

Choreography

as

a

reading practice

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I move, the city moves, the Earth as an ecological entity moves, space moves. I never come back in my life-time in the universal scale of movement. Organisms are constructing various relations to their environment; migrating birds come and go, some butterflies wait for the chilly night to ooze away in order to be able to fly, whales move in regard to the warmth of the sea, various creatures hide and come out in the rhythm of the day and night, cold air masses collide with warm ones, the tree next to the house where I live grows, blooms and drops its leaves, my body regenerates, gets older, gets worn out – the effect of the gravity increases. From the cellular level to the cosmology surrounding living condition organizes, takes shapes and exists in a constant movement, which I perceive and onto which I react every moment. I am surrounded and part of the infinite network and sets of moving relations. My life is in permanent motional tangle of perceived, conceptualized and lived, which I am aiming to recognize and structure – not necessarily organize, but to take place in these relations in a way that continuation of my life is possible in re-generative and sustainable way.

INTRODUCTION

This writing discusses the question of the relation between the practices of reading and writing when it comes to choreography. My purpose here is to examine the question of the position of a choreographer as a reader based on the on-going artistic experiments, thoughts and experiences within the frameworks of my current artistic research process titled Contextual Choreography. Thus this text is an invitation for further discussions about the topic within choreographic art. I approach reading and writing as modes of knowing that are activated in and with the choreographic practice. I understand both verbs 'to read' and 'to write' broadly, i.e. that they are intertwined bodily processes instead of separate completed actions. I focus here on the experiences of kinesthetic alertness and bodily responsiveness to the movement, which are the operative sensitivities in the making sense of the sense of the world through choreographic thinking and art.

BACKGROUND

I have worked as a professional choreographer from 2003 in various frameworks in the field of contemporary dance. In the early years of my choreographic work, I was interested in inventing, creating and making dance-steps, bodily states and dance-moves to be composed on a proscenium stage i.e. to make repeatable choreography as an author who writes movements and composes them as 'phrases'. These works were meant to be toured in various circumstances as repeatable dance-objects without changing the structure or movements of the 'piece'. This kind of production-based approach and cultural professionalism in the field of contemporary dance got emptied from its significance after a few years of professional work. I realized that dance as an artistic discipline is just one of the possibilities to explore and process movement and its dis/organization with choreographic thinking. To understand this meant practice-wise an extension out from the realm of dance in which I experienced that

movement was something to be possessed and mastered in order to produce dance. I found this approach insufficient in terms of the choreographic practice that I was interested in. Dance-pieces as rehearsed, produced and repeated/repeatable human-centered artistic forms were not anymore of my interest, but the dis/organization of the movement understood broadly was. As an artist I did not recognize myself anymore as a writer of dance-pieces in the realm of contemporary dance production.

The starting points for exploring the possibilities of the notion of choreography as a reading practice lies 1) in my experience based on multi-sensory perception that the world is in constant movement and 2) in my attempts to make sense and comprehension out of these perceptions and experiences. With 'a' world, I mean here a complex eco-, bio-, geo- and meteorological multiform sphere, which is affected by and in dialogue with the material forces of the human actions and movements. The human body is in movements and motions with non-human moving bodies forming the above-described world. Non-human bodies have a different temporality than my body and some of their movements go beyond of my lifetime. It seems that some of these bodies, for example buildings or my working-table, are stable and cohesive, but according to the new materialist views their material solidity and inertia is just a perceptual illusion. (Coole & Frost 2010, 1-36). To be grounded and to be surrounded with and among these bodies, my movements are co-created. The quality of the surrounding materiality and movements affect the way I move. The material circumstances perceived in this way makes it impossible to master the movements, but instead I am in various continuous sensory-motor relations with them.

