

Title: Rewriting the body archive through performance

Subtitle:

Author(s): Nguyễn Thanh Thủy

Issue: ARCHIVES

Publication date: 20th November 2020

Article DOI: 20th November 2020

Between 2012 and 2019 I have carried out an artistic doctoral project at the Malmö Academy of Music concerned with the function of gesture in music performance, titled *The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music*. This project has its origins in the performance culture of traditional Vietnamese music, and more specifically, it seeks to question the objectification of women performers that has become a part of this culture across the past decades. This paper is built around my individual experience of embodying this culture, and of my attempts at seeking to resist its gendered gestures, on the lookout for different directions, with the aim of performing differently.

Fig. 1: Women working on street in Hanoi 2012. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

I was born into a theatre family and was raised with traditional music from an early age in Hà Nội. In 1995, I travelled outside of Northern Vietnam for the first time to attend the *National Dân Tranh Competition* in Hồ Chí Minh City. The train ride across the country took around 38 hours, and I arrived in an urban environment of a kind I could not have imagined. The diversity and intensity of the city soundscape and the nightlife of Sài Gòn made a big impression on me. But even more important, this was the first time I began to grasp the division of my country which was the result of the civil war. I immediately realized that many of the “war heroes” of the north were regarded as war criminals and terrorists in the south. Suddenly the life I had lived so far, completely embedded in a traditional music environment, also emerged as a similarly cocooned perspective of the world, completely defined by the propaganda of my government. However, the competitions I entered in 1995 and in 1998 furthered my career as a traditional music performer, winning these competitions brought me into a professional life that was very much defined by the emerging nation branding through traditional music. I increasingly appeared in TV shows and public concerts designed as entertainment, each tending to feature a conservative and superficial view of both the music itself and women performers. In these TV shows, I would always be recorded in scenic outdoor settings with waterfalls, romantic parks and so on, never on a concert stage.

Video 1: Nguyễn Thanh Thủy in an outdoor setting for a DVD recording in Vietnam, 2001.¹

This video, or rather, my experience of recording it, became a central reference in my collaboration with the Swedish choreographer Marie Fahlin. I believe, for her, it became emblematic for my experience of being socialised into the role of being a female performer of traditional music. The video was recorded in 2001,

¹ Lời Ru Quê Hương (2001). Sông Hồng Audio, Vietnam.

when the head of my department at the Vietnam National Academy of Music decided to make a promotional DVD with traditional music. In it, they made me pose for a performance of a three-minute piece, and the recording of it brought me to two different provinces with scenic landscapes and put me into a lot of suffering, for instance when performing in a stream balancing dangerously on a float. It should be noted that I did not know how to swim at this time. Also, on the float I was bitten by leeches that, together with my fear of falling into the water, made this video recording session a truly horrific experience, despite the pastoral appearance it may have in the image.

Although I had become a celebrated artist, I did not have the freedom to choose how I should meet my audience. The performance culture, centered around these TV shows in Vietnam, has also developed particular gestures, which female students today learn when studying a traditional Vietnamese instrument, like the *đàn tranh*.² The teaching of traditional music is equally related to the commercialised views of women as it is grounded in the preservation of tradition and taken together with the historical overview of how nationalism and communism has shaped the country, that this teaching has an immediate relation to nation branding.³

Gender is a socially defined behaviour, something that we do.⁴ Building largely on the writings of Judith Butler, the notion of “doing gender” has often been discussed in terms of performance. This performance of gender is primarily constituted through the repetition of actions (often verbal ones) that are “naturalized” in the body (Butler, 1990: xv). In her discussion of the foundations of gender construction based on theories of performativity, Susan Leigh Foster observes how perspectives of embodiment, such as action and bodily articulation tend to be lacking. Foster argues that a comprehensive understanding can only be obtained by adopting an embodied perspective, and through a grasp of “the articulateness of bodies’ motions”, which employ “tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance offers a social and historical analytic framework for the study of gender” (Foster, 1998, p.3). A further discussion of the detail of our embodiment is necessary. Our experience of the body can be understood from the perspectives of the body image and body schema, where the former is related to our perception of the body and the latter to action (Pitron & de Vignemont, 2017, p. 115). While the body schema is referred to as “a system of preconscious, subpersonal processes” (Gallagher & Cole, 1995, p. 370), the body image on the other hand is “conscious and personal” (De Preester, 2007, p. 605). As observed by Helena De Preester, “a gesture or a bodily posture could not be turned into a political gesture or into a posture with political implications without manipulating or summoning in some way our tacit (bodily) knowledge of movement and motor behavior (i.e. the body schematic aspect)” (p. 380). This also has a bearing on the study of musical performance, as argued by Jill Halstead (2005) in a study of the practice of female conductors in which she claims that a gender perspective is essential for “understanding any

