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The (Re)Sounding Experiment, Traces, Faces and Spaces of Artistic Research, Orpheus Research Centre, Gent, 20 februari 2013

Down With Experiment. Long Live the Process!

or

Dance Doesn't Exist

Dance is created in the instance when the onlooker affords the movement such meaning that it is legitimized as dance. It's not just there. Dance authors itself in a void, in the space between the public and the private and it cannot excuse itself from its political, social, cultural or private context. The movement articulates the self and puts the work within the framework of what the viewer is able to interpret. This ability in turn, is dependent on the position our culture affords man as a body. Dance doesn't exist in it self. It's created in the eyes of the beholder.

All my life I have observed and studied how and why people move. As a choreographer and artistic researcher I use my observations and try out different expressions. I fashion and reshape reality in favour of my interpretation, my images and everything I desire and crave. This I do with the hope of being able to make visible some of the possibilities and new interpretative directions we would otherwise neither be aware of, nor recognize. Do I experiment?

Some years ago, when I read in the National Swedish Encyclopaedia that my artwork was experimental, I felt offended. Somewhat disappointed. I have never considered my work to be experimental. Explorative, innovative – yes, but not experimental. To me an experiment has a starting point as well as an ending. It starts from some kind of thesis that through a number of tests will be confirmed or rejected. Why did I react so strongly? I felt like if my work was referred to as something diminished, not to be trusted.

Exercise no 74: Sit down comfortably, alone. Speak well about your professional life to yourself.

Rejoice in what you hear. Write down what you remember and save it. Do it.

Why is the word being said? Why is the movement in motion? These are questions about the transmission of language, the politics of listening and about the roles of representation in dance. We move politically on an excursion in search of miracles. I might be a disloyal provocateur, but the methodology of the examination of an on-going artistic research process does not necessarily relate to the notion of experimentation. I am most often more interested in other things than “cause and effect”. The experiment itself is most often a deadlock. It’s just a fragment of a process and can be dismissed as something without any other goal than itself. Art is an on-going continuity.

Exercise no 75

Seat yourself comfortably in solitude. Talk critically to yourself about your professional life. Contemplate possible alternatives for development. Do it.

In my artwork I do not want to express myself in order to be understood. I want to express what I do not understand myself. I point out conventions and make us aware of the shortcomings we cannot avoid. It may be that what I also provide alternatives, but the choice is yours – not mine. I am testing and searching my way forward to find that incomprehensibility, using the art of dance as a resistance movement. So, what do I do?

I live my reality every day. I experience, I see and I listen to what goes on around me. A multiplicity of information jostles in my experience of this reality. I interpret it on the basis of what I have been through before and draw conclusions, which are sometimes revised even before they have been formulated. The thin shell of the body encompasses an inexhaustible energy and a vast range of possibilities. I think I know because I am reminded of something. I think I understand because something is recognised.

In my work, trying to create some kind of meaning, new contexts are formed. I listen to the movement. Bodily movement has a tonality of its own: long, short, hard, soft... Listening to the on-going is like deciphering an alien code. Slowly I lay a puzzle of all impressions and a meaning appears. Sound, movement and smells take me through time and space. The movement is there and the sounds follow.

The organic sound of a body or an object is transformed into a new creation, an abode for both stillness and silence. I may have heard the sound, I may have seen the movement phase a thousand times without giving it a thought. In the process of artistic research they are highlighted and rise to the level of consciousness. They are placed in a new context and put demands on your thoughts and senses.

We put ourselves in motion, running fast or moving slowly. Pretty much every one of us tends to wobble around. We step sure-footedly forward, start to lose our balance and then get the jitters. It is easy to slip and lose your direction. I'm aware but not experimenting.

The work takes form in the void between what has been and what will come. It is in that space everything plays out, new insights are created and the context becomes clear. Everything is documented to make the process accessible. If choreography is a composition of movement, giving form to loose, rambling fragments, music has the same relationship to sound and form is a prerequisite for everything that shapes meaning. Simplicity is often the key to an urgent address. Music and dance (as well as other art forms) can challenge me intellectually, seduce my body and transport me to that desirable space. But I'm a critical listener. I do find that a lot of it is crap, overburdened and lengthy. Then there is music so exciting, so challenging or enjoyable that all that crap I mentioned is erased from my memory.

Exercise no 73

Write down your latest thought. Look at the words. Develop the thought away from goal related to conventional intelligibility. Kneel down and push the thought forward while singing a song. Do it.

This is the point of departure also for the process of artistic research. It is my knowledge in and about choreography, about the methods that emerge within the artistic process and production that make artistically based research a reality. The distinction between my "ordinary" artistic process and research is that I also document the work in such a way that I can make available both the process and the end result to peer forums and a wider public.

In-depth work processes demand the presence of others, their knowledge and reflections. Collaboration with for instance other choreographers, dancers, circus artists, composers and/or visual artists generates some good, quite a lot of confusion as well as resistance. All of that forces

me into greater clarity in relation to my ambition. This includes scientifically merited researchers, like philosophers or sociologists, who also take part in my work. The artistic research is motivated by a need for the development of long-term, deepened processes. I do research within and through my artistic practice.

