
Moving objects

What moves whom? Who moves what?

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

Moving objects is a performative practice that I have been developing for four years in different contexts. Through a simple proposal (or action score), participants move objects that were already in a space. In silence, the landscape changes and the action of moving objects reverses its logic: who moves whom? The gesture ceases to be utilitarian and becomes the result of listening and deciding; it becomes the primary gesture of creation and, invoking Simone Weil's concept, of decreation.

No mere body as an object, nor mere figuration of the object. *Moving objects* calls into question the relationships between objects and bodies, between figuration and abstraction, eroding these dichotomies, revealing relations of continuity, contagion, mimicry, absorption and chiasm between bodies and objects. In this intertwining and blurring of body and object positions, a performative critique of the categories of subject and object as well as the very structure of representation becomes apparent.

In this lecture I propose to reflect on certain events that have taken place in the unfolding of this practice (a practice that may find parallels with the spontaneous practices of social and political protest, as well as with playing, or certain rituals), which highlight transfigurative relationships between bodies and objects, potentials for transformation of the common space and its collective meaning and that allow critical exploration of dialectics between what we look at and what looks at us, what we touch and what touches us, what we move and what moves us.

Keywords: figuration, object, body, decreation, collective creation, performative practices, play

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Nonexistent, impossible, imaginary objects are in our thoughts all the time, but in art they move from the inside to the outside, words and images cross the border.

Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*

I would like to problematize, perhaps, the issues that were at play in the framework of the conference Figure and Body / 3rd Biennale of Visual and Figures Theatre – IF Barcelona, held on 15 and 16 November 2018 at the Institut del Teatre: the body as a performing object and the dramaturgies of the figure. First of all because the categories of object and body can at least be questionable and because the issue of the figuration of the object, in the sense of the object as a representation of the figure and specifically the human figure, also opens an immense field of reflection related to the classical distinction, and not free of difficulties, between figuration and abstraction. My problematization of these issues does not come from an intellectual decision but rather from experiences of work and observation of perception in performing creation contexts. One of these experiences is what I have called with my friends and colleagues *Moving objects*, and lies, in fact, on an ambiguous ground between play, ritual and performing experimentation as such.

Moving objects is a performative practice that I have been developing for several years in different contexts and with different groups of people. Through a simple proposal (or action score), participants explore the changes in the common space, the relations between objects and bodies, empty spaces and absences. The proposal is formulated as follows:

Proposal

In silence

- 1- Look at the space and the objects therein.
- 2- Move an object.
- 3- Look at the space again.

Variation 1**In silence**

- 1- Look at the space and the objects therein.
- 2- Move an object and/or
- 3- Put your body in a place, like an object.

We also propose other variations depending on the context: to determine a space from which to look and another in which to move objects; not to determine this distinction; to begin with the objects that are in the room as they are; to begin from an empty space.

The form the proposal finally adopts on each occasion depends on the number of participants, the space, the number of objects and other specificities of the context. I have practised it with groups of performers in a dance studio, in a house, with groups of teenagers and senior citizens in the classrooms of a public secondary school, with a group of young people in a room in MACBA, with around one hundred people of different ages, nationalities and cultures at the CCCB theatre, with choreography students of the CSD, with children at home, and with a group comprising the architect Sara Ojanguren, the artist Beatriz González, the musicians Matt Davis and Nuno Rebelo and the playwright Albert Tola, with whom we have been researching different forms of *Moving objects*. I am currently working on a solo piece that is the result of these experiences (and others) and that focuses on the dialectic between the absence and presence of the object.

What do we see through all these tests? Many ideas emerge through this practice but the most outstanding, perhaps, are related with its own name: *moving objects*. In English *moving objects* can mean at least three things: the fact of moving objects, objects that are moving and objects that move emotionally. The first meaning designates the action we perform: we move things, we change their place, we move around the space carrying them, we pick them up, we pull them, we grasp them, we push them, we hold them, we kick them, we carry them, we clasp them, we slide them... using different parts of the body to change the place of things: sometimes just holding them between finger and thumb is enough, on others we have to use all our weight to push a big object, and even work with other people to be able to move it. The speeds are modified as a consequence of the size and weight of the objects but not only because of these factors. Also as a consequence of desire. Once the mechanism is set in motion, the objects move. They move because in fact they awaken our desire: the desire to see an empty place, to build, disarrange, fill, refill, arrange or relate volumes, colours and shapes, make narratives and strange relations flourish, alienate the object, hide it, make it reappear. Attract unexpected and also highly expected meanings. This is the strange thing: we have started by moving objects and soon they move us. And they move us emotionally. Because this desire emerges based on a given emotion, sometimes subtle, sometimes urgent. On what the body has felt as a shaking of the object in its own flesh. Objects, moreover, make sounds when

