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Divergent Embodiment: A Comparative Analysis of Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language and Tao  
Ye's Circular Movement Technique

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Yinqi Wang

Thesis Committee:  
Assistant Professor Lindsay Gilmour, Chair  
Assistant Professor Charlotte Griffin  
Professor S. Ama Wray

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# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract of the Thesis</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Historical Context of Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye</b>	<b>3</b>
Ohad Naharin	4
Tao Ye	8
<b>Circular Movement Technique and Gaga Language</b>	<b>12</b>
Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique:	13
Drawing Circles: Momentum and Release	13
The Art of Process	15
Case Study: Performance at Penghao Theater	16
Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language	19
Float	20
Trinity of Forces: Internal, External, and Involuntary	22
Case Study: Black Milk	26
<b>Comparison of Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique</b>	<b>29</b>
The Similarities	30
The Differences	32
Float vs Momentum	32
Snap vs Process	35
Multiplicity vs Simplicity	37
Imagination vs Rationality	39
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>42</b>

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# Abstract of the Thesis

Divergent Embodiment: A Comparative Analysis of Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language and Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique

by

Yinqi Wang

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Assistant Professor Lindsay Gilmour, Chair

This paper examines the divergent approaches to the movement research of two distinguished choreographers: Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye. Naharin developed Gaga Language in the 1990s, emphasizing the imaginative and sensational aspects of dance through imagery-based improvisation. In contrast, Tao Ye evolved his Circular Movement Technique around 2010, focusing on rational analysis of the body's physicality to explore the curvature of movements in relation to momentum and gravity. Despite their differing cultural backgrounds, both methodologies offer intriguing insights into the human body's potential. By analyzing their historical, methodological, and aesthetic perspectives, this paper aims to deconstruct the seeming dichotomy between various aspects of Gaga and Circular Movement Technique, interpreting and embracing the validity of both approaches. Between the sensual experience of Gaga and the rational examination of the Circular Movement Technique, the human body can experience both a zealous joy of the flesh and a transcendental totality from the coolness of the mind.

# Preface

Dance is both accidental and inevitable for me. Prior to my first encounter with dance in 2018, it never occurred to me as an option. As a teenager, I sought pleasure, ordeal, excitement, crisis, fantasy, and the meaning of life through anything other than dance: music, painting, philosophy, movies... The moment I started dancing was when I realized a sense of fear and weakness fabricated by the “art” that had engulfed me before: the fear of a direct gaze towards the corporeal, the humanly mundane; the weakness of admitting our insignificant existence. In response to these existential horrors, there emerged an abundant, inexpressible feeling of reality, as if molten irons crept into my lungs. This sudden revelation rendered life without dancing akin to shadows in the cave, un-salty salt, unworthy of living.

“We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.”<sup>1</sup> I fail to comprehend the metaphorical rhetoric of Friedrich Nietzsche. So, I take it literally.

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a Book for All and None*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

# Introduction

In the intricate world of contemporary dance, divergent approaches to movement research often yield profound insights into the human body's physical potential. This paper delves into the parallel paths of two renowned choreographers: Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye. In the 1990s, Israeli Choreographer Ohad Naharin developed Gaga Language, an imagery-based improvisation practice that emphasizes the sensational and imaginary experience of dance. Around 2010, Chinese choreographer Tao Ye evolved his Circular Movement Technique which utilizes one's rational<sup>2</sup> analysis of the physicality and anatomy of the body to exploit movement curvature in relation to momentum and gravity. These two movement research practices, despite originating from vastly different cultural and geographical contexts, share intriguing similarities and differences in their philosophies and practices. On the one hand, Naharin's Gaga Language invites dancers to traverse the boundless landscapes of their imagination, snapping into wild narratives through sensation. Contrastingly, Tao's Circular Movement Technique orchestrates a dance of gravity and momentum, sculpting arcs of precision and control in breathtaking synchronicity. By looking into both choreographers' research from historical, methodological, and aesthetic perspectives, this paper investigates their seemingly contradictory approaches by asking the following questions: How to imbue dancing with sensation and imagination? And what does it mean to move the body rationally?

The analysis of these two choreographers does not necessarily negate the existence of each other, or favor one over the other. The value of this comparison aims to deconstruct the seeming dichotomy between various aspects of Gaga and Circular Movement Technique, interpreting and embracing the validity of both research techniques. Between the sensual

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<sup>2</sup> Tao uses the Chinese word “理性” repeatedly in interviews, and rehearsals. The direct translation of the characters is rationality in English. The paper will further contextualize his usage of the word.



experience of Gaga and the rational examination of the Circular Movement Technique, the human body can experience both a zealous joy of the flesh and a transcendental totality from the coolness of the mind. The following chapters will begin with a historical contextualization of both choreographers' early life, dance training, and their initial choreography experience. Then an in-depth analysis of both Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique will be given to elucidate their perception of methodologies and movements. The paper will end with a detailed comparison between the two. This comparison moves beyond their physical practice and leads further into their aesthetic.

## Historical Context of Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye

In this historical portion, I will briefly recount Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye's early lives as dancers, their training experiences and influences, as well as the establishment of their dance companies. Before tapping into their movement research itself, the stark contrast between their tastes, personalities, life experiences, and aesthetic pursuits already collide and converse with each other. A sneak peek into each choreographer's unique perspectives can be stated as follows: on the one hand, Ohad Naharin searches for a complex and multi-layered experience that contains what he calls "Everything, everywhere, all at once."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Tao Ye attempts to minimize everything on stage until there is nothing to cut, leaving only dancers and movements.<sup>4</sup> The chapter begins with Naharin's life, training, and choreography. Then Tao will be introduced exploring his childhood experiences as a young dancer, early training, and founding of his company. Through this historical recount, we can start to observe how their

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<sup>3</sup> Billy Barry, *Gaga Summer Intensive*, Wang Yinqi, June 2 - 7, 2023, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Wu, Dan. "Wudao keneng chengshou zhi zhong 舞蹈可能承受之重 [The weight the dance might bear]." *第一财经日报*. August 15, 2013.

shared experience in the military and other training experiences influenced their later research as choreographers.

## Ohad Naharin

Born in 1952, in Mizra, Israel, Ohad Nahar's whole life is tightly interwoven with dance. In the documentary *Mr. Gaga*, he reflected that "the idea of physical pleasure from physical activity was totally part of how I conceived myself as being alive."<sup>5</sup> The pleasure of dancing and a close relationship with nature and movement lives in Ohad Naharin's early memory. Starting at the age of five, Naharin spent his early childhood in a Kibbutz, a form of agricultural community where residents live and work together. The pastoral life, with the animals, plants, and playing in the fields, left an unforgettable mark on him. He described his departure from Kibbutz as "being torn from [his] siamese twin."<sup>6</sup> Music also consistently existed in the family. Naharin's mother, Tzofia Naharin, depicts how they made music by banging rhythms on tables, on the stairs, and with spoons on pots. She also taught the young Ohad music, dance, and composition, and the Feldenkrais Method, a movement practice developed by Noa Eshkol and Moshe Feldenkrais<sup>7</sup> to "rediscover [one's] innate capacity for graceful efficient movement".<sup>8</sup> Though he grew up without any standard dance training, his passion and understanding of movement emerged very early in his life. To become a dancer or choreographer never appeared to Naharin as necessary. As he recounted, he was always the dancer in the family, class, and in school.<sup>9</sup> Dancing was a way of life for him. He was always singing, dancing, and making up dances<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Tomer, Heymann et al.. *Mr. Gaga: A True Story of Love and Dance*. (2016 Icarus Films Home Video).

<sup>6</sup> *Mr. gaga*. 00:06:40.

<sup>7</sup> Galili, Deborah Friedes. "Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century." *Dance Chronicle* 38, no. 3 (2015), 366.

<sup>8</sup> "Feldenkrais Method" Feldenkrais Method, <https://feldenkrais.com/about-the-feldenkrais-method/>

<sup>9</sup> *Mr. gaga*. 00:04:15.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah, 362.

In 1970, due to his ankle injury, Naharin was unable to be a soldier on the field during his military service. Instead, he joined the entertainment group in the military. Though growing up without any standard dance training, his passion and understanding of movement began to emerge. He sang, danced, and choreographed for the troop and soldiers<sup>11</sup>. This military experience not only provided Naharin with performance experience, but it also led him to glimpse the ferocious war and the human condition. He tells the story in *Mr. Gaga* about “singing bad songs to traumatized soldiers” during the Yom Kippur War. “We had one show where I remember I really wished I could disappear. They were kinda forced to sit in this place with us and we’re forced to perform for them.”<sup>12</sup> Though Naharin does not state straightforwardly about his works and his military experience, glimpses of reference to war and a sense of brutality can often be perceived in his work<sup>13</sup>.

