

EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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Chapter 8

Touching Forgotten Realities

Bettina Mainz

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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8. TOUCHING FORGOTTEN REALITIES

A Practice of Detecting the Happening

Bettina Mainz (Germany)

Preamble

This chapter investigates **critique**, **freedom** and **reconciliation** – all of them forces that have proved to be important throughout my life. It draws on my background as somebody in Berlin, Germany in the mid-1960s, who began to study movement and performance in the Netherlands in the 1980s and then got involved with Prapto's practice of Free Movement, which I first encountered whilst travelling in Java in 1990. It also draws on my own evolving movement practice, which I call 'Body of Becoming'.

Meeting Prapto and his work made me recognize my main life pattern, which was one of 'critique', that is, inner fighting and rejection with an implicit longing for freedom. He helped me to uncover the principles of 'unfreedom' within my own system and put them into a context of 'life possibilities'. Whilst doing this he stayed so close to the inner process of my own understanding and readiness for transformation that it could touch my body on a level which allowed for embodied reconciliation to happen. 'Reconciliation' here means a process of becoming friends with my own being and with life itself.

My immediate response of saying 'no' to whatever might confront me turned into saying literally 'yes' – even if just for a little while. This happened through my physical being which became a place for my mind to transform. From this seed I am still trying to find ways in which the critical mind – which is still alive – can nurture my living practice and teaching in a way that allows embodied reconciliation to take place in me and in others.

My point of view in this writing is personal. Yet to support and widen my thoughts I draw on a lecture given in Berlin in 1978 by the philosopher Michel Foucault which was published as *Qu'est-ce que la critique?* (What is critique?) in 1990 in Paris. In this lecture Foucault speaks about "this critical attitude as virtue in general" (Foucault 1990, 43) and proposes "as a very first definition of critique, this general characterization: the art of not being governed quite so much". (ibid., 45) I also draw on an essay by Judith Butler on Foucault's notion of virtue. Here Butler writes: "Critique is precisely a practice that not only suspends judgment ... but offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension." (Butler 2001, 1) From this point of view I would say that Prapto is practicing a critical attitude; its virtue is embodied in the art of his responses through which he is supporting *blossoming* in the environment.

Born in the Age of Criticism

The main value I grew up with was being encouraged to openly criticize authorities, parents, teachers, governments and ways of living, achievements and friends without being harmed or being asked to be silent. We did not take anything for granted nor did we believe anything just because an authority said it was true. We were passionately expressing our 'no'. As children, we were also treated relatively equally compared with the adults. We were respected in our rebellion. No punishment was ever given to us, either when we were children or as young adults, for the act of criticizing and questioning. I even received a lot of support in my environment for being critical.

How then did this attitude become destructive?

Embodying the Right to Criticize and to Be Against

I did not distinguish between critique or judgment, criticism or rejection, fear or condemnation, struggle or inner fighting. It was all the same and resulted in absolutely saying 'no' and excluding myself from my environment. As if to justify my negative attitude, my judgment turned against me, and began to govern my mind's activity. It felt like an avalanche of hammers banging my head, not leaving anything whole. All the 'weapons' and strategies I developed to fight them back just increased this utter confusion in my body and mind, which did not leave any place for me to be.

Still I was proud to have the freedom to 'call into question' the reality of all the phenomena I encountered; I doubted my confusion,

all my strategies and perceptions, even the distance that I created between them and everything else that exists, including my own being. But by questioning everything, I was left with no thing, no body and no self to refer back to. Questioning thus became a moving pattern of its own, performed in little variations, never finding a resting place in its endless loops and dispersal. It created its own rules and maps which, when followed meticulously, even seemed to offer some freedom – if I ignored the prison within which it moved.

Dance as refuge

*move or die
my house has become uninhabitable
movement the salvation
the dance a pleasurable variation of running,
orbiting the contracted places inside
...I am not this and not that!
no middle and no media
will show me
a way*

Such an embodied misunderstanding of criticism led me into a dependency on movement as a means of avoiding the collapse of being ‘buried by an avalanche.’ There was an ongoing hurry and struggle against my body’s need to rest. Ultimately my practice of freedom was to develop the art of ‘governing’ my body. In 1990 after my third year at the SNDO Theaterschool in Amsterdam I felt the need to pause my studies in this institution which had been containing my struggle so well, and to face this fact. I travelled to China and Indonesia, still not knowing how to find my way.

