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Between chance and choice: Reflections on the practice of Viewpoints¹

Guilherme Meletti Yazbek²

Abstract

This reflective and testimonial article aims to combine the author's personal concerns and his academic research. It arises both from his experience as a facilitator of the Viewpoints practice at the Experimental Center for Performing Arts at Sesi (Núcleo Experimental de Artes Cênicas do Sesi) in São Paulo and from an inquiry into aesthetic issues from the 1960s and 1970s, primarily in New York. Furthermore, the author considers conceptual, philosophical, and practical issues in two books. *Firstly, The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, and *secondly, Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, by Mary Overlie. As these reflections are woven together, the study also leads us across the thoughts of authors such as Miriam Rinaldi, John Cage, and Sally Banes, among others.

Keywords: Actor's training. Anne Bogart. Improvisation. Mary Overlie. Theater's pedagogy.

Entre o acaso e a escolha: Reflexões acerca da prática do Viewpoints

Resumo

O presente artigo, de caráter reflexivo e testemunhal, teve como objetivo o cruzamento de inquietações pessoais do autor — decorrentes de sua experiência enquanto condutor da prática do Viewpoints no contexto do Núcleo Experimental de Artes Cênicas do Sesi, em São Paulo — com questões estéticas manifestadas nas décadas de 1960 e 1970, principalmente em Nova Iorque, bem como com questões conceituais, filosóficas e de ordem prática presentes em *O Livro dos Viewpoints: um guia prático para viewpoints e composição*, de Anne Bogart e Tina Landau, e *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, de Mary Overlie. Na tessitura das reflexões, atravessaram também pensamentos de autores como Miriam Rinaldi, John Cage e Sally Banes, entre outros.

Palavras-chave: Anne Bogart. Formação do ator. Improvisação. Mary Overlie. Pedagogia do teatro.

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Entre el azar y la elección: Reflexiones sobre la práctica de Viewpoints

Resumen

El presente artículo, de carácter reflexivo y testimonial, tuvo como objetivo cruzar las inquietudes personales del autor—surgidas de su experiencia como conductor de la práctica de Viewpoints en el contexto del Centro Experimental de Artes Escénicas del Sesi (Núcleo Experimental de Artes Cênicas do Sesi), en São Paulo—con las problemáticas estéticas presentes en las décadas de 1960 y 1970, principalmente en Nueva York, así como con cuestiones conceptuales, filosóficas y prácticas en *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*, de Anne Bogart y Tina Landau, y *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, de Mary Overlie. En la tejeduría de las reflexiones también se cruzaron pensamientos de autores como Miriam Rinaldi, John Cage y Sally Banes, entre otros.

Palabras clave: Anne Bogart. Formación actoral. Improvisación. Mary Overlie. Pedagogía del teatro.



The Viewpoints approach both dance and theater as physical entities akin to natural landscapes that can be entered and traversed. [...] The Viewpoints is dedicated to reading the stage as a force of nature.

(Overlie, 2016, p.VII)

The purpose of this article, which is both reflective and testimonial, is to combine personal concerns, regarding Viewpoints, aesthetic issues manifested in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in New York, and conceptual, philosophical and practical issues present in two books. Firstly, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau—published in English in 2005 and in Portuguese in 2017—and secondly, *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, by Mary Overlie—published in 2016 and not yet translated into Portuguese.

The reflections gathered here are mostly derived from my personal teaching experience facilitating the practice of Viewpoints at the Experimental Center for Performing Arts at Sesi (Núcleo Experimental de Artes Cênicas do Sesi), in São Paulo—an annual free acting course for those with prior technical or university education, aged 18 to 27 years old. I have been conducting the practice in this context since 2018, in partnership with Murillo Basso and under the supervision of Miriam Rinaldi. Over ten months, each group experiences continuous Viewpoints training, in addition to other artistic-pedagogical practices.

For this article, I revisited notebooks from different periods of my Viewpoints experience as a facilitator and also as an actor in training, in this case focusing on the SITI Company intensive summer course with Will Bond and Gian-Murray Gianino, in 2019.³

The study is presented in six parts below.

³ This is exclusively my experience. Bond and Gianino, actors from the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI Company), a theater company founded in 1992 by Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, conducted the course. Traditionally, company training—whether internal or open to the public—lasts for three hours per day and is conducted by two actors or actresses from the company, one responsible for the first half, with training in the Suzuki technique, and another responsible for the second half, with Viewpoints.



The simplest is the most complex

In the chapter of The Viewpoints Book entitled “How to begin?”, Bogart and Landau (2005) list the physical requirements for practicing Viewpoints and then explain some precepts and introductory exercises prior to the practice of the nine viewpoints itself.⁴ These are the “basic concepts behind Viewpoints” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 22). As happens throughout the book, the conceptual and philosophical issues of the practice are integrated into the instructions for the exercises, with only a few purely argumentative parts. In this “practical guide”, the theory is often exposed in the experiences suggested and better understood in action.

In the chapter in question, the authors make use of the phrase “If you can’t say it, point to it”, by Wittgenstein, clarifying precisely that the practices point more to the Viewpoints principles than their theoretical exposure. Consequently, one understands that the precepts to begin Viewpoints training are especially difficult to explain. What actually precedes the practice of the nine viewpoints—and thus is the most fundamental, basic and “simple”—is perhaps the most difficult to explain and yet of utmost importance to practice. Therefore, paradoxically, the simplest is the most complex.

I will now shed light on the principles of *peripheral vision*, *soft focus*, *extraordinary listening* and *awareness*. The hypothesis proposed here is that these principles refer almost to the same issue, seen from different angles. Pedagogically speaking, they point to the same objective: scenic presence. Indeed, when conducting the practice of Viewpoints, I realized that evoking one or another expression during the exercises is directly linked to the facilitator’s perception of the path of each performer in training. It is therefore a didactic issue. In a given situation, it is of greater value for each performer when the conductor evokes a specific image—“Activate peripheral vision”, “Work with soft focus”, “Listen with your whole body”, “Pay attention to what’s already happening”—but the goal is

⁴ The reflections in this article focus on the relationship of the bodies at play with each other and with space, hence the nine physical viewpoints mentioned. The vocal viewpoints are not within the scope of the reflections gathered here, although these are also present in my pedagogical practice.



much the same.

