

# Mute: the audience in the role of perceptual guest and dancing as amplified experience

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*Text by Anastasio Koukoutas*

*Mute* — the new piece by COCHLEA res and dance artist Georgia Paizi — is what we could call a “staged” experiment; it is structured around a series of “what ifs” that each spectator individually is invited to play with during a 40-minute time slot. “What if you turned off the sound while watching a dance performance?” or “What if you isolated your gaze to focus only on one performer?” are only two of the proposals this in situ choreographic project has to offer. In the heart of it, however, lies an invitation to explore more deeply our own embodied experience and participation, to recognize that sound and movement is embedded in our sensorial perception of others and of the world. This is of course made more palpable as the “invisible presence of sound” complicates dominant

representations of the dancing body and highlights the corporeal as a process of audition, (re)writing and transformation. Therefore, it demonstrates how we embody and we are embodied through sound and movement, by investigating further what the materiality of sound — and its absence — adds to our understanding of dancing/sounding bodies and subjectivity.

As I enter the gallery space of Haus N Athen — some of us are already wearing the earplugs we were offered at the entrance — slightly “cut off” from the babel and footsteps of people finding their preferable spot in the room, I sense that the bodies of the dancers have been switched on for a while. The space is already charged with the type of energy you get when you arrive too late at a party. However, there are no traces to prove that; the prevailing silence heightens our process of acclimating to the ongoing performance of which we only get to see a fragment. Four dancers on a 9-square-metre platform each, wearing headphones, tune vaguely to the rhythm of a sound score we cannot hear — the DJ visible in the corner of the gallery space, his head bobbing and grooving to his own music. Some of the dancers have their eyes closed, responding more discretely to their interpretation of movement, others wear a neutral facial expression — “I see you but I don’t” kind of thing — while trying out an erratic dance with more unrecognizable patterns. Some bear the visible marks of their physical effort on their T-shirts, some look effortlessly suspended in their own kinesphere.

In the forty available minutes there’s plenty to sense and elaborate; time actually dilates, especially if you increase the

"muteness" by wearing the noise cancelling earbuds in addition to the earplugs. I notice that people around me improvise and experiment with all available devices; but the point is that in this peculiar circumstance we get to experience something different, a feeling that strongly reverberates with the inflicted isolation we all, more or less, felt during the pandemic. From this perspective, the performance negotiates the space as making "a way" out of "no way". The bodies are secluded in their own restricted environment but they manage to create the kind of tranquil assertiveness that speaks more of adjustability and survival and less about suffocation. It somehow recalls what Tracy McMullen, following Judith Butler's thought about "the performative", approaches with her term "the improvisative" [1] — although I'd be careful with how dance is used metaphorically to bring bodies that are often silenced into audibility. But there is something not easily classifiable in this performance and I tend to believe that it is the materiality of (no) sound and that of the muted bodies which adds to our understanding of how the moving, trained and trainable body can become a potential source of resistance to the meanings it is required to bear.



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A great deal of the above is also attributed to what we could call "the perceptual guest". I am borrowing this term from Barry Shwabsky [2] to signify the willingness of the small audience to explore the sensorial apparatus given by the performance, to understand how our ability to shift our perception is modulated by the affective, stylistic, or immersive quality with which we engage with our own experience. It also suggests to value what we perceive before we can claim that we understand what we perceive. These acts of perception remain both partial and mobile, as we experiment with the devices, we dive into almost absolute silence, we tune in with the soundscapes of the musician Jeph Vanger or as we are caught within the perceptual frame of

another “guest”. We are both visible and audible, by allowing ourselves to relate to what we sense around us and accordingly relate to our own bodies and to others. It is more or less what Merleau Ponty said about the body being-in-the-world, a result of both our own direct and mediated experiences. Thus the “perceptual guest”, in this case, is generated through trust and curiosity, familiarity and alienation.

Depending on our stance, thus, a dense moment of physical outburst is interpreted as virtuosic or chaotic, a body lying on the surface of the platform could be either a self-explanatory action of resting or a moment of anti-virtuosic stasis. Georgia Paizi and her group of dancers (Lina Vergopoulou, Katerina Delakoura, Elton Petri, Augustinos Potsios) seem to attempt a comment on how heavily mediated our experiences with the world have been lately — undeniably, the pandemic made things worse by heightening the digital as a way out — but also tempt us to think anew what “relational corporeality” feels like, when bodies and (no) sound, or even sounding bodies, are constantly dis/re/co-located in temporary choreographic configurations. Upon leaving the space, I cannot help but notice that this intimate sharing, however short in duration, leaves you with a rare quietness — no applauding, no buzzing crowd, no modest bowing appreciative of the warming welcome — with an almost complex feeling that has emerged through resonance, both in terms of auditory experience and strong, enduring images of the dancing body.

## Notes

[1] Tracey McMullen, "The Improvisative", The Oxford Handbook of  
**und. Athens** = (Forthcoming), Edited by  
online publication date: Jun  
2014, accessible at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

[2] Barry Schwabsky, "The Perceptual Guest - Art in the Unfinished  
Present", 2016, Verso



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