² The *đàn tranh*, also called *đàn thập lục*, is a plucked zither of Vietnam, similar to the Chinese *guzheng*, the Japanese *koto*, the Korean *kayagum* and the Mongolian *yatga*. It has a long soundbox with steel strings, movable bridges and tuning pegs positioned on its top.

³ I discuss the emergence of a concert culture and the role of female musicians in traditional Vietnamese music further in Nguyễn (2019, p.11-22).

⁴ The origins of an understanding of the social construction of gender can be traced to Margaret Mead’s classic study *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935/1963), in which she claims that presumed natural sexual behaviours vary across cultures and are ideologically and culturally situated.

performance practice that involves human bodies; nowhere is gender more directly created, perceived, enacted or challenged than through the display of the body and the dynamic of its gestures” (p. 222).

Fig. 2: Workshop at Inter Arts Center, Malmö 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

The repetition of actions that are “naturalized” in the body which is not only related to our perception, but just as much to the social impact ever since we were born, create a body archive.⁵ During the time working on this project, by approaching the body as an instrument for performance, and how they may be shaped through social interaction, I have seen clearer how I have *become*⁶ a Vietnamese-Woman-Female-Musician and many times I have encountered how that body archive could restrain me. I have made many artistic projects that explore intercultural collaboration through interdisciplinary methods. In this paper I would like to focus on some examples from my work with Fahlin, in order to show how the work with her has challenged my archive as a Vietnamese woman and musician, and how my performance—in intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic collaborations—can provide counter images of traditionally gendered behaviour.

Between 2012 and 2014, Fahlin and I worked intensively on a series of pieces, and one them was *Vodou vibrations sounds of memories of fields and burdens living in translations and broken bows balancing on plateaus while speaking to one self and scratching the surface of the raft while drifting away*. I will henceforth refer to the piece by its abbreviated title, *Vodou Vibrations*. It is a choreographed piece for a single performer, but also a site-specific project, with video projections and pre-recorded sounds, performed by me and choreographed by Marie Fahlin. The choreography aims to challenge my habitual movements, into which I have been socialized as a Vietnamese woman and *đàn tranh* player, by introducing effort through choreographies that explore more forceful and aggressive movement qualities. The music is drawn from a number of sources, including an earlier composition of mine for six *đàn tranh*. The piece premiered at Inter Arts Center, Malmö in 2014 and has since then been performed in many different venues in Sweden, the UK, and Vietnam.⁷

Video 2: Excerpt from *Vodou Vibrations*.

In *Vodou Vibrations*, I aimed at disconnecting with the archive of the choreography of gender in traditional music performance. It was a laborious, and sometimes a rather awkward process for me. As a performer who has been trained to play her instrument since childhood, it is hard to think of something which goes outside the embodied knowledge. But the many-layered body that we wished to activate through the

⁵ The notion of the body as archive is also found in a recent documentary film, *The Body as Archive* by the dancer/choreographer and filmmaker Michael Maurissens (2016) which aims at better ways of understanding the knowledge constructed through contemporary dance, and in particular with regard to the legacy from the choreographer William Forsythe. Drawing on interviews with dancers from Forsythe’s company, the documentary builds on accounts from neurologists and anthropologists, as well as other choreographers. Maurissens’s research shows that everything we are is an archive. The body can remember what the head cannot. Hence, it is possible to locate kinetic knowledge, write about it, and transmit it.

⁶ This refers to Simone de Beauvoir famously stated phrase, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (1949/2011, p. 330).

⁷ see the documentation of the process of making the piece in the online repository in the Research Catalogue: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/55919/461904>.

choreography allowed me to start developing an identity which, again, was less defined by tradition than by the situation in which I choose to act.

