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Intuition, Subjectivity and the Clash with the Objectives

or

Who is the Choreographer?

I am a choreographer. Who are you? We arrogate the right to decide for ourselves what that label should be. And when we then assert this, others will either accept our statements or reject them; they will criticise or affirm us. The student seeking to be trained as a choreographer carries expectations as to how to acquire the skills to make this choice possible. The choice to assert what one is. As an educational institution, we can provide a B.A, an M.A. even a Doctorate in choreography but we cannot educate an artist. By employing choreographers, artists and others with the desired skills and experience as teachers and supervisors, we can contribute to a more profound understanding of such matters as the methods various artistic practitioners are developing and the skills and insights they are acquiring as part of that development, as well as helping to shape a process of reflection concerning those methods.

Our dignity demands of us all that we take responsibility for ourselves and our ideas. We do what we have to do. The work is lonely. The sensory starvation we suffer when working on our own can be pitiless and cruel. Although it can be mitigated though by working with other people and by identifying with them. I am a choreographer. Most often, artistic questions arises for me out of a dialogue which references philosophy, ethics, to some extent morality, but also aesthetics. I conduct this dialogue both with myself and others, with people I know and those I do not. I conduct it with people who are near at hand or far away. Since I believe that our outlook on life determines the way we see reality, the image or representation that art creates is of crucial significance in how we interpret that reality.

What and where is the movement to be used?

Choreography is movement composed in time and space - the movements of the body or the movements in/of society. Choreographic composition is a tool for what is to be created and what will generate meaning in subjective terms. The analysis of movement is part of the tool chest, space/architecture, philosophy, sociology, the history of art and culture are others. Politics, economics, media and market structure are also fields to be included. At their best and taken as a whole, these studies in theory and practice can provide students with the insights they are searching for in order to be able to relate to their idea of identity, of their “material” and to their conceptual universes in a constructive way.

The attitude of society to art is reflected in the design of cultural policy. Art can be seen as a self-image of society. Education in the arts has to be continually redeveloped in relation to this. The labour market for choreographers is becoming increasingly commercialised, and we have to counter the demands to adapt art to the market with counter-arguments that are constructive and relevant. Having studied with us, our students should have been given the tools to be able to relate critically to their contemporary world, to artistic endeavours of various kinds and to the forms of creativity that can both change and develop the “market”, so as to make visible their skills, their art, while being able to present and reflect on them in a social context.

I quote myself from the book: Close Encounters, published by University College of Dance in Stockholm in 2007:

”We live out our lives in different rooms, in inner and outer spatialities. The passage of time and the experiences we have gone through are what we use to design our internal spaces. The external ones are shaped by politics, ideas about the construction of society and school, for example. The external spaces determine a great deal of the evolution of the internal ones. Our creativity develops in relation to the support or opposition offered by space. And normally – what is normal if not adapted? The norm lays down that we keep within the framework of what is acceptable and supported by convention and tradition. We learn and adapt in order to resemble one another as best we may. We behave normally. Why? So-called reality is a cultural construction, characterised by our ideas about ourselves, society, culture, religion... It is a powerful construction – a game that dominates everything else, in which our roles have been allocated. Who accepts their role? Who demands their role? Who creates their role?”

A major threat to creativity is posed by the obstructive nature of clarification: where the middle way holds sway and the goal is overshadowed by the utilitarian aspect. This makes our awareness less acute, and we are reducing to using simplified and more acceptable solutions out of an erroneous ambition to make the middle ground the right one for everybody: Just make it a little bit more acceptable. Misguided benevolence renders people passive and indifference comes to reign over the aestheticised surface of a blended and jumbled consensus whose sole aim is to reflect the expectations of the world around us. Creativity requires attentive observation as well as a kind of recognition of the madness inside us. An affirmation of the ugly as well as the beautiful, of the violent, of passion or of the poetry peculiar to silence. Without this, existence loses its meaning. In my view, the role of the artist is to recreate, to create anew and redefine, to revolt and to provoke... Many artists refer to the need to tear up the rules. Neuroscientists tell us that order is born out of chaos. So what then are positive boundaries, and what is setting limits on the opportunities you have?”

