

Go Beneath the Surface: A Study on Underwater Dancing

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Abstract

In recent years, underwater dance has received more and more attention from dance creators and audiences for its novel dance scenes and innovative technique handling. Experiments with underwater dance are gradually increasing in both Western and Eastern dance communities. It is gratifying to see that underwater dance, as a new creative arena, is full of possibilities and inspirations to be explored; it is also thought-provoking to see that underwater dance brings new technical challenges and new perspectives on the art of dance. This paper will use two underwater dance productions as an entry point to analyze the creative ingenuity and cultural impact of underwater dance, and theoretically reflect on and internalize this latest frontier in dance.

Keywords

Underwater Dancing, Choreography, Symbolization, Culture

1. Introduction

Dance choreographers have always searched for new forms, moves, dance figures and elements to enrich the performance. They try to expose the nature of dance, uncover its beauty and further develop it as art through different experiments. One of such experiments involves transferring the dance outside the traditional stage, and probably the first novel creative stage of all others in this area was water.

Water itself has long served as an inspiration for choreographers worldwide given its versatile, whimsical and rhythmic nature. Worldly renowned choreographer Pina Bausch brought a water pool on stage in her work *Vollmond*, while younger generations of contemporary choreographers are obsessed to show the flow of water through rhythmic undulations of the limbs. Yet recent attempts to perform a full dance piece completely underwater are undoubtedly a realm yet to

be explored in depth. What makes underwater dance different and unique, what are the core natures that constitute an underwater performance, and how can these natures contribute to the development of dance as art overall?

This paper attempts to discuss the above topics by analyzing the effect of the underwater environment on the dancer's body and the symbolic meaning it implies. Based on the movement theories of Friesen and Heppenstall, this paper will closely examine two famous underwater dance works from both Western and Eastern worlds, *AMA* and *Pray*, respectively. This paper will theoretically reflect on and look within underwater dance, and attempt to rationally consider how to deconstruct the appearance and essence of underwater dance.

2. The Objective Natures of Water: Effects of the Underwater Environment on the Dancer's Body

A positive and efficient relationship with the environment increases the sense of self and the expressivity in a performer, as Friesen stated: "The giving in to and the rebound from gravity is the source and dictator of all movement (Friesen, 1975)". Performances, dance and modern art have recognized several objective aspects of the dancing environment in the world—gravity, balancing, breathing, to name a few—as a constant, and they often attempt to make it visible. Yet an underwater environment will have to make dancers move away from the existing experiences and search for new possibilities.

2.1. The Change of Gravity in the Underwater Environment

There were unaccountable attempts in traditional dance works to visualize gravity, such as the use of falling-down moves to show how the dancer is drawn to the ground, or the use of blowers to blow up the dancer's hair and clothes to make the anti-gravity floating effect. Underwater dance itself, however, provides an anti-gravity floating environment that makes difficult movements such as stalling and hovering accessible. Although gravity is not completely removed—that is, the dancer is still pulled to the bottom of the water—weight is partly taken off the normally weight-bearing spine and its vertebrae by buoyancy, thus allowing the body to move in ways not otherwise possible on land. In such ways, the motions requiring confrontation of gravity (upside down, flips, leaning and so forth) would become more accessible than that of a traditional dance stage.

2.2. The Change of Balancing in the Underwater Environment

Of course, an anti-gravity environment does not remove all obstacles for underwater dancers: although life originates in the oceans, humans are terrestrial beings, so the underwater world is at first alien to one's physical and mental states. Being in an underwater world, especially when it is a performance space, requires learning a new set of perceptual responses to orientate oneself accordingly. While supportive for certain moves, water immobilizes other moves and slows them down, and requires more practice to work with balance and body control.

Movements such as swinging limbs and jumping will be resisted by the water and require the dancer to detach from the original experience on land and find a new balance. There must be mutual support among all parts of a dancer's body to bring everything together. Moreover, a sense of balance while "standing still" now demands more effort to accomplish, as the force of water is constantly pushing and pulling the immersed body.

2.3. The Change of Breathing in the Underwater Environment

If the techniques of dealing with gravity and finding balances can still find some reference in traditional dance, then breathing in underwater dance is a completely new path that needs to be explored on its own. The use of breath is crucial in dance, as it is an extension of movement, connecting and stretching different movements to form a completed whole, and without it movements can become stiff and inefficient. In an underwater context, however, breathing becomes almost impossible: it is an objective limitation of the environment. For now, most underwater dance works require the dancers to hold their breath during the performance. Such a non-naturalistic movement pattern undoubtedly presents challenges to posture and alignment. In order to compensate for this unnaturalness and bring the audience a more fluid aesthetic experience, underwater dance performers usually show the illusion of breathing through specific movements. This might be one of the reasons why underwater dance has been even more concerned with facial expressions and chest torso movements than other forms of contemporary dance. When it is necessary to breathe, care is also taken to use the breath to convey a more intense emotion than traditional dance breathing.