After his military service, Naharin joined the Batsheva company in 1974. His formal dance career began with this apprenticeship at Batsheva which shortly after granted him the opportunity to study in New York at the Graham School because of his phenomenal performance in Martha Graham’s *Jacob’s Dream* in 1974, Israel. In New York Naharin also studied with Kazuko Hirabayas and the Limón technique at Juilliard. At the School of American Ballet, he studied with Richard Rapp and Stanley Williams.<sup>14</sup> This further education in dance paved the way for him to be a professional dancer in Israel’s Bat-Dor dance company and Marice Béjart in Brussels. Among the rich experience with different choreographers, Naharin was amazed by Gina Buntz’s artful combination of flowing movements with disjointed moments. He described

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah, 362.

<sup>12</sup> *Mr. Gaga*. 00:09:50.

<sup>13</sup> The usage of machine gun in *Last Work*, Male dancers stomps together with virtuosic movements, resonating with Greek War Dance in *Sadeh 21*.

<sup>14</sup> Deborah, 362.

her as “the most influential choreographer [he has] ever worked with,” and who set him free from Graham and Béjart<sup>15</sup>.

In his interview with dance scholar Deborah Galili, Naharin further recognized the many influences he received during his time in New York. “He acknowledged... the elegance ever-present in ballet, the sense of weight that characterizes Limón, and the emphasis on moving from the pelvis along with texture, stretch, and passion prevalent in Graham technique.”<sup>16</sup> He also notes how his collaboration with David Gordan and Billy Siegenfeld taught him the spatial dimension, retention, and showmanship.<sup>17</sup>

Receiving much inspiration from different choreographers, Ohad Naharin’s research began long before the term “Gaga” was pinned down to his unique style. During the early 1980s, Naharin already began sharing his movement research with his pick-up troupe in New York. He incorporated his research into classes and rehearsals. It facilitated “[his] need to communicate to dancers as a choreographer and, [and] to help dancers to better their interpretation of [his] work.”<sup>18</sup> This movement investigation in relation to his choreography was also deepened when Naharin received his tenure at Batsheva in the 90s. Besides the Graham and ballet techniques, “Naharin added his own weekly class—simply referred to as ‘class of Ohad’.”<sup>19</sup> It was not until 2003 that the name “Gaga” replaced this unofficial reference. Naharin considered this name as an act of dissociating the practice from his name: “I really was tired of calling it my ‘movement language.’... Then it didn’t take long somehow to come [up] with Gaga.”<sup>20</sup> For him, Gaga

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah, 363.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Deborah, 364.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Deborah, 365

represents the ability to laugh at oneself. It relates to the sound of a baby talking as well as a sense of lightness with laughing.<sup>21</sup>

With more than 30 years of working with the Batsheva Dance Company and dancers, Ohad Naharin keeps his movement research and Gaga language alive. Gaga isn't a codified technique but a sense of "discovery and going beyond [dancers'] familiar limits on a daily basis."<sup>22</sup> With the aid of Gaga, "a bottomless treasure chest" as critic Gia Kourlas put it, Naharin's works are infused with rapid switches of textures and multi-layered narratives, attacking audiences with "ingratiating directness"<sup>23</sup> or luring them with "mysteriously compelling episodes."<sup>24</sup> Creating more than 35 works during his tenure as the artistic director of the Batsheva, Naharin now is the house choreographer of the company and still making new works.

The chapter above shows Naharin's close relationship to dance, stemming from an early pleasure in movement and a childhood spent on a Kibbutz. Joining the Batsheva company in 1974 after his service in the military entertainment group, Naharin embarked on his formal dance career, honing his skills through training in New York and collaborations with various choreographers. Later, with his research into body and movement, Gaga emerged as a sense of discovery and pushing dancers beyond their limits. Throughout his tenure at the Batsheva Dance Company, Naharin's exploration of movement and Gaga language has remained central.

The next chapter introduces Tao Ye's early life, training experience, and the founding of his own dance company. It is intriguing to perceive the similar military experience, and their

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<sup>21</sup> Deborah, 366

<sup>22</sup> Sara Porath, "Gaga -- Interview with Ohad Naharin on, Arts in the City," YouTube Video, 4:10, Mar 13 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4U3FnDjFo8>

<sup>23</sup> Seibert, Brain. "Review: Ohad Naharin is More Than the Sum of His Imitators." The New York Times. March 2, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/arts/dance/review-ohad-naharin-hora-batsheva.html>

<sup>24</sup> Howard, Rachel. "Ohad Naharin in San Francisco." The Hudson Review. Spring 2015. <https://hudsonreview.com/2015/05/ohad-naharin-in-san-francisco-2/>

different training process: Naharin's late introduction to the formal dance training vs Tao's dogmatic training early on in his childhood.

## Tao Ye

Born in Chongqing, Tao Ye started his training in dance at the age of 12. When he was still a teenager, he showed extreme flexibility in his back bend following a Yoga posture on TV, which was seen by his grandmother who later was determined to send Tao Ye to a dance academy. As one of the six male dancers at the school, his teachers and classmates were all astonished by his flexibility and called him “noodle boy<sup>25</sup>.” Though gifted with flexibility, Tao Ye was barely happy at that time. “I was a problematic kid back then, and I barely talked<sup>26</sup>.” After 4 years of professional training, he was admitted to the Beijing Dance Academy. However, the high registration fee blocked him from enrolling. Instead of paying for the school, Tao Ye, then, decided to join the Shanghai Military Dance Troupe<sup>27</sup>, where he was required to train in different dance styles, including Chinese minority and folk dance, tap dance, and jazz.

The encounter with modern dance came later in Tao's training. During one of the workshops held by a veteran, Tao Ye first experienced modern dance. Unlike the more stylized dance in the military which emphasizes the external performative quality, the more internally-focused modern dance helped Tao find intimacy and connection to his own body. Through the veteran's connection to Jin Xing, one of the pioneers in Chinese modern dance, Tao Ye decided to quit the troupe and join Jin Xing's company. Years later, he could still recall the unforgettable impression of seeing Jin Xing Dance Company's studio space for the first time. He

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<sup>25</sup> Wu, Dan. “Wudao keneng chengshou zhi zhong 舞蹈可能承受之重 [The weight the dance might bear].” 第一财经日报. August 15, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

describes: “White Marley stretched smoothly on the ground reflecting the sunlight from dormers”. In Jin Xing’s studio, instead of kicking or stretching their legs, all the dancers lay on the floor and tried to find their breathing rhythm and awareness of their bodies<sup>28</sup> to start the rehearsal. In Jin Xing’s dance company, Tao Ye started to systematically study modern dance. The company classes were taught by choreographers around the world. Jin Xing also encouraged the dancers to watch performances while they toured in Europe. Tao Ye, therefore, was exposed to different styles and techniques. As if a sponge submerged in the water, he came to the studio the earliest and stayed until the last. There he also met his future wife and cofounder of their company, Duan Ni. Tao’s residence at Jin Xing Dance Company became his initial moment to emotionally connect with dance instead of mechanically repeating what had been taught to him during his training. The former problematic young dancer who never spoke a word now found an internal drive to question and answer himself, and to further find his way.

In 2008, Tao Ye founded his dance company with Duan Ni and Wang Hao. The initial stage of the company was excruciatingly difficult. When Tao Ye and Duan Ni established the company, they only had 3 thousand yuan (about 400 USD) in savings. Without a regular rehearsal space in the city, they had to borrow from their friends. As long as it was an empty space, they would even dance on the cement floor. While living in Beijing, the only place they could afford was a gym in Zhuozhou, Hebei province. Though the rent was only 5 yuan a day, the commute took 6 hours. “A lot of people think that they need to have a studio and some money to choreograph works. But Tao Ye doesn’t think that way,” Duan Ni recalls, “we didn’t have the money for the next meal, but we knew we had rehearsal tomorrow.”<sup>29</sup> Tao Ye’s unshakable commitment to making work became a strong pillar for the company. In 2009, they

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Wu, [The weight]

spent a whole year gathering movement materials. Tao remembers, “Every day I walked into the rehearsal room, creating new movements is my only thought. After two months, I found myself purified in this process.”<sup>30</sup> The repetitive life cleansed the fear and hesitation in his mind. He found peace and determination through the rehearsal process. He also realized that the meaning of dance did not need to be intentionally given or stimulated by something other than the human body. The process of moving itself already contains a profound theme that is unique to dance as an art form. Thus, unfolding the processes of movement became Tao Ye’s research.

