

## Body, Experience and Writing in Choreography

Isabelle Schad

When the body and its materiality start to become the work itself, and the work itself turns into experience and process, the question of working principles becomes a place of complex interdependencies between the making of the work and the mechanisms of production. This place, where the pertinence in re-inventing ourselves, the others and our common practices and where an emphasis on a continuous learning process forces us to make revisions, gets challenged.

In relation to my own work practices, my interest is to reflect the function of the body within such processes. This investigation links many topics and fields between and around the body and dance, dance and theory, different fields of science (i.e., psychology, embryology, microbiology) and dance, choreography, life and politics.

Gilles Deleuze describes the complex series of perceptions and sensations as *percepts* in the film *ABÉCÉDaire*<sup>1</sup> and the links between *concept*, *affect* and *percept* that lie within “any-body.” But they are so rarely transmitted by a body in a way where the experience becomes a shared one between the body presented/presenting itself and the spectator who is watching.

What/Who moves while seeing? What can the act of seeing be beyond the action itself? What happens to the body of the spectator in the “act” of watching? These questions keep coming back to me and it seems to be related to embodiment and cells and things that keep me busy in my own practices. The question is *how* I would like to work, present and share the work with the audience.

### On Cells, Practice and Choreography

What happens in the process of choreographing for a public presentation?

In my work I am looking for answers in somatic practices such as *Body-Mind Centering* invented and developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, where the emphasis is brought to

---

1

<sup>1</sup> Boutang, Pierre-André, prod. *L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze avec Claire Parnet*. France: [1988-89/1996](#). Film.

the perceptions and sensations of one's own body — towards understanding *who we are* through understanding our past processes — towards an understanding of *how we are* by embodying physiological or embryological processes.<sup>2</sup> And it is by understanding *where we are coming from* that we understand something about our present selves and about space; as in the very early embryological developments, everything *is about* space: location is the important factor.

Since we are created from our own space as well as by our (embryological) process, the body becomes simultaneously both the space and the place where space and time fall together. The origins of movement lie within the body and the act of it *becoming* itself. Each single cell has its (own) double membrane: one *looking to* the inside and the other facing the outside, and it is there where interior/exterior dialectics might originate. Remembering (our membranes) goes through our own memory; we re-member what informs a structure by studying and embodying cellular processes (cellular communication, division, differentiation, migration of cells, cellular membranes and fluid). If re-membering past processes of our first cells gives us information about who-how-where we are, it also informs us about our environment and how we create our own environment through (cellular) relationships.

Applying this approach to choreography means *questioning its form* by looking at what *in-forms* the form. Re-membrance is not only a meditation, but a work on the membrane itself: permeable and ever-changing, membranes and spaces that are drawn to the inside, folded; once again becoming the outside. Invagination and rebound, inside becoming outside, fluid processes of *becoming structures*: Endoderm, Ectoderm and Mesoderm becoming all the structures — all the bodily systems of our present body.<sup>3</sup>

This understanding of the working/moving body is based on both experience and process. When such processes become choreography, the choreography is based on experience and working process as well. If the choreography would be based on score-

---

2

□ Bainbridge Cohen, Bonnie. “Embryology Workshop.” Paris: June 2010. Workshop. see also: *Sensing, Feeling, and Action*. Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 1993. Print.

3

□ Drews, Ulrich. *Taschenatlas Embryologie*. Stuttgart: Georg Thieme Verlag KG, 1993. Print.

writing like a partition in music — the body then becomes the music, the voice and the score might give indications to re-find the experience and the process again and anew in *present time* to become *presentation*. Along the way within a creative process the writing of a score would enrichen, become more and more complex and precise in relation to (inner/outer) space, initiation of movement, rhythm (time), intensity, etc.

In my current project “Musik (Praticable)” the proposed score that I wrote serves as a timeline and consists of drawings that give information about space and time and about where the movement initiates from in the body, and an additional text document where those descriptions are formulated more explicitly. The 14 dancers — who are at the same time co-choreographers — produce this text file along the way throughout the process. They make notes and write about their own perceptions of inner/outer space, their body experiences, their strategies, the impact and influence from their environment. Little by little, the score starts to resemble a piece of writing itself, which has its own logic, almost like a poem, from which everyone can nourish her/himself in her/his own way. Therefore the dancing of the piece possibly becomes a meditation upon the score as well as a piece of writing, which serves the performer to be in present time whilst meeting an audience. The audience is *feeding back* the performer in her/his activity, which again will *feed back* the score that might be re-written again after this experience and so on. Ideally practicing thus continues in the duration of the *presentation* in front of an audience and becomes a decisive factor of the work progress

Which words could describe those bodies and (body) images that emerge if those bodies and images are beyond what we know already, those that we recognize as known images; beyond dance style, narratives, signs or representation? Or could the movement itself be the meaning? The body as the meaning, like the body *is* the medium dealing with and as its movement. Meaning emerges during the performance through the texture of the body, the texture of the movements, the texture of time and space.

This approach of writing dance whilst focusing on the body as a medium and focusing on (somatic) body practice(s) at the same time has recently become more present. Therefore I would like to talk about a movement back to the body and to dance after a conceptually dominated choreography from the 90s on.

The current difficulty is to avoid — within a movement towards common interests — the exploitation of notions where we tend to end up creating tendencies rather than a movement. As a way to reflect upon present tendencies, politics and mechanisms of

production, I propose the question: What would happen if mechanisms of production were not (or very rarely) a factor?