One work that shows the elements of gravity, balance and illusionary breathing in an underwater environment has to be Julie Gautier's solo dance (Gautier, 2018). The five-minute-film draws its title from a Japanese term "sea maiden" that refers to pearl divers. The practice of Ama is said to be over 2000 years old, and traditionally the women it refers to would dive without scuba gear or air tanks, making it the precursor of modern free diving. To fully illustrate such history, Gautier performed her work in the world's deepest pool in Italy. In terms of technique, the water supports her in stopping in "mid-air" and completing a continuous rotation, allowing the extensibility of the action to expand. She is in a constant state of imbalance and has been experiencing falls and rises under water pressure. In terms of emotional expression, water in this work is invasive, oppressive and suffocating. While the water helps the dancer to perform difficult movements, it oppresses the speed of these movements, making it seem that each time they are completed, one's strength is completely taken. As the speed slows down, the overall emotional expression becomes mournful and oppressive while waiting to explode. The water hinders the dancer's desire to fly high and to jump to the heavens. But at the last moment, everything could no longer be suppressed, the dancer exhaled all the gas left in her lungs, formed a

huge bubble in the water that covered her face, and then rose slowly and inexorably under the bubble. This is not only a perfect ending point for an emotional outburst, but it also gives the dance anonymity, allowing the individual who struggles against the water and eventually rises up to represent all women. As Gautier puts it, “I dedicate this film to all the women of the world”.

3. The Subjective Characteristics of Water: The Sense of Physical Boundary and the Cultural Differences Conveyed by Water

In addition to the objective characteristics of water, water is also endowed with a variety of subjective characteristics. For example, water is seen as a highly interactive space because of its tangible, shape-shifting nature. Water can be perceived as an alien space and can thus amplify one’s sense of unease. It is also worth noting that water plays a different role cultural-wise in the Eastern world.

3.1. The Physical Boundary of the Underwater Stage

Art historian Mi-un Kwon describes the potential of subjective characteristics in art creation. She argues that when the creator has a concept of environmental specificity, the form and structure of a given environment changes from a fixed, stagnant entity to an interlocutor that constantly interacts with the performer (Kwon, 1997). In underwater dance works, the interaction between the dancer and the environment is particularly strong, and unlike the interaction between the dancer and the air on the traditional stage, the mutual dialogue between the environment and the performer is visible to the naked eye. The natural element of water is thus transformed from a mere background for the performance to a vehicle for discourse, creating a fluid narrative that works with the performers.

But beyond the interactivity that benefits the performers, the water is also a “foreign space” naturally divided by the surface, a division that makes the underwater environment alien and exclusive. The use of space is crucial in choreography, as Heppenstall describes: “It is human bodies, themselves constituting pictures, designs in Space, their separate movements interacting like musical phrases, like the idiom of a language, in such a way that designs in space become designs in Time also, projected into rather than accompanied by the actual music of the orchestra, which itself, thereby, becomes spatially significant (Cohen, 1950)”. A specific space brings different emotional imagery to the viewer, which is why considerable underwater dance works including *Panatonni* and *La fleur des Eaux* have dance moves of “breaking the physical water surface boundary” (diving into the water or rushing out of the water) purposefully, showing that choreographers are clearly aware of how underwater context is both a finite and alien space, and hope to convey this point to the audience. By breaking the borders of the physical dimension, the work also presents a feeling of breaking the mental chains and breaking through oneself.

3.2. The Cultural Representation of Water in a Different Cultural Context

Besides the physical boundary, cultural differences and varied imagination carried by water creates a spiritual border that builds up appreciation thresholds for the audience. Chinese underwater dance work *Pray* is an embodiment of this cultural difference and exoticism. Most physical movements in this dance piece are inspired by the Aspara frescoes, which literally means “flying in the sky (Fei Tian)” in Chinese. The dancer floating underwater is linked to the imagination of deities flying in mid-air. To imitate the original Aspara frescoes, the dance moves focus on the “S” shape of the body posture, various handprints with religious archetypes, and the stretching and extending foot movements. Nevertheless, the essence of “flying” is displayed not through body gestures, but through the long floating clothes that move with the water. While the dancer’s moves remain slow, the long sashes of the costume flutters with the waves, thus movement and stillness have reached a delicate balance. The movement reflects the vigorous vitality, while the stillness contains the graceful and peaceful temperament. This combination of motion and static can only be achieved by using water as the medium.

