

Drawing through *Phantasmata*. On the Synaptic-Performative Expression of Sign

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I. Premise: the terms of the question

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Issue no. 18 of the journal *diségno* is devoted to the theme of the synapse as a metaphor for a dynamic relational manifestation within/of complexity, whose signs foreground, above all, the expressive dimension of the act of drawing beyond mere description. Focus I, in particular, addresses the performative valence of *synaptein*. Let us begin with the word: *synaphé* or *synápsis* –the nominal counterpart of the Greek verb *synápto* ('I connect', 'I bind together')–, in general terms, denotes the various modes of the spatializing operation of touching, joining, knotting, intertwining, articulating. The prefix 'syn', equivalent to the Latin 'cum', emphasizes the inescapable relationality of these actions, whose enactment

therefore exceeds mere connecting. While our common mentality tends to assimilate connections to relations-as-correlations, strictly speaking the connection '*inter*' does not at all coincide with relation concretely understood as '*infra*'. The simple connection is the extrinsic link between substantial entities, that is, entities existing as such in their determined identity prior to their connecting. Relating, by contrast, is an ongoing holistic process that precedes and institutes the tension of the relata, enacting their never substantially fixed delimitation as such, moment by moment and in ways that vary and transform incessantly. Real relations, in short, are not things but processes of processes, and they do not link things.

As intuited in the second half of the twentieth century by René Magritte through the practice of painting, mere

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connection on the one hand and concrete relations on the other ultimately correspond to two incomparable modes of exercising the productive power of thought. The linking connections are cardinal elements of the logical-analytical mind, which reasons through 'similarities', whereas concrete relating belongs to *cogitare* [1] that instead lives through 'resemblances', whereby thought becomes world "by becoming what the world offers it and by returning what is offered to it to the mystery without which there would be no possibility of world or thought" [2].

The rhythm of relational resemblance is analogous to that of a kind of breathing, which inhales the world and exhales that same world differently, in circularly open ways.

1.2

Our culture has stratified several possible ways of interpreting *synaptein*. The prevailing paradigm –underpinning and organizing informatics, linguistics, structuralism and the scientific mindset– is the dichotomously binary one proper to diaretic logic, whose foundations were laid by Plato in the *Sophist* [218b-221c] as an instrumental technique aimed at univocally defining the determined identity of any object whatsoever. Its linear tree-like structure is that of the inverted 'Y' as the schema of the binary and exclusionary alternative 'is/ is not', in whose replication the constraint of the One asserts itself without contradiction, becoming two and then progressively two again.

According to the studies of Carlo Sini, this linear and visuo-centric bifurcation originally stems from the epochal project of a "chrono-graphic transcription of the voice" [Sini 1992, p. 96] into an ideal/abstract dimension, with the aim of "making the invisible of the voice visible" [Sini 1992, p. 97]. The price paid is "the desomatization of the word" [Sini 1992, p. 96] and, therefore, abstraction from every concrete mode of embodiment. The methodological path of discursive sequencing (*diexodos*) in a tree structure is in fact fixed, in transcription, on the plane of points that symbolically represent the inscription of the here/now according to the geometric coordinates of position and succession, entirely irrespective of the performative, gestural and mimic-expressive components of the embodied voice erupting within actual communicative practices. On the basis of the universality of meaning as abstract concept, "the 'signifier' is not at all the 'natural body of the voice', but

a representation of the 'pure' voice: a voice emended of its oral-gestural practice and reconstructed within the abstractly chrono-graphic schema of the line [...] and of definitional topology" [Sini 1992, pp. 96, 97].

To this paradigm –one of the most formidable achievements of the logical-philosophical interpretation of the decisive advent of alphabetic writing– a second dominant model of connection is added, which triumphs in modernity. In order to free differentiation from the restraining yoke of the One, it focuses on the proliferation of multiplicity according to circular and/or cyclical structures. Within this movement, whose metaphor is that of the "book as image of the world" [Deleuze, Guattari 2017, p. 41], unity is no longer evidently and repeatedly transcribed in chrono-spatial terms, but withdraws and recedes, while nonetheless continuing to exert –as *hypokeimenon*, that is, as an invisible underlying unity– its irresistible unifying power.

As emphasised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, multiplicity in this case too is not 'made' –that is, not performatively brought into operation– but once again symbolically represented, albeit in a different mode from the rigorously binary one of logical *diairesis*. The difference lies in the fact that unity no longer manifests itself objectively: "a new type of unity triumphs in the subject. [...] The subject can no longer make dichotomies, but accedes to a higher unity" [Deleuze, Guattari 2017, p. 41].

