

Unpublished Notes on the Viewpoint of Space
Based on the work of Mary Overlie
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AN INTRODUCTION TO SPACE: The Classic Progression

“The whole world is a stage.....and we as players but do play our part etc....”.

This verity, usually quoted with a bit of a sigh of both resignation and relief that we are absolved of certain obsessive struggles, turns out to be yet another half truth(which one could argue makes it an untruth) foisted upon us by the aged gods of the theater. The whole truth is that the world is a *potential* stage. The world awaits the performer’s intention and extraordinary awareness to actually *become* a stage. Far from simply playing our part, the contemporary performer is charged with the responsibility of creating the stage by this power of intention. In the post post-modern era, meaningful theater, or performance, requires this effort on the part of the performer. Whenever this effort is not made we get the unborn, the stillborn, or perhaps just a rote repeat of outmoded formulae. We get the half live.

The half-truth “that we do but play our part”, denies the very essence of the modern performer. It is our obligation as artists, and our responsibility, to not only play on the stage, before watchers, but to create the stage, and subtly direct the focus of the watchers as well. This intention has its basis in ordinary, everyday attention. However, through training, which thoroughly engages both mind and body, this ordinary attention matures into extraordinary intention, focus and awareness. This mature awareness of the performer has the power to transform the performer, the activities of the performer, the watcher, and the arena of performance.

In order to create the stage the contemporary performer’s role is to “point things out” so to speak. What is being pointed out is how things really are.

This is a human being.

And this seemingly unrelated creature is a human being as well.

This is what a human being is made of.

This is what a human being does.

The Viewpoints are a way to map the mind’s relationship to body and its environment. Mind, body, environment; this is the terrain of the actor, the dancer, the contemporary performer. Viewpoints Practice is initially the practice of pointing things out to oneself and physically manifesting this information. Following this definition, performance is therefore the activity of pointing out for others what is there in experience all of the time. The Viewpoints are a tool to manifest all of the varieties of our experience of “how things are”. It teaches us how to integrate our own individual process of discovery with “performing” or showing our discovery to others, the watchers.

The Viewpoints body of work, or technique, is perceived as “new”, or “other” because it refuses to draw familiar lines around the actor, or the activities of performing and watching. The viewpoints work for instance treats the empty space as equal to the occupied space. The empty space is as alive as the performer. In fact the empty space gives rise to *things or events*. The empty space gives rise to filled space, corporality.

Inaction gives birth to action; stillness to movement; silence to sound. There is no action without conscious inaction, there is no movement without conscious stillness and there is no sound without a full experience of silence.

The “ performer’s body” in the Viewpoints work also includes what we normally perceive as “not our body”. In working with the viewpoints, all of the things we perceive and with which we interact are also experienced as “our body”. The wall, the chair, the actor, the spoken word of the actor, the proverbial cup which the actor lifts to her lips while “acting”, are all of equal importance. These elements are given equal attention and are thereby empowered to “play their part”. The parts all of these elements play, how they organize themselves in any given moment, are of little concern to the actor. The actor puts these elements into play by applying an extraordinary quality of attention. The performer who is performing well is occupied by this activity and has no interest or attention left over. In this way the truth of the moment is revealed.

The performer/actor therefore is engaged in a two fold activity; exercising acute awareness and then manifesting what is experienced or perceived in action. The performer directs the perception of the watcher by ‘pointing out’ elements of the perceptual and sense fields.

Therefore we can continue the pointing out list as a compendium of activities the performer might be engaged in:

This is the space.

This is the corner.

This is my breath.

This is weight, gravity, mass.

This is the time it takes....

This is nothing.

This is something.

The pointing out activity of the performer is applied to the performer or “doer’s” own awareness first. The first activity of the performer is to point out to oneself. But in creating performance we include the others, the watchers. (The watchers in the traditional western view are the audience. But this process doesn’t assume this narrow view necessarily. The watchers could as well be the unseen gods. Regardless, in every instance, the first watcher is our own mind. Who the watchers are makes no immediate difference to the actor). As performers therefore, we are engaged in both experiencing and enlarging our own awareness and leading the others, the watchers into experiencing and enlarging their awareness.

