

Vanishing: Choreographing the Ephemerality of Dancing Bodies Through Archeologically Inspired Practices

Telma João Santos

ABSTRACT

Vanishing is a dance piece featuring the possibility of a choreographic structure of non-defined and non-classified transition spaces—from the daily cycle of dawn-nightfall to the transient spaces in between the perceptions of what is seen and who sees it. Between visibility and invisibility, virtuous and insignificant choreographed movement, presence and absence, seeing and un-seeing, there is the development of a set of ‘vanishing acts’ as representative of the ephemerality of dancing bodies. From the experience of participating in the creation process as a researcher, I present here some concepts that helped me navigate the process, from the first ideas to the public presentation.

Keywords: Vanishing; dance; choreography

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Introduction

Vanishing is a dance piece created and performed by Beatriz Valentim and Bruno Senune. I have known Senune personally since 2015, and I have been collaborating with him since his first solo piece in 2016, *Kid as king*, when I participated as a researcher and dramaturgical supporter. Since then, we have cooperated on several projects, and I have been present in almost every dance piece in which he participates, particularly as I am highly interested in his path to becoming performer and choreographer. Senune and Valentim have been dancing together as performers for several choreographers since 2018 and, as they told me in conversation, they had been feeling an urge to create a piece together since the beginning. However, they were always so busy that it was not until 2023 that they were finally able to sit down and formulate an initial idea for *Vanishing* and propose it to Palcos Instáveis, a joint initiative by Choreographing Center Instável and Porto's Municipal Theatre. The piece was chosen as one to be supported and presented in 2024, and a joint venture between these two artists finally came to fruition. They invited me then to follow along with the process, helping them to consider concepts, create meaning, share references and write about the experience and process.

As choreographers, Valentim and Senune have demonstrated individual concerns that intersect with each other and naturally reverberate within their piece. For instance, Valentim has been dedicated to research and creation based on the discussing and choreographing from questioning the origin of concepts and movements, as in *VADO: a solo about empty stuff* (2018), where she addresses the concept of emptiness, how to deal with it as a dancer and the limits of confrontation with the empty space;¹ in *Self* (2021), where she questions the relationship with her reflection in another body, the mirroring, its differences and its dualities;² and in *What is a problem?* (2022/2023), where she develops a

path from the question 'What is a problem?'³ towards a choreography of possibilities of approaching what is a problem, from individual to more collective perspectives. Meanwhile, Senune has dedicated himself to researching the transitions within changing states of the body, emerging from the confrontation and anguish towards life and the emotional changes we must accept and manage. This is exemplified in *Kid as king* (2016), where he explores states of almost-explosion, on the edge of collapse, in an imploded landscape on the brink of suffocation;⁴ in *Drift of the eyes* (2017), where he explores states of post-explosion, post-ecstasy and, simultaneously, slowness, tiredness and the construction of a path to a possible metamorphosis;⁵ and in *Presage of a profound melancholy* (2019), where he explores the desires of arriving and of regenerating as an impulsive response to a voluntary departure.⁶

The process of creating *Vanishing* was mainly dedicated to developing a collection of choreographies of the sensitive and of what I like to name the 'un-seeing'. The movement analysis explored in this piece is centred on details and mis/conceptions of normativity of dancing bodies as notions of body, time and space, as well as on practices related to sensitivity/perception, that is an observing body, the concept of which will be approached later. Their interconnection leads to an important step within the creative process: astonishment as a transitional space and place of hope. Throughout our discussions of how to place *Vanishing* within contemporary practices and artistic landscapes, the idea that astonishment with the world is resistance arisen: the focus on the ability to be surprised and enjoy daily cycles in continuity, from day to night and during its transitional moments.

I also introduce 'ephemerality of dance' as a concept and as part of my approach to *Vanishing*, and I introduce the notions of 'archeologically inspired practices' and 'participant observation', not only as concrete movement-based but also conceptual facets entangling this piece within a broader artistic contemporary landscape.

Some preliminary concepts

Un-seeing

The concept of ‘un-seeing’ was inspired by a moment when I was searching for a way to explain to Valentim and Senune how I was perceiving their movement-based interpretation of *Vanishing*. This is because they were searching for spaces in between seeing and not seeing themselves and between the other and the audience, as well as opportunities to be concrete in their interpretation by using their gaze and eye movements, as well as by being more abstract in searching for varying distances between themselves and between them and the audience. Thus, ‘un-seeing’ involves creating micro- and almost invisible movements inspired by one another that, through repetition, become potent, that is when each of the choreographer-performers un-sees himself from the other’s perspective and from the several interferences and interdependences within the process.

Mis/conceptions of normativity

This concept was always present when discussing the process, be it when sharing meanings, physical sensations or more formal thoughts. Eventually, mis/conceptions of

normativity became the idea chosen by both Valentim and Senune as the mechanism for creating different forms and presences as performers (see Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks (2010) for more insights on archaeologies of presence). They were committed to creating a movement vocabulary inspired by one another and to being focused on how to disturb normative conceptions of a dancing body: the notion of the body itself, such as considering how to do a plié with the back arched as if it was the standard form; the notion of time, such as how to create stillness in unexpected intermediate moments as if they were expected; and the notion of space, such as how to create a geometry of space with a set of imaginary spots as if they were there concretely.

