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Rhythmanalysis: An Interview with Paola Crespi

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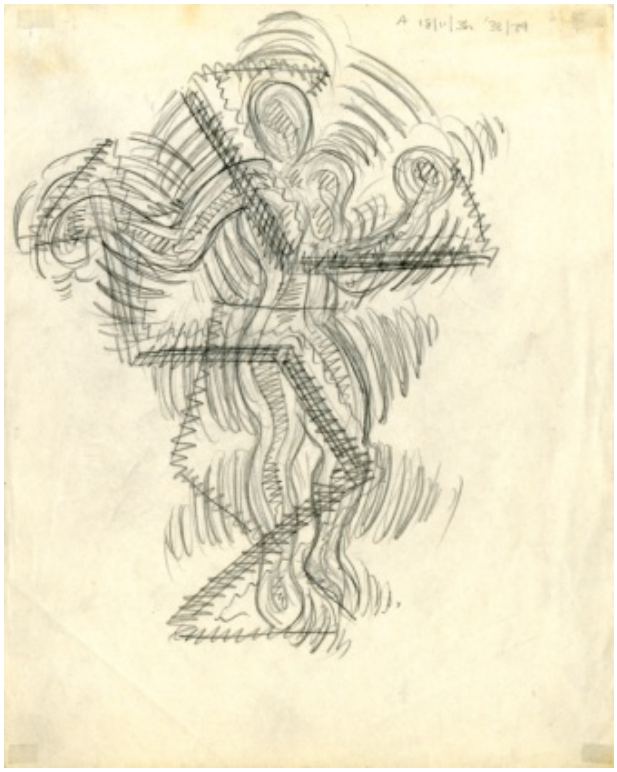
For a special issue of Body & Society *on 'Rhythm, Movement, Embodiment', Paola Crespi presents two previously untranslated texts, Rudolf Bode's 'Rhythm and its Importance for Education' and Rudolf Laban's 'Eurhythmy and Kakorhythmy'. In the following interview she uncovers further unpublished and untranslated sources and she discusses some of the main themes of these texts in relation to the more widely known text by Henri Lefebvre,* Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life (2004), *as well as Roland Barthes'* How to Live Together (2012)*, in which he presents an account of 'idiorrhythmy'.*



Rudolf Laban, Single and Double Figures in Spatial Forms:

A Figure in a Dodecahedron, c.1938, L/C/5/123.

Sunil Manghani: For the special issue of *Body & Society* on 'Rhythm, Movement, Embodiment', alongside your own contextualising essay (Crespi, 2014), you produced translations of two previously untranslated texts: Rudolf Bode's 'Rhythm and its Importance for Education' (2014) and Rudolf Laban's 'Eurhythmy and kakorhythmy in art and education' (2014). Perhaps, as a starting point, you can say something about how you arrived at making these translations and what the authors mean to you in relation to your own research interests.

Paola Crespi: Bode and Laban are notable exponents of the German movement of *Körperkultur* [body-culture], and

their influence is widely recognised. For my PhD thesis, which explores Laban's unpublished work carried out in England in the years comprised between 1938 and 1958, I work with the material of the Laban Archive held at the National Research Centre for Dance in Guildford (Surrey). The whole collection of Laban's unpublished documents (held also in other archives and private collections in the UK and in Europe) has surprisingly been mostly overlooked, and also Laban's early books and articles published in German, among which there's the one I have translated, have previously received virtually no attention beyond the small community of Laban's followers.

Bode was mentioned both in Laban's biographies, and in other accounts of *Körperkultur* and the Weimar epoch. In particular, Toepfer's *The Empire of Ecstas*y (1997), where the author puts Bode's rhythmic gymnastics in relation to other theoreticians' and practitioners' take on rhythm, and Doerr's biography of Laban (2008), where she discusses the professional and political frictions between Bode and Laban, gave me the initial idea for the translations and introductory text. Bode and Laban were competitors in their professional life. What I've tried to show in the article is that their antipathy and political disaccord can be traced back also to their conception of rhythm as found in very early texts, such as the ones translated. Rhythm is for Bode an undivided continuum, Laban comes, instead, closer to defining a discrete continuum.