It is worth mentioning that in *Pray*, the imagery of water is all different from that in *AMA*. The water no longer brings a sense of oppression, but plays the role of a supporter, holding the dancer in “mid-air”. Thus, in this work, the dancer becomes the controller of the water. The work also gives the audience a perspective that rarely incorporates the boundary line of the water, trying to create an infinite and free new space out of the limited space. This is a bold attempt: Aspara itself is a distant, mysterious and unnatural concept, and a completely underwater space widens this distance and may make the audience feel the fear of being oppressed and excluded. However, the work is clever in its use of soft costume lines and rich colors to dilute the cold distance and make the audience feel a sense of opulence and joy rather than aloof divinity. This distinctive costume and color palette, which is closely associated with the local culture, will emphasize a sense of cultural belonging and establish a strong national cultural identity in the reconstruction of historical memories, making it easier for those familiar with or belonging to the culture to empathize with it (Tian & Wu, 2023). This is also entirely different from the anonymity of the *AMA*: this work is quite emphatic about cultural uniqueness.

4. The Defects and Deficiencies of Current Underwater Dance Attempts

Underwater dance is based on free diving, which is also known as the second most dangerous sport in the world. The increased water pressure will compress the diver’s body, while dance movements will consume the oxygen even quicker. If the distance below surface and the body duration were wrongly estimated, the issues can easily lead to fainting and drowning and other extremely dangerous

situations. This makes the process of training an underwater dancer even more arduous and risky in comparison to dancers of traditional stage.

Further down this vein, underwater dance is mostly performed with the dancer holding breath. This makes underwater dance generally short in terms of length or rely on post-editing to form a full performance. The work *Pray*, for instance, was reportedly shot underwater for 50 seconds at a time, the performer would float up for air then dive back down to perform, and repeated such process for 200 times. Underwater dancer Yashu Zhang also reasoned: “If I hold still, I can hold my breath for two minutes, but if I dance, I must use my muscles and my brain is also active into a state of performance, so oxygen consumption is very fast. I could barely stay for one minute (Ye, 2022)”. This time limitation can lead to unprocessed fragmentation of the work, where the dancer’s emotional expression and physical condition are put to the test.

Moreover, the changing underwater environment means that traditional stage costumes need to be improved before they can be used in underwater dance performances, which not only increases the cost of creation and performance, and adds on to the risk of being injured by unfit costumes in more complex environments. As in the work *Beaded Curtain*, the performer was required to wear weights in order to walk stably underwater, and had fishing lines attached to her costume to create a floating effect (Da, 2021). For inexperienced dancers, these yet-to-be-improved costumes will make them more vulnerable to injury.

At the same time, underwater group dance has not yet been much attempted. Dancing underwater can have more unpredictable effects on fellow dancers than on land, making partner interactions more difficult. Meanwhile, solo dances underwater currently show considerable homogenization of emotional expressions and imagery presenting, which makes the audience susceptible to aesthetic fatigue.

In addition, popular underwater dance works are generally disseminated online, and while this makes for a wide audience and may create the impression that an era of “art for all” has finally arrived, it actually flattens and limits underwater dance. The immersive experience of live audience interaction is an integral part of the traditional stage, and cannot be replaced by underwater dance. From this point of view, there is still a long way to go before underwater dance can reach the influence of traditional dance.

5. Conclusion

Dance is a silent language, showing the commonality of the world’s aesthetics. In the continuous development and innovation of dance, underwater dance works are yet to become comparable to traditional stage works in numbers, this new stage is still waiting for creators to explore shine; underwater dance works are also not minimal in numbers, but only a few can be remembered and sought after. While the underwater environment has solved some of the traditional stage pain points, it has also brought new, unresolved dilemmas. Through weightless-

ness and a slowing down effect caused by the density of water, movements can be supported and restricted at the same time. Water also creates and resolves boundaries at the same time, both physically, and culturally. The traditional dance industry can absorb ideas from the creation of underwater dance and see how the change of space has brought about greater imagination while communicating and connecting more closely with global cultures.

As dance is a ubiquitous element of culture, new attempts to explore the instinctual nature of dance in various contexts remain nonstop. Underwater context is certainly not the last frontier of dance. Nevertheless, it serves as one of the most unique, imaginative and challenging spaces for dance moves. How to utilize the characteristics of water and create innovative dance works would continue to be an essential question for upcoming choreographers to ponder.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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