I started learning the *đàn tranh* when I was eight. I can see how my experience of being in the world is deeply rooted in a perspective seen with, and through, my instrument. My body has been socialized into behaviours typical of a traditional music performer, and in many ways into behaviours very specific to performing the *đàn tranh*. Importantly, this also immediately assumes that the performer is female. That is one of my body layers which I can identify most and feel most confident about. Now, when Fahlin asked me to do something with my instrument that I had never done before, and later, when she asked me to move without the instrument, I felt so clumsy, so disabled. In the first workshop, I experienced the extent to which my skills as a performer are situated in particular contexts, like a concert hall, and bound to particular tools, like my *đàn tranh*. In the end of this exercise, which was part of the workshop, I had totally forgotten what I was supposed to do—finding new movements and not to be playing—but instead, I immediately fell into the habit of normal playing. I believe that the difficulty I experienced in expressing myself through movement alone may be understood through a reflexive analysis of my body archive as a female musician. She wrote in one email to me:

"I think a lot about a many-layered body, and that they exist within oneself, not hierarchically, but as an archive where one can move back and forth between experiences of how one has been, that which is contained within who we are now. Within this archive there are deformations of the body, and maybe that is the only thing that exists. The “what we do” deforms us, or forms us, and through, and in, that body we meet new phases in life which in turn deforms us, so in the end we’re a walking archive." (Fahlin, 2014, personal conversation)

Fig. 3: Workshop at Weld studio, Stockholm 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

The possibility of “moving back and forth” within this archive seems to be an important starting point for this work, but also how these continual “deformations” in the archive are recorded. The choreographer André Lepecki refers to the Foucauldian notion of the archive, as a “general system of formation and transformation of statements” (1972, p. 130). Lepecki argues that, similarly, “choreography is also a dynamic system of transmission and of transformation, an archival-corporeal system that also turns statements into corporeal events and kinetic things” (Lepecki, 2010, p. 37). To Lepecki, the performer’s body is not a closed archive, but rather as site for transformation, a site for rewriting experience, through performance.

Fig. 4: The *Vodou-đàn tranh*

At the heart of the inquiry in *Vodou Vibrations* lies the question of how a female performer can challenge her body archive and aim for a bodily identity which draws on other conventions and possibilities. What are the constraints that I, as a female Vietnamese musician, had to overcome in order to create new choreographies?

In Vietnam, it is essential for a musician, learning to play the *đàn tranh*, that each component of the sound production is practiced in a manner that results in a gracious and beautiful performance.⁸ It is also a matter of shaping the body of the performer to fit a certain set of gendered norms and ideals. Hence, if the musician is female, the grace and beauty implied is of a different nature than if the student had been male. However, in *Vodou Vibrations* Fahlin and I were looking for movements that were conceived outside of that cultural framework. We sought out movement that demanded effort in performance, and which also clearly projected this effort, like in the choreography when I am crawling on the floor like an insect, only allowing elbows and toes to touch the ground.

Video 3: Excerpt from *Vodou Vibrations*.

Sometimes Fahlin's gaze adopted an outsider perspective, when looking at my performance on the *đàn tranh*. This gaze, uninformed by tradition, also created material for the piece. She saw my *đàn tranh* fingers with plectrums as what she called "the deformed *đàn tranh* fingers" and she imagined them as a "symbolic threat", with a potential for violence. Viewed from inside this performance culture, the plectrums are understood as tonally necessary and integrated into the pleasant image of the female performer. Still, the conceivably threatening and aggressive quality of the plucking hand equipped with sharp-looking plectrums, was something we wished to explore. We decided to make a film with close-ups of finger movement: Giant fingers with plectrums, now independently "experiencing other ways of being in the world" (Fahlin, personal communication, 2017). We also recorded the sound of the finger plectrums scratching different surfaces, which became the material for electronic music in this scene. The video was designed to be projected onto two walls in a corner of the room, making specific use of the possibility of the hands entering on either side. In the piece, this video of giant hands was shown as a contrasting layer to my live ritual performance of female everyday movement (she looks so small compared to the giant hands), combing her hair, serving the sole purpose of "beauty". For making this video, in the workshops, I spent a lot of time working differently with my hands, observing my own hands, my fingers and their movements (often performing without an instrument) from a new perspective. This allow me to see my hands as external objects, and not as the core representation of my identity as a *đàn tranh* player. In the process of making this video, we also aimed to find hand movements that were more violent and threatening, rather than graceful and light.

Video 4: Excerpt from *Vodou Vibrations*.

