

What is “good” in art? The artistic research dilemma

Efva Lilja¹

University of Dance and Circus, Stockholm

“Yes, but...I really shouldn’t...ah...oh, well. No, it didn’t turn out that way. Doubt keeps pushing me. Do you understand what I’m not saying? In the artistic process the work gnaws on and inside its own being. Ouch, ouch, ouch. We endure together.”

I know that this sounds like a romantic musing over the role of the solitary artist, but it is true and utterly real. The work (like living) offers much resistance and short spells of flow, lust and light, a wind that blows in all by itself and dispels all doubt. Suddenly work (life) offers a most intense presence in the moment and absolute calm. A short while... It is so wonderful and worth it all! Has this something to do with “good”, with the inkling of having conquered something of importance? What makes it so fantastic that I can identify it as “good”? Is it correct to think “good” as a criterion for quality? Can others also see this as a qualitative step forward and not just hype on a market infatuated with stardom? What makes art “good”? Some see the market as the basic judge of quality, the primary definition of what is “good”. What sells best is best. Others hold a different view.

Some time ago I asked a number of colleagues (choreographers) what criteria they see as relevant for the evaluation of artistic quality in their own works. What is “good” art to them? Most of them seemed to agree about what is essential when it comes to judging quality. The primary object is to make other artists interested in what you produce, so that your art becomes a point of reference for them. Success in the market comes second, the knowledge that there are buyers and an audience for the work. The third criterion is about public and private funding, receiving economic support for one’s work. The consequence of this way of reasoning is that there must be an evaluation by colleagues of the quality in a piece of art.

As an artist I’m used to public scrutiny and criticism, both by those with knowledge and by those without, often in the form of “expressing an opinion”. Quite a few people hold an opinion about my art. In the academic world, criticism is not public to the same extent, but it is still subjective. When an artist does research, the discussion about quality is broadened to include the process of research, and on that basis also the artistic result. The enhanced process inherent in research offers an opportunity to develop both practice and theory. The artist’s ideas, knowledge and competence are tested. What I still miss both in the public criticism and within academia is relevant competence among the critics. You

¹ DOCH, Brinellvägen 58, box 27043, SE-102 51, Stockholm info@efvalilja.se

must know art, choreography, in order to offer the kind of criticism that I am able to accept as a point of further development, both as an artist and as a researcher.

Good scrutiny by colleagues demands a critical mass of relevant competence. For this purpose, we can borrow the term *peer review* from the academic system of quality control. In a small country like Sweden, where only a handful of artists are involved in artistic research in choreography, this kind of *peer review* demands international collaboration. By putting our work in a broader context, we gain not just the critical mass we need, but also supervisors, examiners and good colleagues.

When I discuss choreography with my colleagues, we rarely talk in terms of “good” or “bad”. The term “quality” is more interesting. There are certain criteria we use when we are in a position to offer criticism of somebody else’s artistic practice: Is there something original, a personal approach/expression in the work? Can I distinguish a purpose and direction behind the work? Is there a contextual discussion or positioning? Is there a development of time, space and form in the presentation? How are intra-medial effects used, such as music, light or imagery? Is the work relevant in a current discourse? How is the work related to other choreographic practice? Is there a development of established codes or other contextual spheres (social, political, cultural)?

To answer questions like these, you need knowledge about choreography, the artistic process and production based on experience and work within the field of choreography. All artists do not have the interest or the knowledge needed for this. To me as an artist, knowledge in art is what I need in order to create something, express my idea and communicate it to the outside world. It is also how I am able to enjoy art, an enhanced ability to communicate, and to take in the world from another perspective than our everyday life, a conscious reflection and visualization of meaning in the subjective impression/interpretation of a work of art.

You need good strategies to survive! I owe this to myself, to life and art (or life as an artist). Survival is closely linked to the discussion of quality. A long life as an artist has given me a position on the market. But regardless of varying degrees of success, it keeps pushing me with higher and higher demands of productivity. Do more, faster, better and better, and preferably cheaper – but is it “good”? How do I know? Can artistic research have an influence on the artistic practice and our idea of what constitutes the “good” in art?

I am a choreographer. Understanding and knowledge of choreography is also needed for participation in the inter-disciplinary activities often involved in innovative stage art. Therefore I seek new ways to deepen my knowledge of the choreographic practice: in questions of compositional technique, analysis of movement, aesthetics, philosophy and other fields of knowledge important to what I want to achieve. I do this by discussing and exchanging ideas with other choreographers, other artists, other researchers, but also through teaching, supervising and other ways of sharing a work experience. Above all I do this through research and sharing insights and knowledge generated by other artists-researchers. From them I gain both better tools for my own artistic process and for collaborations that are vital to my work.

