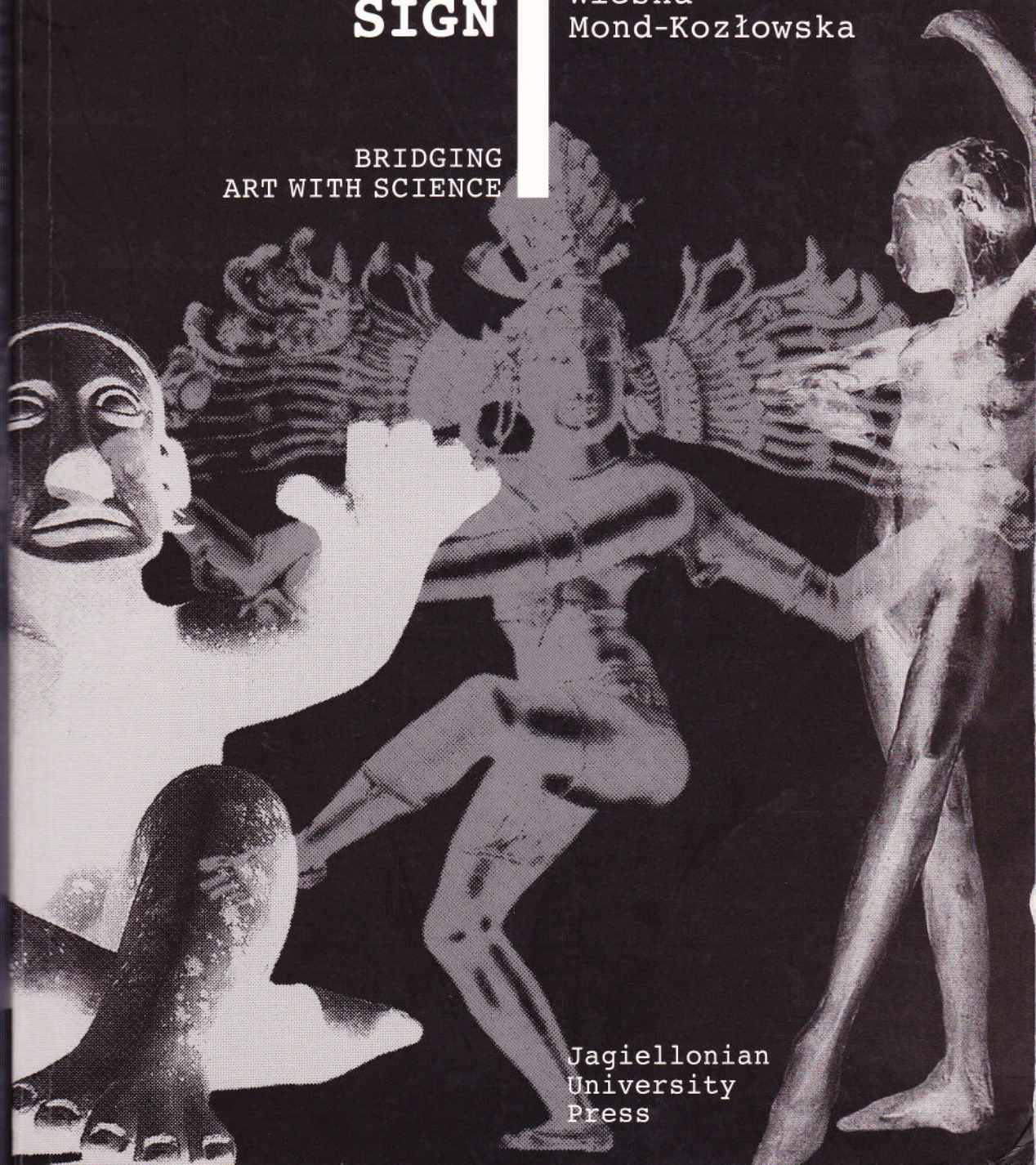


THE HUMAN BODY— A UNIVERSAL SIGN

Towards
Dance
Anthropology

edited by
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BRIDGING
ART WITH SCIENCE



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Ruth Kanner

BODY IN WAR

"We're all lying in the sand, hiding the body that holds our soul, concealing the softness of our bodies, so your head won't be hit, and not your neck, please, and not your chest and not your stomach and not your manhood which you already forgot all about and also not your legs and please not your hands. No, for God's sake, no." (from *Discovering Elijah* by S. Yizhar)

War is the ultimate instrument for the destruction of the human body. What are the reactions of the human body to the forces threatening to destroy it? And, contrariwise, what kinds of internal mechanisms does a man mobilize to become a part of a destructive war machine, where he is risking the loss of his own body in order to destroy the bodies of other people, the enemies?

These questions had been guiding an experimental theater production created by the writer of this paper in Israel, a country that has known too many wars.

The play is based on S. Yizhar's powerful anti war novel *Discovering Elijah* (Yizhar 1999). The writer, a participant – observer of the war, recounted his personal experiences and moral dilemmas, focusing on some aspects of the human body at war.

The text speaks about the 1973 Yom-Kippur War. However, it raises penetrating questions about any war mechanisms, in which a living body is turned into a dead body – a corpse.