Innovative choreographers have always worked through exploration, experimentally (possibly) and inquisitively to find a way forward. Among originators and creators, the word “experiment” is rarely spoken, but among interpreters (dancers, actors and musicians) it’s more in use. Does it matter?

Professional ethics is a vital concept. It is necessary to listen in order to gain a sense of humility in relation to one’s work. Listening not just to the movement but also to what goes on around it. The latter includes not only one’s fellow dancers and colleagues but also the other people in the social reality we all share.

Exercise no 83

Go for a swim. Remember all sounds you hear when you hold your breath under water. Make a composition using these sounds and dance it in the water. Do it.

“The art of Dance in a Frozen landscape”, was an artistic research project I performed during Arctic Ocean in 2002, an expedition towards the North Pole arranged by The Polar Research Secretariat of Sweden’s Royal Academy of Sciences. Why would a choreographer go to the Arctic to work? Why stage dances in surroundings where there is no audience? Why designate it as artistic research?

This vast expanse around the North Pole is made up of water. Frozen, incredibly deep water. In this deep-frozen whiteness, a continuous but imperceptible motion occurs. The ice drifts, is set in motion by the wind, breaks up from the pressure of the tides, is coloured by the continually changing light or submerged in the absolute darkness of the polar winter. Nothing is solid, and yet there is a powerful impression of stillness and silence.

What we call insight is to be found in silence. Every human being has to deal with their own silence, their own loneliness. There is so much stirring. We have to listen if we are to attain any kind of intelligibility. If I dare eavesdrop on my own silence, I can find joy in all the insight and understanding it contains. In this way the desire to eavesdrop on other bodies is awakened. I want

to know. I can see the movement. Bodies, as human dwelling-places, communicate in movement. Silently. If it is not to fade away, the inner life must be nourished and stimulated. I made my way to find the time and the opportunity to deal with my relation to all this by taking off for the Arctic. To investigate what the cold, the ice, the snow and the whole of this apparently abandoned place would do to me.

People who live at northern latitudes move in a different way to those who live in warmer climates. The further north I get, the slower and more restrained movement becomes. Gestural language becomes more “refined” and words become sparse. The colours pale. We become increasingly quiet-spoken and patient. The cold forces us to constrain our bodies, to stop wasting heat. The darkness sets a different rhythm and the natural world makes its considerable resistance felt. Human life is impossible in the Arctic. It is so cold that the effort to speak is painful. The silence contains sounds. The sea, the ice, the snow and the wind produce their own sounds.

I searched to make space for my thoughts about the concept of time, to reflect on it. I was trying to understand our endless hunger for history, for our roots, to make it all intelligible. What sets its stamp on our linguistic codes? I was a subjective interpreter of signs, travelling through a frozen world. I danced. I wrote down my thoughts and observations to share with the curious. I made use of myself. My body was at the disposal of this process, my mind groped for intellectual codes to capture transient thoughts and regain control.

Anxiety is a way of expressing this helpless fumbling wherever it occurs. Inevitably so, if one abandons what is already familiar. It is thrilling, exhilarating and marvellously pleasurable, only then to come up against the enormous resistance of so much that cannot be grasped and be forced into a fall with nothing to cushion the landing. It hurts. Nothing can be achieved without a certain degree of both pleasure and suffering.

I maintained body warmth by keeping as much of my body as possible covered. I kept the heat in, by keeping my movements contained. I kept my arms and legs moving close to my trunk. When I rested, I huddled up or dug myself in. I closed my mouth and closed off myself. The cold of the ice made movements more constrained. Tight.

There are many different things underlying what a movement expresses and it can easily deceive. To get to the meaning, I tear away its skin (of necessity, if I am to get to the heart of it). The bits left over become debris in the rubbish dump of all that is non-essential.

I could not bear to be without that moment when one movement yields naturally to become another. A certain degree of skill and time for the process to deepen are required if the search is to succeed. What is clear is that it is often when conditions are at their very worst that it happens. That is when creativity is challenged and is at its strongest. Crisis. Enormous tension. Anxiety. Wounds heal and clouds disperse without anyone missing them. The most demanding of challenges succeeds a time of pleasure and joy. Fighting my way on the ice – is that dance?

There are no movements left to discover. The human body and its movement have been thoroughly analysed from kinetic, medical, social and anthropological perspectives – indeed, from any conceivable viewpoint. What remains as an inexhaustible source to be explored, is the linguistic perspective and how this relates to dance as an art form. I put myself through what I want to have tested. My experience is stored in my memory, in my bodily archive. What happens on the outside corresponds to its equivalent on the inside. The work consists of repetition. Over and over again.