Peripheral vision, as the expression itself explains, is the action of activating the edges of the field of vision, thus de-hierarching it and paying attention to all the information that comes through the gaze, not restricting it to the center of one's vision or to what is immediately in front of the viewer. However, in *The Viewpoints Book's* exercise called "Peripheral Vision", the authors indicate the importance of soft focus during practice. A soft and relaxed look concerns non-fixation on a single point. It allows information from the surrounding space and the people at play to arrive naturally at the viewer, without them having to search for it avidly.

In itself, the expression soft focus is almost contradictory as it unites the adjective *soft*—which, in the situation, evokes relaxation and amplitude—with the noun *focus*, center of attention, cut, narrowing of vision. In short, *soft focus* could be considered a "broad cut"; thus an oxymoron. This principle can be understood as a more receptive than active gaze, as the authors explain, which is a definition that is usually clearer and more useful for practitioners.

These two concepts form a small circuit in which one uses soft focus in order to activate *peripheral vision*. However the purpose of *soft focus* is a relationship to the environment with a non-hierarchical view, which again characterizes *peripheral vision*. In short, it would be a matter of practicing one to achieve the other, and vice versa. Therefore both concepts would be very close, if not coinciding. However, the circuit I suggest is not limited to these two terms. In the aforementioned exercise, there is an instruction for participants to close their eyes and realize that their bodies receive information through more senses than vision. This activation of the entire perceptual system for receiving and reading the world around us is precisely the definition of the concept of *extraordinary listening*. Not limited to the action of listening, *extraordinary listening* is "to listen with the whole body, with the entire being", "listening with the whole body without an idea of the result", leaving room for the unknown. Furthermore, when explaining the concept of *soft focus*, Bogart and Landau also bring it closer to *extraordinary listening* by stating that "by taking the pressure off the eyes to be the dominant and primary information gatherer, the whole body starts to listen and gather information in new



and more sensitized ways” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p.31-33).

Finally, *ongoing awareness of others in time and space* would be included in this circuit of precepts for the practice of Viewpoints, and it would be the result of the three concepts already explained. In short, it is about activating *peripheral vision* through *soft focus* in order, with *extraordinary listening*, to be continuously *aware* of all the surrounding space and, therefore, present both spatially and temporally. In Viewpoints, one practices being at play, always in a relationship to something, and this provides a path to appease the ego—or the idea of genius—and crystallized wishes, in favor of a fine and sensitive connection with the partners with whom you interact and share a space.

Furthermore, as the space that surrounds oneself is also occupied by other bodies, it is an ever-changing space. That is why the four skills discussed are continuous and inexhaustible, and that is why I say that the simplest is the most complex: it is with them that we start but it is also to them that we always return.

“But, can I look to the side?”

This question, which one usually hears from people who are starting their training in Viewpoints, largely stems from a preconceived idea about the technique—at least in Brazil, I can affirm. This idea is that Viewpoints is rather cold and that performers border on automatism when practicing it, without even being able to look to the side. But this is an untruth, I can already say from the outset. Nevertheless, I am interested in trying to understand where this thought possibly comes from historically.

About the action of gazing in Viewpoints, it is important to clarify: it is free. *Soft focus* and *peripheral vision* aim precisely at a freer, wider gaze, which is thus able to receive a range of information from the entire surrounding space rather than a single piece of fixed (and therefore hierarchical) information in the center of the field of vision.

That said, repeatedly looking to the side to check whether something is being done “right”—or at the precise moment—is not a productive attitude for training



and is hence even cited in the good-humored list of “bad habits and fallback positions”, which Bogart and Landau present. There are, however, a numerous range of distinct spatial dynamics in the Viewpoints practice.

On the one hand, initial training in unison and also Lane Work, for example, are very rigorous practices in terms of frontality and activation of the entire sensory apparatus. In these cases it is an exercise (and a challenge!) to keep looking ahead and seek to activate *peripheral vision* and *extraordinary listening*. Even so, one has to be careful not to stiffen one’s eyes too much and turn into an automaton—a figure that seems to haunt Viewpoints.

On the other hand, in practices such as The Flow, Grid Work or Open Viewpoints, just to name a few, the relationship is less focused on frontality. In these dynamics, three-dimensionality, multiple directions and even a higher degree of play—or freedom in creation—are factors that invite a more detached gaze. This, by the way, usually happens naturally.

In general, it is worth bearing in mind that working with the gaze is a path of research and self-knowledge. It is not a formula, nor a formal determination, but a pedagogical principle. The appeasement of both gaze and facial expression is related to their removal from a superior position that they usually have in realistic style interpretations, providing a path of de-hierarchization of parts of the body and paths for the scenic play.

Nevertheless, it is possible to recognize a hypothetical historical narrative to justify this recurrent confusion about the gaze in the practice of Viewpoints. This question would be, by the way, just one symptom of another broader question that will be addressed later on: the rules of the game. Many works of postmodern North American dance—in the 1960s, mainly in New York and centered around the Judson Dance Theater—, the Viewpoints’ “place of birth”, actually contained a degree of coolness because to different extents they were opposing the highly expressive, emotional, and psychological charge of modern dance.

Yvonne Rainer, one of Judson’s central figures, theoretically synthesized her “aesthetics of refusal”⁵ in the iconic *No Manifesto* in 1965. As for her artistic

⁵ The expression, by Sally Banes, is quoted in “What is a contemporary dance? Yvonne Rainer” (Gil, 2004).



creation, it is worth remembering Trio A, 1966, part of *The Mind is a Muscle*. In this short dance with interconnected movements with an apparently everyday quality, there is a very clear rule defined by the choreographer: dancers must never look at the audience, ever. As Rainer clarifies (1995, p.271), “either the gaze was averted or the head was engaged in movement. The desired effect was a worklike rather than exhibitionlike presentation”.

