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## A SILENT PRELUDE TO A DANCE. HOW SILENCE SHAPES THE VIEWER'S EXPERIENCE OF A SITE-SPECIFIC DANCE PERFORMANCE

### 1. Introduction. Dance, music, and pathicity

At the very beginning of *Die Formen des Räumlichen. Ihre Bedeutung für die Motorik und die Wahrnehmung* (1930) the neurologist and phenomenologist Erwin Straus (1891-1975) emphasises that that modern dance's post-war claim to emancipate itself from music has ultimately served only to demonstrate the essential connection between music and dance. According to Straus, in fact,

The connection between music and dance is neither accidental nor empirical. Dance has not lost the ground beneath its feet, but rather the space that befits it. Clearly, an essential connection must exist between dance movements and the music that accompanies them, as well as the spatial structure created by the music. This link cannot be arbitrarily removed (Straus 1960, 141, my transl.).

According to Straus, the spatial presence of sound is only fully expressed in musical tones, which become manifest through the phenomenon of the 'lived rhythm'. Indeed, the musical tone «has an activity of its own; it rushes upon us, seizes us, affects us, takes possession of us» (Ibid., 155, my transl.), awakening an immediate impulse to move within us and betraying the 'immediate link' between hearing and movement. This bond and the phenomenon of 'motor induction' – termed by Straus 'lived rhythm' – can only be understood if we consider the pathic moment of sensation. This is the moment that concerns not what is given to us objectively (the 'gnostic' moment), but how it is given. It concerns the «immediate communication we have with things on the basis of their changing sensible mode of givenness» (Ibid., 151, my transl.), which is present in all our sensible experiences:

Our senses of sight and hearing do not merely provide us with sensory impressions; they bring colour and sound before us. As long as we perceive objects, we also feel colours and tones in the sense that they affect us and organise us according to determined laws (Ibid., my transl.).

In all our perceptions, a coercive dimension is always at work. This manifests itself in the dynamic of 'seizement' (*Ergriffenheit*), which is characteristic of the 'lived rhythm' and attested to by the kinship between the terms 'hearing' and 'obeying' (*hören - horchen - gehorchen*). This obedience concerns the impossibility of escaping the impulse to move. The 'determined laws' by which we are affected do not concern a specific movement, but rather the impulse to move; a drive to set oneself in motion, which is experienced when perceiving something with particular intensity. Straus characterises this phenomenon as a 'lived rhythm', a 'tension', a revitalisation of one's own tone. This is not to be understood as muscle tone, but as a way of feeling: one suddenly feels revived, in the grip of an «energy of movement that seems to arise from itself» (Ibid., 103, my transl.). This movement «is neither the effect of a cause nor the result of imitation [...] it escapes the alternative between activity and passivity. For it is in this grasping, and in its suffered character, that it finds the strength of its activity: self-movement and the source of incomparable energy» (Ibid., 106, my transl.). As soon as this movement is carried out – which manifests itself first of all at a postural level in the form of straightening the torso and taking bolder steps – one ceases to move in physical space, the 'optical' space in which one moves according to directions set by goals to be achieved and enters 'acoustic' space. This is a 'living', 'mobile' space that arises alongside bodily movements as an integral part of the processes of 'seizement' and 'lived rhythm':

The energy of movement in 'being taken' is not a push, but a 'pull': only the appearance of presence in listening inaugurates movement. This is already a response, even though this expression does not appear in Straus, since listening does not fall within the realm of sensoriality in this case, but is a mode of communication (Ibid., 42, my transl.).

Dance movements are devoid of any purpose in themselves; they symbolically convey feelings as a 'form of communication', which is not merely the 'transmission of information', but a response to emotional stimuli. This response varies depending on the type of

dance and the choreography and operates over time and in different contexts. Here, we are considering dance more on an experiential than a choreographic level. However, even in the latter, codified steps and poses can be identified as emotional responses to choreographic stimuli in a performance or to specific nuances of emotional communication.

## **2. Pathicity without music**

We ask ourselves to what extent the ability to create movement actually depends on music. If it is true that, for Straus, the liberation of dance from music through ‘absolute dance’ results in a loss of contact with the acoustic space, then the reason music makes such contact possible is not because of a specific genre, but because of tone’s affective, spatialising and dynamizing power, or its pathic effectiveness: «all hearing is in the present. That is why, in the acoustic, there is repetition, whereas in the visual there is only multiplication. In sound we have happening in the present» (Ibid., 156, my transl.). Listening – and not merely hearing – involves participating in the creation of sound itself and its dynamic, spatial nature. While in fixed, Euclidean optical space there can only be juxtaposed sounds, in acoustic space there can be repetitions. This is because the affective communication it conveys restores the procedural dynamics of how we are affected and the variations that configure this communication, involving a corresponding change in the acoustic space. This is not because one is listening to music, but because of the connection between listening and pathicity. Listening to the tone involves following the essentially kinaesthetic, affective communication implied by it. The focus is not on sound, but on tone. Tone is ‘pure’ sound, unconnected from any reference to the world or meaning. It is the emblem of the emotional nature of our experience and the feeling of being «touched» and «vibrating» (Boissière 2023, 18, my transl.). In other words, it is entering into that emotional communication typical of ‘lived rhythm’.

Listening to the tone of a sound involves listening to the dynamic of kinaesthetic, spatial and relational understanding that characterises feelings and the way they are expressed. Therefore, if the importance of music for dance translates into the effectiveness of tone in conveying pathos, this does not mean that such pathos is conveyed exclusively by music. Despite music’s paradigmatic role in ‘capturing’ and ‘setting us in motion’, other factors can be equally

effective in connecting us with the emotional dimension of our experience, particularly in dance. Since the advent of modern dance, and especially in the contemporary sphere (cf. Falcone 2020, Brandstetter 2021), this emotional listening plays a pivotal role in the developmental phase, not just on stage. We argue that one such factor is silence, which effectively conveys the connection with pathicity. Historically associated with sacred dances, silence plays a pivotal role in facilitating the connection with the divine in dance rituals. This is evident in Sufi dances such as the whirling dance of the dervishes, which is practised in absolute silence in more intimate or private contexts, despite being accompanied by music and singing in public settings. Other examples include Tibetan ritual dances, which are performed in silence as a form of spiritual preparation, and Hopi dances, which are ceremonial dances of the Pueblo and Hopi Native Americans that are performed either in silence or accompanied by natural sounds, such as drums and footsteps.

In the Western world, silence and repetitive gestures are used to explore movement itself. This approach aims to investigate the transition from everyday movement to dance movement and transcend the clear dividing line between the two. This period also saw the first site-specific performances, such as Trisha Brown's dances on rooftops, including *A Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970) and *Roof Pieces* (1971), in which a dancer walks down the side of a skyscraper supported only by a rope. These performances, especially the latter, demonstrate the impossibility of reducing silence to the absence of sound, as is often the case in urban dance and contemporary site-specific performances. Conversely, the absence of musical accompaniment makes one more attentive to ambient noises and sounds<sup>1</sup>, including those

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth highlighting the similarity with John Cage's piece "4'33\"", in which the silence resulting from not performing a musical piece allows ambient noises to come to the fore. John Cage's indirect influence on postmodern dance experiments should not be underestimated. In the early 1960s, his student Robert Dunn held workshops in New York that were attended by several dancers, including Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay. These dancers later founded the Judson Dance Theatre, an experimental environment and hotbed of choreographic practices. It should also be noted that environmental noises began to take on significant importance in restoring one's connection with nature and thus promoting the acquisition of bodily awareness (also for therapeutic purposes) in the exploratory dance of

produced by the movements themselves – breathing, the sound of footsteps or costumes. This is evident, for example, in contact improvisation, one of the choreographic practices that arose from the experience of the Judson Dance Theatre, based on the exploration of the different ways in which two falling bodies shift their weight to each other, in a ‘weight-based’ dialogue based entirely on listening to the sensations of ‘weight’ that weave communication between dancers. While music is not absent from contact improvisation sessions – now more of a workshop practice than a stage practice – it is often avoided precisely to facilitate felt-bodily listening.