In the practiced performer the list of what is pointed out takes on the syntax of invitation.
The watcher is invited to:

Look here.

See this.

Feel this.

See this first, now this, then that.

Hear this.

Don't look here.

Look there.

Abide.

Dwell.

Be anxious.

Relax.

Think.

Don't think.

Dream. Come on and dream a little dream with me.

Gap out for a moment.

The object of the progression described below is to enter by stages a particular kind of activity which in turn creates a particular kind of arena. This arena could be called an intensified field of play, a sanctified space, even perhaps, a very worthy type of stage. The activity or "play", which begins with the barest of attention, is play of a fairly powerful order. By progressive stages this play creates an arena and becomes the subject being presented within it. In this case the players create the stage and the stage in turn raises up the activities of the performers.

(the following are headings for specific exercises and activities described in separate text)

Clean the space

Creating the Space by Seeing

Taking a Walk in Space

Working With the Eyes

Allowing Your Body to Follow the Interest of the Eyes

Opening Up the Physical Vocabulary: Walking, Stopping, Dwelling, Running

Acknowledging and Defining the Spatial Field of Play

Moving toward Open Improvisation

Two Rules which allow us to open the field of activity to any source or impulse once a ground of spatial awareness has been established:

1. Everything, which is occurring in the space, must arise from your perception of what is happening in the present. This is the Present Tense Rule. Everything that arises must be related to what is happening all around you or what has happened since you stepped into the space to work. The "past" reaches back no further than your conscious beginning of this exercise. The "future" in this case is being built out of your full participation in the present; consequently the future is also of no concern. You could think of the past as everything that happened before the beginning of this improvisation. The future is everything that will happen after it

ends. Imagery must arise from what is happening now; story if it arises is based on what is happening now in the space. Associations should arise from what is happening now. All movement, sounds and activities are derived from looking, listening and responding to what is happening now.

2. We all must acknowledge that something is being made every moment. This is The Product Rule. This activity of working is generating something. Being in the space with this type of awareness and with this type of permission to respond is producing some thing, or a series of things; a product, a series of images and experiences, which can be experienced from the outside. By entering into this space you agree to acknowledge what is being made and to relate your movement, impulses, associations, sounds etc. to that.

If you use these rules as reminders as you work you will constantly be juggling two things in your awareness: looking, seeing, hearing, sensing, almost searching for, information about what is occurring moment to moment and taking one step back, allowing, almost searching for, a mental formation or pattern, an acknowledgment or recognition, of what is being made.

There is a third activity. Because of the dynamic between these two rules we are required to plunge our knowledge of what is being made back into the present by acting upon it. Movement, both abstract and literal, sound, words, song, emotional impulse, memories and fragments of memories or images, which arise from the present activity, are all allowed in this space. In fact anything, which was excluded in our previous work, should now be allowed in. This could be doing something; it could be doing nothing. You must do or not do while following the two rules above.

Depending on our skill level in juggling these two activities we can begin to “compose” from our awareness of the present. This is a rather sophisticated activity which unifies knowing and not knowing. We know what is happening now through our trained awareness. As we act upon this we are led directly into the unknown. The known in this case is assembled out of a series of previously unknown, “open”, responses. This activity of basing the unknown on the known creates what we often perceive as “authentic” or “truthful” responses. (See Chapter for discussion on relationship of Improvisation to Composition)

Training our awareness largely depends on allowing ourselves to not know, to not label or reify. We train ourselves to get comfortable with not knowing long enough for our perception to be unimpeded by thoughts or projections. Cultivating this little gap in conceptualizing allows us to move toward really knowing, or knowing more deeply. While practicing viewpoint improvisation we are in an endless loop of knowing based on not knowing. This type of knowing which is based on not knowing bears fruit as deeper knowledge. Thus we burrow down into reality and knowing on deeper levels. Acting from this deeper knowledge creates much more meaningful action. For the performer, actor, mover this is the whole purpose of such activity.