“‘We didn't want to emote’, Paxton explains [in relation to the whole dance scene at that moment]. ‘On the other hand, the glazed look was obviously becoming or had already become a cliché’” (Banes, 1993, p.43). One can conclude that the search for the almost apathetic neutrality of the face in so many works of the period is possibly the reason for the generalization that the practice of Viewpoints leads to a mechanical, automatic attitude. Although in that period issues of gaze and coldness were aesthetic concerns of the generation, today they are not a priority, much less with regards to Viewpoints, even though it is a technique intrinsically linked to post-modern dance in its *status nascendi*.

Scores, Improvisation and Contemplation

To understand the genesis of Viewpoints, it is necessary to consider Mary Overlie's arrival in New York in the 1970s. The 1960s was marked by the influence of John Cage in many spheres of art, which can be characterized, in short, by the influx of Zen Buddhist philosophy, interdisciplinarity⁶ and artistic creation through scores, chance methods and indeterminacy. In the 1970s, improvisation was a tonic of the New York dance and theatre scene. The Grand Union (1970-1976), an improvisation collective, was a direct result of the Judson Dance Theater, having as an intermediate point the *Continuous Project Altered Daily project*, led by Yvonne Rainer and presented in 1970 at the Whitney Museum.

It was in this context that Overlie arrived in New York and established a partnership with Barbara Dilley, mainly, who was directly responsible for her decision to live there, and with whom, in 1972, she formed the improvisation group

⁶ Or even by indiscipline, as Almeida and Olinto (2017) infer, through the multiple deviant propositions of Cage, radically outside the established rules and standards.



The Natural History of The American Dancer along with five other dancers. Overlie (2016) states that it was in this context that she saw the six viewpoints emerge, in silent rehearsals in the iconic building at 112 Greene Street, from the physical engagement with dance in the absence of verbal communication. The choreographer also points out the importance, at that time, of exchanges between artists of different artistic languages—almost always under the tone of deconstruction—in partnership projects, the enjoyment of works or even more personal exchanges, including intimate ones.

Another partnership established by Overlie and often cited in her book was that with Steve Paxton, who in the same year of 1972 began to develop Contact Improvisation—a technique used by Overlie in her classes at NYU’s Experimental Theater Wing along with Hamilton Floor Barre⁷. Barbara Dilley, in 1974, was hired as a teacher at Naropa University, and later developed her Contemplative Dance Practice, a research method bringing dance and meditation closer to each other. At the time, meditation, contemplation and seeking to reconnect with Nature were in vogue. Mary Overlie herself studied Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and even became a teacher of the practice, a factor that influenced her conception of the Six Viewpoints. One can also recall Anna Haprin’s practices of contemplating nature’s elements on her deck outside San Francisco and Simone Forti who observed the animals on her visits to the Giardino Zoologico di Roma, in a brief period when she returned to Italy.

Many *avant garde* dances of that period oscillated between the following three disparate but possibly complementary paths of creation: 1) choreographic organization based on scores (plus chance methods and indeterminacy), 2) improvisation, and 3) contemplation (i.e. the meditative spirit). Such avenues of creation—which in themselves bring together broader philosophical and political issues—were immersed in the *zeitgeist* of the *sixties*, with its intense wave of orientalism, countless utopian social movements fighting for freedom and equality

⁷ Overlie (2016) explains that she added to the practice of Viewpoints other body practices that were not formal/formatted (such as classical ballet or even some modern dance techniques), but that worked through sensations. The choreographer also cites Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s Body-Mind Centering.



(social, gender, racial) and anti-violence demonstrations against the Vietnam War.⁸

Specifically regarding Judson, their greatest interest was in the choreographic creation process based on the notions arising from John Cage of score and chance—keynotes of Robert Dunn’s course on composition for choreographers—and on the expansion of what could be considered dance or even art. Between 1962 and 1964, of the sixteen dance concerts presented to the public in the Judson context, only one focused on improvisation: *Concert #14*, on April 27, 1964.

Starting from this brief scheme of North American avant garde dance in the 1960s and 1970s, one can analyze improvisation in Viewpoints by analogy, noticing the following three energies or driving forces: 1) tasks (scores), rules, the Apollonian, cold element; 2) improvisation, play, the Dionysian, hot element and 3) the contemplative path.

Miriam Rinaldi, in her doctoral thesis entitled “Theory and Practice of Viewpoints” (2016), analyses the period in which Mary Overlie *originated* Viewpoints—the choreographer preferred the term “originated”, rather than saying she had invented it. In the aesthetic field, starting from the visual arts, Rinaldi locates the aforementioned driving forces (which this article organizes in a slightly different way) into two strands of North American art of the period: minimalism on one side and action painting with its *all over* effect on the another (this being a recognized antecedent to Allan Kaprow’s happenings).

[...] on the one hand, Allan Kaprow’s organic art, without distinct boundaries between life and artwork, and on the other hand, the impartial art of the minimalists, focused above all on reception and the role of the spectator as seen in Robert Morris’ texts and experiments. These extremes epitomize the spirit of an era and its aspirations in an exemplary way, fomenting fertile ground for understanding the context and emergence of the Viewpoints technique (Rinaldi, 2016, p.35 – quote translated by G.M. Yazbek).

Although it is usually thought of as a visually cold and rational art—which it is— minimalism is approached by Rinaldi through the concept of *presentness*, as

⁸ Rinaldi (2016) presents a clear overview of the *sixties* (Richard Schechner’s term whose scope extends beyond the 1960s) in New York.



described by Robert Morris in “The Present Tense of Space”, 1978. Rinaldi, actress and researcher, sheds light on the question of reception, the kinesthetic involvement of the spectator when in the presence of a minimalist work and its relationship not only with the dimensions of time and space, but also with memory. As shown by Rinaldi (2016), Morris argues that the spectator, when faced with a work of art devoid of theme and details, dives into himself, in a mnemonic exercise that is sometimes abysmal. This, transposed to improvisation in Viewpoints—also sometimes “emptied” of a theme or easily perceptible emotions—and for the practitioners themselves, seems to clarify the meditative dimension exposed above, which entails less action and more contemplation.