These two models dominate the scenarios of the Capitalocene, having removed what, according to the two French thinkers, constitutes a third 'natural' possibility, one that does not respond to the "physiocide" [cfr. Grant 2008] characterizing our civilization (*Weltzivilisation*): the rhizome. According to this non-paradigm derived from vegetal life, "any point can be connected to any other [...]. Every trait does not necessarily refer to a linguistic trait [...]. Like a tuber, it agglomerates very different acts: linguistic, but also perceptual, mimetic, gestural, cogitative: there is no language in itself, nor a universality of language, but a concurrence of dialects, vernaculars, jargons, special languages. There is no ideal speaker-hearer. [...]" [Deleuze, Guattari 2017, pp. 41, 42]. The act of drawing, consequently, is transfigured and transformed: "The line no longer forms a contour and passes between things, between points. [...] It traces a plane that no longer has dimensions other than those of what traverses it, and the multiplicity it constitutes is no longer subordinated

to the One [...]. They are multiplicities of masses [...]: anomalous and nomadic multiplicities, no longer normal or legal" [Deleuze, Guattari 2017, p. 688].

1.3

As the etymology further suggests, the word 'synapse' is also bound up with the intimacy of a touching (from the Greek verb *synapto*: 'I touch', but also –this should not be forgotten– 'I taste by eating and drinking'). Here too, the dominant cultural canon tends to interpret touching primarily in the sense of adherent contact, reducing –indeed abolishing– any distancing.

Yet even in this case another, more originary sense of touching remains possible: not merely and organically tactile, but properly haptic, beyond the division and demarcation of the different sensory spheres. This mode, beyond any will to appropriation and while respecting immanent distance, fosters synaesthetically a responsive disposition of receptive and savouring listening, in which the inseparability of sensing and sensed is not a given but an indefinitely ongoing process.

1.4

As for the adjective 'performative', it evokes an act of a non-descriptive and non-representational nature, by virtue of which actions are realized and brought into effects that structurally establish and transform the order and configurations of the existing world. Beyond the generic lexical meaning of the English verb 'to perform', from which it directly derives, the emphasis on the non-constative and non-representational sense of this adjective emerged in late twentieth-century culture through the international debate within the philosophy of language, when the lectures delivered in Oxford and Harvard by John L. Austin in the 1950s advanced and argued the thesis –supported by the theories of the 'later' Ludwig Wittgenstein– according to which the totality of linguistic acts has an eminently performative character, insofar as: "A – they do not 'describe' or 'report' or state anything whatsoever, they are not 'true or false'; B – the act of uttering the sentence constitutes the performance, or is part of the performance, of an action which would not *normally* be described [...] as 'merely saying something'" [Austin 1987, p. 9].

Extended beyond the specialized field of Speech Acts theory and the philosophy of language, the emphasis on performative power displaces and calls into question

both the metaphysical primacy of representation in all its principal implications and the classical-modern conceptions of knowledge and knowing. It thereby opens onto a perspective according to which every cognitive and epistemic act is itself a performative activity that operates pragmatically and cannot be reduced within the limits of various forms of epistemological cognitivism.

Addressing the question of performative synapses at work in the embodying gesture of drawing thus makes it possible to test the tension between the symbolic-representational character of the video-logo-centric conceptions that still dominate contemporary culture, politics and aesthetics, and what might be defined as a sapiential and symbolically ultra-melancholic element which, from a certain strand of twentieth-century art onwards, is reinforced in significant developments of contemporary artistic research [3].

2. Knowing as recollection through signs

2.1

Thinking is '*Andenken*', as Martin Heidegger derived from the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, and all knowledge is inseparable from memory [Heidegger 2022]. But in what sense? As taught –and ultimately sealed in his final book/autobiography– by Carlo Sini, memory is by no means the opposite of forgetting: "memory is one with forgetting. [...] Public and private knowledge is made of memories, and therefore of forgettings; that is, of recollections that interpret signs; signs that heal, in the present, the catastrophe of the past" [Sini 2025, pp. 340, 353]. For "memories heal forgetting, but also promote it, in the substitutive figures of recollection" [Sini 2025, p. 365].

Remembering –if we wish to take up the precious Leopardian verb (perhaps also in its suggestive pseudo-etymology of re-incorporation)– is a process that entrusts itself to the imaginative movement of imagining. It therefore cannot settle and fix itself in memorizing as possession and retention of memories understood as data [4]; rather, it lets itself go and lets go, insofar as its dynamic movement follows the force of forgetting in order to keep the imaginative processes themselves alive and operative.

Here too, it is a matter of synapses. In its derived meanings, the verb *synápto*, at the logical-philosophical level,

came to designate the *synemmenon axioma*, that is, the hypothetical syllogism [5], which, according to Aristotle, also includes that peculiar form of syllogising at work in reminiscence (*anamnesis*), insofar as it is distinguished from memory (*mnéme*). While the latter indicates a static acquisition of the soul, bound to time, the former consists in an activity always in progress, in whose reactive unfolding “we are moved according to one of the preceding movements [...], seeking the next movement” [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 451b, 16-19], proceeding from inference to inference “in search of an image (*phantasma*)” [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 453b, 15]. There are movements at work, therefore –only movements, never things, never data– in the processes of *anamnesis*. The mode of inquiry proper to this in-progress syllogising, moreover, inevitably “moves something bodily” [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 453b, 15]; its performativity cannot but unfold as embodiment. A terminological clarification: following, above all, the studies of Deleuze and Guattari, and Jean-Luc Nancy [cfr. Nancy 1995] on the ineffability of the body as *arché* of any revealing of the world, the substantial use of the word tends to attribute to it an organic substantial subjectivity and/or objectivity, whereas the preferable verbal form to embody shifts attention to ongoing processes akin to what Antonin Artaud called the “body without organs” [cfr. Artaud 2003]: an unformed cluster of excitable multipolar mass, continually dismembering, emptying itself and absurdly re-stitching itself in its delirious schizo-metamorphoses.