Because of his pioneering approach to movement in China at the time, Tao’s work met certain frustrations and had little audience. Nonetheless, the company had more opportunities on the international stage in the 2010s, including performances at the American Dance Festival, Lincoln Centre, and Sydney Opera House. In 2011, the company acquired its own space in Beijing. Up till now, Tao has created 11 works. From *2* to *12*, all are named in digital numbers. The number of the work represents the number of dancers on stage. This correlation between titles and dancers reveals Tao Ye’s minimalistic approach to dance. He aims to minimize any other elements until there’s nothing else to cut. Lightning, costume, music, staging, props, etc. are all reduced to the degree that bodies and movements become the absolute focal point on stage. What matters to him are the dancers, and this is the reason why he titled the piece based on the number of dancers on stage.

Tao Ye’s inclination towards a solid and physical movement practice with the guidance of reason can be detected in his early days of training. Two of Tao’s aversions in his early dance training were the codified movement shape and the dramatic emotional expressions. In terms of the former approach, Tao reflected that “My ballet teacher was taught in Chinese martial arts. He

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<sup>30</sup> Li, Changwei. “Shenti jiuxiang wanhuatong, ni yao zai nage cengmian dakai ta? 身体就像万花筒, 你要在哪个层面打开它? [Body is a kaleidoscope. From which dimension will you open it]” *Nanfang Metropolis Daily*.



used the same method to train us in ballet by putting a needle below our gesture leg to keep it in the air<sup>31</sup>.” What matters was not the external rotating process from the hip joint to the toes, but the appearance of straight and high legs. Dance was taught and appreciated not as an art form that connected oneself with the body, but as a form-driven practice dictated mainly by its visual appeal. When Tao entered the Shanghai Military Dance Troupe, dancers and their movements still became either “a symbol of authority” or “a tool for entertainment and propagandistic services.”<sup>32</sup> Movements and performances were rigid and conventional translations of political ideologies.

Other than the dogmatic training that focuses only on form, deliberate emotional expression is another disinclination for Tao. When he was a young student performing Chinese minority folk dance on stage, Tao Ye was reluctant to smile as an expression of children’s naivety and joy. He joked that his smile was even uglier than his cry.<sup>33</sup> Tao’s dislike of emotional expression can also be perceived when he recalls his first viewing of a dance theater performance in Germany. The 3-hour-long performance shocked him.

It was a collage of music, dance installations, videos, etc. More than 30 people were on the stage, and they spoke three different languages, English, German, and Indian... A couple was having real sexual intercourse against the bar, while the whole stage started to rain and blow winds. It was a space of infinite possibilities, a huge stimulation of various senses<sup>34</sup>.

Tao believed the intense emotional expression in dance theater had already achieved its apex, particularly in the Western dance world. He was exhausted by the repetitive focus on religion, politics, and sex.<sup>35</sup> Intending to find his own way, Tao consciously eliminated emotional

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<sup>31</sup>Wan, Jiahuan. “Tao Ye: Zuihou wo biancheng yige hen gudu de ren 陶冶:最后我变成了一个很孤独的人 [Tao Ye: I become a lonely person at last].” China Newsweek. August 26, 2013.

<sup>32</sup>Zhao, zhao. “Tao Ye wudao shi wo de biaoqing 陶冶 舞蹈是我的表情[Tao Ye dance is my expression].” Men’s Uno.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>A Gai. “Tao Ye: Yinwei wukemingzhuang, suoyi shouwuzudao 因为无以名状, 所以手舞足蹈 [We dance, because of the indescribable]” 象外. August 11, 2021.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

elements and narrative from his works. Embracing physicality over prescribed forms, Tao's aversion to overt emotional expression led him to an exploration of "movement for movement's sake." Disenchanted by the sensational design of the Western dance theater, Tao discarded the narrative and emotional baggage, focusing on the purity of movement itself.

In conclusion, by looking into Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye's lives as dancers and choreographers, we can start to observe how their shared experience in the military and different training experiences influenced their later research as choreographers. Naharin's childhood experience in a Kibbutz and formal training in New York led him to develop the innovative Gaga Language, characterized by its emphasis on sensation and improvisation. Tao, on the other hand, transitioned from rigid military dance training to modern dance in his early twenties, founding Tao Dance Theater with his wife despite financial constraints. Their choreographic styles—Naharin's multi-layered narratives and Tao's minimalist focus on the body—showcase the diverse possibilities within contemporary dance.

## Circular Movement Technique and Gaga Language

After the brief historical recount of both choreographers, the chapter below dives further into their movement research. Starting with an overall exploration of Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique, I will elaborate on both its mechanism and artistic values. Then a short analysis of Tao's movement phrase will be given to illuminate his concepts and aesthetics. Then I will focus on Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language through the concept of float and the trinity of forces.

## Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique:

Tao Ye's Circular movement technique, following the notion of "movement for movement's sake," encapsulates the most nuanced process of moving and engages the audience through continuous internal sensing of the body. The following section will first present the general principles of Tao's technique with a straightforward example: the *drawing circle* exercise. Next, the aesthetics of Tao Ye's circular movement technique, and the importance of process, will be further discussed through a movement phrase performed by him and Duan Ni at Penghao Theater.

### Drawing Circles: Momentum and Release

Though the name of the technique indicates movements in round shapes, the circular movement technique does not simply mean drawing circles with the body. The term "circular" refers to any movements with curved trajectories, and the circle is only one of the curved lines created naturally by rotating the limbs around their joints. By bending, twisting, spiraling, rotating, and releasing different parts of the body, curvatures can be naturally produced. Over a decade, more than a hundred movement combinations have been developed by Tao Ye and Duan Ni to help the dancers adapt to this style<sup>36</sup>. Yang Meiqi, Duan Ni's mentor at Guangdong Modern Dance Company, has summarized the three main contributions of Tao Ye and Duan Ni's movement research: 1. The gain and loss of **central gravity**. 2. The gravitational **momentum** in the fall and recovery, 3. The pulling process within the joints and muscle<sup>37</sup>. These attributes of

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<sup>36</sup> Tao, Ye. Huang, Li. "Wujin de eryuan duihua 无尽的二元对话 [The endless dual communication]." November 28, 2021.

<sup>37</sup>Yang, Meiqi "Disandai xiandaiwu yishujia de jueqi — yi Zhao Liang, Gao Yanjinzi, Tao Ye, Duan Ni de chuanguo weili kan xiandai yishujia de duli yu zhen cheng 第三代现代舞艺术家的崛起 — 以赵梁、高艳津子、陶冶、段妮的创作为例看现代艺术家的独立与真诚 [The rise of the third generation of the modern dance artists — The independence and sincerity of the modern artists, Taking Zhao Liang, Gao Yanjinzi, Tao Ye, Duan Ni as examples]." 31.

Tao's contributions are tightly linked to one another: **The loss of the central gravity** creates the falling and momentum. When the **falling** body hits the floor, it uses the rebound from the ground to **recover** its central gravity. In order to execute this recovery process, the dancer needs to skillfully transform the falling momentum into an upward pulling force with careful **articulation of the muscular process with supple and loose joints**. For the dancer to maximize the momentum from the fall, the rest of the body needs to be released. Any unnecessary tension held at the distal end hinders the redirection of momentum and flow of the movements. In Tao's circular movement practice, the fall and recovery technique and release technique complement each other and further amplify the beauty and dynamism.

The constant shift of the bodyweight destabilizes the dancer's central gravity all the time. The rapid turns and flips topple the dancer's sense of directionality and set a high bar on their spatial awareness. One of the training exercises Tao Ye invented to train his dancers is the "*drawing circles* (生笔画圆)."<sup>38</sup> This exercise combines two of the focuses of Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique: the spatial awareness of the body, and the shifting of dancers' central gravity. In this exercise, the dancer is required to imagine 3 to 5 penpoints growing out from specific parts of his body ( i.e. the back of the ear, the inner right knee, and the tip of the ring finger). The goal is to simultaneously draw curved lines with these imaginative nibs in the air. "If we take the body as a canvas and each body part as penpoints, we can also paint in space and time."<sup>39</sup> Each nib moves independently as if forming its own drawing. Collectively, they create unpredictable trajectories and curvatures of the body. Because the curved lines travel through

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<sup>38</sup> Tao, Ye. Huang, Li. "*Wo yong wudao duikang rensheng zui zhongji de yizhong kongju* 我用舞蹈对抗人生最终极的一种恐惧 [*Dance as a tool to fight against the final fear in life.*]" 哔哩哔哩bilibili, 2018.

[https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1sp411d7VZ?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1sp411d7VZ?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click).

<sup>39</sup>Tao, Ye. *Shine Hills* | Tao Ye. 陶身体剧场. Accessed April 2, 2022.

