

Analivia Cordeiro: An Essay Portrait

by Ania Catherine

Cordeiro, Analivia

Analivia Cordeiro

Analivia Cordeiro, an originator of computational choreography, a name in books. I call her Analivia. When we were connected, she said: "I want to have a conversation with you." I expected coffee. She suggested "in movement." I knew then we were cut from the same cloth.

We meet a few weeks later, "nice to meet you" and two kisses on the cheek. In the middle of a Basel art fair inside the booth where her work was exhibited, I put some music on. It played from my phone and people walked by, some stopped to watch while others continued. I was not nervous at all, very calm and with this odd feeling like I was reuniting with someone after years apart, not how I would expect to feel when about to dance with a hero of mine. We were strangers who just committed to ten minutes of our bodies talking. I wore black, she wore a black and white bodysuit that matched the work she had on view. There was multimodal listening. When we stopped, everything had changed. This woman was family. Not a metaphor—actual family. An aunt who had known me since childhood, we traversed years of conversation, coffees, dinners, walks, birthdays, tears, milestones in these ten minutes of movement. Should I re-say "nice to meet you" after our bodies met? I thought. We felt each other before we knew each other but also, isn't feeling just another shade of knowing? A theme emerges and a story begins.

Later, recounting this first meeting with her, I said something about antennas. "I felt that your antenna was receiving my signal and my antenna was receiving your signal." She understood immediately because this is how dancers talk. We're radio towers, like bodies are transmission devices. She once told me that many people believe the body exists "just to hold the head." They live as though everything important happens in thinking, and the body is just the unfortunate container we're stuck with. Her life's work has been proving otherwise and feels more timely than ever.

Analivia carries a lineage that survived everything. Rudolf Laban in England. Maria Duschenes bringing her work to Brazil during the war. Analivia studying with Duschenes

from age seven—not learning steps but learning something harder to name. How movement thinks. How the body reads space before the mind maps it. She recalls to me her experience working with Hanya Holm in New York, 1978, from whom she was taught "movement according to expressionistic tendency." German expressionism—Wigman, Bausch, Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet that she learned by imitating as a child. She's the only Latin American in the archive of Schlemmer's followers. What a distinction to carry alone. This is one of hundreds of things that have surfaced over several Zoom calls she takes from her floor, often with sunglasses on, in a room flooded with light, wearing bright pink. Analivia is at once a lightning rod in cultural history, a most lively embodiment of the present, and reaching her limbs far into the future. So alive in fact sometimes I think I'm the one twice her age.

The body reading other bodies. The nervous system firing in sympathy. Mirror neurons, scientists call it now, but this was decades before that research. It was merely experience. We don't align on a passion for shapes, discipline, training—though these are also chunks of our pasts we share—but in a shared visceral knowing that something happens in the spaces inside the body, the spaces we imagine between body and mind, between the body then and now, between our bodies and others' bodies, between our bodies and others' minds, our minds and others' bodies, an experience with no substitute, no replacement. We don't have to explain to each other what we mean by saying we know things because our bodies told us. This common understanding alone injects so much oxygen in the room, leading to conversations that feel like we're dancing around the pulse of life itself. I will never underestimate the expansive power of a simple shared premise again.

In 1973, she choreographed a piece with nine dancers but did not have the funds to bring them to Europe or the United States to perform. Most people would see a wall there: end of story, impossible, give up. Analivia saw possibility. She made a dance video instead. It became the first piece of video art from Latin America. The refusal to see obstacles as final as a throughline in her story is what frequently sends currents through my blood and an expanded sense of the possible when with her.

Her story is sprinkled with these moments that she casually mentions as details, but that to me illuminate the brilliance and strength of her interior. At twenty-five in New York, studying with Cunningham, she reached the top level and was then told she couldn't join the company because she was not American-born. This posed issues due to funding requirements. Most dancers would be destroyed. She thought: "When I'm forty I'll be retired anyway." She went back to Brazil and started over.

"There was a moment I said I have just this body," she tells me. "And it was very good. This decision was very good."

I have just this body.

Everything in that sentence. Not I need a better body. Not if only my body could. Not if only my body was born here. Just I have just this body. This is what I have. Go.

Years later IBM wanted to buy her technology and she said no. She tells me about an exhibition at LACMA showing how IBM systematically undermined independent artists, suppressed counter-culture technology. "I have seen the circles," she says. "I know what is going on behind the curtains." She chose to stay outside, she protected something she knew was worth protecting even if she couldn't fully articulate what.

She's spent seventy years watching walls dissolve if you have the boldness to walk toward them. She has this fearlessness that isn't reckless or stubbornness, it's olympic clarity. This thing that must happen when you trust your body for so long that you forget to second-guess it. She listened to her body instead of their voices.