Here I'll discuss five body identities attended to in the course of this production: The aggressive collective body, the body as a broken object, the body as a part of a war machine, the body that holds on to its vitality, the body of the actor.

The Aggressive Collective Body

In his book *On Aggression*, Konrad Lorenz (1966) refers to Militant enthusiasm as a specialized form of communal aggression. The subjective experience of aggressive zest in man is correlated with the following, objectively demonstrable phenomena in body sensations and responses: the head is proudly raised, the chin stuck out, a shiver runs down the back and the facial muscles mime the "hero face".

All these phenomena, reveals Lorenz, are traces of animal behavior:

“The male chimpanzee, when defending his band with self sacrificing courage, sticks out his chin, stiffens his body, his hair stands on end, producing a terrifying magnification of his body contours. The hair raising and the whole combination of body attitude is calculated to make the animal appear bigger and more dangerous. This is the origin of the ‘holy shiver’ of man.”

Jane Godel observed, moreover, acts of inciting to aggression and fight in apes. They inflame other apes to a state of fervour leading to collective aggression, using rhythm and dance.

In the process of working on this show we had been trying to explore this arousing mechanism. Collective group rhythmical activity was repeatedly used for the build-up of aggressive body energies. These exercises sharpened the actors’ awareness of the internal processes mobilizing the human body to violent collective activities.

The idea of forgoing one’s individual body in favor of collective aggression is represented in the show by various means. At the onset of the show actors take off their private clothes and wear uniforms. They visibly become items in a group of identical bodies. Then the group becomes a chorus talking in unison, glorifying wars of the past, when “soldiers rose and mounted horses and rode all colourful with flags waving and trumpets blowing”, as symbols of power and glory. Gradually, the rhythmical, ritualistic text becomes aggressive. Such a rhythmical recitation is repeated further on in the show, when the soldiers celebrate the bringing down of an enemy warplane with rhythmical dancing and singing. “We knocked him down!” the soldiers sing, “We knocked him down”. The enemy’s warplane is conceived as possessing a personified identity, a body of its own.

The Body as a Broken Object

The story-teller encounters the bodies of two soldiers killed in the air raid:

“All you can see is a pair of army boots, heels touching, toes too far apart, falling lifelessly to the sides, and the head of one and also the other pulled back much too far, with no muscles to hold it back, with the same finality of death.”

The interpretation of the text describing the dead body is revealed in the standpoint of the storyteller. The way the body is being examined reminds one of a crashed car damage assessment performed by a professional assessor. No, this body can no longer function. Total loss.

This sort of attitude is repeated again and again in the show – soldiers talk angrily about the dead comrade whose live body has turned into “something” – as one of them tries to define – “like a stone or sand”.

The tension between the powerful vitality of the living body and the lifelessness of the dead body is intensified through the image of legs, the legs that should have been dancing, as opposed to the legs that have fallen lifelessly to the sides. This reminds one of this image in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. The story traces the fate of Anatol Kuragin’s leg, first dancing, courting and later amputated after being hurt in war.

The Body as a Part in a War Machine

What happens to the human body when an army is storming a target under fire? What is the mechanism compelling the individual to shut himself off to all the warning of his individual body for the sake of collective goals?

To investigate these questions we created a scene in which the group of actors were running in unison, in a stylised rhythmical manner as one big body. They keep repeating a sentence that serves as an inner command: "Only to run and reload and press the trigger all the time never stopping". At the same time the storyteller is exploring the mechanism activating them:

"How does a man get up from the sand crater he's in and climb out and start to run, how does he get up and run when they're firing hard on him, did he shut himself off to all the warnings his body gave him and start running... because daring is like armour, and your soft body, your too soft body, when it runs exposed it deters the crazy shrapnel... you yourself don't exist, you are nothing, you are only the thing that is shooting, and you run, and shoot and run and shoot, stripped of everything you are, stripped of everything you were, stripped and nothing but a shooter of fire..."

The soldier's rhythmical running with the repeated mantra depict the operating instructions creating a soldier: The soldier's body is programmed as it were to perform the actions securing success in the battlefield and push aside all the disturbing questions arousing the body's basic instinct to protect itself. In this way an efficient war machine is being constructed.

The Body that Holds on to its Vitality

The scene terminating the show is digging in for cover under fire. Here, without the rhythmical movements or the enthusiasm of collective attack, the group is disintegrating into a collection of isolated persons, painfully aware of the vulnerability of their own personal body and its various parts. Every soldier is standing alone on the stage next to a black hole, toward which each one who has been hurt is stepping slowly. Each in his own turn is reciting begging-praying lines, bargaining about each body part:

"your head is exploding, your stomach is exploding, your ears are exploding, more and more, this exploding, all the time... just not my head, such a pity if my head, and just not my spine, horrible, horrible and also not my shoulders... Which part am I ready to give up so they don't get everything and finish all of me? One leg, one hand one eye? ... and the fragments of white-hot iron flying at you don't care who they hit on the way and who will be torn to pieces, he'll be torn, his flesh will be torn, his stomach will be torn."