Historically to emphasize choreography as writing practice is motivated through its etymology. The development, purpose and aim of the dance-notation -systems affirm this perspective. But the notation is also something to be read in order to know how to move.¹ To think of choreography as a reading practice can be motivated with the same historical situation when it comes to the beginning of the

dance-notation. Historical moment of combining movement, place and printed symbol to choreography-writing (Foster 2011, p. 17) can be thought of also as the moment when a choreographer became a person who was supposed to have a skill to read that notation. It is worth to think through the possibilities, which the operational shift from writing to reading generates; especially when choreography has expanded from human to non-human and from everyday dynamics to virtual dimensions. Choreography as practice no longer operates only as a human formal order or superimposition to moving bodies but also a way to examine socio-ecological systems and structures in which human bodies move and in which movement is controlled and regulated with various systems and apparatuses. Choreography operates as a way to comprehend the moving world. This offers new possibilities to choreography, choreographic art and choreographic thinking.

The idea of mastering the movement as a starting point for choreographic art is insufficient and rather suffocating. When using the word movement, I mean by it an experiential phenomenon. I perceive movement through lived experience. Movement is how the world is and how I perceive it, including the life and death of the living. For example, when I go out from my working-space and stand in the big crossroads by the Theatre Academy, I listen, watch, smell, taste and sense how the movement is dis/organized and regulated in the crossroads. A stream of bikers and walkers with various ages and outfits, the rhythm of the traffic lights, various cars accelerating and braking, robust forms of the buildings, a seagull randomly spiraling over the crossroads, the temporality of the growth of the trees in the middle of the crossroads, the breeze of a wind on the leaves and on my skin, breezy air in my nose, variations of colors in the asphalt and the grass, knowledge of standing on earth's surface moving in space and sense of grounding gravity pulling me onto the tectonic plate come together in a simultaneous dense experience. The density of the experience and the recognition of the multiple simultaneous movement-information are vertiginous. This experience reminds

me of the final scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point*² (1970), in which a singular composed static becomes beautifully decomposed plural in the framed images (in a composed film). Thinking movement as an experiential phenomenon is part of the historical development of ways out from the concept of movement that has prevailed since western scientific revolution. In the scientific perspective the movement is approached with the human motivation to master the outside world with universal physical laws with causes and effects. (Parviainen 2006, pp. 15-26) The desire to rule and control the movement with various technological applications and to perceive movement as an external phenomenon which can be directed prevails, but the art of choreography is a perfect field to bring out alternatives when choreography is understood as a dis/organization of the movements.

Movement is thought and conceptualized by various contemporary philosophers as a profound way of being in touch with the world, comprehending, knowing and making sense out of it (Noë 2004 pp. 75-79, Johnson 2007 pp. 19-32, Manning 2009 pp. 13-28) and by various social scientists as a way to comprehend how movement functions in the formation of, for example, the concept of freedom in the lives of kinetic elite and the ones whose movements are constantly repressed. (Kotef, 2015, pp. 1-26, Sheller & Urry, 2006). From the manifold appearing and definitions of movement, the movement that is in focus here is relational, perceptually multi-sensory and affective, and as such it does not have a clear beginning or end. My interest is in the movement that operates through coupling the individual human body to the larger moving bodies. This means that as a choreographer I do not aim to master the movement in the sense of possessing it in order to dance. That is one of the reasons why the choreographic art that I am articulating is processual and virtual. It can take various material forms in various disciplinary areas. I have let go of the idea that a choreography functions as a construction of, or for, human-accomplished movements and instead I have started to think of choreography as a way to recognize how various surrounding relational movements are continuously formed,

dispersed and re-formed, regulated, controlled and dis/organized. This shift is based on the experiences in which the entanglement of the perception, sense and experience of the world and its movements is not referring to a sense of construction anymore. With this view I contribute to the thinking in which choreography is no longer understood as composing of a linear coherent unity but as processing of simultaneous incoherent multiplicity. Choreography thus is a way to comprehend the world that escapes the logic and practice of construction. From this point of view, choreography as a human artistic activity can be thought of as a processual inquiry of the situation in which the interpretation of the surrounding movement takes place. This inquiry, which entails the re-examination of the position toward movement, I call reading.