Observing Body

In *Vanishing*, Valentim and Senune shared practices related to the sensitive/perception to create a space between them infused with a shared presence and togetherness but without concreteness, focusing on the eyes and the gaze that travels through several parts of the body, as if they had observing hands, observing hips, observing legs, observing arms, an observing head and so on.

Vanishing – a dance piece as a project

Valentim and Senune met in 2018 in Azores, Portugal, while participating in the first artistic residency for the dance piece *IO – Landscapes, Machines and Animals* by Portuguese choreographer Né Barros. In this piece, they performed a duet and underwent a highly intense creative process, becoming closer and, in doing so, realising they shared common artistic interests. From that point, a collaborative spirit started to emerge and make sense, and they began to search for an opportunity to create a piece together.

After many conversations and some artistic pieces on which they worked together as performers, they started to design an idea for the collective and choreographic premise they wanted to pursue: a solo dance piece, where the first part is danced by Valentim and choreographed by Senune and the second part is danced by Senune and choreographed by Valentim, interconnected through an aesthetic and dramaturgical development with a unique and continuous sound and light design. The goal of this specific strategy and



From Vanishing, Beatriz Valentim in the solo choreographed by Bruno Senune. Photo: João Octávio Peixoto/TMP



From Vanishing: Beatriz Valentim and Bruno Senune encounter each other and change roles.

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device selection was to question the rigidity of dance approaches and of the roles of choreographer and performer, seen classically as hierarchic and fixed. In this piece, Valentim and Senune decided to question movement as a glorification of visibility and identity, to turn disappearing moments and movements visible, as well as transitions between body states and daily cycles.

One of the main inspirations for *Vanishing* was the notion of daily cycles as a metaphor for the continuous, never-ending cycle of life, referring as well to the iconography of ouroboros, the figure of the serpent—or dragon—that bites its own tail, which is a mystic symbol representing the concept of eternity. In consideration of the dichotomy between dawn and dusk, Valentim and Senune intended to dive into the poetics of night and day as conductive materials for both solo pieces, reflecting on the concept of time and its constant movement as a life catalyst. This was achieved through detailed and focused observations of the other's body, gestures and particularities to collect information and propose the resulting choreographic scripts. From this starting point, they intended to identify recurrences that could be unveiled, broken, rethought, redirected and attentive

to an infinite spectrum of changes and possibilities of seeing, un-seeing and vanishing on stage. Further, the sound design, a continuous proposal, reinforced the idea of cycle and repetition: averting one's gaze, hiding, approaching, straying, balancing, shrinking, fixing small choreographic scores through clear and explicit repetition and developing a dramaturgy for the body are additional elements in this dance piece.

Valentim and Senune decided to place themselves within a transitional landscape and confront the challenging question, 'What is this apparently empty space in each of us and in between us?' In effect, they made visible the complexity and density of what is usually invisible because it is considered 'less important': the metamorphosis of the visible, the fixed and the apparently unchangeable. The conceptual transience and the intermediate spaces found within what was originally fixed as a normative or hegemonic conception of dance and its validated movements are also part of what motivates the construction of this piece, from the search for movements in between the virtuous movements belonging to dance to the search for movements that characterise the dichotomy of day



From Vanishing: Bruno Senune in the solo choreographed by Beatriz Valentim.

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and night, delineating a landscape for their transitional states, dawn and dusk. Valentim and Senune thus transformed the stage into an exploratory environment in which they are archaeologists of the ancestries that configure ephemerality, transience, intermediate spaces, boundaries of the contiguity of concepts and concrete movements. They destroy the binary concepts of the origins and place of dance, affecting the virtuosity or collapsing of the binary nature or connection with the exploration of the scenic space.

Writing-wise, I was devoted to considering and delineating concepts and methods to identify the words that could best describe how I was experiencing rehearsals, conversations and documentation videos⁷.

Valentim was devoted to narrating and describing movement, while Senune was devoted to creating scripts using words and random thoughts on pieces that could also be read as poems, as in the following:

Appearance and vanishing of the form
 Body in a constant metamorphosis
 Appearance and vanishing of the 'selves'
 Get lost in myself
 I forgot myself in you
 To embrace these notions
 I don't know. Did I ever know?
 (Bruno Senune, from his personal notes)

Notes on the ephemerality of dance

The transient and ephemeral nature of dance is one of its most commonly accepted features, but also one of the most interesting and complex aspects of this performative art; even though a dance piece is defined in the first place and, even if it is thoroughly prepared, it is unique to each public presentation—in fact, it can never be performed exactly the same, not only due to the impossibility of an exact replication of the same event, but also due to the impossibility of guaranteeing the same connection with the audience or space. As performance studies professor and researcher Peggy Phelan states, ‘It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as different’ (1993, 146). Further, following dance studies professor and researcher André Lepecki, ‘Dance always vanishes in front of our eyes in order to create a new past. The dance exists ultimately as a mnemonic imprint of what has just lived there’ (1999). Moreover, in considering photography as a method of creating memory in dance, Carrie Lambert-Beatty writes, ‘Images of dance never capture the energy, dynamism, or power of a live performance. They are pale representations at best, of an inherently ephemeral art’ (2008, 132).