### **On emptying out words and current tendencies in dance and performance**

The mechanisms I want to talk about are the very place of all the contradictions existing in making work and presenting it. Related notions, like *open space*, *practice orientated work*, *work-in-progress*, *process vs. product*, *collective work*, *networking*, *collaboration*, intermingle in such ways that intentions and reality rarely fit together anymore. Through the development of a *market* around these notions — it is not even possible to *not* mention them as part of your work anymore. And they become both: a reality of working and a fertile or slippery ground for misunderstandings and commercial instrumentalism where an emptying out of meaning occurs. Within the *market of presentation*, those notions are often promoted but without any meaning. The market doesn't really value the work of artists that resist the lie(s). It might be hard to resist and not play the game(s) if the main reasons for a piece being presented or not, for being part of dance festivals or not, are still connected to 1) name 2) size of production/money involved 3) the agreement on a consensual curation applied by (many of the) curators who in the end administrate the market.

It is therefore not only about finding truthful solutions, how to work with each other without anybody losing her/his “body of work”/own work but also about finding strategies to transform and resist the conditions of the market. Taking the concrete case of collaborations in the field of dance/performance, many times *collaboration* ends up becoming one person's artistic property in which all of those involved are *working for*. If one and the *same process* comes from *several individual processes* that interconnect and no-body is losing her/his own “body of work,” we could evacuate the notion of *working for* and start to speak about *working with* and therefore imagine a real meeting.

### **On trying to resist**

In the last years, I have co-initiated several projects/groups that are searching for ways of organizing, possibilities of functioning and exploring different ways of *working together*.

With Bruno Pocheron and Ben Anderson I initiated “Good Work”<sup>4</sup> in 2003. Originally, its

starting point was the continuous exchange of experiences between the members of the created network and a collective research in ideas, which would then be spread into the development and presentation of a series of public performances. Each performance produced in the frame of “Good Work” intends to be approached as a collegial concept development involving several persons within the group. This work on concept and related ideas would take into account all the different elements that constitute the performance (choreographic material, spatial, visual and sound design, etc.). The actual realization of these elements would then be shared between the artists involved in relation to their specific fields of research and practices. During the realisation of the developed ideas, we thought at the time that the characteristics of (our existing) networks would have an immense impact, as each of the participants (different backgrounds, coming from different countries, etc.) brings with them their own infrastructure (rehearsal spaces, contacts to venues, accommodation, etc.) — an essential survival strategy for being part of the independent dance scene, within which everyone is always dependent on public funding and subsidies.

In 2005 Alice Chauchat, Frédéric Gies, Frédéric de Carlo, Odile Seitz and myself initiated the open collective “Praticable.”<sup>5</sup> “Praticable” proposes a specific model of collaboration between artists in the field of dance and choreography: it is a horizontal work structure, based on the sharing of body practices, which brings together research, learning processes, creation, production and distribution, multiplying circulations between them. This structure is the basis for the creation of performances that are signed by one or more participants of the project. These performances are grounded, in one way or another, in the exploration of body practices to approach representation.

At the time that “Praticable” was initiated, we wanted to find ways to give visibility to the working context that were creating and decided to set the following rule for the presentation of pieces made in the frame of “Praticable”: when a piece signed by one or more participants of the collective is programmed by a theatre, we add a first part, which consists of a short piece, an excerpt of a piece or a work in progress by another

---

<sup>4</sup> Further information: [www.isabelle-schad.net](http://www.isabelle-schad.net)

<sup>5</sup> Further information: [www.praticable.info](http://www.praticable.info)

participant. The duration of this first part can be up to 20 minutes in length. To present a first part together along with the piece that is programmed gives us the opportunity to inform the audience about the organization of the whole project, to contextualize each work by showing more approaches to the notion of body practice as a choreographic tool, which is the central notion to “Practicable.” It allows us to use our network to share the opportunities of each of us and to distribute proposals that are either in-progress or shorter than the usual formats promoted on the performance market.

Both structures similarly attempt to propose ways of working that are non-hierarchical; “Practicable,” with a focus on body practice and “Good Work,” on practices coming from different fields, such as art and architecture, light and sound design, choreography, etc. Both of them deal with modalities of working and thinking (together) and their effects on (re)presentation.

Looking back at our initial intentions, I realize today how much I try to avoid certain terms like: networking, collaboration, horizontal work structure, etc., for the above mentioned reasons — as those expressions become more and more void of their (original) meaning or at least in how we originally thought about them — how we want to defend them and put them in practice.

Another recent experience of making works “together” — or should I say, in parallel — has been the piece(s) “Unturtled(s)” (from 2009 ongoing) realized with the visual artist Laurent Goldring. Within that process we realized that the more we separate our working practices — Laurent Goldring’s work on the image and my work on the body — the more he focuses only on the image and myself only on the body, the more we manage to actually *work together*. When we are *not* trying to mingle our (own) medium into the other’s, then we become more truthful in our *working with* and finally also *the together*.

### **On chances of meeting in practices and theory through sharing knowledge and writing from the body**

If the meeting between body and theory, dance and theory, practice and transmission of knowledge is becoming the nook that allows for the actual (re)thinking the body — as much as reality — that allows for communicating *thinking* through language, a language of its own needs to be found, words need to be written from the body.

Transmission of information is a part of our nervous system which sits in a gap that is, in the in-between, in the synapse in order to deliver responses and not reactions. It is not about transmitting information like a teacher, if one is *teaching* people anything, which

could be transmitted as fact. It is about sharing experience(s) and learning from each other. It is about bringing knowledge and experiences together. Bringing conscious knowledge to the body and from the body to consciousness. This is where writing practice and body practice meet and nourish each other; an inside learning and not an outside one. Sitting in the synapse provides us with the chance to avoid sitting in/on tendencies or hierarchies. Practicing as a chance allows us to avoid repetition — practicing instead of rehearsing. Giving (back) pleasure to the body in the form of writing and to choreography as text.