As a choreographer-reader I am interested in the material and social conditions of human movements more than movements accomplished by a human body. This inquiry is aesthetic in its core and here choreography as a reading practice can be thought of as a strategy to recognize choreographies that form the mobile planet in many levels and scales, from microscopic to cosmologic. If reading is understood as decoding the written symbol in order to comprehend or make meanings, I can turn my decoding gaze from the materiality of the written symbol toward the materiality of the surrounding and environment. Thus the quality of the reading changes from decoding the printed symbol with the movements of the eyes to decoding the in/organic with the sense of movement. My purpose is not to develop the idea of reading understood as decoding printed symbols but to understand reading as a process, which brings together multi-sensory perception and interpretation of the surrounding movement-materiality. Focusing on the surrounding movement in this embodied decoding, the multi-sensorial input, and processing it, can be thought of as reading, which provokes an awareness that unfolds artistic possibilities. These possibilities can be processed into responsive, emerging writings.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4DhYAT-Feg> (accessed 14.2.2016)

¹ When it comes to the dance-notation and reading and writing -practices it would be worth to take a closer look at their relations through translation-studies. There is no space enough now to go into this interesting area.

REFLECTIONS

It makes a difference to think of a choreographer as a writer or as a reader as well as considering the practice of choreography as reading or writing. As writing this text my fingers are moving in the frames of qwerty –system on the keyboard and my eyes are moving from a written symbol to another in order to activate a linguistic comprehension of the traces that the movement of the fingers on the keyboard leave on the screen. Isn't this choreography in which writing and reading is literally and simultaneously coupled with the movement? If this writing is considered a choreography then the movement of the eyes is needed to perform it. What could the shift from the writer to a reader mean in contemporary choreography or more broadly in the realm of art? What could that choreographically generate when the human centered perspective is displaced to object-oriented or geo-centric? What are the lines, marks, symbols and signs to be written if movement is not to be mastered?

In the dark sci-fi scenario the movement of the planet Earth will be stopped with military technological applications as an ultimate power display. But before this end happens, what could be the life-generative place-taking and artistic act within and what could that aesthetic process produce? What are the sensitivities, skills and abilities that a person who can be called a choreographer needs, develops and shares today? Should the discipline of choreography be re-named in the art-academies for example to the direction where choreography

understood as a relation between the human body and movement could have multiple approaches instead of being defined by the history of writing?

With this short introductory I would like to invite choreographers and colleagues to discuss how choreographic art could contribute to the paradigm shift from the choreographer who masters the movements as a means of human-centered construction to the choreographer who disengages him/herself from the mastery and couples him/herself with the complex multi-directional relationality of surrounding movements that form the conditions for organic selfhood. The inquiry is open for further developments.

In order to acknowledge and recognize the simultaneously unfolding multidirectional movements I can think of choreography as a reading practice, which locates and offers a place to my body in the surrounding movement-mesh (Ingold 2011, pp. 63–65, Morton 2010, pp. 29–38.). With the help of environmental philosophy, human geography, ecology, geology, astronomy, biology and mobility studies to name the few from the fields of Humanities and Natural Sciences, choreographic art contributes to the thinking of our place on this planet. Reading happens through lived recognition of movement patterns and through parsing them in relation to the moving human body. At the same time, this inquiry can be a poetic choreographic interpretation of the social-material situatedness of the body.

BIO

Simo Kellokumpu is a choreographer and a doctorate candidate in Artistic Research in the Performing Arts Research Center at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. His on-going artistic research –process Contextual Choreography focuses on the relations between the notions of choreography and context. The research process has been shared as artistic proposals, performative lectures, presentations and workshops in places such as Reykjavik Dance Festival (2013, 2014), Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2015), The Research Pavilion in Venice Biennale (2015), CARPA the fourth colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts (2015) and Senselab, Montreal (2016).

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