And why these words on the “middle way”? I believe that we in the educational system most often go for quality criteria set out by conventions on, for instance, knowledge. We have to be much braver in order to contribute with the tools that are relevant for a creative and innovative approach to society, and to the interactive activity of art in a social/cultural context.

This is why, when people start talking about knowledge, I often start to feel uneasy. The concept of knowledge is often used as a pretext for justifying all kinds of things. Frequently it is carelessly expressed as something objective, as though the person in question looked it up in a dictionary and simply accepted the definition without a moment’s thought. This is not what the student, nor the artist, does (or should do). They doubt, question and tries constantly to re-examine the concept. Questioning prevailing ideas is the foundation of change and growth. Knowledge should be put to the test and it needs to be re-evaluated in order to provide it with new nourishment.

Our awareness of the world and other people, our capacity to convert sensory impressions into action and growth demand creativity. That creativity in turn is based on a sense of dissatisfaction with what is and a desire for change. Reality has to be examined critically and reshaped, but that questioning of what is felt to be inadequate has to be carried out with a certain degree of self-confidence. Creativity fails where there is not enough faith in one’s own capacities. Curiosity, expectation, feeling and intuition are the key to survival, as they are for that desirable thing we call creativity. Individual ability and knowledge develop in relation to the trust one has in this very principle - a challenge to all educators.

We are our own greatest challenge. What is important? Our task is to reshape reality, to express it, to get others involved... How do you know what you know? What does knowing mean?

Higher education should operate with working methods which open up new ways of seeing, making space for the vision of the audience and laying the groundwork for a creative dialogue between the performer and the person encountering the work in performance. We need to facilitate the creation of more advanced artistic and pedagogical processes, which afford time and space for work of quality and for the formation of knowledge and new insights. Processes which integrate contemporary social and environmental perspectives and create both understanding and legitimacy for the opportunities art alone affords. Attentiveness is a key-factor.

“A measure of distraction forms a useful part of attentiveness. It serves as a collection of wrinkles in the way we think that obstruct a precipitous clarity. Lack of attentiveness is soon revealed in a person: he or she becomes conventional.” (Swedish writer Horace Engdahl)

At the basic educational level (for the bachelor’s degree), the young student often asks for explanatory models based on the idea that existence and art actually can be explained. Quite impossible! We can make statements, we can offer our experience of artistic method and process – but every attempt to incorporate movement in models designed to explain meaning and application is doomed to fail. The young student is trying to find his or her way through education to an understanding of how tenable his or her own vision, talents, abilities are. Meaning is created out of individual choices and decisions based on experience and carried out over time. Our most important task therefore in the course of educating students is to provide them with time, supervision and the relevant courses as “inputs” to the student’s self-development and to that of his or her artistic process.

Who is the student? The interest of becoming a choreographer, is most often paid by the dancer. The interest of studying choreography has a much wider interest. You will find architects, visual artists, composers... among those interested in different courses. Are they welcome?

If, at the level of the bachelor’s degree, a powerful need is felt to identify the ego in relation to a nascent artistic career, at the master’s level there is a greater need to work in a deeper, more advanced way and one that is more firmly connected to the wider world (maybe also to the wilder world). In my view students have to test out the scale and nature of their ambitions after completing their bachelor’s degree. It is only when the artistic career has been developed and the need for a more deeper, more advanced way of working has arisen that a master’s degree becomes a real alternative and there-after it is only when a well-founded, individual artistic mission based on experience has found itself in need of research that training in doing research and doctoral studies becomes relevant.

Experience is the outcome of time while the working process, reflection, doubt and satisfaction all require time.

Although time as a concept is a convention, a shared agreement reached by our society, we still embrace an utterly subjective sense of time. Sometimes it is fleeting and intangible, at other times it is sluggish and slack. Normally it is measured against all manner of transient phenomena. The apple rotting from within, ice cream melting or the numbered days of the aging person. Developing as an artist and a human being requires time. Although the time of education is something that we have defined within the Bologna Agreement, we can still make the time we experience our own. The artistic process can be experienced as something that is constantly

ongoing, the time of the work as an interval, as the time between what was and what will be. Time is a precondition, how we define it and the value we assign it, is up to the individual. The student is investing his or her time.