An important part of what generates new knowledge within my field is the understanding of what lies between the subjective impression and the choreographer’s intention. To seek a meaning in bodily movement is to use your experience and memory in a new context. To understand what is expressed rather than to be told something. As dancers we develop an ability to convey meaning through interaction with the compositional elements presented in time – space and energy (power), that which constitutes form.

Your appearance conveys what you think. Your thoughts are mirrored in your body. The professional dancer can relate to this by focusing on the thought. Thought and movement become one – or each other’s opposites in a more complex expression. The practical knowledge of how this is done generates a refined way of self-expression. We must practise registering with the eye, as well as by intellectual reflection and use of the body.

Practical knowledge in dance means understanding what the body is and how it is used by will or purpose. This includes everything from methods used to train physical skills to ways of making the bodily movement correspond to the dancer's thoughts. It is also about understanding how an intention can develop into a correspondence between the subjective experience and the understanding established in the eye of the beholder. This knowledge, based on theory, practice and experience, is difficult to formulate and explain to those who do not have it.

My work requires collaboration with other fields of knowledge. I know the trans-disciplinary as good results from awarding inter-disciplinary cooperation where my specific disciplinary knowledge is a prerequisite. How obvious – and yet how difficult to execute!

Artistic research has many detractors. The toughest critics can be found among academics, who consider artistic methods to be “fuzzy” or unscientific. Some artists are critical for fear that art will become academic and create a “B Team” of artists who cannot make it on the market and therefore turn to research. You might think that artistic research, as presented by universities around Europe, often seems to occupy itself with very specific details within an established practice. You might think that much of what is called artistic research is “about” art, not “in” art: research in the humanities without a practical (“artistic”) presentation. This is often the case, but I find it less interesting to write about. I concern myself with what I think can stimulate a development that I long to see happen.

The quality of artistic research (and the artistic representations that will emerge as a result) is completely dependent on which artists choose to engage in research and in the discourse between colleagues that can take us further. This in turn depends on how universities and other seats of learning can develop their activities and organisations also to welcome high-ranking artists. Academic traditions are strong, rooted in ideas from an old culture about research and quality. Artistic research demands that these ideas expand. As artists we must express more clearly and emphatically our field-specific ideas about art, research and quality. We must show our ability to be peers. We also need to express clear criteria for the artistic qualifications needed for appointment to the rank of professor within the arts. The demands must be high and based on artistic practice, on works of art judged to be innovative and original. That is how the higher seats of learning within the arts can embrace the high-ranking artists needed for both supervision and research. Without them we will never reach “good”.

“Good” art is not the same as good artistic research. Good artistic research is not the same as “good” art. Through research we become better artists, artistic representation is strengthened in society and we develop better tools for processes that generate quality. To create relevant means for sharing the results of artistic research, we need to establish various international forums where artists can present their work either live or digitally, get it reviewed, criticised and reflected upon by other artists engaged in artistic research. If we present these forums as peer reviewed, they can be accepted by the academic community as generators of quality and thereby worthy of financial support.

I carry knowledge with me about my work and within it, as well as about and within the works of others. By developing my artistic work also as research, I dedicate myself to uncovering what goes on in the artistic process, making visible the methods that are honed by it and making room for a theory to

take form. This process is documented and can, just like the end result, be criticised and reflected upon by the outside world.

Documentation is made for a reason. What is documented for whom? What do I want to discuss with my peers? I see it like this: *You* are the object (I do this to tell *You* something). *You* are the recipient with whom I discuss my work and thereby also yours. The documentation is there to facilitate dialogue. *You* are not one, but many, maybe a multitude, but always one singular *You*. The documentation finds a form and develops through and within the dialogue with *You*.

Artistic research is presented artistically. There must be openness for what can be a relevant presentation of artistic research based on the idea of the project, its purpose, process and end product. This means that it is not primarily the work as a product that is the object, but that the delivery of the project can be documentation, reflection and conclusions from the research in the form that the artist chooses. This presentation will position the new insight in the context of the outside world where other artists can criticise, use and maintain it through documentation and reflection over the work. The work/presentation is the product that describes the process represented by the work. The public space where all art is displayed generates the open discourse that is a natural part of any quality-oriented work.

To reach what can be seen as necessary, progressive and quality-driven, means taking risks. Transformed into action through artistic method and practice it can offer images and stories that make us rethink what we have taken for granted and approach other truths with curiosity. Maybe leave an established notion of quality to develop another. Ideas for what a performance can be may be turned upside down and new forms of expression may make us part of desired events and processes, reflections of our different realities. Surely that is “good”?