2.2

Shortly after the revolutionary advent of the civilization of writing, with reference to bodily affections and affects and in order to explain why memory and reminiscence are by no means synonymous, Aristotle employed an argument that directly invokes the activity of drawing: “The affection produced by sensation in the soul and in the part of the body that houses sensation is like a sort of painted drawing (*zographéma*), in the possession of which we say memory consists” [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 450a, 30]. If the register of memory thus preserves possession of the trace of representations of perceived objects, reminiscence, for its part, concerns the act in operation of a searching synaptic drawing, which mobilizes the body both retrospectively and, at once and simultaneously, protensively. Ingemar Düring [cfr. Düring

1976], one of the most authoritative twentieth-century interpreters of Aristotle’s work, argues that the processes of anamimnetic inquiry, in their bodily repercussions, develop dynamics and qualities of movement analogous to those of imaginative activity in the sleeping condition –that is, when *phantasia* withdraws from its constraining subordination to rational intellect.

From imagining, indeed, there flows the power of synapses orchestrated by the trace-forms [cfr. Laban 1999] of a drawing which, only in the *Gestalt* of its traces deposited in the archive of memory, declines into representation; whereas, in its restless recollective movement in search of images –the crucial problem, addressed later (in §4), concerns how to reinterpret accordingly the labour of the imaginative image itself– it instead develops its performative re-activity in the metamorphic processes of a *Bildung* always in the making. Let us recall, in this regard, the fundamental distinction between *Gestalt* and *Bildung* articulated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “To designate the complex of the existence of a real being, the German language employs the word *Gestalt* (form), a term in which abstraction is made from what is in motion [...]. Now, if we consider existing forms, and especially organic ones, we notice that in them there is nothing immobile, fixed, or concluded, but everything oscillates in a continuous movement. For this reason, German appropriately employs the word *Bildung* (formation) to designate both what is produced and what is in the process of being produced” [Goethe 2014, p. 12] [6].

2.3

If the word ‘disegno’ (drawing) etymologically derives from ‘*signum*’, the gesture it names may be considered –starting from the same root, though not indifferently so– both on the symbolic-representational plane and on what we may call, by way of distinction, the ‘symbolic’ plane. The first philosophical elaboration of the *symbolon* is due to Plato, who held that it can only be treated through a “bastard” (*nothos*) [7] reasoning, since the erotic movement of *symbollesthai* alludes, on this side and beyond any diaretic logic, to the never fully predictable rebounding reactions of a one-that-is-two: neither one-one nor two-of-two.

Platonic reflections on this matter took their cue from the theatre of everyday life among the ancient Greeks, for whom *symbolon* named a shard of pottery that was

marked rather than divided –incised, scratched on the surface. It imitated the forms of erotic bonding in all its manifestations, and the non-divisive incision that marked it emphasized a self-rebounding bond that did not hold together through *reductio ad unum*. It could result in a clean break –one + one, two of two– only with the complete destruction of the *symbolon* itself, when lovers separated definitively and irrevocably. The verb *symbollesthai*, therefore, in the middle voice (neither active nor passive), expresses the undulating rebound of processes in a continuous, divergent yet concordant experimentation with distance, in the curving of the sideral orbits of that “stellar friendship” of which Friedrich Nietzsche [8] speaks in *The Gay Science* [Nietzsche 1965]. Logic operates on the parts of the shard no longer marked but definitively broken, replacing the erotics of an irreducibly dual and plural one with the symbolic analytics centered on deferrals of the presence of an index that stands for something else (that is, for its external object). Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the work of Charles Sanders Peirce returned to the Platonic gesture, rethinking the infinite symbollic dynamics of the Sign as a process of processes that is triggered and bursts forth in the event of any signalling –within the resonances of its harmonic overtones of a pathic, emotional, nervous and, in any case, embodying character– ‘for’ an interpretant [9], which is itself a rebound-effect generated, in the moment, by the signifying field of which it is the interpretation in act. Infinite semiosis admits neither pre-constituted subjects nor autonomous and stable objects –the Sign self-interprets in the act of its own signaling– but only self-rebounding and undulating energetic explosions of the world within the world, at the rhythm of transitory triangulations in which the decisive element is the response-reaction which, as Peirce emphasizes, tends to become habit. In this perspective, therefore, *cogitare* [10] is by no means the activity of a self-centered thinking subject, but the rebounding response to the ubiquitous occurrence of events, insofar as their signaling is received and manifests itself for an interpretant in transit, incapable of installing itself and persisting in a substantial identity as interpreting subject. It follows that the attribution of meaning to a given event depends on: a. the fact that its signaling has elicited an interpretant; b. the way in which the latter has interpreted it contingently through reactions tending to become habit.