If improvisation in Viewpoints is sometimes labeled as cold due to its strict rules and minimalist character, this is just one side of the coin. Improvisation can—and should—have warmth, elan, and a playful spirit! A smile or a random tear, like gazing, are expressive actions and can, of course, be part of improvisation. However, due attention must be paid to the recognition of patterns or even vices of the actor when on stage (or improvising). Thus, Viewpoints is a powerful growth tool and “a gauge for your own strengths and weaknesses, for discovering how you are free and how you are inhibited, what your own patterns and habits are” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p.19-20).

The rules and the game. The rules of the game

The Viewpoints improvisation system, mainly as organized by Bogart and Landau, configures what Trisha Brown called, in the early 1960s, structured improvisation:

[when] in the beginning you set a structure and decide to deal with X, Y, and Z materials in a certain way, nail it down even further and say you can only walk forward, you cannot use your voice or you have to do 195 gestures before you hit the wall at the other end of the room, that is an improvisation within set boundaries (Banes, 1993, p.20).

Such a collocation meets the deconstructionist spirit that Mary Overlie recognized in the New York art scene when she arrived and that is pointed out by

Rinaldi (2016) in the artistic research of the so-called minimalists and in their influence on the world of dance. The originator of the Six Viewpoints clearly states how the six points of view she named SSTEMS—*space, shape, time, emotion, movement, story*⁹— are the basic materials of a deconstructed theater. According to Overlie, deconstruction, a key term in postmodernism, is the philosophical basis for the practice of Viewpoints.

Overlie's improvisational practice proposes scenic creation through the *particalization*¹⁰ and meticulous examination of components, a constant path of deconstruction and reintegration of materials. According to her, "the heart of Postmodernism rests in the microscopic activity of differentiation" (Overlie, 2016, p.87), an assertion anchored in terms of the philosophy of difference and which supports the notion of *news of a difference*, which was dear to Overlie.

The in-depth study of scenic presence and the elements that make up a scene, but also of the subtle nuances, various small differences and transformations, is only possible due to the existence of rules. A totally free improvisation, without clear guidelines, would not allow the degree of deepening in the unraveling of the scenic practice as structured improvisation does. This explains Viewpoints' radical minimalism, its reductionist spirit and its well-defined rules; the apparent limitations. "But I can only walk and nothing else?" Yes, in certain exercises or improvisations, the only vocabulary for action is walking, and that's not little. It is a matter of calibrating attention, perceiving nuances; a matter of noticing the slightest differences, as Overlie invites us to. It is not, therefore, about limiting the game, but about reducing and *particalizing* the parameters in order to reach a greater level of depth and detail.

Every game has rules, and it is the game that has them. They don't own the game. When facilitating at the Experimental Center, the issue of disobedience to the rules emerged in conversations with the practitioners countless times, and it is truly a relevant issue. Nonetheless, usually when someone asks "Was it okay

⁹ Overlie's Six Viewpoints will be presented throughout the article in *italics* to differentiate from the nine viewpoints of Bogart and Landau.

¹⁰ Overlie states that the term *particalization* should be used as an extension of the noun "particle" rather than as the action of making something "particular" or "individual"—even though both notions can be intertwined.



that we broke the rules?”, a colleague presents a complementary argument: “But we were so connected! It was a collective decision”. The exact words might vary slightly but they almost always have the same meaning. When all is said and done, are the rules important? Yes, they are essential. However, as already stated, they serve the game and not the other way around.

The Viewpoints game is about awareness, connecting with the collective, perceiving events taking place with certain bodies in a certain space and time in a refined manner. “The central issue in all Viewpoints improvisations is the search for consent. Without speaking, the group finds a way to playfully and artfully solve the task” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p.85).

With regard to the rules, I refer to two artists who were direct influences on the North American dance and theater scene in the second half of the 20th century. Both Anna Halprin and John Cage brought rules, generally speaking, to their artistic practice as ways of creation in opposition to genius, virtuosity and even expressiveness, aiming at bringing art closer to life. What is being generically referred to as rules were by both artists referred to as “scores”, which are originally musical scores—graphic representations that give rise to songs. However each artist faced scores with specificities.

In the case of Halprin, I believe that the procedure is best understood when the term “task” is used. The search for movements, for the choreographer, could start with tasks as simple as carrying a trunk or a person, or observing an element of nature and seeking to translate this with the body. The focus would be on the perception of what was happening with the body when performing these tasks, rather than on any judgment or aesthetic intention given a priori. Halprin’s creation was basically based on improvisation, with different degrees of structure. And even when formalizing choreographic works, these were fundamentally organized by tasks—therefore, still with a degree of improvisation—bringing art closer to life and making people see (and live) as, strictly speaking, anything could become dance.

In the iconic *Paredes and Changes* (1965), tasks were actions as ordinary as e.g. walking, running, undressing and dressing again at certain times, or tearing up large amounts of brown paper and throwing the pieces in the air. In line with what



Halprin has already stated in many forms, tasks may tell you what to do but they don't tell you *how to* do it, let alone *what you will feel* while carrying out the task. This, in my view, is in line with the use of tasks while practicing Viewpoints. It is primarily about how a collective achieves a certain objective based on the refined *awareness* and connection of individuals. The meanings and sensations resulting from the scenic actions arise from the meticulous consciousness with which they are performed, displacing them from everyday time-space.

In the case of Cage and Robert Dunn, the notion of score is mostly (but not exclusively) a form of “graphic notation”, but not limited to the ordering of musical notes: “a particular type of musical notation that no longer necessarily featured musical notes on their staves. These scores featured drawings, graphic notations, such as dots or lines, and also numbers and words” (Almeida and Olinto, 2017, p. 23 – quote translated by G.M. Yazbek).