### 3. A neophenomenological approach

By questioning the indistinguishability between music and dance, we lay the foundations for a reflection that aims to enhance the effectiveness of silence for the spectator, rather than the dancer. While the aforementioned examples of dance enhance the dancer’s perception of silence and their surroundings, conveying a state of concentration or even trance in sacred dances, which greatly contributes to their mystical character, the same may not be true for the spectator. In fact, silence seems to affect spectators in a completely different way, evoking emotional states that are entirely distinct from those described above. We will explore this theme by analysing the site-specific performance *Prélude to Mountain Ghost*, which took place at the Feuerle Collection in Berlin between October and December 2024. The opening act consists of the Chinese *gongfu* tea ceremony, performed by tea master Li Wang. This is followed by a dance solo, choreographed and performed by contemporary dancer Po-Nien Wang. The dance solo is accompanied by two pieces of music, one for each part of the solo, with a pause of silence between them. We hypothesise that the silence during the tea ceremony performance significantly impacts the viewer’s experience, greatly affecting their perception of the accompanying music for the two sections of Po-Nien Wang’s dance – the first featuring high-pitched, dissonant music, and the second featuring more harmonious vocals – as well as their perception of the poses and movements themselves.

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Anna Halprin (1920-2021) in her studio in Rodeo Valley forest near San Francisco, as well as in the environmental workshops for dancers and architects organised by her and her husband since the late 1950s.

This analysis will be conducted from the perspective of the new phenomenology developed by Hermann Schmitz. In addition to drawing on the lexicon and categories referring to the felt body, we will also consider the characterisation of silence as atmosphere. We will explore this further following Jürgen Hase's reflections on the subject. We will investigate the experience of dance spectators using Tonino Griffero's neo-phenomenological atmospheric approach, focusing particularly on the notions of atmospheric resonance and competence. Our aim is to demonstrate that the measures taken to promote an immersive experience for spectators of this site-specific performance constitute potential elements of disturbance with respect to immersion, instead conveying an emergent experience (cf. Griffero 2023a). We argue that silence plays a significant role in this, hindering the process of achieving a calm and contemplative state of mind, at least at certain moments. We will demonstrate that this disturbing effect makes spectators particularly receptive to key aspects of the dance solo. Schmitz developed this with the aim of restoring access to the spontaneous and involuntary aspects of life experience<sup>2</sup>, new phenomenology does this by placing the felt body (*Leib*), understood as

Whatever someone feels in the vicinity (not always within the boundaries) of their material body as belonging to themselves and without drawing on the senses seeing and touching as well as the perceptual body schemata (the habitual conception of one's own body), derived from the experiences made using the senses (Schmitz 2019a, 65).

Focusing on the 'felt' dimension of bodily experience highlights the body's inherent complexity and its inability to be reduced to anatomy alone. This forms part of a broader questioning of the 'psychologist-reductionist-introjectionist paradigm', which

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<sup>2</sup> New Phenomenology [aims] to make their actual lives comprehensible to humans, that is, to make accessible again spontaneous life experience in continuous contemplation after having cleared away artificial ideas prefigured in history. Spontaneous life experience is anything that happens to humans in a felt manner, without their having intentionally constructed it. Today, human thought is so enthralled by seemingly natural assumptions of conventions and hypotheses in the service of constructions that it has become painstaking to disclose spontaneous life experience; but doing so is of great importance, because it can point the way out of dangerous limitations and entanglements of the human understanding of self and world and, in consequence, aid in finding a better way of living (Schmitz 2019a, 43).

emerged from the exclusion of theology and then the natural sciences from philosophical reflection by Democritus and Plato. Psychologism is the internalisation of personal experiences into a «closed, private inner world (e.g. the soul) that is directed by a «central power (e.g. reason or free will)» (Schmitz 2002, 492). This means that in order to perceive an entity belonging to the external world, it must first be represented in the 'inner' world. Reductionism involves reducing the external world to «a small number of types of features suitable for statistical and experimental treatment (the so-called primary sensory qualities – even today, the only data that physics draws from experience)» (Ibid.). Finally, introjection refers to the relegation to the internal world of everything excluded from the external world – a world reduced to quantifiable and measurable characteristics. This is evident in the way affective states are considered and identified as internal psychological states that we project outside ourselves. Conversely, for Schmitz, they are atmospheres that are understood as «spatially extended powers able to affect the felt body». In other words, they are the affective dimension of corporeality, or Straussian pathicity, which disappears as soon as it is reduced to its physical component. Atmospheres and the lived body are an integral part of the «most important aspects of spontaneous life experience», which includes the 'felt' space of time, listening, motor behaviour, the lived body, and emotions. This space cannot be reduced to three-dimensional geometric space. Schmitz calls this latter space 'local-relative' because it is defined by the position and distance of objects from each other. However, it is only one of the levels in which human spatial experience is expressed. Underlying local-relative space and enabling it is felt-bodily directional space (*Richtungsraum*), characterised by felt irreversible directions towards or away from the lived body (e.g. the gaze and gestures) and facing the vastness. In fact, it is the impetus of these felt directions that enables us to move fluidly without having to calculate the position and distance of each final or intermediate goal, as if we were moving exclusively in local-relative space. Then there is expansive space (*Weiteraum*), which presents itself as a vast expanse devoid of structured points, lines and surfaces (cf. Schmitz 2019c).

#### 4. Silence as an atmosphere

Schmitz considers silence to be primarily a spatial phenomenon. The space of silence is exactly like the space of time «which surrounds sensitive people with a formless vastness (*Weite*), for instance when they come out of a stuffy room into the open air », but also the space of one's own body, which is «spatially extended in a way similar to sound (it is indivisible and pre-dimensional)», the space behind us (*Rückfeld*), «which we constantly take into account through tiny movements as we stand, sit back or turn» (Schmitz 2023, 46) as well as the space of freely performed movements. The peculiarity of spaces without surfaces is that, although they have volume, they lack three-dimensionality «three dimensions can only be distinguished through lines, and lines can, in turn, only exist over surfaces. And just like sound, a penetrating silence also has a volume that expands wide and thick when it is solemn, narrow and even thicker when it is oppressive, and wide and delicate when it is the silence of a pristine morning» (Ibid.). The perception of silence is therefore inseparable from the effect it has on the body itself:

As it happens with sound, with a solemn or oppressive silence, with the water flowing upon the blinded swimmer, detached from volume of surfaceless spaces emerges in its fundamental felt-bodily form as a competition between contraction (*Engung*) and expansion (*Weitung*), as tension (*Spannung*) and dilatation (*Schwellung*) (Ivi, 47).

Thus, the connection between silence and the felt body emerges. The antagonism between tension and expansion constitutes the 'vital drive' on which the 'dynamics' that characterise the felt body itself are based. This antagonism can escape the individual's body through the distribution of the two poles of felt-bodily dynamics – the expansive and the contractive – between the individual and their communicative partner, who may be another person or an object. This unfolding of the body's dynamic is called body-proper communication. It can be antagonistic when involving two entities or supportive. In the former case, it can be unilateral when one entity always holds the pole of contraction (for example, a menacing mass advancing towards us provokes an expansive reaction in us, causing us to dodge it), or mutual. Therefore, the dodging movement is an integral part of the felt-bodily response to what affects us. Starting from the involvement of the motor scheme – that orientation system composed of felt-bodily directions

(including bodily movements themselves) and felt-bodily isles stimulated or brought out by them – it takes place. These felt-bodily isles are pre-dimensional, surfaceless and ‘absolute’ areas that correspond to certain parts of the physical body but are not reducible to them. The felt body itself can be considered a ‘crowd’ of felt isles, some of which are relatively stable «(oral cavity, anal zone, chest, back, belly, genitals, soles, etc.) while other times they come forward or dissolve on the basis of excitement (itch, palpitation, burst of heat, ache, etc.)» (Griffero 2019, 21). For example, when an insect bites us, our hand automatically moves to the affected area to scratch it without us needing to calculate the exact location; it is most likely the felt-bodily isles that mediate the relationship between the perceived and physical bodies. Similarly, when dancing, after an initial learning phase in which the student moves in local-relative space, guided by the senses and perceptual schemas to calculate the position and relative distances between the limbs, practice causes the motor schema to acquire an increasingly important role, until it becomes the dancer's main system of spatial orientation. He no longer calculates the distances and relative positions of his limbs and surroundings; instead, he allows himself to be guided by the directions he deems relevant to the dance, such as those derived from music, the gestures and glances of fellow dancers on stage and scenic elements. This allows him to express the forms of felt-bodily communication that emerge from the source of these directions.

