Natalie Heller’s *First Impressions*

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All three performers remain in almost complete stillness for several minutes. At about three minutes in Lerna Babikyan, sitting closest to us on stage right, begins making slow and tentative sorting movements that arrange delicate and invisible objects on the ground in front of her. She appears pensive, slightly confused, as though she is expecting to learn something important from the arrangement of these small objects. And while her movements are quite minute, at the same time there is a remarkable immensity to her delicate gestures.

One might be tempted to begin here, taking Babikyan’s movements as the starting point of the performance and proceed to analyze all the motions that will follow. This would however, disregard subtle perceptual transformations that happen before any discernible movement happens. Focusing on this period of stillness, which is much more than a simple lack of motion, we find many of the ambiguities and agonisms that explain the curious impact of Babikyan’s gestures and a complex form of motion that animates all movements that follow, in this remarkable new work from choreographer Natalie Heller.

We enter the performance with only a few clues for engaging the work. What is given, however, grants access to many of the complexities that will run through the work, through the performer’s bodies and the space around them. From the title we know that impressions have been made. Because it is a dance performance, we expect that moving bodies will be implicated in the playing out of the impression making. We also know that Heller has recently relocated her practice to Istanbul, that her performers are of this city, and that this new work is a response to the impressions the city has made in the nine months since her arrival.

Steve Roden’s “Between Voices and Sky” introduces the performance followed by three bands of light illuminating the separate areas of the stage where the dancers remain relatively still. Once these areas are fully illumined, we feel quite sure that we’ve been introduced to the bodies that will play out the drama of impressing and being impressed upon, yet at the same time we feel an absence that points to more than these three bodies on stage.

We come to this performance, as we do the rest of our phenomenal experience, with the expectation of an agent behind motions. Whether they are bodily motions or the motions of a city such as Istanbul, if impressions have been made, we expect to be able to identify what made those impressions. If something has been pressed upon and *im*pressed, we expect that there will be something *ex*pressing itself, something pushing itself in on and imprinting itself on the performer’s bodies. While we know this agent is Istanbul, we don’t expect Heller to give us a city backdrop, props or any explicit representations of the city, we don’t expect Istanbul to arrive in its full presence. Yet, because most of us know the feeling of the motions of a huge city in our own bodies, because we know very well how it inspires us and exhausts us, stimulates and bores us, puts us in motion and frustrates our desires for all kinds of motions; because we come to this performance with what Heller calls these “body-memories,” we find ourselves in the first few minutes of stillness, feeling an expectation for and an absence of the impressing agent, not as an explicit thought, but through our own bodies as we project them into those on stage.

The low droning minor tones intimate the struggles the bodies will go through. The cycling repetitions suggest a very old motion, one moving before Istanbul came into being and one that will be in motion long after it is gone. With the performers still standing still, the looping movements exacerbate our desire for the bodies to initiate some discernible motion. Our need for a discernible agent of the motions we hear is accumulating. Even though our desire for fully visible and circumscribed agent is phenomenologically speaking slightly misguided, we nevertheless have this desire, and as Heller draws out this period of stillness, this desire is skillfully frustrated, and for those patient enough to endure, a subtle perceptual shift happens as the soundtrack moves forward. We want motion to arise out of motionlessness, and we want a visible agent to arise out of the invisibility, yet because Heller, in this extended period of stillness, makes us question whether either of those will arrive, we undergo a perceptual (and conceptual) shift where we feel the present bodies, and anticipate their hypothetical movements as proceeding beyond the distinctions between motion and motionlessness, visibility and invisibility.

The three performers remain in their positions throughout the stage. The soundtrack continues to move forward. Another important disruption is brought about in our usual motor-perceptual assumptions. With the continued absence of the impressing agent of motion, and our continued need for its presence, Heller further transforms the bodies on stage and our perception of them. Those bodies themselves come to be infused with this absent and invisible source of motion. We no longer expect some external agent that will be impressing itself on the bodies from outside. The bodies themselves are both what expresses the city and what is impressed by it. Both giving and receiving in the same gesture. We no longer perceive bodies in one point in space and expect some impressing agent in another. They are felt as partaking in the agency we seek and therefore the bodies aren’t felt as over against the city, nor is the space felt as a neutral empty area where this interaction will happen. With our own expectations for presence, and Heller's deft use of absence, we are brought into the complex and ambiguous form of motion the piece will exploit throughout, where agency is felt as ambiguously situated between giving and receiving, activity and passivity, expressing and being expressed, moving body and moving city.

Left in its absence and invisibility the city as agent arrives more fully because this is how we actually experience the motion of a city. We can see the boundaries on a map that distinguish Istanbul from the regions surrounding it, yet our lived experience of a city is an experience of a formless entity: This is because our body is interwoven with the city’s body. Istanbul can never be fully circumscribed because the human body is part of the expression of the city it is in, possibly the most important loci through which the city's motions flow. To know the city we have to put our bodies into it, and to do so, as a tourist, a resident, or an artist newly arriving to make a home for her practice, is already to be part of the city itself, to be an expression and to be however minimally intertwining one’s own agency with the agency of the city. In a city our bodies are the city, making while being made, expressing the city while being expressed by it.