[http://www.taodancetheater.com/Archives/IndexArchives/index/a\\_id/385.html](http://www.taodancetheater.com/Archives/IndexArchives/index/a_id/385.html).

different spatial planes<sup>40</sup>, connecting them or breaking these boundaries, the dancer's spatial awareness is sharpened in this process. Moreover, this activity keeps challenging the central gravity of the dancer by pulling his weight away from the center. The push and pull created by each body point keep destabilizing the verticality of the dancer's body. The dancer, thus, needs to dare to give up their center of gravity and grab it again. The *drawing circle* exercise, as one of the practice routines for the dancers, helps the understanding of Tao Ye's dance as a much more physical approach with little stir of emotions. Unlike Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language which stimulates physical sensation through imagery and imagination, Tao's exercise minimizes any affectation both in terms of the movements and dancer's emotions. It is based on the body's very material relation to the world: dancers' spatial awareness outward, and their control of the central gravity inward.

## The Art of Process

When the finely tuned spatial awareness and the dynamic shifts of the central gravity are combined in Tao Ye's logically choreographed movement phrases, the aesthetics of the circular movement technique will be revealed. The technique itself becomes *an art of process*. "[Good movement] texture can surface through a delicate process or honing."<sup>41</sup> In the documentary *Tao. The Body*, Duan Ni describes the importance of process in works of Tao Dance Theater. The movement finds its artistic expressiveness through its meticulous manifestation of the body and its physical properties. Taking one of Tao Ye's early phrases as an example, the floor combination performed at the Penghao theater contains the aforementioned crucial elements of

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<sup>40</sup> Tao separates space with 7 different planes. These planes include the traditionally used perpendicular planes: 1. horizontal, 2. vertical, 3. sagittal. And the other four planes are the slopes cutting through 4. from the front top to the bottom back, 5. from the back top to the bottom front, 6. from right side top to bottom left, 7. from left side top to bottom right.

<sup>41</sup>Tao, Ye. Duan, Ni. TAO Dance Theater Documentary. YouTube, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hQMZHKWh1E>. 3:13

the circular movement technique:<sup>42</sup> The performers (Tao Ye and Duan Ni) continuously turn on the floor with different parts of the body. The directionality of the movements is pointed with spatial clarity. By sweeping the limbs or pushing off the floor, momentum is generated to carry their bodies across the space. Each dance move is seamlessly connected. The end of one movement creates the momentum for the next one to begin. The beauty of the phrase cannot be pinpointed at a moment of climax. The density of the movements and the ongoing process of falling and recovery as a whole demonstrate the aesthetic of the circular movement technique: It is a **craft of process**.

### Case Study: Performance at Penghao Theater

The intensity of Tao's movement phrase is high with constant weight change and seamless shift of directions. The analysis below shows some potential ways to appreciate Tao's movement by emphasizing its ride of momentum and shift of central gravity. I will zoom into one segment of this phrase to demonstrate my reading of it.

One of the segments of the phrase is particularly dense and involves dynamic changes in their central gravity. From 1:06 to 1:13, Duan Ni and Tao Ye turn four times with different parts of their bodies: Leading with the left hand, the first turn is on the right side of the waist (Figure 4)<sup>43</sup>. Their left legs sweep swiftly on the horizontal plane and spin in a full circle. Their upper bodies fall to the ground accordingly. The legs create momentum for them. And they quickly respond to it with a rapid tuck of the abdominal and pelvic areas. After the first turn, Duan and Tao release the contracted core area and initiate the second turn with the right arm<sup>44</sup>. This turn is

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<sup>42</sup>Tao, Ye. Duan, Ni. *TAO Dance Theater* 陶身体剧场. YouTube, 2010.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-ehADI9KwQ>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 1:08.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 1:09.

a transitional movement between the first and the third turn. By bending the legs and supporting with their hands, they sit up, recovering from the first turn, and prepare for the third turn.

The third turn on the left foot is the most dynamic one because the core area is lifted from the floor to the air. Thus, by pushing off the floor with two hands and sweeping the upper body quickly to the right (Figure 5)<sup>45</sup>, more energy is imbued to generate enough momentum. When the dancer raises the core in the air, the left foot has to be forced to a sickled shape<sup>46</sup> (蒯脚). The challenge of this third turn is that the dancer has to spin on the foot with this awkward shape. To achieve that, they have to contract the core and throw their upper body to the right side to reduce the pressure on the left foot. After overcoming this dynamic moment, the third turn is finished with the lead of the right toe, and the core is released to the floor again. In the fourth turn, the dancer further lifts the core by releasing the upper body to the floor. The turn is executed on the right side of the shoulder. The momentum is gained partially through the sweeping left leg and partially through the fall of the upper body. After slowly releasing the core back to the ground, these four continuous turns end, and the phrase eases into a relatively slower part.

These four turns demonstrate the visual impact of Tao's choreography when he puts the process at the center of his ideal. Within 7 seconds, four turns are closely connected one after another, and the momentum passes quickly through different body parts. For the sake of analysis, I separate this segment of the phrase into four parts based on the turns. But in actuality, the movement happens so fast that neither can the audience distinguish them at first glance, nor does the dancer have time to think about the movements in parts and execute them distinctively. Movements are weaved together in a continuous process. The aesthetic of the circular movement technique is precisely the process itself. The seamless transitions of momentums, the passing of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 1:10.

<sup>46</sup> A particular shape of foot, appearing a lot in Chinese minority or classical dance. The palm of the foot rotates inward, and the outer side of the foot supports the weight of the body.

the movements through each joint and muscle, all these details are exclusively highlighted in every moment of their dance. By focusing on the uniqueness of each process, the movement phrase becomes so dense that it creates a continuous flow of energy. Unlike Naharin's works that engage audiences with drastic contrasts between low and high points, Tao's movements sustain a sense of climax from the beginning to the end.

The importance of process entered early in Tao's choreographic aesthetics. During his interview with *Nanfang Metropolis Daily*, Tao reflected upon his experience in making the work 2: "Every day when I walked into the rehearsal studio, the only thought I had was to make phrases... Two months later, I was cleansed up by this simple and repetitive life. I began to understand what the process is. And I realize that the process is the meaning of my work."<sup>47</sup> Just as the postmodernists claim "movement for movement's sake," Tao Ye's response to this tautological claim is that the movement is the process. The meaning of the dance does not need to be justified with an outside inspiration. The movement itself and how dancers approach it already have tremendous profundity.

By focusing on the process, Tao differentiates himself uniquely among other choreographers. For instance, movements can express emotions such as in the works of Pina Bausch; memetic forms such as swan arms in ballet; or to convey communicative or cultural values, like social or ritual dance, etc. Nevertheless, when dance stops associating outward or puts itself under servitude for external purposes, movements begin to focus internally on their own existence in space and time. How do they unfold in space and time? How are forces transmitted through our muscular and skeleton structures? By emerging into the details of

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<sup>47</sup>Li, Changwei. "Shenti jiuxiang wanhuatong, ni yao zai nage cengmian dakai ta? 身体就像万花筒, 你要在哪个层面打开它? [Body is a kaleidoscope. From which dimension will you open it]" *Nanfang Metropolis Daily*.



moving and conversing internally with the body, the process of moving is simultaneously the means and the end. Movements, therefore, become pure and intense in each transitory existence.

In this chapter, we discussed the curvature form of Tao's Circular Movement Technique, its utilization of momentum and release, and its particular focus on the transition and movement process. By breaking down a segment of Tao's movement phrase, we further discovered the logical design of his movement transitions and how this flow leads audiences to a consistent climatic experience. His reliance on the physicality of the body and attention to the movement process bestows meaning in the movement itself, affirming the concept of "movement for movement's sake." In contrast to Tao's focused study on the physical side of the body, the later chapter shows how Naharin's Gaga Language expands from the purely physical side of the body, opening up to a holistic experience of sensations and imagination.

## Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language

Gaga is an imagery-based improvisation that utilizes sensation and imagination to stimulate new movement patterns and encourage dancers to go beyond their physical limits. The "Gaga Introduction Sheet" offered at Suzanne Dellal Center, Tel Aviv shared a brief description of Gaga as "a new way for learning and strengthening [the] body, adding flexibility, stamina and agility while lightening the senses and imagination."<sup>48</sup> Many Gaga classes offered across the world not only offer the toolbox for professional dancers to expand their physical potential but the Gaga classes are also opened to the general public in the form of Gaga/people. Many concepts and principles in Gaga/people and Gaga/dancer are shared interchangeably. The scope of this paper will focus on the Gaga/dancer.