2.4

Carlo Rovelli has repeatedly emphasised how the moment of bouncing “is the true realm of quantum gravity” [Rovelli 2014, pp. 54, 55], in the annulment of both spatial and temporal categories. The rhythmic oscillations of rebounding and swaying likewise constitute the primary impulse of all dancing, whose fundamental disposition has recently been defined by Virgilio Sienias ‘haptic’, that is, rebounding from a touching without contact. The Florentine choreographer explicitly refers to the embodying possibilities of the performatively synaptic drawing of a touching/being-touched that does not at all aim at settling into adherent contact. For: “The space of adjacency is a place of resistance: one literally resists touch, one touches without touching. [...] One could say that dance originates from the capacity to resist touch, channelling focalisations on the body of the other into sequences of movement” [Sieni 2022, p. 25]. Even in this case, deeply dancing *cogitare* [Gasparotti 2024] develops its spatializing embodiment, putting its synapses to work according to the unpredictable possibilities of encounter, engaged with the irreducible resistance of the changing apparitional figures of an Other that is never available.

According to the ‘psychedelic biologist’ Merlin Sheldrake, the rhizomatically operating synapses in the kingdom of lichens, mushrooms and truffles are as if they orchestrated and composed, radiating from the mycelium, a kind of “jazz concert in which the musicians listen to one another, interact and respond in real time” [Sheldrake 2020, p. 53] [6]. What astonishes in the musical *synaptein* of this improvised concert is the fact that: “at a fork in the path, hyphae are not forced to choose one direction rather than another: they branch and proceed in both directions. [...] If they encounter an obstacle, they branch and, once it has been bypassed, the hyphal tip returns to its previous direction of growth. [...] Fungi are capable of following all possible directions at once. [...] By growing in one direction and withdrawing from others, mycelial networks can even migrate within a landscape” [Sheldrake 2020, pp. 61, 65, 66].

Palaeobiological studies attest that mycelial organisms were the first to develop such complex, flexible networks of invisible synaptic filaments which, prior to any rooting, touch, intertwine, break off and migrate –without head or tail– in order to solve the problems of life

within the surrounding environment in trans-specifically symbiotic contexts.

Some contemporary researchers have drawn from this the conclusion that: "Individuals have never existed. We are all lichens" [Gilbert, Sapp, Tauber 2012, p. 326], involved in interminable musical reactions and negotiations at work in a symborg–cyborg condition, which knows neither the distinction between organic and inorganic nor that between living organisms and technological or 'artificial' elements.

3. *Instabilitas loci et importunitas mentis*

3.1

From Aristotle's authority it follows that if the searching that constitutes reminiscence did not stimulate the movements of anamimnetic synapses, no memory would ever become manifest, and amnesia would be the normal condition of a soul incapable of thinking and acting, insofar as "thinking (*noein*) is a kind of imagining (*phantasia tis*) or is not possible without imagination" [Aristotle. *De Anima*, I, 403a, 8, 9]. For the anthropocentric assumption of the Greek philosopher, anamnesis is an exclusively human activity, insofar as its syllogising is governed by the nous of rational *psychē* and thus belongs "only to those to whom the capacity for deliberation (to *bouleutikón*) belongs by nature" [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 453a, 12, 13]. In human beings themselves, however, the searching movements of reminiscence may be excited, interrupted, diverted or distorted by bodily-affective conditions that generate states of hyperkinetic "confusion" [Aristotle. *De memoria et reminiscencia*, 453 a, 23], according to an uncontrollable and uncontainable kinetics. For this reason, the Church Fathers described this condition in terms of '*evagatio mentis*', '*curiositas*', '*instabilitas loci vel propositi*' and '*importunitas mentis*'. Nevertheless, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problem XXX*, I –attributed to Theophrastus– states that "all those who have become outstanding either in philosophy, or in politics, or in poetry, or in the arts appear to have been melancholic" ([Aristotle]. *Problem XXX*, I, 953 a, 10-12), insofar as "all melancholics are outstanding not by illness, but by nature" ([Aristotle]. *Problem XXX*, I, 955 a, 39, 40).

What unites these exceptional individuals is the fact that "the melancholic temperament produces anomalies",

being itself "anomalous" ([Aristotle]. *Problem XXX*, I, 953 b, 9, 10), albeit in a fully natural manner. The Greek terms '*anomalía*' and '*anomalos*' originally indicated what does not correspond to what is *omalós*, that is, regular, level, symmetrical, uniform and thus apt to generate connections and similarities. In the melancholic disposition, every form of oppositional binarity is suspended. The unstable and wave-like character of the affective vortex unfolds a meteorology that escapes prediction, schematization, regularity, causality and logic, oscillating within uncertainty in thinking, speaking, signifying and judging, beyond the opposition between darkness and clarity.