It is not by accident that the when Babikyan initiates the first explicit movements that they have such an impact, that they appear both tiny and huge, micro-macro at the same time. Heller brought us into a complex form of motion in the first minutes, and now Babikyan’s movements capitalize on a highly charged motor-perceptual space. Had Heller relied on a simple un-ambiguous form of motion—where body and city were separate entities, one active, another passive, one impressing the other expressing—then these tiny motions would not have had the large impact they do. Having achieved this complex form of motion with her performers on stage, those movements in turn draw out more complex aspects of the spectators’ body-memories. Babikyan’s delicate movements draw on our own memories of our own experiences in cities, our sorting motions, possibly those that unpack important objects we chose to bring to a new city from our previous home. At the same time, because her body is also the locus of the city’s expression, her movements draw on our body-memories of the much larger agent that has expressed itself through our bodies. We therefore feel Babikyan’s movements as including an aspect of the formless agency that carries trains across landscapes, steel to the top of skyscrapers, and populations across the Bosporus. Drawing on both the micro and macro aspects of our body memories, Babikyan’s bring us into the rich motor-perceptual fabric the performance proceeds throughout.

Although all of this happens when Babikyan’s initiates the first discernible motions, when she does move, looking back we see that we can’t truly maintain such a strict distinction between motion and motionlessness. Her tiny movements feel much larger than they appear not because they are the first movements after a period of simple motionlessness, but because they are the first visible manifestation to punctuate the tension skillfully set up between the visible and invisible motion and motionlessness. Even in their apparent stillness the performer’s bodies and the space through which they extend were already permeated by the invisible agency of the impressing city, already drawing on our memories and the motion we projected on stage. As spectators we know and remember in our own bodies that cities express themselves through our bodies in our motions but even more so when the city, with its enormous infrastructure and architecture stops our bodies, holds us in stillness, attention, awe, wonder, fear and other forms of motionlessness. The performer’s stillness in the first three minutes was not experienced as the simple absence of the action of this invisible agent, because even if we don’t think about it we remember how it feels for the city to reach deep into our flesh, to express itself in our body’s stillness. Stillness is not a lack of motion but is one of the ways the city has for acting and impressing itself on and through the body. Well aware of this, in the show’s brochure Heller quotes Akram Khan “to achieve stillness requires a great amount of discipline and energy, you don't just stand still on stage, you are trying to say something through that stillness.” Thus Babikyan’s first movements are only the first in the sense of collapsing one aspect of the ambiguity of motion and motionlessness and opening another. It is in this opening, capitalizing on the tension inherent in the ambiguity manifest that we feel the force and impact of the city through Babikyan’s bodily movements.

Having established a phenomenologically accurate and highly charged context of motion to depict the interaction between bodies and city, Heller can now exploit the full breadth of this capacity. One place this becomes palpable is in our perception of the space created on stage. As Babikyan continues her sorting movements all three performers remain on stage right. The space should appear to be drastically off-balance with the performers and the potential of movement all located on one side. Yet while we know this, we actually feel that a balance is achieved throughout the space. Su Güneş Mıhladız stands at center stage, closest to the empty part of the stage, and while she does not cross over to the other side of the stage, we are left wondering where the sense of balance comes from. Her body is not there, she is not acting on anything remotely: the only thing of hers that passes the halfway point of the stage is her own field of vision as it projects from right to left. As she waits at center stage, body erect, staring intensely and straight into stage left, we are brought into another complexity of the moving perceiving body. We realize that it is Mıhladız’s vision that balances the stage. Perception has become much more substantial, almost with a weight of its own, and we tacitly come to feel the bodies extend out beyond themselves into the perceptual space they fill. Still, with only a few subtle movements from the performers, we come to feel the entire area of the stage as a single motor-perceptual fabric. There is no neutral or empty space; all space is animated by perception and motion. Now, bringing this to a more palpable expression, Babikyan begins to approach the space filled by Mıhladız’s vision. If this space were simply empty or neutral space, Babikyan’s entry would have little dramatic impact, but as she makes her way into Mıhladız’s field of vision, we feel a charge as though she is entering into and implicating herself into the external musculature of Mıhladız’s own body.