Sally Banes (1993) explains that Dunn, in his composition workshop for choreographers, which took place between 1960 and 1962 and which gave rise to Judson, proposed choreographic creations based on the use of scores, not because of their melodies, but for their rhythmic time-structures, in the wake of Cage's emphasis on durations. Based on this logic, other scores, drawings, graphics, maps, among others, served as a starting point for the creations. However, at times Dunn's scores could indeed be understood as tasks (and not graphical notations, as argued); for example, when assignments like “Do a six-minute dance” or “Make a five-minute dance in half an hour” were proposed by the teacher.

A score was often made by a choreographer so that someone else could dance from it, which reiterates the necessary self-sufficiency of the object, itself, of the words and/or images gathered there. In the Judson context, Yvonne Rainer, among others, drew topographic patterns plus numbers and words designating actions. Elaine Summers even used a drawing of her son as a score for a dance performed by Ruth Emerson. The latter developed a graphic (a score) for *Narrative*, a collective choreography in three parts:

Each dancer was given a score that indicated walking patterns [Viewpoints' topography], focus, and tempo, and also cues for action



based on the other dancers' actions. The instructions are not dramatic or psychologically descriptive; they refer to abstract movements and individual focus, rather than interaction. For instance, directions to dancer B (Paxton) include the directive "Take great care never to focus on G (Rainer) or direct your movement at her." Three of the dancers walked along geometrical paths during part one: Paxton along diagonals, Dunn along a rectangle, and Summers along a circle; McDowell walked at random backwards, and Rainer walked at random sideways. The focus for each dancer was quite specific, and each one had to cue his or her tempo to the rates of the other dancers (Banes, 1993, p.41-42).

Scores have been used since the 1950s—by Cunningham, for example—in creating performance situations in front of an audience. However, in the practice of Viewpoints, scores are used as a pedagogical strategy, generating improvisational dynamics when, for example, delimiting topographies—lanes, quadrants, a grid, etc.—or delimiting actions, as in the improvisation exercise "Entrances and Exits". These examples are present in the book by Bogart and Landau. But Viewpoints is a versatile way of thinking and organizing scenic practice, and its exercises can be unfolded and recreated. "Viewpoints is an open process, not a rigid technique. We hope that this book will be for you not an end but a beginning" (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p.xi, preface).

In my practice as facilitator, for example, it is common that the dynamics of improvisation have additional assignments—we call them "collective tasks"—to be carried out in-game without prior planning. The logic of ingredients (originally from Composition) is transposed to the various dynamics of improvisation. Thus, in addition to dealing with the rules of each game, the awareness and action of the performers find themselves engaged in achieving success in various tasks such as: a long pause, a jump, a tempo apex, a diagonal, a fall, and so on, always to be carried out collectively and in unison—without an individual action indicating the moment. This compositional logic during improvisations will be resumed later, in the last part of this article.

From the historical moment of countless aesthetic, and even institutional, transformations of the Judson generation—which quickly expanded the frontiers of dance, including within more traditional cultural spaces—the rules were transposed to Viewpoints in a territory where aesthetics and pedagogy meet. The



rules exist in Viewpoints to enable a non-hierarchical path of research in which the performer's search is no longer for a previous idea or emotion to be formally resolved and becomes a playful path of discovering the expressive power of the very presence of bodies in game situations. As Overlie (2016, p.3) says, "listen and see what already exists, instead of trying to manipulate material into something that looks like art or theater or dance to you".

To close the question of the rules of the game, I evoke Cage, who in his text "Grace and Clarity", originally published as part of "Four Statements on the Dance", in *Dance Observer* magazine (1944), after defending the importance of clarity as a temporal structure—which in our line of thought would be associated with the notion of rules—says:

With clarity of rhythmic structure, grace forms a duality. Together they have a relation like that of body and soul. Clarity is cold, mathematical, inhuman, hut basic and earthy. Grace is warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, and like the air. *Grace is not here used to mean prettiness; it is used to mean the play with and against the clarity of the rhythmic structure.* The two are always present together in the best works of the time arts, endlessly, and life-givingly, opposed to each other (Cage, 1973, p. 91-92 – author's emphasis).

Nine plus six, eleven

From our experience in the intensive summer training at SITI Company, in 2019, one of the most striking things was how the conduction of the Viewpoints practice mixed the Six Viewpoints by Overlie with the nine viewpoints organized by Bogart¹¹, freely oscillating between the two systems, working with notions and exercises of both. The members of the company who were in charge of facilitating—Will Bond and Gian-Murray Gianino—seemed to enjoy with freshness, pleasure and gratitude the teachings of Mary Overlie found in her late and only book, published not long before, in 2016.

The first Viewpoints exercise proposed by Gianino was the exercise "Walking

¹¹ Aiming at fluidity of reading, from this point onwards the nine viewpoints organized by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, and continuously practiced by the Siti Company, will be referred to as "Bogart's viewpoints" or "the nine viewpoints".



and Stopping in Space” (Overlie, 2016, p.145). It was not said, in the situation, the title of the proposed exercise, nor that it was Overlie’s (and not Bogart’s, the company director), and frankly this did not seem to be an issue. The practices related to the six or nine viewpoints are similar, of course, and can even be intersected, as happened on this occasion. In the workshop, as the general practice became more advanced and the class more connected, the facilitators proposed a long sequence of Open Viewpoints sessions in which five or seven people would usually improvise for about five minutes. Within the Viewpoints technique, this exercise is the closest one gets to free improvisation. However, at each session, two viewpoints were defined as focuses and, again, both six and nine viewpoints were used, without major differentiation and, definitely, without hierarchization.

I believe that joining the viewpoints of both systems can be used in conducting practices, as long as it is enriching for the participants—and this, however, is in accordance with the subjective sensations of those leading the practice (or also practicing, of course). The limit for such a “crossover” is when the rules become unclear. In the context of Viewpoints, unclear rules do not allow for a game. The clarity of which parameters are under scrutiny, and through which dynamics, is of paramount importance.

In my practice with the Sesi Experimental Center groups, the guideline for facilitating continues to be Bogart’s nine viewpoints, as this system presents clearer practical proposals and with greater variation in difficulty—regarding focuses of attention. Such variation allows for more nuances and possibilities in the construction of didactic sequences, which is essential, especially for those conducting long-term research. However, I have been including notions proposed by Overlie in our practice, with the feeling and belief that this is enriching for practitioners.