Back to the expedition. Every step on the ice met a resistance that increased the dynamic effect. The resistance had to be fought. Even when my steps were easier, on the crust, my body was under strain. The readiness had to be constantly in place in case I would step through the ice or fall over. And so I choose to lie down. The weight of the body was displaced over a much larger surface when lying, making it easier for the frozen crust to support it. The body could find some rest when confident of being held up and its movements become softer. In this way some of the preconditions for my work on the ice started to define themselves.

I improvised on the basis of the impulses I receive from the physical conditions, the colours in the whiteness, shape of the ice, its great ramparts and dams. I used my fear of polar bears, of crevasses, of all the various dangers I failed to comprehend. I used my fascination and pleasure in the unending beauty nature offered. I listened within and trusted my intuition. On other days an intellectual struggle was waged in which I rigorously criticised everything I previously gained. Why? To what end? I tried to discern any insights I may have made, to incorporate them into the choreographic process and the next time I went out on the ice it was with choreographed sequences of movements that had to be tested.

The requirements of body and mind interact in a fundamental way in the research process. While the work I do is concrete, tangible in a practical sense, that work has still to be combined with an

intellectual process. It has to be brought together with conscious intention and will if the meaning of its substance is to be revealed.

I can experience what my own movement expresses from within, or it can be experienced by others. Powerful feelings and their expression are often intensified by the fact of someone watching. It is for this reason we make our work available to the observer. The dance comes into being in the encounter with the audience, the meaning of the dance only happens in the awareness of the other.

Exercise no 98

Walk backwards. Observe what you leave. Stop. Stand still. Make yourself into the border of between what was and what will be. Turn around. Walk forward without thinking of what is behind you. See all that is ahead of you. Go to meet it. Do it.

What is it that makes the whole thing intelligible? If I want to make a discovery, my inner life (my will, mind and memory) is set in motion and new meanings are created. When I put trust in my own capacity for insight, I accept the experiences I have as the response. I create my own meaning. This is my privilege as the person addressed. Our intentions govern our senses.

I set limits to the moment in order to keep my focus trained on it. I put up boundaries around the time I want to defend and break down others that surround what I am attracted to. I stretch things out, reject them, blow them up and resist them. But I also manage to find those moments that are capable of containing eternity, passion and the splendour that inspires that obstinate grubbing my search involves. Somewhere I will find my way. It's just a question of composition. The process of composition consists of this kind of searching for contexts and it is unceasing. Dance creates meaning with references to itself.

Exercise no 100

Move with dignity, softly, calmly and touch gently a whole day. Do it.

Down with experiment. Long live the process! We all become co-creators of meaning, of significance through the on-going. We assign values; we give opinions, we think. We look at what happens in different ways. We create different meanings and assign different values to

various goals. In doing so, we become more clearly defined to each other and can go on with our lives, living.

I conclude by giving you my manifesto. I wrote it to support myself in times of despair:

”Change a habit and avoid convention. Stop indifference from catching a hold. Push away slowing resistance and open up for enjoyment free from perversion. Stir up and mess up. Create new rites around that which must be protected so that goodness and love are again recognisable. View art as immaterial pleasure or materialised madness, the alphabet of outrage paired with lust and profound intimacy. A dissection of reality down to its smallest particles, reunited in entirely new entities dipped in love. The encounter with art should be like coming home or finding an exciting, challenging place where anything can happen. A place where we want to remain, amidst all the incomprehensible, to be present, listening, narrating...”

Notes:

The expedition Arctic Ocean 2002 lasted barely two months. Before taking off, we were given lectures on cold weather and the injuries cold can cause together with information about life on board. Those of us who would be working on the ice received rifle training owing to the danger posed by polar bears. In mid-April we assembled in Gothenburg – 32 research scientists, 22 crew members, 5 officials of the Polar Research Secretariat and 1 artist (the undersigned) – and on April 20 the ship left harbour for its 6860 nautical miles long journey.

My work on the ice was documented and presented as a short film for Swedish Television; a new choreographic work, *The Outmost White*, premiered at the Ice Globe Theatre in Jukkasjärvi in the very North of Sweden; my texts from the expedition were published by E.L.D.

In this text I quote from some of my books, such as:

100 Exercises for a Choreographer and Other Survivors (Ellerströms 2012) and *Words on Dance* (E.L.D. 2003).

More articles, books, films on www.efvalilja.se

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Efva Lilja has produced works that have been staged in more than thirty countries around the world. She has written several books on dance, directed films and exhibited her own visual art, set a world record, danced on the North Pole and received a number of prizes and awards. Since late 1990s she has worked with artistic research and been an active force nationally and internationally working to create conditions for artists to do research in their arts. She is engaged in the boards of the Konstnärliga forskarskolan, ELIA and PEEK. She is a member of SHARE, SAR and other professional networks. She writes and lectures frequently on the topic of her art and of artistic research.

Efva Lilja is working for the development of higher artistic education, research and leadership questions. She is also an activist in cultural politics, for instance on the EU level in Team Culture 2012. She has among other things promoted the establishment of higher education and research within circus, master programmes and research programme in choreography, thereby putting DOCH on the world map.

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