A clear example of alternating felt-bodily communication is formed when dancers dance in pairs: the pole of constriction passes from one partner to the other, eliciting an expansive response in turn. However, when dancers perform the same dance figures to the same rhythm, a supportive felt-bodily communication is formed, regardless of whether they are performing the same dance figures. Here, several people are connected by a common vital drive, but do not address each other. Schmitz gives the example of activities performed together, such as singing, playing music and rowing. Felt-bodily communication with that which affects us is not only mediated by felt-bodily directions, which Schmitz calls ‘motor suggestions’, but also by ‘synaesthetic qualities’, i.e. the qualitative traits present in everything we perceive. Motor suggestions and synaesthetic qualities are

Bridging qualities that can be noticed in one’s own felt body but also be perceived in encounters with others, whether at rest or in

motion. These are suggestions of movement – vivid sketches of motion without being fully enacted – and synaesthetic qualities that are mostly intermodal properties of specific sensory qualities, but can, in the case of expansive, dense or pressing silence, also occur without any sensory quality. Synaesthetic qualities that do not require synaesthesia are, for example, the sharpness, luridness, softness, flashiness, brightness, hardness, warmth, coldness, gravity, massiveness, density, smoothness, roughness of colours, sounds, smells, sound & silence, of a springy or sluggish gait, of joy, of enthusiasm, melancholy, freshness and tiredness; this list suggests how much overlap what is felt bodily and what is perceived objectively (Schmitz 2019a, 68).

Silence is therefore one of the bridging qualities that facilitate felt-bodily communication. Moreover, expansive, dense and oppressive silence is emblematic of the fact that synesthetic qualities can occur without any sensory input (Ibid.). This emphasises the connection between silence and the felt body, highlighting the atmospheric nature of silence. In fact, silence is atmospheric to the extent that it manifests itself «the occupation (*Besetzung*) of a surfaceless space or region within lived presentness» (Schmitz 2023, 45), but that does not automatically make it a sentiment. However, if all feelings are indeed atmospheres, the opposite is not necessarily true. Feelings are atmospheres to the extent that «for each person feeling them, feelings become something their own as they perceptibly grasp their felt-body» (Ibid., 49). Feelings are characterised by a power that manifests itself precisely in this Strausian ‘seizement’, that being in the grip of a feeling from which – consciously or unconsciously<sup>3</sup> – one cannot escape, as anger makes clear: «No one can arrest in their soul or consciousness the anger that is rising in them; what happens instead is that their felt body is perceptibly overtaken by it [...] the angry person can only be angry in a way that makes them, at least in a first moment, get carried away for a while by the rage that is taking them, becoming an accomplice to that rage and making that raging impulse their own» (Ibid., 50). This is not the case with felt-bodily stirring, which occurs when one experiences an atmosphere without being affected by it. This is the case with [«sober observer of a cheerful but somewhat ordinary folk festival» who «can be intrusively

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<sup>3</sup> «The most powerful atmospheres [...] are exactly those which lie in the background and provide the tacit and non-thetical contextual conditions for transitive perceptions» (Griffero 2020b, 96).

affected (*betroffen*) by that joyful atmosphere without any feeling of joy» (Ibid., 49).

However, this does not imply that silence is not a feeling. When overwhelming, it establishes itself as a feeling that is «spatial and material, and in the manner characteristic of feelings, forms the basis of an experience of being overwhelmed» (Schmitz 2019b, 208, my transl.). Silence reveals the spatiality and materiality of feelings as atmospheres even more than music does, insofar as it manifests itself through a breadth, weight, thickness and materiality that are entirely unique. This matter is neither visible nor measurable; however, this does not prevent the presence of «a peculiar verticality that differs fundamentally from the familiar visual and tactile experience» (Ibid.). Similarly, Jürgen Hasse, whose investigation of silence builds on new phenomenology, emphasises that silence is only indirectly related to acoustics and loudness: «when you can barely hear anything with your ears, it is quiet in the sense of being calm or very still» (Hasse 2025, 129, my transl.). The idea, in fact, is that if it is true that it is somehow audible, silence

It is not 'positive' perception of something that reaches the eardrum. Silence does not penetrate the body. Instead, it seeps into the body's sensory system through emotional impressions. In a sense, the body is overwhelmed by the sound of silence because the hearing organ cannot perceive silence positively. Silence, which is not audible, is an internal phenomenon and a tangible aspect of physicality. In silence, a feeling of vastness emerges that fills one's entire being (Ibid., 131, my transl.).

Silence – which is always a specific kind of silence<sup>4</sup> – has an intrinsically pathic character rather than a perceptive one. In fact, it is impossible to perceive it without becoming involved and participating in it; it cannot be perceived as «uninvolved observer from a neutral outpost», but only as «pathic participant» (Ibid., 135, my transl.). This aspect is evident in the contemplative silence experienced during practices such as meditation or prayer. Silence modifies perception because it changes the way we feel in our bodies:

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<sup>4</sup> Given the wide range of qualitative nuances it can exhibit, from the oppressive silence that follows an argument, to the serene silence of a pleasant place, to the focused silence of a library, silence is not a one-dimensional concept.

It points out that experiencing silence can be somewhat isolating. It creates a sense of being immersed in silence. This feeling is physical as well as auditory, and has an effect on the tangible connection to one's surroundings. Consciously experiencing silence requires a firm and calm stance. Standing in one's own will is a prerequisite for becoming aware of silence, which can be felt as expansiveness in one's body. This type of stance has nothing to do with standing in mathematical space with metric distances. Rather, it is standing in relation to one's own self and the world around. Ultimately, a silence arises from the physical silence of one's own self – a silence that the individual is and embodies habitually. This type of standing requires more than it seems at first glance. In Western cultures especially, being human is often an agitated, hectic existence, driven by external forces and constantly in motion, in order to achieve something (Ibid., 136, my transl.).

For Hasse, silence permeates our perception of ourselves and the world, preventing us from perceiving ourselves or the world as separate from it. In fact, there is the possibility of 'being' in silence; that is, of consciously experiencing that 'embodied silence' which belongs to us in a constitutive way. This is the contemplative silence achieved through meditation (which explains the link between silence and religion). These practices only appear to mark a total abstraction from one's experience; in reality, they anchor one to the present, to the 'here and now', hence their association with a dynamic state of tension that requires long practice to maintain<sup>5</sup>. The difference between 'being' in silence and simply 'being placed' in a local, relative space stems from the intimate link between silence, one's own body and listening to one's feelings. The frenzy of contemporary Western life, which is linked to the imperative of productivity, stems from the fact that it obstructs our ability to live in the present moment and connect with our feelings: «experiencing silence is only possible as an experience of the present moment. When we enter into meditative silence, we do not shut ourselves off from the world. Instead, we become highly receptive to all incoming stimuli, without distorting them through the interests of our ego» (Ivi, 148, 151, my transl.). Silence cannot be accessed with the physical body – «you cannot 'go' into silence

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<sup>5</sup> «silence does not exist – at least in the human experience of one's own body – as a fixed state. No one is silent forever. Silence is more of a short-term than a long-term dynamic phase of being, comparable to the tension of the archer before the shot, the concentrated moment of pause that is only possible in silence» (Ibid., 275, my transl.).

as if around a corner» (Ibid., 163, my transl.) – but can only be felt-bodily.