Of the six Overlie’s viewpoints, three are very close to Bogart’s viewpoints: *space*, *shape*, and *time*. *Space* is subdivided into three of the nine viewpoints: architecture, topography, and spatial relationship. *Shape* is related to both shape and gesture of the nine viewpoints. And *time* is subdivided into four parameters:



time, duration, kinesthetic response and repetition.¹²

Of the SSTEMS, therefore, three are left: *emotion*, *movement* and *story*. *Movement*, for Overlie (2016), concerns how you feel the space from and through your movement; it concerns the ability to experience movement through sensation. This viewpoint differs a lot from Bogart's viewpoints, but, due to an intuitive rather than rational decision, it was not included in the practice. The two notions that were indeed incorporated were those of *emotion* and *story* since not coincidentally these two specific parameters are not related to creative material but to operations or perceptions.

The notion of *emotion* in the Six Viewpoints is very different from the notion of emotion for dramatic theater—a theater that stems from a dramaturgy, mostly with a fable, with its characters, intentions and pre-defined conflicts. According to Overlie, *emotion* is the presence of the performer when at play; it is an active and ever-changing self-awareness: “Becoming present is to become aware of the mind and body shifting like sands in a desert” (Overlie, 2016, p. 29). Performing their own presence, performers exist in their entirety at that given moment, thus also presenting themselves to partners or a possible audience without protection or barriers—a thinking that is close to Grotowski's *via negativa*—, allowing the performers to be seen and read in the fullness of their humanity, with their weaknesses and strengths.

The possible emotions that arise on this path, in this exercise of being present at all times, are emotions that take the performer by surprise. They are born in the fleeting moment, and not because of a conflict established in advance. Without prior planning or intention, the emotions in Overlie's conception inadvertently erupt in the performer. This is in agreement with the fact that Viewpoints deals with what is already given in the reality of the presence of certain bodies cohabiting the same space-time. In Viewpoints, it's less about intending, creating, proposing, and more about calming down, perceiving and responding.

Bogart and Landau (2005, p. 80) have a synthetic but significant statement

¹² The articulation between the two systems established here is my own inference arising both from the analysis of the theoretical framework under discussion here and from my practical experience.



about emotion (which they do not consider a viewpoint) in their book, which is also related to reflections made earlier in this article:

The gift of Viewpoints is that it leads you to, not away from, emotion. People often misunderstand the goal as being a state of neutrality and deadness as opposed to a state of aliveness, receptivity and experience. What's important to remember about Viewpoints is that, just like other "methods" of acting, the goal is to be alive and engaged onstage. The beauty of Viewpoints is that it allows us to reach this goal, not by forcing it out of ourselves, but by receiving it from others, and ourselves.

As for the viewpoint *story*, it differs from the notion of history as narrative and fable, therefore, from the notion of story for the theater with a dramatic matrix, as well as for classical ballet or even modern dance. *Story* for Overlie is synonymous with logic, with the sequencing of information.

As human beings we reflexively and successfully sort tons of information on a daily basis, formulating a living ongoing story. This material, interrogated as a natural phenomenon, turns into particles that turn into an arrangement of those particles, exposing the manipulation of logic that is the core of Story (Overlie, 2016, p.43).

In other words, our entire way of relating to the world, according to the choreographer, is through logic. For Overlie, in art, it could not happen differently, there would be an underlying logic to all works. In the case of figurative or narrative works, logic would be the story, or the theme, which is perhaps easier to understand. But even in the case of abstract artworks, there would be a logic. For example, the logic of texture, the spacing between elements, the relationship between colors, thinking about paintings; the time logic of actions or repetitions, spatial patterns, in the case of scenic works.

In the wake of Dada, John Cage, in music, and his partner Merce Cunningham, in dance, followed a path of random compositions through chance operations like the use of *I-Ching* or more prosaic methods, such as throwing dice or even tossing a coin.

Artists like Cage scoffed at the old-fashioned and confining forms of Story. These artists were trying to get the audience to pay attention to a larger sphere. They were staging an all-out attack on the dominating and hierarchical position of Story in performing arts. In defending and staking out their territory their statement was: this does not mean anything. This



statement was, and is meant, to redirect our attention to a vast array of sounds, logics, structures, spaces, movements, shapes, times, dimensions (Overlie, 2016, p.45).

Although she felt that she was part of the same generation and with artistic aspirations and intentions similar to those of Cage and others, Overlie did not agree with the issue of total absence of meaning. In her view, every work of art means something insofar as it is created through logical choices. According to her, the choice to use the term *Story* as one of her six viewpoints, and not *Logic*, would have been, therefore, almost a provocation to the anti-narrative, anti-emotion generation; a radical stance in favor of artistic creation as a conscious and logically essential act, even when abstract. “A white canvas with a black dot is dealing with logic. If the dot is centered, it has a different impact on us than if it were placed in any of the millions of other possible positions” (Overlie, 2016, p. 50).

Having clarified Overlie’s concepts, I return to the hypothesis that the viewpoint *emotion* would be less of a material that the performer deals with when at play and more something that he perceives or feels, something he is surprised by. The viewpoint *story*, on the other hand, would be a constant operation: the continuous reading of the logic of the present, the perception of differences and movements, so that choices are made against the options presented to the performer. For these reasons, I believe in the power of absorbing these two viewpoints in the improvisation system with Bogart’s nine viewpoints. Because they are less to do with materials being articulated and more related to principles to keep in mind when at play, these two viewpoints do not interfere with the rules of the different exercises/improvisations and, as I have noticed in the actors’ and actresses’ testimonies, they tend to enrich the experience of practice.

That said, one realizes that joining all fifteen viewpoints (from the two organization systems) might not be a productive path in scenic research. As already stated, the similarity or proximity between some of the fifteen viewpoints could lead to little clarity in the rules of improvisation, in dealing with the material. However, working with eleven viewpoints—Bogart’s nine plus Overlie’s *emotion and story*—has proven to be a fruitful path.