The student is also investing his or her desire and hunger for the intangible in what we call insight or understanding. This is something we have in common – with an audience as well. Dissatisfaction with the prevailing circumstances, or feeling inadequate in relation to them, is something we all share. All interest arises from a sense of something missing. When something is lacking... I go looking for it. We interact with the work of art by arrogating to ourselves the right to project our needs onto what is taking place. We see (or do not see) what we want and hear what we want to hear (or don't). Choreography can be seen as a survival strategy in which the presence of chance plays a role, a process in which we can allow ourselves to be taken unawares, to be ravished, revolted, provoked or caressed gently and carefully.

The student is provided with the understanding that body and mind constitute the reciprocal preconditions of the artistic process, as in the rest of life. If work on the movements of human beings or objects is concrete, tangible in fact, then that work has to be combined with an intellectual process in order to be incorporated in a choreographic form. Choreography is a refashioning of the prevailing, an overturning of hierarchies in favour of new ones for someone else to overturn. The work consists of repetition. Over and over again, of desire and aversion – indeed, of all the opposites that make up the dynamic both of life itself and the work we do.

It is in this sense that work is a struggle between meaning and meaninglessness. It is life itself that provides the resistance. The good, the beautiful, desire and pleasure have to be contrasted with their opposites in order to be experienced. How could we express an opinion about the beautiful unless we were familiar with the ugly? And, indeed, we have to take care that we do not become all too immersed in only the pleasant things since, as human beings, we develop by way of resistance. Extremes of feeling such as passion or suffering make life feel more intense and to lose oneself in desire is a wonderful thing. How is the student to relate to this?

The next step after a master program, is doctoral studies. Insights into how artists deepen their knowledge and develop their skills and their capacity to communicate and give form to their vision are important and worth acquiring. They provide a foundation for the development of artistic careers, methods, educational strategies, as they do for labour market issues. What is the artist looking for in his or her working process? What are the issues that drive the work? Many prominent artists possess a unique form of knowledge which is communicated through the finished work. When the path they take to reach their goal is documented, and the questions arising as a result are made available, then others can follow the process, examine it critically and learn from it. That means that other artists are enabled to gain greater knowledge; they can be inspired, provoked or stimulated by the work. This is how knowledge develops in the arts: as a body of knowledge that can contribute to the development of new forms of artistic expressions and which can be shared with the world around us both as part of the process and through the work of art itself. Training in artistic research also opens up the possibility of interdisciplinary and cross-genre collaboration, while providing access to both new and more established forms of theory-making. This is exciting.

It is vital to draw attention to art as a means of attaining the knowledge and insights we would otherwise not acquire. Demonstrating the ways in which art operates helps to develop our communicative resources and can contribute to the creation of greater awareness about the importance of art for the development of a society. An awareness that art can in fact be both fun

and frightening, and that it is absolutely essential that art as art has its place in our everyday lives since it provides a voice for what would otherwise not be said.

The choreographer conveys knowledge about and in his or her work. In seeking to develop our work as a form of research, we take part in a process that has something to teach all of us. This process is documented, and just like its outcome, is open to criticism by the wider world. In the contemporary performative arts, the performer is most commonly both the practitioner and the representation/the work. The artist is her or his own instrument. The artist also represents thought, movement and the events that when presented have extensive ramifications for entirely separate forms of expression. Body and mind, the corporeal and the intellectual – the artist is a key actor in the development of new knowledge.

The Bologna Agreement presupposes three interconnected levels for all higher education. In the “Dublin descriptors”, emphasis is placed on the need for students to encounter leading research within their field as part of their undergraduate work. This also applies to educational courses in the arts. Traditionally this was expected to take place as a result of the encounter with artists of recognised merit, but the bar has now been raised by these new formulations of educational targets. The requirement for reflection and for the ability to place one’s own artistic achievements in a wider context are now emphasised in the examination criteria. Advanced techniques are required to develop these skills and abilities. The experience of systematic reflection and the means to make this experience available need to be developed. Training and education in artistic research is an indispensable part of this methodological evolution.