Experiencing silence is only possible as an experience of the present moment. When we enter into a meditative silence, we do not shut ourselves off from the world. Instead, we become highly receptive to all incoming stimuli, without distorting them through the interests of our ego. Silence is an ‘encounter’, understood not as a «simple encounter, being captivated by something that has a palpably moving effect on me in its reality» (Ibid., 164, my transl.). Hasse draws on Romano Guardini’s definition of encounter, which presupposes «I feel attuned to the silence. A situation of encounter requires me to ‘take a step back, get a proper view of it’ (reality, JH), be affected by its peculiarity and respond to it practically» (Guardini in Ibid., 164, my transl.). When encountering silence, two contrasting movements are at work simultaneously: distancing oneself from reality involves setting aside the gnostic moment and productive, egoic activity. At the same time, this distancing is an opening to pathicity – the way in which it «affectively takes hold, touches the self and puts it in motion» (Ibid.), analogous to Straus’s phenomenon of ‘lived rhythm’. Encountering silence presupposes the ability to let go; to set aside the gnostic moment and the egoic logic of productive action. This prepares one, physically and mentally, to be transformed by the way in which one is affected. Regarding the contemplative attitude, Hasse says: «It is observing, not controlling; seeing, not appropriating; looking, not creating and making» (Ibid., 155, my transl.). What is at stake is a shift in attention:

Silence is also the core of that unfocused, ‘listening’ attention that is open to its counterpart and thus not directed at anything specific. Any concentration that is open in this sense – and not just cathartic contemplation – requires silence as a mood of possibilities. In its openness, it requires that (somewhat) focused perception be suspended. Those who always see, hear, smell, taste or touch something can hardly discover what has never been perceived before (Ibid., 166, my transl.).

It is therefore in this ‘listening’ attention that the dual movement of distancing and approaching takes place: detaching from the ‘what’ and anchoring to the ‘how’, and with it, to the ‘here and now’. This is what gives meditative practices their revitalising effect. It is a question of «a revitalisation of the overheated vital drive, which strengthens self-reflection – as mental serenity and as self-

determination of meaning and the intensified use of the senses» (Ibid.,148, my transl.). This revitalisation is not related to the frenzy of contemporary society, where movement is merely a means to an end. Instead, it is about the revival of feelings, which Straus defined as 'lived rhythm', from which dance movements draw their momentum.

### **5. Prélude to Mountain Ghost: a site-specific performance**

The characterisation of contemplative silence as a state of dynamic anchoring to the 'here and now', to the affective action being exercised by motor suggestions and surrounding synesthetic qualities, and to the variation of this action, to the different nuances of felt-bodily communications that are forming, lends itself to identifying an intimate link between silence and dance. In particular, the training practices carried out daily by dancers – barre exercises for classical dancers, breathing and relaxation practices drawn from release techniques in contemporary dance – can be interpreted as training practices for one's ability to 'be' in silence, that is, to get in touch with one's feelings and their variations. This is how dancers develop their expressive and interpretative abilities, i.e. their ability to unconsciously select, on stage, the physical and emotional communications that are most relevant to them in order to convey the 'emotional tone' characteristic of the genre of dance and choreography they are performing<sup>6</sup>. Body movements are an integral part of the ability to 'remain' in silence, i.e. to maintain this state of tension. For example, accentuating a large movement or increasing the area of the body that is in contact with something intensifies and varies one's sensations, allowing them to be used creatively. Lying down on the ground, for instance, can promote the type of sensations that contact with the ground elicits. Similarly, when silence becomes part of the scene, dancers experience it as a way of heightening their sensitivity to the emotional stimuli (including sound) of the scene. While this may be more problematic for dancers accustomed to following the motor cues of music, they are more likely to experience silence as an expressive and creative resource than as a problematic element, given their daily training in listening to their body's motor cues and synesthetic qualities. For spectators, however, it is less obvious that a silent dance performance will

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Merit Müller (2015, 315) where barre exercises are compared to a ritual practice akin to a religious one.

induce a contemplative state and prompt them to 'let go' of their controlling, hyperactive attitude to daily life. The experience of *Prélude to Mountain Ghost* highlights this difficulty and its impact on the viewer's experience of a dance.

Firstly, this is a site-specific performance, which gives it a highly immersive character. Traditionally, site-specific works of art claim that the work coincides with a process, establishing a structural link between the process's unfolding and the place where it occurs, as well as the people present as they «focus on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site and demand the physical presence of the viewer for their completion» (Pearson 2010, 4).

In *Prélude to Mountain Ghost*, this is expressed primarily in the strong link between the conception of the performance itself and the Feuerle Collection, particularly the temporary exhibition entitled Natural Beauty. This exhibition was curated by the gallery owner, Désiré Feuerle. This exhibition features photographs by contemporary artists Nobuyoshi Araki and Adam Fuss, which adorn the silk-lined room that is already furnished with pieces from the Chinese imperial era. The black-and-white objects portrayed – fruits and plants – have intriguing textures and configurations: a flower as if 'crystallised' in its state of decomposition, the sinusoidal skeleton of a tree... The chiaroscuro lighting of soft lights in this large underground room, many parts of which are left in shadow, forms a kaleidoscopic interweaving of human and natural forms that evoke themes such as sexuality and the ephemeral, as well as encounters between Western and Eastern cultures and between different historical eras<sup>7</sup>.

This syncretism is the hallmark of the Feuerle Collection, a non-profit organisation founded in Berlin in 2016 by Désiré Feuerle and Sara Puig. Housed in a former Second World War telecommunications bunker, the foundation has two exhibition rooms, as well as a Sound Room, a Lake Room and an Incense Room. It inherits Feuerle's style of juxtaposing ancient and contemporary art, as well as an approach aimed at creating a dialogue between artistic eras and styles that are far apart, from the history of the

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<sup>7</sup> The setting profoundly enhances and inspires the work, reflecting the collection's belief in the seamless interplay between past, present, and future, and abolishing barriers between different art disciplines and cultures: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCuL8tFSzNE&t=518s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCuL8tFSzNE&t=518s) (accessed: 28 December 2025).

place. The collection includes Chinese furniture from the imperial era, Khmer sculptures from the 7th to 13th centuries, and contemporary pieces. Since 2023, the foundation has hosted performances, including dance pieces such as *Prélude to Mountain Ghost*, choreographed and performed by Po-Nien Wang. This takes its title from the poem *The Mountain Spirit* from ‘The Nine Songs’ by Qu Yuan (343-278 BC), a poet and politician who wrote famous poems during his exile. The poem that inspired the performance reads: *How long is ‘now’?/How did we come to be?/The only place I can never lose myself, is in myself./Alone yet moving,/In the rhythm of beginning, middle, and end./Are we simply the stories we tell?* Po-Nien Wang describes how this poem inspired his performance as follows:

I aim to traverse the delicate interplay between identity, gender, and sensuality, reflecting upon the ambiguous and alluring verses of Qu Yuan. Attempting to untangle the enigma of the ever-shifting force suspended between masculine and feminine, divine and mortal, physical and spiritual. Inspired by the fluidity of *The Mountain Spirit*, the performance seeks to free the self from the confines of gender and societal repression and to unfold in dialogue with the evocative space of The Feuerle Collection, and the unique collection. (<http://www.po-nien-wang.com/prelude-to-mountain-ghost>).