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<sup>48</sup> Galili, Deborah Friedes. "Going Gaga: My Intro to Gaga Dance Classes." Dance in Israel, November 25, 2008. <https://www.danceinIsrael.com/2008/11/going-gaga-my-intro-to-gaga-dance/>

As mentioned earlier, naming Gaga as a language instead of a technique reveals the ever-growing nature of Naharin's movement research. Each Gaga class facilitates a laboratory place for the participants to “go beyond [their] familiar limits on a daily basis.”<sup>49</sup> In the past thirty years of development, many concepts and terminologies have been created distinctively in Gaga as verbal cues or shortcuts to access different movements (e.g. “tama” refers to the ball movement availability in the joints) and body parts (e.g. “pika” refers to the space between the anus and genital area). The discoveries of these shortcuts do not necessarily canonize Gaga into codified forms. Oftentimes, new ideas arise replacing the old ones. Similar ideas can also be further explored with new imaginings. Because of this, Gaga is ever-changing and kept alive.

Based on dance scholar Deborah Galili and Einav Katan’s research as well as my experience at Gaga winter and summer intensives in New York, this chapter introduces Gaga from its basic concepts to its aesthetic significance. Among many facets of practices in Gaga, the following paragraphs break it down from two perspectives: 1. The concept of float, 2. The trinity of forces and other movement qualities. Following the breakdown of Naharin’s Gaga Language is an analysis of his work “Black Milk.” The selection of these two concepts and the choreography showcases the stark contrasts with Tao Ye’s Circular Movement Technique.

## Float

In the past three intensives I’ve attended in New York City, float was usually introduced as the first concept during the method class. It is considered as the default setting of the body while practicing Gaga. In *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin’s Movement Research*, dance scholar Einav Katan also puts float as a cornerstone, “Perhaps more than other

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<sup>49</sup> Sara Porath “Gaga – Interview with Ohad Naharin on ‘Arts in the City’.”

instructions, for Gaga trainers the instruction of a float became fundamental.”<sup>50</sup> Float is defined in relation to gravity. Different from Tao Ye’s Circular Movement Technique, which consistently amplifies the gravitational pull through the relaxation of the muscles, float is an intricate negation of gravity on a molecular level. By gently activating the flesh<sup>51</sup> to carry the skeletal structure of the body, dancers create a sensation of floating in the water. As the foundation in Gaga, float motivates the dancers to constantly sense the body as a whole. Because of the ever-present experience of gravity pulling the dancers downward, float enlivens the body with the virtue of lightness (described by the term gina).<sup>52</sup>

What contrasts with float is the concept of “dead flesh.” It is a position in which the dancers stop sensing the body actively but simply give in to gravity. At the Gaga Winter Intensive in New York, 2024, the instructor, Kyle Scheurich <sup>53</sup>, asked the dancers to drop all of the body parts towards the floor and feel the heaviness of it. This position immediately evoked a sense of numbness and immobility. In order to cancel this feeling, Kyle started to guide the dancers to simply raise the corners of their mouths, to “fake a smile.” Though the instruction was physical (elevating the corners of the mouth by activating the muscles on the cheek), the feeling of joy and lightness occurred because of how humans naturally associate this facial movement with pleasure and a sense of lightness in contrast to the heavy pull of gravity. The smile on the face reveals how little energy is needed to activate float. Though some Gaga exercises push the dancers to seek great efforts, the status of float, as a home base, reaffirms the sensitivity, pleasure, and lightness of dance. Dance can be something as easy and joyful as a smile.

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<sup>50</sup> Katan, Einav. *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin’s Movement Research* (Palgrave Macmillan; 2016), 45.

<sup>51</sup> In Gaga, flesh can often be understood interchangeably with muscles.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah, 371.

<sup>53</sup> Kyle Scheurich, Gaga Winter Intensive, Wang Yinqi, Jan 2 - 7, 2024, New York.

If the exercise of “dead flesh” helps the dancers to understand float from its opposite perspective, another concept, the idea of horizontal forces, directly expands the scope and experience of float. During the same method class, Kyle guided dancers through a series of activities to redirect the gravitational pull from a vertical plane to a horizontal plane. The exercise began by simply raising the arms above the head and dropping them down to the side of the body following the speed of gravity. Then he suggested an image of how water drops and expands itself on the floor. In a similar sense, the arms, rising above the head, can also drop to the horizontal plane around the dancers instead of cascading downward towards the floor. By using imagination, dancers redirect gravity from the vertical to the horizontal plane. When this idea is applied on a molecular level with all body parts, dancers will be in a state of microscopic dropping and spreading of the body, as if floating in liquid, constantly fed by the buoyancy of water. Connecting with this image of water, float exemplifies the mutual exchange between imagination and sensation in Gaga. Dancers imagine the redirection of gravitational pull to create a sensation of floating. This feeling of floating on the water, in response, further enhances the imagery of spreading horizontally.

### Trinity of Forces: Internal, External, and Involuntary

Float, as a default setting of the body, underlies many practices in Gaga. The trinity of forces, likewise, is also a foundational concept. During an interview between Ohad Naharin and former Batsheva dancer Shamel Pitts, Naharin introduces the trinity of forces: the internal forces, external forces, and the involuntary forces inside of us.<sup>54</sup> The internal force is the movements of one’s own will. They are movements consciously decided and executed by the dancers. The

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<sup>54</sup>TRIBE - Multidisciplinary Visual “Ohad Naharin in conversation with Shamel Pitts – Totality of TRIBE - Virtual Benefit (Dec. 2021)” YouTube Video, 3:41, December 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD85HUmjPIk>

internal force is a familiar way of dancing for most of the dancers. The second force is the external ones. The movements are carried out with the imagination of an outside force like a puppet controlled by invisible strings. The third force is involuntary energies coming from the inside of the body. An example of this force type can be a hiccup. It's an internal force that originated from ourselves yet is beyond our control. The understanding of these three forces may appear to be obvious. Yet it takes practice and research to tease out differences. "To understand what I said means nothing if you don't dance," Ohad later said in the same interview.<sup>55</sup> In the following paragraphs, examples and my personal experience will be offered to further elaborate the functionality and the dynamic relationships among these three forces.

As stated in the definitions above, the internal force, or the force of one's own will, is a straightforward approach to movements. Most dance movements are created because of dancers' active command of their bodies. The external forces, on the other hand, occur when dancers yield their movements to an outside force. The same movement, grand battement to the front for instance, can either be executed with internal forces, in which the abdominal muscles, hip flexors, and quadriceps are actively engaged; Or it can be carried out with an imaginary wind blowing from below, taking the leg high in the air.

Batsheva dancer Billy Barry shared the imagery of a hanging bed sheet to elaborate on this idea.<sup>56</sup> In this exercise, the dancers imagine their bodies turned into bed sheets hanging on the strings. They sway very gently in response to the wind blowing across the room. This image can evolve in different scenarios: this "bed sheet body" can either be very wet and heavy, a bit reluctant to follow the wind; Or it can be fresh and dry with very strong wind blowing across. The movements, reacting accordingly to different situations, can either be very subtle and refined

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 3:40.

<sup>56</sup> Billy Barry, Gaga Summer Intensive, Wang Yinqi, June 13 - 18, 2023, New York.

or explosive and chaotic. Nevertheless, the same sense of surrendering can be perceived in both scenarios because of the external forces as the source of the movement. Dancers apply external forces especially when they perform movements with great effort. It helps release unnecessary tension. In fact, the external forces create a sense of relinquishment that guides dancers to yield to efforts instead of fighting against them. During a moment that requires a high volume of intensity, dancers are encouraged to insist on letting-go of the body and embrace the chaos or efficiency of the external forces.

The third force among the trinity is the involuntary forces coming from inside of the body. This force is created because the body obtains certain instinctual impulses that are beyond the control of the mind. A hiccup or a sneeze can be a starting point to access this force. A continuous stimulation of such a force can be a hysterical laugh.<sup>57</sup> During the Gaga class, dancers were instructed to keep laughing as hard as possible. Then, they silenced the voice, leaving only continuous impulses from the diaphragm. By amplifying this stimulation to the whole body, dancers started to dance involuntarily with uncontrollable upheavals.

Compared to the other two forces, the involuntary force from the inside complicates movements with its embedded conflict: Though the source of the movement is generated within the body, it is beyond one's control. My experience with this third force often evokes a hysterical exuberance with a sense of silliness. The internal chaos surprises and overwhelms me, as Kyle Scheurich described in the class "feeling on top of yourself."<sup>58</sup> The body becomes the playground where one's instinctual impulses collide with an organized bodily form. Although both external forces and the involuntary forces from inside welcome a sense of letting-go to search for the physical limits of the body, the latter often consume greater energy. It is a more

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<sup>57</sup> Kyle Scheurich, *Gaga Winter Intensive*, Wang Yinqi, Jan 2 - 7, 2024, New York.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

active ignition of many engines. Energies popcorn and travel around the vessel of the body, almost “forcing” the mind to give up the clear control of form and balance. This letting-go of the clear control and the relinquishment to wilder forces inside of us reawakens internal animalistic power. Dancers open themselves up to this happy conflict rather than being frustrated and judgmental towards the effort and dissonance.