Her father was friends with Fellini, who she also saw around growing up. She found herself as a child sitting at a dinner table with Dali. These facts are unrelated to our work together but something I enjoy imagining as part of her background.

She talks about her own marriage. How her husband knows: sometimes she needs him gone. "Sometimes I say to him you are getting into my space I don't want and he doesn't take offense." If she loses herself, she told him, there's nothing left to love. She becomes "just I don't know, an envelope, something empty." An envelope. I picture this. The paper shell of a person, the you-shaped container with nothing inside. This is what happens when you give too much, when you're too available, when you forget about internally space.

Internally space. I love how she talks. English is her fourth language. Sometimes the grammar bends. Sometimes it bends into something more precise than correct English would be. Internally space. Exactly.

What is our first relationship if not the one we have with our own bodies? All relationships with ourselves and others can fill rather than drain if you perform the below like a score: Wait. Listen. Notice who appears. Act boldly once you know. But don't chase. Chasing means you haven't listened yet, haven't felt it in the body yet. Chasing is all mind.

Analivia's approach to getting somewhere real feels almost archeological, which is an approach she takes with movement itself as well as life. She digs and identifies: that feeling down there, that is real. That is life. That is you. It is more common than many admit that we spend our whole lives busy stacking furniture on top of what we know,

then wonder why we can't find it. This is her method: seeing what's already there, removing what blocks it. Not molding—excavating. She doesn't make dancers. She reveals people to themselves. Which turns out to be the same as making dancers. Which turns out to be the same as teaching people how to live.

This is what she learned from Duschenes, from Holm, from German expressionism: don't impose vocabulary on bodies. Remove obstacles. Let authentic movement emerge. The truth is already there. Your job is to clear what covers it.

She teaches children this way. She told me a story once about a blonde girl who came to her class, she was very beautiful and started moving. After months Analivia told the mother: "Your daughter has to go to martial arts, she's not meant for dance, she has another body language."

The mother was very traditional, and was a bit worried. But the girl became a champion in martial arts. Years later the mother came back to thank her.

Another girl—not interested in moving, a little heavy, but demonstrated an incredible mind. In the middle of class, Analivia stopped her: "Where are you?"

"In the earth," the girl said.

"But where in the earth?"

"In Brazil."

"But where in Brazil?"

On and on, from planet to country to city to room, until finally: "You are in the center of the dance classroom. If you have a diagonal crossing here, mathematically speaking, you are in the center."

The girl loved it. She became a psychologist.

Once she reminded me about a dream I had told her about. I had no memory of it. She remembered perfectly. "You said to me you had a dream you had a tree in the middle of that trying to find yourself." In the middle of what? "The place where the baby develops," she said. "You had a tree. Remember this. You had a dream."

I didn't remember; she'd been thinking about it. Her father was a landscaper—she knows trees. Knows that roots and leaves have the same size, that the trunk connects them. She looked at the human body and saw: the neurological system. She saw in my forgotten dream something I couldn't: the image of connection, of communication, of life

itself. "We are exchanging a feeling when we move together, it is feeling communication. It's absolutely neurological in the sense of alive." The nervous system is the place where we're most ourselves, most connected, most real. The tree in the uterus. The roots spreading.

Analivia appeared in my life when I was blooming but simultaneously all over the place. We started having these long phone calls, hours and hours. We thought we were talking about dance. We were talking about dance, but we were also talking about what it means to be, how to tell the difference between loneliness and solitude, how to trust your body when your body starts saying unexpected things.

Everything she has advised—protect your energy, trust your body, embrace solitude—I knew somewhere deep in my stomach. It had been buried under other feelings, under the furniture, under all the supposed-tos and should-bes.

I told her I needed to be alone most of the day now. 85% alone. Just me, work, my cat, silence, long walks. Everything else felt like too much, like my nervous system was just—she interrupted: "You are absolutely right. To digest all the information you have to have internally space."

She told me about Fred Forest, the telematic artist. Ninety-something, still working. Someone complained: "He's not easy to work with."

"Sure," she said. "He protected himself his whole life against the negative energy. He's not available."

Not available. She said it like a compliment, like a method, like a secret. This is why he lasted—he's not available.

In a world demanding total availability—notifications, DMs, emails, calls, everyone wanting a piece, wanting response, wanting access—the radical act of saying: not available. The body needs gates and the nervous system needs silence. This isn't antisocial, this is architecture. The hybrid gift she's passed on is an odd cocktail of a philosophical stance, a worldview, and a refusal. A commitment to reality, to the body as it actually is. She doesn't see walls but she respects limits and these are not in competition but somehow complementary in her implementation.