SM: *Körperkultur*, you explain, is associated with the 'life reform' movement in Germany at the time, with concern for one's body treated as the route to a 'higher Mensch'. This is of course a very loaded concept, and we can come back to the nationalistic concerns, but within this pervading context placing such interest on the body it is striking that Bode and Laban come to different definitions of rhythm. They both share the starting point of rhythm as a corporeal, material phenomenon, but Bode defines rhythm as being of a irrational, undivided nature, while Laban is interested in rhythm as polyrhythmic and polymorphous. As you explain, they take contrasting positions, but perhaps you elaborate on these definitions, and say more about the differences and/or connections? Is there, for example, a way in which an 'undivided nature' can be understood as being polymorphous, made up multiple rhythms? So, for example, where perhaps we might perceive a set of different rhythms might there in fact be an overall rhythm, beyond our immediate rational understanding?

PC: I am in fact claiming for their perspectives to be different, on the basis of Laban's polyrhythmic approach. I believe Bode and Laban's positions can be understood as different interpretations of Bergson's philosophy. If Bode reads Bergson through Klages and understands him as proclaiming the primacy of undivided duration, Laban, instead, reads Bergson finding in it his concept of discrete continuity. Moreover, contrary to Bode, for Laban rhythm is expressed in bodily action but it exceeds it, propagating beyond the boundaries of the body. For Laban there exist other rhythms, as evident in the text, which compose reality and to which the individual might be in accord or disaccord.

I think it might be worth here clarifying some aspects of Laban's theory of Effort/Rhythm, which he developed in the English factories during and after World War 2. With C.F. Lawrence, a Manchester-based industrialist, he worked on a project for 'economising effort/rhythm' (see Laban and Lawrence, 1947). The technique and methodology developed in this project did not aim at quantitative efficiency, as with Taylor's 'Time and Motion' studies, but focussed on qualitative nuances, like those of flow, but also inclination towards time, space and weight. Although Laban doesn't provide a univocal definition of effort, this can be both the individual exertion of energy and more generally a primal creative force. Individual effort is a force that, inflected by gestures, becomes rhythmical and, more generally, effort is the vital force or elan vital which in its rhythmical exertions and recuperations shapes reality as much as human (and non-human) action. The polyrhythmicity that Laban mentions in the translated text is more complex than Bode's account of rhythm as irrational - it is chaosmotic. Surely, however, Laban thought of an 'All- or Ur-rhythm' encompassing and synthesising, although maintaining difference in the particular rhythms of life.

SM: In your article you write: 'Bode's insistence on the incapacity of the intellect to grasp the flowing nature of rhythm and his dualistic uncompromising view with regard to the latter is at odds with Laban's harmonious triangulation of eurhythmy, kakorhythmy and Ur-rhythm'. Perhaps you can elaborate, especially on these specialist

terms used by Laban. A key reference here is to the notion of 'flow'. At one point in your text you refer to the etymology of 'rhythm' in the Greek language relating to the verb reo, meaning of 'to flow', while the term *rhythmòs* (as used by Aristotle) means 'form'. Inevitably perhaps, you cite from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion of rhythm and refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004:401): 'There is indeed such a thing as measured, cadenced rhythm, relating to the coursing of a river between its banks or to the form of a striated space; but there is also a rhythm without measure, which relates to the upswell of a flow, in other words, to the manner in which a fluid occupies a smooth space'. For Bode there is an apparent opposition between *Takt* (measure) and rhythm, while again Laban's reference to polyrhythm would seem to suggest differing 'states' of rhythm. I'm intrigued by the difference between measure and rhythm, but I wonder if these two terms here are themselves useful in making distinctions of types of 'flow'. I suppose I'm asking: is there a danger of us conflating too much under the rubric of rhythm? Equally, I'm interested to know more how 'flow' relates to Bode and Laban's critical ideas and manifests in creative and expressive output.

PC: I think rhythm is of crucial significance to any ontology, or discourse on ontology, in so far as it speaks of the relation of time to space, of difference to repetition and of mediality. Lubkoll (2002) suggests that discourses about rhythm take place during paradigm shifts. I like what this says in relation to the present. This might explain the recent 'return' of rhythm as outlined in this special issue, but also in recent works (Goodman, 2009 and Ikoniadou, 2014). At the same time, what I find interesting is that inside this milieu of *Körperkultur* what otherwise might risk becoming a too theoretical or abstract discourse was explored and put into practice. In fact, the boundaries between theory and practice and a predominance of influence are very difficult to trace, leaving us to wonder whether Bode and Laban first found rhythm in the corporeal or whether they were first influenced by their readings and then applied them to their practice. I believe, at least for Laban, it is safe to say that it was a dialogue.