In *Vanishing*, the ephemeral nature of dance is not only a conscient feature, but also a tool of dance; as such, choreographic scripts are constructed using the ephemerality of the visible moment, accounting for the desire to create ‘disappearing acts’ through choreography, employing ‘disappearance as a performative strategy, pointing to the construction of performance and in this way critiquing and dialoguing with performance theory’s discourses of re/presentation and dis/appearance’ (Phelan, quoted in Flexer and Sandiland 2020, 2). Just as day and night repeat themselves daily but not in the exact same way, this piece highlights the fact that dance traverses a transient space within templates of repetition that allow us to recognise it as standard, but we never observe its definite and repeatable final form.

Notes on archeologically inspired practices

One of the starting points of *Vanishing*’s creative process towards choreographic construction, particularly in the connection established between Valentim and Senune,

was participant observation, a well-known qualitative data methodology used in field work, especially in sociology and anthropology/ethnography.

Participant observation is used across the social sciences, as well as in various forms of commercial, public policy and non-profit research. Anthropology and sociology have specifically relied on participant observation for many of their seminal insights, and for most anthropologists and many sociologists, conducting a participant observation study at a field site is an important rite of passage into the discipline (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 2013, 75–76).

Participant observation is a methodology in which ‘a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture’ (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). Similarly, Valentim and Senune, who already knew each other and shared a common interest in the ways their bodies inhabit scenic spaces and artistic creation, decided to defy themselves individually as participant observers to research ways in which the other’s body inhabits several stages (life, imaginary, choreographic and so on), including how it reverberates existence and the experience of observation from the one who proposed the movement scripts. The field work of participant observation occurs not only in the studio and in concrete rehearsals, but also in their efforts towards production and communication, for which they are both responsible in this dance piece⁸. Nevertheless, two factors are important to highlight, as they are dissident from a more formal perspective on participant observation: first, there is no rule that participant observation must have result in a speech about the other person or a description of the differences from the other; the main goal of participant observation in this specific case is to provide insights so that what is choreographically proposed results from these observations and allows the other to be challenged by movements already in their movement vocabulary, even if not used frequently as choreographic material. Second, it is also important to note that choreographic proposals involve the challenge of being archaeologists searching for two main things: memory and astonishment for what is presented; that is, there exist several layers of participant observation, where the relationship between observer and observed is not standard in the sense that the observer researches

and the observed pursues their routines. Rather, it is a more dynamic relationship where the observer and the observed research simultaneously, propose ideas, discuss them and try them out without definite roles. Valentim and Senune also wanted the audience to be close to them, even if seated in one direction (there is a front), assuming another layer of observation. Here, observation is not simply a participant regarding the audience in the sense that the connection is established only through the dance piece, and from sharing the same floor and the same space, we are not interested in analysing the connection established with the audience or how its participation influences the piece.

Vanishing was an interesting process in which to participate as a researcher, from the proximality to the choreographers/performers, as well as the fact that I find their individual universes interesting and it was deeply insightful to follow constant negotiations and doubts along the way. I believe in the importance for researchers to be part of the artistic creative process, dealing with difficult and fragile moments, as many of the resulting questions were central to considerations of concepts, and they teach us to become more aware of the continuous metamorphosis of life itself.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://beatrizvalentim.pt/VADO>
- 2 <https://beatrizvalentim.pt/Self>
- 3 <https://beatrizvalentim.pt/O-que-e-um-problema>
- 4 <https://brunosenunecontact.blogspot.com/p/kid-as-king.html>
- 5 <https://brunosenunecontact.blogspot.com/p/a-derivados-olhos.html>
- 6 <https://brunosenunecontact.blogspot.com/p/melancolia.html>
- 7 see PhD dissertations by O'Sullivan (2007) and Longley (2011), for instance.
- 8 This dance piece was choreographed and performed by two Portuguese dancers and choreographers, and even with financial support by GDA Foundation and Setúbal's city council, to accommodate a team with a light designer, a musician who creates original live music, a researcher, a videomaker and a costume designer, it was impossible to hire a producer and a person to work on the communication, so Valentim and Senune worked together in both roles, defining in the beginning what each would do for which task and negotiating new tasks along the way.

BIOGRAPHY

Holding a PhD in Mathematics and in Performing Arts, **Telma João Santos** has taught at several universities for more than twenty years, developing performance pieces and focusing on the multidimensionality of self-re-presentations. Her work involves intersecting mathematical discourse and movement analysis, and she has worked with several artists as a researcher throughout their creative processes. She is now developing the documental autobiographic project titled *Between Struggle and Mourning*. Her research focused on the intersections between scientific research and artistic creation, participating as a researcher in several processes. Her book *On Performance Art: Conceptual Approaches, Creation and Research Methodologies*, and an Encyclopedia of Artistic Practices was published in 2025 by Ethics International Press.

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