Babikyan continues to lumber her way through Mıhladız’s perceptual space, and Mıhladız herself drops down onto the stage’s ground. While she appears to do this from her own desire to explore a different orientation for her body, we are brought into some of the greatest manifestations of the ambiguous forces that animate the bodies on stage. Now on the ground Mıhladız is balancing on her haunches and reaching forward to keep herself suspended between rising up to whatever she is reaching for, or falling back, possibly defeated and exhausted. She is balancing but expresses a remarkable ambiguity such that it isn't clear if she is grasping something she wants, or if she is being grasped by something she wants to free herself from. While in the first three minutes the performers brought us into the ambiguity of activity and passivity through one aspect of motion, now Mıhladız brings this ambiguity to a higher expression through her struggles and contortions. Leading up to some of the key moments of the performance, she begins to tear and pull violently at her own body and let it fall back down to the ground. We feel the fullest manifestation of the agony and ambiguity in the work’s depiction of the forces one feels as they attempt enter and become continuous with the city's movements. Initially she appears much more active as opposed to her earlier stillness, yet the ambiguity between activity and passivity is retained. While she’s violently pulling and slamming her body it isn’t clear whether her body is moving from her own centralized control, or if the source of movement is in the space around her. She is pushing and being pushed upon, tearing and being torn. Mıhladız brings the invisible agency of the city to its fullest visibility as she wrenches at her body and lets it slam back to the ground, and because it is her own arm that is fighting against her body, she represents beautifully the fact that it is through our own bodies that the city acts, and that in the struggle to bring about a balance with the city, that it is nowhere appropriate to maintain a simple distinction between what is internal and external, what moves and what is moved, what is body and what is city.

Mıhladız brought us into and out of the balance of the competing forces that play themselves out through the body. Shifting focus to Esra Yurttut, our desire for balance transfers to her body as she attempts her own, much more precarious attempts to balance the competing and ambiguous forces. The soundtrack has now taken on a pessimistic turn. Mıhladız convulses on the floor suggesting that her body has taken a toll in its attempts to balance the city’s and her body’s forces. Yurttut now mounts the back of her chair in a precarious position where we feel that those forces could assert themselves to the further detriment of this performer. As opposed to the kinds of balance Mıhladız experimented with, we feel that Yurttut is more bold, possibly foolishly challenging to upset the balance of forces playing themselves out through her body and through the space. The artifice she is perched upon, the chair suggests that the danger can enter all aspects of our life, even our private life, our domestic and our work life. We have a pre-understanding of the struggle that goes in these parts of our lives. we are also sitting in a seat, facing in the same direction as Yurttut's seat is facing, mirroring her situation and struggling with her. When she lifts herself up and stands balanced on the top of the chair, we feel how precarious her balance is. She is almost standing completely on the back of the chair, approaching an orientation we can feel in our own bodies will end in disaster. We wonder how slippery the floor is and if it will let go of its grip on the chairs legs as she puts more weight on the chair's back and less on the seat. And, as she lifts herself up completely, the chair’s grip holds and she lets herself down gently on the other side. In a split second she goes from her balanced position atop the chair, to a momentary fall where her body out of balance gives in completely to the world’s forces, then back to a graceful balance on the other side of the chair. She has pulled it off, she has redeemed our desire to take risks with our bodies and to push the forces into new continuities, yet we still feel she has risked something, and despite her soft landing, the droning music indicates that nothing has resolved itself. She has transgressed and risked taking the forces out of balance, and she is ok, but she very tentatively tests the new ground that she is on, and sits on her newly oriented artifice and looks as though she is waiting to see how her intervention will turn out. While Mıhladız is fine, the space feels as though it bears the weight of this risk, reminding us of the intimate connection our bodies have with the spaces they live within.

Nearing the end of the performance Babikyan returns to her original position after having walked freely among the other dancers. Mıhladız is going through one more agonizing convulsion and now falls to the ground completely defeated by the forces that tear at her from inside and outside. Yurtutt appears to have perverted her space in her experiments with the chair and is writhing under her artifice that has returned to its original upright position. In one last desperate attempt Mıhladız lifts herself up to her feet, and again tries to achieve a balance as she reaches out for something she needs desperately. She steps forward slowly, and as though she were on a tight-rope, or walking on the edge of a fence and her optimism is made naïve and desperate by the pessimism of the music. Mıhladız brings us to the highest tension of the competing forces as we wait to see how this tension will resolve itself. She falls to the ground once again, this time appearing defeated, yet her position on the ground appears to be a powerful one. She spreads her body out on the ground, her previously frail arm now grasps powerfully at the ground in front of her. In giving into the forces that run through the space and her body, she has taken on her most powerful position. The three remain in these positions as the lights dim. As the performance began with several minutes of stillness while the soundtrack established the context for motion, so the piece ends with several minutes of cycling and droning sounds once the bodies return to stillness. The performers have gone through their various individual trajectories and are now exhausted, yet the continuing cycling of the music suggests that the larger agent, the city of Istanbul, the ancient mover will continue. Istanbul has animated and particularized itself as a city through these bodies and through Heller’s choreography has heightened its own expression, intensified its ambiguity, yet has resolved nothing, and will proceed through further bodies as its way of expressing itself as a city.