Your need for solitude? Not a problem—a solution. Your body's shifting desires? Not confusion—clarity. Your exhaustion with overstimulation? Not weakness—information.

"One thing I think is very important," she said on a recent call, "is that we are not avatars."

She sees what I'm doing: putting dancers in galleries, at dinners, creating person-to-person encounters instead of stage-to-audience distance, finding ways to make movement collectable. We both use technology to support bodies, not replace them, using technology to create and perform value of movement, of dancers, of life itself. She recognizes this as aligned with her life's work. Different methods, same orientation. We work to keep something alive in a world bent on making it obsolete.

She was one of the first people globally to use motion capture. She knows its possibilities intimately. "I really know. I accept and I say this is not everything." But she's watched the trajectory. Watched dance move toward digital, toward perfection, toward the replaceable body.

"When you become an avatar you are reduced to the motion captured."

"How much you leave behind you just to be able to be an avatar."

The awkward, limited, aging, mortal, real body—this is what matters. This is what she's spent fifty years proving. When you're near a dancing body, that map shifts. Something happens in the nervous system, in the roots, in the tree growing in the uterus. This is not something avatars can do. This requires breath, sweat, the risk of actual encounter.

I imagine the rooms of people telling her no. Dance doesn't go with computers. You're not American. You're too old. You're not technical enough. Video isn't real art. The market won't support this. No one will understand. She just didn't listen. Or she listened and then did it anyway.

Near the end of one call, after hours of talking about our lives, our work, our futures, she said: "We are we so let's be us."

I've been thinking about this sentence for months. We are we. Not: we are similar. Not: we understand each other. We are we. A single entity made of two bodies, two generations, two continents. I hear: our blood is the same color.

Let's be us: bodies with antennae, with roots, with trees growing in unexpected places.

Analivia is seventy, I'm thirty-five. She's in Brazil, I'm in Spain. She's worked fifty years. But we are now both connected by lineage stretching back to Laban and forward to whomever I'll pass this to someday. Connected by commitment to these imperfect, mortal, miraculous bodies.

She tells me about her daily practice. She lies on the floor and does an inventory. How are the parts of her body connecting to earth? She gets very detailed. Discovers things she didn't see before. Sometimes a shoulder is off, and when she lets it fall to the floor,

her whole back shifts. "It's not exactly alignment because I don't want to be aligned," she says. "I just want to know what's bothering me."

This is learning to dance. This is learning to live. Same thing, really. Lie down. Notice. Let the body tell you what it knows. Don't impose alignment. Don't impose should-be. Just: what is? What's bothering you? What do you actually feel? Learning to separate what's yours from what's theirs. Learning where you end and the world begins. How to lie on the floor and take inventory. How to notice what's bothering you without trying to fix it immediately. How to let your shoulder drop and feel your whole back shift. How to be not available. How to create internally space. How to let things come instead of chasing. How to see walls as mist. How to trust your body when it starts saying unexpected things, inconvenient things, true things.

Hours and hours of conversation, two dancers across generations and seas talking. We initially thought we were documenting an artistic exchange. We're actually documenting something harder to name. We became two people reminding each other how to trust what we know. She's teaching me what she learned from Maria Duschenes, from Hanya Holm, from seventy years of listening. I'm learning through this exchange that the truth was already in me as it is in all of us. Gnostics would love our conversations. This oasis, contagious and iridescent, now a mirror I use daily for myself and others. The lineage continues. The transmission keeps moving.

How to be we. How to be us.

This is not about techniques, methods, steps. This is about living by a premise: we are not avatars. We are bodies and our bodies know things. The knowing is already there, has always been there, will always be there. Our job is just to clear what covers it. Dance. Clear furniture. Remember that the walls were never real.

This is the inheritance.



Ania Catherine is a Los Angeles-born, Barcelona-based artist whose multidisciplinary work spans choreography, performance, installation, film, and writing. Characterized by an affinity for stillness and repetition, her creative process is one of iterative excavation and attunement. She draws from embodied research, slow cinema, and the aesthetics of boredom to illuminate knowledge stored in flesh and gesture—considering the body to be a tool for learning and unlearning. Her work has been shown at Art Basel, SCAD Museum of Art (Savannah), Dansmuseet (Stockholm), Foyer de la Danse at Opéra de Paris, Dance Camera West (Los Angeles), Francisco Carolinum Museum (Linz), MEET Digital Culture Center (Milan), CICA Museum (Seoul), Ars Electronica (Linz), Trauma (Berlin), Forum des images (Paris), and the International Meeting on Screendance (Valencia), among others. She holds a master's degree from the London School of Economics and works internationally performing, choreographing, speaking, directing, and teaching. In 2016 Catherine co-founded with Dejha Ti the award-winning duo practice Operator.

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