In the workshops for *Vodou Vibrations*, Fahlin and I kept experimenting with ways of countering common habits in my relation to my instrument, in the search for new approaches. The point of departure was the creation of choreography that would challenge my habitual movement, but also to counter the conventional image of a female Vietnamese traditional music performer, and *vodou-đàn tranh* was created from one of those workshop. The prepared *vodou-đàn tranh* was like a new instrument to me, and the hand gestures I used were devised to be violent and threatening. For the preparations, I used a nail, a paper-cutting knife, two bolts, a long metal knitting needle and three plastic fasteners. We found these tools to be sonically and visually effective, but

⁸ Numerous examples of this kind of choreography are found on Youtube. For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WNdKyj5gXM>

perhaps their most important function was to disconnect me from my encultured behaviours as a traditional music performer. Fahlin fixed a sequence of hand movements, and from that starting point, I worked with the sound of the prepared instrument, using the sequence of hand movements as a score to improvise on. With the idea of placing the instrument in a standing position on a table, which would then allow it to cover my body if I were to stand behind it, the audience could only see my hands, not my face, nor my body. Moreover, they could hear the instrument, and sometimes my voice, spoken into the sound hole on the back of the instrument. The *đàn tranh* and I merged; the *đàn tranh* became my body and my face. Or, to describe it differently, the instrument now had human hands and a human voice. The scene disconnected from all behaviours I had learnt in *đàn tranh* playing. By placing the instrument in this position, the communicative gestures typical of traditional *đàn tranh* playing were altered. In traditional music, the *đàn tranh* is normally presented as a symbol of softness, tenderness, and peace. In this scenario, from a distance, the viewer could only see two hands moving across the instrument, playing with dangerous-looking tools and producing peculiar sounds.

Video 5: Excerpt from *Vodou Vibrations*.

The discussions I had with Fahlin while working on the piece often addressed memories connected to my identity as a Vietnamese woman. I once referred to a childhood event from my life in Mai Dịch at the outskirts of Hà Nội, which captures the experience of being both subject and object in a certain action, and how this can be the root cause for a girl to lose her sense of how to even walk properly. I told Fahlin a story, from when I was living in Vietnam as a teenager, of a “game” which only boys enjoyed even if it also required a girl to make the game work. When a girl walked past a group of boys by chance, sometimes the boys would stop talking, look at the girl, wait until she came closer, and then start counting in sync with her steps: “one-two-one-two-one-two”. The girl might not notice it at first, but then, sooner or later, she would recognize their attention. Then, the girl, very often, would blush, reacting either by walking faster, running, or trying to walk out of sync with the counting. That could make her right foot step on her left foot sometimes, or vice versa.

Fig. 5: Nguyễn Thanh Thủy in an outdoor setting for a DVD recording, Vietnam, 2001. Photo by Ngô Trà My.

I have been thinking of this reaction cycle and the awareness of being watched (as a woman, by the male gaze) while working on this piece. Here, by noticing that she is “being looked at” a woman forgets that she has a “real” body, not just an image body. As Sobchack noted, “the more aware we are of ourselves as the ‘cultural artifacts’, ‘symbolic fragments’ and ‘made things’ that are images, the less we seem to sense the intentional complexity and richness of the corporeal existence that substantiates them” (Sobchack, quoted in Warr & Jones, 2000, p.41).

Iris Young (1980) discusses the characteristic features of “throwing like a girl” with reference to Erwin Straus’ classic observations of what he thought to be a biological, rather than acquired, characteristic feature. Young takes this example as point of departure for an inquiry which is built largely on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, and from this perspective Young suggests that “it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a

subject to its world. Thus focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence” (Young, 1980, p. 140). A core observation in Young’s paper is how “feminine existence” is negatively defined by the socially transmitted imperatives not to take up space, not to engage the whole body in physical activity and not to fully project physical intention in the moment of action.

While the little story above about my childhood never became part of the piece, it certainly does reflect some of my gendered habitus and the constraints put on the potential for movement of a Vietnamese woman. Another personal memory, referenced at the outset in this paper, did become the source for one of the scenes in *Vodou Vibrations*. By referring directly to some formational personal experiences, the creation of the choreography also became an exploration, and indeed a rewriting, of my body archive. But this rewriting would also take shape through our revisiting other ancient Vietnamese traditions, and hence, the novel identity which began to emerge was not merely that of a modernized, or westernized, woman, but that of a differently grounded Vietnamese performer.