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- ❖ We have brought our attention to the space by cleaning, straightening and scrutinizing.

- ❖ We have entered the space and experienced it as directly as possible maintaining interested neutrality.
- ❖ We became aware of our eyes as the perceivers of the space and, through practice of intentional changes of focus, shed our habitual patterns of looking.
- ❖ We connected our whole body to our visual perception and were led, without premeditation or thought through the space.
- ❖ We noticed and cultivated spatial attractions, and repulsions allowing the space itself, in both its architectural form and in its fluid changing forms created by the group, to direct our movement.
- ❖ We opened up our field of physical response as wide as possible while holding our spatial awareness.
- ❖ We began to notice the emergence of time, shape, line, movement, imagery, story, and emotional feelings of all sorts. We perhaps experienced many unnamable things which could remain unnamed.
- ❖ Through maintaining a sense of working in the present and recognizing what was being made we were able to play with all of these elements.

The object of this progression is to create the kind of practice or activity which naturally gives rise to the viewpoints. Given the requirement of having to make something, if you entered a space with no restrictions, but with the single intention of working from a basis of awareness you would begin to create from the elements present. We would perhaps not name these elements immediately, choosing to work intuitively and without conscious labeling. At some point however we would want to go further, to know more or have the ability to repeat various ways of entering which produced certain results. We would then begin to invent the language, to notate, our intuitive open explorations. We would then give birth to our own version of the viewpoints. The above progression leads a group into the kind of open exploration informed by awareness which eventually allows us to have a direct experience of the viewpoints,

Noticing the Voice of the Inner Observer

Here are some examples of the voice of the inner observer or witness of a performer engaged in this viewpoint improvisation practice. This is the inner dialogue of someone working in the present and navigating by direct perception. Note that this activity does not privilege memory, psychological story, association or image over other perceptual or sensory information:

“I am here, they are there. He detaches himself from the group and moves toward the corner and stops. I in response move there as well. I am standing quite close to him, shoulder to shoulder. We are facing the same direction and I suddenly notice we are on a diagonal line facing another couple 15 feet away standing on a parallel diagonal line. We all turn to face the opposite direction and run to opposite walls, simultaneously taking one step sideways on arrival. I notice we are a quartet but in an instant one of us are drawn off in a curling walk toward the pillar, enticed by a darting move on a rigid line by another member of the group far across the space.”

“I notice her standing in the northwest corner of the room. On seeing this I walk to stand in the southeast corner. She recognized that I am in the opposite corner and she moves to the third corner. I, feeling quite flirtatious, move to the fourth corner and things are getting quite intimate. We, in a sudden impulse of consummation, take one step on the diagonal out of the corner. Upon doing this I have recognized that the group is in a clump a little left of center but three of us, including my partner, previously in the corner remain out of the clump in various locations in the room. I ask myself, “What is the pattern of location or relationship to the clump and or the room that the three of us are making?” I see that we are an equidistant triad midway between wall and clump. We begin to circle the clump clockwise, faster, and faster. The clump begins to turn in the center, counter clockwise.....”

(Curricular exercises described in separate text)

Differentiating Two Kinds of Space: Architectural and The Space Amongst and Between

1-1 An exercise for establishing awareness of space amongst and between

1-1 Relaxing the Timing Rule

1-1 Extending the Vocabulary to Floor pattern

1-1 Solo Space Exercise

1-1 Solo Space Exercise, level two

Establishing an Arial View; The Dots in Space Theory

The Japanese Rock Garden

Variations on The Rock Garden

Grids and Corridors; aids in making the empty space tangible

Fine Tuning our Sense of Spatial Design

--Creating Group Forms

--Placement in Space

Architecture as Map, Score, or Script