The site-specific format thus seems to continue the overcoming of the dualisms represented by the Feuerle Collection itself and the exhibitions presented there, such as the dualism between East and West, ancient and contemporary works of art, figurative art and photography, and performing arts. There is also a dualism between man and nature, and between the masculine and the feminine. Audience members can take part in this process by moving freely around the space, at least at the beginning of the performance and during the dance solo, which takes place at two different points in the room. At most, one or two metres separate teacher Lin Wang from Po-Nien Wang, and there are no chairs, marks on the floor or raised platforms to distinguish the stage from the audience. The entire room is stage space<sup>8</sup>. Visitors descend into the underground

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<sup>8</sup> The audience will be standing and will be able to move around the space during the performance, as a reference to the typical visit to the permanent collection, underlining the equal, same-level, insertion of disciplines like dance and tea practice into the immanent total art work that has been created by Désiré

hall where the Silk Room is located, leaving their bags and coats in the cloakroom. They then enter the Silk Room one by one and are free to view the exhibition. The room is lit only by spotlights that shine on the artworks. There is no music, and people speak in hushed tones as they would in a museum. In the centre of the room, a figure sits in meditation wearing a white, almost monastic-style robe. This is Lin Wang, the tea master. At a certain point, the door closes, and the audience is invited by the masked figures to approach Lin Wang. She is sitting on the floor in a meditative position with an erect torso, crossed legs, hands on her knees and closed eyes. She has a serene and concentrated expression on her face, which is almost inscrutable. It is difficult to tell whether she is male or female. She remains in meditation for a long time, even after all the spectators have sat down around her in a semicircle. Although there is not complete silence, there are a few murmurs and whispers which gradually become fainter. It is as if Lin Wang is waiting for absolute silence, and the audience feels obliged to remain silent until the performance begins. However, even when people are silent, Lin Wang persists in remaining in meditation. Being so close to her makes the difference between her state of concentration and 'inner silence', and that of the spectators who observe her with respect, as if she were an exhibit, even more apparent. They are curious, but also impatient. They experience Lin Wang's absorbed silence in a detached manner, seemingly different from the curious silence they share with the audience. Lin Wang's silence is the kind of contemplative, cathartic silence that Hasse refers to, whereas the silence of the spectators can be perceived as 'imposed', as in a museum or theatre. Thus, even though there are no physical barriers between them, the dividing line between stage and audience is re-established. In fact, the concentrated, absorbed, peaceful silence emanating from Lin Wang could elicit a sense of detachment, or even alienation and exclusion from a meditation that is only exhibited and not shared.

The difference between Lin Wang's experience of silence and that of the audience appears to be due to the presence of various forms of heartfelt communication. On the one hand, there is felt-bodily communication between Lin Wang and the audience. This communication is antagonistic and unilateral rather than reciprocal. Lin Wang has her eyes closed throughout the ceremony

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Feuerle: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCuL8tFSzNE&t=518s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCuL8tFSzNE&t=518s) (accessed: 28 December 2025).

and never looks at the audience, so she seems to be minimally influenced by them. While she is certainly influenced by the sounds she hears from the audience, such as footsteps, them sitting down around her and murmurs, she would not start the performance without hearing the audience sitting quietly around her. However, the fact that she waits a while before starting seems to prove that she has ultimate control over the timing and manner of the performance. Then there could be a sense of solidarity among the audience, who are all united by the shared experience of watching the performance and are turned towards Lin Wang. Finally, there are forms of perceived antagonistic communication alternating with spectators sitting next to, behind or in front of you, as well as with one or more companions with whom you exchange glances and whispered comments. The collective nature of the experience of silence therefore emerges – an experience closely linked to that of semi-darkness. As George Home-Cook points out<sup>9</sup>, when attending a performance, silence and semi-darkness complement each other. In fact, poor visibility leads us to rely more on our hearing, refining our ability to listen to the sounds and movements around us. These are perceived first and foremost by the effect they have on us. Silence accentuates this sensitivity to the emotional dimension of one's experience and the feelings it arouses. Thus, in the meditation preceding the tea ceremony, although some spectators may simply feel a sense of relaxation other viewers could feel reminded of their role as observers of a silent practice in which they are not actively involved and could therefore feel detached from Lin Wang's state of concentration and their own. For people who practise meditation, this can generate a sense of frustration because they are familiar with the state of concentration and peace that meditation brings, and so they feel frustrated at not being in that state. Even if they decide to use the performance as an opportunity to enter a contemplative and

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<sup>9</sup> We would like to highlight George Home-Cook's reflections on listening as a form of attention. In line with an enactive approach to perception, Home-Cook characterises aural attention as an intersubjective and intersensory process: the experience of sound is inseparable from that of light and resonance. Noise, designed sound, and silence are ways in which spectators become bodily engaged in shaping the theatrical atmosphere. While Home-Cook primarily focuses on listening to radio plays, his research also provides valuable insights into the roles of silence and attention in theatre. However, we favour the neo-phenomenological approach, as it highlights the felt-bodily nature of the spectator's experience.

relaxed state, their experience as spectators and participants would somehow spoil this practice of silence.

We must also consider the expectations surrounding the performance and the reflections and observations exchanged during the exhibition visit, which distracted the audience from the dance they had come to see. Li Wang's meditative silence forces them to accept that they have no control over when the dance will begin or how involved they will be in the performance. They have received no instructions about this, but they can start to think about it for themselves. This reaction seems to intensify as soon as the tea ceremony begins, with figures dressed in white – invisible to the audience until now – bringing in the tea table and stove.

### **6. A silent gongfu tea ceremony**

Lin Wang begins a true exhibition of the tea ceremony. While it respects the characteristics of the ceremony, it is not a real tea ceremony, but a performance. The tea is never shared, and above all, the performance takes place in total silence. In contrast, the tea ceremony, especially *gongfu*, is a shared social practice that is typical of everyday life. This method of tea production uses small teapots and cups to steep fine tea in a five-step process: boiling the tea; rinsing the teapot with the hot water; reboiling the water used for rinsing the cups; decanting the first infusion into cups and discarding the leftover tea; and finally, sipping the tea with others (cf. Hendren 2012) – spanning the period between the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasty, tea utensils were designed for production and refinement. This was not generally considered between the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasty «as an adornment of everyday life so much as an integral part of it» (D'Abbis 2019, 9). In fact, it is aimed at «nourishing sociability and friendship» by creating «an ambience of quiet, relaxed, attentiveness both to the tea and to each other. No matter how noisy the surroundings, the presence of a *gongfu* teaset and the care with which the host boils the water, prepares the pot or *gaiwan*, and brews and serves the tea, combine to create a space for attending to aromas, tastes and conversation» (Ibid., 10). The absence of conversation, music and other sounds apart from those produced by preparing the tea makes this ceremony more like a performance. This is particularly true when the practice of tea preparation is elevated to the level of an art form, or *chay* (cf. Ibid.,11), when it is taken out of the realm of everyday life and

elevated through devoted attention to each of the five stages of preparation. Each stage is refined using specific utensils for each aspect of the process. Therefore, the silence of the tea ceremony that opens Po-Nien Wang's solo is not related to that which traditionally accompanies the Chinese *gongfu* tea ceremony. The latter can take place in silence, but pleasant conversation is especially common during the *gongfu* ceremony – where the focus was primarily on the characteristics of tea and tended to be accompanied by the sounds of everyday life. In contrast, this silence seems to refer to the state of meditative contemplation traditionally associated with the Chinese tea ceremony. However, this essentially depends on tasting tea, which does not happen here. The silence and darkness that dominate Lin Wang's performance encourage viewers to pay attention to every detail of the ceremony, such as the sounds of the portable stove and the boiling water, as well as the steps involved. However, this can cause viewers to adopt a more analytical attitude, which prevents them from experiencing the serenity emanating from Lin Wang and the setting. For this reason, silence appears to distort viewers' perception; their analytical attitude and awareness of not having 'let themselves go' into the contemplative state emanating from Lin Wang causes them to view features that facilitate this state as elements that inhibit it. The time it takes for the water to boil seems endless and the gestures appear slow and repetitive and paying attention to every detail can have an almost irritating effect.

### **7. The spectator's experience. A synthonic or discrepant resonance?**

This phenomenon is characterised by Tonino Griffero, author of a neo-phenomenological approach to atmospheric science, as a phenomenon of emergence. According to Griffero, this experience characterises contemporary art such as

ephemeral works, intangible installations, natural transformations that are only abstractly or photographically perceptible, synesthetic creations that intentionally exceed any elementary semantic plane, and perceptual dislocations [...] The aim is to generate intensely immersive atmospheres and involve the viewer in performative practices, the outcome of which may also be (relatively) detached contemplation (Griffero 2014, 166-167, my transl.).