In relation to Laban's specialist terms, it is interesting to note how he takes them up again in a late text published posthumously (1959). In here Laban speaks of rhythm as 'proportional relationship' and he considers how rhythmical education should focus on 'the exclusion of those forms of the flow of energy which are non-rhythmical, i.e. (...) the part which collide and struggle in a destructive and dissipating way'. This is what Laban called 'kakorhythmy' in the early text I translated. For Laban, this 'uncontrollable maze of contrasting tendencies has no real rhythm', but can have a 'dead and stable regularity', which is surely not what the author means by rhythm, and that could be equated with metre, or 'a chaotic avalanche-like precipitation', something that resonates with Bode's notion of the irrational.

Laban's take on rhythm is therefore one that emphasises the Ur-rhythmic underlying dynamic and oscillatory balance between two opposites. Rhythm's features, such as duration, repetition, change, habit, pleasure, energy, and the polarity of qualities potentially expressed in it - such as flow and stagnation, for example, in regards to 'duration', or 'stability and 'motility' in regards to 'change', make up the 'different degrees of complication' in which 'the single rhythms are mixed'. This is seen by Laban as contrary to the general conception of rhythm in which 'the notion of recurrence in time is so prevailing'.

In terms of flow: Karl Toepfer (1997) tells us that Bode's emphasis on 'free flow' and the irrational ended up in a failure in terms of pedagogy (129). However, we should note that Bode's school in Munich is still open today, and therefore there might be a constructive way in which we can speak of free rhythmic gymnastic. Unfortunately, I am no expert in this, as I only superficially looked at the foundations of Bode's pedagogic system and his practice.

Laban speaks of a 'flow of movement' common to all activity. In line with what I said earlier, this flow is seen as populated by 'micro-rhythmicalities', which he proceeds to explore in his effort theory as mentioned above. Here, flow is a motion factor of effort and can be either bound or unbound. We return to qualitative multiplicity. In his practice, Laban was much more concerned with the rhythmical pulsation of effort and recovery, than with an unrestricted flow.

In general I think another difference between the two authors is that Laban was much more interested in the study of

movement and rhythm, rather than on applying a technique. In this sense, we don't speak of the 'Laban technique', as we might do with Martha Graham's for example, or Bode's. But we do use Laban's insights into the nature of rhythm, movement, and flow.

SM: In your essay you note of the centrality of rhythm for modernity, but suggest of a lack of scholarship in this area. What directions do you think this might head in and what impact will this have on broader studies of modernity? As you put it: 'the translation of Henri Lefebvre's (2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* marks the moment in which rhythm descends into the theoretical arena', and I'd like to come back to your thoughts on Lefebvre shortly, but you argue that the texts by Bode and Laban help demonstrate rhythm being 'omnipresent in philosophical, artistic, socio-economical and psychological discourses at the turn of the 20th century'. Perhaps you can elaborate on this remark. Do you think there is something significant in that Bode and Laban were developing their critical writings in relation to a creative practice (in this case gymnastics and dance)? Or, put another way, what are some of the key ideas we can take from Bode and Laban that perhaps we can't from Lefebvre; and/or how do you consider the relationships between these texts?

PC: For English-speaking academia this could be an invitation to engage with relevant literature from other countries. There should be more openness and maybe more investment in translation. For example, *Die Tat* functioned as a platform to facilitate debates on rhythm and education for many authors and intellectuals of the time. It is possible that looking at those debates can tell us something new about issues related to the study of modernity. It is a very fertile ground not only for modernity studies, but for cultural history and performance studies.

In response to the second half of your question, yes, I believe the texts show not only the extent to which rhythm was a discussed notion in different fields, but also the extent to which the performing arts were at the cutting edge of these discourses. By this I mean that Laban and Bode were in no way 'just' influential in their respective artistic fields, but also in the political and intellectual ones. Laban in particular was also acquainted with the academic world and gave lectures, for example, at the Sorbonne in Paris and took part in the 1937 International Congress on Aesthetics there. It seems that the idea of the intellectual as disjoined from the artist/dancer was alien to them. They fed their theory into their practice, which in turn gave rise to their thinking. At least for Laban it is clear that this was his overall methodological approach.