The formation of artistic knowledge lies close to the sources of creativity and has special characteristics which represent unique values. Both practical and theoretical forms of knowledge come together in the artistic process with experience of human communication and with intuition. Within the process there is an interplay between unhurried deliberation and the making of instantaneous choices. The development of competitive research is facilitated by creative environments. This allows the field of the arts to make important contributions to the field of knowledge about how creativity works, how creative environments are created and how the presence of art in the social corpus can provide us with greater knowledge about the marvel of being human.

We therefore need the understanding and respect of the world around us for what the performing arts can contribute to society. We need to define more clearly, or revise, the description of our artistic fields. Our aim is not to educate for what is but for what will be. In raising the bar that high, we are actually providing our students with greater freedom of choice. The future always makes greater demands than the current state of affairs. So, who is the choreographer?

I call into question a life lived in search of reasons that may prove convincing enough to go through with it. If living itself is the goal, art is what intensifies our experience of it. Through art I can widen the boundaries of what is possible and challenge my own abilities to the utmost. I want to make use of myself based on an idea of what makes our existence meaningful.

It is crucially important that education in choreography should take place in an environment made up of professionals who are active at high level. As you have noticed I am talking about education in choreography, not about the education of the choreographer. What is needed is a sufficient degree of artistic representation to generate a critical mass, international and national exchanges, interaction between professionals, students, artists and other researchers. In various ways, we are the ones who have power over the current situation and we have to ensure that these

requirements are made reality. We need to formulate the way educational courses and their financing is organised while creating space for positive encounters: the students and other participants can fill them with content, goals and meaning. The rest is politics.

Possessing knowledge about the past is a precondition of understanding the present. There is a great deal to be put up with, endured and to be developed. This is how our lives are staged. It is the cultural, geographical and social contexts that provide a body with definition and the contours within which our inherited abilities can grow and our personalities take shape. Developing an artistic career as a choreographer, is about using the ego in relation to society and the wider world; it is about seeing oneself and one's work in a context in which the individual voice can stand out from the mass. I am a choreographer. Who are you?

We need more artists to express their views on the matter, on education as well as on research, to draw attention to the need also for research in art. We need more artists who express and describe a variety of views, a variety of working methods, a variety of issues that can be encompassed by the advanced process we call research. Who are the individuals with needs of this kind and with the skills required to carry out artistic research projects of quality?

There are a large number of stones strewn across the ground for us to stumble over in any discussion focusing on this issue. By tradition, it is the originator who considers him or herself to be the creative artist, while the interpreter does so more rarely. In the fields of dance this role is primarily assigned to the choreographer and much less frequently to the dancer, in music it is usually assigned to the composer and rather less often to the musician. How can those of us working in higher education ensure that we provide our students with the tools they require so that they can make an informed choice about an artistic identity? How can we do this without contributing to a hierarchical ranking of their choices of profession such as dancers, pedagogues, circus artists, teachers, architects, philosophers, therapists, visual artists or choreographers? How can we facilitate the development of an advanced methodology in the field of endeavour they have chosen?

We need to provide a voice for those artists who are actively engaged in trying to develop the possibilities artistic research has to offer, and we need to make a space for them. We can do this by creating a range of possibilities that are complementary to those already on offer to artists to work within our universities, where artistic research is carried out on the basis of a different definition and then usually as research about and for art. As an artistic institution within higher education, we have a particular responsibility to make space available for research in art by artists themselves.

What a degree course in choreography can offer is the chance to make accessible and comprehensible the conditions of creativity, the production of immaterial values and the relevance of the future art-scene to the development of a multicultural and complex society. Only then can we wish ourselves all the love, desire and unutterable satisfaction we can imagine and positive working processes in which struggle and resistance give way to new issues, doubts and...

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