In *Prélude to Mountain Ghost*, something quite peculiar happens: the tea ceremony is intended to encourage ‘serene reflection’ and is presented as an immersive experience. However, due to the aforementioned characteristics, it appears to have more emergent than immersive outcomes for some participants, thus influencing their immersion in the performance. We aim to examine this emergent experience and its effects on the subsequent dance solo, drawing on Tonino Griffero’s notions of atmospheric resonance and competence. Griffero’s atmospheric approach is part of a ‘pathic’ aesthetic that values humans as subjects of action, specifically the action of atmospheres. These are ‘quasi-things’ entities that constantly invite individuals to feel a certain way. Griffero characterises these invitations as Schmitzian motor suggestions and synaesthetic qualities, which he terms ‘atmospheric affordances’.

A term coined by James Gibson, ‘affordances’ refers to the qualitative characteristics that emerge from the interaction between a subject and its environment. Specifically, it refers to the characteristics of the subject and the environment encountering each other in specific circumstances and presenting themselves as ‘invitations to act’ in a certain way. For example, a chair is ‘sittable’ for an adult man without disabilities, while a surface of water is ‘walkable’ for an insect (but not a human). The ‘non-activist’ (non-Gibsonian) conception of affordances enables us to recognise the emotional nature of our experience. Atmospheres are, in fact, the set of affordances with which we resonate felt-bodily. Thanks to its felt-bodily dynamics and felt-bodily isles, the felt body constitutes «a perfect seismograph of one’s own and others’ emotional situation» (Griffero 2020a, 108). Understanding the relationship between felt-bodily and resonance communication helps us to characterise the latter «how different felt-bodily isles (rather than a unitary body image) become active resonance zones diversified by both quality and intensity, gnostic or pathic prevalence» (Griffero 2024, 175). According to Griffero, there are two types of atmospheric resonance: discrepant and synchronous. The former involves the inhibition of fluid bodily behaviour, inducing a contraction and eliciting «the emergence of felt-bodily isles that were previously unknown to the subject (and which can become pathological if their disorganization prevails)» (Griffero 2024, 157). For example, one may become aware of them on the basis of their ‘pathological disorganisation’ (independence), which can lead

to hypochondria. Conversely, when there is harmony rather than discrepancy, the latter, «by facilitating bodily behavior, provides a protopathic felt-bodily well-being that momentarily prevents the emergence of certain isles or promotes their harmonious alignment with external reality» (Griffero 2024, 157).

The emergence of felt-bodily isles that were previously unknown to the subject may be part of the subject's generation of a 'sub-atmosphere', which is an atmosphere that arises in response to a discrepancy in the perceiver's atmosphere. Unlike Schmitz, Griffero and Gernot Böhme (2016) argue that atmospheres can also be generated. Griffero identifies three 'ideal types' of atmosphere: prototypical ones, which are objective, external and unintentional, and which are sometimes lacking a precise name. (cf. Griffero 2020b, 95). These coincide with what Schmitz considers to be the only existing atmospheres. The second type are 'derivative-relational atmospheres', which are objective, external and intentionally produced. They are related to directional space and imply an 'in-between' space between subject and object (Ibid.). These are atmospheres created through interaction; those that arise in theatre are of this type.

Finally, there are the 'spurious atmospheres', which are «subjective, projective and even related to single objects and local spaces. This wide range of atmospheric feelings has therefore, as its extreme poles, groundless quasi-objective atmospheres and merely projective individual moods» (Ibid.). These 'ideal types' of atmosphere must, of course, be conceived flexibly, so that a prototypical atmosphere, for example, can become derivative-relational «such as when, for example, an atmosphere breaks free of its anchoring point (which is the source of its radiation), loses its thematic reference and materializes into random or at least inappropriate things and situations» (Ibid., 95). Another notable point is that the relationship between the perceiver and these atmospheres involves different 'emotional interactive games'. We refer to this as an 'ingressive-antagonistic encounter' when an atmosphere overwhelms the perceiver «completely reorient[ing his] emotional situation and be refractory, as a real antagonist, to a more or less conscious attempt at a projective, reflective and amending interpretation» (Ibid., 96). The perceiver may thus find himself «attuned with it (syntonic encounter), to the point that, whereas others may even be upset by the atmosphere in question, they do not even realize they have entered it» (Ibid.). There are also

cases where «one clearly recognizes an atmosphere in its 'objective' roots (mere contemplation), but without being really felt-bodily involved [...] An atmosphere can also elicit a resistance (mood protest) and the very intensity of this emotional reaction is indeed the best proof of the objective effectiveness of the atmosphere one reacts to» (Ibid.).

These distinctions are valuable tools for understanding the nuances experienced by viewers of *Prélude to Mountain Ghost*, on whom our focus has been. One experience that we have not yet appreciated enough is that of those who experience the opposite of what has been described. For these people, the atmosphere of contemplative calm conveyed by the silence that permeates the tea ceremony resonates with them harmoniously. Those who are accustomed to this practice, familiar with the place or simply in a calm frame of mind may feel at ease, thanks to a general sense of well-being that does not give rise to any specific felt-bodily sensations. This resonance is conveyed by the tangible atmospheric elements of silence: the dim light, the white colour of Lin Wang's robe, and the care, delicacy, precision, and slowness of his gestures. The sounds of fire, boiling water, and water being poured can also act as factors of progressive relaxation, placing the user in a state of tranquillity, even if they do not lead to a true meditative state. Physically, this can result in the body gradually releasing tension, particularly in the lower body – as spectators are seated on the floor – and in the chest, due to the relaxing effect that silence and dim lighting have on breathing. Even the head can feel 'lighter', free of thoughts. However, it should be noted that the tranquil atmosphere initially conveyed by silence appears to be protopathic, but changes over the course of the tea ceremony. In fact, it seems to transform into a derivative-relational atmosphere thanks to the appearance of a series of atmospheric affordances. It is not possible to identify a specific generative point for the feeling of tranquillity conveyed by silence. This feeling is not simply the absence of sound, which is in fact present (consider the murmurs of the people and the sounds produced by Lin Wang during the ceremony), but rather it materialises in a «sphere of condensation (where the character of the percept is widespread)» (Griffero 2023b, 17). As Griffero emphasises, «even if it is in the form of supervenience over the components of the environment, an atmosphere can condense in elements that radiate it without being its cause» (Griffero 2021, 87, my transl.). For example, at the dentist, one often fears the noise of

the drill more than the expected pain. In our case, the sphere of condensation encompasses all the atmospheric qualities that characterise the tea ceremony, inviting unilateral antagonistic felt-bodily communication with Lin Wang and her unilateral antagonistic felt-bodily interaction with objects: The soft, *chiaroscuro* light of the Silk Room; Lin Wang's composure during the initial meditative phase; the crackling of the portable stove; the sound of water boiling and being poured; the slowness and precision of Lin Wang's gestures; their patient repetition; and Lin Wang's serene and absorbed attitude.... These affordances are responsible for the gradual relaxation of those who tune in to the atmosphere of tranquillity conveyed by the concentrated and contemplative silence that characterises the Silk Room during the tea ceremony.

At the same time, these affordances can be identified as the distinctive feature of an atmosphere of tranquillity. This atmosphere is recognised as such without any sense of involvement. This does not mean, however, that they are unaffected by it on a physical level, experiencing what has been termed 'felt-bodily stirrings'. What is at stake is a «softened kind of discrepant atmosphere (without involvement)» (Griffero 2020a, 110). This experience of «uninvolving atmospheric feeling» (Ibid., 111) is characterised by Griffero as a two-stage process. The first stage is dictated by incorporation (*Einleibung*) and the second by excorporation (*Ausleibung*). Alternatively, one could speak of a mixed case «in the case of an instantaneous event (attraction-rejection)» (Ibid.). Excorporation occurs when one enters a state of 'autopilot', such as when driving monotonously with little vital impulse, or by dozing in the sun. Thus, even if viewers of *Prélude to Mountain Ghost* do not feel immersed in the relaxed atmosphere, they may still be moved by it, witnessing the awakening of the physical isle within them and experiencing deeper breathing as a result. However, after some time, they may see this isle dissolve, just like all the others. They would then enter a trance-like state, but this would be different from the relaxation experienced by those in tune with the present atmosphere. While the former would have no felt-bodily isles activated, the latter would have some. Nevertheless, given the length of the tea ceremony (between 25 minutes and half an hour), it is possible that the person will become increasingly drawn into the atmosphere. Lin Wang's repetitive movements could cause them to lose their analytical attitude,

allowing them to let go of their worries. The sense of benefit they experience as they let go could help them to release their tension, even if only partially, enabling them to approach an experience of attuned resonance. If this does not happen, it is possible that, rather than excorporation, the discrepancy present in this type of experience of a lack of personal involvement in atmospheric feelings will become increasingly noticeable. Thus, despite slower breathing and greater relaxation of the limbs, the person may still be preoccupied with troubling thoughts; the surrounding atmosphere may contrast too starkly with their worries, or the measures designed to promote contemplation, such as physical proximity to strangers, may instead cause discomfort, perhaps because the person cannot tolerate such proximity, especially when it highlights the apparent ease and relaxation of others.