This trinity: internal, external, and involuntary forces, forms the basis of the Gaga toolbox, aiding dancers to approach movement with a contrast of texture and dynamics. As mentioned earlier, this intellectual understanding and differentiation of the above concepts is incomparable to their physical practice. New images and connections still occur through the ongoing research.

In my experimentation, the connection between the internal and external forces deepens when I link them with another Gaga concept “grab and let go.”<sup>59</sup> For example, when I throw a punch with my fist, the movement starts with the grabbing of muscles in the scapula, pectoral region, and upper arm to initiate the punch. The act of letting-go follows immediately after that to send out the explosive power from the grabbing of the muscles. If the muscles are fully engaged through the whole arm, including the hand, wrist, and forearm, then the energy will stop the movement, resulting in slowing the speed of the punch. This idea of “grab and let go” organically combines the internal force (grab) and the external force (let go and ride the momentum of the movement). This connection further inspires me to experience float as a constant interaction between internal and external forces as well. Recalling from the earlier paragraphs, float can be interpreted as a constant dropping and redirecting of gravity from the vertical plane to the horizontal plane. The idea of “let go and grab” echoes the process of “drop and redirect”. Therefore, dropping, created by the external gravitational pull is constantly

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<sup>59</sup> Ben Green, Gaga Winter Intensive, Wang Yinqi, Jan 2 - 7, 2024, New York.

redirected by the active internal force (imagination). In my personal experience, Gaga has greater utility as an ongoing research to develop movement language versus a canonized technique. The activities and terminologies are not built in a hierarchical way where fundamental steps lead to more advanced technical tricks. It is created organically where concepts and ideas converse and inspire one another through bodily research.

### Case Study: Black Milk

Originally choreographed for the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company with five female dancers in 1984, *Black Milk* has since evolved into a fifteen-minute quintet exclusively comprised of male performers<sup>60</sup>. The title, as social and cultural theorist Susie Linfield suggested, refers to German Jewish Poet Paul Celan's 1947 "Death Fugue," a famous Holocaust poem<sup>61</sup>. Though the work doesn't unfold with a straightforward narrative, the use of props (a bucket with mud and water), the contrast between the isolated self and the synchronized chorus, as well as the drastic shift between stillness and motion give rise to an emotional voyage for the audience. Set with Paul Smadbeck's minimalistic percussion music, the composition of the piece flows dynamically with cannon, repetition, group, and solo sections. By analyzing a thematic phrase of this work, the case study below alludes to Naharin's application of the Gaga Language in his choreography and sheds light on his aesthetic preference of "snapping into" and "multiplicity of" movements which will be further discussed in the last chapter.

Though *Black Milk* predates Naharin's naming of his movement research as Gaga, his exploration of the agility of movements, and snapping of narratives can still be perceived in this work. Through years of restaging after the further development of Gaga Language, different

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<sup>60</sup>Aldor, Gaby. "The Borders of Contemporary Israeli Dance: 'Invisible Unless in Final Pain.'" *Dance Research Journal* 35, no. 1 (2003): 81–97.

<sup>61</sup> Linfield, Susie. "Batsheva Dances, Challenging Gender and Demonstrating Athleticism." Forward.com. <https://forward.com/culture/131714/batsheva-dances-challenging-gender-and-demonstra/>



Gaga tools are applied more intentionally to support the dynamism of the work. The reason for choosing this pre-Gaga work to elaborate on Naharin's movement research is because, first, I acquired some embodied experience of the work through the GagaLab workshop in New York with Gaga instructor, Omri Drumlevich.<sup>62</sup> Second, I observe that the movement style and the use of minimalist music in *Black Milk* share more visual and sonic cohesion with Tao's movement phrases. By analyzing this work, the differences and values of Naharin and Tao can be seen clearer in light of each other.

Throughout the whole work, the thematic phrase, from 7:29 to 7:50<sup>63</sup>, repeats and varies throughout the dance. It starts with a forward fall coming downstage. Then, dancers, extending their arms and legs on the vertical plane, draw circular trajectories with their upper bodies. In contrast to this organized open structure, the dancers quickly move into reaches and jump on both diagonal lines. Within a very confined space, dancers, then, stomp forcefully towards the front, side, and back of the stage with a sudden break of the torso after each step. What follows this axial moment is a series of locomotive movements, covering the depth of the stage. The movements alter quickly from grand jete to rolls on the floor. The constant change of directions and levels creates a whirlpool of energy juxtaposing the static section prior to and after this phrase.

The circular motion of the upper body<sup>64</sup> at the beginning of the phrase exemplifies the essence of float. Even though dancers extend their bodies to a very open frame, they do not tense the body with excessive grabbing of the muscles. There's a sense of spreading of energy as if a drop of ink gradually diffuses in the water. The looseness of their shoulder joints and neck is especially evident when they describe the circular trajectories. However, when compared to

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<sup>62</sup> Omri Drumlevich, Gaga Summer Intensive, Wang Yinqi, August 6 - 11, 2023, New York.

<sup>63</sup> Tütükin, Slava. "Black Milk (Ballet)." YouTube video, 13:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tfo0jAqqQhQ>

<sup>64</sup> 7:30

Tao's floor phrase earlier, it's worth noting the sense of gentle resistance within Naharin's floating quality. The dancers still carry the structure of the body rather than Tao's total relinquishment to gravity. This gentle carrying of the body allows the dancers to snap into explosive jumps immediately right after. The confined stomping of the foot and breaking of the upper body<sup>65</sup> showcases the use of internal and external forces.

The stomping of the foot is an active and affirmative movement executed by the dancer. During my learning of the phrase with Omri Drumlevich in GagaLab New York, 2023, he instructed us to push a low voice from the gut while stomping the left foot forward. This vocal element connects dancers' core with their steps, amplifying the determination and precision of the move. The breaking of the upper body, on the other hand, happens unexpectedly as if the dancers' heads are pushed down abruptly by an invisible hand. Though the movement appears to be a sudden lowering of the torso, it is initiated from below. The pelvis, knees, and feet pivot quickly towards the right. The upper body, as a result, falls abruptly as if losing the ground. This time, the swiftness of the motion is achieved not through concentrated intention, but through the imagination of external forces. This instant shift between internal and external forces repeats three times as dancers perform the movements to the front, side, and back of the stage, giving rise to a sense of struggle, frustration, and hysteria.

Naharin's subtle interplays of internal and external forces, stillness, and outbreak build up a unique arc of development. Israeli dance critic Gaby Aldor characterizes his style as "instantaneous changes from rapid movement to stillness, allowing time for minuscule details; and the development of...story-frame."<sup>66</sup> Unlike Tao Ye's application of repetition, in which the endless evolution of the motif and circular motion creates inevitability and elevation, Ohad

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<sup>65</sup> 7:35

<sup>66</sup> Aldor, 89

Naharin's snapping into different textures and movements constantly frustrates audiences' anticipation. Like the stomping of the foot in three directions and the locomotive movements succeeding it, Naharin sets an identifiable pattern/rhythm to generate the swirl of energy, immediately following the breaking of his own "rules." This aesthetic effect he offers choreographically to the audiences aligns with his movement research of finding the "wow" moment, and new experience on a daily basis.

## Comparison of Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique

The chapters above introduce both choreographers' movement research and what is essential to their practice. Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique exploits gravity and momentum through the curvature lines. The architectural design of his phrases manifests a high level of internal logic. His careful inspection of the movement process maximizes the usage of gravity and redirection of momentum. Every movement is connected with a sense of inevitability like a cog in a machine. On the other hand, Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language approaches movement in a freer improvisational manner. Dancers simultaneously call upon multiple forces (internal, external, involuntary) through verbal cues igniting different body parts and stimulating the imagination.

Though the guiding principles of their movement research are seemingly different, both Tao and Naharin's choreographic works display an immanent life force through rigorous movements. In the following paragraphs, I will first provide some supplementary information on

the similarities between the two movement practices. Then a thorough comparison between the two will unfold from their relationship to gravity to their aesthetic preference. This section focuses on the comparison between the two artists: their artistic vision, training methods, and how they relate to their choreography.