moved. When leaning them on something, sliding them, carrying them, picking them up... they emit sounds; to some extent we can imagine that they speak, that they sing.

All this is so simple and so old! So ordinary and so strange! Both extremely innocent and subversive... There is, however, a radical difference between the utilitarian gesture of moving an object and this play. The same difference that exists with the girl that in her room moves around furniture, books, small boxes, pencils, teddy bears, pillows and blankets, clothes and photos, toys, mats and chairs. The seven-year-old girl creates a new world. The adolescent subverts the given world. And how does she do this? With a coarse and genuine gesture of creation or rather of decreation, invoking Simone Weil's concept (Weil, 1966: 91; trans. 1993), which refers to the gesture of making space, of withdrawing, making space so that the new, the other, the difference emerges. By leaving an object in a place and looking at it, we withdraw and let the relations between things question us. It is a purposeless gesture beyond itself, useless.

At these three levels — action, passivity and affection — we play at moving objects. From time to time we have the feeling of being in a ritual: totems are built, the space is filled and emptied, architectures are formed within the room, objects are concealed, arranged and aligned, a hotchpotch is made in the centre, they are scattered, knocked over, turned away. It is here when we see their humanity without humanism, their *lacking* humanity according to Didi-Huberman's happy expression (Didi-Huberman, 1992: 90; trans. 2014): we see them torn apart, knocked down, dead, looking at us, fallen, in a corner, knocked over, leaving the space, crawling.

Sometimes we feel the urgency of subverting the order of things, of collectively modifying the common landscape, and it is then when the occupations of public spaces resonate, things protest, bodies protest, the desire for change emerges contained by the walls of the room or the space where we are playing. On some occasions the group and the objects form a dissonant cluster: mixture? transformation? metamorphosis? knot? void? centre? perimeters? all at the same time? On others there is a subtle tuning between bodies and objects. Sometimes solitude and others meeting. The body and the object blur their limits.

Not mere body as an object, nor mere figuration of the object. *Moving objects* calls into questions the relations between objects and bodies, between figuration and abstraction, eroding these dichotomies, revealing relations of continuity, contagion, mimicry, absorption and chiasm between bodies and objects. Moments of distortion of the meaning of the action, moments of anthropomorphism of the object, of the object as a question and of the object as pure movement. In this intertwining and blurring of body and object positions, a performative critique of the categories of subject and object as well as of the very structure itself of representation becomes apparent. Also, and more deeply, the ingenuous question reappears that we endlessly repeat when we are two years old, and which concerns both the bodies and the objects: and this, what is this?

But this is also the question that brings the object back to us. The object is a question. The relationships between objects and enigma. What is there shows a void, an absence, a loss, as Didi-Huberman suggests in his book *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. The object questions us because it flags up an absence. Finally, it flags up death. When we look at things, something in them looks at us. For Didi-Huberman, indeed, between the tautological (and cynical) posture that says “what I see is what I see” and the posture that wishes to go beyond the anguish of the void overcoming it and “making of seeing an exercise in belief” (Didi-Huberman, 1992: 22; trans. 2014), between “the optical evidence” and the evidence of “the presence”, there is a false dilemma. In reality, Didi-Huberman suggests (Didi-Huberman, 1992: 47; trans. 2014):

There is no need to choose between what we see (with its excluding consequence in a discourse that fixes it; namely, tautology) and what looks at us (with its excluding influence in the discourse that fixes it; namely, belief). One must be concerned about the between and only by it. All that is needed is to try to enter into a dialectic; that is, to endeavour to think about the oscillation and contraction of the beating heart, the beating ebb and flow of the sea, from its central point, which is its point of concern, of suspense, of in-between. It is necessary to return to the point of inversion and convertibility, to the dialectical driver of all oppositions. It is the precise moment when what we see begins to be reached by what looks at us, a moment that does not impose either the excess of plenitude (glorified by belief) or the cynical absence of sense (glorified by tautology).