Improvisation and Composition

The Viewpoints Book, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, is subtitled “A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition”. From the outset, the authors create a differentiation: one thing is Viewpoints—“a philosophy translated into a technique” (2005, p.7) of scenic improvisation based on nine parameters or points of view—and another thing is Composition.

According to the authors, Composition is a method for creating works, for practicing the arrangement of elements in time and space. “Composition is to the creator (whether director, writer, performer, designer, etc.) what Viewpoints is to the actor: a method for practicing the art” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p.13). Of course, nothing prevents directors from also practicing Viewpoints, however Composition allows for a greater intersection with other spheres of theatrical making—lighting, sound design, dramaturgy, art direction, etc.—and with other artistic languages.

When compared to Viewpoints, Composition would be one step ahead in the matter of completion—concerning previewing and finalizing scenic actions—since the practice in Viewpoints is always an improvisation. As vocabulary, the nine viewpoints can be used in any situation¹³, but as a practice, scenic research, training for actors and actresses, they are always about improvisation dynamics.

The practice of Composition, on the other hand, has an extra degree of programming. For a Composition, the group of participating artists—remembering that here the authors aggregate all the creators—has a short time to scenically solve an assignment (a score!) or, as the authors also say, a list of ingredients. Such a list can be more closed on itself, as an exercise in scenic making, or already focused on a creation process. It is worth noting that there is always a degree of improvisation even in a Composition, since, due to the limited time of creation—an “exquisite pressure”, as the authors say—the rehearsal should never be enough

¹³ For example, during the season of a play, viewpoints can become common vocabulary for the team, e.g. “Today the show tempo was too slow”; “The architecture of this new space is different, we will have to restructure the topography of the actions”.

to actually fully determine scenic proposals . “Margin of error: margin of freedom”.¹⁴

The didactic division between Viewpoints and Composition is, in fact, a positive one, pedagogically speaking. To practice Composition, it is interesting—or even necessary—that the collective of performers is already operating with maturity and tranquility from the viewpoints. However, there is already in the practice of Viewpoints the training—in the sense of perception, sensitization and sharpening—of a *composing gaze*.

I am calling a *composing gaze* the ability or attitude to see and read—with full *awareness*¹⁵—the elements that are forming the scenic space at a given time and to respond creatively to it: sensation and reaction; perception and response. The practice of Viewpoints demands that the player at all times read the configuration of the space and the logic underlying the movements. The Viewpoints practitioner develops the ability to do and see himself doing, synchronously. As Grotowski said:

It can be read in ancient texts: We are two. *The bird who picks and the bird who looks on. The one will die, the one will live.* Busy with picking, drunk with life inside time, we forgot to *make live* the part in us which looks on. So, there is the danger to exist only inside time, and in no way outside time. To feel looked upon by this other part of yourself (the part which is as if outside time) gives another dimension. There is an I-I. [...] I-I does not mean to be cut in two but to be double. The question is to be passive in action and active in seeing (reversing the habit). Passive: to be receptive. Active: to be present (Schechner and Wolford, 1997, p. 378 – authors’ emphasis).

Similarly, Overlie always refers to the Viewpoints practitioner as an *observer/participant*. To exist within time but also outside of it, says Grotowski; to exist in space, but also outside of it, It is possible to infer. Viewpoints advocates for a performer who is present and sensitive to what is already happening—

¹⁴ Final verses of the poem “Errância” (“Wandering”), by Orides Fontela: “Only because / I falter / encounter / what is not / I sought // only because / I falter / invent / the labyrinth // the search / the thing / the cause of the / quest // just because / I miss / hit: myself / build. // Margin of / error: margin / of freedom”. [Translated by G.M. Yazbek.]

¹⁵ Returning to this article’s first reflection, where awareness includes *soft focus*, *peripheral vision* and *extraordinary listening*.



because there is strictly always something happening¹⁶. However, there is more than one existing dimension of time with regard to the performer's actions when at play; and, to clarify them, I evoke the notions of *feedforward* and *feedback*.

The simplest and most direct way of understanding *feedforward* is as the ability to foresee something that will happen in the immediate future, as one who "anticipates the necessity for action" (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 34). It is thanks to this skill that, in an improvisation, we are able to be in perfect sync with a partner in some action, causing that feeling of "Wow, it looks like this was rehearsed!". This skill is very much required for the introductory exercises of the Viewpoints practice but it is also essential later on, for more complex dynamics. Over time, when one is in constant practice of Viewpoints, feedforward becomes more and more "automatic" or "organic". In other words, it becomes part of a more intuitive, less rational body intelligence.

As for *feedback*, a better known expression since it is used in many contexts, this is a temporal remnant of the immediate past in the performer's present; it is what you get in return after an action. In an improvisation, for example, if a performer walks in a certain direction, this instigates (re)actions in the other partners at play. These actions return to the performer as spatial and kinetic data. "*Feedback* is the information and sensation that one receives as the result of an action" (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 34). If thought of in a presentation situation, *feedback* also concerns the audience's reactions.

Feedforward and *feedback* are, as the authors explain, poles or opposite and complementary energies of the scenic experience, and training is necessary to sharpen and calibrate them. Awareness—the starting and ending point of Viewpoints training—refers, therefore, to a present that, at every moment, is informed by the immediate past, but also presents a series of possible futures that are equally immediate. With regard to this opening of paths:

Viewpoints relieves the pressure to have to invent by yourself, to generate all alone, to be interesting and force creativity. [...] Viewpoints helps us

¹⁶ Here I am thinking of John Cage's statement about Robert Rauschenberg's White Paintings that "A canvas is never empty." (Cage, 1973, p. 99) and his subsequent reflection on the inexistence of silence—as a total absence of sounds—, which led to the iconic work 4'33".



trust in letting *something* occur onstage, rather than *making it occur* [...] In Viewpoints, there is no good or bad, right or wrong—there is only possibility and, later in the process, *choice*. [...] Viewpoints leads to greater *awareness*, which leads to greater *choice*, which leads to greater *freedom* (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 19 – authors’ emphasis).