## The Similarities

Gaga and Circular Movement Technique have two shared rules in their practices: no usage of mirrors, and keeping the eyes open. All Gaga classes take place with mirrors covered. Naharin states clearly “We work without mirrors. Mirrors are forbidden.”<sup>67</sup> The absence of mirrors allows the movements of instructors and fellow participants to become the core visual references for dancers. Gaga term “kagame” means mirror the movements of the instructor, including their form, texture, volume<sup>68</sup>, etc. Similar to Naharin, the studio space of Tao Dance Theater in Beijing has no mirrors either. For Tao, mirrors act as an external distraction against the internal focus of Tao’s technique. Instead of appealing to the appearance of the form, what’s more crucial is 360-degree spatial sensing. In Circular Movement Technique, dancers constantly shift their gaze following the releasing of the head and coming in and out of the floor. The dynamic change of levels and direction negates a traditional frontal presentation of dance which is oftentimes reinforced by the existence of mirrors in the studio. For both choreographers, the clear forms are achieved through the delicate sensing of the body, instead of looking at oneself in the mirror.

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<sup>67</sup>Danceconsortium “Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement” YouTube Video, 2:08, Oct 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vJc>. 0:46

<sup>68</sup> Volume refers to the intensity of the movement. How much energy or effort does it take to execute the movements?

The second shared aspect in both choreographic investigations resides in their mutual insistence on opening eyes throughout the entire research. In the Circular Movement Technique, the internal circulation of breathing and energy may inherently lead the practitioner to close their eyes, thereby enhancing their sensing of the flow and gravity. Nevertheless, the act of keeping eyes open not only achieves movement synchronicity, a crucial stylistic feature of Tao's choreography, but it also operates as the windows guiding dancers through intricate spatial changes, bridging the realms of their inner selves with the external reality (space, time, and gravity). One example of the importance of eyes can be perceived in the neutral stance (正步) that Tao takes as the basis of his technique.<sup>69</sup> Like the first position in ballet, the neutral stance, taking in parallel position, is a home base for most of Tao's movement phrases. In this parallel position, the body is stacked in its anatomical alignment with muscles released to the pull of gravity. In relation to the gravitational pull, the intention is guided inward: the eyes observe the nose, the nose points to the heart, and the heart sets down to the core (眼观鼻, 鼻观心, 心观中段). From the ground to the top, back to the front, the dancer is engaged in an internal circulation of awareness. The weight of the body is sensed and grounded again and again. The softening of the gaze towards the nose links the internal awareness with the external space and gravity, affirming and supporting the dancer's existence on stage. Gaga Language exhibits the same tendency of closing the eyes, stemming from its emphasis on heightened bodily sensations and the engagement of imagination. It is easier for dancers to feel more in their bodies and indulge in fantasies when their eyes are closed. One of the rules in Gaga, however, makes it clear that the eyes should be kept open throughout the class. The reason behind it lies in the multi-layered nature inherent in Gaga. Naharin says "One of the things Gaga can help you with is

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<sup>69</sup> Tao, Ye. Tao Dance Theater Workshop, Wang Yinqi, May 2021, Anaya, Qinhuangdao.

multi-layered tasks in movement...It teaches you to listen to your body before you tell it what to do.”<sup>70</sup> Visual information is one of the many layers of the multi-tasking experience in Gaga.

## The Differences

Despite different intentions behind their choices, both choreographers share the insistence on keeping eyes open and no mirror for their movement research. Following the elucidation of these two shared aspects, an examination of their disparities will be presented in the following paragraphs. Starting from their different relationship to gravity, the chapter will further explore their preferences in movement and composition. Ohad Naharin’s Gaga Language takes float as the default relationship to gravity, which trains dancers to snap into a wide range of movements. Tao Ye’s Circular Movement technique exploits the existence of gravity, utilizing momentum through his detailed examination of transition and process. The former’s works consist of multiple layers and provoke the imagination of both dancers and audiences. The latter finds profundity inside the movement itself and prioritizes the power of simplicity in the concept and design.

### Float vs Momentum

The primary distinctions between Gaga and Circular Movement Technique lie in their approach to gravity. The body’s relationship to gravity plays a foundational role in both of their research methods. Their distinct reactions to this constant external force lead them to divergent movement qualities. Gaga employs the concept of float to negate gravity on a molecular level, whereas Circular Movement Technique reinforces the gravitational pull by emphasizing its

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<sup>70</sup>BAMorg “Ohad Naharin on the Language of Gaga” YouTube Video, 2:41, Feb 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bje66VbeJGM>, 0:59

connection to dancers' central gravity. Recalling from the previous chapter on Gaga Language, float is attained through gentle activation of the muscles, supporting the skeletal structure of the body. This floating sensation helps dancers to feel the body as a whole and to enjoy moving with "the virtue of lightness." It is a conscious choice to negate the "dead flesh," referring to body parts that are disconnected from the mind and succumb to the gravitational pull. This glance at the concept of the "dead flesh" in Gaga may appear to be a criticism of Tao's research, given the fact that the Circular Movement Technique instructs dancers to release all tension in their muscles, therefore amplifying the gravitational impact on their skeletal structure. Nevertheless, Tao's amplification of gravity activates the mind-body connection as well. Instead of being pulled down passively, Tao's Circular Movement Technique also enhances total body awareness through the sensing of gravity.

If Gaga takes gravity as a counterforce to constantly invigorate dancers' total body sensations through the gentle negation of its downward pulling, then Circular Movement Technique is an internal affirmation of the undeniable link between the human body and gravity. Tao Ye elucidates this affirmation by explaining his understanding of the Chinese character "重," meaning weight, "This character can be separated into two other characters '千' and '里'. The first character means 'thousand,' representing repetition; while the second character denotes 'inside.' Therefore, the character '重 (weight)' can be interpreted as a process of repetitively turning one's gaze inward."<sup>71</sup> Similar to Gaga's sensing of gravity by negating its downward pulling, Tao Ye's conceptualization of weight also demands active and repeated sensing. The immediate consequence of their affirmation or negation of gravity manifests in the momentum within their movements. As stated above, Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique fully utilizes the momentum of the body. The released muscles and the full body awareness assist the dancers

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<sup>71</sup> Tao Ye, Tao Dance Theater Workshop, Wang Yinqi, May 2021, Anaya, Qinhuangdao.

in utilizing the least amount of energy to achieve the most dynamic moves. Furthermore, the momentum created by each movement is meticulously redirected with scrutinized processes and transitions, giving the impression that the phrases acquire their own mechanism and evolve with an inherent logic.

Circular Movement Technique's affirmation of gravity generates an endless flow of movement, whereas Gaga's concept of float efficiently handles the presence of momentum, contributing to Naharin's attainment of a different aesthetic: the fast change of narratives and the ability to snap. During the Gaga winter intensive in 2023, Kyle Scheurich elaborated that "sometimes the process of movements are not important to Gaga. We challenge our ability to quickly shift the imagination and the narratives of the movements."<sup>72</sup> Unlike Tao's usage of momentum, the existence of momentum for Naharin could possibly delay the fast twist that he wants to achieve. This ability to snap in the narrative of the movements is well reflected in Naharin's repertoires. For instance, dancers can abruptly shift into an aggressive, predatory mode after immersing themselves in the fantasy of a graceful ballerina. Float, as a default status, situates dancers in a most agile mode. The gentle negation of gravity permits the body to be simultaneously loose and sensitive, making it available to snap into the wildest of fantasies.

Through the lens of gravity and how it impacts both choreographers' approach to their understanding of movements and phrases, we begin to see insights into their aesthetic preferences: on the one hand, Ohad Naharin seeks a complex and multi-layered experience encompassing what he terms "Everything, everywhere, all at once." On the other hand, Tao Ye embarks on a thorough investigation of the body's physical relationship with gravity, space, and time, culminating in an aesthetic of kaleidoscopic process and repetition. The following

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<sup>72</sup>Kyle Scheurich, Gaga Winter Intensive, Wang Yinqi, Jan 2 - 7, 2023, New York.



paragraphs further elucidate these aesthetic differences from three comparisons: snap vs process, multiplicity vs simplicity, and imagination vs rationality.

## Snap vs Process

Stemming from their unique movement research, Naharin and Tao also approach their choreography differently. The former looks for dancers' ability to snap into movements, and the latter pays more attention to the sequential process of movements and their transitions. Starting with Naharin, the richness, and dynamism in his repertoire rely on dancers' ability to snap into movements that can either be as subtle as caressing a cloud with their skin or as explosive as moving on the verge of life or death. Many tools in Gaga Language also aid in achieving this vision. For instance, float, as the default status of the body, makes dancers highly attuned to gravity. The overall sensing and gentle igniting of the body makes them available to various textures without necessarily building up to the result. The usage of external forces is another way for dancers to snap into high jumps and challenging positions without excessive tension. As Kyle Scheurich shared during the repertory session:<sup>73</sup> Any challenging movement already requires a certain amount of effort to accomplish. In order to find ease in these challenging moments, dancers can imagine external forces to aid them, like a gush of wind blowing from afar, or a sudden collapse of the floor.