A Way

My first encounter with Prapto is on his land, Padepokan Lemah Putih, in October 1990.

*He moves:
His hands meet and rise – feet noticing stepping back
The bamboo’s whispering touches my ear – haste drops
away
A sense of peace is meeting my sense of struggle and a sense of touch
is meeting my sense of separation.*

Later I realized that I did not understand what Prapto was doing, nor did I identify the substance in his movements which enabled me to suddenly feel the present moment. As a result, I started to study on his course.

“Find your way,” Prapto says – this is our first practice, which we follow for a few weeks.

*Every day I am coming with my bike to the place where we practice.
I am sitting there and any direction, all strategies, any possible way
I start to move, any attitude I imagine, any reason to move – none of
them feels appropriate any more. Insurmountable distances keep me
in place – mountains of conflicting impulses.
I stay and wait.
Oh! Here I can catch a point of view on which I can ride — no, no, not
this!
I wait and stay still.
Each day I think: today will be the day that I can move.
But nothing links me with my way.
Sometimes I overcome distances, layers, walls, gaps and isolations. I
jump over – hop! – and then I run. I run and throw away what I have.”*

“Freedom you cannot find in your own rejection,” Prapto says.

What is ‘freedom’? Where could I possibly find something which exists just as a vague yet all-pervading longing?

~ ~ ~

*However far a spirit may depart from his host
It needs to come home, if not it will become a ghost.
The body welcomes the return of the spirit by feeling the taste of its
presence.
'Oho' feeling says, 'I would like to be with you
however strange your way might be
tell me where you go and what you see and I will show you all my
mystery.'
'No,' spirit says, 'if I reveal where I go you as well would fly and say
goodbye'
'So I will' feeling says and flies away.*

*The lonely spirit tries to cry but any impulse dies. Aghast he sets off
to commune and to find a common tender tune – with the feeling
for only when together are they revealing
the blue of a sky that will never die.*

In my understanding, Javanese culture contains a developed art of feeling. The Javanese learn to position themselves by feeling, to place it in and around their bodies and have it determine the time and their timing. Feeling is a means for communication which then does not need words to speak. It is a sense that nurtures our immediate insight. There is a natural uniting of what are still commonly treated as two distinct disciplines in our Western culture: the field of knowing and the field of sensing/feeling. Growth for the Javanese can happen whilst being in touch with our surroundings and context through the subtle and complex feeling sense and does not necessarily need reasoning. I myself sensed a dimension which touched my being. I felt no need to reject this – on the contrary, I got a sense of a potential in humans that was worth living for.

I am starting to feel that, as the mind touches body, the spirit touches soul.

Reconciliation:

When two things which have been apart can touch again or become friendly is a concept that recurs frequently in the field of reconciliation work. Any occurrence that releases an isolated or solidified item and reintegrates it into something wider may be seen as reconciliatory.

It feels deeply reconciling if the distance that was created out of fear or shame between ourselves and an object or an aspect, an energy, or a feeling, shrinks, so that the object's energy and feeling can touch us and be felt, be received and be transformed. We can perceive a widening of the space that we are in.

~ ~ ~

“Please practice Seeing:

from the shadow of the light into the light,

from the light of the shadow the light,

from the light of the light into the shadow.

Seeing the shadow in the shadow, the light in the light.”

From where do I look and see? Is there any location I am feeling?

“I give you practice,” Prapto says, and begins to move with me.

The gathering point up in my head relaxes, runs down the back as a relief, runs through the heart and pervades the diaphragm; my heels finally touch the ground. There is space to look from, there is space to look in – a vicious circle in my head has abandoned his hiding.

I am amazed.

The branches of the tree are building a gateway to the blue sky behind, which in turn comes down to me and touches my eyes – I am calming down. Light paves and organizes the confusion that had been in the shadow for so long.

