they imagine the choreographer envisions. They develop the skills necessary for this process first by committing to many hours daily of repetitive exercises designed to increase strength, extend flexibility, and cultivate the ability to coordinate all parts of the body so as to execute complex movements with precise timing. They also practice copying movement and memorizing it so that they are able to reproduce and modify as requested the choreographer's directions according to aesthetic criteria for the movement's appearance that they have assimilated as part of their training.

Dancers training to improvise movement in performance generally pursue entirely different strategies for cultivating the body's responsiveness and capacity. Rather than learning to reproduce a choreographer's specific movements, they develop their ability to attend closely to each moment and what is occurring in it, and they also develop strategies for responding to what they are witnessing. This response could take the form of a different but related movement (or sound); it could even copy as a form of response, but not in order to reproduce faithfully but instead, to open a dialog whose ongoing development is unknown. Thus, rather than learning routines or increasing physical capacities in order to perform specific feats, dancers must train to detect trajectories and patterns within others' movements in order to engage with them so as to explore collectively the unknown.

Just as dancers working towards repeatable spectacle must respond to what the choreographer has stipulated by applying clearly designated aesthetic principles establishing what is desirable, so too, dancers who are improvising have assimilated parameters for what constitutes an appropriate response. In hip hop, for example, dancers would be seeking to register another dancer's sequence of moves and then devise their own iteration that might incorporate references to those moves and to the moves of others while also articulating one's individual inventions, and all these must evince the characteristics of coolness, toughness, invincibility, brilliance, and adherence to "keeping it real." In contrast, contact improvisation asks dancers to find ways to make contact and merge weight with one another while also continually responding to the body's momentum and gravity's influence on it. In this process they must maintain an expansive focus, an openness to "going with the flow," and a resistance to making something happen that they have conceived of in advance.⁸

As these two examples indicate, there is no single training regimen that is suitable for all genres of improvised dancing. However, there are probably certain values that improvisors, regardless of genre, share: a willingness to perceive and attend to the ongoing flux of events, a desire to collaborate with others, or if improvising a solo, with one's surroundings or with one's self in the previous second, and a commitment to not knowing the outcome of any next moment or of an entire evening of dancing beyond the fact of having attended to the process of improvising. And all these values run counter to the demands of producing reliable spectacle, as the commodified versions of both hip hop and contact improvisation make evident. Hip hop as commodity, versions of which can frequently be seen in music videos or dance competitions such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, delivers the look but not the feel of the genre by arranging standard

⁸ See Novack for a comprehensive analysis of these guiding principles for the form. Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

sequences, performed similarly by all dancers, which feature virtuosity for display rather than dialog. Similarly, contact improvisation's remarkable weight sharing sequences have been studied and codified, learned, and then incorporated within pre-set routines of movement by various ballet and Broadway choreographers in order to provide viewers with dazzling new images of partnering. These conversions to commodity, however, always remove the immediacy and particularity of the encounter.

In terms of Marx's insight into how labor is erased, what these examples reveal is the opportunity to see the difference in the labor of improvising and delivering a commodity in action. Improvising dancers look noticeably different in terms of their focus and attention and the ways they are sensing events around them from dancers who know what they are going to do next. Dancers who have rehearsed exactly what they intend to do notice whether other dancers are where they need to be in order to achieve the desired effect, and they may adjust their own movements accordingly, however, they are primarily geared towards replicating as perfectly as they can what has already been decided. Improvising dancers, in contrast, are making decisions in each moment that can be seen if one is looking closely. It is not that they are tentative or hesitant, but rather, that the quality of their attention to what they are doing and what is going on around them is oriented towards inviting and entertaining the multiple possibilities for what might happen next.

And what about choreographers who are trying to guide, facilitate, or direct improvised performance? Do their roles differ from those seeking to design dance for profit, and if so, how? Both roles require the choreographer to carefully assess the capacities of the dancers, their strengths and limitations, and their preferences for how to move. The director of improvised performance, however, creates conditions within which decision-making can occur that will lead to unanticipated discoveries whereas the commodity oriented choreographer must establish exactly what will happen as well as the certainty that it can happen. Choreographers in either role are held accountable by the viewers, yet what the viewers assume they will see can vary significantly. They may desire to see breathtaking displays of virtuosity, or they may hope to witness a process of discovery and exploration. When they attend performances that deliver something other than what they expect, they can be irritated, disappointed, or outraged, and it is in part the choreographer's responsibility in arranging for the advance publicity and descriptions of the event to assist viewers in selecting what they attend.