Lefebvre mentions in passing, at the very beginning of his *Rhythmanalysis*, that the concept of rhythm seems clear to us as long as we don't attempt to describe it. When we do, we fall in the trap of assigning it to the 'mechanical' *(Takt)*, leaving the 'organic' aspect of it aside. To prove this point he mentions musicians, historians and economists and 'those who teach gymnastics' (Lefebvre, 2013: 6). He then proceeds to analyse rhythm famously in relation to repetition and difference.

Did Lefebvre know about the work and practices of Bode and Laban? Among the musicians he mentions, there could have been Dalcroze, the historians and economists could have been Karl Bücher and Georg Simmel. Could Bode and maybe Laban have been Lefebvre's reference in terms of gymnastics? We can only speculate. In his *Rhythmes, Pouvoir, Mondialisation* (2005) the French philosopher and historian Pascal Michon mentions the work of Laban along with that of Paul Valery, Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard and others as of pivotal importance for the study of rhythm. He reminds us that 'Laban and Schlemmer', the well-known Bauhaus artist operating at the same time as Laban, 'fuelled discussions about the notion of rhythm in between the two wars' (Michon, 2005: 413, own translation). It is possible, and in fact very probable considering Laban's engagement with French academia, that these discussions percolated into France at different levels, both artistic and theoretical. I believe this opens up new exciting research scenarios for a cultural history of rhythm.

SM: I was in India at one point when drafting my questions; in Fort Kochi, Kerala. Hurtling about the streets in a motorized rickshaw, peering both through the front shield of the vehicle and straight out through the opening where

one clambers aboard, I couldn't help think about the chapter in Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* called 'Seen from the Window'. He writes of how 'to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it'. In order to do this there is a need to 'situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside'. For him the balcony provides the right balance and he goes on to give that wonderful description and analysis of a street in Paris. There is a definite beat to the description - a series of starts and stops - through which we get a clear sense of the different articulated rhythms of traffic light sequencing, pedestrians and vehicles. From where I was sitting, however, I felt a little lost for words. There is the constant beeping of horns in Kochi (in fact on the rear of most vehicles is a sign saying 'Sound Horn'). Everyone drives at their own speed, typically aiming to move ahead into the next best unoccupied space. And while one ostensibly drives on the left-hand side, in reality you steer wherever you wish to go. Stray goats and dogs sit about in shaded spots, unperturbed by the roaring proximity of cars, vans, rickshaws and people. Stall-holders wheel their wares in amongst the traffic, negotiating space as a rickshaw driver makes an abrupt turn to pass a bus that has unexpectedly stopped. People sit on the roadside mopping their head with a cloth, or gazing in their mobile phone. A line of vehicles faces the wrong way, waiting to board the ferry. And the horns, some loud and bellowing, others more squeaky and shrill, just keep up their sonic dance. Lefebvre writes of 'inexorable rhythm, which hardly dies down at night', still referring to rue R. from his balcony. But I can't help wonder, how might we begin an analysis of the rhythms of other places where the vantage point of a balcony doesn't seen enough?

PC: This brings me to the point that really shows the importance of looking at rhythm from Laban's and Bode's practical perspective. In fact, Lefebvre invites us to integrate a bodily perspective into rhythm, but there is very little 'body' in rhythmanalysis. Also in the description of Mediterranean cities as you say from a window, it is the visual aspect of rhythm (together with its more abstract relations to socio-economical fluxes) that comes to the fore, and not an embodied one. Instead, the texts that I translated derive from an understanding of rhythm as an embodied phenomenon and call for a fleshy rhythmanalysis, a project already partially underway (see for example Henriques, 2014 and Reynolds, 2007). In response to your question, then, an analysis of rhythm in this sense has to become experiential: a dancing rhythmanalysis.

SM: The texts of Bode and Laban have been translated into English from the original German, which means they now potentially gain a whole new life. I'm interested in their status now, appearing in a new language (and perhaps in a more academic context?), in a very different political and cultural environment. You write: 'the "rhythmanalysis" of the turn of the [20th] century is not an exclusively Teutonic phenomenon, it is also true that a copious amount of material on rhythm of this period is written in German and remains untranslated'. Your work is deliberately aimed at the broader project of understanding a cultural history of rhythmanalysis. The use of the word 'Teutonic' is of course somewhat eye-catching. I wondered if there was something further to say about the original status of these texts in relation to the period and the national context in which they are written. You note the connections both Bode and Laban had with Germany's National Socialist Party. As experts of rhythm both were called upon to help the Nazi regime define a 'German rhythm'. There are shades here of the 'Heideggerian problem', whether or not a universal philosophy is separate to an individual's politics. I appreciate you not wanting to get waylaid by such a conundrum, but I wasn't sure you attributed the issue enough to the fact the texts have largely fallen dormant. Was there a period in which it was unpalatable to give them attention and consider their translation? Are these now purely historical documents or do they warrant contemporary interpretations?