It is as if such a disposition disarticulates –without negating it– every logical structuring, and then loops these anomalous manifestations, concentrating attention on the extravagant effects of such excess.

The symbolical field of spatializing drawing of melancholically performative synapses is heightened on an aesthetic, multi-layered plane in the most sapiently experiential sense of the term. As Nicola Perullo has recently argued, the haptic disposition precisely characterizes the aesthetic field in its most authentic nature, insofar as "the haptic says nothing other than a processual and relational conscious perceiving. It is an immersive participation in the flow as a moving totality, an experience that does not dwell on (s)objects nor cling to them, but rather hovers over them in order to attend to processes. The aesthetic manifests itself as haptic perceptual correspondence; in haptic perception the aesthetic appears" [Perullo 2022, p. 143].

Sapient listening (from the neglected etymology of *sapio*: to taste, to savour) of such haptic aesthetic listening, however, is suppressed and obstructed by the video-centricity that characterises our logocentric or "agrilogistic" civilisation (in the recent interpretation of Timothy Morton) [cfr. Morton 2021], which is grounded in the isolation and primacy of the eminently symbolic class of signs. Thus, rather than in the discursively representational condition of *diexodos*, it is in the symbolically and synaptically performative disposition –whose prototype is the mycelium and its hyphae– that meaning is to be sought.

3.2

Only in what Walter Benjamin called the exclusive "language of man" [cfr. Benjamin 1962] do signs function insofar as they indicate their objects independently

of any resemblance or shared quality with what they denote, within a pervasive and all-consuming legal-abstract generalization.

As Charles Sanders Peirce specifies: “A Symbol is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates in such a way that the Symbol is interpreted as referring to that Object. It is in short itself a general type of law, that is, a Legisign. [...] Not only is the symbol itself general, but also the object to which it refers is of a general nature” [Peirce 2021, p. 153].

Although arising from the processes of infinite semiosis, the symbolic –as the completion/trafficking of semiotic processes in transit– ends up isolating itself in an anthropocentric protrusion, in which the denotative character of the sign assumes an abstractly logical-juridical and stable value. This necessarily inhibits the symbolical potentialities of synapses at work, enclosing the human animal in a “private world” [Heraclitus, fr. 89 DK] centred entirely on the logical dimension of ‘meaning’.

Meaning, whose pragmatic-performative nature –distorted and crystallised by the hypostatisation of the “logical interpretant” turned subject of interpretation– appears alienated in the forms of the Idea (in the Platonistic sense) and the Concept. And yet, as Peirce clarifies: “Not all signs have logical interpretants, but only intellectual concepts and the like [...], which are all either general concepts or closely connected with general concepts” [Peirce 2021, p. 153].

For: “No thought in itself (which is a mere feeling) has any meaning, nor any intellectual value; for meaning does not lie in what is thought in the act in which it is thought, but in what that thought can be connected with by subsequent thoughts in a representation; so that the meaning of a thought is something virtual” [Peirce 2021, p. 95].

The consequence of the all-too-human self-confinement within the symbolic dimension lies in reducing the evental dynamics of the living to discursive linearity, whereby the loci of meaning are reduced to mere places –where one simply ‘is’ [11]– resistant to any spatial opening. Thus the cosmic jazz concert orchestrated by synaptic networks is overpowered and suffocated, and dance itself is interrupted, or rather reduced to the superficial shell of the attitudes of a great Dance separated from the small Dance that should animate its spatial embodiment [12].

4. Dancing through *phantasmata*

4.1

The Renaissance treatise by Domenico da Piacenza, *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*, explicitly draws attention to the fact that every form of dancing can only ignite and extinguish itself as a “dancing [...] through *phantasmata*” [Procopio 2014]. But what kind of imagining is at stake here, and in what way does it induce dancing “breathing the body through *phantasmata*” [Domenico da Piacenza. *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*, I, 14, 15]?

From this perspective, the power of the phantasma cannot be reduced to the Platonic notion of *eidolon kai eikon* as a copy of that of which it is an image, nor to its Aristotelian retention within the soul as guaranteeing recollection –though such recollection, without the searching enacted by anamimnetic syllogising, would never be consciously available as such. What is instead at stake is *phantasia* in the unfolding of its magical power, through which –as argued in the 1920s, before definitively closing his ‘philosophical period’, by the controversial painter, alpinist and thinker Julius Evola– “all reality must be transmuted into a dream after having negated it in sleep [...] into a ‘perfect act’, which will be experienced as absolute reality” [Evola 2006, p. 95]. This is a condition of reactive somnambulism [13] that unmasks the illusionistic myth of a reason permanently awake.