Reconciliation:

I am not pointing to the content of ‘reconciliation’ but more to the very act, the mechanism of release when an ongoing struggle or effort ceases. Basically the struggle is embodied and inscribed in our being and our nervous system. This determines how we see and perceive ourselves in the world we are living in. The nature of reconciliation is that it touches an aspect of this struggle, scratches at its insularity or unties its bindings,

We might get a sense of the enemy. It might be real or unreal, seen or invisible, ancient or young, subjective or objective, existing or non-existing. We might also get a sense of relief. ‘Reconciliation’ can happen in many layers of our existence.

One Way to Describe How Prapto “gives practice”

What is the practice Prapto is giving and how does it connect to the themes of ‘critique,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘reconciliation?’ Here I offer one possible way of seeing it.

Based on the cultural value attached to communing by feeling, Prapto developed a form of art as a way to respond, by moving, by feeling-in-movement and, in this way, communicating with anyone and anything that would touch his field. The field of feeling connects all kind of phenomena. No fundamental distinction is made between the material and the immaterial, the human or non-human world. Anything, whether recognized or not, has the potential to resonate directly with and in our bodies through a vibrancy transported by the atmosphere, which can be seen as the substance through which feeling communicates itself.

The body that feels can not only track a single point of view but can capture a multidimensional picture of what is. It might recognize its participation in creating an atmosphere in cooperation with anything else which is there, seen and unseen. In Prapto's practice this complexity resonates in his body system and his movement moves all of this in the atmosphere. Because I am part of this atmosphere my body system can follow the subtle suggestions given by this moving frame and find new possibilities or new ways of organizing itself. This can be called 'transmission.'

From my point of view Prapto is sharing an attitude of 'critique.' He is responding by questioning whether what is shown is all that there is to that person. He perceives something of what does not want to be seen or be felt. No distinction is made whether what is hidden relates to our beauty, clarity, confusion or contraction, our dissociation, dispersion and fear. Anything has the potential to offer an anticipation of what the person might become, a discernment of what is moving or standing still and what might be caught in timelessness. This all together is what *positively* constitutes a person and one way through which our being expresses itself. Once this constitution is touched and *discovered* it becomes able to move.

Prapto's practice here is to find and provide *inter-independency*, meaning a relation that *relies* on but does not *lie* on and that can *stand* on its own, balancing and moving the tumbling as a dynamic in responsiveness. Balancing here becomes a stretch of personality; the *inter-independency* is supported by an attitude of non-identification and a curiosity towards life, seeking to support the *blossoming* of a person.

This relational attitude is critical without being identified with the content of what is formulated – Prapto's responses embody and carry a freedom of choice and a sense of offering possibilities and suggestions; his responses are a mirror and a tool containing truth without being *the* truth. He takes the risk of being wrong. His responses are contextual. They can vary with any new situation. They are built on knowledge and experience which increase with any response given and they follow a strong intuition.

Our way of being is not judged, but also it is not left as it is when Prapto withholds attention from those aspects that would keep our separateness in place – for example the effort, the questioning, the struggle, the identification or the fear associated with actually feeling. These strategies lose their power as their resonances dissolve without receiving feedback. This can trouble our system. Sometimes

experienced as a sudden effect it might be too strong, too quick and threatening. At other times the reason to sustain our habit becomes incomprehensible even to us. Often there is a wonder involved as the world looks different and our bodies feel different than they did before.

I am still in the process of understanding how to create the conditions for reconciliation to happen through my own movement and living practice. Conditions that will allow our beings to open into a path of participation, supported by an increasing embodied flexibility, responding to whatever is confronting us, leading to a life that might be less fearful and more free.

Body of Becoming – Forgotten Realities

A practice of detecting the happening

I open a window into my own practice:

This sharing takes place in a little studio called UTOPIA-unbedingt in Berlin. It is white and measures less than 45 square meters. It offers a safe frame for *Forgotten Realities* to appear. ‘Forgotten’ here does not necessarily refer to something we have known before. It refers to a ‘reality’ which speaks to us in the moment we touch it but which seemingly ceases to exist if we do not remember its – even unknown – presence from time to time.