PC: The texts are from 1920 and 1921, so they were written during the Weimar Republic. They should be seen as the expression of a Volkish subculture that later fed into the Nazi propaganda. George Mosse's (1964) *The Crisis of German Ideology* explains the dynamics of this passage also in relation to Eugen Diederich, the publisher of both Bode and Laban's text. Diederich, who left the direction of the journal in 1927, was known for being open-minded and for allowing controversies between different perspectives in the journal (see Mosse, 1964: 53). However, there is little doubt that many of the Volkish ideas portrayed in New Romaniticism circles filtered into Nazi propaganda, together with some of their exponents (see also Green, 1986), such as Bode and Laban. This has not stopped German and French scholars taking them into consideration for their theoretical import, but it has slowed down their impact in the English-speaking world (although see the work of Cowan, 2007 and 2012).

There are significant differences, however, between Bode and Laban's relation to National Socialist politics, sometimes subtle sometimes evident. Bode joined the National Socialist party in 1922 (Guilbert, 2012: 9) and remained a member throughout World War 2. He was classified as a collaborator after the war. His career before and during the war was inspired by the philosophy of Ludwig Klages, one of the strongest intellectual influences to NS propaganda. Laban never joined the National Socialist party. He started to become well known around the end of the 1920s with his Kinetography, a way to record dances. His career steadily progressed until 1936, when he was forced to leave Germany. Between 1933 and 1936 he played an important role in shaping the National Socialist propaganda in his field. He was Ballet Master at the Berlin National Opera from 1930 till 1934 and then became Director of Movement and Dance under Goebbels Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda. With this title he was to oversee the organisation of the 1936 Olympics and prepare a piece for the inauguration of the Dietrich Eckart stadium. It is not clear what happened, all we know is that Goebbels found it 'too intellectual' and not in line with the National Socialist propaganda. Following this episode, Laban was quickly disposed of, with accusations of being a homosexual and a Freemason. It is possible that the delicate and ever shifting power dynamics in the party changed and he fell out of favour.

Laban was forced to leave Germany, moving to Paris and then to England for a new life. This new life will be very important for school education in the UK, as curricula were formed also following the precepts found in Laban's Modern Educational Dance, where Laban builds on his movement and rhythm research in the factories. However, the chapter of Laban's life between 1933 and 1936 was silenced after his arrival in England and the debate on the nature of Laban's relation to the National Socialist regime is still ongoing, awaiting for further research in the archives. My PhD thesis partakes of this research.

Since the initial idea and first draft of the text and translations, my work has progressed and I encountered further evidence, in Laban's writings, of the importance of rhythm in relation to his political stance. In an unpublished handwritten text in German found in the Laban archive, Laban comments on what he defines as German Idealism (read Nazism in this context) and explains that

> we could justify and excuse also German Idealism, by way of looking at it as an indifferent natural phenomenon. Unfortunately, it is not. It has come into being not naturally, but artificially. *It arose from the inflammation of weak souls, which found the Takt and the Rhythm of natural life too difficult*.
>
> (Laban, n.d., L/E/25/12. Own translation and my italics).

What's striking here is Laban's mentioning of the relation of Takt to Rhythm in the context of Nazism, which he also defines as an 'inflammation [that] grew and grew into megalomania in a pathological way' (ibidem). Although this is not the place to engage further with this aspect, to get back to your questions, yes, I think these texts surely have political connotations which should be further explored in relation to rhythm, and my contention is that they are valuable documents for a further understanding of modernity in this sense. On the other hand, they highlight a continuum with current concerns in critical theory, such as those focussing on rhythm and flow, but also the role of the practitioner and the craftsman in society.