This would exacerbate his feeling of unease at being the only one who cannot 'let go', as he analyses the steps of the tea ceremony and Lin Wang's gestures in great detail and with great intensity. In fact, it is likely that the aspects of the atmosphere that are most 'irritating' to those not involved become more apparent: the repetitiveness and precision of the gestures could give the impression that the performance is endless, leading the person to think about time passing and the dance that has not yet begun. This irritation could even turn into resentment towards the organisers for not meeting expectations. This results in a change at the level of the felt-bodily isles. In fact, we could see a change in the felt-bodily isle of the chest, with the upper part becoming more active and leading to faster breathing. Meanwhile, the shoulders or limbs could stiffen due to physical proximity to strangers. The gaze may shift away from Lin Wang and towards the sides of the room as a sign of irritation and impatience. This occurs alongside the emergence of the aforementioned feelings: discomfort, frustration, impatience, disappointment (in terms of both expectations regarding performance and one's inability to feel involved in this immersive setting), and even resentment. These are spurious atmospheres projected by individuals as a form of resistance to the dominant atmosphere of quiet and therefore reveal its effectiveness. Such sub-atmospheres would not occur if they were not provoked by the sense of quiet and contemplation conveyed by the silence, which can be unbearable for participants in extreme cases. They express their discomfort through sighs and comments

to their companions, trying to escape its effect, but in doing so reveal that they are nevertheless in its grip.

The creation of such atmospheres, which seem to result from a kind of crescendo dictated in part by the duration of the tea ceremony (lasting about twenty-five to thirty minutes, the same length as the dance solo), nevertheless indicates what Griffero refers to as 'competence' or 'atmospheric intelligence', which he defines «as a 'sense of atmosphere', which at least allows one to avoid the crudest manipulation, and thus one makes the best use of the atmosphere of those implanting and power-legitimising situations whose restoration Schmitz tirelessly desires» (Griffero 2023c, 94, my transl.).

It is precisely this skill that conveys the immersive experience of the tea ceremony that precedes Po-Nien Wang's dance solo, in which silence seems to play a key role. However, what we intend to analyse is the effect that this experience has on enjoyment of the subsequent dance. After sipping her tea with composure and delicacy, Lin Wang puts down her cup. Very slowly, two figures dressed in white approach her. One of them picks up the small table and everything on it. The other moves rhythmically in front of them, probably waving a papyrus scroll held in front of her as if it were a sceptre. She moves with an almost hieratic air. The way all three figures walk, slowly and placing part of their feet – wrapped in thin white slippers – makes this walk a perfect transition between the tea ceremony and the dance that follows. At the exact moment when these three figures dressed in white, like vestals of an ancient temple, float away from the room, swallowed up by the darkness, their exit crosses paths with the dancer's entrance, who appears as if out of nowhere, advancing towards the audience, who, in the meantime, have risen from the floor and turned towards the side of the room where the figures dressed in white are exiting. Po-Nien Wang's dance solo begins. He is positioned completely off-centre in relation to the room in which the performance takes place. The dancer wears a tight-fitting pair of trousers that widen towards the legs, and his torso and feet are bare. His thick black hair is tied back in a ponytail. He positions himself directly in front of a tree-trunk-shaped sculpture with a sinusoidal form, which he seems to reproduce by crossing his lower limbs in a certain way and throwing his face back with his hands raised to slightly different heights. The lighting is the same as in the rest of the exhibition –

there are no spotlights or lights specifically for the dancer, just warm lighting that gives his body an amber colour.

### **8. The viewer's experience of music. Between sintonicity and discrepance**

If it has been quiet so far, music will now start to play from somewhere in the room, perhaps from the speakers at the back, and accompany Po-Nien Wang's movements. The track is from the 1994 album *Gagaku: Court Music of Japan* by the Tokyo Gakuso ensemble<sup>10</sup>. It is an instrumental piece composed of strident notes produced by a series of wind instruments, sounding like a cannon. This dissonance seems to be precisely the point of connection with the previous silence. In fact, these sounds represent the threshold between silence and music, and between silence and voice. While these sharp, strident sounds may seem disturbing to viewers who have entered a state of relaxation and are therefore in contrast to the quiet atmosphere they had experienced, this is not the case for those who have had a different experience. In fact, music can take on the value of a call and simultaneously reflect what is being experienced. The succession of strident sounds, apparently without any melodic connection, creates a distressing effect that completely reconfigures the perception of space. In line with Straus's reflections and the neo-phenomenological approach adopted, there is an intrinsic link between sound, feeling and movement. Just as with silence, the realm of sound is a 'felt', living space «set out by rhythmic and tonal suggestions of motion, as in the case of piercing noise, echoes dying away and tones rising and falling, crowding and circling of tones, as they leap across from musical sounds onto dancing and marching corpora» (Schmitz 2020, 64). Adopting a neo-phenomenological approach based on the work of Gernot Böhme, we identify music and architecture as spatial arts whose main task is

Essentially the creation and shaping of spaces and experiences of spaces [...] The dynamic volume of sound is like the corporeal volume of vital drive that consists in tension and swelling [...] It arises through suggestions of motion that in the case of felt-body and sound (as well as far beyond these) correspond to one another and make corporeal communication [...] possible [...] Acoustic and,

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK\\_XK1k3my0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK_XK1k3my0) (accessed: 28 December 2025).

in particular, musical forms are among the carriers of atmospheres of feeling via corpus-proximate bridging qualities (Ibid., 64-65).

The dynamic nature of sound manifests itself in the form of motor suggestions and synesthetic qualities that precisely convey atmospheric feelings due to their impact on the felt-bodily dynamics. These bridging qualities unify two types of intensity: spatial intensity, in that they occupy spaces devoid of sound surfaces, and temporal intensity in terms of duration and related properties such as fast and slow. It is in fact the intensity of duration that makes a sound 'historical' and therefore variable over time: «the form of a whistle changes with its duration. It lengthens and becomes more insistent until it is finally intolerable and you cover your ears, unless you get used to it and stop listening» (Ibid., 65). As for the distinction between speed and slowness:

The faster a motion is, the more crowded it is under the pressure of the new, of what is arriving. The parts, which are bound one another in an indivisible relationship, are pressed together by it until duration is torn apart and slip into pastness. The fast is fleeting, delivered up to transience. By contrast, the proportion of unorn duration grows with the motion's slowness; that is why the intensive texture is in this case looser, less crowded (Ibid., 66).