Thus, in the practice of *Moving objects* we feel this concern. We are continuously suspended in it. We also feel the continuity and the chiasm between the body and the object, the reversibility between the visible and the tangible that Merleau-Ponty talks about: “What is open to us, therefore, with the reversibility of the visible and the tangible, is – if not yet the incorporeal – at least an intercorporeal being, a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends further than the things I touch and see at present” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 142-143; trans. 2010).

The distinction between figuration and abstraction becomes ambiguous. Because, what kind of abstraction is generated in the simple action of changing the place of an object and looking at it? Is the gesture of moving a thing without a purpose an abstract gesture?¹ Could we say that these actions are figurative? Could we say that the arrangement of the objects in relations that break or transform the utilitarian arrangement of things is a figurative representation? Are these distinctions meaningful in this context?

1. This question is related to the relationship between uselessness and abstraction, concepts that, obviously, are in no way equivalent. Abstraction has to do with generalisation, with removal of differences, with decontextualisation. An abstract gesture can refer to a gesture that is in some way independent of any mundane context; in this respect, many of the steps of certain dance styles can be considered abstract gestures and also useless. The useless gesture is the gesture that lacks a purpose circumscribed in its environment, but nevertheless is not necessarily abstract: when we move a chair to overturn it and not sit on it, the gesture is specific and yet useless.

Finally, we could also point out the lack of definition between the living and the inert that appears throughout *Moving objects*:

The category of the sinister, which since Freud has mainly been related to the issue of the blurring of the living and the inert, might help describe the performance of media things and real things in postdramatic theatre: what is my self if the strange, the other, the object from which I want to categorically separate is already in it? (Lehmann, 1999: 367; trans. 2013)

I have noted thus far a series of estrangements and ambiguities that take place at a perceptive, experiential and symbolic level in the development of the practice. Each level of observation and reflection opens up many questions that we are unable to address here. However, before ending and as a way of opening, I would like to pose a series of questions that emerge out of these experiences and that I find very relevant when contextualising this practice. Because, what is the reason and purpose of this totally analogical practice that relates the body, bodies, and the object, objects, through the skin, through gaze, smell and sound, without an utilitarian purpose but with consequences such as the generation of other spaces, other gazes, other perspectives, other contexts where we can be together? What reason and purpose, in a world in which the virtual reality is developing at full speed? What reason and purpose for feeling the weight, distance, warmth, form of the object with the body, its absence, when perhaps what is increasingly monopolising our experience is the image? What can a space in which the word can be contained precisely in the silence show us? What can a practice in which we listen to each other, organise ourselves and manage our individual and collective desires at the level of the symbolic give us? Is it somehow related to artistic creation?

Perhaps as a rudimentary answer to the first and second question there is a deep concern, which has nothing to do with a nostalgic attitude, which we share with the architect and art theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa: “The hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world” (Pallasmaa, 2005: 22). When I cannot touch things, feel their weight, look at them from the skin, my relationship is distant; to some extent, I let myself be enveloped by things, by the others. I feel outside that inter-corporeal, inter-subjective fabric of which I form part. I am displaced. And, perhaps, what is necessary now is to locate oneself, not firmly, but perhaps in a shifting yet responsible way. The situation, the orientation, offers me an anchorage from which to follow and also makes the difference, a radical and open difference, explicit.

The fact that the word can be contained by the silence seems to me a way of opening the symbolic. A discursive respite. And at the same time, precisely, a possibility of updating the discourse. I do not know if perceiving, changing things around together, feeling our knots, the moments of fury, of tuning, of agreement and disagreement, in silence, creating shifting common and always new landscapes has something to do with artistic creation but

in any case it reminds us of the importance of the gesture unlinked from the useful. The importance of this gesture that, in the end, is more a withdrawal, a manner of giving way.



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