There is a degree of complexity in the practice of Viewpoints, which is noticeable in the excerpt above. Certainly, an actor is an agent, someone who creates, who bets on an event, but an actor is not an abstract existence, alien to scenic, material reality. An actor always exists in a context, exists with their partners, in a certain space and time. The power of Viewpoints lies in the process of understanding—through practice—that the actor’s strength is not in creating scenic events “out of nowhere”, based on supposedly ingenious previous ideas, but in noticing the arrangement of scenic elements (spatial, kinetic, sonorous) and acting through choices based on facts, in a reality that presents itself in the fleetingness of the present time.

Improvisation in Viewpoints is a constant search for not rationalizing, not premeditating an event before it actually exists as a possibility in improvisation. And therefore not forcing. However, it is not about doing nothing. It is—and this is a fine line—about having sensitivity and *extraordinary listening* to perceive the events that are about to happen and to see yourself in them, or possibly outside of them! There are no obligations in an improvisation. There are, as already said, rules, possibilities and choices.

At the SITI Company workshop, at the end of an Open Viewpoints session, I tried to explain how uncomfortable the feeling was that, as I perceived and read more and more of the compositions that were occurring in the improvisation—via *feedforward*—I somehow felt surrendered, having to, at all times, respond to the silent calls of my scene mates. Naivety on my part. Based on Will Bond’s response to this discomfort, I noted this down after that morning training: “Practicing Viewpoints is a constant vibration/oscillation between responding to stimuli and resisting it. Sometimes I can feel an impulse, resist and just breathe, watching an event happen.”

Freedom in the art of improvisation comes from choice. And choosing is dealing with *Story*. Even in an improvisation, dealing with the viewpoints is choosing



at each moment, it is composing with the other inhuman and human elements with which one is sharing space-time. Therefore, practicing Viewpoints is also practicing the composing gaze.

The practice is not saying “yes” to everything that fortuitous compositions of the bodies in space suggest. The importance of practice—in this sense, close to the notion of training and improvement—concerns the increase of paths, of possibilities. Practice leads to an expansion of sensitivity and *awareness*, which, therefore, leads to the perception of a greater number of possibilities, which leads to a greater freedom of choice. “Open SSTEMS Improvisation is a chance to inhabit a performative dimension that is an equal mixture of choice and chance” (Overlie, 2016, p.80). When improvising collectively, the future is not exclusively in your hands, yet indeed part of it is, and, as Overlie (2016, p.51) stated, “art can only happen if you have the sensitivity to perceive it”.

Faced with a stimulus, an impulse: to go or not to go; to act in consonance with an external action or act in opposition to it, in resistance or contrast. Once, at a Viewpoints workshop, the North American actor Thadd McQuade¹⁷, who was in conduction, explained that he organized the viewpoints differently from the members of SITI Company, with whom he had learned and practiced. Above or before the time and space viewpoints, he located the viewpoint *repetition* and also a viewpoint called *opposition*, which he had invented. In other words, apart from viewpoints as parameters or materials for creation, he established these two viewpoints as compositional dynamics¹⁸.

In McQuade’s game reasoning, when faced with a stimulus, it is either repeated—thinking of repetition in an expanded way, of course, as consonance—or it is opposed, in dissonance, differentiation. This way of thinking and practicing Viewpoints is similar to the way Polish-Brazilian artist and theorist Fayga Ostrower (1983) explains composition in the visual arts, making use of the terms *similarities* and *contrasts*, understood in a wide range of possible degrees (major, minor) and

¹⁷ The workshop took place on December 1st and 2nd, 2017 at Teatro da Revista, in São Paulo. McQuade was not and is not part of SITI Company.

¹⁸ In addition to the “repetition/opposition” pair, McQuade’s organization of viewpoints also differed from that proposed by Bogart and Landau in that it introduced “orientation” into physical space viewpoints, as well as “acceleration/deceleration”—present in Bogart’s vocal viewpoints—in the physical time viewpoints



levels (the various possible relationships to be established in the same composition). An aesthetic element, be it a dot or line on a canvas, a slow walk or a static body shape in a scenic improvisation, for example, will never be similar or contrasting by itself. Compositional reasoning is always contextual and relative: reference and comparison criterion are needed¹⁹.

The way in which each person reads spatial composition is subjective, as there is always a range of possible criteria (or viewpoints!) to consider. Going back to Overlie's assertion, Viewpoints is a mixture of chance and choice. For those who are improvising, I believe that this guideline is important: "What am I relating to, right now?"—which viewpoint, which element external to me, which other performer, through which parameter? Or, to put it another way: "Where does my interest lie?"

The scenic presence in Viewpoints is largely due to the performer's continuous attention to the elements and factors external to him, and not just to the internal ones. I realized that it is common for beginners to get annoyed and say that Viewpoints is too logical or rational as an improvisation technique—which is neither wrong nor right. There are, in fact, many parameters and focuses of attention to keep in mind continuously. Regarding this:

Acknowledge this dilemma with the group. It is natural and unavoidable. You practice Viewpoints to become more conscious. But in the beginning, you will feel self-conscious. Later, with practice and perseverance, this *self-consciousness* dissolves into a kind of hyper-consciousness—a constant state of heightened awareness that is achieved without effort or thought (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 60 – authors' emphasis).

Between the analytical and the intuitive, between the cold and the hot, between tasks and improvisation, between meditation and composition, between the exterior and the interior, between theater and dance, between chance and choice: the Viewpoints practice is located at this threshold of the performing arts.

¹⁹ Ostrower makes use of these terms, this reasoning, when thinking about analysis via the fruition of a work. Regarding the creation of the work, the author states that the artist's options are intuitive, keeping, therefore, differences in relation to the thought that we articulate here about the practice (creation) of Viewpoints being between intuition and analysis (*composing gaze*), between chance and choice.



Regardless of stylistic preferences, its practice is a fruitful path to raise the awareness of the performer and their relationship with their partners, as well as with any physical space where the performing arts can take place.

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