Musical sound is a true 'motion in space' which, in the case of speed, is therefore more subject to the pressure of the 'new' that continuously 'breaks' the duration of the sound, revealing its fluctuating and changing character, hence also a sudden change at the felt-bodily level. On the contrary, a slow sound is an uninterrupted duration; its relationship with the 'new' that bursts in is looser, its texture is looser, and therefore less crowded. These characteristics lend themselves to being correlated with felt-bodily qualities: the epicritic tendency and the protopathic tendency. Terms borrowed from neurologist Henry Head to characterise two different forms of touch, they designate two different ways of operating synesthetic qualities: the first in a sharpened and punctiform manner (such as Mozart's music, but also the acute pain of a tooth), the second, on the other hand, is a way of operating by spreading in a dull and diffuse manner (think of Beethoven's music or stomach ache) (cf. Griffero 2017, 81). Therefore, fast music has more epicritic traits, while slower music has a more protopathic character. This allows us to reveal the coincidence between how we perceive music and how it affects us. This is how we grasp music's essentially spatial nature «develops dynamically in the intensive

expanse of surfaceless sonic space, pouring atmospheres of feeling into it and presenting them, but only as hints, so that listeners can be stirred up (*angeregt*) or involved by the atmospheres presented» (Schmitz 2020, 68)<sup>11</sup>. So, while Straus emphasised how music – specifically tone – reveals the coincidence of feeling and movement, Schmitz and Böhme further characterised the fact that this coincidence depends on how music configures the felt body. Music can condense or contract the body in such a way that it resonates with the felt-bodily dynamics on which the emergence of affective states depends. These affective states are in fact generated by the oscillation between tension and dilation that constitutes the felt-bodily dynamics: the oscillation between anguish and amplitude gives rise to a spectrum ranging from fear to relief, encompassing anguish, pain, effort and enjoyment.

The piece that accompanies the first part of Po-Nien Wang's dance solo benefits from the coexistence of epicritic and protopathic elements. While the strident sounds are expressly epicritic, they follow one another with a protopathic slowness that accentuates their contracting effect. This conveys a sense of anguish and almost suffocation. However, this emotional state is dampened by the dancer's movements. The succession of dance figures, involving contortions, precarious poses, and long lines that are abruptly broken, makes the anguished succession of the music 'visible'. At the same time, it allows us to appreciate their 'stability', their ability to maintain a dissonance that nevertheless emerges as a thin thread to cling to. This dissonance does not seek reconciliation or harmony; precisely for this reason, it stirs something within us. This is more evident to the listener who, until that moment, has been unable to tune into the calm atmosphere conveyed by the silence. The slow, strident sounds seem to be a continuation of the 'agony' that is latent in Lin Wang's gestures and which he perceives as unbearably slow.

And yet, it is precisely the attention to detail in gestures that the tea ceremony encourages, even in an analytical or impatient spirit, which allows us to grasp the subtle nuances of Po-Nien Wang's

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<sup>11</sup> Gernot Böhme also emphasises the spatial nature of music, which he associates with architecture. According to Böhme, both music and architecture are 'spatial arts' whose main task is «is essentially the creation and shaping of spaces and experiences of spaces» (Böhme 2016, 179). On the topic of musical atmospheres, see also Scassillo 2020.

dance: the positioning of his hands and feet, how his trousers 'cushion' his sudden, decisive movements, how slowly he lifts a leg and how he holds a balancing pose. Discrepancy does not necessarily become harmony; harmony and discrepancy can coexist, inducing the viewer to maintain an analytical attitude while the frustration, disappointment and resentment that might otherwise have emerged during the tea ceremony fade away. At a certain point, Po-Nien Wang takes the white cloth that the tea table was resting on and covers himself with it as if it were a veil until his face is hidden.

He moves to another spot in the room, this time an empty one, followed by the spectators. He drops the veil and strikes a series of poses as if posing for a photograph. These accentuate the chiasmic character present from the outset, indicating a strange and intriguing coexistence of inner conflict and harmony. This is conveyed by the spaciousness of his arm movements, as if reaching beyond the limits of the room, stretching his whole body. He moves quickly, alternating between standing and sitting poses. At one point, with his arms open in the shape of a V, he lowers himself and picks up the white cloth with his teeth. Then he rises again, as though he has just caught his prey. He lowers his arms and brings his hands in front of himself, covering the front of his body. He brings his palms together and then moves his hands apart, maintaining contact between his fingertips as if forming a sphere. He lifts this sphere above his head, he covers himself with the sheet again and lies down on the ground in a sprawled position, his bent legs resting on the ground and turned towards the audience, covered by the sheet. The music stops and, for a few moments, the spectators contemplate this white figure. They cannot tell whether it is human or animal, and it stands out against the dark background. After a while, still in silence, he bends to one side, sits cross-legged and rearranges the cloth around his, making movements with his hands and arms.

The hands appear to perform mudra movements<sup>12</sup>; these involve approaching and then moving away from oneself. The viewer is plunged back into a mystical silence thick with anticipation, curiosity, and expectation. The strident character of the just-ended piece still echoes, yet it allows this dissonance to 'settle'. This is a transitional silence that can be experienced with

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<sup>12</sup> Mudra movements are symbolic hand gestures originating in Indian classical dance and spiritual practices, often employed in dance and meditation.

both relief and trepidation. Captivated by the gestures, the spectator's focus returns to the details and the slightest variations in the movements of the fingers, which gradually distance themselves from the anguish that characterised them. At a certain point, the dancer stands up, turns his back to the audience and takes off his trousers, loosening his hair in the process. Wearing only a loincloth, he appears to have freed himself from a burden. The music, *Cloudbank*, a composition by Julianna Barwick<sup>13</sup>, is completely different from the previous piece. Vocals repeat the same melody, increasing in intensity and duration. This seems to mark the unveiling of something and conveys a sense of inexorable change – like a rebirth or an affirmation of a self that had been imprisoned within itself for too long. Initially, the movements of the arms dominate, moving as if to form a wheel above the head. This is followed by a lateral bend of the torso, accentuating the circular succession of the arms moving one after the other. This movement, accompanied by this unexpected, ethereal vocalisation, resembles stretching upon awakening, but with an added emphasis on rolling on the ground in a circular motion. Then, the movements become slower and more defined. Po-Nien Wang lingers in each pose as if a part of himself detaches with each one, bringing out something new and harmonious that bursts forth, yet is always 'kept alive' by the dissonance that characterises sequences of contorted and intertwining movements, now repeated but completely transfigured.

This aspect is emphasised by the music. The vocalisation that characterises this music, is repeated like a canon, referencing the previous music as if it had been 'translated' and reconfigured in a melodic key. The high-pitched sounds emphasise the epicritic components of the music and the dancer's movements, but are overpowered by the sensation of amplitude, extension and elongation, which gives the music and Po-Nien Wang's movements an exuberant and liberating character. The final part of the dance lends itself to being experienced in a 'mixed' way, characterised by alternating moments of harmony and discord. While this music can evoke a liberating, expansive feeling, the experience of silence and music that characterised the performance may lead one to find in this repeated vocalisation a sort of inexorable cyclicity, which

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK\\_XK1k3my0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK_XK1k3my0) (accessed: 28 December 2025).

partly continues in the repetitiveness of Lin Wang's gestures during the tea ceremony and the in the repetitive nature of the dance figures and dissonant sounds as well. However, this change may also appear premature in relation to the sense of dissonance and discomfort that characterised the performance. For this reason, when the dance solo ends, seemingly celebrating this conflicted yet liberated version of himself that is finally 'out in the open', the viewer may feel that everything happened too quickly and that it is somehow unfinished. After the bows, the audience lingers in the gallery. They are offered fine tea produced by Lin Wang, and the atmosphere suddenly takes on the tone of an exhibition opening. People start talking and moving around the room, lingering among the works of art on display.

### 9. Conclusion

The case study presented has enabled us to demonstrate the effect that silence can have on the spectator's experience of a performative work of art, such as the one described. Evoking silence as a contemplative emotional state through the *gongfu* tea ceremony can make it more difficult for the viewer to let go and open up to this encounter. Thanks to the theoretical tools of new phenomenology and Tonino Griffero's atmospheric approach, it has been possible to highlight that this experience can also have a 'discrepant' character. In other words, it can evoke emotional states that conflict with the dominant contemplative atmosphere conveyed by the silence that accompanies the opening tea ceremony. This discordant resonance significantly influences enjoyment of the dance solo, particularly the music and the qualitative features of Po-Nien Wang's movements, giving the viewer a finer sensitivity with which to grasp the dissonant aspects present in his solo dance performance.

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