4.2

From the 1970s onwards, Steve Paxton would often urge his dancers and students: “Imagine. Don’t do it!” [Paxton 2018, p. 38]. To move by executively applying an ideal *Gestalt* [14] of what must be done –already thought and calculated by a separated mind– may indeed ensure functional and efficient actions according to instrumental rationality, yet it does not necessarily give rise to dancing in a strong sense (having instead suffocated, repressed or obstructed the silences and vacuity of the small Dance). Through his research into relational movement, Paxton came to the conclusion that, beneath and beyond the embodied ‘attitudes’ of dancers, their more or less precise athletic performances, and independently of choreographic prescriptions, it is the power of imagining that originally ‘breathes’ every embodiment, shaping, emptying and modulating energies in process through the contagious

influence of its phantoms and in accordance with the jazz-like concert of chaosmic forces. Yet anthropo-
logo-centric efficiency –the hallmark of the dominant epistemological and cultural canon– appears to have forgotten the very premise of the Aristotelian doctrine of human action as *proairesis* (literally 'pre-seizure') [15], a premise both affirmed and implicitly undermined by Aristotle himself. Reason alone does not move anything. In its autonomy it is analytical and generalising, legally calculative, judgemental, and therefore fully capable of assessing the feasibility of action, evaluating ends, and selecting means. Yet the force that initiates and sustains any movement does not belong to rationality, but arises from an *alogen* element, which Plato had already called '*orexis*': desire, inclination, *conatus*. As Emanuele Severino has noted [Severino 1980, p. 380], Aristotle's attempt to connect rational deliberation and non-rational motivational force ultimately collapses into an *aporia*: on the one hand, calculation of means that cannot produce ends; on the other, a force that knows nothing of the ends it is meant to serve. Melancholics, however, seem to embody –almost shamanically– a different path. As Aristotle observes, they often fail to remain within their rational deliberations, or fail to deliberate altogether, due to their incontinence, and yet they act, and often with remarkable results: «they do not adhere firmly to reasoning, because they are guided by imagination» [Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1150 b, 27, 28]. Thus, rather than lucid rational calculation, it is *phantasia* that governs their action, producing effects that inspire wonder across all fields, including politics.

4.3

In the suspension of binary mentality grounded in dichotomous logic, which underpins linear conceptions of the Sign, being guided by imagination does not exclude reason, but rather repositions it as a regulating and limiting instrument operating in-process within relational dynamics. Reason may thus be used to calibrate impulses of synaptic movement, to overcome obstacles, and to expand the field of possible actions. Not pre-emptively or pre-formatively, however, but performatively –through what may be called *autoschediastic* calculation [16], that is, 'improvisational'. As the Jesuit sociologist Michel de Certeau observed,

improvisation already characterizes everyday walking, where the pedestrian selectively actualizes spatial possibilities, thereby producing deviations, shortcuts, and new configurations of the urban order. It also operates in reading, understood as a drifting through the page, a metamorphosis of the text through wandering attention –“an improvisation and an expectation of meanings drawn from certain words, an overflowing of written spaces, an ephemeral dance” [de Certeau 2010, p. 152].

Paxton himself once foregrounded the question: “How do you know you aren't improvising?” [Paxton 2018, p. 26].

4.4

We have thus reached a crucial point. The imagination that “breathes the body through phantasmata” [Domenico da Piacenza, *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*, I, 14, 15] is both less and more than the faculty traditionally attributed to the Western philosophical subject. The image is not a determinate presence, nor a copy of anything, nor a stabilizable entity in any sense. Andrea Emo [see Emo 1989; 1992; 1998; 2006] conceived *phantasia* as a self-negating magical power and therefore necessarily iconoclastic: “The image is the royal road to the abolition of the image, to supreme iconoclasm” [Emo 2019, p. 162]. The image “redeems from identity” [Emo 2019, p. 155], acting as “absolute difference” [Emo 2019, p. 154]: not a determinate otherness with respect to something else, but rather that which is never any determinate entity whatsoever, including itself as image. It operates as a flickering manifestation of the catastrophe of every image, in which every product is consumed in order to allow the process itself to re-emerge. The artist Anselm Kiefer was deeply impressed by this aspect [17]. The result of these iconoclastic processes is rhythm: the very rhythm of the world's breathing.

5. Nothing is what it is

If, as recent biological studies show, fungi are capable of following multiple directions simultaneously, migrating their synaptic networks across space, and if hyphae at every bifurcation branch without choosing one path over another, then canonical paradigms

of connection are fundamentally overturned, beyond any form of 'agrilism' [18].

In the final chapter of *Entangled Life*, Merlin Sheldrake asks: "If we say that a plant 'learns', 'decides', 'communicates', or 'remembers', do we anthropomorphise the plant, or vegetalise a set of human concepts?" [Sheldrake 2020, pp. 266, 267]. It is a well-posed question, and like all genuine questions, it admits no determinate answer.

In any case, foregrounding the performative character of synaptic drawing trace-forms, within a non-representational perspective, entails a melancholic deconstruction of the canons underpinning Western rationalism and scientism. Contemporary art has already opened this path, particularly in certain late twentieth- and twenty-first-century practices that abandon anthropocentric intellectualism [cfr. Gasparotti 2019; 2024].