Video 6: Excerpt from *Vodou Vibrations*.

In this scene, I was sitting on a raft playing my instrument in front of a video projection depicting a woman carrying a big bundle in slow motion.⁹ We projected the video so that my shadow would be displayed on the screen, a visual layer to connect the choreography with the projection. In this scene I attempted to expand the potential of my body movement and for this purpose I used hand movements specific to *Tuồng*,¹⁰ called *loan*, in order to obtain movement qualities that were not restricted by the “feminine existence” in Vietnamese traditional music. *Loan* is often used to manage two swords, and I adapted these movement sets to a performance with two bows. I also created a musical development by using the bows for more percussive playing. Towards the end, this music was transformed into a long sustained sound. We imagined this final part as played while “floating under the water”, with the *đàn tranh* lifted by hands and feet while I was still bowing it.

In this part I revisited traditional Vietnamese theatre with the purpose of questioning the commercialised and commodified image of female musicians that is projected in today’s performance culture in Vietnam. If this scene can be seen as a representation of my fear of falling in the water, and how my fears have now turned to actually trying to stay afloat and still holding the instrument in the stream, then what is the role of my body in this choreography? Through this active resistance of my habitus, and the attempt to engage my body in a choreography which deforms the “feminine existence”, *Vodou Vibrations* becomes a critique of the traditional musical culture in my home country. The process of making the piece could perhaps constitute an example of how conceptually driven performance art and choreography “can consciously engage in a physical training that seeks to resist oppressive ideologies concerning women and their body in performance, effectively challenging the terms of their own representation” (Albright, 1997, p. 94). *Vodou Vibrations* certainly forced me

⁹ As part of the choreography in the piece, as well as in this film, I carry large bundles, as an exploration of the burdens of everyday life in Vietnam experienced by women working in the streets of Hà Nội.

¹⁰ Also called *Hát Tuồng* or *Hát Bội*, is a form of Vietnamese theatre. *Tuồng* is often referred to as classical “Vietnamese opera” influenced by Chinese opera and became very popular in Vietnam during the Nguyễn dynasty in the 19th century.

to grapple with many different kinds of choreography, providing methods for creating a transfer of all the knowledge into my performer's body. I argue that this can be seen as a way for me to re-write my body archive—and thereby creating tools for me to perform differently.¹¹ If carried out with repeated¹² and relentless energy, such actions might eventually deform the archive and result in new hybrid identities.

¹¹ For me, “performing differently” was a discovery of a critical, and also political, dimension in musical performance. The phrase is found in my analysis of the creation of my individual choreography in a different piece, *Inside/Outside* (see further Nguyễn, 2019, pp. 44–49).

¹² As proposed by Butler, the repetition of gendered identity can be countered, suggesting “the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

References

- Albright, A. C. (1997). *Choreographing difference: The body and identity in contemporary dance*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
- Butler, J. (1990/1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949/2011). *The second sex*. New York, NY: Random House.
- De Preester, H. (2007). To perform the layered body: a short exploration of the body in performance. *Janus Head*, 9(2), 349-383.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foster, S. L. (1998). Choreographies of gender. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 24(1), 1-33.
- Gallagher, S. & Cole, J. (1995). Body schema and body image in a deafferented subject. *Journal of Mind & Behavior*, 16(4), 369-389.
- Halstead, J. (2005). The night Mrs Baker made history: Conducting, display and the interruption of masculinity. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16(2), 222-235.
- Lepecki, A. (2010). The body as archive: Will to re-enact and the afterlives of dances. *Dance Research Journal*, 42(2), 28-48.
- Maurissens, M. (2016). *The body as Archive*. Documentation film. Accessed 6 March 2020. <http://www.thebodyasarchive.com/>.
- Nguyễn, T. (2019). *The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music*. (Doctoral Studies and Research in the Fine and Performing Arts). Malmö: Malmö Academy of Music, Lund University.
- Pitron, V. & De Vignemont, F. (2017). Beyond differences between the body schema and the body image: insights from body hallucinations. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 53, 115-121.
- Warr, T. & Jones, A. (2000). *The artist's body*. New York, NY: Phaidon.
- Young, I. (1980). Throwing like a girl. *Human Studies*, 3, 137-156.