And this is why I felt so much pressure in the dream: I was suddenly going to make claims about what viewers would see that probably could not be realized. By accepting an invitation to perform in a venue of a certain size and prestige, thereby placing my work within a series of other artists whose work was renowned for its combination of imaginative and virtuoso display, and with so

little time to work up the punch that the occasion demanded, I was agreeing to attempt to meet certain criteria of excellence and standards of taste and distinction that my rowdy company of improvisors could probably not attain.

But, of course, it is more complicated than what I have sketched out thus far, since as Arjun Appadurai has rightfully observed, the social life of any thing, including a dance, can move in and out of the commodity form.⁹ And there are artists who have succeeded brilliantly in presenting improvisation within mainstream and highly popular venues. Working successfully within the heavily commodified contexts of the classical ballet company and the Broadway show respectively, William Forsythe and Savion Glover have each developed strong practices of improvised dancing. By looking more closely at their work, I hope to show not how improvisation can be commodified, but how it can assist in undoing and resisting the drive towards commodification even though both artists have garnered substantial acclaim among viewers expecting to see a commodity.

As he likes to tell it, Forsythe misread his contract upon arrival in 1984 as the new Artistic Director of the Frankfurt Ballet and somehow thought he needed to produce three entirely distinctive evenings of new work each year.¹⁰ As in my dream, the pressure was on to create ballets of the highest quality, so he needed to devise new ways of working quickly. Drawing upon the grammatical organization of the ballet lexicon and the superb training and commitment of the dancers, he developed a set of improvisation directives that guided the dancers' actions, and also structures through which they would react and relate to one another at specific moments in a given dance. He thereby created a coherent appearance for the ensemble while opening up the possibilities for multiple pathways of exploration within any given moment.

More specifically, he taught dancers to transfer a step's action from one part of the body to another, and to perform familiar movements within entirely different bodily orientations within space. Dancers learned to reverse, invert, or retrograde standard phrases, extract from basic principles such as outward rotation their opposites and apply those to movement, and proliferate the ways that *épaulement*, the classic system of balancing rotations and counter-rotations within parts of the body, could be configured. Through this intensive expansion of ballet's organizing principles, Forsythe de-stabilized the specific movement items within ballet that could be exchanged as commodities and refocused attention on ballet's potential as a set of generative principles capable of endless new invention.

The dismantling of ballet as a repertoire of positions and steps coupled with the opportunities afforded to dancers to create new movement both in rehearsal

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-63

¹⁰ William Forsythe, personal communication with author, May, 2015.

and in performance redefined their responsibilities. They no longer worked towards exhibiting the perfect position or transmitting the most memorable extensions and elevations, and instead, began to attend to the process and flow of movement. Rather than deliver one picture-perfect moment after another, they concentrated on moving through rather than arriving at, thereby developing a sense of the ongoingness of movement and their enjoyment in each moment of it. As Forsythe observes:

No one has ever done arabesque, they've passed through an approximation of it. Arabesque will remain primarily a prescription, an ideal. I mean, there is a good arabesque and a bad arabesque, and a phenomenal arabesque, but arabesque is about passing through.¹¹

Dismissing the idea of a defined step, Forsythe instead asked dancers to focus on and tune to their own experience of arabesque, not as entity but as event. In the "eventing" of movement, dancers also attuned increasingly to the changing spaces and bodies around them.

As dancers became capable of generating movement according to a given formula or set of directives, Forsythe began to develop each new ballet using certain of these algorithms and then relying on the dancers to devise the individual movement. Rather than established sequences of movements, orchestrated for each of the dancers in the piece, each new dance consisted of a set of conditions and possibilities. Although the overall appearance of the piece was identifiable, both in terms of the kind of movement produced and the coordinated engagement of movement with music, scenery, and architecture, many of the specifics of vocabulary, phrasing, and location of action could vary from performance to performance.