For instance, the installation *Liminal* by Pierre Huyghe [19] (Venice 2024, later shown in Seoul and Berlin) stages the idea that every threshold of a processual world in perpetual transformation radiates a specific techno-natural agency, capable of communicating beyond symbolic linguistic codes [Gasparotti 2025a]. As Huyghe states:

"Once an environment is established, I let it develop its own 'agency' and 'sentience'. [...] I produce uncertainty rather than illustration. [...] I think of a language that can be invented [...] a non-human, non-animal language. [...] In my relationship to reality I play [20].

Artistic expression, in this perspective, does not represent reality, nor does it produce it ex nihilo, but rather postproduces it [cfr. Bourriaud 2004]. The theatre of "dancing for phantasmata" thus plays by reinventing and reconnecting synaptic, reversible, rhizomatically mycelial and iconoclastic images, in which the tragicomic vicissitudes of appearing-disappearing worlds are enacted. As Tristan Garcia puts it: "There is no meaning, no immediate cohesion of things, nothing in common [...]; in fact, nothing is what it is" [Garcia 2024, p. 11].

Drawing is not signification—at least not in its ideal, symbolic or juridical sense. Rather, it is a performative, synaptic and improvised becoming of thought without subject and without object. It is a practice that remembers and dismembers—through the voids and re-stitchings of the body with/without organs—the forgetting that, as Friedrich Nietzsche argued, is necessary for action, and therefore for life itself.

Notes

[1] In such cases, rather than the verb 'to think', we prefer to use the form 'cogitare', following its etymology from *agitare/agitarsi*, to move, to be in motion, in relation with others and with the Other. It is highly significant—and at the same time eloquent—that the *Treccani Online Dictionary*, in reporting this etymology, renders "*co-agitare*" as "to agitate within oneself, in one's own mind" [<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cogitare/>], thereby completely removing the infra-relational dimension of *cum*, and thus reinforcing, in the most exemplary way, the entrenched anthropo-logocentric conviction according to which thinking is the manifestation of a spiritually 'mental' and autonomous interiority. We have attempted to deconstruct and move beyond this assumption in Gasparotti 2024.

[2] Magritte 2005, p. 158. We addressed this issue in Gasparotti 2010.

[3] We are referring, in particular, to two parallel strands of contemporary artistic research and experimentation: on the one hand, the practices and projects of a group of artists who often collaborate on joint works, such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster; Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe; on the other hand, the countercurrent performances of Emilyn Claid, Anne Bean, Joseph Morgan Schofield, and Ash McNaughton. The investigation into the presuppositions and implications of these "adventures of the unrecordable", as they are defined in Huyghe 2024, lies at the centre of Gasparotti 2025b.

[4] Even in the interpretation of the movement of remembrance, a logocentric and videocentric mentality tends to prevail, the effects of which were most clearly denounced by Henri Bergson. According to this mentality, the human logical-analytical representation of movement ends up negating it outright, reducing it to a concatenation of static positions. In one of his university lectures from 190, 1903, devoted precisely to the sign in its relation to the idea of time, the French philosopher, revisiting Zeno's paradox of the arrow, argues: "If I analyse Zeno's arrow crossing space, it is always in different positions and the movement of the arrow appears to me as a series of positions. If I analyse, not from within but from without, the movement of my arm being raised, if [...] instead of feeling myself performing it I observe it being performed from outside, I see that it passes through one point and then another, and so on [...] and this movement is for me nothing other than the succession of the positions of the moving body along its trajectory": Bergson 2011, pp. 77, 78.

[5] Aristotle specifies that the act of recalling memory—which "is neither re-acquisition nor acquisition of memory" [*De memoria et reminiscencia*, 451 a, 20]— "is like a syllogism: for the one who recalls infers that previously he saw, heard or experienced something of this kind, in a condition of inquiry" [*De memoria et reminiscencia*, 453 a, 10-12].

[6] Processes of formation understood as *Bildung* oscillate and continually rebound in the very course of their unfolding, dynamically immanent and yet at the same time constantly projected beyond themselves,

within the intrinsically formative life of matter itself. The model of *Gestalt*, by contrast, can be traced back to the classical Aristotelian conception and denotes form as a predetermined immaterial principle imposed upon material reality from without, insofar as it is ideally prefigured in the intellect of the agent. It fixes, circumscribes, and identifies the substantial object, isolating and separating it from every other object and abstracting it from movement and transformation.

[7] As Plato clarifies in the *Timaeus*, such “bastard reasoning [...] scarcely credible” [*Timaeus*, 52b, 1] is not based on what is sensibly perceived or perceptible but unfolds “as if we were dreaming” [*Timaeus*, 3], thereby abolishing any distinction between oneiric phantasms and empirical reality.