Accepted truths are the basis of our conventions. We must move on. Innovative art breaks away from normalcy and makes us see values that would otherwise remain hidden. Innovative art breaks conventions and traditions to make us rethink our idea of us and the world, of what is thought of as normal, of what is called “good”, or what is recognizable as quality (“good”?). Our thoughts and experience take us further towards new insights and positions vis-à-vis the present stat, including how we live – and the arts.

I make research and fight with my ideas about art, what is “good”, what is quality, meaning... Artists must have a better chance to take responsibility for the production theories and visualizing the knowledge that exists within the artistic practice. The demands are similar whether research is artistic or scientific. We must bring existing knowledge into the open, but also create new insights that can legitimize the values we want to defend in our works.

Many universities hungrily seek artists to take part in cross-scientific projects, as post-graduates in research hubs, as participants in reference groups or other academic endeavours. They seek our presence because our methods differ, our way of tackling problems is different, our way of looking at everyday life, reality, living... is different. Or sometimes they want us to take part simply because art is a popular field that easily fills up the student roster. It is great to feel welcome, but even better to be able to work on an artistic base. Only when art is respected on the same grounds as science is there a real dialogue with and within the academic community.

Artistic research has an impact on the conditions for innovation. There is, however, nothing that guarantees that risk-taking will pay off in any other way than enhancing the intensity of living and being in the present. Going “all in” doesn’t automatically mean that it will be “good”. My approval of

a work doesn't automatically mean that it is “good”. But risk-taking sharpens the senses and that sensibility hones your ability to listen and your empathy, creating unexpected intimacies. The artist-researcher uses professional skills, knowledge and often years of training, committing to the process all of his or her personality and individuality. The research cannot be separated from the artistic practice. The artist is both the subject and object, for and within the research.

An artistic seat of learning has a great responsibility for exposing and motivating art as art, the artist as a partner aiming to make art, artistic research as equal to scientific research and to communicate the societal values represented by these “cultural experiences”, the knowledge and the competence. There is also a great responsibility for developing criteria for qualitative scrutiny. The organizational/practical development of courses and research projects will influence and impact not only the future of artistic representation, but also relationships with those passionate politicians within the sphere of culture, who will provide us with new stages, motivated and knowledgeable producers and an audience full of curiosity, a sense of participation and respect in a well-developed labour market. Doesn't this sound fantastic?

Maybe artistic quality doesn't have to be formulated. Maybe it is more important to decide which competences are needed to judge quality in art. What to a wider circle is recognizable as quality or something “good” is almost always based on conventions established through tradition in a social and political context. This makes the concept conservative by definition. So – how do we regain the mandate?

Words that are read are interpreted subjectively, just like movement, imagery or other expressions in our communicative register. The meaning is construed from the context. Artists with a relevant level of knowledge can decide what is “good”, regardless of whether it is something completely innovative or a development based on elements from an established tradition. To express the opinion that this is “good” – and why – is a challenge for the brave. You cannot always say what you think. I often put more trust in what is not said outright and believe that I can understand what you are not saying.

Good strategies for survival open doors to completely different rooms. Rooms that also welcome difficult people. Rooms full of light. Dark rooms and airy rooms. Transparency turns its back on the sun and reveals other qualities than those normally achieved by different kinds of movement. Questioning and despair are eternal followers, but also the euphoria when life's puzzle occasionally offers pieces that fit together, when something becomes “good”... Practice generates insights that develop communicative abilities that are a cornerstone of democratic society. In art, as in research, innovation is questioned and everything that breaks new ground is criticized. But it's damned good fun!

Okay, I'm happy with all this...but...I want more. Why not sing a little? I make up a song about art, research, inter-disciplinary collaboration, social conscience, things important for life, decisive, crucial... Jaws drop. Out of wide-open mouths that were silent seconds ago comes a song. Interesting.

Well, yes... Is this what we call intuitive knowledge – or what? Ho, ho, ho! Let's get on with life. Go out there and do something!

Presentation of contributor

Efva Lilja has made a name for herself as one of Sweden's most exciting choreographers with a very distinctive repertoire that has been much celebrated. She has created pioneering new work in a range

of collaborative endeavours with other artists; works that have been described as poetic, erotic, controversial and of epoch-making importance for Swedish dance. Today she presents solo performances, exhibit drawings and video art. Lilja is Professor of choreography and since 2006 the Vice-Chancellor of DOCH –University of Dance and Circus in Stockholm. She is engaged in the strategic development of artistic research and research education for artists through ELIA and SHARE. She is also a board member of Konstnärliga forskarskolan in Sweden and of the PEEK program at FWF in Austria. List of works, research and bibliography on www.efvalilja.se.