By introducing improvisation and new options for collaboration among dancers, Forsythe converted the ballet company from a factory that produced new works to a laboratory that was continually researching and testing possibilities. As early as 1986, the program notes for *Pizza Girl* list the dancers as co-choreographers, and in other works, including *Quintet* (1993) and *Eidos:Telos* (1995), they are credited as collaborators. This reorganization of the relationship between choreographer and dancers, strongly hierarchical, authoritarian even, and long held within the ballet tradition, unsettled the distribution of power within the company structure and invited all members to contribute to all phases of the creation of new work.

It is important to note that all of this experimentation was funded, not by ticket sales, but by the German government. Although most performances sold out, and the company also toured as an illustrious export and cultural ambassa-

¹¹ Steven Spier, "Engendering and Composing Movement: William Forsythe and the Ballett Frankfurt," *Journal of Architecture* 3, no. 2 (June 1998): 137

dor of the German nation, they were fully subsidized through a cultural policy that was dedicated to supporting the arts for the public good. As part of the state-run opera house system, the Frankfurt Ballet did not operate under the same degree of pressure to sell its performances as Broadway. And although the productions were spectacular in many ways, they did not serve up spectacle, but rather created reflections on the very nature of spectacle by offering uncanny juxtapositions of narrative and action, mis-using lighting and stage sets, and creating nonconventional characters, many of whom talked about what they were doing while doing it.

Improvised sections of dancing in these pieces enhanced their reflexive capacity by giving the viewer a sense of uncertainty as to what would happen next, an uncertainty that, in turn, prompted reflection on the act of viewing itself. Sometimes the improvisations were so tightly structured that it was almost impossible to discern that they were, in fact, spontaneously composed. Other times, there was just enough rawness to detect the haphazard, leading to an informality and the intimation of a collaborative ethos that drew viewers into the process of making movement and its meaning. As a result viewers were denied the opportunity to consume the dance passively and instead drawn tacitly into the laboratory of investigation along with Forsythe and the dancers. Because viewers could see the dancers responding to and making decisions about each next moment, they witnessed the work of dance making. The dancers appeared at ease, and there was no attempt, as there frequently is in ballet, to mask or cover over the effort demanded by their task.

Savion Glover has undertaken an analogous disruption of dance's commodification, using improvised dancing to subvert viewers' expectations for extravaganza and also contesting the history of demands made on tap dancers within the traditions of tap on screen and onstage. Performing to great acclaim from an early age, he first appeared on Broadway at the age of ten in *The Tap Dance Kid* in 1986 and then premiered his first hit show, *Bring in 'Da Noise. Bring in 'Da Funk*, in 1996. Since then, Glover has produced a number of new evening-length performances in collaboration with different dancers and musicians that have regularly toured internationally. Although these performances may initially appear to be a highly desirable product, producing a form of spectacle that sells out at each theater, Glover has repeatedly found ways to resist expectations and efforts to commodify his dancing. Instead, he has worked to establish himself as a member of a community of tappers who are dedicated to preserving as well as renewing the dance form's vitality and spiritual power.

Especially as it was elaborated in Hollywood films, tap became oriented towards dazzling displays of quickness combined with gymnastic skill and balance, delivered with a gaze that appealed to the viewer to enjoy and appreciate the action. The films' choreography stipulated that the dancers maintain poise and likeability as they executed the rhythmic sequence of taps, all while running

up a wall, dancing across a table, or weaving among various moving objects. Tap was thus frequently combined with stunts of varying degrees of complexity, which, in the most successful incarnations, contributed to the development of the character the dancer was portraying. Thus Gene Kelly's antics with umbrella and puddles reinforce the way he is falling head over heels in love, and Fred Astaire's debonair dances with a cane reinforce his upper class status. In the case of African American tap dancers who were able to cross the color barriers into Hollywood, there was always the mandate to appear eager to please.