[8] “We are two ships, each of which has its own destination and its own course; we may well cross paths and celebrate a festival together; as we have done [...]. But precisely then the all-powerful force of our task drove us apart again, into different seas and zones of sun [...]; the different seas and suns have changed us! That we should become strangers to each other is the law that weighs upon us [...]. There is probably an immense invisible curve and sidereal orbit within which our different lives and aims might be encompassed [...] –let us rise to this thought!”: Nietzsche 1965, §279, p. 155.

[9] The interpretant, for Charles Sanders Peirce, is not an interpreting subject already existing somewhere, ready to grasp signs from the world externally and to relate them, coldly and according to fixed criteria, to their given object. The interpretant itself emerges, in its vanishing apparition, from the sudden activation of a semiotic field which, for Peirce, operates through dynamic triangulations of the same within the same. It is the logocentric overestimation of the logical interpretant of signs as “legisigns” that produces and imposes the illusion of a metaphysical Interpreter, subjectively pre-existing and external to the momentary play of signification.

[10] See Note I.

[11] Jean-Luc Nancy rightly specifies that place, in relation to corporeal becoming, is not “position”: Position is where one stands, a determinate and secure domain of in-sistence. Bodies, instead, “have no place, neither in discourse nor in matter: [...] They take place at the limit, as limit: edge, fracture and intersection of the foreign within the continuum of sense”: Nancy 1995, p. 17.

[12] According to Steve Paxton, co-founder of Contact Improvisation, every dance that unfolds visibly in its spectacle as *great Dance* must originate from –and ultimately be reabsorbed into– the rarefied movement that appears not to move: a barely perceptible yet intensely living, necessary and involving motion in its fluid and aerial elementary nature. Within this invisible *small Dance* lies the secret and condition of possibility of all dancing. Paxton developed this insight through John Cage’s influence, according to whom all musical process is constituted by silence, insofar as silence is the non-subjective, non-intentional and non-perceptible element of sound, just as sound is the subjective, intentional and perceptible manifestation of silence itself: see cfr. Cage 2010.

[13] It should be noted that nineteenth-century ballet frequently explores the theme of somnambulism, on which Marius Petipa himself worked. The tendency intensifies in the twentieth century (see George

Balanchine’s *La sonnambula*, 1946, revived in 1960 by the New York City Ballet). In the new millennium, the trend continues in works by Enzo Cosimi (*Hello Kitty!*), Trajal Harrell (*Tickle the Sleeping Giant*, 2001-2012), Boris Charmatz (*Somnole*, 2021, 2022), and Cristina Rizzo (*Ultras. The Sleeping Dances*, 2019; *Sonno*, 2021; *Monumentum – The Second Sleep*, 2022, 2923). See Tomassini 2023.

[14] See Note 6.

[15] With the term ‘*proairesis*’, Aristotle designates “deliberation prior to action [...] always accompanied by reason and reflection. [...] The object of *proairesis* is what has already been judged through deliberation. [...] One ceases to search how one should act when one has brought the principle of action back to oneself and to that part of oneself which commands”: Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1112a, 15-1113a, 6. This doctrine has profoundly influenced Western conceptions of action up to modernity and beyond.

[16] Already the Greek philosophers (including Aristotle, who refers to it in the *Poetics*), in order to describe a particular mode of action and procedure that would much later come to be termed ‘improvisation’, employed, with reference to the ritual celebrations associated with tragic theatre, the adjective ‘*autoschediastikós*’, which literally means “that which gives itself (*autós*) its own dynamic form (*schéma*)”. The term therefore denotes the spontaneous initiation of a compositional process whose dynamic configurations are not preformed within *proairesis*, but rather take shape in the course of their unfolding, so long as the mobilised energies remain in operation.

[17] This is evidenced by the 2023 exhibition –held as a collateral event of the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia– by Anselm Kiefer, entitled *Anselm Kiefer. Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce (Andrea Emo)*, curated by Gabriella Belli and Janne Sirén, Venice, Doge’s Palace, 26 March 2022 - 6 January 2023.

[18] Developing an anti-Marxian insight derived from Derrida, according to which agriculture both anticipates and presupposes industry, the British philosopher Timothy Morton interprets the emergence of agriculture in Mesopotamia some twelve thousand years ago as the advent of an inexorable and totalizing machinery of thought and practice that is at once intoxicating, persuasive, and seemingly rewarding in its capacity to satisfy human needs optimally. Through this agriological program, the spaces of dwelling are planned, organized, and mobilized according to the imperative of maximizing the rational exploitation of available natural resources, relying on the indefinitely perfectible progress of the *technai* understood in a Promethean sense. The ontological structure of agriologistics is grounded in three fundamental assumptions: (1) the inviolable validity of the principles of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle; (2) the equation of existence with presence; and (3) the unquestioned conviction that rigid, clear-cut, and insurmountable boundaries separate the human from the nonhuman, together with the corollary that human existence constitutes the best possible mode of being. [cfr. Morton 2021]

[19] We addressed this topic directly in Gasparotti 2025a.

[20] The quotation is taken from Stéphanie Renault’s interview with the artist entitled *L'essenziale è perdersi*. In *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, 3 August 2022.

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