SM: Roland Barthes, in his lecture course *How to Live Together*, provides a further point of interest regarding an ethics of rhythm. He similarly picks up on the etymology of the term (and likewise the reference is to Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics*). Barthes is interested in *rhythmòs*, which as he notes 'never applied to the regular movement of waves', but rather 'a distinctive form, a proportioned figure, an arrangement' (p. 7). To get away from the typical association of rhythm as 'regular cadence', he adds the prefix 'idios' to define the term idiorrhythmy. He is interested in a way of living (together) that is a form of life, 'a regime, a lifestyle, diaita, diet', and which is '[s]omething

like solitude with regular interruptions... the aporia of bringing distances together ... the utopia of a socialism of distance' (p. 6). He regards idiorrhythmy to be a matter of space and place: 'Let's be clear', he writes, '...a fantasy requires a setting (a scenario) and therefore a place' (p. 7). He recounts of a brief instance, which, echoing Lefebvre, he views from a window, but which in this case reveals an inequity of rhythm at a very personal level. The scene, then, offers an account of idiorrhythmy by displaying its obverse, where rhythmic 'form' is lost (or overridden through a power differential):

> From my window (December 1, 1976), I see a mother pushing an empty stroller, holding her child by the hand. She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal, or one of Sade's victims being whipped. She walks at her own place unaware of the fact that her son's rhythm is different. ... Power - the subtlety of power - is effected through disrhythmy, heterorhythmy.
>
> (Barthes, 2012: 9).

Quite distinct from a national rhythm, or even a collective rhythm, Barthes is angling for a certain compatibility of individual 'forms of life', or as he puts it 'a socialism of distance'. I wonder how you feel Barthes' account reads in relation to Bode and Laban's definitions (and practices) of rhythm?

PC: For what concerns Laban, I think there are similarities with Barthes's take. Laban also thought of each individual as having her own specific rhythm expressed through or inflected by body movement. Similarly to Barthes above, we've seen how Laban saw kakorhythmy, dis/hetero-rhythmy as source of disturbance of an auspicable harmonic rhythm (eurhythmy), founded in the dynamic relation of form and flux. Rethinking about Laban's comments on National Socialism mentioned above, maybe we can speculate that it is this dynamics that he considered not to have been understood by the regime and we can further speculate that it is this same dynamics that set him apart.

Laban's practice of rhythm and movement aimed at an ethics of individual choice partaking in a universal harmony exemplified in All-rhythm. This is evident when he claims, in an unpublished document, that 'ethical behaviour is an act of artistic creation' (Laban, n.d., L/E/25/60. Own translation). As a third way, an alternative to ethical systems founded on knowledge or belief, 'the free person through her conviction posits herself the law of conduct' so that 'every new act is a new choice, an independent resolution'. What is not clear, is how these monadic realities should coordinate and how an ethics of responsibility can be built, something that is also applicable to Laban's case and his ethical conduct. Laban's practice was focussed towards to betterment of society and, if in his German years (up until 1937) it was strongly spiritual and mystical, in the English years (1938-1958) his focus shifts to an ethics of movement and rhythm aimed at freeing from constrains by knowledge of full bodily (and therefore mind) potential.

Contrary to this, Bode's anti-intellectualism and his focus on the irrational aspects of rhythm dips into an indistinct Whole leaving no room for self-expression and freedom. In the text I translated, Bode claims that:

> [it is] perverse (...) to derive from such an individuality of form the right of individuals to diversity, freedom and free will. We say rather that all diverseness, all freedom and all free will is the complete opposite of individuality, because everything that is individual is coupled to the rhythm of life. We step into the territory of the rational every time we want 'un-relatedness' - or, more positively, 'freedom'
>
> (Bode, 2014: 56).

To sum up, Barthes' 'socialism at a distance' might be seen as a response to Bode's and Laban's previous approaches: it seems conscious of the perils deriving from these two stances. It would be interesting to put it into practice.

This interview relates to Paola Crespi's contributions to the Special Issue of Body & Society *(2014; Vol. 20, No. 3-4) on Rhythm, Movement, Embodiment, edited by Julian Henriques, Milla Tiainen and Pasi Väliaho.*

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Paola Crespi recently completed her PhD in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her interest lies in the intersection between media and performance studies, something she explores through the notions of rhythm and diagram. Her thesis focused on the work of movement theoretician Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) and, specifically, on his unpublished notes and drawings held at the National Resource Centre for Dance in Surrey (UK).

Sunil Manghani is Reader in Critical and Cultural Theory and Deputy Director of Doctoral Research at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton (UK). He is author of *Image Studies: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013), *Image Critique and the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Intellect, 2008) and editor of *Images: A Reader* (Sage, 2006), and *Images: Critical and Primary Sources* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