Because of Glover's exceptional skill at emitting very rapidly sounds of extreme complexity, his dancing is often assimilated by viewers into this Hollywood derived tradition of tap as the next generation of spectacle, even more explosive and quick-fire than its predecessors. Glover, however, has resisted that tendency in several ways, all geared towards encouraging viewers to hear how he is developing the dance. Neither his posture nor his facial expression conforms to the requisite likeability of Hollywood characters. Often slightly hunched, and with his focus directed downward or off to the side, Glover does not directly look out at and appeal to the audience. In *Sole Power* (2010) he even danced in the dark for a significant period of time, thereby alerting viewers to the importance of sound's transformation. He also frequently dances with his back to the audience. When one can see his face one watches him listening, not only to the music and to his own taps, but also to the moment and what it demands next. He does not dance to please the audience, but to satisfy the dance itself.¹²

Glover also works to deflect a spectacle-seeking gaze by concentrating on the interactions among dancers and between dancer and music while continually experimenting with different dancers and distinctive musical traditions. Sometimes aligning his dancing with a hip hop aesthetic by using its music and wearing its fashion, and other times working with different jazz musicians, and even with canonical classics such as Vivaldi and Bartok, Glover constructs a dialog between the sounds he makes and the beat and feeling of the music. When jamming with other dancers, he focuses intensively on the sounds they produce and

¹² Here I am arguing in alignment with Thomas DeFrantz who writes: "Glover's performance persona expresses interiority and emotion, passions not bound by the marketplace, but also not indulged by him to the level of melodrama. His emotional palate is limited by the time allotted to it and our ability to understand its subtle gradations. To get us there - to get us to be with him more quickly, Glover tries to erase his body in his dancing; he displaces the fact of torso, arms, elbows, hands, or even hips as he works through rhythm. He offers dances that we can hear and feel but not see. In this, Glover defines his version of the hip hop "real" - his masculinity - to be located in his commitment to the beat, buoyed by his interior life, which can only be partially represented by his dance." Thomas DeFrantz, "Being Savion Glover: Black Masculinity, Translocation, and Tap Dance," *Discourses in Dance* 1, no. 1 (2002): 26.

all the potential responses to their offering. Even when working with pre-orchestrated music such as in *A Classical Encounter with Savion Glover* (2010), he remained responsive to each moment and to the possible ways he might engage with it.

In these efforts to refocus audience attention on sound, Glover hopes that they will hear the music's beat and his interaction with it: "The beat is basically what takes you through life, you know, whether we have an up tempo beat or a slow beat. It's just a beat. There will always be the beat, you know, and there's rhythm in everything."¹⁵ In his dancing, Glover parses the beat into an almost uncountable number of parts, syncopates and accents those parts, stretches the time between beats, strains its capacity to hold so many parts, arrives at the last possible moment back on the beat, thereby commenting on the very nature of time and the pulse of life itself. When he is able to connect to and expand on the beat in these ways, Glover says it is like praying, not in a religious sense, but as a connection to the spiritual.

Neither Forsythe nor Glover focuses exclusively on improvised performances, and many moments and aspects of their productions are pre-determined. Neither implements improvised movement simply in order to resist commodification. Instead, improvisation seems to function as one of a larger array of strategies designed to unravel that which is already commodified and to reinstate other values having to do with the power of moving and of being in relation with others. Because of the scale and status of their work, as globally circulating and highly visible, they make especially evident the forces at work in commodification and also how improvisation can complicate and even thwart the manufacture of dance as well as consumers' expectations concerning what they are buying as dance. Each, in a different way, could have succeeded on the stage in my dream, not at selling their dancing, but at offering viewers something equally or even more compelling.

Could we argue, then, that improvisation cannot be commodified or that it provides an ideal practice of resistance to commodification? A quick google scan of "how to be spontaneous" indicates that if not improvised action itself, then certainly techniques for how to improvise may well be something that could be sold. A number of self-help sites, replete with advertisers, promise to teach anyone how to be "spontaneous in a relationship, in a conversation, and in bed," thereby selling the art of living in the moment. As all manner of what were formerly private experiences now become available for commodification, is dance improvisation one activity that thus far remains impervious? Rather than respond to this question directly, what I have attempted to present in this essay is

¹⁵ Savion Glover and George Wolfe, "Bring in da Funk," Interview with Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *PBS NewsHour*, May 30, 1996.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june96-funk_5-30/

a series of considerations focusing on the labor that goes into dancing and dance-making that might assist us as we pursue answers.

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