The very terrible threat of the merciless hard and sharp iron of the bullet to one's body exposes what is most dear for a person in his body, and here we witness a desperate attempt to preserve and protect the softness of the body. The person is drawn back to the source of his life, the absolute softness between mother and baby:

“all of you so soft, so entirely unable to withstand all this, all of you scrunched up, your neck, stomach, backside, privates, no longer thinking, no longer feeling, or knowing or planning, also no longer God please do something God maybe only mother, mummy, my mom, mama...”

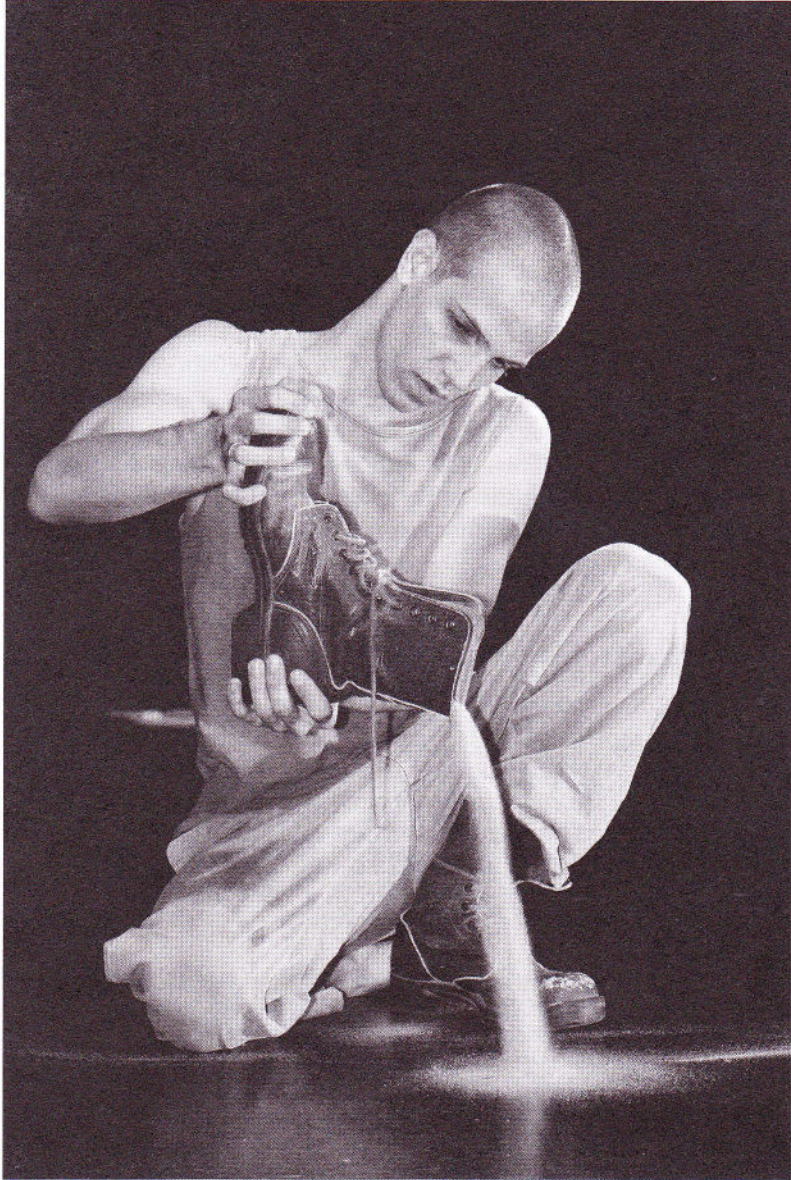


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The Body of the Character and the Body of the Actor

The body standing on the stage, whose body is it? Of the soldier in the imaginary reality of the play? Of the actor embodying this character? This is a complex question in the semiotics of the theatre. It is even more so in the extreme moment in which the body's reaction to the possibility of its destruction is the very subject of the play. We had to encounter the question: How can we represent this extreme psychophysical state, the authentic trembling of the body facing its own annihilation, on the stage? Maybe in order to achieve it, we should look for the real responses of the real body of the actor in the show?

We created a kind of a game with a rule: The actress serving as the storyteller, standing aside, is throwing red play balls on the actors-soldiers dispersed on the stage. Whoever is hit by a ball has to stop saying his lines and quit acting. This is the death of the actor. He lost his monologue for that evening.

This rule brought out intriguing reactions from the actors. For the actors evading the balls and surviving on the stage have become "a matter of life and death", so to speak. This made the actors' bodies produce concrete reactions: Desperately attempting to evade the barrage of balls, an outburst of a laughing of relief when someone else has been hit and the terrible shock when actually hurt, accompanied with a strong protest against the missed opportunity to complete one's monologue, the missed opportunity to go on living.

Summing up

The process we discovered in this work is the transition between various states of the body at war. At first – a body that has forgone its individuality and privacy and has become enslaved to collective aggression, a part of a war machine. In this context, a body that lost its life has become a useless, broken object. Then the isolated, lonely body that under the barrage of bullets has become again a private body, struggling to preserve all its members and its soul.

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