Tao Ye, in contrast to Naharin's snap into movements, finds continuity and process in his choreography. As mentioned earlier in Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique, the process, and transition of movements are highly valued in his work. The texture of dance comes from the delicate honing of process<sup>74</sup>. Through relentless repetition, Tao Ye bestows new details to

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> TAO Dance Theater Documentary. 3:13

interpret the same movement. During a conversation between Tao Ye and another famous Chinese choreographer Wang Mei, he shared a story explaining the importance of process and repetition to him:

Once, there was a person who incorporated a raised hand into his choreography. This gesture, though seen as rebellious in its context, left a lasting impression on the audience. A decade later, the significance of raising hands has shifted, no longer carrying connotations of defiance. Yet, this individual continues to utilize the same gesture, even if it becomes a cliché. What is unknown to the audience is his ongoing exploration behind this gesture. With each performance, the dancer experiments this gesture with variations such as releasing muscles, lowering shoulders, adjusting elbow angles, etc.

Like the story above, the significance of Tao Ye's choreography emerges from the accumulation of minute details and tedious repetitions. Many of Tao Ye's concepts and research existed long before his Curricular Movement Technique, including gravity, momentum, release technique, curves, floor work, etc. However, Tao's work remains distinct by its clear sense of style and originality. He meticulously examines the most basic movements, elaborating upon them to build upon a solid foundation and progress towards complexity. For instance, the first work, *Weight x3*, among his digital series is research devoted to walking. The trilogy: 6, 7, and 8 are all studies of spinal movements taking place on vertical or horizontal planes. Because of Tao's repetitive study of process and transition, his dancers achieve clear forms and synchronicity in their movements with tremendous richness and elaboration. Even though some movements may be used by other choreographers, it still looks fresh to the eyes because of Tao's full exposure to all the details in the same moves.

This contrast between snap and process leads the two choreographers to different routes of compositional preference: The orchestration of Naharin's work encompasses multilayered storylines, whereas Tao Ye's work unfolds and transcends itself from a singular concept. The

former's search for multiplicity and the latter's insistence on simplicity are reflected straightforwardly in their works.

## Multiplicity vs Simplicity

In terms of Naharin, one of the fundamental features of Gaga is its research on multilayered tasks. Dancers are guided to perform conflicted textures at the same time, like shaking and curving, or flexing the muscles while finding fluidity in the joints. Compositionally, he also organizes visual and aural disruptions. For instance, *Sadeh 21* created in 2014 begins with solos that consist of “bendy, rubbery bodies, as if reacting to external forces with elastic feedback,”<sup>75</sup> described by dance critic Jana Perkovic. The explosive and intensive movements set a drastic contrast with the monotonic music in the background. Each dancer showcases laser-sharp focus and a primal wildness, while the pale blue lighting portrays a cool world with pedestrian costumes. Later in the piece, the music becomes groovy with female dancers “snapping their fingers in unison” downstage. Their costumes change into bright-colored leotards, giving the atmosphere of being on a beach or in a club. The male dancers, in contrast, run and jump rigorously upstage “in elegant feathery strapless black dresses.”<sup>76</sup> The audiences can either focus on the pedestrian foreground of the ladies and view the male dancers as an undercurrent, or they can see through the wall of the groovy dance and take the male dancers in black dresses as the caged beasts behind the wall of civic pleasure. The usage of layering and contrast creates moments of unexpectedness and widens the range of imagination of Naharin's work.

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<sup>75</sup> Perkovic, Jana. “Batsheva Dance Company: Sadeh21 review – striking stage imagery.” *The Guardian*. March 9, 2014.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/09/batsheva-dance-company-sadeh21-review-striking-stage-imagery>

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

Tao Ye's approach to composition takes another route. Unlike Naharin's evening-long choreography with constant shifts of energy, Most of Tao Ye's work ranges around 20 to 30 minutes, with monotonous rhythm and intensity. Instead of finding conflicts and rich narratives through addition (as Naharin praised "everything, everywhere, all at once"), Tao Ye uses subtraction and exploits only one concept in each piece. His minimum use of lighting, costume, music, and props, forces the audience to focus only on the body and movements. What matters to him are the dancers, and this is the reason why he denotes the number of dancers within the title. For Tao, his obsession with body and movement opens up audiences' imaginations in a different manner. When the theater space is highly abstracted on the one hand, the irreducible nature and possibility of dancers' bodies are manifested on the other. If Ohad Naharin's choreography engages the audiences with sudden twists of movements, taking us on a wild ride, Tao's method of repetition and attention to process bestow his choreography with a sense of both inevitability and unexpectedness like an unfurling kaleidoscope. His phrase returns repeatedly to the foundational idea, such as walking or falling. Yet each return of the theme leads audiences to new variations.

Starting from the different approaches to gravity between Naharin and Tao, we elucidate further into their aesthetic preferences and compositional choices. Naharin's work involves multilayered narratives and contrasts, while Tao Ye approaches choreography with simplicity and repetition, focusing on the meticulous exploration of a singular concept in each work. Moreover, their aesthetic preferences are also matched with what they each considered as the sources of creativity. Naharin values imagination within the making and performing of his work, conversely, Tao espouses a reverence for rationality as the guiding force for his choreography.

## Imagination vs Rationality

Besides the trinity of forces, another “holy trinity” Ohad Naharin summarized is “passion, skill and imagination.”<sup>77</sup> The training in Gaga Language utilizes the visual imagination, like the feeling of floating in the water or shaking the body on the ground like boiling spaghetti. When it comes to repertoires, dancers are encouraged to interpret Naharin’s movement phrases with their own imagination, finding different “wow” moments on stage. Tao’s inclination towards the logic of the movements and the physicality of the body, on the other hand, juxtaposes with Naharin’s fondness for imagination. For Tao, the repetitive analysis of the sequential process and transitions of the movements is the pillar of his research. On the practical level, it aids the understanding of the body’s temporal, spatial, and gravitational relationship to the world. On the performance level, it also helps the dancers to achieve synchronicity and a collective experience on stage. Tao Ye shares that “rationality helps the dancer to sense the existence of...the other dancers. The intertwined power of reason makes them more inclusive<sup>78</sup>.” Under a shared understanding of the body and the structure of movement phrases, the dancers move in unison as if one person. Naharin’s focus on imagination and Tao’s interest in rationality offers the audience divergent experiences. The complex composition in the former’s works takes audiences on an emotional journey, containing multiple narrative lines and potential interpretations. The latter unfolds itself with both inevitability and unexpectedness, using tremendous determination and focus.

The comparison between Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique reveals Naharin and Tao’s distinct approaches to choreography. Ohad Naharin's Gaga Language prioritizes improvisation and imagination, with dancers engaging multiple forces to ignite

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<sup>77</sup>TRIBE - Multidisciplinary Visual, 1:18.

<sup>78</sup> Fan. Duan. [Conversation between].

creativity. In contrast, Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique emphasizes gravity and momentum, creating logically structured phrases. Despite these differences, they share the rules of no mirrors and opening the eyes. While Gaga focuses on negating gravity for agility, Circular Movement Technique embraces gravity for dynamic movements. Naharin seeks multilayered narratives and contrasts, while Tao favors simplicity and repetition. Additionally, Naharin values imagination, while Tao emphasizes rationality. These divergent approaches also offer audiences unique experiences: Naharin's works are emotionally immersive, while Tao's determination transcends the mundane through repetition.

## Conclusion

In exploring Ohad Naharin and Tao Ye's research trajectories: Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique, this paper delves into the historical context, methodology, and aesthetics of both choreographers. Instead of forcing a theoretical harmony between their practice, this paper deconstructs the seeming dichotomy between various aspects of Gaga Language and Circular Movement Technique, interpreting and embracing the validity of both research techniques. The snapping quality of Gaga orchestrates a multilayered experience where sensations and imagination lead us to an ecstatic frenzy. Conversely, Tao Ye's Circular Movement Technique finds profound meaning in dance through detailed examinations of the movement process and rational assemblies of each transition. The former pursues an excessive abundance with the claim of "everything, everywhere, all at once." The latter, in light of "movement for movement's sake", subtract all the other aspects of the theater, leaving the human body as the sole content of dance. From historical, methodological, and aesthetic perspectives, this paper provides the depth to understand Naharin and Tao's seemingly contradictory styles.

Amidst the swirling currents of sensation and reason, their distinct dances unfold as an ongoing dialogue between the corporeal and the ethereal, revealing the boundless depths of human expression and lived experience.

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