There are a few people coming.

We begin without a task, without a suggestion, without warm up, without preparation. Maybe we talk about this and that.

Whatever happens, *I will not judge!* What a relief.

For a moment we are retrieving the absent-minded being into the body so we can rest there together – or not. When we come a little closer to ourselves, the space is not so densely filled.

The work is inclusive, which means people bring their backgrounds, their interest, their style, their emotions, their longing for the supernatural or for the ordinary. They bring thoughts and sorrows, their need to destroy or create. Everything is welcome. We work with what is there. It is what we embody, what can be read in our movements, what creates the characteristic of what is seen and felt. People may also bring what they do not embody. Even a self that once left is welcomed. We might find it somewhere flying, somewhere hidden; we try to enlarge the space of our possible attention so it could be included and could start to move with us. It might return when it is time.

I am still finding out how to attend to what is happening today and how to receive tiny signs in the movement of the movers, in between all of us, in the doing and non-doing, in my feeling and in what is touched. Still there are ways that I don't know.

There is a curiosity, how 'attention' influences the dimension and quality of the space that is opening for us to move within. If we also watch the space in between carefully, we wonder how it is alive and speaking.

The movers follow their paths, their needs, their impulses, receiving and attending in their own way. They respond. We all cannot help but respond. If we train ourselves to be awake to subtle influences, our responses can become conscious or chosen. We try to respond so that we still feel free.

We are carefully adjusting the degree of our activities, and perceiving changes in the density and luminosity of the space. That does not mean that we adapt to an overall atmosphere. We might be creating more layers of attention and memories and levels of feeling as we go.

The respect for, and sustainability of, the individual process that each person is developing provides the ground for the other processes to happen. The changing movements and atmospheres may build a background; sometimes also they are confronting. Their fields touch or interfere, forming the context for the next aspect to appear.

We are moving independently, practicing *inter-independency*, responding in nourishment, nourishing the responses. There is a freedom to be where and who we are. This can be inviting, or sometimes intense and hard to bear. It is a walk on a fine line, specific every time.

The sound of the instruments I am playing reflects the quality of dialogue happening between us. Whilst listening carefully, unheard sounds may appear.

I do not have to break down the complexity of the layers and levels that we are touching into a system that I know or control. This complexity is 'reconciling: here different layers in our being can touch and exist simultaneously, revealing a richness in life that we, for a few moments, can touch directly. Precisely here I feel I am 'becoming.'

There is no need to understand everything that we touch. No classification is needed yet – just random, soft-edged, felt recognition. When it is time we will know enough. In the resting point that our

verbal sharing provides for us, we sometimes find much consilience – much convergence – in our perceptions.

In and through the talk we crystallize the specific before we enter again.

“Find out how to enter this suggestion, find your way to deal with it, find what it means to you!”

Slowly our understanding increases. Sometimes we have to let all the layers drop away into the middle of our being; nothing is left in the space to rely on, no impulse to follow but the movement which in itself reveals. It is here that freedom finds a dimension which suspends our critical attitude for moments. It is a state of ‘oneness’ with ‘oneself’ which is ‘no other’ than ‘one’s body’ and no other than the world we perceive. The reference here is not distinction or reflection, which serve to find identity, but a state of ‘reconciliation’ expresses itself in which one ceases to question one’s own activity in the activity of life. It contains the freedom to ‘stay home’ whilst moving and provides a delicate state in which to trust the evolving liveliness as an ‘embodiment of the path of life.’

Conclusion

“Critique [..] is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be [..].”
(Foucault 1990, 42)

To engage with Foucault again at the end, I can say that this *work* has become an instrument to tune my question with my questioning, and to feel possibility in the rejection. It is a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be. Growing with our growing understanding and integrity this work becomes a means for reconciliation as an embodied discernment of the present moment’s complexity. This might critically shake our being and build a ground for the yet-unknown to blossom. It might offer the freedom to be as we are in a life that is as it is. If we can touch this, we may move together. This is its virtue.

~ ~ ~

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